ASPECTS OF PRECOLONIAL ISOKO SOCIO-POLITICAL RELATIONS WITH THEIR NEIGHBOURS IN SOUTH CENTRAL NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This work focused on aspects of pre-colonial Isoko socio-political relations with their neighbours in the Niger Delta region of South Central Nigeria. It attempts to illuminate the nexus between internal and external dynamics and the concomitant changes and continuities in Isoko relations with their Urhobo, Ijaw, Ukwuani and Aboh neighbours. The work is premised on the historical method and interpretations deploying primary and secondary data to achieve its objective. The study concludes that intergroup relations in the region is largely influenced by their somewhat common ancestral origin; geographical contiguity; a shared common environmental and cultural practices; and the experience of similar external influences. This is done within the context of contemporary trajectory of the socio-political conflicts in the Niger Delta with serious implications for both National and International interests.

KEYWORDS: Isoko, Pre-colonial, Socio-political, Relations, Niger Delta

INTRODUCTION

Isoko as a minority ethnic group, is a set of people with a common ancestry, a distinct culture, a shared language, value system, norms and beliefs, occupying the western part of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It is one of the over 300 ethnic groups in Nigeria. As a distinct ethnic group, they have lived together over the years with their neighbours within the boundaries of what latter became the Nigerian state. This has however led to greater social, cultural, political and economic interactions and the exchange of cultures, values, norms and beliefs between the Isoko and their Urhobo, Ukwuani, Ijaw and Aboh neighbours currently inhabiting what is today western Niger Delta of Nigeria.

Relationship between the Isoko and their neighbours was affected in pre-colonial times by one major external influence. This is the influence of Western Europe, whose officials, traders and missionaries began to arrive from the sea in the late 15th century, and whose impact was confined mainly to the coast. Thus, this historical development that took place up to the 19th century to a large extent became a prelude to the new pattern of intergroup relations which include; the trans-Atlantic trade; the staple theory - from slave trade to legitimate commerce; introduction of Christianity and Western Education; and European penetration into the interior and the subsequent colonial administration. (Ikime, 1985:20).

Inextricably tied to the above is that, the slaves traded were raided from the hinterland. The coastal dwellers organised large-scale slave raid in the hinterland with the aid of arms and
ammunition. The Ijaw were said to have been notorious for this. To this extent, (Dike 1956, 39-40 and Ikime 2000, 5) point out that as soon as the trade in human beings was established as a profitable one, the coastal dwellers engaged in inter-community wars and war captives became an article of trade. Slaves were also obtained through subterfuge; and the traditional justice systems were modified in such a way that enslavement became the punishment for more offences.

Noteworthy is the fact that, the imposition of British rule in the territory that later became Nigeria towards the end of the 19th century was a major landmark in the history of relations between the Isoko and their immediate neighbours. With that event, a new pattern of intergroup relations began to build up. One other development that affected the relationship between the Isoko and their neighbour was the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade and the changeover to legitimate - largely palm produce trade by the 1850s. This change soon led to a situation whereby the European adopted policies, which compelled the coastal traders to show a lot more initiative than hitherto in penetrating the Isoko interior for collecting the (abounding) palm produce. (Dike, 1956: 97-127). The above scenario, no doubt affected the behaviours of the inhabitants of the region. It went further to create problems of intergroup relations, arising from which most of the hostile relationship between the Isoko and their neighbours, which were hitherto peaceful, emanated.

It is on record that since the 1950s, Nigerian scholars and others have shown increasing interest in the theme of intergroup relations amongst the peoples who made up what is today Nigeria, with emphasis on the attitude and characteristics of the scholarship of the halcyon days. Against this backdrop of revisionist scholarship, it has become imperative to establish the existence of actual historic links and to investigate how they operated. Put differently, emphasis is focused on the networks of links between the actual historic cultures, which the colonial administrators met in existence on their arrival. This particular aspect did not strike the attention of the colonial writers, if otherwise, they shied away from it, and preferred to speculate freely instead.

From studies carried out by scholars (Hubbard 1931, 1948; Ikime 1969; 1972, Peek 2002 and Okpevra 2013a; 2014, 2015) on the origins stories, migrations and the socio-political organisations/institutions of the Isoko and their neighbours, the following observations are made. (a) The Isoko and her Aboh, Ukwuani, Urhobo and Ijaw neighbours claim somewhat common ancestral origin; (b) They have common geographical contiguity; (c) they share common environmental and cultural practices; and (d) they experience similar external factors and influences. All of the above shaped and positioned the Isoko and their neighbours of the nature and character of relations they eventually exhibited over the periods. Again, in their story and origin it is evident that the Benin factor in the people’s traditions of origin, growth, development and evolution of cultural practices is not peculiar to the Isoko alone. This no doubt has unprecedented significance for their relations from earliest beginning.
Benin is one of the distant neighbours of the Isoko. This is so stated because there is no geographical contiguity between the two, yet most account of the Isoko origins are linked to Benin. Thus, as (Ikime, 1972: 21) suggests any discussion on the relationship between the Isoko and the other ethnic groups in the western Niger Delta region should appropriately begin with Isoko-Benin relation. This is so because, majority of the Isoko clans claim Benin origin. Yet it is pertinent to ask if (any) links were maintained with Benin after the clans finally settled in their present locations, if on the affirmative, what was the nature of these links. However recent researches have provided the incontrovertible facts to negate the wholesome ascription to the Benin – Isoko connexion. (Okpevra 2015 and 2013a).

