

A Peep into Isoko Relations with her Neighbours under British Colonial Rule in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

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Abstract.

This work attempts a discourse on the establishment of colonial rule in Isokoland and its impact on inter-group relations. The changes and continuities in intergroup relations, which colonialism eventuated in these societies, remained largely misunderstood. The work attempts to illuminate, the nexus between colonial administrative and socio-economic policies and the changes in Isoko relations with her neighbours. Colonialism ruptured the organic interdependence amongst and between the various pre-colonial social formations it agglomerated into a single political unit, which was christened Nigeria. In this connection, colonialism was the catalyst of the changes and continuities in inter-group relations in Nigeria during the 19th and 20th centuries. The work shows that there was a shift from an essentially agrarian communal economic system and patterns of interactions to a pseudo-capitalist economic system based on the export of cash crops facilitated the encapsulation of the entire spectrum of these social relations into the colonial economy. The work is premised on the historical method and interpretations deploying primary and secondary data to achieve its objective. The study concludes that changes in intergroup relations in the region were largely influenced by geographical contiguity; and the experience of similar external influences having lasting implications for contemporary regional, national and international community relations.

Keywords: Isoko, Relations with Neighbours, British Colonial Rule, Niger Delta, Nigeria

Introduction

British Administration in Southern Nigeria introduced new dimensions in the pattern of relationship between the Isoko and her neighbours. With that event, a new pattern of intergroup relations began to emerge at the same time as many aspects of the old pattern continued to survive to a significant degree, as these could not be abolished overnight. In other words, the imposition of British rule on Nigeria towards the end of the 19th century constituted a major landmark in the history of relations among the different groups as exemplified between Isoko and her neighbours in this study, (Okpevra 2005:395, 401). The Isoko had varying types of relationships with her neighbours of the Warri Province that was created by the British Colonial Administration before British Administrative measures and policies introduced new dimensions in the pattern of relationships of the Isoko with their neighbours.

Writing on intergroup relations under colonial rule between the Igbo and their neighbours of Southeastern Nigeria, Afigbo (1987:79) has this to say,

.... Colonial rule in Nigeria had important implications for inter-group relations... It meant among other things that people now had to take into account ideals, interests and institutions arising not only from their indigenous experiences and sanctioned by their traditions and usages, but also others introduced and imposed by the new rulers. While many of the implications of this changed situation took time to become manifest, some were felt almost immediately. Among the latter, for instance, was the outlawing of war and oracles and their agents as instruments of inter-group relations in this whole area... by and large, each community brought under effective control by the British learnt that it had lost the initiative to determine whether its relations with its neighbours were going to be peaceful or warlike (79)

Hitherto, it would seem the actual consequences of colonialism on the dynamics of inter-group relations in Africa did not capture the imagination of many a scholar. All along, it would seem that attention was unduly focused on the political, social, and economic consequences of colonialism and the significance of these on the emerging nations. (Okpeh Jr.2006:299)

Arising from the foregoing, issues regarding the implications of these changes on the morphology of these societies on the one hand, and the nature and character of human relations in them on the other were either taken for granted or deliberately ignored. Two problems immediately emerged from this posture: firstly, for a long time, the changes and continuities in inter-group relations, which colonialism eventuated in these societies, remained largely misunderstood and unappreciated; and secondly, nation-building problems as they relate to the latter-day National Question in these nations could not be immediately apprehended, articulated and addressed. All of these affected the growth and development of the continent for quite some time.

Be that as it may, researchers of culturally plural societies like Okpeh Jr., (2006:300) were soon to demonstrate that, for an objective comprehension of the contemporary structure and patterns of intergroup relations in aggregate societies like Nigeria, an evaluation of the place of colonialism in the trajectory of this process is essentially significant. This has become necessary because, although an essentially economic and political phenomenon, colonialism left behind its trail a plethora of developments, which have serious implications for the evolution of intergroup relations in Nigeria.

