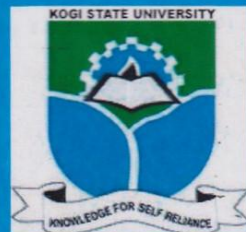


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The Abua/Odual Group and Her Cross River Neighbours Since the Pre-colonial Era

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Abstract

All through history, mankind has always been on the move. Such movements brought about new settlements and accounted for different experiences. The Bantu migration is one of such profound movements of human kind that has extensively shaped the history of Africa South of the Sahara. The Efut (Balondo) migration to the present-day Nigeria was a bit of the Bantu migration. It is believed that the Efut and some related groups after arriving the Cameroon area moved further to establish some settlements in the Cross River region, while some of them continued to penetrate the heart of the Niger-Delta and established some settlements for themselves. The evolving groups include the Abua, the Odual, the Ogbia, the Engeni, the Abureni etc. After settling for a long time, the Ijaw people accessed the Niger Delta, likely from the Benin axis. Even though many factors especially that of geography have melted these aboriginal groups into a common historical environment with the Ijaw, they still maintain their distinct characteristics. Their peculiar cultural norms and values such as language, masks, masquerades, housing styles, world view, economic practices etc., consistently portray their Cross River roots. It is the consciousness of the history of their distinct origin that has triggered their rejection of assimilation by their larger Ijaw neighbours. The paper encourages beneficial inter-

group relations with all the groups in the Niger Delta including the Ijaw but on the basis of mutual respect for the enhancement of the overall development of the Niger Delta region.

Introduction

It is very common for reasons of convenience, and perhaps out of intellectual lethargy, to call and identify almost all the inhabitants of the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria as Ijaw.¹ In fact, the Ijaw have been deliberately but wrongly projected as the largest ethnic group in the Niger-Delta and fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria after the Hausa/Fulani, the Yoruba and the Igbo.² This is not correct because the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State is the largest ethnic group in the Niger Delta and the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria. G.I. Jones in his landmark work entitled, *The Background of Eastern Nigerian History Volume III. Tribal Distribution* (2), evidently confirms this assertion that "after the Igbo, the Ibibio are the largest ethnic group in Eastern Nigeria, speaking a common language and their country on the west side of the Cross River and between the Enyong valley and the coast is heavily populated".³

To consolidate the above erroneous claim, some non-Ijaw neighbours in the Niger Delta who constitute distinct minority ethnic groups and have proven to have settled in the Niger Delta area before the arrival of Ijaw have in the last few years been grouped as sub-groups of the Ijaw. Some of the groups include the Abua, the Odual, the Ogbia, Engeni etc., known appropriately as the Abua/Odual group. The correct historical perspective is that the ethnic groups in Akwa Ibom/Cross River states migrated from the Nigeria-Cameroon border and settled in the Niger Delta region.⁴ Indeed, available evidence links the Abua to the Efut (Balondo) people who domiciled in the Cameroon, parts of the present-day Cross River and Akwa Ibom States.⁵ However, it should be mentioned that some of these groups have been "infiltrated" by settlers from other directions such as Benin.⁶ Moreover, based on the available

information at the author's disposal, not all the non-Ijaw groups have yet been identified at this point.

This paper is divided into nine sub-themes. which are introduction, Efut migrations, geographical particulars of Abua/Odual group, Abua/Odual group dispersal and settlements in the Niger Delta, language factor as a proof of the "East-West" migration of the Abua/Odual group, economic relations between the Abua/Odual group and her Cross River neighbours, shared social and cultural value, Dismantling the Pan-Ijaw identity of the Abua/Odual group and conclusion.

The Efut Migrations

According to Nanji, the origin, migration and settlement of the Balondo have diverse versions. There is a popular opinion prevalent among the Balondo people concerning their origin and migration which have also gained the approval of some researchers of Balondo history who claim that the Balondo originated from the Congo region, sailed to Calabar where they lived for many years before making a second journey to their present location in the Cameroon. These researchers also claim that a faction of the Balondo in Calabar refused to embark on the second migration to the Cameroon and has therefore become the group of Balondo in Calabar called the "Efut". Although the greatest source of Balondo history is derived from oral tradition, such sources must be carefully analysed in order to minimise bias and lies that can distort historical facts.⁷

Citing a historian, Sese Atabong Motale, Nanji states that:

The Womboko and Bakweri hypothesis recall the first wave of migration from the Fako Mountain saw our ancestors migrating to this region. The second wave was between 1770 and 1780 during the Great Exodus when most of the inhabitants of Rio del Rey fled the region. There were several waves of migration; several groups sailing to the present-day Nigeria (Efik, Aruan, Afikpo, Ibibio, Efut, Ejagham). Several groups sailed towards Ubenekang and settled around

