

Indigenous Approaches to Peace Building and Conflict Resolution: A Study of IJIBOR in Bekwerra LGA of Cross River State, 1933-1967

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Abstract

The study examined the indigenous approaches to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Ijibor. It was observed that the methods were so unique and productive in maintaining peace and effective in conflict resolution. Using the content analysis method of analysis, and drawing evidence from primary and secondary sources the discovered that in terms of their features, these methods were similar to what was obtaining in Western societies, but differs in term of effectiveness and potency as object of divinity and reverence were attached to them by the people. However, colonialism and post-colonial states institutions were notable events and forces which overwhelmingly affected these indigenous approaches to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Ijibor. The colonialists came with the colonial agenda and introduced western methods of conflict resolution. This was craftily done by subjugating the hitherto existing method of peacebuilding and conflict resolution which they met on arrival in Ijibor. The indigenous methods of peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Ijibor was closely observed, controlled and relegated to the background for purposes of governing all aspects and affairs of the Ijibor people, advertising the colonial pattern of conflict resolution and demonstrating the craft of colonial imperialism.

Introduction

Conflict has been prevalent in traditional African societies and often had its origin in many aspects of their cultural life. It is obvious that conflict is a natural phenomenon in human society except that the approach to its perceptive, nature and management varied

from one society to another.¹ Even the pattern and phases of conflict varied from community to community. It is important to note that the derivatives of conflict in every traditional African society were germane to the cultural activities of the people. Hence, peace and conflict were indices of culture allied to governance and social engineering in indigenous African societies.²

Conflict was found at every level; at the family level, this happened especially when an individual in the family protested over maltreatment or protested over property inheritance or marital related issues and so on.³ From the socio-economic point of view, it happened especially where there was land encroachment, territorial dislocation, house sequestration, trade imbalance and non-payment of tributes or loans.⁴ At the socio-political sphere, conflict was derived from tussle to the throne, misapplication of custom and tradition and impeachment/dethronement.⁵

¹M. Gluckman, *Custom and conflict in Africa* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1955), p. 105.

²A Braimah, "Culture and Tradition in Conflict Resolution", In Chris Garuba (ed.) *Capacity Building for Crisis Management in Africa* (Abuja: National War College, 1968), p. 34.

³A. Wade, "Should Africa develop its own positive Law?" *Presence Africanize*, 1965, 8 (1): 308-318; M. Gluckman, *Custom and conflict in Africa*, pp. 101-105.

⁴L. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, Glencoe IC: The Free Press., 1956.

⁵F. M. Deng, and I. Zartman, *Conflict Resolution in Africa* (Washington D.C, Pelview Press, 1991), p. 45.

There was conflict among various communities especially where there was a breakdown in diplomatic process leading to inter-communal conflict and violence. It is also evident that the invasion of territories for one reason or the other often occasioned war. Violation of the supernatural, breaking of taboos, breach of sacred sanctions and the defilement of shrines, sanctuaries, groves were causes of socio-cultural/ religious conflict in traditional African societies.⁶

However, there were indigenous approaches to peacebuilding and conflict resolution mechanisms in every traditional African society which were very significant in managing conflicts. The notable feature of this conflict resolution mechanisms stood traditional African societies in the vantage position of demonstrating their unique culture. This was why in pre-colonial African societies, peace and harmony most time, reigned supreme and often produced unique atmosphere for peace to thrive and development became dynamic.⁷ For this reason, J. R. Bassey argued that:

Africa had long developed institutions, systems, relationships and customs, all of which constituted their social order...and through the indigenous institutions, the people's behaviours were predictable as their relationship were based on good-faith and brotherhood. Some of these indigenous institutions in Africa played vital roles in the evolution of customary law in Nigeria.⁸

One of the traditional African societies, the indigenous approaches and institutions had demonstrated uniqueness and effectiveness in peacebuilding and conflict resolution was Ijibor in Bekwarra LGA of Cross River State. Peace and unity was promoted by different

institutions/ instruments in Ijibor. The methods were relatively informal and less intimidating; while people who used them were very familiar with the procedures. Emphasis was placed on reconciliation and restoration of social harmony than punishment of conflicting parties. The administration of justice was made an open affair for all adults to freely participate in the process. However, the powers of some of these institutions were truncated if not completely wrecked by the colonial authorities who portrayed some as useless, while others were brandished "fetish."⁹

The paper examines the indigenous approaches to peace building and conflict resolution in Ijibor in Bekwarra LGA of Cross River State. It will also consider how colonial and post-colonial government had affected these institutions and their application in intergroup relations with their neighbours.

Origin of Ijibor people

The people of Ijibor had rich histories of peaceful co-existence long before the arrival of the British colonial rule – which advertently created many of the conflict. Tracing the historical origin, migration and settlement patterns of both the Ijibor people remain an onerous task, given the fact that Ijibor community was semi-literate, and most of their history was not formally documented in written forms. That notwithstanding, the use of oral tradition has provided some insights into that aspect of the history of the people. The people of Ijibor have been one of the strands of communities that make up the Bekwarra people. This is to say that the Ijibor, just as other sub-groups comprised what make up present-day Bekwarra. Moreso, through anthropological studies, the Bekwarra people are a distinct linguistic group whose population have continued to grow over time. The Ijibor people, just as many of their kin and occupy an area of about 345sq km between

⁶M. Gluckman, *Custom and conflict in Africa...*, p. 105

⁷F. M. Deng, and I. Zartman, *Conflict Resolution in Africa*, p. 48

⁸J. R. Bassey, "Indigenous Institutions in Ibibioland and their Contributions to the Development of Legal System in Nigeria, 1930-2010," *Ibom Journal of History and International Studies*, 13 (1), 2011: 70-97.

