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Ibibio/Igbo Diplomatic Relations: The Pre-colonial Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines the diplomatic intercourse between the Ibibio people and their Igbo neighbours in Southern Nigeria during the pre-colonial period. Undoubtedly, these two groups had intense diplomatic relations during the period under study. The relationship was enhanced by factors such as geography, shared migration routes and settlement particularly with the Cross River Igbo and Ngwa Igbo groups. In addition, economic relations, inter-ethnic marriages, shared cultural institutions such as *ekpe*, *ekpo*, *akang*, *ekpri akate*, *nsibidi* etc. The bilingual disposition of the frontier communities as well as the influence of the imperial Aro oracle, *Ibritam Inokon* (Long Juju of Arochuku) and warfare. It is observed that the relations in this era was very cordial since it was well managed with requisite pre-colonial diplomatic processes, methods and strategies; hence, though boundaries existed, it did not exist as “lines” or “frontiers” that separated them consequently, the Ibibio/Igbo areas could be described as a “socio-economic unit” where the people of both areas derived maximum benefits from their interactions. From the colonial period, the relations between the two groups began to deteriorate and “ethnic” competition instead of cooperation became prevalent. In the post-colonial period, series of conflicts and mutual suspicion still characterized their relations. The paper concludes that the pre-colonial diplomatic variables should be re-engineered and a regional orientation forged between the groups to engender nation building and fast track the development of the areas. It adopts a historical analytical method.

Introduction

The Ibibio live in the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria and are considered the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria. For the purpose of this study, the term “Ibibio” applies to all the groups that inhabit Akwa Ibom State such as Annang, Oron, Eket, Obolo (Andoni) and Ibeno (Akpan, 2016). Modern ethnographers have divided Igboland into five main groups. The categorization is based on territorial location and general cultural similarities of each group. These are Northern or Onitsha Igbo, Northeastern Igbo, the Southern or Owerri Igbo, the Western Igbo and Eastern or Cross River Igbo. The component units of the Cross River Igbo include Aribra, Abam, Afikpo and Eda. Others are Arochuku, Ohafia, Ututu and Ihechiowa. The Southern or Owerri Igbo consists of Isu-Ama, Ora Ita-Ikwere, Ohubu-Ngwa, Isu-Item Ford and Jones (1950); Anwana (2008). This work is concerned primarily with Ngwa, Azumini and Ndoki groups of Southern or Owerri Igbo and the Eastern or Cross River Igbo.

The Ibibio are believed to be a people of hoare antiquity and one of the earliest settlers in South Eastern Nigeria (Talbot, 1923). Having settled in their present locale, the Ibibio established and sustained diplomatic relations with their neighbours, far and near, including the Cross River Igbo, the Ngwa, Ndoki and the Azumi Igbo., among others. According to Afigbo (1990), the ultimate foundation of external relations was anchored on the principle that no community, no matter how rich and however favoured by nature can produce all it needs for sustenance. To attain these goals, geographical, economic and other advantages provided by nature and history are utilized and maximized.

The Ibibio and Igbo relations revolved on certain fundamental planks such as economy, inter-ethnic marriages, shared cultural values etc. These variables were diplomatically managed and the people blended into a functional socio-economic unit and maximum mutual benefits were derived. This experience must have informed Northrop (1978) to assert that “in the pre-colonial times the largest unit of identity for most inhabitants does not appear to have been primarily ethnic unit as they exist at present period.” Afigbo (1990) agrees that the presence of boundaries in nations of modern Africa that defy ancient zones of cultural, political and economic contacts are artificial imposition of the European colonialists who created arbitrary units for administrative convenience. He opines further that in spite of whatever impressions contemporary ethnic chauvinists looking for secure political identity and autonomy of their ethnic homelands, the links which bind the peoples of the different states of the federation to the peoples of the regions around them are ancient and varied. The intricate network of relationships among the village-republics of the Cross River zone in the final analysis transformed them into a “cultural zone” whose boundaries, even linguistic boundaries, could not be defined with any precision. This work is an attempt to validate this thesis.

This paper is divided into four sections. Section one is the introduction, section two discusses the historical linkages and pre-colonial contacts between the Ibibio and Igbo through the examination of the nature of migration and settlement, the influence of geography, economic relations, inter-marriages, shared cultural borrowings, bilingualism and warfare. Section three examines aspects of the relations that underpin diplomacy while section four is the conclusion. Section three looks at Historical Linkages and Pre-colonial Contacts of the Ibibio and Igbo

Migration/Settlement

Migration was a very important factor of contact even from the very early period in the process that led to the settlement of the portion of Africa south of the Benue, east of the Niger and west of the Cameroon Mountains. It continued to be important until the main demographic spread and ethnic alignments of the Cross River peoples and their neighbours attained more or less the forms they have assumed. After that, the movement of the population remained important as a contact mechanism, as groups and individuals moved forward and backward within the whole zone either in search of more secure and more favoured places or simply as they fled from punishment or collapsed political and economic fortunes. The spread from their places of first settlement brought them into contact and this promoted continuing relations in a wide-range of human affairs (Afigbo, 1990).