Bamusso and towards Fako (Balondo). Another group sailed towards River *Meme* and rivers Masaka (Bakundu and Bima) and another group plunged into the massive Kurop forests (Batanga and Ngolo), while another group remained or fled and took refuge in the forests and returned after the wars.⁸

According to the Efut Combined Assembly, the Efut migrated from the Cameroon during the Batanga Wars of the 11th century and settled in Calabar. This account is not in tandem with the popular version of the origin, migration and settlement of the Balondo which holds a contrary view. The brief history of the Efut propagated by the Combined Assembly states in part that:

The Efut are descendants of the Bantu race of Central Africa, who migrated from the Cameroon during the Batanga Wars of the 11th century A.D. to this part of the world. Seven Efut founding fathers namely: Nabanda, Na Ukem, Na Mpara, Ebuka, Atu Iyoko Ifakama and Ifundu of the Balondo tribe left the Cameroon in the wake of a senseless and destructive war to look for a new abode. Each of them sailed out in a canoe fully equipped and carrying separate royalty and *mgbe* (ekpe) insignia as symbols of individual sovereignty. Strongly united by a common ancestral origin and devastating experience, they journeyed together arriving first at Rio del Rey otherwise known as Usakedet. Their next port of call and temporary settlement Nteten now known and called Ikang in today's Akpabuyo Local Government Area from there they moved to Isu Ekom Esighi in Akpabuyo where they established a permanent settlement and when pushing further afield left Ebuka who had become too old to join the trip, in this field settlement. But the two sons of Ebuka, namely: Ebuka and Aya Ebuka joined others in the trip which landed in Esuk Orokok/Edim (now Edibe Edibe) where all the Efut settled and successively acquired the vast Efut lands in what is known today as Calabar.⁹

Another account states that the Bantu people who later became the Efut Bakassi migrated from Central Africa and are properly known as the Balondo. On their departure from Central Africa they are said to have entered Cameroon and stayed in the neighbourhood of Isangele, otherwise called Usak Edet. They were comprised of Northern Balondo known as Bina and the Southern Balondo, known as Batanga. Here they formed villages some of which were Abua, Nabonda, Ekondo Titi, Ekondo Nene, Batanga and Bakundi.¹⁰

It is also claimed that it is probable that they must have stayed there for about a century until one day, a Batanga man who used to have a secret love affair with the wife of a Nabonda man was caught and hacked to death by the angry husband. The Batanga people, in revenge of their dead, waged a war and drove the Nabonda people who fled to Calabar through Ikang. From Ikang, they moved as roving fishermen into the Calabar River creeks on which banks they founded five scattered settlements of Efut Abua, Ibonda, Ukem, Nkpara and Ifako, Efut Ekondo and Idundu. A few others remained at Akpabuyo as Efut Esighi. Some of them remained at the area known as Bakassi, such as: Efut Inwang (Bateka), Ambai Ekpa and Abua.¹¹

Abasiattai avers that the Efut migrated originally from Balondo region of Cameroon. Since tradition states that they precede Efik (but not the Qua group of the Ejagham), their advent in Calabar River probably occurred in 1500 A.D.¹² According to Ekarika, the Efut like Ekondo, Abua, Ibonda, Idundu, Ukem, Ifondo etc., migrated from their ancestral home near Usak Edet in the Cameroon following the outbreak of the Batanga War or another pre-historic war of that nature. The Efut later separated from a section of Uruan and established a community known as Efut Inwang around Usak Edet in the Rio del Rey. After some time, the land could no longer contain them; hence, some of them started to move on and landed on the shores of Ntemtem otherwise known as Ikang in Bakassi. Ekarika claims further that the Efut settled for a long time at Ikang and penetrated considerable areas of the settlement.

However, they could not tame the thick forest land and swamps around areas bordering Efut Ifiang.¹³

After settling at Ntemtem, Ikang for some time, they sailed southwards through the Atimbo River, which runs as far as Idundu and founded settlements such as Isu Ekom (Efut Esihi or Efut Abua) in present-day Akpabuyo Local Government Area. After sometime, some of them sailed further through the Qua River until they arrived at the border region now known as *Esuk Edibe Edibe* in modern Calabar. They again deforested some portion of the area and settled there. Another group accessed present-day Creek Town via the Calabar River. The Efut named this region Mosiguni. They also established communities such as Ibonda, Mbarakom and Ukem before some of them migrated further to establish Etonkoasari (Esuk Okokok now in the region of Anantigha, Calabar South).¹⁴

On their arrival to the area, they deforested the vast thick Equatorial mangrove forest in the hinterland for their habitation. They eventually stamped their authority of ownership on the land as their permanent land. Since the Efut came in their various kindred/groupings, they must have separately deforested their places of abode and settled within the region in their separate kindred groupings and established their *mgbe* (ekpe) shrines in their respective areas of authority. The brief historical sketch explains why the Efut now inhabit Calabar, Akpabuyo, Okoyong, Creek Town and Bakassi in Cross River State.¹⁵

