

THE ROLE OF THE MONARCHY IN FOSTERING DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN AGBOR AND BENIN

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Abstract

This paper reviews the social psychology of the inter-group relations that exist between the people of Agbor and Benin; it focuses on how the interactions between these people have affected their way of life and beliefs. Today, it is difficult to distinguish among these different people's cultures, languages, and the names they bear. Inter-group relations between various indigenous clans in pre-colonial Nigeria have received less attention from historians and others, thus, helping to perpetuate the erroneous notion that Africans before the coming of the Europeans were isolated from one other and unable to form complex relationships and governments. These racist views have been upheld by the European community in an attempt to justify their actions on the continent and in Nigeria in particular. The Truth is, even before the coming of the Europeans, Africans were in contact with one another, they interacted through diverse means like trade, wars, and inter-marriages among others. The paper will therefore attempt to establish that the people of Agbor and Benin have had a long period of cooperation among themselves, thanks to the roles that the kings played. It will also explain some of the conflicts that threatened to tear these groups apart. It would show the various ways that these groups showed solidarity with one another in the area of attending festivals,



burial ceremonies, marriages, and others. This study will achieve its objectives using the qualitative research method to analyze the available data while relying on the use of primary and secondary sources to provide the necessary information. The paper concludes that the kings played major roles in maintaining the peace and harmony that both kingdoms continue to enjoy.

Key words: Inter-group relations, Agbor, Benin, Kings, Culture, and Kingdom.

Introduction

Intergroup relations refer to the relationship that exists between different groups. In pre-colonial Nigeria, various kingdoms organized themselves the best way they could, while at the same interacting meaningfully with members of other groups. Some of the benefits of inter-group relations are that the collaboration between the various groups in the community increased, there was also reduced conflict among the various members, and it promoted integration among the different aspects of the society. In the case of Agbor and Benin, the relations between them had mostly been cordial, even though at other times, it took the form of conflicts and disagreement. This notwithstanding the people of Agbor and Benin according to the Dein of Agbor are brothers.¹ This singular fact has guided all of their relations. The Kingdoms of Agbor and Benin were sovereign and related to each other on this basis. Although it is believed by some groups that the people of Agbor were conquered at some point and became vassals to the people of Benin. There is no evidence to support this claim, either in written records or otherwise to support this belief. At most, this belief may have stemmed from an assumption that arose as a result of the numerous wars of conquest that were carried out by Oba Ewuare.² It is not known for sure which policies were part of



the very vast Benin empire³ during the pre-colonial era due to the paucity of written records.

To justify the assertion that the people of Agbor were vassals of Benin, some writers point to the semblance in the political system of both communities. According to Obaro Ikime, “The Obishop would thus be explicable in terms of the influence of the social and political institutions of Benin. He claims that the Bini group succeeded in imposing their political system through conquest”⁴, while the traditional Benin historian Jacob Egharevba believes that all the Obi’s of “Eka” were installed in office by the Oba of Benin at Benin City and also given a sword of office. He went further to say that they owed allegiance to the Oba of Benin their overlord at Benin City.”⁵ Albeit some writers hold a different view on the origin and political status of the people of Agbor, they believe that although Benin was a great kingdom and wielded so much influence throughout the area, it never actually amounted to the permanent subjugation and the regular administration of the surrounding communities⁶. They explained further that the relationship in culture may be a result of the proximity of the communities and the series of wars that were waged between the two people⁶. According to Simpson’s quotation from the Talbot Vide Nyandals experience in 1702 of the skirmishes between Agbor and Benin in which Agbor emerged victorious, in an attempt to resist Benin’s aggressive expansion. A noteworthy event in the relationship between Agbor and Benin was the time when the then Oba of Benin Oba Ovonranwem posted troops at Ologbo to fight the people of Agbor for their perceived intransigence, but by this period the once powerful kingdom of Benin was on her way to decline. According to Ostia Mordi, “the provocation which Chief Egharevba referred to which induced Oba Ovonranwem to declare war against the people of Agbor was not because she revolted against her rule but because she had blocked all channels through



which the Benin people collected royalties from the Southern Esan Tribes, demanding that a share of such royalties should come to Agbor.⁷ The claim therefore that Agbor was conquered by Benin remains a controversial issue.