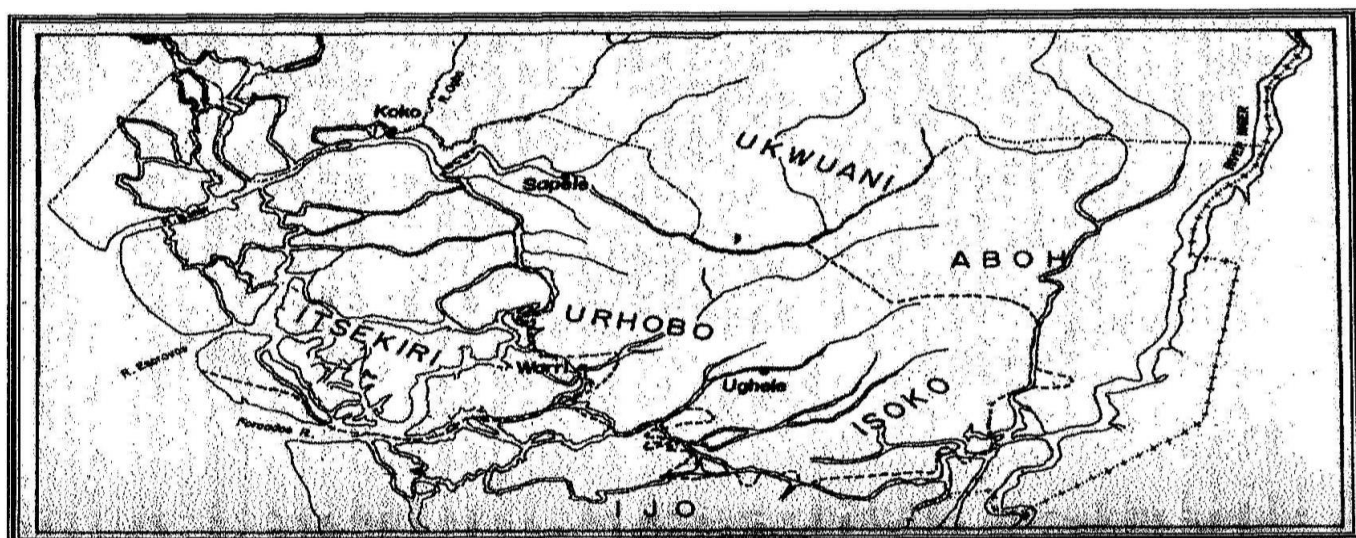


Figure. 1: Map of the Western Niger Delta showing Study Area. **Source:** Ikime O.(1980) “Peoples and Kingdoms of the Western Delta” in *Groundwork of Nigeria History* (adapted).

It is against this background that this work attempts a discourse on the process of the establishment of colonial rule in Isokoland and the impact of this on the people's relations with her neighbours. The Isoko have as her neighbours the Urhobo to the west, the Ijaw to the south and the Ukwuani and Aboh to the east. The area occupied by the Isoko and her neighbours was not an area for which the colonial administration appeared to have had any initial particular strategic economic interest. However, developments in Isokoland were greatly influenced by policies formulated against the background of broader considerations concerning the colony and protectorate of Nigeria. It further situates Isoko relations with her neighbours within the mainstream of colonialism. It attempts to illuminate, the nexus between colonial administrative and socio-economic policies and the changes in Isoko relations with her neighbours. This is done within the context of the military conquest and subjugation of the people, colonial prejudices, and the resulting social economic and political changes.

The history of the Isoko people during the era of Native Administration (1931 – 1950) has not yet received satisfactory attention. Administrative records available now dwell more on the Urhobo section of the "Sobo" Division than on the Isoko. This is evidence of the attitude of the British administration to the newly created "Sobo" division and partly explains why Isoko felt unhappy with the new association. The years 1931 to 1950 are taken in this work as the era of Native Administration. The reason was that virtually all the build-outs in the region during those years ~ social, economic or political were anchored on the British-guided Native

Administration. The workings of the Native Administration cannot be studied in detail in this work, however, some of the outlines have been filled in as part of this work as would be seen subsequently.

Another fundamental issue is that the colonial period produced certain inequalities between different groups. The colonial masters had started at the coast and moved inward to the hinterland. In the context of the then-British contraption of the Warri and later Delta province, the Itsekiri at the coast had been the first to be exposed to British authority. Next, the British moved into the Urhobo hinterland and then to the Isoko areas. The rate of development also tended to follow the same pattern: the establishment of trading firms and the building of schools followed this pattern. The result of all of this was a deliberately orchestrated unequal development. In other words, British colonial policy engendered ethno-national consciousness among the Itsekiri than her Urhobo and Isoko neighbours in pre-colonial times. Thus, the consolidation of British rule facilitated ethnic nationalism and identity conflict in the Western Delta.

Whereas in the pre-colonial period, the ethnic groups, which forged different relationships, were acting as equals, the associations, which colonial rule sought to promote in the colonial period, especially by the 1930s, were not an association between equal partners. This now made the groups to be consistently mindful of their shortcomings in comparison to one another. The Urhobo ethnic nationality wanted the Isoko ethnic nationality to join them because they understood that, at that time at least they were at an advantage in terms of men and resources. The Isoko were unwilling to remain with the Urhobo because they saw clearly that they were being treated as junior partners. The same reason explains the unwillingness of five Urhobo clans to remain with the Itsekiri ethnic nationality in the "Jekri-Sobo" Division, therefore, it was not just that the Isoko were anxious to be independent, rather it was that they sought conditions under which they would have a more even chance of developing their potentialities. As Okorobia and Olali (2013:434-435) put it when the British decided to reorganize the established Native Administration so that each ethnic group would have its institutions