Factors and Patterns of Contact:
Outline of Intergroup Relations between Isoko and their Neighbours.

Indeed, migrations and socio-political ideas are usually not unidirectional. This claim can better be understood within the context of the beginning of Isoko contact with their neighbours. In this light we are reminded by (Afigbo, 1987: 1) thesis thus,
Different Nigerian ethnic groups have always sought through their richly varied traditions of origin and migrations and through accounts of the rise and expansion of their socio-political systems, to preserve, among other things their perceptions of the relationships, which existed between them and their neighbours.

From the above, it behoves on us to see the beginning of the contact of Isoko groups and their neighbours as that which is inextricably tied to their richly varied traditions of origin and migrations. Such traditions and accounts, (Afegbo, 1987: 1) maintains, constitute our main source of evidence for reconstructing the patterns and dynamics of inter-group relations in pre-colonial Nigeria. It becomes imperative to resort to some of them in reconstructing the intergroup relationships, which existed in that segment of the Niger Delta inhabited by the Isoko and their neighbours.

However, there seem to exist in the early history of the Isoko, accounts of relations with their distant Benin neighbours. In addition to Benin, whose ancient empire and modern and public affairs with the history of the region intertwined, the Western Niger Delta has five major ethnic nationalities that have historical and contemporary relations with one another. These are Isoko, Urhobo, Ukwuani, Aboh, Ijaw and Itsekiri. The Itsekiri having been cut off by the Urhobos, it was said that until the establishment of British rule in the late nineteenth century, there was scarcely any Itsekiri contact with the Isoko. Except, in connection with the Eni 'juju' or 'oracle' of the Úzere, to which the Itsekiri and others used to take their suspected witches for trial (Okpevra 2013a, 318-320). No doubt, from very early times a great deal of socio-political, cultural, and even economic relationship went on among the Isoko clans, and between them and their neighbours – Aboh, Ukwuani, Ijaw and Urhobo.

Nevertheless, arising from the above it must be emphasised that due to the inadequacies contained in Isoko and their neighbours' traditions of origins, neither the question of their respective origins have been fully resolved, nor (for which reason also) is it possible to date, in specific terms the beginning of their relations. However, there is evidence that Isoko and their neighbours did not live in isolation of one another from their earliest existence.

Secondly, migration, both primary and secondary was another means of intergroup contact. In this regard, it is evidently clear how some groups have to move carrying with them cultural traits. Under this category, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade perfectly fits into this genre of migration.

The one time obnoxious Trans-Atlantic slave trade affected the people of the Niger Delta. One major phenomenon which arose from the impact of the Atlantic world on the societies and states of the (western) Niger Delta by the Portuguese exploration is worthy of note. This is "the distinction between coastal peoples, who monopolize and managed the trade and contact with European traders and nations, and the inland peoples of the Niger Delta, who were excluded from direct contact with the European." (Ekeh, 2004: 3). For instance until the first decade of the 20th century, the Isoko had been almost untouched by European influence, unlike their Ijaw, Aboh and Urhobo neighbours. Previously, anything that had been known about them were reports and rumours spread by their Ijaw and (Ukwuani) Aboh neighbours who referred to them as Biotu and Igabo respectively (Hubbard, 1931: 116). Although the names Biotu - "People of the interior" -
and Igabo - "those behind them" were contemptuous and derogatory designations, it shows that the early Europeans who came to the coast (of the Niger Delta) could not have access to the Isoko people because they were in the interior.

Aside the above external dynamics, there were however, other factors, which for want of a more appropriate term, maybe described as cultural, which also helped to promote intergroup contact between the Isoko and their neighbours. The most important is the religio-ritual in form of the consultation of oracles and celebration of festivals. The most ancient and wide-ranging religio-ritual factor which helped to promote intergroup contact between the Isoko and their neighbours was associated with the Eni Oracle of Uzere Kingdom. An exposition on this aspect of intergroup contact has been sufficiently dealt with elsewhere (Okpevra, 2013a: 313-326)

One other cultural factor of early contact between the Isoko and their neighbours was marriage. Available evidence suggests that within the Western Niger Delta and even beyond, marriage promoted intergroup contact and integration during the period under study. These evidences in form of traditions of the people suggest that all along the frontiers where the Isoko met with their neighbours, inter-ethnic marriages took place and that these helped to promote or indeed cement intergroup relation. This can also be clearly established with the aid of Oral traditions from the border between the Isoko and the Ijaw, the Urhobo, as with traditions from the border between them and the Ukwuani and Aboh.

Again, there was a tendency among the frontier Isoko to borrow political institutions and practices from their neighbours. Here the Isoko would appear to have been very much prone to borrow political and social institutions from their neighbours. They borrowed Benin monarchical and court traditions and titles. To the Isoko, in the words of (Alagao, 1972: 65 and Capt. Miller, E.A., (1932) NAI. CSO File 27994. Intelligence Report on the Iyede clan), Benin became the “political Jerusalem”. Political pilgrimage to Benin became, among some of them, an act depicting rising status. It would appear such pilgrimages were at times undertaken for reasons of political education by persons aspiring to political office.

One of the new developments in the nineteenth century and intergroup relations of the Isoko and their neighbours was the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade and the changeover to legitimate - largely palm produce trade by the 1850s. The foregoing can be taken as the broad outline of intergroup relations in pre-colonial western Niger Delta.