⁹J. R. Bassey, "Indigenous Institutions in Ibibioland and their Contributions to the Development of Legal System in Nigeria, 1930-2010," *Ibom Journal of History and International Studies*, 13 (1), 2011: 70-97.

latitude 6° 37' and 6° 47' North and longitude 8° 48' and 9° 00 East.²

The origin, migration and settlement pattern of the Ijibor people has stimulated so much debate among historians and griots alike. However, based on oral tradition, some informants posited that the people of Ijibor like their kit and kin could be traced to a place called 'Bete'¹⁰ in the present-day Obudu area of the Cross River State. However, others suggested that the word "Bete" in view of the origin of the Ijibor people could also mean Irikwe (up North), Ebang Iye (foreign land), Ebeni or Bete.¹¹ The name north or foreign land shows that where the people reside and occupy today was never their first home. Just as was the case with many societies across Africa, migration from one point to the other was almost a certainty because of the fact that during those years, there were various unprovoked attacks and invasions.

Nonetheless, another account, based on colonial records had it that:

"the origin of the Yakoro [the term Yakoro is another name used in identifying the entire Bekwarra group] people is said to have been the settlement of one OdamaAshide a member of AbangKubi family of Buabong in Obudu, who married many women from Alege, Mbube and Yalla and settled in a place which is named Buabong.....¹²

Either way, both the colonial records and the testimonies extracted via oral traditions pointed to the fact that the Ijibor people – which is a sub-group in Bekwarra ethnic group – originated and migrated from Obudu region. However, there is evidence, which suggests that Ijibor people must have been forced down south owing to invasions and conflicts up north. Anene noted that many of the societies at the bend of the Cross River region suffered from the Jukun invasion expeditions and as a result moved to other locations they had

considered safe places.¹³ However, it should be stressed that the position that Odama was the progenitor of the Ijibor (and other Bekwarra peoples) community could not be further substantiated by oral sources. Nevertheless, there is a general belief among the people interviewed that Odama led the father(s) of the group who must have founded the Ijibor people and by extension the entire Bekwarra ethnic group. In a nutshell, there is no denying the historical fact that the Ijibor people, alongside other people that make up the present-day Bekwarra migrated from somewhere. Although the evidence to explain strongly the causes from the migration appears to be very limited. Even so, there are general consensus among scholars that some of the most vital explanations for the movement of persons from one point to another include: war, famine, poor soil texture, family antagonisms – resulting from dispute either over succession or land, or simply from a man's desire for adventure.

Indigenous Institutions for Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution in Ijibor

Another vital dimension to the pre-colonial existence of the Ijibor people (as with other communities under Bekwarra) was the pattern of their traditional judicial systems, as well as their cosmological perspective to law and justice. Ingrained in what has been termed the "African justice system" where the customs of the people determined what was right and wrong, the people of Ijibor constituted their legal system in pre-colonial times based on their customary belief and practice. Just as other societies had, they understood the need for a body of laws, which helped the society to be organized. Such laws were decorated with stringent punishments for defaulters.¹⁴

¹³Anene, *International Boundaries of Nigeria*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁴Erim, O. Erim, "The Emergence of a New Society: Upper Cross River," In: Jaja S. O., Erim E. O. *et al*, *History and Culture of the Upper Cross River* (Enugu: Harris Publishers Ltd, 1990); Donald O. Omagu, *A Neglected History: The Bekwarra people of Cross River State and the*

¹⁰Pius Adie, 75 years, nil, Calabar, Cross River State. 20 February 2020.

¹¹*ibid*.

¹²Uncatalogued Colonial Report on Yakoro, nd.

The judicial system of the Ijibor people was stratified into segments which served the purpose of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Peace building can be divided into pre-conflict and post-conflict efforts involving political, economic, social, and military actions to strengthen political settlement and address the root causes of conflict. Fundamentally, there were seven strata: National Judicial Body (NJB), Community Judicial Body (CJB), the Extended Family Court (EFC). Others included: The Family Court (FC), Inter-Community Court (ICC), Age-Company Court – ATEN – (ACC), and the Ordeal Court (OC). Each of these courts had its own function and jurisdiction.¹⁵ The NJB was composed of the oldest living chiefs from each community that make up the entire Bekwarra. By implication, it means that the Ijibor group had, no doubt, contributed towards that cause over the centuries before the arrival of the British legal system. While the CJB was “the first instance and appeal” court, the chief of the Ijibor community in this instance chaired the CJB. That of the EFC was headed by the oldest man in an extended family lineage. Down the line, the FC had the oldest male as its chairman. He kept the Afutang and performed sacrifices to the spirits of departed ancestors should in the event that a punishment was one, which required a sacrifice before the convicted could be allowed to reintegrate into the society. The ICC was not a standing court, but could be described as an ad-hoc court set up whenever two or more communities had issues. For instance, the ICC was considered a necessity should Ijibor and another close community under the larger Bekwarra society get involved in some form of dispute. The ACC was made up of young boys and girls of a certain age bracket, and chose a name to differentiate themselves from other age grades. Stiffer sanctions were meted out to any member who

defaulted on any of the laws. The highest of them all was the OC. The OC was the final court. It, therefore, means that from the family court to the community judicial body, appeals could be made by accused persons. However, when such a case had been tried by the Ordeal Court, there are no rooms for appeals. This is due to the fact that judgements that emanated from this court were believed to have been sanctioned and approved by the gods themselves.¹⁶ In fact, Talbot validated this position when he writes “the ordeal is the greatest safe guard of justice.”¹⁷

