

AGBOR-BENIN SOCIO-CULTURAL RELATIONS IN PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL TIMES

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Abstract

Inter-group relations between various indigenous clans in pre-colonial Nigeria may 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 another. For this reason, this paper focused on the socio-cultural relations between two contiguous indigenous pre-colonial and colonial kingdoms in Southern Nigeria. It focused on how the social interactions between these people have affected their cultures and practices over time so that in recent times it is a bit difficult to distinguish among these different people's cultures, languages and some of the names they bear. Some European writers believed that before the Europeans came, there was no contact or movement among the indigenous Nigerian people and by extension, Agbor and Benin. The European community has upheld these racist views in an attempt to justify their actions on the continent and in Nigeria in particular. The study revealed that, 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 nature of the contact between the two groups was highlighted, focusing on their origin and culture, some of the festivals celebrated in both lands, marriage rites, and burial ceremonies. To effectively research the subject matter, the qualitative

method of research was used while relying on primary and secondary sources to provide data. This research exposed not only the rich culture of these historic kingdoms but also the similarities in culture and relations that existed between the people of Agbor and Benin.

Key words: Inter-group relations, Agbor, Benin, Festivals, Culture, and Language.

Introduction

A major feature of society is interdependence. Human society is perceived as a collection of individuals' economic, social, and political activities, giving them access to life's necessities. There is nothing unusual about this, because, a man by nature is a dependent creature. He depends on his environment and others for food, shelter, and clothing all of which gives him a purpose on earth. Humans need each other, no group or human community, notwithstanding its level of development can be an island entirely to itself.¹ Before the Europeans' intrusion and involvement in African nations' affairs, some kingdoms and communities exhibited quite sophisticated modes of organization and politics. These kingdoms were focused on the growth and development of their various peoples, they instituted policies that guaranteed the sustenance and growth of their various communities.

Inter-group relations may denote interaction between two or more distinct cultural, linguistic or ethnic groups. However, in a more general usage, inter-group relations imply the simple or complex, conflicting or accommodating, cooperating, consensual, peaceful or acrimonious, intense, dense or indifferent way that one group is connected or associated with another in the course of their interaction with each other. From the above, it is clear that these relations were either peaceful through trade, marriages and cultural visits or violent



through wars and forceful emigration.² A principal factor that promoted inter-group relations in pre-colonial times was migration. This was common among the pre-colonial societies of Nigeria. This act it was believed was birth out of economic necessity, modernizing influence and political motivation. In all, it is believed that the economic motive was the most decisive factor that influenced the movement of people from one place to another³. It is instructive to note that the relationship between both kingdoms was not always peaceful. However, they were able to settle their grievances and habited harmoniously among themselves. This relationship led to some borrowings and similarities in the culture and ways of life of the people. Based on the foregoing, and for clarity purposes, this paper discusses sectors of the socio-cultural relations of the people of Agbor and Benin, the similar chieftaincy and kingship ideas and a conclusion.

Socio-Cultural Relations of the People of Agbor and Benin

Custom can be defined as a long-established practice considered an unwritten law resting on authority and long consent.⁴ Throughout pre-colonial Nigeria, the indigenes were easily identified by the customs they practised, this is because the customs and traditions of the various people were distinct from each other. The uniqueness of the different customs appeared and was showcased through the following mediums:

Body Marks- Body marks are scarifications, which are specific identification and beautification marks drawn on the body. It was customary for the people of Bini to make incisions which were called body marks, these were lacerations made on the bodies of the indigenes. Body marks or “iwu” in Benin dialect consisted of five bands about two inches down the back, the marks were made on both

sexes when they reached the age of puberty.⁵ The body marks drawn by the people of Benin were mostly carried out to give them a sense of identification, most especially during the era of the slave trade. Benin was very notorious for her activities during the slave trade era,⁶ with the help of the body marks, slaves that returned were easily identified and reabsorbed into the community. Another reason why the people of Benin drew body marks on their children was to beautify them, the marks were seen as a symbol of honour, beauty, heritage and something worn with pride⁷.