Socio - Political and Cultural Relations

Here, the theory of unity in diversity readily comes to mind, which stresses the pre-colonial co-existence of groups. In other words, common bonds existed among Nigerian peoples as the differences in language and cultures were apparent; this theory emphasizes that the Nigerian peoples from the earliest times possible had had links among themselves. (Ajayi, 2006: 96). In the study of the Isoko and their neighbours, it would seem that peaceful contact loomed larger than stories of wars and conquests. In the relationship between the Isoko and their neighbours there were obviously periods of tensions, which epitomized the theme of conflicts and there were equally periods of less tension, and peaceful co-existence, (Okpevra, 2017: 382). It is against this background, an examination of the socio-political and cultural relations of the Isoko and their neighbours in the region will be underscored.

Isoko - Aboh Relations:
The Isoko people share boundary with the Aboh people in the eastern flank. Some scholars are of the view that the Isoko people had more contact with the Aboh than the Urhobos. (C.S.O.26 File 28903: Intelligence Report on Sobo - Aboh group of the Warri Province). In other words Isoko-Aboh dealings had been relatively extensive than any other of her neighbours with undoubtedly geographical proximity as a major determinant because, while the Urhobo dealt with the Itsekiri, the Isoko and Ukwuani dealt with the Aboh Kingdom. (Ikime, 1980: 26).

Aboh is an ancient African kingdom in the Western Niger Delta; comprising the Ibo speaking people and any Sobo (Isoko) villages built on its land. The kingdom of Aboh is located on the banks of the Lower Niger, (Nwachukwu-Ogedengbe, 1977: 135). According to (Hubbard, 1948: 27) “their country lies to the east of the Sobo country (i.e. the Isoko) where they have come into intimate contact with the Eastern Sobo (Isoko)”. He went further to state that the Aboh are friendly, but slightly contemptuous of the Isoko, whom they regard as ignorant but harmless savages.

From earliest time, Isoko-Aboh relations had been indeed extensive ranging from socio-political, economic, cultural, and Diplomatic relations. In examining the migration and traditions of origin of Uzere, Ozoro and certain of the Isoko clans, Aboh featured prominently (The clans of Ozoro and Uzere obviously had social and commercial relations with Aboh, (Okpevra, 2015: 13-24)

The Isoko, it would appear were subtly an imperialistic people who engaged in wild adventurous expansion and establishing “colonies” outside their home. In this case, the Aboh territory was the obvious choice. As a result of “the outspread of various Isoko clans, there exist the phenomenon of a number of Isoko settlements sited very close by, and sometimes actually in Aboh territory” prominent among these settlements are Ibrede, Iyede-Ame, Lagos-Irri, Ikpidiama, Ewedhe-Ashaka, and Osafo. Others are Ase, Adiawali, Umuoru, Onya and Ibredeni.

In terms of cultural relations between the Isoko and Aboh, linguistic evidence plays a major role. For instance, in Isoko the speakers of Enhwe, Igbide, Umeh, Ozoro, Ellu, and Ofagbe dialects show unmistakable traces of Igbo influence to wit the Aboh, especially in pronunciation and vocabulary - a relative large number of words found in these dialects being clearly of Igbo origin. (Mafeni, 1969)

One more dialect cluster – the Niger Isoko cluster – must attract our attention here. The dialects in this cluster or group are spoken in places like Ase, Iyede-Ame, Ibredeni, Ibrede, Onogbokor, Ige and Umuoru, in the south western part of (the defunct) Aboh Division, adjoining Isoko Division. In these areas, the inhabitants speak Isoko alongside various Aboh (Igbo) dialects and most speakers are bilingual in Isoko and Igbo. However, the Isoko appears to enjoy little or no prestige in these parts and is referred to, apparently derogatorily, as Igabo, (Hubbard, 1931: 115-116; Mafeni, 1969 and Peek, 2002: 172). The term Igabo has been said to be obviously a development from the expression Igafe Aboh which meant “beyond Aboh”, an innocuous reference to the Isoko people who live to the western part of Aboh Division as it were.

In a situation such as shown above, it is easy to understand the dominating influence of the Igbo dialects on the Isoko dialect with which they were/are in contact in this area. However, this is not to deny the Edoid background of the Isoko language but, it no doubt shows largely the interrelationship between the Isoko and Aboh.
One aspect of the socio-political cum cultural link between the Isoko and Aboh has to do with the royal regalia. The traditional rulers in Isoko have a strong flair and love for coral beads, used in adorning their royal crowns. In any case, this cultural predilection of the Isoko royalty assumed to be of Benin origin needs some clarifications. It has similarly been assumed that because the rulers of many principalities on the Benin frontier, appropriated so much of Benin royal regalia, political symbols and titles, therefore the political systems of these polities (or more specifically the concept and institution of monarchy must have been imposed by or borrowed from Benin. (Afigbo, 1987: 23).

One of the most coveted regalia is the coral beads. As to the source of the coral beads which the Isoko rulers were and are still adorned, we may gleaned from the earliest of such evidence available to this writer. This appears to be the passage in Olfert Dapper’s description of Africa in 1686 which mentions a place called “Gaboe” as an important center for trade in akori beads and which he said was frequented by traders from Benin early in the seventeenth century. From Dapper’s geographical location of “Gaboe” (Talbot, 1926: 922) and some other scholars have been inclined to identify it with the Igbo principality of Aboh, strategically located at the head of the Nun estuary of the Niger. This in turn has suggested trade route running from the central Sudan along the Niger waterway, and which route supplied Aboh with Akori. (Northrup, 1972: 221).

