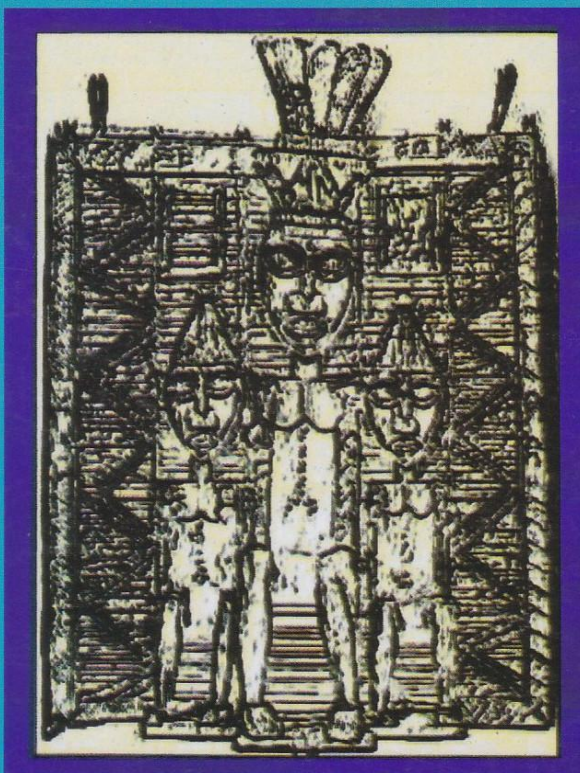


Wilberforce Island Journal of History

VOLUME 2

JULY 2018



WIJH
ISSN 2354-2500

A Journal of the Department of History and Diplomacy
Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Nigeria

Ibibio Diplomacy with Equatorial Guinea Since the Pre-colonial Era

By

Uwem Jonah Akpan,

Department of History & International Studies

University of Uyo

Abstract: *This paper examines the diplomatic relations between the Ibibio people of Eastern Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea, one of their maritime neighbours. It discovered that the Ibibio and other groups in Eastern Nigeria started to migrate to Equatorial Guinea in the pre-colonial period. Equatorial Guinea later became the "gateway of civilization" to Nigeria. It was from Equatorial Guinea that Hope Waddell of the Presbyterian Mission, and pioneer Christian missionary in Eastern Nigeria was ushered into Calabar in 1846. Equally in 1893, the Primitive Methodism made its in-road into Eastern Nigeria via Equatorial Guinea. Following the appointment of John Beecroft as the first British Consul to the Bights of Benin and Biafra in 1849, the Ibibio area came under the jurisdiction of the government based there until 1882, when the headquarters of the consular administration was transferred to Calabar. In the economic realm, cocoa was introduced to Nigeria from Equatorial Guinea. Besides, extensive trade relations existed between the two neighbouring territories. In the 1940s, it was reported that the working conditions of thousands of Ibibio migrants in the plantations in Equatorial Guinea was becoming deplorable. This resulted in a trans-national diplomatic intervention by the Ibibio State Union with the aim of managing the relations. Diplomatic effort helped in sustaining the relations until 1975 when the country expelled thousands of Nigerians. The paper concludes that groups on frontiers should maintain sustainable ties that promote good neighbourliness. It is anchored on the framework of citizen diplomacy and adopts a historical narrative method.*

Introduction

The Ibibio live in Akwa Ibom State, South Eastern Nigeria and constitute the fourth largest ethnic nationality in Nigeria (Offiong, 1991). Akwa Ibom State, one of the 36 states of the Nigerian federation was created in 1987. Akwa Ibom State is bounded on the east by Cross River State; on the south west by Rivers State, and on the west and north west by Abia State and the south by the Atlantic Ocean. The distance between Akwa Ibom State

and Equatorial Guinea, one of the maritime neighbouring countries of Nigeria is about 93 nautical miles (www.google.com/aquplot.com/distance).

Equatorial Guinea can be rightly described as the “gateway of civilization” to Nigeria because of the tremendous socio-economic under-currents that permeated Nigeria from Equatorial Guinea. For instance, it was from the island territory that the seed of Christianity and colonial administration were sown in Nigeria. Equatorial Guinea also became a source of employment for thousands of Ibibio migrants following the establishment of plantations by Spain. Some crops like cocoa and improved specie of cassava were introduced from Equatorial Guinea to the Ibibio area.

The paper is divided into ten headings. Section one is the introduction. Section two examines the geography and colonial antecedents of Equatorial Guinea. Section three discusses the missionary enterprise in Eastern Nigeria and the Equatorial Guinea connection. Section four looks at the introduction of cocoa to Akwa Ibom from Equatorial Guinea. Section five examines the socio-economic development in Fernando Po and its impact on the Ibibio people, section six considers the phenomenon of unemployment and rural-urban drift in colonial Nigeria and the nexus with Ibibio migration to Equatorial Guinea. Section seven clarifies the concept of citizenship diplomacy, section eight looks at the Ibibio State Union diplomatic initiative in Equatorial Guinea, section nine examines the Ibibio/Equatorial diplomatic Relations in post-colonial Nigeria, while section nine is the conclusion.

Equatorial Guinea: Its Geography, People and Colonial Antecedent

The Republic of Equatorial Guinea consists of two separate territories, Rio Muni covering 26,000 square kilometers and Bioko (formerly Macias Nguema Biyogo) covering 2,034 square kilometers. There are also several offshore islands, including Pigalu (formerly Annobon), Coriso, which covers 15 square kilometers (six square miles), Elobey Grande and Elobey Chico, each about 2.5

square kilometers. Bioko is a parallelogram-shaped island formed by three volcanoes. In the north of the island is Mount Malabo (Uwechue, 1996).