Scholars agree that Ibom was probably the first point of contact between the pre-colonial Ibibio and Igbo. Ibom is located in modern Arochukwu Local Government Area of Abia State. Arochukwu situates in the Cross River plains, in the buffer zone between three major ethnic groups – the Igbo, Ibibio/Efik and Ejagham (Bassey, 1999). Having migrated from the Central Benue region, the Ibibio dispersed South-wards through the forest and later settled in Usak Edet region in the Cameroon side of Nigeria-Cameroon border. Later, the Ibibio migrated into Nigeria (Ukpong, 1999).

Noah posits that:

Upon leaving the Cameroon, the Ibibio migrated into Nigeria...one group reached Nigeria perhaps by an overland route and settled at Ibom in Arochukwu, probably about 8000 BC, where they established the famous shrine known as the *Long Juju of Arochukwu*...from Ibom some of the Ibibio people spread to other places in the mainland, while others remained...(Noah, 1980: 6).

Having settled at Ibom, the Ibibio developed common cults and secret societies like *ekpo*, *ebre* and deities of fertility and farming like *abasi isong* as agricultural practices increased. The famous Ibibio oracle, *Ibritam Inokon*, also developed at Ibom, which traditions say was under the charge of the Ibibio-sub group known as Ebrutu (the modern Efik). As Ibibio language distinctly developed from proto-Bantu, its basic, fundamental characteristics common to all Ibibio dialect emerged, viz: the elision of the last letter of a large number of words (Abasiattai, 1991).

Abasiattai (1991) adds that further population pressures from the northwest by the advancing Igbo, and other conflicts with the Ekoi to the north-east, who had by now settled in the region, led to warfare and social tension. One evidence of this was the existence of slave trade and slavery (probably following the advent of the Portuguese). One of the Ibibio men at Ibom named Uruk is believed to have bought an Igbo slave whom he also named Uruk Nta. The latter became the principal instigator of the Aro-Ibibio War, during which the Igbo hired Ekoi mercenaries to fight and drive the Ibibio (excepting some remnants) from Ibom about 1530.

Corroborating the Ibom episode, Afigbo (1981) and Dike and Ekejiuba (1990), note that the quarrel was over inheritance. In the conflict that ensued, the Igbo group formed a military alliance in order to ensure their own survival in the face of expanding Ibibio influence, because it is believed that the Ibibio outnumbered the Igbo; hence, the Igbo sought ways and means of consolidating their position. With time, the Arochukwu region attracted further immigrants. One of the groups that came into the area was the Akpa, believed to have come from Akamkpa area of modern Cross River State. It is believed that their advancement into the region was motivated by economic factors such as fertile land and the potential slaves that were available in the area. The Akpa succeeded in carrying out raids because they were armed with European firearms which they obtained at the coast.

It should be noted that the relationship between the Ibibio and the Aro neighbours was not initially characterized by belligerent, interecine and rancorous warfare. Evidence shows that before the arrival of the Ejagham, the Aro had settled down with the Ibibio in an atmosphere of cordiality for mutual benefits (Anwana, 2008).

Anwana (2008) citing Murray records the nature of the existing relationship thus:

The Aros lived with the Ibibio at Ibom...The reference to be drawn from this is that the original Aro (Eze Agu and his descendants)...settled down among the Ibibio for purposes of trading in the same manner as the Hausas do at the present day. In all possibility, they formed settlements and tried to make friends with the Ibibio inhabitants. When this failed, they resorted to another device and called in the mercenaries for purpose of exterminating them and driving them southward across the Enyong Creek (Anwana, 2008: 125).

The Aro clan (or sub-clan as it is sometimes called) comprises nineteen villages. Each of these villages was largely autonomous especially in matters which did not touch the interests outside of it. In the 1920s, the nineteen Aro villages had come to regard themselves as falling into five “patrilineages” that is, into five groups or families, each of which believed that it descended from a single founding father or closely related group of founders. An analysis of the villages reveals the enduring legacy of the Aro contacts with the Ibibio and Ejagham. The classification shows that the Igbo group consists of eight villages, the Ibibio group has two villages and the Ejagham group has six, with the unspecified groups having three villages. Anwana (2008) citing colonial sources opine further that “the

strength of Arochukwu arose from the very diversity of their origins. All the groups contributed some factors to the Aro power and the manner of their blending was the measure of Arochukwu's greatness".