The forms of punishments adopted by the courts in Ijibor varied, and depended on the nature of crimes committed. Crimes were categorized into criminal and civil offences. Under criminal offences, cases such as murder, manslaughter, assault and injury, adultery, theft, witchcraft made that list. While civil offences were: debt recovery, browling, matrimonial issues, inheritance, among others. Under criminal offence, offenders were likely to get between death sentences and banishments (either complete or partial). While civil offences were treated in a manner such that the issues were resolved amicably.¹⁸

Negotiation and Mediation in Ijibor

Negotiation method of peacebuilding and conflict resolution existed in Ijibor. It was all about positive perception of agreement resulting from cooperation, compromise and consensus among the individuals with a set goal of achieving the best for mutual relationship. A lot of activities were carried out in Ijibor which required and necessitated solidarity trust and confidence and credible display of wisdom and whims. In Ijibor negotiation permeated all the activities carried

¹⁶*ibid.*

¹⁷P. A. Talbot, *The People of Southern Nigeria: A Sketch of their History, Ethnology and Languages, with an Abstract of the 1921 Census* (London: Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1926), p. 620.

¹⁸Joseph Okuta Ajor, “African Traditional Judicial Systems: Bekwarra as a Case Study,” *A Long Essay* (Calabar: University of Calabar, 1997), pp. 21-88.

Nigerian Civil War (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press Limited, 2016), p. 66.

¹⁵Joseph Okuta Ajor “African Traditional Judicial Systems: Bekwarra as a Case Study,” (A LongEssay, University of Calabar, Nigeria, 1997), pp. 21-88.

out for survival and development. In trading, there was the need to bargain for reasonable prices and a lot depended on the bargaining power of the traders and their patronizers. This helped in the process of peace building. In religion, man negotiated with the supernatural for spiritual development.¹⁹

In conflict resolution, there were two levels of negotiation-between the parties to the conflict on the one hand and between the parties to the conflict and the negotiators for peace on the other. Negotiation was one of the methods of conflict resolution in Ijibor which involves the process of reaching an agreed mode of operation. It entailed level of bargaining to ascertain coping strategies of relationship.²⁰

Mediation method prevailed in Ijibor's conflict resolution model, to the effect that parties to the conflict necessarily submitted themselves to a neutral third party, adjudged to be highly interested and concerned with the wellbeing of the individuals. Mediation was an art adopted to intervene in a conflicting situation and environment with a view to bringing about friendly disposition and restoration of order to both parties to the conflict and the society at the end of the intervention. In Ijibor, the cord of relationship, which was cordial and harmonious, was never allowed to go down the drain by mere misunderstanding between parties to the conflict. The passers-by were forbade to fold their arms watching a quarreling duo engaged in physical combat or engaged in tumultuous exchange of abuses. Woe betided such passers-by who refused intervention in the conflict and restored order. It was part of the social responsibilities of every individual to be his brother's keeper – a dictum that flourished in Ijibor, long before the arrival of the Europeans.²¹

Expectedly, such fighting duo might bring about calamities from the enraged deities who might have been offended by the conflict,

especially when the passers-by knew the concern of the supernatural for the divine ordering and social control of the society and for the wellbeing of the creatures. Thus, the passersby were duty bound to intercede and resolve the ensued conflict for the benefit of the families of the fighting duo and the entire society. Individuals were potential mediators for the purpose of engaging in the social development of the society. No one was left out in the social responsibility and an effectively engaging art of mediation.²²

Individuals in Ijibor had often displayed interventionist approach to conflict resolution in their domain – family, market, farmstead and shrines as well as on the street. Mediation was a purposeful art through significant media and principles governing the process of social justice and harmonious relationship. The parties to the conflict hardly ever appreciated the effects of the conflict until persuaded to understand the implications of their actions. The scene of the conflict was no doubt a hot bed of argument, disaffection and displeasure borne out of the clash of interest with which the issues of conflict were couched.²³

The institutions mentioned above were all involved in the process of negotiation and mediation. National Judicial Body (NJB), Community Judicial Body (CJB), the Extended Family Court (EFC), the Family Court (FC), Inter-Community Court (ICC), Age-Company Court – ATEN – (ACC), and the Ordeal Court (OC). The NJB was composed of the oldest living chiefs from each community. While the CJB was “the first instance and appeal” court, the chief of the Ijibor community in this instance chaired the CJB and also administered justice which prevent conflict in the first instance and resolved conflict when they occurred. That of the EFC was headed by the oldest man in an extended family lineage and was also involved in conflict resolution. The FC had the oldest

¹⁹*ibid.*

²⁰Donald O. Omagu, *A Neglected History: The Bekwarra people of Cross River State and the...*

²¹*ibid.*

²²M. O. Ojielo, *Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)* (Lagos: Centre for Peace in Africa, 2001), p. 5.

²³Donald O. Omagu, *A Neglected History: The Bekwarra people of Cross River State and the...*

male as its chairman, who kept the Afutang and performed sacrifices to the spirits of departed ancestors should in the event that a punishment was one, which required a sacrifice before the convicted could be allowed to reintegrate into the society.²⁴

Arbitration and Adjudication in Ijibor

Arbitration had been one of the significant methods of resolving conflict in Ijibor. It was a unique way of producing an arbiter who reached out to special decisions which the parties to the conflict must submit themselves to. Arbitration also produced the venue from where such decisions were arrived at and executed. Thus, there were arbitral courts, tribunal and proceedings in Ijibor before the advent of colonialism. The courts include: National Judicial Body (NJB), Community Judicial Body (CJB), the Extended Family Court (EFC), the Family Court (FC), Inter-Community Court (ICC), Age-Company Court – ATEN – (ACC), and the Ordeal Court (OC). The operational model of arbitration had been couched in contentment of the Ijibor authorities, condescending interest of the parties to the conflict (the disputants) and the working schemes of Ijibor customs and norms which gave arbitration an unconditional backing and implementation in the process of conflict resolution.²⁵