Equatorial Guinea has several ethnic groups with the Fang, the largest group, accounting for about 80 percent of the mainland population. The Ntumu Fang occupies the areas north of the Benito River and the Okak Fang occupies the south. There are other groups including the Kombe, Balengue and Bejuba. The Bubis were the original inhabitants of Bioko (Fernando Po) Island, which they shared with the Fernandinos, the descendants of slaves freed from slave ships in the 19th century who mingled with long-settled migrants from Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Cameroon (Uwechue, 1996).

The Portuguese navigator, Fernando Po, was the first European to explore the coast of Equatorial Guinea in the 15th century. He reached the island that was to become Fernando Po in 1472. It was first called Formosa (meaning beautiful). Another Portuguese navigator, Ruy de Sequeira, reached Annobon Island in 1474. The Portuguese were followed by the British and the Dutch slave traders. In 1494, the area of Equatorial Guinea was allotted to Portugal. In 1778, Portugal ceded Fernando Po to Spain. In 1827, Spain, which had not then occupied the island, permitted Britain to establish a naval base there and to use same as a port for the landing of slaves re-captured from the slave ships and ports of the Oil Rivers. Fernando Po was nearer to the Oil Rivers than Sierra Leone where liberated slaves were at first settled (Udoma, 1987).

The British then sent to the island, freed slaves from Sierra Leone and Jamaica. The freed slaves formed a British settlement and were treated as British subjects. Most of the immigrants were artisans and labourers. General (then Colonel) Edward Nicolls served as the first Governor and was succeeded by Captain W.F. Owen (Noah, 1991).

In 1830, Mr. John Beecroft was appointed Acting Governor of the Island. In 1849, the British Government established a full

consulate in Fernando Po and appointed Mr. Beecroft as the first British Consul for the Bight of Biafra and Benin. In the performance of his duties as a British Consul, Mr. Beecroft used the British Squadron for the protection of British traders. (Udoma, 1987).

According to Dike (1956), the famous and prosperous firm of Messrs John Holt first began in Fernando Po. It was a succession to the business first managed by a Dutch man known as Lynslager, who was also a British Consul and a business man. On taking over the business, the Holt Brothers of Messrs John, Jonathan and Thomas extended it to Nigeria where the business experienced a period of boom, expansion and remarkable prosperity.

Before Beecroft had been a year old on the Island, he had made himself *persona grata* with the African rulers of Old Calabar, a community on which Fernando Po depended for food supplies. The former Governor of the island, Captain Owen, had quarreled bitterly with Duke Ephraim, the leading chief of Old Calabar in 1828 and the latter had threatened to starve the British settlement by refusing to supply them food. Beecroft undertook two goodwill missions to this chief and settled the differences between Old Calabar and the British to the satisfaction of all. Governor Nicolls attributed the success of the settlement in obtaining food from the "native" states almost entirely to "Beecroft's excellent management of the chiefs, opposite on the coast" – Old Calabar. Beecroft soon proved that he had a rare gift of gaining the confidence of Africans, hence, he was appointed the Acting Consul in 1830, when the General Nicolls returned to England on sick leave (Dike, 1956).

Beecroft had extensive influence at Fernando Po and the trading communities of the Niger Delta such as Old Calabar, Bonny, New Calabar, Brass and the Cameroon, in which more than half of the West African trade of the time was done. Just as his work at Fernando Po enabled him to study and influence the trade and politics of the Nigerian coast, his acquaintance with the interior of the coast lands gave him a deeper knowledge of Nigerian conditions; hence, he became, in his lifetime, the foremost British

authority in this part of West Africa.

In 1836, Beecroft ascended the Cross River up to 120 miles from Old Calabar, studying the commercial possibilities of its basin. Again in 1840, in the service of Mr. Jamieson, he entered the Benin River, proving that it was merely a large inlet of the sea, and not, as had been confidently stated, the principal mouth of the River Niger. In 1841 and 1842, he commanded expeditions up to the Cross River. Through these expeditions undertaken while he was still residing in Fernando Po, Beecroft's knowledge of the Nigerian hinterland had greatly increased and African chiefs on the coast, including the rulers of Old Calabar, had begun to suspect the motives for his frequent incursions into the area of their influence (Dike, 1956). According to Beecroft's own account, cited in Dike:

The King Eyamba of Duke Town, Calabar expressed his apprehension that our explorations of the river (the Cross River) would lead to consequences injurious to the trade of his town; and as said: "I hear your countrymen done spoil West Indies. I think he want come spoil our country all same (sic). Beecroft assured him that his aim was purely scientific, not political, and stated "we only want to see where all water of the Cross River, came from" (Dike, 1956: 5).

Dike (1956) observes that the population of Fernando Po in the 1840s and 1850s was a very mixed one and the census of the town of Clarence taken in March 1856, two years after the death of Beecroft, illustrate the cosmopolitan nature of the Fernando Po population.

Fernando Po and the Missionary Enterprise in Eastern Nigeria

The desire by the Efik monarchs to have missionaries who would teach them and also help in industrialising the area was facilitated by John Beecroft, who, as stated above, was the Governor of Fernando Po and a familiar person to the chiefs of Old Calabar. By 1844, the Scottish group of missionaries had opened correspondence with Beecroft who had not persuaded the chiefs to agree to definite terms respecting the projected arrival of the

Scottish missionaries.