Apart from the Aro, other sections of the Cross River Igbo, particularly the Ohafia, have a history of common settlement with a section of the Ibibio, Obolo, (Andoni). It is believed that the Ohafia people came from Benin to Andoni area. They left Benin during the reign of Oba Esigie. As a wandering army, the Ohafia people stopped at some places in the course of their migration from Benin. One of such resting places was Obolo (Andoni). Ohafia lived among the Obolo (Andoni) as Mbem Owan at Okwala. They engaged in fishing, slave raiding, head-hunting and other warlike activities. The period of the sojourn of the Ohafia in Obolo coincided with the coming of the Portuguese to the Niger Delta in the 15th century (Ejituwu, 1991).

It is believed that the Portuguese tried to foster some level of integration of the Obolo(Andoni) and Ohafia through the instrumentality of Christianity. While the King of Obolo(Andoni) accepted the new move, the Ohafia rejected it and there began a process that resulted in the migration of the Ohafia from Obolo (Andoni). The Portuguese came with guns and rums and gave them to the Obolo (Andoni) as instruments of coercion. When the Ohafia could not withstand the pressure exerted by the Obolo (Andoni) and the Portuguese, they decided to leave the Obolo(Andoni) area, but "not before they had taught them a lesson". That lesson was to engage the people in a surprise attack and behead as many of their men as they could (Ejituwu, 1991).

Ejituwu (2010) records that one morning in about July, 1494, Ohafia attacked and massacred the Obolo(Andoni) and took away many of their women, they fled through Ndoki water corridor and ended at Umuahia-Ibeku. According to this account, what happened to the Ohafia, thereafter, is not known, except that they were constantly afraid that Obolo(Andoni) and their Portuguese friends were likely to trail them to avenge the death of the people; hence, they could not stay in Umuahia-Ibeku but migrated further to a distant land now called "Ohafia" in the present day Abia State. Apparently, Ohafia transferred the tradition of head-hunting and war-likeness to the hinterland and were loved by groups like Aro, who were slave traders but were not a race of warriors. Apart from this, Ohafia is famous for its *okerenkwa*, a ceremonial war-dance. *Okerenkwa* has become a national cultural outfit. Their common settlement in the pre-colonial period has resulted in the Obolo (Andoni) regarding the Ohafia people as their kith and kin in the Diaspora and often invite Ohafia people when they have any important occasion requiring such invitation (Ejituwu, 2010).

The Ibibio also had robust relations with the Ngwa Igbo people. The Ngwa people are believed to have dispersed from a village known as Umunoha, situated near Owerri. Tradition has it that a number of persons were on a journey in search of a new land in which to dwell and so they migrated across the Imo River. At the time, the whole land on the left bank of Imo River was inhabited by the *Ibeme* (Annang) who received the migrants and allotted them portions of land to settle. After some time, the Ngwa embarked on an expansionist scheme and occupied vast tracts of uninhabited virgin land. This resulted in series of skirmishes with their landlords (Nwaguru, 1978).

This position is supported by Northrop (1978), Afigbo (1990) and Abasiattai (1991). These scholars agree that the group that is today known as "Ngwa" evolved that identity after their settlement in the present locale and were joined by groups from other parts of Igboland. These bands of pioneers are said to have absorbed the customs of the Ibeme (Annang) and also adopted their language as an alternative to their own. Also

Nwaguru (1978) notes that the experience resulted in inter-mingling of the Ibeme (Annang), the Mboko (Ibibio) with the Ngwa Igbo. According to him, the group at present known as Ibeme in Ngwa consists of various Ibeme (Annang) Moko (Ibibio) groups and Ngwa migrants from Nsulu and Ntigha. The Mboko Umuanunu group is made up of Ibeme and migrants from Bende, Okpuala (Owerri) and Ngwa people from Ngwa-Ukwu, Nsulu and Ntigha. The Mboko Amairi consists of pure Mboko stock. Mboko Itungwa group is made up of migrants from Ibeme and Ngwa stock of Ntigha, Nsulu, Mbutu and Mbaise village of Itu (Itu being another from Ibibioland). Ohanze group consists of Mboko and Ngwa migrants from Nsulu and Ntigha.

The Ndoki Igbo trace their origin to Benin. It is believed that they migrated from Benin as a result of civil war that erupted in the area. The Ndoki moved through Akassa to Oguta before they got to Azumini Creek. After their settlement, the Ndoki also intermingled with the Ibibio (Annang) group. One of the groups known as Iwueke consists of some villages such as Ohambele and Ohanuku which are believed to be of Ibeme (Annang). Also there are some villages from Ika Annang stock in Ndoki (Annang stock) (Ford, Nwaguru, 1978).