In Ijibor, arbiters or arbitrators had lived up to their expectation of being impartial and had interpreted the customs and norms creditably suitable to issues of conflict handled in the arbitral proceedings. The implementation of the arbitral decisions of the arbitrage practically fitted into the dynamics of cultural heritage, which had been bequeathed to the Ijibor by their forebears. Arbitration, therefore, had a long history of existence in theory and practice in Ijibor societies.²⁶

Arbitration was inherent in the methods of conflict resolution in Ijibor

societies. It produced arbiters, judges and arbitrators whose radiant interest was to reinforce a popular decision that enhanced harmonious relationship in the society. The functional implementation of the decisions which Ijibor arbiters designed was anchored on the influence of the deities. Effective communication towards making the arbitral proceedings enduring was quite engaged in the process of conflict resolution in Ijibor societies. Both the arbitrators and the parties to the conflict had the singular choice of mutual understanding through functional communication of interests and decisions across board. This was necessary to ascertain the acceptability of the designed decisions for implementation and programming. No one engaged in arbitration lacked the proper understanding of the intent and purpose of the decision reached and concluded towards the advancement of development agenda piloted through conflict resolution.²⁷

Reconciliation as a Process of Peacebuilding in Ijibor

Restoration of peace and strained harmonious relationship characterized conflict resolution method in Ijibor society. This stance was eked out by the need to keep the society in one union drawing together every individual towards cooperation and compromise. This was aimed at promoting mutual understanding and the elevation of social engineering to the submit of operation.

Conflict was no doubt a natural phenomenon as conflict resolution to set it ablaze was naturally tuned. In traditional Ijibor societies, the two parties or parties to the conflict never closed their eyes against the restoration of order, relationship and reasonability. At least one of the quarreling parties was reasonable enough to associate with the wisdom of reconciliation. Reconciliation became necessary for the fighting parties to rest the issues which warranted the conflict and therefore sued for

²⁴*ibid.*

²⁵Donald O. Omagu, *A Neglected History: The Bekwarra people of Cross River State and the...*

²⁶*ibid.*

²⁷*ibid.*

peace in order for peace and tranquility, to reign and so move the society forward.²⁸

Reconciliation was carried out in Ijibor societies with a view to pacifying the parties in conflict without destabilizing the social order and cultural engineering. The synergy involved in the task of reconciliation revealed the singular fact that Ijibor societies had long developed the capacity to ignore those things and factors that brought about divide and rule. Infraction of social order and socialization meant complete erosion of mutual understanding and blissful development.

Reconciliation method of conflict resolution was unarguably anchored on the provision of soothing balm towards promoting peace and harmony in Ijibor societies. Such a balm healed the wounds of conflict and served as “medicine” regularly applied to the ensued conflicts. The reconciliatory, who were adjudged as experienced pacificators usually used the right and appropriate language to persuade the parties to the conflict and the crowd of audience at the scene of conflict resolution. No one was left in doubt as to the desirability and the substance of seasoned reasoning associated with the logic of reconciliation. It was always a heartwarming exercise penetrating the conscience and psyche of the people at the venue of reconciliation.²⁹

Role of Traditional Rulers in Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution

The political culture of Ijibor recognized the traditional rulers as the overall bosses and fathers of the towns and villages. The traditional rulers were at the apex of a hierarchy of chiefs and statesmen. They were the sacred representative of the supernatural on earth and the personification of the society. Indeed, the traditional rulers were the link between the sacred world and the physical universe. They were the liaison personalities between the gods and the people over whom they governed at different level – family and community. The traditional rulers often played

pivotal role in the governance of Ijibor. Thus, to enable the traditional rulers play significant role in Ijibor society, they were distinguished and invested with specifically distinct title symbolic of the history of the society.³⁰

Traditional rulers in Ijibor, at coronation were ritually cleansed and endowed with the capacity to cleanse the society of fifth and bless the people from time to time. The capacity for ritual cleansing therefore, enabled them to decipher whatever situation that surrounded Ijibor, especially in terms of conflict and crisis. The traditional rulers normally rose to the occasion of resolving the conflict upon the advice and suggestions of the people. This entailed that the traditional rulers were surrounded by a retinue of elders quite capable of teaming up with the family head or village head in the art of conflict resolution.

Peace building in Ijibor: Extrajudicial Methods

Extra-judicial devices were associated with the religious inclinations of the Ijibor people. They were means beyond the physical power and wisdom to resolve conflict by the people, chiefs and elders as well as the age-grade association and other professional associations in Ijibor. The extrajudicial devices were administered by leaders of secret societies, priests and priestesses as well as the diviners widespread in Ijibor societies. The extrajudicial devices included oath-taking, use of ordeal, curses, excommunication and blood feud. The extrajudicial methods were employed to resolve conflicts whose causes were unknown and whose method of resolution were beyond human comprehension and wisdom.

Ordeal was also associated with the extra-judicial methods in Ijibor societies. Ordeals unravel whatever doubt or misery that enshrouded the offenders either civil or criminal. Ordeals take many forms from one Ijibor community to community. For example, among the Ijibor, a person accused of witchcraft was asked to swim across a creek

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

full of crocodiles. The Ijibor had an Ekim oath capable of destroying those who swore falsely.

