

African Research Review

An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 5 (5), Serial No. 22, October, 2011

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070--0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v5i5.4>

The Place of Bonny in Niger Delta History

(Pp. 36-45)

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Abstract

Bonny occupies a strategic position in the Niger Delta Studies. Issues to be examined in this article include the circumstances surrounding the founding of this unique settlement on the Rio Real of Eastern Delta and its implications for the reconstruction of the history of other Niger Delta communities. An attempt will be made to unravel the strains encountered by the indigenous economy of our study area in the face of the assault of Old and New imperialism of the West from the fifteenth centuries to the recent past. Bonny's strategic and pivotal role in the spread of Christianity in the study area is also highlighted.

Early history

The indigenous settlers of Bonny are known as the Ibani with a distinct language that goes by the same name. In fact the Ibani language has been classified under languages spoken in Eastern Ijo which themselves belong to the Ijoid group (Efere and Williamson 1989, pp. 43-44, Derefaka 2003, p. 23). Dike (1956, p.24) has given the impression that the Bonny are of Igbo origin. He suggest that the first migrants to this area, under their veritable leader Alagberiyé himself, a distinguished hunter, had made incursions into this area between 1450–1800. This movement according to him was necessitated by the penchant to profit maximally from the trade in human cargo. The

consequence in the words of Dike was the gradual conversion of the little Ijo fishing villages into the city states. Jones (1963, p. 29) whose conclusions drew inspiration from Dike's work stresses that it is possible that Bonny... moved into the Delta during the Portuguese period (1450 - 1550) but it is equally probable that they had moved down before this time. The position informed the choice of the title of his book. 'The Trading States of the Oil Rivers' against the background of his conviction that the Ibani like most Niger Delta states came into existence as a function of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

Alagoa and Fombo (1972, p.3-4) have argued that the Ibani of present day Bonny migrated out of their original homeland in the Ijo ethnic – group of the central Delta. As a result of social upheavals Opumakule and his brother Alagbariye and Asikunuma popularly known as Okpara Asimini and their families resolved to move northwards and later southeastwards through the Ndokki territory to settle in Okolo-ama, curlew town, the present day location of the Bonny. Alagoa (1972, p.152) traces the origin of the Ibani to the Isideni lineage of the Kolokuma in Central Delta.

On the date of these migrations and the founding of Bonny and other Eastern Delta States like Nembe, Elem Kalabari and Okrika, Alagoa (1976:338) concludes, in the face of all available evidence that the settlers would have moved into this area between 1200 and 1400. To the wary researcher this date is very revealing as it goes a long way in providing the basis for the historical reconstruction of our study area. Both Dike (1956) and Jones had postulated that the settlement of the Ibani in Bonny was a function of the Trans – Atlantic slave trade. In other words they (i.e. Dike and Jones) are of the opinion that the coastal states were founded so the settlers could profit maximally from the trade in human cargo. This view is no longer tenable because the new date proffered by Alagoa (1976) means that the coastal dwellers had moved in to their present site before the advent of the slave trade. It must be mentioned, however, that recent research studies on the Eastern Niger Delta have questioned hitherto popular conclusions. There is now an indication that the original homeland of the Ibani could be located in the Eastern and not Central Delta, as was widely held (Horton 1997, p.195-255). This 'fresh insight' needs some time for closer examination and assimilation.

Dike (1956:24) observes that the original name of Bonny Okoloama, was informed by ecological realities. Okolo stands for 'Curlews'. The first settlers

discovered that the new site was full of curlew birds. But Ejituwu (1991, p.68-69) argues that the Ibani first settled at Out-Ochad (Ibani Nanabie) in their search for a place of abode having left Ndokki up the Imo River. Whereas the Andoni see them as Ebinyanya which means 'wanderers', it is worthwhile to acknowledge the dexterity and resolve of the roving Ibani who were determined to establish themselves in their new location in spite of all odds.

Inter-group relations

The adumbration on the inter – group relations is predicted on the fact that no ethnic group is entirely self – sufficient. The Bonny people were involved in different types of socio – economic and politico – military relations with their neighbours viz the Kalabari, Andoni, Okrika, Ogoni, Ikwerre (Ndele) and Igbo amongst others.