The Afaha, which is the largest group in Ibibioland is of the same stock with a section of Ngwa Igbo. According to Akpan (2012), the Afaha people migrated from Usak Edet in the Cameroons and later moved in-land and created settlements for themselves throughout the areas that became Calabar, Ogoja, and Owerri Provinces of colonial Nigeria. It is believed that the section of Afaha people that dispersed to live in Ngwa Igbo had initially settled in Ibibioland. It is believed that up to 1937, the Afaha Ngwa Igbo used to visit their kith and kin in Ibibioland and used to come with a traditional play. The Afaha people are associated with the elephant as their primary totem. This totem is prevalent in Ngwa Igbo, for instance the elephant statue are conspicuously displayed at some strategic positions, like the Town Hall and the vicinity of Aba Motor Park in Aba. Aba is believed to be inhabited by Afaha Ngwa. Moreover, some migrants from Itu clan in Itu Local Government Area in Ibibioland can be found in Itu Mbaise, Imo State, Itu in Ngwaland, and Itu in Item clan also in Abia State (Akpan, 2012).

On the other hand, the Okon people of Essien Udim Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, consisting of 16 villages divided into two groups namely: the Afa Okun and the Utu Eke are of Igbo origin. They are believed to have migrated from Obinkita and Ututu in Igboland and have since inter-mingled with their Annang host and absorbed part of their culture even though they still exhibit some aspects of Igbo culture (Akpan, 2012).

The Ibibio had a longer frontier with the Igbo than any of other Ibibio neighbours. Thus, in areas like Aro, Iberre, Oboro, Oloko, Bende, incoming Igbo eventually displaced, usually after some fighting, part or the whole of the original Ibibio population and their land, while in other areas like Ukanafun, the Ibibio later dispossessed the Igbo of the land the Igbo had occupied (Abasiattai, 1991).

Geography

The pre-colonial diplomacy of Ibibio and Igbo lends credence to the assertion that history and geography are inseparable subjects. Based on this, Smailes cited in Imbua (2006) argues that "only barrenness can ensue from the contemporary divorce of historical and geographical scholarship in English speaking world". Without doubt, people, places and events provide the basis for historical and geographical enquiries. Afigbo (1990) argues on this basis that "any meaningful discussion of the external contacts and relations of the Cross River cultural area must necessarily begin with the assessment of the extent to which its geography or natural features promoted or at least permitted contact with neighbouring regions and people.

One of the most important geographical features that influenced the pre-colonial diplomatic relations between the Ibibio and Igbo was the Cross River and its tributaries-Akpayafe, Qua Iboe, Mbo, Uya-Oron Rivers among others. The Cross River rises from the Cameroon Mountains and flows north-west until it meets the Anyim River. There it turns south-west towards Enyong Creek, from where it flows south-east to the sea. Leaving the forested and hill near the Cameroons, the river passes through a gently undulating savannah plain until it reaches its confluence with Enyong Creek, then it continues through the forested coastal plain which extends west to the Niger Delta (Latham, 1972).

These streams are claimed to be among the "Oil Rivers" that facilitated the exploitation of palm produce from the region in the era of the "legitimate trade". As its main backbone, the Cross River, with its tributaries promoted much travel and contact that served the needs of the people by providing the degree of linkage with neighbouring regions commensurate with the socio-economic needs and development of the time. The other significant body of water in the area was the Enyong Creek, which linked the Ibibio mainland through Itu to Arochukwu and her neighbours (Ukpong, 1986, Imbua, 2006). The Ibibio/Ngwa Igbo occupied and still occupy a contiguous plain land enclosed by some tributaries of Imo River at its lower course, namely Achacha stream and Aba River, which also enhanced their relations (Ntukidem, 1988).

Economic Relations

Trade was another factor that engendered relations between the Ibibio and Igbo during the period under study. According to Afigbo (1990), pre-colonial trade could be categorized into two types. The first was that in which goods moved from one village market to another in all directions of need. Through this process of trade, ethnic and cultural frontiers were crossed. He describes this pattern as "relay trade". The second type was the long-distance trade in which professional traders crossed clan and ethnic frontiers or zones of cultural transition to market their wares from one major market centre to another. The long distance trade had identifiable routes, major market centres and major traders and was different from the first "relay trade" because its routes were unplotable.

Ukpong (1986) notes that the pre-colonial Ibibio people from Ibiono Ibom traded in Igboland particularly with the Aro. According to him, it was easy for the Aro to visit markets at Use Ikot Amama and Ikot Aside in Ibiono Ibom and return to their homeland that very day. Similarly, other border villages in Ibiono Ibom and even non-border villages also traded with the Aro. He adds that apart from the Aro, traders from other parts of Igboland such as Abriba, Nkwerre and Awka also did business with the people of Ibiono Ibom. Other neighbouring communities in Ibibioland with the Aro such as Ikono and Ini people also had extensive trade relations with the Aro. The Abriba Igbo who were the most famed blacksmiths in the Cross River region transacted business with the Ibibio. There were trade routes between the Ibibio and Igbo areas; however, the most important route was the Arochukwu – Itu – Ikono – Opobo route. This route linked the coastal city-states, west of the Cross River with the Igbo and Ibibio hinterland.