Extrajudicial methods of conflict resolution was borne out of Ijibor's cultural heritage. An Ijibor man would do all things possible within the reach of the customs and norms, to ensure amicable resolution of conflict. In the event of not deciphering the truth of the matter, the Ijibor man resorted to employing other means of facilitating peace and restoring harmonious relationship. Conflict resolution was, therefore, a positive innovation and accreditation of social relationship in Ijibor societies.³¹

Case Studies of Specific Conflict and Their Resolution: Ijibor and Ishibori Boundary Conflict

The relationship between both Ijibor and Ishibori dates to the very earliest times before the incursion of the British colonial government. The way the settlement pattern of the semi-Bantu Negroid people of North of the Cross River bend, among which both the Ijibor and Ishibori groups happened to belong to, affected the relationships between and among every unit in that region. The Ijibor people (and to a larger extent the entire Bekwarra), by virtue of their settlement pattern has consistently related to the Ishibori (and larger Ogojaland) over time. The position of these peoples had remained somewhat peaceful, until the forceful invasion of the British colonial authorities, whose many 'selfish' policies created avenue for hostilities among the indigenous peoples.³² Despite the language link, respect was accorded their various myths of origin and migration. Moreover, by virtue of their relationship, the people had caused to intermarry. As a result, this socio-cultural practice of marriage helped to strengthen and increased inter-group relations between the Ijibor and Ishibori peoples.³³ Enmity and intrigues (in most cases resulting to slight antagonism) also

characterized other aspects of Ijibor-Ishibori relations during the periods before 1947.

The relationship between both groups on economic terms has been a very historical one. The Ijibor and Ishibori people during pre-colonial era were not only strongly connected via trade routes (cutting across their communities and areas such as Obudu, Tivland, and various trading stations at Bensara) but were also connected based on the kind of articles they traded during those periods.³⁴ Such a relation was fundamentally supported by the fact that both groups had agriculture as their mainstay. Although the nature of their agricultural activities was largely at the subsistence level, where most of the homes cultivated and produced with the mindset to survive first, and thereafter, should there be excesses, the concept of trade-by-barter was employed.

Traditional dances and festivities were other elements that aided the relations between Ijibor and Ishibori peoples in pre-colonial times. On such occasions, both Ijibor and Ishibori people invited friends, and relatives (especially those made through marriages (In-laws) to go and watch such dances or partake in certain festivities opened for all. According to Chief J. I. C. Igbe, whenever the Ishibori people wanted to stage their traditional dances just as the Iwali Dance, they invited their Ijibor neighbours to share in their merriment, as they would be plenty to eat and drink.³⁵ The Iwali Dance was a very significant cultural aspect of not just the Ishibori people, but the entire Ogoja and Obudu peoples of Northern Cross River. Idagu proffers some insight on the Iwali dance when he writes "The Iwali dance, which is today referred to as "queen" dance was the first dance in Obuduland where young girls of about the age of five to seven old performed."³⁶ The other dance, which also supported interactions was the umbulukpa dance that was strictly for entertainment and

³¹*ibid.*

³² Pius Adie, 75 years, nil, Calabar, Cross River State. 20 February 2020.

³³*ibid.*

³⁴*ibid.*

³⁵*ibid.*

³⁶ Emmanuel Idagu, "Obudu-Tiv Boundary Relations: A Study in Internal Boundary Conflict and Co-Operation, (1950-2007)," (A PhD Thesis, University of Calabar, Nigeria, 2014).

only performed by the male folk. Other dances among the people remained: the Ugiga dance (meaning pepper dance performed by both men and women), Ugbogo dance, the Izamgbada dance and Igbili dance performed by maidens only.³⁷

Also, the Ijibor people and their Ishibori counterpart equally shared land when they cultivated oil palm. The oil palm was a natural crop that played an important role in the social and economic lives of the peoples under discourse. Apart from the oil and kernel, such trees were tapped to extract wine, which in most cases formed the bedrock of their social interactions. On either side, the art of tapping was a ritual preserved exclusively for the male gender. Moreso, other items that were cultivated and produced among the groups included: yam (ipem), cassava (ologo), pineapples, native beans (ebetuo) groundnuts (anangkere), rice (iwuanyinyang), sweet potatoes (achaka), melon (atan), beneseed (anang), okra (itibi), pumpkin (achehe), fruited pumpkin (okong-obor/ogwu), bitter leaves (uchu), scent leaves (ishung-ufah), plantain and banana. Fishing as an economic activity was used to complement farming, even though, among the Ijibor and Ishibori peoples, it was never considered as a major economic main stay due to the absence of rivers in the area.

Beyond trade and commerce, as well as every other relatively peaceful index of their interactions, the people of Ijibor and Ishibori engaged themselves as well in some forms of conflicts that emanated because of incompatibility of certain vital interests. During field trips, it was gathered that a series of skirmishes at some time characterized the relations between the Ijibor people and Ishibori. In many instances, those skirmishes erupted due to many reasons that ranged from prestige, land encroachment, as well as allegations of assaults and kidnappings.³⁸ Specifically, oral sources posit that in the 1870s, Ijibor people accused

Ishibori people of assaulting Ijibor traders who had ventured into one of the Ishibori's markets to trade. When all diplomatic channels failed to resolve the issue, both parties started a conflict in which traders from both communities were denied entry into each other's markets. This lasted for some 15 years and would be settled after colonial influence had become much pronounced among the people.³⁹

Findings from the studies on these areas revealed that the British had their earliest contact with the Benue Valley as far back as 1899 or even sometime earlier.⁴⁰ Many other parts of what would later become colonial Nigeria had felt the British presence long before 1899. Some of the examples include the British bombardment of Lagos in 1851. Lagos was declared a British colony in 1861.⁴¹ There was also the consulate activities within the Oil River Protectorates, which was constituted by the regions of Akassa, Nembe, Opobo, among others.⁴² The point to note here is that with

³⁹*ibid.*

⁴⁰Kasimu S. Judde, "Resistance to Colonial Administration in Keffi: Magaji's Encounter with the British," in: Aliyu A. Idress and Yakubu A. Ochefu (eds.), *Studies in the History of Central Nigeria Area*, (Volume 1) (Lagos: CSS Limited, 2002), pp. 597-621; Aliyu A. Idress, "Colonial Conquest and Reaction in the Middle Niger: The British Subjugation of the Nupe 1897-1900," in: Aliyu A. Idress and Yakubu A. Ochefu (eds.), *Studies in the History of Central Nigeria Area*, (Volume 1) (Lagos: CSS Limited, 2002), pp. 661-686.