Given that Isoko frequented Aboh markets during the pre-colonial period especially with the coming of the Europeans to the region, it is safe to claim that they may have obtained most of the beads from Aboh markets. Secondly, virtually all Isoko clans believed and affirmed in their story of migration that while they were fleeing Benin they all passed through Aboh. From the above it is evident now that Aboh’s trade in beads must go back to the 15th century or earlier, so it was probably from there that Benin got the beads, which it exported westwards to Akanland. (Fage, 1962).

Isoko - Ukwuani Relations

To the northeastern part of Isokoland is the Ukwuani ethnic group. The Isoko had had considerable relationship with their Ukwuani neighbours. Inter marriage has become in the circumstance a noticeable feature of this intensified contact. Consequent upon the 19th century migration; Isoko migrants came into Ukwuani land, through inter-tribal marriages and cultural contacts, both Urhobo and Isoko languages were fluently spoken in many parts of Ukwuani. (Okolugbo, 2004: 23). The above scenario is reinforced by (Dike, 1956: 44) when he notes that

Inter-marriages attendance at inter-clan festivals, blood covenant between neighbouring political units, and the many communal-market groups in the tribal interior, were effective instruments of cultural unity.

In spite of the above, some of the Isoko (who now settled in these places) still return to their “homes” either to marry wives, to bury dead relatives or for the annual festivals, (C.S.O. 26, File 28903: Intelligence Report, Aboh - Sobo village group).
On the other hand, the Isoko influence is palpable on the Ukwuani socially and culturally. By the same token it is not out of place to notice that some individuals in a number of Ukwuani clans claim lineage to some Isoko clans especially those on the border. Majority of whom (for instance Abbi, Emu, Onyia, Ushie) have inhabitants tracing their origins to Isoko and other places. (http://www.naijaryders.com/artfors/147516-culture-focus-kwalle-ndokwa-ukwuani-history.html. Retrieved 16/10/2019)

One other linguistic and cultural affinity shared between the Isoko and the Ukwuani is the common practice of ending their orations (at funerals, marriage, political meetings and other social function/occasions) with the rendition, “Isi Egware” or “Shie Gware” indicating the end of a speech, and the audience usually answered a thunderous “Iyaa” or “Iyoo”. This practice which is generally shared by the Isoko, Urhobo, Aboh and Ukwuani has been linked to Benin as the seemingly source of their common origin. Dr. Olusola O. Akinwunmi quoted by (Ojieh, 1989: 72) has therefore argued it that:

“Egware or Gware” as used by these people at the end of their orations was a corruption of the Benin word “Eguae” meaning the Oba’s palace and “Isi” or “Shie” as used by these people could not be far from the Ibo word “Isi” meaning head (since some of these peoples notably the Isoko and Ukwuani have people (elements) of Igbo origin and so the word Isi could have derived from their linguistic affinities with the Igbo.

One could therefore suggest that “Isi-Egware” or “Shie-Gware” simply meant Isi (head) of Eguae (the palace) representing the Oba of Benin who invariably is the head of the palace. It is also therefore safe to suggest that the people ended their orations in this manner probably to commit all they have said into the hands of the Oba (presumably as truth).

Further cultural relations between some Isoko clans such as Ozoro, Ofagbe, Ellu, Aradhe and Iluelogbo (Owhelogbo) with the Ukwuani clans of Emu, Abbi, Utagba-Ogbe are easily discernible. Ozoro and Iluelogbo share common boundaries with Emu and Abbi respectively in the Ukwuani territory. This geographical proximity between the Isoko and Ukwuani clans has fostered great cultural exchange. For instance, the Umuagaga migrants from Iyede in the Isoko territory are Ukwuani speaking today. This emanated from their (Iyede) having been culturally assimilated into the Ukwuani system of language and traditions. (Ojieh, 1989:74).

Between the Isoko and Ukwuani, the extent of linguistic affinities is relatively high. Some of their terminologies and usages are very similar. For instance, “enwe” which is the Isoko name for monkey is also the Ukwuani equivalent for the same animal. Other examples of similarities in terminologies and usages between these peoples abound. For example, the table below shows some of the common usages (Okpevra, 2014: 162).
The list is inexhaustible. The similarity in terms of names of persons, places, and things between the Isoko and the Ukwuani must be seen as a result of cultural borrowings which are usually not unidirectional.