Abasiattai and Noah state that when the Efik arrived from Uruan, it was the Efut who gave them land: first on the west bank where the Efik built Creek Town (near the Efut settlements of Ukem and Abua), and later on, on the east bank where they built Obutong (or Old Town). The neighbouring Efut settlements on the east bank included Ekondo, Ibundu, Mkpara and Ifoko. When the Efik built other settlements on the east bank on neighbouring land obtained from the Qua, the Efut and Efik came to live in very close proximity, to inter-mingle and thereby mutually acculturate.¹⁶

Abua: Geographical and Population Particulars in the Niger Delta

For a clearer understanding of the Abua people, a brief examination of the geography of Abua is necessary. Abua territory is one of the ancient kingdoms in the Niger Delta. It is situated in the present-day Abua/Odual Local Government Area of Rivers State. It is located on the riverine coast, West of Ahoada. It is bounded on the South by the Kalabari and the Sombrero River; on the South-West by Nembe; on the West by the River Orashi (Engenni); Odual and Kugbo territories; on the North-West by Engenni and Ekpeye of Ahoada West Local Government Area and North-East by Ekpeye of Ahoada East Local Government Area and the Ikwerre of Emouhua Local Government Area.¹⁷

According to Appia, the National Population Commission claims that Abua/Odual land mass is 704km². Appia also states that the population figure of 134,420 which was the outcome of the National Population census of 1991 and the 282,988 in 2006 were rejected by the Abua people. He claims that local projection put the population at about 500,000 in 1991.¹⁸

Odual clan is bounded on the East by Abua villages of Ogbema, Ogbogolo, on the West by Oloibiri, Amurukeni in Ogbia (in Bayelsa State), on the North by Oruma Ibelebiri (also in Ogbia) and on the South by Nembe Town of Oluasiri, Bassambiri, Ekpoma, Ogbolomabiri (also in Bayelsa State) etc.¹⁹

The Abua Group Dispersal and Settlement in the Niger Delta

There are about three traditions of origin of the Abua people. These are the tradition of independent origin, the Benin Empire migration tradition (the Ijaw origin) and the Delta-Cross movement tradition.²⁰ These traditions have been critically examined from the "in-side out perspective" by an Abua historian.²¹ As will be seen in the work, the Abua people initiated a legal battle against the Ijaw vehemently requesting that the Abua should be delisted as one of the Ijaw sub-groups. This legal battle was won in 2019.²²

Murdock, Nair, Williamson, Alagoa, etc., evidently posit that given the language of the Abua people, the people may have migrated from the Bantu heartland and moved downwards to the point where they currently occupy through the Eastern Niger Delta. The traditions of other people with related languages, the culture of the Abua group and a comparison of the linguistic relationship between the Central Delta group and her immediate neighbours reinforce their view.²³

The above proposition posits that the Abua group shares the same ancestry with the Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom State. This view is strongly supported by similarities in the numbering system of Abua, Efik, and Ibibio. It is also supported by some socio-political similarities; Abua, Efik, and Ibibio among others belong to the broad language group known as Delta Cross. Murdock suggests that these three ethnic groups – Ibibio, Efik, and Abua among others belong to the Bantoid sub-group of the Nigritic family based on linguistic evidence.²⁴

Similarly, Ejituwu writing about the Obolo (Andoni) which is also a Delta Cross speaking community, suggests that:

There was a general movement of the Delta Cross speakers from the Upper reaches of the Cross River towards the mouth of the river. As population pressures mount at the mouth of the Cross River, various groups of Delta Cross speakers started to look for new rivers and creeks into which to expand. To the east, they found themselves blocked by a cluster of other Bantu-speaking groups who were themselves in the process of expansion; to the west however, lay an area, which while not empty, was more sparsely populated. Accordingly, several waves of migrants travelled along the western creeks, some eventually settling down either in the Eastern Niger Delta or elsewhere in the Delta. According to Ejituwu, the Central Delta group to which Abua belongs is one of the earliest migrants among these Delta Cross speakers.²⁵

Tradition has it that Abua, Odual, Kugbo, Ogbia among others sometimes referred to as Abua group after migration from the Rio del Rey settled at Agana in the present-day Obolo (Andoni) area before the arrival of the Obolo (Andoni) people.²⁶

It is also believed that:

Crossing through the present-day Obolo area, they journeyed to Obomotu and thence to the place that was later known as Ake in the Central Delta....with time, Ebela moved southwards with his large family and began to spread. He is believed to be the progenitor of the aboriginal Ogbia man. With time, it became obvious that the space was not enough to accommodate them. Ake and Emeni thus moved north-wards. This movement led to Ake's founding of Eguaka, a community he named after his wife. It is here that Ake died, his remains were taken back to Ake, his first settlement and the spiritual capital of the aborigines....As a mark of honour, Ebela, Emeni and all their related communities, which by now were neither Abua, Ogbia nor Odual raised Ake to the status of a god and declared the day of his burial a national holiday...similarly, having passed on, the leadership of his house fell on his son, Ogidi.²⁷

The Ogbia aborigines are believed to have occupied many scattered settlements. They were located right in the forest zone between Okoroba and Opune in Ogbia. They were organised in petty kingdoms in which a parent settlement was either surrounded or flanked by offspring settlement. For instance, Ebela, the parent settlement was flanked by Itokopiri on the North-West, Oguman Esan on the East, Emeni on the South and also Ogidi and Ake on the West. Also, in the Kugbo line, Amiiriwal was surrounded by Egula, Odioma, Ekanah and Agbaraga. Each kingdom had a political super structure ruled by a war leader, strongly supported by a court of elders. Tradition also maintains that Agum was one of the aborigines who originally inhabited Ebela kingdom.²⁸

Available records on the origin of Twon Nembe indicate that the Opu-biga, Kala-piga, Obolo, Onyo and Oro were not the original settlers of the town. The assertion is based on the belief by the majority of the people and the scenery of the place that a town must have been in existence in the vicinity before the advent of the Opu-biga, Kala-piga, Obolo and Oro, who represent the Ijaw evolution in the area. This reinforces the belief that Bantu-speaking population of the Abua, Ogbia and Odual were already established in the Niger Delta when the remote common ancestors of the Ijaw and Benin established themselves in the Delta.²⁹

The rest of the group moved on to Opumatubu and later to Arughunya and settled. There the Kugbo and Odual groups settled but the Abua lineage moved further to a location called Esidia Ozu and settled. Once settled, they discovered that the perennial flooding at that location was a source of destruction to crops and property, Abua and his people then moved further north east to Olokpogha. Other Abua offspring who constitute members of the group spread to convenient places where they lived with their children in the neighborhood of Abua. These settlement places have become clans now. Thus there exists Emughami, Okpadien, Otami, and Agana from the immediate stock. Agana inhabits Central Abua area while other places are named after the groups from the Abua stock.³⁰

Corroborating the above stance, a source holds that the Abureni communities of Abua, and Idema had settled in the Obolo (Andoni) area before their departure to the Central Delta. The source also states that Agana was the "son" of Abua. There is a community known as "Agana" at present in Obolo (Andoni). The source also claims that the sacred drums of the national religion of Abua and Obolo (Andoni) are called *okam* and *akama*, respectively.³¹

It has been established that in the Eastern Delta, the original Obolo (Andoni) migrants settled among the Ibani (Bonny and Opobo), Okrika, Kalabari and Nkoro. The Ibani and Nkoro are in the midst of the Obolo. Bonny was first a

settlement of fishermen from the Andoni; hence it was originally called "Andony". Obolo (Andoni) settlements at the Rio del Rey with a population of 300 may have integrated into Grand Bonny. Outside Grand Bonny, Ayama (Peterside), Otuokolo, Finima, Abalamabie and the Asaramtoru villages were also first settled by the Obolo (Andoni). It is also believed that the people of Okochiri, Okuru, Ogloma, Bolo and Ogu had once settled in the present-day Obolo (Andoni) area.³²

Some Kalabari towns have tradition of prior settlement in the present-day Andoni country. Moreover, Bille is Obolo (Andoni). Other Kalabari towns believed to be Obolo (Andoni) kinsmen include: Ido, Tombia, Abalama and Kula. It is also opined that except for the Endeme, the first settlers of Akialame, Amabiame, Iturome and Bukome came from Obolo (Andoni) area, while Jones asserts further that "the Korome ward, and some of the other groups in the Kalabari territory, is more likely to have an Andoni and Efik off-shoot".³³

The Language Factor

The Cross River region is geographically contiguous with the "core Niger Delta" adjoining it. The relationship between the two areas illustrates the correctness of the observation that "river basins do not necessarily make geographical regions". The continuity between the geographical regions is matched by the continuity in the distribution of peoples and cultures. This continuity is easily demonstrated through a comparison of the languages. Thus, the Cross River sub-branch of the Niger Congo family of African languages has extensions of members into the "core" Niger Delta. The Cross River sub-branch is classified into Bendi (comprising languages of the Ogoja area), and Delta-Cross for the languages of the rest of the Cross River region extending into the "core" Niger Delta.³⁴

Along the northern fringe of the Delta, smaller groups have close linguistic relations with the groups in the Cross River region. The Central Delta or Abua group (comprising Abua or Abuan, Odual or Saka, Kugbo, Ogbia, Ogbronuagum or