Apart from the trade routes, the Ibibio were linked socio-economically to the Igbo through the Aro settlements. In 1854, for instance, many Ibibio including Efik, reportedly lived in Aro. Similarly, by 1900, particularly, the Aro had established settlements (or enclaves) in several Akwa Ibom villages, notably at Esene in Nnung Asang; Ikot Ama and Ikot Oku in Okon Annang; Use Ikot Amama; Nnung Okoro and Okopedi in Ibiono; Ikot Osukpong in Ika; Nkwot and Ukpum in Ikono; Mbak Ukan and Nnung Okoro in Ediene, Southern Iman and Awa clan. One Aro settlement, Ekpemiong, situated between Ibiono and Itak, was a large village. These settlements, which presumably started as resting places for

itinerant Aro traders, probably date back to the hey-days of the slave trade in the early 19th century (Abasiattai, 1991; Akpan, 2016).

Northrop (1978) has extensively discussed the deep economic diplomacy between the Ibibio and Aro. He notes that the association between the Aro and Ibibio was as old as Arochukwu itself, since some of the founding villages of Arochukwu were Ibibio speaking. According to his account, during the era of the slave trade, the association was expanded as a result of both economic and geographical circumstances. This was possible because the Ibibio possessed a dense population, and surrounded Arochukwu on three sides. It was natural that those villages of Arochukwu which were Ibibio in origin and whose citizens continued to retain the Ibibio language and elements of its culture should have become the trading partners with the Ibibio.

Northrop (1978) adds that the Arochukwu village of Obinkita was divided into four patrilineal kindreds; four of these operated among the Ibibio and one among the neighbouring Ngwa Igbo. Just as trade among the Ibibio was divided among several Aro villages, trade in the Western Ibibio area was divided among the four Obinkita lineages. The divisions corresponded roughly to ethnographic divisions among the Western Ibibio. Thus, Ndi Akweke lineage operated among the Northern Annang, Ndi Chioka among the Southern Annang, Ndi Otu in the Opobo area, and Ndi Okoro in the Ibiono clan of the Ibibio. Over time, as the number of Aro settlements expanded there was a certain amount of overlapping in the border areas, though these basic divisions in trade and settlement remained up to the time of the Nigerian Civil War.

Some Igbo residents in Ibibioland practised usury and by this means owned substantial farm-land and palm bush in the Ibibio villages where they lived, pledged by their Ibibio creditors (Abasiattai, 1991). Indeed, the area was an "economic unit" – in the sense of (a) being effectively linked by trade routes (b) using more or less the same currencies – brass, rods, copper wire, cowries, manillas etc. (c) economic resources of the Ibibio conveniently supplemented the produce of Igboland (Afigbo, 1987).

Inter-marriages

Inter-ethnic marriages served as another factor which sustained contacts and relations between the Ibibio and Igbo in the pre-colonial period. The Ibibio and the Igbo had engaged in inter-marriage right from when both groups settled at Ibom. Afigbo (1987), states that Igbo migrants from Okigwe-Olu-Umuahia ridge penetrated the Ibom area and made the population complex as a result of inter-marriages. Two Igbo groups, Ada and Ututu, are believed to have inter-married with the Ibibio at Ibom and the union produced a new group referred to as Ada-Ibibio. Also Akpan (2012), citing a colonial source records that the village of Ikot Uko in Ika-Annang in Akwa Ibom State, apparently inter-married with the Ukwa (Igbo) their neighbours to a considerable extent that they assimilated the customs of both areas. It is believed that the Ika people used the process of inter-marriage to acquire farm land in Ukwa Igbo area. In addition, Ika men engaged in extensive marriage of Ngwa Igbo women. Also Afigbo (1990) records that Igbo groups of Azumini and Ndoki were said to have been fond of marrying from among the Ibibio whose women they claimed "made excellent wives." (Afigbo, 1987).

Afigbo (1990) notes that in some cases, after the marriage has been contracted, the wife was made to live among the husband's people for the purpose of generating cultural diffusion, since the wife would introduce some elements of her culture like language, dances, folklores, world view, dishes, etc. Over the generations and centuries, this kind of links resulted in the cultural transfer and borrowings. Apart from this type of practice, there

was another type of marriage in which traders and other categories of Ibibio and Igbo people like hunters and traditional medicine men, who rendered services on either side of the frontiers took wives there. Rather than going back with their wives, they allowed them to stay among their own people to provide, not only conjugal benefits to the husbands, but also other form of benefits which aided their businesses.

Obviously, inter-ethnic marriages promoted integration. This was particularly so because the Ibibio paid high premium to in-laws, as well as grand-children who are products of marriage. Because of their sacred nature, grandchildren and in-laws 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 always guaranteed even in the period of wars. Moreover, the offspring of the inter-marriages often served as mediators in inter-conflicts, and generally they helped to smoothen relations between the Ibibio and their Igbo neighbours (Abasiatti, 1991; Akpan, 2016). Afigbo (1990) adds that the Institution of marriage was used to end protracted wars. This was done by rulers and warriors who, after failing to conquer their powerful enemies, sought to win them over by exchanging their daughters in marriage. Alternatively, ethnic groups that lived close to each other use this method to encourage intimate cultural contact and thereby prevented wars between one another.