they created the Jekri-Sobo Division which had in it the Itsekiri and several Urhobo groups on the ground that the Itsekiri and these Urhobo groups were so inter-mixed that they would fuse into one in the future. But the Urhobo in this Division continued to protest their continued subjection to the Itsekiri who were seen as British allies in the violation of the Urhobo territorial integrity. The Itsekiri also acted as British guides and interpreters, as well as the first native court judges and clerks in Urhoboland despite the objections by the Urhobo. The Urhobo also argued that their tax money was being used to develop the Itsekiriland. Eventually, the Urhobo were excised from the Jekri-Sobo division and a Western Sobo Division was created for them with headquarters at Ughelli. The importance that Ughelli came to acquire in Urhoboland is owed to this decision. It was the first place in Urhoboland where a British colonial official resided. The Sobo Division, however, included the Isoko who are not Urhobo (434-435).

From the above, it is clear that the course of British administration in the area instilled in the Isoko a sense of bitterness, distrust, and aloofness towards the colonial administration. As we shall subsequently see, this was to engender strong negative feelings towards the people throughout the colonial period. A development that helped shape people's perception of themselves and their relationship with their neighbours.

A survey on the Impact of Colonial Rule on the Relations between the Isoko and their Neighbours



Figure. 2. Map of Delta State showing the Isoko and their Neighbours

Isoko – Aboh/Ukwauani Relations:

The Isoko-Aboh relations predate the 19th century and were intensified rather than diminished in the 19th century and during the colonial period when certain Isoko clans were placed in the “Kwale and Aboh Division” by the British colonial masters (Ikime 1967:664). Succinctly put, the political and administrative re-organisation in 1906 saw the protectorate of Southern Nigeria and the colony of Lagos amalgamated into a single administrative unit. Following this re-organisation, the Isoko were now included in the new Aboh District which was formally part of the Central Division (C.O. 591/ 3. Annual Report Western Division 1905-Government Gazette No. 2, 9th May 1906, 50)

The European presence in the late 19th century onward further stimulated the Isoko-Aboh relations. For the Isoko, the place of contact with the Europeans as described by Welch (1931:36) is the Ase Creek, which runs down into the Forcados and Nun Rivers to form the Niger running into the sea at Burutu. In this region, both the towns of Ase and Asaba-Ase, though in the Isoko country, are not strictly Isoko, are towns of the Igbo-speaking sub-cultural group, and both were more intimately in contact with trade and new ideas than the average Isoko village.

British colonial administration largely stimulated the Isoko-Aboh relationship. Between 1914 and 1931, the Ase clan area together with the Isoko-speaking clans of the Warri province constituted a sub-district of the Warri Division as it were. The sub-district (aside from the Agbon clan of the Urhobo ethnic group) plus the Ase clan area was renamed Aboh Division. Ikime (1967:664). Before now, the Aboh district was the area which as it turned out, historically acknowledged the suzerainty of the *Obi* (King) of Aboh.

It is in the light of the above that the British officers, influenced by the widespread authority of the *Obi* of Aboh in the 19th century were inclined to build the new Native Administration structure around the *Obi*. This is supported by the report of 1928 thus:

The Chief feature of interest in this Division has been the possibility of a future Native Administration built up in the non-Sobo parts on what is left of the organization of the kingdom of Abo under the *Obi* (C.S.O. 26/2 File 11857 vol. vi: Annual Report, Warri Province, 1928)

Arising from the foregoing, the new administration was to cater for the Isoko especially those clans at the frontiers, without much ado. One other area where it is clear that British colonial administration stimulated the Isoko-Aboh relations is noticeable as follows:

Apart from the fact that the *Obi* was in the past a prominent personage with considerable power over a wide area, there was the British preference for some kind of "paramount chief" around whom to build their Native Administration Ikime (1967:665)

It is worthy to mention here that, there were no paramount chiefs in Isoko land of the likes of chief Dogho of Itsekiri-Urhobo areas but the *modus Vivendi* that characterized the Isoko-Aboh relations during this period is commendable.

One cannot talk about Isoko-Aboh relations without mentioning the diplomatic relationship that existed. The Aboh monarch wields so much power within the Western Niger Delta and even beyond. This is evident in his political alliances with neighbouring hinterland towns and villages, especially clans that were former offshoots of the Aboh party. These clans such as Amai, Ogume, Ozoro, Ashaka, and Orogun established diplomatic links with Aboh through *Nzè*, the religious cult of the Aboh party (Okolugbo 1981:507) The *Obi* of Aboh was even conferring chieftaincy titles on some of the rulers in these villages.