Bukuma, Obulom, or Abulome, Ogbogolo and Mini are some examples.³⁵ The Odual language has a distribution network. The Adibaam comprises: Adada, Emelego, Ogboloma and Okolomade. The Aruhunya group comprises Ekunuga, Anyu, Emaarikpoko, Obedum and Odua.³⁶

Odual is co-ordinate with other Central Delta languages such as: Abuan, Abureni, Obolom, Ogbia, Ogbogolo and Ogbronuagun. These languages which Odual are coordinate are also spoken in Rivers State of Nigeria, except Ogbia, which is spoken in Bayelsa State of Nigeria. There is dearth of scholarly linguistic literature on these languages in comparison with languages such as Degema, Kalabari, Obolo and Izon.³⁷

It should be noted that Abureni which is classified as a Delta-Cross has strong similarities (word list) with the Ibibio language as shown below.

s/n	Ibibio	Abureni	English
1	<i>lba</i>	<i>lwal</i>	Two
2	<i>lta</i>	<i>lsar</i>	Three
3	<i>l nang</i>	<i>lnya</i>	Four
4	<i>Ekpat</i>	<i>Ekpa</i>	Bag
5	<i>Akeni</i>	<i>ltami</i>	My own
6	<i>Ami</i>	<i>Ami</i>	I, Me
7	<i>Mmin</i>	<i>Amin</i>	Win e
8	<i>Ako</i>	<i>Aguh</i>	Pot
9	<i>Unam</i>	<i>Enam</i>	Animal
10	<i>Obuh</i>	<i>Obor</i>	to beco me decompose d
11	<i>Eka</i>	<i>Aya</i>	Mo the r
12	<i>Baka</i>	<i>Ba</i>	Divi de
13	<i>Odom</i>	<i>Olom</i>	Bit e

Source: Daniemi Etire. *The Orthography of the Abureni Language*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, 2015

Economic Relations between the Abua/Odual and Her Cross River Neighbours

There is evidence of internal long-distance trade spanning the length and breadth of the Niger Delta. Because of the geographical position, the Eastern Delta states in the salt-water delta would have required items of their diet from outside. The north-to-south trade, therefore, must have pre-dated the European overseas trade. Parts of the east-to-west trade also pre-dated the overseas trade, for the canoe and salt industries were basic to the economy and were noted by the first Portuguese; some parts went on side by side with it (as with the north-to-south trade); but other parts were superseded by European imports.³⁸

But whatever the degree of influence of European trade, Alagoa strongly states that before the arrival of the European traders on the coast of West Africa, the new overseas trade was grafted to an earlier system of long-distance trade within the Niger Delta. Indeed, this earlier long-distance trade, in all probability, provided the stimulus to the formation of the state systems, in ways similar to the better known changes wrought by the overseas trade. The overseas trade merely altered the nature and dimensions of trade within the Niger Delta, and accelerated changes already begun by the internal long-distance trade.³⁹

The strategic location of Abua at the banks of the rivers -Orashi (Engenni) and Sombrero was influenced by the vegetation prevalent in the environment. Tall trees and natural forest abound. These forests provide a veritable habitat for many species of animals. These rivers also enhance fishing as an occupation as well as combining sufficient sunshine to produce fertile harvest. It is this special natural feature that distinguishes Abua from the swamps of the eastern Niger Delta.⁴⁰

According to a source, the soil in the fresh water swamp is more conducive to agriculture; bananas and plantains have been cultivated for a long time. The earliest form of exchange in

the Eastern Delta states was therefore one between them and the fishing and farming communities of the fresh water swamp region such as Abua. This was to form the bedrock of trade relations between Abua and her Eastern Delta neighbours of Nembe and others who regarded Abua as the immediate mainland community for their food supplies. In the saltwater mangrove swamps of Nembe, the economy consisted mainly of fishing and salt production. But in an age when the agricultural potentials of the mangrove was scarcely realised, and when swamp reclamation could only be undertaken manually, this constraint limited Nembe to only a few farming methods, mostly intensive methods.⁴¹

It has been pointed out that because the area lacked sufficient arable land for farming, fishing had, from the time of settlement, been the major occupation of the people. The collection of mollusk, such as shellfish, periwinkle, whelks and oysters may have constituted significant part of the diet of the Central Delta people, as indicated by ethnographic information. Indeed, while shellfish was a very important source of protein, there seem to have played a subsidiary role in the diet of the Ijaw of the Eastern Delta.