⁴¹Preye Adekoya, "The Succession Dispute to the Throne of Lagos and the British Conquest and Occupation of Lagos," *African Research Review: An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal* Vol. 10, No. 3, Serial No. 42, (2016), pp. 207-226; Oludamola Adebawale, "Game of Thrones: 1851 Bombardment of Lagos by the British Naval Forces," *The Guardian Newspaper*, 29 June, 2019, accessed 04 June, 2021, <https://guardian.ng/life/culture-lifestyle/game-of-thrones-1851-bombardment-of-lagos-by-the-british-naval-forces/>; Kristin Mann, *Slavery and the Birth of an African City: Lagos, 1760-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

⁴²Waibinte E. Wariboko, *Elem Kalabari of the Niger Delta: The Transition from Slave to Produce*

³⁷*ibid.*

³⁸Godwin Igbe, 85 years, Retired Principal, Bekwarra, Cross River State. 18 March 2020.

British presence around the Benue valley, – and as the case may be – almost every facet of life of the indigenous peoples of that region began to experience new changes.⁴³ Many smaller communities, villages and towns were summed up to make up clans, districts, divisions, and provinces. In order to administer the people adequately, the British colonial government set up political structures such as the warrant chief system based on their hasty generalizations, which drew a conclusion that many of the societies across old Eastern region were acephalous in nature, and lacked a centralized leadership feature.⁴⁴ To remedy this shortcoming, the British colonial government structured out the indirect rule system for easy administration of both the political and economic life of the peoples.⁴⁵

Unlike the smaller units of political, economic, and social structures that existed before the emergence of colonial administration, every society were merged into a broader political unit, irrespective of linguistic, and cultural differences. With reference to the area of our study, the British colonial government designated both communities – Ijibor and Ishibori – under the broader umbrella of Ogoja Province, which was one out of the five provinces that was in existence in colonial Southeastern Nigeria. Established in 1905, the Ogoja Province was a tapestry of various administrative Divisions.⁴⁶ Some of these included: the Afikpo Division, Obudu Division, Division, Abakaliki Division, Ikom Division, Obubra Division, Uyo Division, among others.⁴⁷ However, such

restructuring was not altogether devoid of some forms of petty resistance from the people (Ijibor and Ishibori inclusive). Oral account, however, claim that there was opposition to colonial rule in some villages within Bekwarra (to which Ijibor belongs), even though the Europeans had in possession of dangerous weapons. Evidence shows that a clash between the people of Ogoja Province and the Europeans happened when one European officer, “on his way to Obudu was confronted by the Nyanye people and he had to deal with them brutally. The people readily yielded or succumbed to the European high-handedness because of his possession of dangerous weapons and even pledged loyalty to him. A second incident was recorded in the Ujia sub-clan. It was reported that the colonial officer resided first at Ugidi market located formally in Ububa Ebechua village under Ujia sub-clan area; from where he planned a military escort that devastated villages like Ububa, Ayikang and their environs. The inhabitants of these area put up very weak resistance and were quickly subdued because of the superior weapons such as guns, as opposed to their native cutlasses, bow, and arrows.”⁴⁸

After a series of shows of force on the people, the British colonial government stamped its authority across many societies in southern Nigeria. Unlike when the people of Ijibor and Ishibori had autonomous leaders (comprising men from the family level), the colonial authority disrupted such a system when they forcefully grouped the people under a single socio-political authority. As part of the political blunder made by the British colonial government, one central administrative office called the Native Court (NC) was created and assigned to a clan. This act alone disposed the pre-colonial political structure, where the recognized chiefs and leaders were relegated to the background, and

Trading under British Imperialism (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2014); E. J. Alagoa, *The Akassa Raid*, (Ibadan: University Press, 1960).

⁴³Obaro Ikime, *The Fall of Nigeria* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 30.

⁴⁴Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs*, p. 156.

⁴⁵*ibid*, p. 178.

⁴⁶Patience O. Erim, “Impact of Colonial Rule on Old Ogoja Province, 1905-1955,” (Ph.D. Thesis, (University of Calabar, 1992).

⁴⁷Erim, O. Erim, “The Emergence of a New Society: Upper Cross River,” In: Jaja S. O., Erim E. O. *et al*, *History and Culture of the Upper Cross River* (Enugu: Harris Publishers Ltd, 1990);

Donald O. Omagu, *A Neglected History: The Bekwarra people of Cross River State and the Nigerian Civil War* (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press Limited, 2016).

⁴⁸*ibid*.

the sovereignties of the people of Ijibor and Ishibori were usurped.⁴⁹

This became worse by 1935 when the chiefs and elders from Ijibor and Ishibori – as well as members of other communities across southeastern Nigeria – were relegated to playing only nominal, unofficial, and supervisory roles in the new administration that followed the post-1929 Women's war. In fact, the experiences of both Ijibor and her Ishibori neighbours under colonial rule became very uniform. Take for instance, both groups would later come to realize that the British colonial rule had truncated their customary laws, since disputes that involved offences against customary taboos were directed to the Native Court, whose law was not in tandem with that of the indigenous customs and undermined the sovereignties of the indigenous chiefs. Collectively, the loss of sovereignties for both the Ijibor and her Ishibori neighbour was an unfortunate rape on their tradition, and this undoubtedly embittered not only the people, but had a corresponding aftermath effect on the societies. Thus, the chiefs, as well as those considered as the mouthpiece of the peoples began to resist colonial interest and actions in more subtle ways.