Evidence of the influence of the Aboh Monarch is established by the report of 7th March 1932 wherein the District officer, Warri submitted a memorandum to the District officer, Kwale, complaining that without consulting him, the *Obi* of Aboh had made one Okenedo at Usoro (Ozoro) an *Ovie* and that information reaching him revealed that Okonedo had paid £90 (ninety pounds) approximately ₦45,948.00 (Forty-five thousand, nine hundred forty-eight Naira only using the current exchange rate) to the *Obi*. The District officer immediately demanded the withdrawal of the title from Okonedo (Kwale Dist. 5. File ANA: 39, District Officer Warri to District Officer Kwale, 7th May 1932). In his reply, the *Obi* gave instances of his predecessors crowning different Usoro (Ozoro) *Ivie* - plural of *Ovie*. He, however, modified it by saying that "the title could not be conferred on anyone unless the whole village are unanimous on their choice so that the case of Okenedo could be null and void" (Kwale Dist. 5 File ANA 39, "*Obi* Oputa II of Aboh to the District Officer, Kwale.")

One aspect of missionary activities that helped to foster intergroup relations between the Isoko and Aboh was the initiation and sustenance of group meetings designed to foster unity and cooperation within various missionary bodies. A good example was the Catholic organization formed in 1924 under the presidency of one Patrick Okoro (Usikpedo, 2007). The organization promoted the general welfare of the Catholics in the Isoko and Aboh divisions. This organization encouraged and financed the translation of the catholic catechism into Isoko.

Ozoro was the first Isoko town to have any dealings with the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) with the establishment of a congregation there in 1918. Between 1918 and 1954, there was no Parish priest resident in Isoko. The catholic endeavour in Isoko was superintended from various bases, such as Warri and Aragba in Kwale Division. By 1938, it became a part of Ashaka Parish in the Aboh division. It was not until 1954 that Ozoro had a resident priest (Ozoro Catholic Mission Maternity Record". File No. 1 1962. No. 25).

During the punitive expedition to Isoko in 1911 by the British colonialists, the reaction of the Isoko people was more evasiveness than confrontation. They avoided "pitched battles with the invading soldiers, but decided to wear them down through desertion and starvation." (Ononeme 1969:17-19). As a mark of solidarity, certain Kwale (Ukwuani) towns like Orogun, Abbi, Igbuku, and Emu-unor, which have common boundaries with Isoko communities, gave shelter to the "Isoko fugitives" seeing the plight of their "kinsmen" and neighbours. These fugitives include people from Oleh, Ozoro and Owhe. The co-operation of the Ukwuani neighbours with Oleh, Owhe and Ozoro towns was very effective to the extent that it jolted the British patrol team (NAI CSO 4/3 vol. 10. "Report from Richardson to P.C. Warri dated 13th March 1911. Para 7).

During the period of Christian persecution in Isokoland, about 1916, the non-Christians persecuted Christians because they believed in the new faith. These crises resulted in the birth of new Christian colonies and villages. Those who could not bear the extant traditional life of heathenism had to escape or migrate elsewhere to

practice their newly embraced religion. Among the Isoko Christian villages that emerged were Bethel and Iden from Oyede, Canaan, and Ikpidiama from Irri, Udhedhe (Town of Peace) from Akra-Iti. Others moved to Iden near Aboh. Out of the villages that emerged, only Ikpidiama is essentially Isoko-speaking while others are bilingual. As all of these settlements maintain contact with their parent Isoko clans, they still maintained close associations with their Aboh neighbours (Ikime, 1972)

The process of establishing colonial rule largely stimulated and intensified the relationship between Isoko and Ukwuani. As noted above, the people of Oleh, Ozoro and Owhe had to face severe military action by the British in the period 1910-1911. Unable to withstand the military onslaught, they then resorted to the mass evacuation from their towns. Aside from the Isoko towns of Uzere, Olomoro, Ofagbe, and Ada-Irri who offered asylum to their hard-pressed neighbours, Ukwuani towns of Abbi, Ushie, Emu-unor, and Orogun also offered shelter to the Isoko refugees/fugitive (NAI. CSO 26 File 11857 vol. IX Annual Report, Warri Province 1931 Appendices 2 and 3).

After the termination of hostilities, the bulk of the fugitives returned to their homes, but others did not return. Thus, some Isoko settled in Emu-unor, Abbi, Ushie, and Igbuku. Here they settled down and became virtually “naturalized” citizens of their new homes. These new settlers continued to engage in their usual profession – farming and palm nut collecting Okolugbo (2004:23). Such Isoko have become bilingual, speaking both Isoko and Ukwuani. Significantly, their presence in the Ukwuani country threw a bridge between the two groups, thereby intensifying social and economic contacts between the Isoko of Ovrode, Ofagbe, Owhe and Ozoro, particularly with their Ukwuani neighbours.