Between the Obolo (Andoni) and the Ohafia Igbo, tradition developed and has remained that when an Obolo (Andoni) man was dissatisfied with his marriage, he would go to Umuahia-Ibeku for a wife. Umuahia-Ibeku is believed to be the location where the Ohafia "dumped" Obolo (Andoni) women whom they had abducted from Obolo (Andoni) when they fled the area. The tradition expresses the roots of their relations that span many centuries (Ejitiwu, 2010).

Shared Culture and Borrowings

Religious factor was an important cultural aspect that promoted the relations between groups. In the case of the pre-colonial Ibibio-Igbo, the ancient and wide ranging religio-ritual factor that helped to engender their relations was the *Long Juju*. The *Long Juju* oracle was known in Ibibio as *Ibritam Inokon* and in Igbo as *Ibin Ukpabi*. The oracle is believed to have been introduced into Ibom by an Ibibio man called Ino Okon. According to its social character, it was a local god of the Ibibio. Then it was captured by the Igbo slaves of the Ibibio, who successfully rebelled against their servile status. Under the control of the erstwhile Igbo slaves, the *Ibin Ukpabi* grew in influence to become the most powerful oracle in West Africa by the 19th century (Noah, 1980; Afigbo, 1990).

The Aro used the special protection which this oracle was widely believed to afford them to promote their commercial interests and vice-versa. The oracle became famous for its precision in detecting crimes and forecasting of the unknown. According to Basse (1999), the fact that the *Long Juju* served as an instrument of inter-group relations can be shown in a number of ways. First, people attached value to the oracle because of the belief that it forecast the future or solved any problem ranging from barrenness, ill-luck, poverty, infertility to malaria or epidemic. Apart from being an important religions of the people, the oracle was placed at the apex of the peoples political, judicial and religious pyramids. Consulting the oracle as an imperial external arbiter undoubtedly prevented innumerable local wars and thus promoted integration. Also, the oracle operated through agents. The links established by these agents could reach deep down to the roots of the society and could also last long. In addition to the oracle's agents whose interactions helped to promote relations, equally important was the activities of the clients who from time to time made pilgrimage to Arochukwu in search of psychic help and relief from the oracle.

Another factor which promoted the historical linkages and relations among the Ibibio and Igbo was the prevalence of traditional societies which was very highly developed among the people. The Ibibio, for instance, had *ekpo*, *ekong*, *ekpri akata*, *obon*, *ekpe* etc. Varieties of these societies diffused to the Cross River Igbo and Ngwa Ibo areas. The societies performed similar socio-economic and political functions in the communities. However, there were observed variations in usage. The institution of *ekpe* (believed to have been introduced into the Cross River region by the Ejagham group) enjoyed tremendous influence in the area across the Cameroon border. Because of the profound influence, Anwana (2008) describes Eastern part of Nigeria as *ekpe* cultural area. It forged closer links and inter-group relations among these communities. According to him, at Arochukwu for example, the *mgbala ekpe*, that is *ekpe* halls, located at various places still serve as the meeting points where important issues are discussed and decisions taken for the administration of these areas. It is believed that these institutions were borrowed from the Cross River zone (Anwana, 2008)

Nsibidi was the reduction into writing of the sign language which was later extensively monopolized by some secret societies like *ekpe*, *ukpotio*, *nyambge* etc. It was prevalent among the Ibibio, the Cross River Igbo and other groups in the Cross River region. It also spread up to Bende area of Igboland. Once *Nsibidi* had attained full cultural fruition, it acquired at least four levels of meanings. It was once understood as the secret language of secret societies- it became more associated with secret language of *ekpe* society; it once served as a secret code for transmitting amorous messages and white ethnographers applied it to the principles of decorative arts (Erim, 1990).

There was a tendency among the frontier Igbo and their neighbours to borrow political institutions and practices from one another. Here the Igbo would appear to have been much prone to borrow political and social institutions from their non-Igbo neighbours (Afigbo, 1987). Indeed, the deep intercourse between the Ibibio and Igbo manifests also in their socio-political organization. These two groups, like the other ethnic groups occupying the Cross River region, did not under one sovereign political authority, nor indeed evolved political paramountcies of any considerable size.

According to Abasiattai (1991), the special Ibibio-Aro relationship was further evident in the Aro being the only Igbo group to call the Ibibio by their name "Ibibio" and not "Mmong" as the other Igbo did; while the Ibibio called them *Inokon* and not "Uneghe", the Ibibio name for all the other Igbo groups. Of significance also was the bearing of Igbo names in the various communities the Aro settled in Ibibio area, these included: Nana, Okorafor, Mbodi, Inokon, Okoronkwo, Okorie, Akra, Iwe, Okonna, Eke, Mba among others. Moreover, Ibibio names like Uko, Udo and so on are also borne by the Cross River Igbo people.