Relations with the Igbo in general and especially the Ndokki stock was so close that Jones (1963, p.105) concludes 'the Bonny people were derived from a section of the Ndokki tribe living on the lower Imo River which claimed to have migrated there from the Central Ijo area. From very early times, the Ibani left their original homeland in Central Niger Delta during a period of civil strife and sojourned among the Ndokki in the Azumini area otherwise known as the Imo River Valley. Later they moved down to their present settlement at Okoloama near the Niger Delta coast after a brief stay among the Ogoni. To buttress this point Oguagha (1992, p.43) notes that some Ijo communities like Elem Kalabari and Bonny groups proffer traditions of migrations through Igbo territories before settling in their present homeland.

There were strong commercial links between the Bonny and Ndokki via the Imo Valley. Against the popular opinion in some circles, Alagoa (1971, p.355) observes that 'long distance trade across the delta and into the hinterland was well established before the Portuguese arrived in the Delta at the beginning of the sixteenth century. It is most needless to stress that the Ndokki is one of the hinterland settlements of the Igbo that maintained economic relations with the Bonny of Niger Delta. Oguagha (1992, p. 44) further observes that the economic relation between the Ijo of the Niger delta as a whole and the Igbo communities in the interior was a function of ecological differentiation that existed between them. The Igbo as a result of their geographical terrain were mainly farmers who produced yams, palm oil and livestock. These food items, often times, were exchanged with the fish

and salt produced in the Niger Delta coastal settlements. With the advent of the Atlantic Slave Trade, slaves became a viable item which was brought down to the Delta Coastal area by the Igbo.

Much of the relations between the Kalabari and the Ibani revolved around trade. It should be recalled that Bonny is bounded in the immediate north by the Kalabari. Attempts by the Ibani to dominate the trade in the hinterland had always led to frictions. Although there was every indication that the Bonny recorded more victories, it is worth mention that the Kalabari posed a serious challenge to the belligerent manoeuvrings of the later in their bid to control the hinterland trade network. This commercial tussle led to so many wars. In fact, two of such wars were recorded in 1790 alone (Dike 1956, p.32). Between 1871 and 1882, not less than five wars had taken place. But despite these strains, the Bonny and Kalabari have always maintained good ties through inter-marriage and other socio-economic relations (Alagoa & Fombo 1972, pp. 78-79).

It has earlier been stated that the Ibani, having migrated from the Ndokki territory of Imo River via the Ogoni axis, settled at Okolo-ama, a site adjacent to the Andoni. Thus the relations between the Obolo (Andoni) and the Ibani is as old as the history of the settlement of the latter in their present homeland. Ejituwu (1992, pp. 62-71) records a seven-year war fought as a result of relentless attempts made by parties to participate in the Atlantic Slave Trade. The Andoni would have desired to manipulate the Atlantic trade routes to their advantage but the Bonny were resolute in their ambition not only to maintain commercial relations with the Portuguese on the Rio Real but also to control the hinterland markets. Thus they were prepared to flex their military muscle to keep the status quo. This often led to skirmishes between them and the Andoni. From 1826 -1846, Ejituwu (1992, pp. 112-123) examines the last phase of the struggle for supremacy between the Obolo (Andoni) and Bonny. This tussle stemmed from the exigencies of the 'legitimate' trade which replaced the obnoxious trade in human cargo otherwise known as the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

In a bid to discontinue with the slave trade for mainly economic as well as humanitarian reasons, the British proffered assistance to the Ibani through the provision of military weapons to checkmate the clandestine activities of the Portuguese, Brazilian and Dutch dealers who were still interested in making a fortune out of human cargo trade. These other European dealers saw a willing ally in the Andoni. Thus it was a clash of the 'super-powers' which reflected

in the gory conflicts between local contenders viz the Ibani and Obolo. In their work Ejituwu and Okoroafor (2009:48) posit that the Niger Delta became a 'theatre of rivalry' between the Portuguese rooted in Andoni, the British in bonny, the Dutch in New Kalabari (New Calabar), the French in Nembe Brass. It is pertinent to note the various overtones at the restoration of cordial relations which came to the climax with the signing of peace treaties between the Bonny and Adoni in 1846 at the end of a war that spanned seven solid years.