Isoko – Urhobo Relations: On the Context Analysis of Isoko-Urhobo Relations¹: These two groups have many social political and cultural features in common and their language (dialects) are more closely related to each other than to other Edoid dialects at least from the layman's point of view. Meantime, one of the innumerable questions at the core of scholarship on Isoko and Urhobo relations is the question of when these ethnic nationalities assumed their current identities. As early as 1929 before the re-organisation of the 1930s which lumped together the Isoko and Urhobo under the “Sobo Division”, Sidney R. Smith in his unpublished manuscript: “The Ibo People, A Study of Religion and Customs of a Tribe in the Southern Provinces of Nigeria” had recognized the Isoko people as distinct from the Usobo (Urhobo) (Dike 1956:39-40). Arising from the age-long misconception that the Isoko are Urhobo, Ikime (2006:503) queried: is it possible for one to meaningfully or conveniently speak of Isoko-Urhobo relations in the Seventeenth Century? If in the affirmative, how would one define Isoko or Urhobo? Take, for instance, did the Isoko clan of Erohwa tucked away as they are on the shores of the Erohwa creek had any identifiable relations with say the Urhobo sub-cultural group of Abraka.

¹ This analysis is adapted and culled from Obaro Ikime's "Thoughts on Isoko-Urhobo Relations" in P.P. Ekeh (ed.) *History of Urhobo People of Niger Delta*. (Lagos and Buffalo New York: Urhobo Historical Society 2006), pp. 503-504. Originally a Keynote Address delivered at the Sixth Annual Conference of Urhobo Historical Society, on Saturday 22, October 2005 at the Petroleum Training Institute, PTI Effurun, Nigeria.

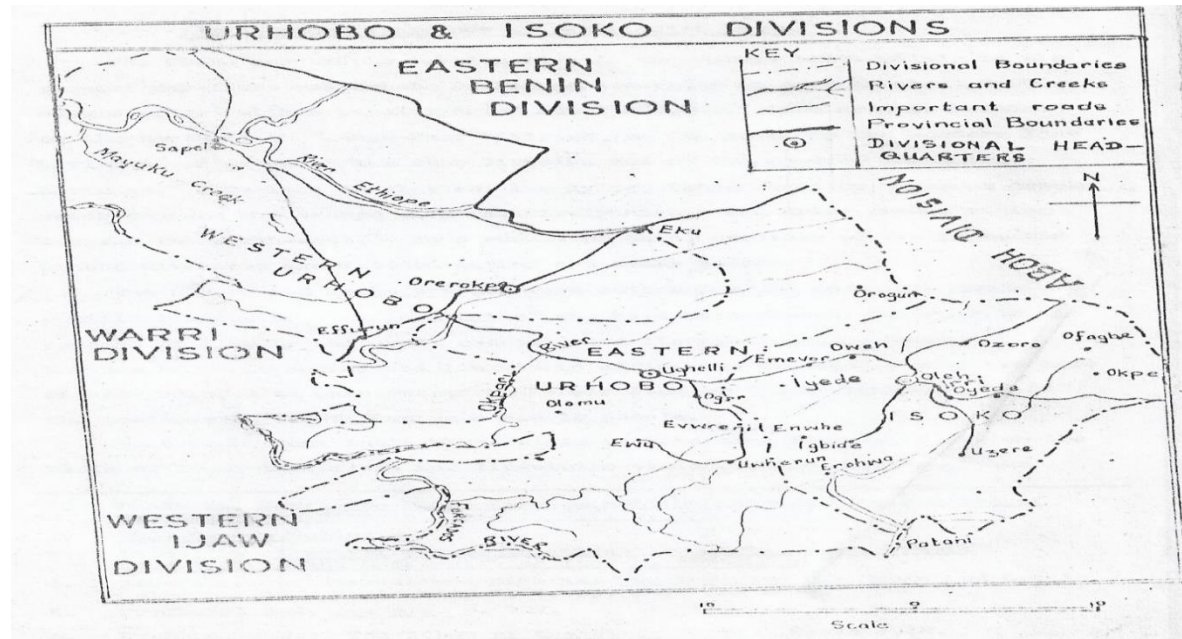


Figure 3. Map of Urhobo and Isoko Divisions.

Did the Isoko clan of Ozoro have any relations with the Urhobo group of Uwheren or Ewreni say in the Seventeenth century? On what source can one depend for a reconstruction of such relations? Given that all the groups that constitute Isokoland today speak the Isoko language, could they have *ipso facto* regarded themselves as a socio-political group with identical political and economic interests that they defended against other groups in the period before the colonial experience? The same question goes for the Urhobo. Was there a common language or mutually intelligible dialects resulting from a common political identity such as can enable one to speak of Isoko-Urhobo relations in pre-colonial times? To all of these questions, one will always find knotty within the context of Isoko-Urhobo relations.

The above discourse becomes significant in the following analysis. Frontier Isoko and Urhobo towns indeed maintained commercial and social relations. It is also true that centres that were famous for specific products, would have attracted people from considerable distances (like the Uzere, *Eni juju* or oracle did right up to the opening years of colonial rule (Okpevra 2013:313-20). Even so, it would be wrong to speak of Isoko-Urhobo relations understood as involving all of Isokoland and all of Urhoboland. This position is also attested to with the naked realisation that of the present 19 clans of the Isoko nation, only six clans share common boundaries with some Urhobo clans. These are Iyede-Ughelli, Enhwe-Ewreni; Umeh-Uwheren, Owhe-Orogun; Emevor-Agbara-Otor, and Igbide-Uwheren. (See figure3 on p.11).