Alagoa agrees with this assertion thus:

There is no denying that since the predominantly salt water swamp environment of the Eastern Delta communities was not very suitable for agriculture, it virtually pre-determined the early settlers to look outside the area for the satisfaction of a large proportion for their food.⁴²

In the above respect, Abua was handy. It should be added that while the Delta environment tends to isolate the Ijaw from their hinterland neighbours to some extent, the river network provided by the delta also constitutes communication links and highways for the exchange of goods and ideas. Alagoa cited in Appia observes that Nembe for example seems to have formed

such a link with their Abua, Ogbia and Abureni neighbours.⁴³

Trade brought the Nembe and the Eastern Delta to Abua and the Ayaezi Abua market soon became an epicentre for exchange. The market dates back to about 1600 and long before it assumed its present name; initially, it was known as *Erugh-lkpo-Kiani*. It was a place where widows, orphans and other weaklings of the society brought their products such as food stuffs, cam wood, chalk, parrot feathers etc. for exchange with other desired items which they needed. The market also had supplies of banana, plantains, yams, palm oil etc., which the Abua were known for. The Abua women exchanged farm produce which were rare as much as sort by their Nembe neighbours with fish and periwinkle through barter.

Alagoa summarises the deep and age-long economic contact between the people of the Niger Delta thus:

People from the Cross River valley apparently penetrated the Niger Delta over thousand years ago. The Ogoni and the Andoni (Obolo) entered the Eastern Niger Delta periphery long ago from the Cross River valley or east of it, and have made the Niger Delta their home. These cases confirm the possibility of movements through the creeks and rivers that naturally unite regions from antiquity. The Abua of Rivers State and Ogbia of Bayelsa State suggest movements into the Niger Delta regions East of the Cross River State, and penetrating farther west into the Niger Delta.⁴³

In specific terms, the people of Akwa Ibom also engaged in extensive trade of *ufofop* – “local gin” with the Abua and their Ijaw neighbours. An informant narrated that in the 1960s, many Akwa Ibom people used to be involved in the business. His base was his village in Uko Ntighe, in the present-day Mbo Local Government Area. He recalls that they used to sail to Abua and other parts of the Niger Delta in a hand pulled boat, a journey that used to last 20 days, to and fro. He adds that they used to

sail through the creeks without penetrating the Ocean.⁴⁴ Farmers and palm-wine tappers from the Cross River region also operate in all parts of Abua/Odual.

Other Shared Cultural values

Studies have shown that people's belief largely informs their pattern of life style and behaviour in the society and as such forms a base for their history. In this case, an analysis of Ijaw belief *vis-à-vis* the Abua may therefore add credence to the above discourse. For instance, the Ijaw believe that God is feminine, while to the Abua, God is masculine. According to Appia, this view is confirmed by Okara's “Ogboinba: the Ijaw Creation Myth”, which states that “then there was lightning and thunder, and *Wonyengi* (our Mother) came down and sat and placed her feet on the “creating stone”, and out of the earth on the table, man as well as all natural phenomena including the sky and seas”. In Abua, the *Ake* Abua – god of Abua, is the most important deity, and is represented as a male. *Ake* literally means God and could be used to mean the sky since it is believed that God dwells high above the created.⁴⁵ The masculine representation of God is similar to the world view of the Cross River people.

A source maintains that:

The *Ake* was thought of as a very benevolent god who personally took care of all the towns and villages in Abua. In this respect, he was not only the *Ake Abuan*, he was also the *Ake-Ema Omalem*, *Ake-Okpeden*, *Ake-Otapha*, i.e. he is the god of all the villages, towns and clans of Abua...the word *Ake* could also be used to mean the sky, since it is believed that God dwells high above in the skies. He is believed to have several attributes. *Ake* is believed to have several attributes. He is seen as the giver of rain from his abode and that is why the Abuan always proclaim *Ake ra lofh*. Because of the divine attribute the Abua man accords *Ake*, in sacrificial offerings, his name is first

mentioned with the belief that, all powers come from him. Other spirits are believed to be a link between *Ake* (God) and man. That is, they are regarded as messengers and instruments of access to the *Ake*.⁴⁶

As noted above, to the Abua, *Ake Abua* is masculine and research has shown that, masculine sky gods are often also king of the gods, taking the position of a patriarch within a pantheon. Such gods are collectively categorised as Sky Father Deities. A polarity between the sky and earth is often expressed by paring a "Sky Father" god with the Earth Mother goddess (more rarely, a sky goddess and an earth god). This is the scenario in Abua. *Ake* is believed to have a wife known as *Umake* – the earth goddess.