Language

Language was an important cultural instrument of diplomacy which helped to strengthen relations between groups. Among Igbo groups, there are linguistic similarities with them and their Ibibio and Efik neighbours. Cross River Igbo have dialects which contain many words or phrases borrowed from their Ibibio-Efik neighbours. According to Anwana (2008), Arochukwu, Ohafia, Ututu, Ihechiowa people exhibit appreciable understanding of Efik language and could speak it easily. This development is linked with the early contacts of the Cross River Igbo with the Ibibio and Efik traders.

The table below shows the list of linguistic borrowings (Cognates) between the Ibibio/Efik and Igbo (Ohafia)

S/N	English	Ibibio/Efik	Igbo (Ohafia)
1	God	<i>Abasi</i>	<i>Obasi</i>
2	Church	<i>Ufok Abasi</i>	<i>Iko Abasi</i>
3	Rice	<i>Edesi</i>	<i>Eresi</i>
4	Chair	<i>Apaghaha</i>	<i>Akpakara</i>
5	A female name	<i>Ikwo</i>	<i>Nkwo</i>
6	A male youth	<i>Akparawa</i>	<i>Mkparawa</i>
7	Fathe	<i>Ette</i>	<i>Ete</i>
8	Plate	<i>Usan</i>	<i>Usan</i>
9	Plantain	<i>Ukom</i>	<i>Ukom</i>
10	Periwinkle	<i>Mfi</i>	<i>Mfi</i>
11	Waterleaf	<i>monmonikong</i>	<i>maimaikong</i>
12	Crayfish	<i>Obu</i>	<i>Obuu</i>
13	Onion	<i>Ayim</i>	<i>Eyin</i>
14	Sugar	<i>Shuga</i>	<i>Shuga</i>
15	Pussy cat	<i>Abussi</i>	<i>Bussu</i>
16	Machine	<i>Mazin</i>	<i>Mmasihini</i>
17	Rust	<i>Nkanafan</i>	<i>Nkarafa</i>
18	Vegetable soup	<i>Erikanikong</i>	<i>Edikangikong</i>
19	Prostitute	<i>Akpara</i>	<i>Akpada</i>
20	Bottle	<i>Ekpeme</i>	<i>Ekpeme</i>
21	A type of vegetable	<i>Adusa</i>	<i>Aduza</i>

Source: Ekeke, O. K. M. (2015). "Linguistic Borrowing in Ohafia Igbo: An Overview". *Higher Education in Nigeria: Perspective & Reforms*. Nnadi, C., Imhanlahimi and Chikwendu, A. (Eds.), pp. 409-419.

Warfare

Unlike after the arrival of the Europeans, inter-ethnic warfare was rare in the area of study. The inter-dependence of the various communities made warfare unnecessary and economically expensive and unwise. It was the European slave trade which gave the area its notoriety for inter-ethnic wars. Slaves were acquired mostly by violent methods involving scuffle. This largely accounts for the reign of terror which characterised the region (Noah, 1990).

Afigbo (1990) confirms that as a social phenomenon, war was considered to have been virtually endemic and senseless. People fought when they had disagreements, real or

imagined, which were considered grave enough to justify "risking life and limb and when there was the predisposing psychological situation".

He also states that:

In any case, war did not necessarily create deep discontinuities in inter-group relations. By itself, it was a form of inter-group relations which encouraged cultural inter-change all round. Even enemies learned from one another military strategy and tactics, borrowed or stole supposedly powerful war-medicine and *juju*, implements and warlike social institutions like closely integrated age-grade and secret societies which emphasized manliness, self-reliance and training in martial arts. It also encouraged the learning of the enemy's language and the borrowing of his dressing habits and other cultural traits for reasons of intelligence and espionage. Equally, the crisis of war often compelled opponents to travel well beyond their immediate environments to learn few tricks, buy or borrow warlike weapons and medicines and so on. With the Ibibio, this practice was very common (Afigbo, 1990: 133).

Even though war could be regarded as a factor in inter-group relations as far as the peoples of the Cross River zone and their immediate neighbours were concerned, Afigbo (1990) also points out that it was only a proximate rather than an ultimate factor because people did not go to war for the sake of war. They fought either over land or they fought for trade rights. They were also wars fought to redeem injured prestige or out of total misapprehension. Land as a factor in inter-group contact was probably the most important as far as the relations between Igbo and the Ibibio was concerned. It served as the key that could open the door to a fuller understanding of the history of relations between Ohuhu (Ngwa) and the Ibibio. The endless quest for land along this entire frontier provoked not only war but also migrations and counter-migrations in which small groups on both sides were either overwhelmed and absorbed or outflanked and allowed to survive as ethnic islands. The Ndoki, Afikpo are dotted with such islands of ethnic Ibibio, Erei and Ntezi peoples. Other groups such as Ubakala, Igbere, Oboro, Ariba, Ohafia and so on, are said to contain substrata of non-Igbo populations who were completely overwhelmed and absorbed (Afigbo, 1990).