According to Beecroft's account cited by Aye:

On my arrival there, I presented to King Eyamba, Mr. Blyth and Mr. Waddell's letter, explaining at the same time the benefit and good results that would accrue from the education of their children in English learning; and, on the other hand, in teaching how to raise production of the soil to give in exchange for European manufactures, and thus increase their wealth and commercial importance (Aye, 1987: 45).

The monarch agreed to give the land to the missionaries free of charge, but insisted that they would have to pay taxes. Beecroft explained to them that there was no profit taxing the missionaries and pleaded that the missionaries were men wholly set apart from trade and the traders. That point established, Beecroft wrote favourably and the Scottish Presbytery approved the establishment of the mission in Old Calabar in 1844 (Noah, 1980).

Rev. Hope Waddell wound up his missionary activities in the West Indies the following year and departed to England where funds totaling £4,000 were raised through public appeal. A Liverpool merchant, Jamieson, allowed the Calabar missionaries the use of his vessel, the *Warree*. On the morning of 6th of January 1846, the party set on the *Warree* from Liverpool. The small party comprised Mr. Edgerley (printer and catechist) of the Jamaican Mission, Mrs. Edgerley, Andrew Chisholm (carpenter), a West Indian, Edward Miller (a teacher), Rev. Hope Waddell, and his black boy George. Waddell records that "we were weak but believed that God had sent us, and was with us, that He would open our way... to go unto the place which the Lord thy God shall choose to place His name there" (Aye, 1987).

For three weary months the *Warree* waded through rough seas and occasional inclement weather, and, on the 2nd of April 1846, the Mission party arrived Fernando Po. On the 10th of April 1846, the Presbyterian Mission expedition sailed from Fernando Po for Old Calabar, and at the mouth of the Calabar River they were met

by Beecroft, who took them on board the government steamer *Ethiope*. In the afternoon of that day, they dropped anchor at Duke Town (Aye, 1987).

Aye records the historic missionary advent thus:

The tropical cumulus sky reflected the gorgeous afternoon weather of the day. The "noble river", as broad as the Thames at Westminster and flowing south-west, was at its low, leaving behind dark marshy bank and exposing the adventitious roots of heavy vegetation stilted on the brackish mud. The river surface looked calm and shimmering in the afternoon sun.... King Eyo Honesty II of Creek Town delivering his oil to a trading ship. As the king saw the missionaries he suspended his engagements and went in his "six-oared gig, covered by an immense and handsome umbrella of various colours" to pay his respects to Captain Beecroft and the Christian party. He was followed by two large war canoes, each paddled by 28 men, with a row of armed men standing down the centre, and swivel gun in the bows. Some of his chiefs also came in their canoes adorned with flags. It was a welcome of great pageantry. Captain Beecroft also reciprocated with a hearty welcome and warm handshake, each expressing gladness at seeing the other (Aye, 1987: 45-48).

King Eyamba V did not see the party on that first day because he had a very crowded day with his usual civil duties and requested the visit to be postponed for the following day in order to do justice to the importance of the occasion which meant so much to him. On the following day when the visitors returned, reception took place in the King's iron palace. Eyamba now looked normal and received the party warmly and ended the occasion by saying: "I look long time for you. Glad you come now for live here" (sic.) (Aye, 1987).

Apart from Presbyterianism, the Primitive Methodist missionaries also accessed Eastern Nigeria via Fernando Po. In August 1869, an English ship, "The Elgiva" anchored in the Harbour of Santa Isabel, the chief port of Fernando Po. During this brief stay, the ship's Captain, William Robinson and the Ship's Carpenter, James Hands (a local preacher), both Methodist,

witnessed for Christ to “a small group of Christians who had been converted by Baptist missionaries. Some of these people were settlers from the Mainland, some were freed slaves” (Okpo, 1985).

When the ship was returning to England, Captain Robinson took with him, a letter from that “little flock” asking that a minister be sent to them. As a result of this call, the General Missionary Committee of the Primitive Methodist sent out Rev. R.W. Burnett and Henry Roe to Fernando Po. In February 1870, the first Methodist Society class on the Island was formed with eleven members, so the Methodist Church in Fernando Po became the “mother” of Eastern Nigerian Methodism (Okpo, 1985).

The work was faithfully nurtured by a succession of devoted missionaries from England. In 1893, the Rev. Fairley, Minister-in-charge of the work at Santa Isabel, capital of Fernando Po, visited the land around the Rio Del Rey River, near a place named “Oron”. Rev. Fairley pressed on to Archibong Town where they were warmly received by the local chief, Prince Archibong. In March 1896, Rev. Stone bore the torch of evangelism to James Town (Okpo, 1985).

The Introduction of Cocoa in Akwa Ibom State

As mentioned earlier, cocoa was introduced to the area from the Fernando Po. Nair records that:

Following the lineage rivalries between Henshaw and Duke Houses in Calabar which resulted in a war, the economy of Henshaw Town had been ruined after the pillage and plunder and effort to revive it after 1875 had met with jealous hostility of Duke Town. There were very few goods on hand with which to resume trade.... It was while Joseph Henshaw was at Fernando Po to inform the British Consul about the Henshaw-Duke Town War that he was shown around cocoa plantation there. He bought some seeds from the farmers, and brought them to Calabar in the hope of commencing a profitable trade in cocoa. On his return to Calabar, in 1879, he bought up some land at Oron on the left bank of the Cross River estuary from Chief Ating Edem Umo of Iquita. He then began a plantation there growing cocoa among other crops. Traders and farmers from the plantations of Calabar, namely

Odukpani and Akpabuyo, bought seeds from him and planted them. Thus, cocoa was introduced to Calabar and its environs by the enterprise and keen commercial acumen of Joseph Henshaw (Nair, 1972:180).