The Social Interdependence Theory (SIT), can be used to explain the nature of relations that existed between these two groups. This is because it explains the nature of human social relationships, it posits that social interdependence occurs when the outcome of the individuals is affected by their own and other's actions, he claims that there are two types of social interdependence: positive interdependence, this is when there is a collective action to promote the achievement of joint goals in the society, and the negative actions, that are carried out to obstruct the goal of the society⁸. However this theory has some limitations, which is that it proposes that the individuals in the community are the main actors in inter-group relations, but as Sigmund Freud has rightly argued, individuals that make up a group have little or no choice when it comes to the direction that inter-group relations follow, this decision rest solely with the group leaders⁹. It is entirely up to them if relations are to be positive or negative.

The Theory of Social interdependence aptly describes the nature of interaction between the people under the study, for one it mentions interdependence as one of the proponents of inter-group relations. Social interdependence deals with resource, roles, and task interdependence. In a community, roles are assigned to group participants, and the duty attached to such roles becomes binding on the individual, if each member carries out the duty attached to them, society will be more productive. While the postulation of boundary interdependence is based on an abrupt exchange among individuals who share a common boundary.



As expected, the people of Agbor and Benin developed a close-knit relationship that has flourished well into the 21st century. To this end, it becomes pertinent to look at the nature of the relationship that existed between the two people, but most importantly, this paper will look at the roles the kings played in fostering a closer relationship between the people of Agbor and Benin.

Role of the Monarchy in Fostering Diplomatic Relations between the Kingdom of Benin and Agbor

Diplomacy is the art and science of maintaining peaceful relationships between nations, groups, or individuals. Often diplomacy refers to the representatives of different groups discussing issues such as conflicts, trade, the environment, technology, or maintaining security.¹⁰ In this case, the Oba of Benin and the Dein of Agbor were charged with the responsibility of maintaining relations between their kingdoms.

It is common knowledge that the traditional leaders of the people are custodians of the people's culture and tradition. They are highly respected and revered by the people within and outside their domain. Their words are law to the people and their advice and opinion on issues are respected and obeyed. Over time, traditional leaders have been known to promote peace, foster cohesion and contribute to the political system of governance. Their government aims to ensure that the people, irrespective of tribe and language live harmoniously in the area. This creates political stability that aids development. They ensured the safety of the people and their properties in an area. When there is peace in an area, it attracts investors, which will in turn lead to job creation. Job creation may lead to the eradication of youth restiveness.¹¹

The Oba of Benin was the Head of the Kingdom. He was both the spiritual and physical leader of the Benin Empire. He led the



council of chiefs who made decisions on such matters as war, trade, taxation, and ceremonial events.¹² He has maintained friendly relations with some of the neighboring kingdoms like Agbor. On two major occasions, the Oba had played a big brother role in the affairs of the people of Agbor. In one instance, he accommodated Obi Obika when he was seriously ill,¹³ before his eventual death, and in another, he accommodated the Dein Benjamin Keagborekuzi when his father died at the young age of two and half years. This prevented usurpers from taking over the throne of Agbor. Under his supervision, the Chiefs in Agbor held the fort until the eventual return of the Dein of Agbor.

Born on the 16th of March, 1916, Obi Obika ascended the throne in 1935. He attended Agbor Government School and was not allowed to further his studies. He was taught at the Native Administration at Benin City and visited towns like Lagos, Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, Ibadan, Ile-Ife, Kano, Kaduna, Enugu, Calabar and Port-Harcourt.¹⁴ Obi Obika like his father was faced with British interference in the discharge of his duties in the kingdom. His reign was peaceful and he commanded respect within and outside the kingdom¹⁵. Obi Obika was sagacious and of calm disposition. He commanded the respect of his people but tragedy struck him when his heir apparent Usialele died. This has never happened in the history of Agbor.¹⁶ It was attributed to Usialele's simplicity and carelessness. Obi Obika fell ill on the 15th of November 1965. Later he became dumb. He was carried to Benin for treatment. He returned home in the same condition. He joined his ancestors on the 29th of March 1967.¹⁷

King Obika was succeeded by Obi Ikenchukwu who was born on 2nd December 1938. He ascended the throne on the 19th of December 1968. Obi James Ikenchukwu was called back home after the tragic death of his father to assume the throne of his



father. His installation was marked with great enthusiasm. Despite the civil war that had begun in 1966; sons and daughters at home felt happy and proud of their new king. Distinguished personalities and representatives of governments, the press, teachers, traders, farmers, and individuals from all works of life and kingdoms were present, including the people of Benin stock.¹⁸ Obi Ikenchukwu died on 29th April, 1979. He had two sons and four daughters. He was buried according to the Agbor traditional rites of burial for a king.¹⁹ After his death, the palace chiefs hurriedly crowned his son king. Obi Keagborekuzi is the first son of Obi James Ikenchukwu. He was born in 1977. He joined the Edakhein (Nwadein) immediately after birth. After the father died in 1979, he was crowned Keagborekuzi 1.²⁰