In the same vein, one other sensitive area of similarities in the cultural affinity between the Isoko and Ukwuani is discernible in the area of what constitutes adultery. To the Isoko and Ukwuani, a man commits adultery through five broad ways, (Okpevra, 2014:163) these are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Isoko</th>
<th>Ukwuani</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oletu</td>
<td>Onotu</td>
<td>War lord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okpara</td>
<td>Okpala</td>
<td>Eldest man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukpẹ</td>
<td>Ukpe</td>
<td>Light/Lamp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odibo</td>
<td>Odibo</td>
<td>Servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ẹkpẹ ti</td>
<td>Ẹkpẹ ti</td>
<td>Box</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ọfigbo</td>
<td>Ọfigbo</td>
<td>Palm oil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ọkoko</td>
<td>Ọkoko</td>
<td>Fowl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbologe</td>
<td>Egbologe</td>
<td>Waterleaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ẹkpa</td>
<td>Ẹkpa</td>
<td>Bag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olugbo</td>
<td>Onugbo</td>
<td>Bitter leaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epapa</td>
<td>Apapa</td>
<td>Groundnut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odo</td>
<td>Odo</td>
<td>Pounding mortar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Igodi</td>
<td>Igoni</td>
<td>Key</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uko</td>
<td>Uko</td>
<td>Cup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uto</td>
<td>Ute</td>
<td>Mat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ọdo</td>
<td>Ọdo</td>
<td>Umbrella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ọlogbo</td>
<td>Onogbo</td>
<td>Pussy cat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eni</td>
<td>Enyi</td>
<td>Elephant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ikelike</td>
<td>Ekenike</td>
<td>Stilt Dance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odogun</td>
<td>Odogun</td>
<td>Mask</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unuọọọọ</td>
<td>Nnuọọọ</td>
<td>Salt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okuẹ</td>
<td>Okuẹ</td>
<td>Parrot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anyenya</td>
<td>Anyenya</td>
<td>Horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akupe</td>
<td>Akupe</td>
<td>Handfan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afeşen</td>
<td>Efeşen</td>
<td>Plate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugeji</td>
<td>Ugeji</td>
<td>Spoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ọpia</td>
<td>Ọpia</td>
<td>Cutlass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogba</td>
<td>Ogba</td>
<td>Fence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iroro</td>
<td>Ilolo</td>
<td>Thought</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author's Field Investigation (2011).
a. If he makes love directly with a married woman, either by speech or through gestures
b. If he intentionally holds a married woman by her hands
c. If he intentionally touches a married woman’s breasts
d. If he intentionally beats her buttocks and,
e. If he succeeds in actual intercourse with her.

All these are evidence of socio-cultural relations between the Isoko and her Ukwuani neighbours.

The fact remains that some form of political exchange or intercourse existed between the Isoko and the Ukwuani. The most glaring evidence of this claim is enshrined in the similarities in the political structures of the people. For instance, between the Isoko and the Ukwuani, the village served as the basic political unit, with more often than not, age rather than royal attachments serving as the basis of ruler-ship. (Okolugbo, 2004: 26-39 and Ikime, 1972: 28-36). Secondly, the age grade system has largely featured as an aspect of the socio-political organization.

In any case, under this clime, it is rather difficult to say with certainty, however, that this was the particular point when/where the Isoko borrowed or gave out a particular aspect of her political usages or systems from/to the Ukwuani. The whole episode, it would seem, was a process, which may have developed over time. Thus what is important here is that the factor of similarities in usages and systems tend to suggest exchange and intercourse, thereby lending credence to the claims that the Isoko had political relations with her Ukwuani neighbours.

One significant aspect of Isoko-Ukwuani socio-political structure is the wide spread accreditations given to the age grade institution called *Otu* (singular) and *Itu* (plural). “Each age grade is a distinct entity and the members of it discuss questions and act in conformity together.” (Basden, 1966: 194; Okolugbo, 2004: 28-30 and Ikime, 1972: 28-36). The different age grades were not just stages of life through which the members passed. Each of these *Itu* (age-grade or age-sets) had defined obligations in community service. We may not here belabor ourselves with the different *Itu*, but let us take one of these as a case in point. There is the first age-set variously called *Otu-Aya*, *Otu-Mpu* or *Otu Apelete* in Ukwuani while its equivalent in Isoko is called *Out Emaha, Emofofa* or *Umupele Emeezai*, whose ages range from 16 in some case to 20 years, (young boys). In some clans, this age grade is too young and incapable of playing any responsible role in the society. Where they are even engaged, their role did not go beyond sweeping of the market square and other minor sanitation works. In a nutshell they acquire the skills necessary for coping with their civic responsibilities during adulthood, (Okpevra, 2014: 164). It is therefore safe to conclude that the Isoko and Ukwuani people whether through trade, inter marriage, migration or political consolidation constantly interacted with one another – identified shift according to historical circumstance and social transformations peacefully.

**Isoko - Urhobo Relations:**

Isoko-Urhobo relations begin inextricably with their richly varied traditions of origin and migrations. The Isoko and Urhobo people were autonomous and semi-autonomous political units of diverse origins, (Bradbury, 1957: 127) brought together by the passage of time by cultural, economic and linguistic connections. Because of their social and linguistic
Figure 2.
Map of Urhobo and Isoko Divisions.
affinities, therefore they are more closely related to each other than their Abob or Ijaw neighbours, hence the tendency to treat them as a single people.

The historical interplay that characterized the various traditions of origin of the Isoko clans and Urhobo clans become functional in the study of Isoko-Urhobo relations as they often remembered the mutual relationship between the two groups in the past. However, the claim of blood relationship amongst them is mainly a result of secondary migrations from Isoko either to Urhobo or vice versa. These traditions of origin no doubt created the feelings of oneness between the Isoko and Urhobo. These could also at once give the impression and evidence that the Isoko and Urhobo peoples had good relations in the pre-colonial era as would be shown subsequently.