Socio-Economic Development in Fernando Po and Its Impacts on the Ibibio People

The introduction of cocoa to Spanish colony of Fernando Po resulted in a shift from trade in palm oil to plantation agriculture. In the last quarter of the 19th century when Fernando Po was still dominated by English firms, labour became scarce as a result of the gradual economic transformation of the island. Labour requirements of both Spanish and alien employers were inadequately met by the indigenous people. By 1880s, it became the usual practice for these English firms and their Spanish hosts to encourage the “Kru men” from Liberia employed in the various vessels plying West African routes, to accept employment on shore. Considerable number of Kru men were employed in this way. Spanish mercantile firms also began to require more labour than the island could supply and, consequently, the Spanish government permitted the transportation of Kru men on the gun boats that used to visit the island frequently. In about 1896, some Yoruba labourers were taken to the island but because of the unsatisfactory labour condition, the process was discontinued. Indeed, although there were other restraints facing agricultural development in Fernando Po, labour was the greatest problem (Osuntokun, 1990).

To solve the problem of labour, the Spaniards began illegal recruitment from the Eastern part of Nigeria. The Spaniards were in the habit of making exaggerated promises of high wages which were never paid and of hiding the fact that the labourers were going to Fernando Po. In order to put an end to the illegal human traffic between Nigeria and Fernando Po, the British Admiralty was given power of “search and arrest” over Spanish ships that might be suspected of indulging in the human traffic which the Nigerian authorities considered as a new slave trade (Osuntokun, 1990).

In 1937, farmers of the island began to look seriously for labour in Calabar area and the part of Cameroon under the British Mandate. The threat this posed to the security and peace of Nigeria was such that the government set up a preventive branch in the Police to deal specifically with the traffic in human cargo to Fernando Po. Just at the time the measure was beginning to have an impact on the illegal service, the Police Force was withdrawn, thus, resulting in practical monopoly of the traffic in men by canoe owners around the Cross River. The traffic, illegal as it was, was well organised by recruiters in Nigeria and Spanish authorities and employers in Fernando Po. The Spanish government and employers paid recruiters liberally both in Sterling and Pestas out of which the "canoe men" and paddlers received their share.

According to Osuntokun (1990), by 1914, there were 10,000 Nigerians in Fernando Po. This labour came mainly from Owerri, Calabar, Onitsha and Cameroon Provinces. The seven divisions showing the highest recruiting rates were Owerri, Abak, Eket, Afikpo, Bende, Ikot Ekpene and Uyo. He adds that the areas are thickly populated to the extent that it would be difficult to resist the argument that shortage of land was one of the main factors causing emigrations. The other factor driving labourers to Fernando Po was pressure of tax collection in Nigeria. This was borne out by the fact that emigration was usually highest from August to October which was the period of tax collection. There was also the fact that labourers engaged in lucrative contraband trade.

However, the above should not suggest that conditions in Fernando Po were so good that Nigerians were flooding into the area in large numbers. Between 1937 and 1938, the Spaniards were confronted with the perennial problem of scarcity of labour. This was primarily due to the ill-treatment of Nigerians citizens in Fernando Po and the inconvertibility of Spanish Pesetas as a result of non-recognition of Francisco Franco's regime in Britain. Even the presence of Nigerians in Fernando Po was considered as illegal as far as the British authorities were concerned. Recruitment of

labour to anywhere was forbidden by the Nigerian Labour Ordinances No. 1 of 1929 and emigration of labourers to Fernando Po was specifically forbidden by the same law (Osuntokun, 1990).

The Phenomenon of Unemployment and Rural-Urban Drift in Colonial Nigeria and Its Impacts on Ibibio and Equatorial Guinea Relations

The Great Depression of the 1930s crippled the colonial economy. Migration to the towns served as an outlet for employment not only in Ibibio land but in other parts of Nigeria during the colonial period and after. The towns were centres of commerce and administration. People migrated in order to gain employment. Some left for the towns to obtain money to pay bride-price or to meet tax demands or to get money to keep their families out of trouble; while young people migrated or tended to migrate to the towns, the unemployed illiterate or semi-illiterate adults migrated to other African countries, namely: Spanish Fernando Po and Rio Muni (Ukpong, 1986).

According to Ukpong (1986), one Mr. Nana Udo Umoren, an indigene of Ekput in Ibiono Ibom Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, who served as a labourer in Fernando Po from 1945-1967, disclosed that each labourer recruited by the Government was paid the sum of £6 a month, while £6 was reserved for him for each completed months of service. The financial remuneration was sufficiently attractive to induce people to migrate. It is estimated that in 1955, a total of 15,000 Nigerians including Ibibio were working in the Spanish territories of Fernando Po and Rio Muni. In 1943, there were about 600 labourers per month, each on two year's contract excluding wives and children, who were expected to be exported to the Spanish territories from the old Itu District. But as at July 1945, a total of 240 labourers had actually been recruited from Itu District. At any time, as many as 100 labourers from Itu District attended Itu Union meeting.