Obi Keagborekuzi is the youngest traditional ruler in the world. This can be found in the Guinness Book of Records. At the age of two and a half years. He was taken to Benin to stay at the Oba's palace²¹ He was taken to England in 1981 where he stayed for twenty-five years.²² He had his primary, and secondary education in London. His education was funded by the Bendel government.²³ He returned in May, 2000. He has had a peaceful reign so far. A feat he attributes to the fact that he lives among his people, walks around the villages, supervises road projects, and visits his farms and family members. He also says that the relationship between him and his colleagues is mutual. So, the sense of arrogance does not come into play. On disclosing his relationship with the Oba of Benin, he said they are very good friends who have taken their relationship into brotherhood, ²⁴ explaining further the existing relationship between both kingdoms, Dein Keagborekuzi stated:

This catalogue of intimacy has continued to the present day particularly when about twenty percent of the present Agbor population now reside in various Benin territories.



These Agbor people have comfortably settled in the above habitations without molestation. Making their economic venture under the giant Umbrella of Omo n'edo uko akpolokpolo and the good custody of their resident Enogie and Odionwere. The collaboration of the traditional leaders can ginger and speed up development in any area, ours inclusive.²⁵

The kings in Agbor were also in the habit of sending their sons to Benin to study. After the Benin looting expedition in 1897, the British Patrol to Agbor took place in 1900 and Agbor District administration was established in 1901. The officer to open the place was accompanied by some Bini chiefs comprised of honorable Osula and others as hosts. They were given lodging according to customary hospitality in Agbor. Mr. I. T Palmer was present and inspired the Dein to send his sons to school in Benin. The Obi sent three sons namely: Adajie, Idemije, and Abaie. The princes were given a page each.²⁶

Challenges in the Agbor-Benin Political and Diplomatic Relations

Ever since its inception, the people of Agbor and Benin have witnessed various political crises. This crisis brought about insecurity, destruction of lives and properties, as well as the disruption of the socio-economic life of the people. However, the crisis assumed a different dimension and became more sophisticated, more deadly, and more militarized with increased contact with the Europeans and their weapons. From altercations about land and border issues, the development progressed to cases of full-blown warfare. ²⁷

According to Don Ohadike in his book, *Anioma*, Agbor Communities were described as the most war-like of the Anioma kingdoms. He claimed that for about four centuries they acted as



a bulwark against the expansion of the Bini Kingdom. Bearing the greatest burden of resisting Edo military imperialism. Its constant wars with Benin are well-known.?? This may have accounted for its consideration as the “most politically and militarily powerful of all the Ika clans as recorded by Chukwu Ebuka and Iwueze Awele Success. The wars which lasted until the 19th century may have also swelled the military prowess of the Agbor community and helped to make it a force to reckon with within the area.²⁸ There is therefore no doubt that within the period under study, Agbor remained the headache of the Benin Kingdom, even though the legendary Benin Historian Jacob Egharevba dismissively presented Agbor as a Benin Vassal whose Chief (Obi/ Dein) was in constant rebellion against the Benin Kingdom to the extent that the kingdom had to take steps to bring the situation under control.

Egharevba gave an account of how Oba Orhogbua authorized one of his generals, Agbon to restore peace at all cost. Agbon then captured “Idigi” territory which he renamed Agbon later corrupted to “Agbor”. The people of Agbor as a result of this development were compelled to maintain their hard-sought loyalty to Benin. This was only short-lived as they again revolted this time during the reign of Oba Ovonranwem. Agbor was to be severely punished but for the 1897 conquest of Benin by British forces and consequent capture of Oba Ovonranwem²⁹. For Joseph N. Egwu, a prominent scholar and historian “The wars between Benin and Agbor are not as simple as Egharevba puts them. Even using his accounts, it seems that the relationship that they had was that of a series of fluctuations and adjustments.³⁰ This position by Egwu is strongly supported by one tradition of Agbor as narrated by Iduwe