In addition to the above, (Ekeh, 2012: http://www.waadodo.org/Organizations/UHS/Debates/UrhoboBeninRelations/Ekeh_Rejoinder.htm) has unequivocally stated that the Agbon peoples of Urhobo have a very clear oral and ritual tradition of where they migrated. They have demonstrated this from town and even street names that they migrated from Isoko. They first settled in the Urhobo sub-cultural unit of Isiokoro, before spreading out to Agbon’s original constituent towns of Okpare, Uhwokori, (Kokori) which later developed several ties with Benin, and Urhobo towns of Orhokpor and Eku. With every sense of responsibility, (Ekeh, 2012:1) further cautioned that “any study of Urhobo history and culture that belittles the huge contributions from Isoko will do so at its own peril”. Many Urhobo communities retain cultural and ritual ties, with some Isoko towns which they regard their points of primordial origin. Tradition also records that the ancestors of the Urhobo clan of Evwreni and the Isoko towns of Enhwe and Igbide migrated together from a place called Elele (Eneni) in the Igbo territory (Ewmoniyen, 2001, NAI, C.S.O. 26 File 27998: Intelligence Report on Evbreni Clan and Chadwick, 1931) and later settled separately in their present sites.

Aside the above somewhat blood relationship, a number of Isoko and Urhobo clans or towns have common boundaries. These include Enhwe, Igbide, Iyede, Owhe, and Emevor on the Isoko side and Uwherun, Evwreni, Ewu, Orogun and Ogor on the Urhobo side. Social and commercial contacts obviously developed between these Isoko clans and their Urhobo neighbours. This no doubt is the result of geographical proximity, exemplified by their being border towns. As a result, the people inter marry and do several things in common; for example, (Ikime, 1972: 27) is of the view that the Iyede and their Ughelli neighbours have married considerably. Enhwe traditions stress a deep friendship cemented by an oath of non-aggression with the Ewu clan of Urhobo. (NAI, C.S.O. 26 File 27287: Intelligence Report on Okpolo (Enhwe) Clan).

The above features have led to the development of closer relations and common characteristics between the Isoko and the Urhobo. For example, the Iyede and Emevor both Isoko towns and Uwherun and Evwreni of the Urhobo, speak a mixture of Isoko and Urhobo. It is sometimes difficult to identify them as Isoko or Urhobo from their dialects. Moreover, cultural assimilation has made the Uwherun and Evwreni to have the socio-political institutions of Edion like the Isoko clans which no other Urhobo clan has, just as Orogun has the Okpara-Uku title because of their administrative connection with Aboh.

Obviously, contacts made during the various strands of migrations indeed impact on inter-group relations. The relations are such that promote peace between the two groups. In other words, these traditions of origins and migration created the feelings of oneness between the Isoko and
Urhobo. These are evidence that the Isoko and Urhobo peoples had good relations in the pre-colonial era.

The traditional system of government of the Isoko and Urhobo is another aspect of their relation. Socio-politically, like all Edoid-group of language speaking peoples, the Isoko and Urhobo have similar institutions and system of traditional local government. (Bradbury, 1957: 136-150; Ikime, 1965: 285). Nevertheless, as pointed out earlier, they are separate peoples, and they were politically not under a single administrative unit. Thus, like all other Nigerian peoples, who did not accept one central authority, their system of government was gerontocracy. The village or clan councils which formed the basis of local government has been described and classified by Ikime, (1965: 285), as counciliar in nature.

These same bodies played the judicial role in Isoko and Urhobo land. Because of this system of “local government”, before the colonial period, each of the clans had its own administration without reference to the other except in cases of certain rituals or spiritual ceremonies. The clans with blood relations had separate administration either for convenience or because of distance so that these clans only kept constant touch with the parent clan(s) in consultation with their ancestors by going home for annual sacrifices and ceremonies. A good example of this is the Okpe clan (in both Isoko and Urhobo) and Olomoro another Isoko clan which hitherto were sending emissaries to Olomu in Urhobo, for permission to celebrate annual festivals in their respective clans or go to Olomu for such celebrations, (File C.M. 266: ”Gbose Clan (Olomoro Branch): Intelligence Report” (Ministry of Local Government Benin); and Ikime, 2006: 508). Thus, ancient ties continue without detracting from the separate identities that have developed over time.

The Isoko and Urhobo clans with the Ovie title, and who got their symbol of authority from Benin, owe a common allegiance to the Oba. (NAI.C.S.O. File 2621943: Intelligence Report on Okpe - Sobo Clan). Such clans include Ozoro, Iyede, Emede, Aviara; and Ughelli, Ewu, Okpe (called Orodeje), Agbon. Not until the period of the colonial rule and in fact after the re-organisations of the 1930s was there any serious attempt made to administer the Isoko and Urhobo as a single people.