Border clashes and trade disputes and occasionally occurred between the Ibibio and the Aro. The Aro used to hire Abam mercenaries to collect debt, redress grievances or chastise an adversary. About 1896, for instance, Ekpemiong Aro in Ibibioland sided with Ibiono against Itak, both in Ibibioland during a dispute, and on behalf of Ibiono, hired Abam mercenaries were invited by the Aro to devastate Itak. Nevertheless, trade required peace and stability and neither the Aro nor their Ibiono hosts or trading partners could afford perennial conflict or warfare. (Abasiattai, 1991).

Some Aspects Diplomacy

The essence of diplomatic craft in pre-colonial times was to promote peace, conclude treaties, maintain and break alliances, establish boundaries, develop and protect trade and pay tribute. Several diplomatic methods were adopted by communities to maintain ties. These included exchange of gifts, sending regular messages, uses of accredited agents like priests. The exchange of gifts was done to strengthen the bond of relationships. Gifts included; slaves, cloths, cowries, beads, kola nuts and so on. The commonly used modes of sending were symbolic language which could not be easily interpreted.

In the case of the Ibibio, secret societies acted as diplomatic agents. Some of them established tool stations along major trade routes. In return for tools, they guaranteed

travelers smooth and safe passage. Their members also had easy entry into neighbouring communities. In other words, an *ekpe* initiate in Ibibioland would have easy passage into any Igbo community, no matter where *ekpe* was active either along the routes or in the village square and vice-versa.

Afigbo corroborates this point

For non-members, it was a different matter. But usually a long-distance trader or other business man would know what society was dominant along the route of his business, and that the normal code of conduct required him to purchase initiation into such a society, even if it did not exist among his own people. Through their “extra-territorial” influence, these societies could also help to arrange restitution for its members inadvertently plundered along their routes of business. They could also arrange to collect debts owing to their members, and to settle disputes between communities (Afigbo, 1990: 140).

It was not uncommon for the secret societies, particularly *ekpe* to use *Nsibidi* in their communication. This was possible because of the regional usage *Nsibidi* had acquired. When the sign language was used, it was understood only by the initiates of such secret society.

Conclusion

Contacts and linkages between the Ibibio of present day Akwa Ibom State and the Igbo people both of Southern East Nigeria, particularly the Cross River Igbo, Ngwa Igbo and Ndoki/Azumini Igbo, have been in existence right from the pre-colonial period. In the case of the Cross River Igbo, particularly the Aro group, the relations is believed to have been enacted at Ibom, which is their ancestral homeland. They co-habited this region and engaged in multi-faceted and mutually beneficial relations. On their part, the Ngwa Igbo dispersed from present day Owerri region, migrated and inter-mingled with the Ibibio population (Ibeme and Moko) who originally occupied the area, with time they evolved their distinct “Ngwa” identity.

As the work has shown, intense economic interactions and inter-marriages between these two groups resulted in cultural borrowings and diffusion. For instance, bilingualism was a common phenomenon associated with the Ibibio and Igbo, particularly at the frontier areas. Indeed, the relations would not have been as beneficial as it was if not for the use of sound pre-colonial diplomatic instruments like secret societies, treaty/pacts, exchange of gifts, emissaries oath-taking, etc. The outcome was that the small autonomous village-states of the Ibibio were often more in conflict and rivalry among themselves, than they were with the Igbo neighbour.

In the pre-colonial times the largest unit of identity for most inhabitants does not appear to have been primarily ethnic unit such as Igbo or Ibibio, but rather the smaller dialect or cultural group. Because of this, the main linguistic boundaries proved no real barrier to trade, and trade routes cut across them. Members of one ethnic group freely attended the markets of another and vice-versa. This is not to say that ethnicity counted for naught, but economic transactions between cultural sub-groups took place as readily across linguistic frontiers as within them. Thus, “little if anything is to be gained by writing the history of each ethnic group separately as has been the unfortunate practice of some historians, much understanding of the economic interdependence of the region will be lost by such approach” (Northrop, 1978).

Considering the level of interaction, inter-mingling and cooperation, which eliminated barriers between the Ibibio and Igbo in the pre-colonial period, the relations

between these two groups could be described as “robust”. Even wars were fought for the purpose of expanding and furthering relations for socio-cultural, economic and political reasons; as such, even in that dispensation, the territorial expanse of Nigeria was beginning to emerge through these relations. Indeed, the area has been a “socio-economic” unit since then. The present generation of Ibibio and Igbo people owe their forebears a duty to galvanize this rich historical and diplomatic antecedent to forge enduring “regional approach” to development within the frame work of the Nigeria federation.

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