In more recent times, they have consistently recognized the fangs of oppression on them, but they have always employed peaceful norms to tackle oppressive acts.³¹ While traditional rulers have a



role to play in the security of their people, the pursuit of these roles has been greatly hindered by several factors which include lack of funding for the traditional institutions. In Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, there is no definite role for the traditional rulers to perform. After the 1897 invasion of Benin, the Oba lost an enormous amount of his powers, this has greatly undermined his authority and power.³² Just like any other relationship, the people of Agbor have witnessed some periods of warfare. In 1895, the Oba built a war camp at Obadan village. He recruited ten thousand men to be trained, so they could be used in Agbor and other campaigns that he proposed to undertake.³³ However, the British invasion of Agbor in 1896 and the Benin massacre that took place in 1897 stopped this from taking place.

Until the early eighteenth century when the military title of Ezomo became hereditary, the position was given by the Oba as a reward to an outstanding warrior from any part of the Benin Empire. The Iyoba (Queen Mother) had her regiment of the Benin army.³⁴ During the 1900s expedition, some Bini Chiefs accompanied the British to Agbor. The people of Agbor were not pleased with the presence of the Bini chiefs because of their arrogance and treachery. Both were inimical to one another after Agbor men had buried alive 40 Bini warriors passing through Agbor defiantly to wage war for revenge for Adesua a Bini princess who was murdered by Eze Ubulu. The soldiers were arrested and buried alive. At that time too the people of Agbor had begun to think about war with the British interference and their followers.³⁵

The citizens of Agbor have been peace-loving and law-abiding. They preferred the dignity of labor rather than being warlike. They hate oppression and man's inhumanity to man. They never failed to organize themselves to fight a war when their freedom was threatened. Some of the past wars were waged by the order of the



Obi against any village that flouted the King's authority or some fought for prestige. Agbor Kingdom was regarded as a city of refuge in this part of the world, on account of her formidable warriors and excellent social organization that belligerent nations or rebellious villages feared to challenge her pride. Generally, males from 2 years of age and upward are militia or fighters under their village war leaders called Okayabor, Odogwu, Iyase, and Olotu. It was observed that because the war was tribal or out of the Dein's control, the war chiefs Agbasogun, Uboh, Ozomor, Iyase, and Ogbuobodi with the Dein and his legion took command over the battlefield. Generally, if Omu (palm fronds) were put across the road between disputing villages it was considered a blockade, with no entry or passage until they could reach an agreement.

A soldier's weapons of war were wooden spears (obo), swords (agbada), bayonets (good or), bow and crossbow (ota and expedite), poisonous arrows (Obara edide), shield (akpan), machetes (opia), gun (ayanzu, adaka). The outfits were "ekpokin" and "Ewuru izagin" which were dyed and smoked to prevent machete cuts or arrow piercings from wounding a wearer. In about the 16th and 17th centuries, steel weapons were introduced by the Portuguese who came to Benin City in about 1485. With the use of steel weapons such as pistols, gunpowder, and machetes, the Bini used them to conquer their enemies with great cruelty. Thus the Oba of Benin became tyrannical, human sacrifices were performed at large. His men ruled other people in his name. Despite the fear of the white men in their Benin City, the Ika of Agbor could not submit but continued to resist any form of cruelty that they met. Fighting continued until the arrival of the British in 1901-1906 in Agbor Kingdom³⁶

There are quite several Ika communities surrounding Agbor, but only Agbor could withstand Benin in terms of military strength,



proving to Benin that there were no pushovers. This provocation was enough to make the Oba post troops fight Agbor for her perceived intransigence. But the warfare was quickly squashed due to a memory of long periods of brotherhood. It was during this war that Agbor gathered enough patriotism and sympathy from her neighbors. Contrary to the expectations of spectators, these wars between Agbor and Benin did not truncate the relations that had existed between the two kingdoms.³⁷

Conclusion

Despite the altercations that sprang up between these two kingdoms, the kings always found ways to quell the tensions so that they never escalated to full-blown warfare. As expected, relations between different kingdoms are inevitable. The most common being boundary demarcation and resource allocation. So some writers may want to attribute the conflicts they had in the community to the issue of sovereignty and Agbor subsequent revolt. This may not have been the case as it remains unproven. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the people of Agbor and Benin share close boundaries. This proximity has allowed them to have exchanges at different degrees, thus improving the welfare and quality of life that members of both communities live.



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