Some Ibibio and indeed other Nigerians, smuggled themselves by boat to Fernando Po without going through the

agency of government. Such people were usually transported across by agents or middlemen, who were paid commissions by the Spaniards in Fernando Po. On handing the would-be labourers or worker over, the agent was paid his commission depending on the number of people he had smuggled or transported from Nigeria. The worker would serve his master without payment to compensate for the commission he had paid to the agent. He thereafter made an individual contract of employment with the master on terms which were usually below those laid down by government (Ukpong, 1986).

Generally, the labourers performed “task work” in plantations of cocoa and coffee and in the timber industry, but a few served as domestic servants, brick-layers etc. All Nigerians were given land to plant on their own. While the hardworking labourers enjoyed “task work” in Fernando Po, the lazy ones among them found life miserable, and as an escape from their misery, they turned to alcoholism, smoking, some spend money on prostitutes and could hardly make both ends meet. Such people never cared to return to their homes until they were forcefully ejected by the Equatorial Guinea authorities in the 1970s (Ukpong, 1986).

Okim (1985) states that the plantation of cocoa on commercial basis in Itu Mbonuso area of Akwa Ibom State, began in the area in the 1950s. This was when some Itu Mbonuso people returned from Equatorial Guinea. These ex-labourers returned home with improved varieties of cocoa pods. Such varieties included the Amazon. This and other improved varieties yielded fruits within a period of five years. Since its cultivation demanded intensive care, and since most of the potential cocoa farmers had no experience in its cultivation, the people generally cooperated with these “returnees” in clearing their own portions of land for cultivation. It was in this way that most people now mastered the technique of cocoa-planting. At present, Itu Mbonuso is the “cocoa-basket of Eastern Nigeria”.

The Ibibio brought back to Ibibio land from Fernando Po,

popular and superior species of cassava, popularly known as *iwa Panya* or *kam kere efere*. It has the attributes of the ordinary yam. After being boiled, it is pounded and eaten with soup just like “yam foo-foo”. The ordinary cassava is of inferior quality. It is usually fermented in water for almost three days and the rather poisonous substance is removed before it is prepared in the form of “foo-foo”. Alternatively, the ordinary cassava is used for the preparation of garri. On the other hand, the improved specie of cassava from Equatorial Guinea is like yam and easy to prepare. It enriched the agrarian economy of Ibibio land (Okim, 1985).

The Concept of Citizen Diplomacy

From the literature, citizenship diplomacy connotes the consciousness and deliberate efforts of a nation state to cultivate the support, understanding and eventual deployment of the citizens for the task of executing its foreign policy. Put in another context, it is the active deployment of all citizens of a country as agents of implementing her foreign policy. It entails the creation of an environment in which every citizen both at home and abroad sees himself as the symbol of his country's foreign policy, who is expected to behave and act in a manner that will enable rather than disenable his country's foreign policy. As a concept, it hints at a high level of nationalism and patriotism leading to the development of the culture of national pride in the citizen that will make him the conveyor of national messages across borders (Saliu, 2010).

Citizen diplomacy has also been dissected as the framework for the defence of the rights of citizens wherever they may be. The concept presupposes that there is a kind of bond between officials conducting the business of the state and the citizens. Whatever a country does outside her borders, it must be in furtherance of the interests of her citizens (Ogunsanwo, 2009). Questions can be asked and are indeed being asked on issues that affect the citizens of a country living in other parts of the world. Responding to the distressed calls of the citizens and asking relevant questions on cases of maltreatment or harassment of citizens living outside the

country are all hallmarks of citizen-centred diplomacy (Saliu, 2010).

The idea is an extension of state's responsibility to its citizens outside the shores of the county. The rights of citizens residing in other parts are taken as important as the rights of the citizens living within the boundaries of a country. Saliu (2010) notes that the concept of citizenship diplomacy is not an ordinary flight of fancy kind of concept. It is a deep rooted concept manifesting the responsibility that a state has towards its citizens who have cause to live outside the borders and the obligations of the citizens towards the state by being the "ambassadors" of their country in other lands. It is thus diplomacy with many edges or what some have called multi-track diplomacy. It is fundamentally a reflection of the governance system prevailing in a country.

The Ibibio Union's Citizen Diplomacy

There were stories in circulation that Nigerian workers in the Spanish plantations in Fernando Po were serving under very hazardous conditions and that they were usually treated brutally like slaves and were driven to work in gangs and had to work under hard task masters. It was also rumoured that they were fed with poor rations and that because of such brutal conditions, many Nigerians died un-mourned and buried in unmarked graves. Such deaths were cleverly concealed and never reported officially to parents, guardians or relations of the dead in Nigeria. It was also rumoured that workers were usually incarcerated in prisons without trial and sometimes for failure to complete in time the assignments allotted to them. Thieves were punished by maiming or by means of amputation of the hand, or a whole arm. Workers were never granted holidays with pay and were never allowed to send remittances to their loved ones or dependants back home in Nigeria. They were not allowed to visit Nigeria for fear that they might not report back for work. One of the most difficult problems in connection with remittances in Nigeria was the rate of exchange of the Peseta, the principal currency or money unit of Spain, the rate of exchange of

which was always fluctuating (Udoma, 1987).