The Ijibor people were reported to have consulted their Ishibori neighbours on the matter of ill-treatment by the colonial servants within their spaces, and certain decisions were reached. Oral account states that:

In 1932, side by side with the Native Court system the old organization remained active, and where the official native court member had no locus standi, according to Native Custom, he usually referred all instructions from government to the rightful ruler, who in his turn, set the Native Organization in motion.⁵⁰

Such were the issues that came to characterize the experience and interactions between Ijibor and Ishibori during the heydays of colonial rule. Nonetheless, pieces of evidence show

that the nature of relations between both parties was, however, impacted by the British colonial rule and its handmaidens – Christian missionaries and trade merchants – in diverse manners. One of such manners was the fact that unlike what obtained in the pre-colonial times, when people from both sides engaged in the worship of different deities, the arrival of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland in 1846 – which began operations in the Creek area of Calabar – ensured that people from many parts of the northern Cross River area began to adopt a singular faith – Christianity.⁵¹ By 1921, the Church Missionary Society (CMS), through the assiduousness and relented nature of the Holy Ghost fathers extended their missionary activities in Ogoja areas. Omagu noted that:

On arrival, the missionaries first settled at Ishibori in present day Ogoja Local Government Area. Representing the mission were Rev. Fr. P. J. Costelloe, Monsignor P. N. Whitney who was Prefect Apostolic of Ogoja Prefecture in 1938. In 1939, Fr. McGetricck took over the prefecture in Ogoja, and later became Bishop of Ogoja.⁵²

Another key area where the missionaries influenced pre-existing relations between the Ijibor and their Ishibori neighbours was in the aspect of education. However, it must be stressed at this juncture that prior to this time, both Ijibor and Ishibori people never lacked a form of education. Their own form of education is what scholars have referred to as traditional education steeped in the framing of the African Indigenous Knowledge System (AIKS).⁵³ It has been argued that the primary

⁵¹Omagu, *A Neglected History*, pp. 67-70.

⁵²*ibid.*

⁵³Gloria Emeagwali, Dei Sefa and J. George, (ed), *African Indigenous Knowledge and the Disciplines* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014); Andre Lalonde, "African Indigenous Knowledge and Its Relevance to Environment and Development Activities," *The Common Property Conference*, 26-29 September, (Winnipeg: International Association for the Study of Common Property (IASCP), 1991), pp.1-12; Joseph R. Bassey, "The Indigenous Knowledge of Law in Pre-Colonial Akwa Ibom Area: A Comparative Study of the

⁴⁹Godwin Agboje Enji, 76 years, nil, Bekwarra, Cross River, 23 March 2021.

⁵⁰*ibid.*

aim of exposing the indigenous people to Western education was just to make out auxiliaries that would “service the technical and clerical needs of the colonial system,”⁵⁴ and not to produce fine intellectuals who might eventually rise to challenge the colonial exploitative system. Evidence shows that most of the worship centres and churches established served multiple purposes. First, they served as places of worshipping God; second, as places for teaching the rudiments of European values and ways of life; and third, as a place for elementary healthcare for the people.⁵⁵

Barely any years after the missionaries had entered Ijibor (Bekwarra) and Ishibori (Ogoja) areas, various schools were established to help actualize the aim of the colonial system. Some of the earliest were the Demonstration Primary School (later known as St. Benedict’s) Igoli-Ogoja, St. Matthew’s Primary School, Imaje-Yala, St. Joseph Primary School, Okuku, and St. Columbus Roman Catholic Mission Primary School, Idum-Mbube, among several others. Moreso, there were schools such as St. Thomas Teachers Training College, Government Technical College, which initially started as Preliminary Teachers College (PTC), and Holy Child Secondary School, Mount Carmel. Others are Mary Knoll College, and Obudu County, among many others. As these places of learning the European model of education began to operate, many indigenes of Ijibor and Ishibori found themselves in a singular

compound. Although, at the initial stage, many of the indigenes of both communities refrained from taking advantage of European education. There were mixed feelings among the people that such an education system might erode the cultural values of the children sent to learn Whiteman’s ideas.⁵⁶

The effect of Western education on the Ijibor and Ishibori people (for those who were privileged to have taken advantage) was that it created a new class of people. This set of people became a distinctive class in the general society. They benefited from job opportunities that emerged since they had acquired Western education, which afforded them the capability to read and write in the English Language.

The improvement of the road network also enhanced trade relations between both groups. This enhancement, of course, was brought about by the ingenuity and innovation of British economic interest in Nigeria, which precipitated better road networking in many parts of colonial Nigeria. The nature of trade and commerce, that had hitherto existed between the Ijibor people and their Ishibori neighbour recorded some increase. This is because colonial government constructed roads, which linked these communities in a bid to ease the stress associated with conveying goods from one location to another. By 1925, the Ogoja (where Ishibori is situated) – Nyanya road was already under construction to link Obudu with Ogoja. In the same year, the Okuku/Abouchichi road (nine miles), which was intended to promote ‘inter-tribal’ trade and foster the confidence of Native market for people was constructed.

Moreso, the people were not just confined to trade between themselves but made more fortune as they traded with colonial companies such as John Holt, which was then sited at Bansora and other neighbouring villages. In return, they bought European manufactured goods such as spirit, liquor, books, bicycles, among others. The people were further exposed to a new medium

Similarities and Differences between the English and the African Legal System,” In: S. Oloruntoba, O. Yacob-Haliso (eds.), *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Development in Africa*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 207-230; S.G. J. N Sananayake, “Indigenous Knowledge as Key to Sustainable Development,” *The Journal of Agricultural Sciences* Vol. 2, No.1 (2006): pp. 87-94.