Dike (1956, p. 44) observes that there were bonds which characterised the relations between various communities of the Niger Delta. According to him 'inter-marriages, inter-clan festivals, blood covenants between neighbouring political units and the many communal market groups in the tribal interior, were effective instruments of cultural unity'. These affinities, in the form of covenant, were more than legal treaties in that they were sealed with oaths and human blood. It is against this background that the relations between the Ibani and Nembe Brass will be viewed and examined. The two communities throughout their history maintained cordial relations substantiated by bloody covenants. The consequence was that the Ibani saw in the Brass man a reliable brother and next of kin of a sort. In the words of Alagoa & Fombo (1972, pp. 79-80) the Kingdom of Nembe (Brass) to the east of Elem Kalabari has never fought any war against Bonny. There was no occasion for rivalry in trade or disputes over territory and both parties believed their national gods related in spiritual. On the economic front, commercial contacts, borne out by the exchange of items like the canoe et cetera, existed between the two communities. There are indications that the Ibani and Brass entered into military alliance to fight against the Kalabari during the slave trade era (Jones 1963, pp. 147-150).

Similarly, the Ibani maintained close ties with the Ogoni and other communities of Northern Niger Delta like the Ndele of Ikwerre ethnic group and the Ekpeye (Fombo & Alagoa, 1972). Their relations stemmed mainly from commerce and effort to gain access to the hinterland markets. When it is realized that the Ibani settled at Opuoko in Ogoni before their southward movement to Okoloama, then the relations between the two communities (i.e. between the Bonny and Ogoni) will be appreciated.

The indigenous economy

The potentialities and performance of indigenous African economies has been a subject of scholarly research in the recent past. An investigation into

the dynamics of the domestic economy of Niger Delta communities prior to the eighteenth century would reveal some intricate realities. Falola (1992) notes that pre-colonial African domestic economy was diversified and comprised of agriculture, fishing, mining, manufacturing and commerce, including essential services offered by specialists. It is no longer tenable, in the light of new revelations, to posit that the indigenous societies of the Niger Delta operated purely subsistence economies. Alagoa (1970, pp. 319-329) has amply demonstrated that the communities of the Niger Delta were engaged in long distance trade. The Ibani, in their indigenous setup, were engaged in fishing, farming, local craft manufacture and trade.

Fishing was the bastion of the domestic economy of the Ibani. Fishing as an enterprise took place in the Bonny Sea and various creeks and ponds where different species of fish like *agbara* (red snapper), *atabala* (tilapia), *deghe* (mullet), *sungu* (sardines), *kigbo* (bonga fish), *ofuruma* (sharpened shark), *ona* (croaker) et cetera were harvested. The fishing gears in operation include *bala* (fence), *bike* (indigenous hook), *suba* (spear), *fon-igbo* (dragnet) while in some other fishing expeditions, for example, the collection of *mgbe* (oyster), a knife was used to slash the roots of the mangrove trees where batches of shell-fish could be harvested.

It is worthwhile to note that some communities amongst the ibani, especially the Kuruama – Bonny, were involved in other viable economic activities comprising farming. According to Bristol (1986, p. 28) ‘farming started as a result of the need to replant the tubers of the *piri-buru* (bush yam) available in the Kuruama bush-land when the settlers arrived’. During the Trans – Atlantic Slave Trade era, the people of Kuruama had become self-sufficient in the production of cassava which was introduced by the Portuguese in their voyage to the Delta.

To further demonstrate that the Ibani operated a diversified indigenous economy, there is evidence to buttress the fact that Bonny settlers engaged in hunting. Dike (1956, p.24) notes that Alagbariye, a legend and an ancestor in Bonny history, was both a chief and a renowned hunter who happened to ‘discover Okoloama’ in one of his regular hunting expeditions. The geographical location of our study area was such that endowed the territory with games or wild animals like leopards, both pigs and monkeys. It only needs to be mentioned that hunting was not a major economic activity of the Ibani. In addition the people also engaged in the manufacture of local crafts

such as wood carving which produced the oko, local basin and mortal pestles. Canoes were carved mainly by the people of Bille and Nembe brass.

Before the advent of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the Ibani were involved in commercial contacts both within their territory across the boundaries with their neighbours. It should be recognized that the production of surplus commodities and peculiar economic need gave rise to exchange and the development of trade. The origin of trade and hence markets has remained controversial. Hodder (1977, p. 253) observes that the traditional opinion that trade was externally stimulated does not sound convincing. He holds the view that the idea of trade was boosted by external contacts. Against this background, Hopkins (1973:54) has observed that local exchange needs were crucial in the creation of markets and that long distance trade had a stimulating effect on marketing activity at all levels. The Bonny were engaged in long distance trade with the Ogoni, Ekpeye, Ndele of Ikwerre, all of northern Niger Delta and also the Ndokki of igbo hinterland. The Ibani exchanged salt, fish and other aquatic products like shrimps etc with the foodstuff and livestock of their neighbours. With time Bonny won the accolade as 'the most powerful kingdom in nineteenth century Eastern Niger Delta and its hinterland' (Wariboko 2007, p. 181)