It should be mentioned that the Ibibio Union later renamed (the Ibibio State Union) was a progressive, cultural and welfare association which was formed in 1928 by the Ibibio people in the Old Calabar Province (now Akwa Ibom State). Their aim was initially the protection of themselves as a group against insult, abuse and oppression. Subsequently, the Union evolved to become a virile instrument of community development and social integration of the various groups in the land and modernisation generally. At its formation, all the Ibibio-sub-groups including the Annang, Oron and Eket belonged to the Union (Noah, 1980).

According to Udoma (1987), Generalissimo Francisco Franco was at that time the Caudillo of the Spanish Empire and the chief of the Flangist party and Head of State. It was necessary that before embarking on the diplomatic voyage from Calabar to Fernando Po, everything should be carefully prepared and planned to meet international standard, especially in a territory under Fascism. The Ibibio State Union therefore had to constitute a very credible and respectable team to undertake the diplomatic mission.

The diplomatic team included: Rev. E.U. Uya, chairman and leader of delegation; Mr. Joseph M. Ito, vice-chairman/deputy leader; Mr. J.A. Ekong, member; Mr. E.A. Edim, member and "pilot"; Mr. E.E. Udo, member and Mr. Silva E. Hezekiah, ex-officio and secretary. The cost of the delegation was £167. The Ibibio Union had to send a pre-delegation to Fernando Po to inform the Ibibio people of the visit. On the 13th of May 1949, the delegates sailed on a boat from Calabar and arrived Santa Isabel, Fernando Po the same day. They were warmly and enthusiastically received on arrival by a joyous Ibibio crowd. The delegates were accorded the diplomatic facility to visit many institutions in the Island, such as farms, workshops, theatres, hospitals, prisons and orphanages. It became obvious that the Ibibio nationals constituted a substantial proportion of the work force on the Island (Udoma, 1987).

The Ibibio nationals scattered over the territory were jubilant

in the knowledge and realisation that they were all still being remembered back in their homeland by their people. Other Nigerians joined in organising receptions for the Ibibio State Union delegates and were full of praise for the foresight displayed by the leadership of the Union in undertaking the visit which, to them was unprecedented. It was the most courageous undertaking according to them, and the first of its kind in the whole history of the association of Nigeria with the Spanish Island in Fernando Po. Most of them marveled at the reception accorded the Ibibio State Union diplomatic delegation in the Island.

It was disclosed that it was only a consul on the island who was assigned the responsibility of protecting the interests of British subjects and of British protected persons, the latter being the status ascribed to Nigerians on the Island. Because of the visit of the delegates as representatives of the Ibibio State Union, Ibibio nationals appeared to have acquired a new enhanced status on the Island. At a very important meeting of the Ibibio State Union, convened on the authority of the delegates under a licence issued by the Spanish authorities, the Ibibio State Union was formed. It was named "Ibibio State Union", Fernando Po Branch. Obong Utin of Ikot Ebok, Eket, then a very influential figure of high integrity, was there and then elected President. Other officers were similarly elected, subject to ratification by the home organisation. But the more important institution created by the Ibibio State Union, Fernando Po, was the office of *Obong Ikpaisong*, which according to Spanish concept was known as *Efe*. *Obong Ikpaisong* was entitled to maintain a court according to Ibibio custom and the holder of the office of *Obong Ikpaisong* was known as *Obong Efe* and was thereby invested with jurisdiction in the dispute between Ibibio nationals (Udoma, 1987).

Since *Efe* was a court, the *Obong ikpaisong* was entitled to sit with other leading Ibibio nationals, including the President, Ibibio State Union, Fernando Po Branch. The *Efe* subsequently became a powerful instrument of policy and discipline by the Ibibio State

Union to the extent that disputes involving Ibibio nationals used to be referred first even by the police to *Obong Ikpaisong* for inquiry. The first *Obong Ikpaisong* appointed by the Ibibio State Union in Fernando Po was Obong Imo Ebong of Okon Eket. He successfully settled several disputes without interference of the police (Udoma, 1987).

The British Consul in Fernando Po was not particularly happy with such a development. He felt, and expressed it, that *Obong Ikpaisong* Ibibio as well as his *Efe* was likely to usurp his functions in the Island and thereby diminish his authority, status and influence. He protested to the Spanish authorities about what he called "this novel aspect" of the visit by delegates of the Ibibio State Union which, according to him, attempted to inject politics into the visit at first accepted as routine, fraternal and non-political. He complained that the office of *Obong Ikpaisong* coupled with the institution of *Efe* was tantamount to the office of an ambassador, the Ibibio State Union thereby giving the impression indirectly of being a sovereign state in Nigeria (Udoma, 1987).

In response to the petition, the Spanish authorities immediately placed a ban on the Ibibio State Union on the Island. As soon as the report of the ban was communicated to the Ibibio State Union in Nigeria, the matter was taken up at once. A delegation of the Ibibio State Union met the Resident, Calabar Province, armed with two resolutions passed by the Ibibio State Union, copies of which were sent to the Chief Commissioner, Eastern Province, the Chief Secretary to the British Colonial Government, Lagos and the Spanish authorities in Fernando Po. In the resolutions, the Ibibio State Union pressed for the lifting of the ban, failure of which all agencies established in Calabar Province for the recruitment of labourers for work in Fernando Po would be closed down. The Union demanded that it must be allowed to function with the offices of the President, Ibibio State Union and *Obong Ikpaisong*, with his *Efe* for the purpose of protecting and catering for the welfare of Ibibio nationals on the island.