⁵⁴Omagu, *A Neglected History*, p. 56; Funso Afolayan, “African Nationalism, 1914-1939,” in: Toyin Falola (ed.), *Africa* (North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), p. 288.

⁵⁵Michael Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule*, (London: Hutchison, 1968), pp. 123 – 124.

⁵⁶Godwin Igbe, 85 years, Retired Principal, Bekwarra, Cross River State. 18 March 2020.

of exchange when they conducted trade activities. Unlike during the pre-colonial times when trade-by-barter, and bulky brass rod, iron cowries, and shells were used, a new legal tender were introduced.⁵⁷ Let it also be stressed here that the year 1925 marked a watershed in the history of British colonial economy in Nigeria. This was the year taxation policy was introduced in Ijibor and her environs. The introduction, no doubt, came with social, economic, and political impact on the lives of the people of the region. First, although its introduction stimulated economic activities, it also created a sort of rural poverty. It also compelled the people of Ijibor and Ishibori to go all out from their original enclaves in search of paid jobs, to enable them to pay their taxes.⁵⁸

On a collective note, the Ijibor people and their Ishibori neighbour, left with no choice, joined forces with other groups in Nigeria – who had been massively marginalized, oppressed, and victimized by the supposed ‘majority’ ethnic group (Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa-Fulani) – to organize strong agitations demanding for states of their own. In Southeastern Nigeria, the agitation called for the creation of three states: Cross River, Ogoja and Rivers, with the acronym “COR” by the 1950s.⁵⁹ During a 1953 Constitutional Conference, the minorities – Ijibor and Ishibori inclusive – expressed fears about their future within a three-region arrangement. Their constant expressions at the Constitution Conference (especially that of 1957) compelled the colonial government to set up a Commission of Inquiry to investigate fears and means by which such fears from ‘minority’ can be allayed. The Commission, later to be known as the Willink Commission, “reported that “unity” would have the same effect as “separation” as a remedy for minority problems and that while a commission cannot manufacture unity, it could devise machinery

aimed at holding the country together. It therefore recommended reforms and constitutional provisions for human rights”.⁶⁰ Therefore, the idea of the COR state remained unattained until sometime in 1967 – in the eve of the Nigeria-Biafra War – when the Nigerian federal military government, at the instance of General Yakubu Gowon, in his tactic to balkanize the eastern region, that Ojukwu had summoned to a war-for-survival against Nigeria.

Based on the foregone narratives, it is pertinent to add here that colonial rule had some vital implications for inter-group relations. Such implications could, of course, be streamlined into two viewpoints. First, it created a massive distortion on several fronts. Secondly, it found a way to bring the people even closer based on the introduction of elements such as Western education, missionary medicines, colonial economy, among others. Moreover, it meant, on a general note, that people had to take into account (new) ideals, interests and institutions, which arose not only from their indigenous experiences and sanctioned by their trado-religious beliefs, but others as were introduced and systematically imposed by their new overlords – British colonial government.⁶¹ Hence, communities such as Ijibor and Ishibori – just as their other counterparts – brought under effective control by the British learnt that they had lost the sole-initiatives to determine for themselves whether their relations with their neighbours would be either peaceful or conflict-prone; as there were no chances for them to make any more independent choices as they deemed fit earlier before the intrusion of colonial authority.

Conclusion

Indigenous methods to Peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Ijibor were so unique and productive in maintaining peace and effective in conflict resolution. In terms of their

⁵⁷*ibid.*

⁵⁸*ibid.*

⁵⁹UgbanaOkupu, “The Politics of State Creation and the Outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War,” *Transafrican Journal of History* Vol. 11, (1982), pp.147-166.

⁶⁰*ibid.*

⁶¹ Adiele Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria* (London: Longman, 1972), p. 79.

features, they were similar to what was obtaining in Western societies, just that they were attached to the object of divinity and revered by the people. Colonialism and Post-colonial states institutions were notable events and forces which overwhelmingly affected these indigenous approaches to peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Ijibor. The colonialists came with the colonial agenda and introduced western methods of conflict resolution. This was craftily done by subjugating the hitherto existing method of peace building and conflict resolution which they met on arrival in Ijibor. The indigenous methods of peace building and conflict resolution in Ijibor was closely observed, controlled and relegated to the background for purposes of governing all aspects and affairs of the Ijibor people, advertising the colonial pattern of conflict resolution and demonstrating the craft of colonial imperialism. The introduction of western model of peacebuilding and conflict resolution was received in Ijibor societies with mixed feelings especially with sense of loss (of values in the Ijibor cultural heritage) and experimenting on the benefits of the newly introduced method.

Furthermore, the introduction had a lot of imposition and condemnation of the original pattern of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. The experimentation of the new model of conflict resolution was in the same environment and space, where the indigenous peacebuilding and conflict resolution once blossomed. The environment and space were the same but the principles and practitioners of the conflict resolution were quite different. Even the result was proportionately different. The speed of grafting the western method of conflict resolution was criminally alarming. Although, western method of conflict resolution had come to stay in Ijibor, the hitherto exciting indigenous approaches to peacebuilding and conflict resolution still thrived so surprisingly. Observably, however, both methods of conflict exists side by side in Ijibor. One dictates the pace of development on a fast lane (western method) while the other controls (traditional method) the speed

orchestrated by the other. It is, however, difficult to discern whether the wedlock of both traditional and western methods of conflict resolution benefited Ijibor far beyond what the hitherto existing method had achieved.

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