According to Appia:

Umake is symbolic of the wife of *Ake* and actually idolised. *Umake* was believed to endow women with fertility and also bring about high yields in crops of those who adored her. Sacrifices and offerings were usually made to *Umake* by members of *Aramuke* cult who are all those who believe in *Umake*.⁴⁷

There is a large area of shared cultural elements of the Abua/Odual people such as the masks which have little in common with those of the rest of the 'core' Niger Delta but obvious relations masks of the Cross River.⁴⁸ The term mask is popularly used to refer to any kind of concealing headpiece worn by an actor in a dramatic performance given by any secret society. Mask is used to refer to the character which the actor is impersonating. While the masks, masquerades and dances steps of the Abua reflect a striking resemblance of their kin in the Cross River region, some differences have been noted and recorded in that of their Ijaw neighbours. For instance, the Abua masks reflects masculinity and are represented by land/forest

elements with less aquatic features like their Ijaw neighbour.⁴⁹

According to Anderson, the term *omu* (or *onu* depending on the dialect), among the Ijaw means mask, masquerader, and masquerade dance. All *omu* represent aquatic beings. Most maskers wear wooden head pieces – *ou tibi* (sic.) that depict water spirits in one or several ways. It has also been established that the Ijaw cultural plays hinges on the canoe.⁵⁰

Paraphernalia: The traditional paraphernalia of the Abua/Odual group is a reflection of what is obtainable in the Cross River region. For instance, there is cylindrical wooden box – *Ebimne* containing ceremonial materials, a trumpet of elephant tusk for announcement and heralding movements of the priest-king, leopard skin as foot mat, sacred ancestral drum.

Masquerades: Like in the Cross River region, masquerades sing praises of men of distinction and equally mock the deviants. They are central to the Abua people because they served both political and religious purposes. They are not only functioned as agents of social control, but were also employed to enforce customary laws; they also entertained roles during festivals.

In terms of settlement pattern, the Abua carried the building pattern of the Lower Cross River region to their present abode. For instance, they build house with a wide space which serve as play-ground and for recreation. They also plant garden near their abode. On the other hand, the Ijaw build their houses without play-ground and gardens.⁵¹

Dismantling the Pan-Ijaw Identity of the Abua, Odual Ogbia Groups

As mentioned earlier, the Ijaw elite in recent times have deliberately initiated a process of internal imperialism in the Niger Delta. This attempt is primarily advanced through scholarship. However, based on the distinct cultural values, and the strong desire of the Abua to preserve their distinct identity, the Abua during a town hall meeting held in Odaga,

Central Abua on the 3rd of March 2011, reached a consensus that it would be an aberration for anybody or group to cite Abua as a "clan" in Ijaw ethnic group. According to their spokesman, Mr. Fubara Appiah, the central tenets of ethnicity is the elements of descent from previous generations and the implied claim of essentialism, that is, the understanding of a shared heritage, which usually includes a common language, a common faith and common ancestry".⁵²

In their opinion, any attempt at fostering a "policy of assimilation" on the Abua by submerging their language and ethnic nationality at the instance of the Ijaw would be resisted by all means necessary. They stated that the Abua and Ijaw can only collaborate for the purpose of forging a nation with shared values.⁵³

The meeting re-echoed Alagoa's observation in his "linkages" published in *The Izon of the Niger Delta* thus:

There are communities living in the same geographical environment with the Ijaw and have therefore shared historical experiences. Some of these communities may be widely separated from the Ijaw in terms of language classification, but can become very closely related to their neighbouring Ijaw groups because of history and proximity. We take the cases of Epie-Atissa and Ogbia as examples of nationalities with clear linguistic separation from the Ijaw, but with convergent historical experiences and environmental proximity.⁵⁵

The deliberate attempt by the Ijaw to claim the entire Niger Delta as its enclave has also attracted reactions from other ethnic nationalities in the region. For instance, an Epie-Atisa historian of the present-day Bayelsa State, Dr. Sasime had in rejecting his invitation to be a contributor to the book, *Izon of the Niger Delta*, by the Ijaw History Project written in part thus:

I wish to use this medium to respond to your correspondence

dated June 13, 2005. I wish to state that the format of the project as shown in the correspondence of June 13, 2005, does not reflect the decision arrived at consensually at a meeting held on October 19, 2005....At the meeting it was agreed that the Ogbia, the Abua, the Odual, the Engeni, the Udekama, the Epie-Atissa, the Egbema, the Ogbia, the Etche, the Ekpeye, the Ikwere and Ogoni shall be treated as neighbours of Ijaw. Strangely enough, in the said format you have put in the Epie Atissa, the Ogbia, the Engeni, the Abua, the Odual and the Udekama under "Northern Delta Fringe". You then put the others under the "Ijaw and their Neighbours". The obvious inference to be drawn from your format is that the Epie-Atissa are sub-unit of the Ijaw. But as a historian you are aware the Epie-Atissa are not a sub-unit of the Ijo. But they are rather Delta-Edoid.⁵⁵ Sasime continues thus:

I wish to state that it is too late the day for any ethno-linguistic group however populous to seek to use the medium of scholarship to subvert the ethno-linguistic identity of any ethnic-linguistic group however small. In this regard, therefore, I wish to reproduce the words of the venerable elder statesman Chief Anthony Enahoro....No linguistic group has the right - moral or constitutional - to impose its language on any linguistic group in this country. Language is the vital organ of the ethnic differentiation. The Epie-Atissa speak the Epie language which differentiate it from other ethnic group.⁵⁶

He concludes that:

I am therefore, using this medium to inform you that I cannot be a party to any attempt to subvert the ethno-linguistic identity of the Epie-Atissa. I have to add also that the Epie-Atissa have not mandated any individual to write the history of Epie-Atissa as a sub-unit of the Ijaw. The Epie-Atissa are not ready to sacrifice their identity as an ethnic nationality for anything...⁵⁷

Also reacting to a court ruling that the Abua should not be listed as a clan in Ijaw following a legal battle instituted by HRM Royal Mogeni Appia of the Awusa Kingdom in Abua nation, on behalf of the entire Abua nation, the monarch notes thus:

Today's judgement is our political, cultural and historical security. It is a light to our path....By the declaration that the Ijaw National Congress (INC) is unknown to law, and its constitution not being a creation of law, the court admits that all reference to Abua being a "clan" of the Ijaw, emanating from the Ijaw National Congress (INC) and/or its constitution remains invalid. By this judgement, the law admits that Abua people are who they say they are as no group, association or person(s) have contradicted Abua's distinctive ethnic identity from all other Nigerian nationalities. We shall not hesitate henceforth to challenge any such reference to Abua being a clan of the Ijaw in the future as deliberate attempt at using the medium of scholarship to cleanse our ethnic identity.⁵⁸

Appia reiterates that while Abua is not averse to identifying with the Ijaw, there has been no formal forum nor referendum where Abua agreed to join the Ijaw National Congress (INC) – the apex Ijaw cultural organisation wherein Abua is being cited in its central zone. The Abua stance is that such can only be negotiated if the Ijaw National Congress is restructured along the lines of conglomeration of ethnic nationalities with equal stakes and shared values for the purpose of forging a strong united and prosperous Ijaw nation", rather than the present arrangement which seeks to assimilate groups such as Abua by defining them as 'clans' or "sub-clans" of the Ijaw – a spurious claim capable of provoking the peace loving Abuan.⁵⁹

Conclusion

This study adopts the Nigerian/Cameroon border migration

tradition of the Abua/Odual group now inhabiting the heart of the Niger Delta region (Rivers and Bayelsa states). In the area, they constitute minority groups among their larger Ijaw neighbours. Available sources link the Abua origins to the Efut and related groups of the Bantu stock who migrated from Central Africa to the Nigerian/Cameroon border – Rio del Rey and later settled in Calabar area of the present-day Cross River State.⁶⁰ Apart from Calabar where the Efut are reputed to have been one of the earliest settlers, within a section known as Efut-Abua, they are also found in Bakassi, Akpabuyo, and Odukpani Local Government Areas of Cross River State, while a fragment of population inhabit Uruan area of Ibibio land, Akwa Ibom State.⁶¹

Tradition has it that Abua/Odual group after migration from the Rio del Rey settled at Agana in the present-day Obolo (Andoni) area before the arrival of the Obolo (Andoni) people. Crossing through the present-day Obolo (Andoni) area, they journeyed to Obomotu and thence to the place that was later known as Ake in the Central Delta. With time, they began to spread. Evidence abound that the Abua/Odual group share a common ancestry with the groups in the Cross River region of Nigeria such as the Efut, Ibibio, Efik, etc.

Evidently the language of the Abua/Odual is Delta/Cross group of Niger Congo family. This view is strongly supported by similarities in the numbering system of Abua, Efik, and Ibibio. The word lists of Abureni language used in the study evidently shows the Cross River roots of the Abureni. Despite the fact that the Abua/Odual group share the same environment with the Ijaw, the belief system and culture their forebears carried from the Cross River region has subsisted. They manifest in their peculiar traditional paraphernalia, masks and masquerades, housing styles, world view, economic system etc. For instance, they hold the fundamental belief that God is masculine; unlike the Ijaw who believe that God is feminine.

These and other features of the continuing relations between the Cross River region and the "core" Niger Delta region confirm the assertion that the two regions are continuous. They are continuous geographically, historically, and have become continuous culturally and economically. There have been movements of people across the region from the remote past creating dynamic flux of relationships between the Abua/Odual people and their Cross River neighbours.⁶² There is need to exploit the common tradition of origin between these groups in the interest of the region.

The Abua/Odual group has indeed resisted every wave of assimilation by their larger Ijaw neighbours and has insisted on their distinct ethnicity. In doing this they are not averse to identifying with their Ijaw neighbours on the principle of mutual respect. Mutual respect should be encouraged in the Niger Delta region to enhance peace and sustainable development.

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