The name of the Ibibio State Union was to remain and in the Spanish language to be known as *ASOCIACION BENEFICA IBIBIO*. Obong Ikpaiong was to remain with his Efe. The Resident, Calabar Province, Mr. C.J. Mayne, who was the most sympathetic of all, threw his full weight on the side of the Union and supported the proper treatment of Nigerian recruits under licence granted by government. The result of the protest was positive. Changes were immediately introduced. All recruits had to be medically examined. The feeding system had to be changed and, among other progressive measures introduced, workers recruited for work at Fernando Po were allowed to make allotments to their dependants at home in Nigeria. Workers were allowed to take their wives with them if they desired, and Calabar was declared a recognised port for the embarkment and disembarkment of passengers to and from Fernando Po. There then developed a flourishing trade between Nigeria and Fernando Po. Recruitment for work in Fernando Po became an established big business (Udoma, 1987).

Ibibio/Equatorial Diplomatic Relations in the Post-independence Nigeria

In November 1966, Brigadier-General Wellington Bassey, an indigene of Akwa Ibom and the first commissioned officer in the Nigerian Army, was appointed the Nigerian Consul to Fernando Po. (Akpan, 2013). Shortly after that came the Nigerian Civil War. At the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, Fernando Po had about 100,000 inhabitants of whom about 85,000 were Nigerians. This number consisted of many thousands of Ibibio people. Osuntokun (1990) opines that the appointment of Brigadier-General Bassey was Nigeria's response to the strategic importance of the island to Nigeria.

With the attainment of independence by Equatorial Guinea in October 1968, followed by the withdrawal of Spanish expertise and management, the working conditions in the plantations began to deteriorate. During the Nigerian Civil War, when the Island was

under the control of Spain, the territory was used by some international organisations to ferry arms and war materials to Biafra.

Obviously, the labour policy of the new administration in Equatorial Guinea, led by President Francisco Macias Nguema, did not favour Nigerian immigrants to the island. In 1970, there were about 30,000 Nigerians in the island, whose labour contract had expired. Equatorial Guinea's government had no boats to repatriate them and the Federal Government of Nigeria was compelled by the difficult situation to act. The Federal Government of Nigeria became involved in the process of the review of the labour condition in Equatorial Guinea. In 1972, a new agreement was signed with the Nigerian government raising the minimum age of workers from 18 to 21, eliminating corporal punishment, increasing wage and capitation, and providing free medical care and free housing. The new agreement also provided for the establishment of a mixed commission of four members, two from each country. In 1974, the agreement was reviewed. However, by this time, the Nigerian labourers were unpaid for up to six months or more, contrary to the provision of the agreement (Osuntokun, 1990).

By this time, military intervention on purely labour matters was a constant occurrence, contrary to the provisions of the agreement. One of such military interventions in April 1974 resulted in the death of a Nigerian. When the Nigerian Ambassador demanded to see the corpse, he was prevented from doing so. The Nigerian community was subjected to all kinds of abuses climaxing in the humiliation of the Labour Attache, Mr. O. Ambah and his family on the 27th of February, 1975. The Labour Attachee was ordered at gun point and without previous notice to leave his house. On hearing this, the Ambassador sent two of his senior members of staff to investigate the cause of eviction and arrest of the Labour Attachee. Surprisingly, the Malabo government arrested the two men and detained them. Further, a Nigerian Embassy car was seized on the 23rd of March, 1975, and the car was never found in spite of

the strong protest by the Ambassador (Osuntokun, 1990).

Osuntokun (1990) also records that the regime of Francisco Macias Nguema was characterised by brutality and police terror of which Nigerians were victims. With the deteriorating economy, the normal administrative functions of government became difficult to be executed and the law enforcement agencies became laws unto themselves. Thus, it became obvious that Nigerians were no longer safe in Fernando Po. In response to the humiliation, some opinion leaders appealed to the Nigerian government to annex Fernando Po. The General Murtala Mohammed-led administration decided to evacuate Nigerians from the island. The process started in late 1975 and ended in early 1976. During the process of evacuation, the government used not only her merchant Navy, but also gun-boats and air force planes, apparently to demonstrate that any overt brutality against departing Nigerians would not be tolerated. The combined air and sea operation evacuated about 25,000 Nigerians remaining on the island. After that, Nigeria decided to cut economic ties with Equatorial Guinea. However, the relation has been reactivated and both countries now enjoy cordial diplomatic relations.

Conclusion

Over the centuries, the Ibibio people have related with many of her near and far neighbours, one of them being the present-day Equatorial Guinea, a historic maritime neighbours. The island of Equatorial Guinea was first explored and occupied by the Portuguese before the Spanish authorities took possession of it. In 1827, the island was ceded to Britain as a base of the anti-slave trade naval squadron. The British used the island territory as the bridge head of diplomacy with Old Calabar monarchs. In 1849, the seed of the subsequent British colonisation over Nigeria was sown with the appointment of John Beecroft as the first British Consul over the Bight of Biafra and Benin with its headquarters at Fernando Po. In 1882, the headquarters of the consular administration was moved to

Calabar.

It is also significant to note that Equatorial Guinea served as the gateway of the missionary enterprise to Nigeria. Rev. Hope Masterton Waddell, the pioneer purveyor of the Christian faith in Eastern Nigeria, was ushered into Calabar, by John Beecroft in 1846, while the Primitive Methodists penetrated the Nigerian field from Equatorial Guinea.