Another veritable area of relationship between the Isoko and Urhobo is in their religious beliefs and practices. They worshipped a supreme God, generally called Oghene and variously referred to in generic terms as “Osonobrughwe” “Ukpabe” “Agbadagbruru” and “Erumeru”; whom they believed created the world and had power over life and death. They also believed in witchcraft, which according to them had the power to assume the posture of any creature, and capable of causing various harms. (Welch, 1931: 319; 1934: 163-164; Bradbury, 1957: 159; and Nabofa, 1995: 229-230). It is against the backdrop of this witchcraft phenomenon that the Isoko and Urhobo have strong belief in the potency of the “Orise” or chalk (Kaolin) juju, otherwise known as the Igbe cult. It originated from one Ubiosa of Ukhuokori (Kokori) in Agbon clan in Urhobo, whence it spread to other Urhobo and Isoko clans and even Ukwuani territory. It started as a little group headed by Ubiosa who had curative powers. It soon grew into a religion of its own which specialized in the detection of witches. One Okinedo (of Ozoro) was appointed the juju priest for the whole of Isoko and Urhobo area (NAI, C.S.O. File 26770: Intelligence Report on Olomu Clan).
The main function of this juju, whose members were mainly women, was the “smelling out” (sniffing out) of witches. Members usually travelled from one clan to another for annual ceremonies and get-together. It was a common practice for members to make open confessions during such meetings. Although the chalk (kaolin) juju has died out in several clans, it is still held high among some Isoko, Ukwuani and Urhobo peoples, (Okpevra, 2014: 168). Because of this belief in witchcraft, it was common in pre-colonial days for dispute over witchcraft to be settled by the Eni juju/oracle at Uzere. In any case, it was a trial by ordeal that was controlled by the Ovie of Uzere. As a result of this, almost all the Isoko and Urhobo as well as the Itsekiri, Ijaw, Ukwuani and Aboh people made regular visits to Uzere either to witness the ceremony or for the purpose of exonerating themselves or their relatives from the accusation of witchcraft. This was indeed another force, which continually brought the Isoko and the Urhobo together into closer contact. Nevertheless, all this colonial government had to undo when it took over the administration of the area in 1900.

Another factor that reinforced the pre-colonial relationship between the Isoko and Urhobo is in their language affinity. As mentioned earlier the Isoko and Urhobo are more closely related in their dialects than any other Edoid dialects, even closer than Esan and Bini. Apparently, this could be what partly made it possible for them to be regarded as the “Sobo Division” with Ughelli as the headquarters, during the colonial period.

From the foregoing, it is discernible that early in Isoko-Urhobo relations, there was a great deal of political, and socio-cultural contacts between the Isoko and the Urhobo. This brings to the fore one basic fact about intergroup relations, i.e. cultural heritage is a veritable source of unity. This found expression in the various factors and patterns of contact between the two distinct ethnic groups.

**Isoko - Ijaw Relations:**

Available evidence indicates that Isoko-Ijaw relations have not been as widespread as between the Isoko and her other neighbours. This is because only the riverain soko clans and settlements have really had any close relations with the Ijaw. Perhaps among the Isoko clans Erohwa is the one that has had the closest relations, even if these were more hostile (NAI, C.S.O. 26 File 27993: Intelligence Report on Erohwa - Umeh Clan) than friendly. Hubbard (1948: 96-97; 185) was very much impressed by the extreme antagonisms that existed between Ijaw and Isoko people. This might have resulted from the history of Ijaw raiding of Isoko waterside “villages” or communities. However, Erohwa traditions claim that the site on which Patani of the Ijaw now stands is Erohwa land and that the site of the shrine of their god (Okiale) is prominent in Patani, (Ikime, 1972: 24).

The above claim is supported by Kabo-wei Ijaw traditions, which accept meeting some original settlers in the Kabo-bulu area, and what is now Patani town in Delta State. The tradition holds that by the last decades of the eighteenth century, following the slowdown of slaving activities in the Forcados, the Kabowei decided to come out of the Kabo-bulu creek and onto the Forcados, which had more land for habitation. It was the Isoko sub-cultural group of Erohwa, maintains the tradition, who were the occupants of what became Patani and the name Patani is a corruption of an Erohwa word “Ipatani” (Okpevra, 2014: 171).
Another significant point of contact between the Isoko and Ijaw has to do with the relationship between the Isoko clan of Uzere and the Ijaw community of Odi. Tradition has it that Uzei the founder of Uzere and the founder of Odi were in the same migratory group from Benin, enroute Aboh to settle at Oruhe (now called Eruke). There was a bloody clash between Uzere and Aboh and the Subsequent killing of Okugbo (Uzei’s son) by the Obi of Aboh under the guise of the former committing an atrocious act in his domain during Okugbo’s visit on his way from Benin. The Uzere immediately raise an army for a reprisal. Eventually Aboh’s army besieged Uzere and the people were slaughtered by the Obi of Aboh forces. Thereafter a section of the "Benin migrants" moved upland to the present site of Uzere, while the other section apparently in the minority moved beyond the Kabo villages of Ogo and Abari along through the Onise creek on the river Nun to found Odi now in present day Bayelsa State of Nigeria. This, the account believes explains the kinship tie that exists between Uzere and Odi today. (Akora and Ekebe, 1997: 12-13).

The Uzere people have a long-standing relationship with the Ijaw of Odi beyond mere acquaintances. This may have resulted to the observation by (Peek, 2002: 173) that “there are scattered references linking Uzere clan with the Ijo especially Odi.

Geographically, on the northern fringe of the Western Delta, the Ijaw sub-cultural groups of the Mein and the Kabo have mainly Isoko/Urhobo amongst others as neighbours. These contacts have been said to be important, involving significant cultural exchange, migration, and marriage - usually of Ijaw men to Isoko women from these neighbouring groups. (Alagoa, 1972: 60). As mentioned above, it is only the riverain Isoko clans and settlements that actually had any close relations with the Ijaw and vice versa. The hinterland communities may have through relay had some degree of contact with the Ijaw especially during the trans-Atlantic slave trade era and the subsequent so-called legitimate commerce.