It is, therefore, the contention of Ikime (2006:504) that “even when groups were involved in (pre-colonial) long-distance trade, they did not trade *qua* Isoko or *qua* Urhobo.” The needs of the various Isoko and Urhobo groups determined their relationships-commercial, social (intermarriage for example) ritual etc., with their neighbouring groups. Paradoxically, of the nineteen Isoko clans, only Olomoro (and recently Otibio or Otor-Igho in Owhe Clan) is known to have migrated from the Urhobo clan of Olomu. It thus appears that more of the Urhobo groupings especially those of Agbon clan descended from the Isoko than the Isoko from the Urhobo, this is one of the reasons, among others, why the Isoko refuse to be classified as Urhobo. It is against this background that Ekeh (www.waado.org/.../Ekeh_Rejoinder.html) deposed that "any study of Urhobo history and culture that belittles the huge contributions from Isoko will do so at its peril"

In the pre-colonial days when each group and each clan looked after itself, there was no debate as to whether the Isoko are Urhobo or *vice versa*. The origin of this debate, it would seem is recent, emanating from the colonial

period. During the colonial period, all of the Isoko clans were placed within what used to be known as the Warri Division, with Warri as headquarters (NAI CSO 26 File 11857 vol. x: Annual Report Warri Province, 1932.); to get to Warri, the Isoko had to traverse Urhobo territory because the Urhobo are geographically near to Warri. However, as the British detected a similarity between the languages of the Urhobo and Isoko, they regarded both as “Sobo”. After the re-organisation of the 1930s, the Urhobo and Isoko were in the “Sobo Division” with Ughelli as headquarters.

Noteworthy is the fact that, when the British were restructuring Nigeria into Divisions, they did not consider anybody's choice of division. People were lumped together into one division while breaking up the territory into administrative units not based on any worked-out principles. One should not conclude that the Isoko and Urhobo were lumped into one Division because they were one people: ethnic homogeneity was not a criterion in the British enterprise. The colonial authorities hardly knew the people they brought together into districts or provinces. They were even not aware that merging "Nigerians" into the new groupings, inadvertently created new challenges for relationships between such groups Ikime (1985:16-20). From the foregoing, it becomes clear that the Isoko and Urhobo are two distinct ethnic groups in the western Niger Delta who were forced into an unholy marriage by colonial rule.

Isoko – Ijaw Relations: By the beginning of the 19th century, the Kabowei has been firmly entrenched on the Niger and the Forcados. Also, were in the position to establish relations with their neighbours, the Isoko, and Asaba-Ase, (an Isoko-Ukwuani border town) and other fellow Ijaw groups on the Niger, Forcados, and Nun Rivers. This is what informed Ikime (1972:25) and Okpevra (2005:401) to depose that "there is wide evidence of commercial contacts between sections of the two groups, especially between the Isoko settlements on the Ase River and the Niger and their Ijaw neighbours”.

Even as the Niger Company established Depots/factories in Patani with its concomitant effects, British colonial rule also intensified Isoko-Ijaw relations, as it equally made certain Isoko clans to attend the Patani Native Court. The Isoko clans of Erohwa, Umeh and Igbide were put under the Patani Native Court in the Western Ijaw country. Later on, a Patani-Uzere court was created. The court sat alternately in Patani and Uzere. The Uzere Native Court opened in May 1904 and was the first court established in the Isoko country Akora and Ekebe (1997:69).

One important sphere in which the Western Ijaw country could not completely maintain its isolation was the area of missionary enterprise. Patani was for the Isoko an important commercial centre where both the UAC and Messrs John Holt & Co. had well-established "factories". It was to these "factories" that the Isoko, especially the people of Erohwa, Igbide, Enhwe, Umeh, Uzere and Oleh, took their palm oil and kernels for sale. Also, the Isoko sold food and other products of their various occupations in the Patani market every thirteenth day (Niger Mission Papers G.3 A.3/010: "Report on Brass and Ijo District 1 March 1907"). It was through this commercial contact that the Isoko came in contact with the nascent Christian Community already growing in Patani.

Unlike other areas where missionary activities preceded the formal establishment of colonial rule, the case of Isoko was virtually the reverse. The first missionary journey into Isokoland, however, was undertaken in the year 1911, after the “formal pacification” of the area by the British colonialists. It was from Patani that Christianity spread to Isokoland. By 1907, the Niger Mission already had a mission centre at Patani. It was indeed from this centre under the superintendence of the Revd. Henry Proctor that Christianity was to spread into the Isoko country Ikime (1965:211).