In the economic sphere, cocoa, one of the dominant export, yielding commodities in Nigeria, was also introduced into Nigeria from Equatorial Guinea. In addition, improved species of cassava also found its way into Nigeria from Equatorial Guinea. With the establishment of large plantations in the island, thousands of Ibibio flocked into the area in search of employment opportunities. In their process, their welfare was undermined, hence, the Ibibio Union, a leading socio-cultural organization at the time had to unleash its citizen diplomacy initiative to seek improved condition and cordial relations with the Equatorial Government. Also, the Nigerian government initiated a series of interventionist schemes aimed at the improvement of the working conditions of Nigerians and when the diplomatic efforts did not yield the envisaged outcome, evacuated the Nigerian citizens from the island with dispatch.

Indeed, Equatorial Guinea can be rightly described as the "gateway of civilization" to Nigeria. The island has played a significant role in Nigeria's political, economic and social evolution since the pre-colonial period. Because of its geo-strategic importance to Nigeria, there is need to constantly fine-tune the relation for mutual benefit. The onus has now shifted from ethnic unions to the Federal Government which is constitutionally saddled with issues of diplomacy.

References

- Abasiattai, M.B. (Ed.). (1987). *Akwa Ibom and Cross River States: An Introduction to the Land, the People and their Culture*. Calabar: Wusen Press.
- ... (1990). "The Old Calabar Province under Colonial Rule: Subjugation and Administration". *History of the Cross River Region of Nigeria*. Enugu: Harris Press.
- ... (1991). "The Ibibio: "An Outline History-1960". Abasiattai, Monday B. (Ed.). *The Ibibio: An Introduction to the Land, the People and their Culture*. Calabar: Alphonsus Akpan Press.
- Akpan, U. (2013). Akwa Ibom and National Development: An Abridged Assessment of the Contributions of the People and the Land". *Ibom Journal of History & International Studies*. Vol. 15, No. 1.
- ... (2017). "Percy Amaury Talbot and the Diplomacy of Colonialism". *Research Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*. Vol. 3, No. 3.
- ... (2017). "Diplomacy and Community Development: The Era of Ibibio Union". *Kaduna Journal of Humanities*. Vol. 1, No. 1.
- ... (2018). *Akwa Ibom and Her Neighbours: A Study of Regional Diplomacy Since the Pre-colonial Period*. Uyo: heritage Preservation Foundation.
- Arndt, Richard T. *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the 20th Century*. Washington D.C.: Potomac Books Inc. 2006.
- Aye. (1987). *Presbyterianism in Nigeria*. Calabar: Wusen Press Ltd.
- Dike, K. (1956). "John Beecroft, 1790-1854, Her Britannic Majesty's Consul to the Bight of Benin and Biafra". *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*. Vol. 1, No. 1.
- Nair, K.K. (1972). *Politics and Society in South Eastern Nigeria, 1841-1906. A Study of Power, Diplomacy and Commerce in Old Calabar*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Noah, M.E. (1980). *Ibibio Pioneers in Modern Nigerian History*. Uyo: Scholars Press.
- ... (1988). *Old Calabar: The City States and the Europeans, 1800-1805*. Uyo: Scholars Press.
- ... (1990). "Social and Political Development: The Lower Cross Region, 1600 1900". *A History of the Cross River Region of Nigeria*. Abasiattai, Monday B. (Ed.). Enugu: Harris Publishers.
- Offiong, D.O. (1991). *Witchcraft, Sorcery, magic and Social Order Among the Ibibio of Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co.
- Ognusawo, A. (2009). "Citizen Diplomacy: Challenges for Nigeria's Foreign Policy". *Citizen Diplomacy*. Eze, O. (Ed.). Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs.
- Okim, F. (1985). "The Impact of Colonialism on Itu Mbonuso People. 1875 1950." *B.A. Long Essay. Department of History, University of Calabar*. Okpo, S.K. (1985). *A Brief History of Methodist Church in Eastern Nigeria*. Oron: Manson Publishing Company.
- Osuntokun, J. (1992). "The Dynamics of Nigerian Equatorial Guinea Relations from Colonial Times to the Present". *Nigeria and its Immediate Neighbourhood: Constraints and Prospects of Sub-Regional Security in the 1990s*. Atte, B.E. and Akinterinwa, B.A. (Eds.). Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs in Co-operation with Pumark Nigeria Limited (Educational Publishers).
- Peters. S.W, Iwok, E.R. and Uya, O.E. (Eds.). *Akwa Ibom State: The Land of Promise-A Compendium*. Lagos: Gabumo Press, 1994.
- Saliu, H.A. (2010). "Citizen Diplomacy and the Future of Nigeria's Foreign Policy". *Beyond 50 Years of Nigeria's Foreign Policy: Issues, Challenges and Prospects*. Eze, O.C. (Ed.). Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs.
- Udo, E.A. *Who are the Ibibio?* Onitsha: Africana FEP Publishers.

- Udoma, U. (1987). *The Story of the Ibibio Union*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books.
- Ukpong, E. (1986). "Some Aspects of the Economy and Society of Ibiono Ibom During the Colonial Period". *M.A. Thesis. Department of History, University of Calabar*.
- Umana, OA. (2004). *First Among Equals: A Chronicle of Pioneering Efforts of Akwa Ibom in National Development*. Calabar: Sacsprint Publishers.
- Uwechue, R. (1996). *Africa Today 3rd Edition*. London: Africa Books Ltd. (www.google.com/aquplot.com/distance).