Bearing in mind that the communities on the Ase River bounded the Isoko in the southeast, it behooves on us to identify some of such communities. Some of these communities are Ijaw sub-cultural groups or units. They include Odi; Abari, a Kabowei town, very close to Uzere and Otorofani, a few kilometers upstream from Abari town on the Forcados. Asamabiri is situated on the Niger right at the point where the Niger bifurcates into the Forcados and the Nun Rivers. All these communities are in present day Sagbama local government area of Bayelsa State. Recall that six Isoko speaking communities are also located within Sagbama local government area of Bayelsa State. (Alagoa, 1999: 102). However, inter-marriages, attendance at inter-clan festivals, blood-covenants between these neighbouring political units and the many communal market groups were effective instruments of cultural unity between the Isoko and Ijaw.

Socio-politically, the Isoko-Ijaw relations equally deserve some attention. The influence of socio-political permeation coloured the relations between the Isoko and Ijaw. For instance, “a few of the western Ijaw clans boasted a clan head akin to the Isoko Ovie, a kind of priest-king. Mein and Kabowei Ijaw for example had such clan heads called Pere. The powers of the Pere like those of the Isoko Ivie (plural of Ovie) were not autocratic. The significance of the Pere lies in the fact that the office which was political as well as religious gave greater cohesion to the clan than was customary among the other Ijaw clans and provided a much more real basis for clan organization. (NAI. C.S.O. 26 File 11857 vol.iv: Annual Report, Warri Province, 1932).

Very much like their Isoko and Urhobo neighbours on the immediate hinterland, the Mein Ijaw were said to have made trips to Benin to obtain approval of the Oba of Benin for the title of
Pereship. The Isoko clan of Iyede exemplifies the practical incentive for such trips. According to tradition, all the first nine *Ivie* of Iyede had to obtain approval of the Oba of Benin, and by this means acquired ascendancy over the other Isoko group. (Capt. E. A. Miller 1932, NAI CSO 26 File 27994; “Intelligence Report on the Iyede Clan” Warri Province, 25). No doubt, the example of the Isoko must have urged the necessity and possibilities of the particular solution offered by a visit to the court of Benin by the Mein Ijaw.

Culturally, intermarriages between the Isoko and the Ijaw were largely prevalent, which quicken the spirit of intergroup relations between them. Under this clime, (Ikime, 1972: 25) is of the opinion that intermarriage between Ijaw and Isoko does not appear to have been widely practiced, while (Alagoa, 1972: 60 -76; 84) emphasized a high level of inter-group marriage between the Ijaw and Isoko women.

The Ngbilebiri traditions recorded at Kiagbodo were said to have contained accounts of several wars against the neighbouring Isoko and Urhobo. But the longer periods of peaceful trade and marriage of Ijaw men to Isoko women have left their mark in inter-change of cultural traits. (Alagoa, 1972: 234-235). The Kabowei are now often bilingual in Kabo and Isoko because of close contact and inter-marriage. The expressions *Egberiyo* and *Itaiye* that begin and end most Isoko folk tales are clearly Ijaw.

One of the most important ceremonial complexities among the Isoko, the *Oworu* celebration may have been derived in part from Ijaw ceremonies. For instance, the Dance steps observed in Isoko *Oworu* masquerades and Ijaw masquerades are virtually identical. On the other hand, the Western Ijaw attributes their practice of *Ovo* (sacred covenant of peace) as well as the *Ivri* Dance (Peek, 2002: 173,184) to the Isoko. And above all, if there were Ijaw cultural influences among the Isoko clans, they are barely recognized with the exception of the origins of *Khikhi* (or *Kainkain*), the lethal local “palm wine gin said to have been first made by Ijaw who used the Isoko and Urhobo as labour. The latter brought back this technology at a later date and harnessed its production back at home as a form of transferred technology. (Okeremeta, 2017).

A number of broad conclusions are bound to emerge from the discourse on the Isoko relations with her Ijaw neighbours. Most important is the fact that the various traditions that bother on Isoko-Ijaw relations indicate a wide array of commercial, cultural and political contacts. This is demonstrated by the Ijaw on the frontier of the Western Deltan fringes who had considerable and intimate relations with the Isoko to the immediate northern fringes. The Mein could further demonstrate this as they sent their political aspirants to Benin like their Isoko neighbours to obtain titles and regalia. Again, it was to the Isoko and Urhobo territory he Ijaw adventurers migrated to found related settlements and communities.

The imposition of British rule on Nigeria towards the end of the nineteenth century constituted a major landmark in the history of relations between the Isoko and their immediate neighbours. With that event, a new pattern of inter group relations began to build up 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.
CONCLUSION

In tidying up this work, against the back drop of the theme of study, it has attempted a discourse on the aspects of pre-colonial Isoko socio-political relations with their Urhobo, Ijaw, Ukwuani and Aboh neighbours in the western Niger Delta, south central Nigeria. It further attempted an illumination of the nexus between internal and external dynamics and the concomitant changes and continuities in Isoko relations with their neighbours. The study concludes that intergroup relations in the region is largely influenced by their somewhat common ancestral origin; geographical contiguity; a shared common environmental and cultural practices; and the experience of similar external influences. This is done within the context of contemporary trajectory of the socio-political conflicts in the Niger Delta with serious implications for both National and International interests. The picture of intrinsic and inherent incompatibility of ethnic groups in the making of a nation as has been claimed for the people of Nigeria by extension and the Niger Delta specifically is not justified by its history.

REFERENCES