By 1912, the Isoko were visiting Patani in large numbers. Some of them eagerly expressed the desire to give up idol worship and become Christians. From here, they bought the Bible in English, or one of the gospels translated into Ijaw, which they put under their pillows “as a witness to God that they have left heathenism and have joined God’s company” as the reverend gentleman so piously puts it (Niger Mission G.3 A3/013: "Letter from J.D. Aitken" (No. 6 of 1913).

One of the pioneer missionaries to the Isoko country was the Revd. J.D. Aitken. By 1913, he had visited Owodokpokpo (an Igbide village), Igbide, Emede and Oleh. Igbide became his headquarters not just because the greatest number of converts was there during this early period but also because it was the nearest hinterland town to Patani, the ultimate base of operations.

In addition to the factor of proximity and the initial large number of converts in Igbide was the role of one Madam Bribrinae, a Patani woman who introduced and spread Christianity to this part of Isokoland. How did she do it? She was one of the early converts to Christianity in Patani. She later gave birth to a set of twins but refused to have the children eliminated as custom demanded, on the ground that her new faith forbade her to do so. Accordingly, she and her children were banished to a small island opposite Patani, where an Igbide man named Abiegbe who was on a return journey from one of his many trade trips to Patani met her. Abiegbe eventually married Bribrinae and brought her to Igbide. She then began the task of evangelization among the Igbide people in 1911 Erivwo (1979:13). Igbide thus became Isokoland's pioneer Christian centre, from where it spread to other areas of Isokoland.

The Political, Economic and Administrative Impact on Isoko Relations with their Neighbours under British Colonial Rule.

Aghalino (1998:19-23) and Ikime (1980:102) reveal that before the establishment of British colonial administration in the Isoko nation of the western Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the people had established an economic system which not only made fairly adequate provisions for their needs, but also those of their immediate neighbours such as the Ijaw, Urhobo and Ukwuani/Aboh. Trade is one aspect of the economic activities of people, and trade and politics cannot be divorced. For one thing, the political system consists of power, influence and public decision making which to a superlative degree affects all spheres of human life to which trade is not an exception. This in itself also invariably affects inter-group conflicts and their resolution.

The fundamental and obvious reason for the establishment of colonial rule over the Isoko country as over the rest of the country was the effective tapping of the economic resources of the country in the interest of the colonizing power, Britain: the implication of this for the Isoko was the intensification of production for export purposes.

Recall that since the early part of the 19th century, the Isoko had been engaged in the production of palm oil and palm kernels for exports. It was basically to market these products that the Isoko travelled to Warri, Patani, Ganagana, Asaba-Ase and other places where European trading firms, had established what used to be described as "factories" that are buying and selling centres. The exploitation of the oil palm tree thus tended to become, for the bulk of the population, the means of raising additional revenue to meet the expenses of their gradually changing pattern of life. Hence, there was an intensification of this exploitation.

The Isoko responded to these pressures by going on *Ukane* - migrating from his home to some area either within the Isoko country or outside it where he thought he could engage more profitably in fishing, farming, or producing palm oil and kernels (Okpevra 2016:179-186). By far the great majority of those who left home in this way engaged in the palm produce trade. A large number of Isoko moved away from home into the Benin, Ondo and Ijebu provinces for this purpose; some moved into the watersides of Aboh territory and Omoku in Rivers State (Anozie 2016) where the indigenes did not fully engage in the exploitation of the oil palm. Before they settled in these areas, some agreement was reached between them and their hosts. Usually, they paid an annual rent for the land they occupied or exploited.

It will be noticed that these migrants spread over wide areas, from the Delta provinces through most of the former Western Region. Some also moved into the Ibo areas of the former Eastern Region. By far the greater number, however, migrated into Yorubaland and Benin. This is easy to explain. The Ibo were themselves heavily dependent on the oil palm for their export production. So the Isoko would have less scope in the Ibo

areas. In Yorubaland, however, Cocoa provided an alternative source of wealth and so the concentrations of palm produce were less and the Isoko, therefore, got much more scope for exploiting the oil palm in this area. That the Isoko were able to spread over such an area was itself the product of the colonial situation. This situation had brought all of these areas under the same central political authority of the British, which had led to the building of motor roads and the introduction of wheeled transport, and which had overall, given a greater incentive for economic activity (Ikime 1972:90-91).

Colonial rule introduced a more organized system of exploitation of the economic resources of the land. The agricultural base of the region was enormous and farmers, fishermen, craftsmen, hunters etc diverted their attention to European commerce. The processing of palm fruits for oil and kernels; and the exploitation of timber and other resources of the tropical forest became the major economic activities. European trade all through the twilight years of the pre-colonial era depended on the waterways of the Ase and Forcados Rivers which were favoured routes for canoe traffic. Also, human portage along several footpaths in the hinterlands was indispensable. Traffic along with these brought goods to the depots of African and European merchants. In later years, of colonial rule, the 'iron horse' (bicycles) were introduced to ferry goods in the hinterlands along earth roads and footpaths.