External contact

The arrival of the Europeans, which signalled the commencement of Old imperialism, marked a significant watershed in the history of Bonny and her neighbours in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The first European callers were the Portuguese championed by Captain Pereira who arrived the shores of the Rio Real (Bonny and the New Calabar River) at the turn of the sixteenth – century. Whereas it should be recalled that the Portuguese had made contacts with our study area as early as the fifteenth century, they were later displaced by the Dutch and the British between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Dike (1956, p.1) distinguishes between two periods of European commercial relations in the Niger Delta namely the first phase which was dominated by the Portuguese until the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 while the second spans from 1807 – 1885. The focus in the second phase was on legitimate trade with palm oil as the crucial item in demand. That the slave trade was very significant in the socio-economic history of the Ibani is a fact borne out by Dike's (1956, p. 13) assertion that 'not only had the slave been' the mainstay of their economies, but slave – trading kingdoms such as Lagos, Dahomey, Bonny and others owed their origin and greatness to the

rise of the slave trade. This position, however, needs some qualification bearing in mind that the original settlers of our study area had migrated into their present homeland as early as about the thirteenth century AD.

The Portuguese were in desperate need of labour to service their sugar plantations on the Island of Sao Thome and later in Brazil. They were also to supply slaves to the Caribbean and other territories of the New World through the Spaniards (Ejituwu & Kporne – Tornwe 1989:120). At a particular point, Bonny became the seat of the slave trade in human traffic because of the safe and extensive anchorage provided by its river and its nearness to the sea (Dike 1956, p. 24).

On the source of the slaves, it is pertinent to note that the bulk came from the Igbo hinterland territories through the instrumentality and manipulation of the agents of the Aro oracle, the Ibini Ukpabi. Some of the slaves were victims captured in inter – ethnic wars (Curtin 1976, pp. 315-316)

The slave trade played a major role in the history of Delta communities including Bonny. While scholars like Dike (1956) and Jones (1963) have argued that the city or trading states were a ‘by product’ of the obnoxious trade, it has been stressed elsewhere in this article, that such positions are no longer tenable. What appears to be a plausible conclusion is Norton’s (1969) finding that the impact of the slave trade could be seen in the transformation of the hitherto fishing villages to city states with the case study of New Calabar. Besides, the slave trade introduced new elements in the socio-political history of Bonny. According to Alagoa (1976:342-343), ‘the most revolutionary change occasioned by the Atlantic slave trade was probably the adaptation of the old *wari* (house) to serve new ends. This new order provided that successful traders could now raise their private households by supplying the security needed for the existence of the members of the house and in addition also purchase slaves’. The traditional house system with the lineage and kinship ties as its fulcrum now found a new formula where wealth and success in commerce became new determinants.

Ejituwu and Kporne-Tornwe (1989, p. 21) note that the ‘new war canoe House system encouraged merit so that each member of a House, even a slave had the opportunity to move upwards to become head’. Little wonder that Jaja, an ex-slave, who later founded the kingdom of Opobo could rise to the headship of the Anna Pepple House in Bonny (Dike 1956, pp.183-184). Seen from a wider perspective Wallerstein (1976) stresses that the Trans-

Atlantic Slave Trade marked the first phase of the integration of African indigenous economies (of which Bonny was integral part) into the world capitalist system. The fall out of this integration is the polarisation of the world capitalist economy and the creation of dependencies.

Bonny also took the centre stage in the advent of Christianity in the Niger Delta. Ogan (2003, p. 65) notes that Reverend Hope Wadell's arrival in Bonny in 1850 marked a watershed as Christianity was rooted in the area in 1864 and from there spread to Brass in 1868, Opobo in 1873, Kalabari in 1874 and to Okrika in 1878.

Conclusion

A close examination will reveal that the Bonny located at the Rio Real demonstrated enviable feat in their effort to establish themselves in their present homeland as early as the thirteenth century A.D. Their ecological realities provided them ample opportunities which they exploited to meet their economic needs through fishing, farming and the manufacture of local crafts at varying degrees. Their deficiencies in the indigenous economy were mitigated by their contact with their neighbours such as the Nembe Brass, Kalabari, Ikwerre, Ogoni and Igbo. The era of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade transformed the indigenous socio-economic by integrating it into the capital mode of production with obvious consequences for the rest of Niger Delta people of Nigeria.

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