In the course of the European stimulating the commercial relationship between the Isoko and Aboh, by the autumn of 1908, a European, Mr J.P. Dunn of the Royal Niger Company, opened the first Isoko trading factory at Ivrogbo. He was to be the first white man to penetrate the Isoko bush when he visited personally Ozoro, Oleh and the adjacent towns, inviting the elders and people to collect palm nuts, crush them and bring the palm oil to the Ivrogbo station. Mr Dunn also introduced kerosene tins into the country, which were the general receptacles for carriers of oil (Welch, 1931:563) until the recent introduction of "Jerry Cans." A critical analysis of the nature and character of Isoko's relations with their neighbours under colonialism is imperative here. This is particularly necessary because of the need to understand how and in what specific ways colonialism altered these relations. It is also important to x-ray the extent to which these changes were significant in the dynamics of inter-group relations in Nigeria during the colonial period and even after.

The above is a brief overview of some of the political, economic, and administrative changes, which occurred in Isoko society during the colonial period. From what is said so far, it is clear that such administrative, economic, and political changes were intended to actualise British colonial interests which were paramount. They were also part and parcel of the colonial government's strategy deployed to neutralise concerted opposition from the people. It is within this context that colonial administrative and political policies are perceived as important variables in the changing nature and character of Isoko's relations with her neighbours. Some examples would help buttress the point one is trying to put forward here. The arbitrary boundary delimitations that occasioned the conquest and occupation of Isokoland did not take into consideration pre-colonial patterns of relations between the people themselves on the one hand, and between them and their neighbours on the other. These developments created new avenues for contact between the people and their neighbours. To understand the full implications of this, an examination of the socio-political and economic changes Isokoland experiences during this period is particularly imperative.

The relationship between socio-economic scarcity, intergroup competition under colonialism and the rise of ethnicity in Nigeria has been emphasized by Nnoli (1980:73) who, for example, opines that arising generally from the capitalist structures and values of colonial Nigeria and its dependent relations with Britain and in general Western capitalism, the competition was the most dominant feature of the colonial situations. People (now) compete(d) for virtually everything: for positions within governmental agencies and commercial centres, for control of local markets, for admission into crowded schools and for control of political parties, and so on. As Nnoli (1980:75) again notes, communal group affiliation and identity became a mechanism for overcoming and pervasive insecurity and anomie of the colonial society. The point, therefore, is that although colonialism no doubt provided a new platform that deepened contacts and interactions between the Isoko and other groups, it also created conditions that increasingly made inter-group relations essentially antagonistic.

Conclusion

Certain salient points have been emphasized concerning the impact of colonialism on the development of the Isoko ethnic nationality and changing nature and character of their relations with their neighbours, especially the Urhobos. The first of these is their conquest and subjugation by the British, which was particularly brutal. The opposition to colonial brutalities that accompanied the conquest of the Isoko filled the people with a general sense of phobia for the colonial administration. Over time, this coalesced into a prolonged resistance to colonialism, and it was not until 1911 that the military phase of British activities in Isokoland was effectively completed. Even after that, the people reverted to passive resistance, which manifested itself in the refusal to pay colonial taxes, opposition to alien district headship and resistance to the administration's attempt to impose a hybrid British idea of justice on the people. All these however evoked in the administration negative feelings towards the Isoko, their trajectories of which affected the character of their relations with other groups. Furthermore, the colonial administration's political and administrative reforms took little or no cognizance of pre-colonial patterns of group contact and interactions. For example, contrary to the supposed attention, colonial officers gave to hitherto existing socio-economic and cultural relations between the Isoko and their neighbours, the boundary delimitations they carried out provided the basis for antagonistic coexistence.

As has been demonstrated, not only did colonialism destroy the basis for autonomous action between interacting groups, but by dividing these ethnic groups into districts, divisions, provinces and regions, it created a consciousness that proved pernicious for harmonious living between them. Moreover, in the application of the indirect rule system of administrations, the practice of encouraging socio-cultural differentiation between ethnic groups altered the structure of inter-group relations in Nigeria. In conclusion, therefore, against the backdrop of the kernel of this study, this work has attempted a discourse on the aspects of intergroup relations in the western Niger Delta in south-central Nigeria through to the process of the establishment of colonial rule in Isokoland and the impact of this on the people's relations with their neighbours. Although not an area for which the colonial administration appeared to have had any particular strategic economic interest, developments in Isokoland were greatly influenced by policies formulated against the background of broader considerations concerning the colony and protectorate of Nigeria. It further situates Isoko relations with their neighbours within the mainstream of colonialism. It attempts to illuminate in due course, the nexus between colonial administrative and socio-political policies and the changes in Isoko relations with their neighbours. This is done within the context of both peaceful and hostile coexistence of the people, colonial prejudices, and the resulting social economic and political changes in the contemporary regional, national and international community.

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