The older generation of Agbor people also had marks drawn on their bodies, these were called (tattoos) or “iwu” according to the Ika dialect. These marks consisted of six bands drawn at the front of the body which gave them a similar look to the people of Benin.⁸ These marks gave them a sense of identity distinct from people of other kingdoms who did not bear the mark. Apart from giving them a distinct sense of identity, the marks signified beautification, just like those of the people of Benin. Sometimes the people of Agbor gave babies marks to spot a reincarnated baby. If a child was worrisome and was suspected of reincarnating, such a child was given a special mark, this made it easy to identify such a child so that the necessary rituals were performed. The *Iwu* was drawn by the traditional surgeon in both societies, he was called the “Osiwu” in Benin dialect and *Osigu* in Agbor.⁹

Dressing: Dressing was one of the important ways that a person could identify the different tribes of the people of pre-colonial Nigeria. In the earliest times, the children of Benin and Agbor wore no clothes on the upper part of their bodies, or they wore one piece



of cloth. The men of Benin stock wore one small cloth called “IGBELUKU” and one large covering cloth called “IGBU”. Women generally wore two loin clothes and a covering cloth, and all clothes were woven. Footwear was rarely worn.¹⁰ In colonial times, the people of Agbor and Benin adopted Western-like styles of dressing. Now, they adorn themselves in white fabric from head to toe. In a fashion that is influenced by the Benin culture¹¹, the men prefer to sew theirs in a way that is convenient for them, they wear a long shirt and a wrapper, while the women favour the use of velvet, lace, and *George*¹².

The men from Agbor stock wore a hand-woven cloth called *Akwa-Ocha* on the left shoulder passing it under the right armpit, the women tied a loose wrapper around the waist upon which they wore a blouse, and a head tie was used to complete the attire.¹³ However, during events like traditional marriages and festivals, both men of Benin descent and Agbor wore a white piece of clothing made from linen. Both the people of Benin and Agbor origin wore coral beads for the wealthy class, for those that were not so buoyant, they used rubber and wooden beads on their necks. Beads were also used to make a cape or a blouse, they also adorned their bodies with beaded earrings and bags. It may be difficult to distinguish between an Ika woman and a Benin woman when they are traditionally dressed.

Arts and Songs- Benin was famous for its arts, dances, and songs, indeed, some myths put the number of dances in the land at two hundred and one, and a great number of these dances diffused to other areas, Agbor inclusive¹⁴. The songs reflected the social and political experiences of the people as they demonstrated their elegance and artistry. It is worth mentioning that some of these songs were royal, and a few were religious each suited to its purpose.¹⁵ Dance was used



to tell a story, the children were mostly occupied with this art especially during moonlight plays. The most popular dances in the area were *Ekokoma*, *Kareta*, *Ugho*, and *Esakpaide* among others.¹⁶

Festivals- A festival has been defined as an event and community gathering usually staged by a local community that centers on some theme, sometimes on some unique aspect of community life.¹⁷ The People of Agbor and Benin celebrated some festivals which were similar in ideology and title. Some of these are:

Igue Festival: The Igue festival was one of the festivals that was handed over to the people of Benin by their ancestors, it is a festival heralding good luck. It began in the era of Oba Ewuare the Great who reigned over Benin in the 15th century (1440-1473AD)¹⁸. The Benin people believed that the luck of their monarch was intertwined with the people over whom the monarch reigns. The people looked up to the Oba for leadership, the Oba was the embodiment of the Edo people's culture and his luck became their own. It was for this reason that the *Igue* festival was celebrated every year. The Igue festival was a time when the Oba and some of his chiefs were involved in *Ague* (fasting). The Benin people believed in ancestral worship so everybody joined the Oba in *Ugie Erha Ehroba*, during this period, the anniversary of their death is celebrated by Benin, and for seven days' propitiations (to appease) are made to the spirits of the departed Oba. This was done to invoke their blessings on the reigning monarch, their families, and subjects. The Igue festival was also a time to offer thanks to the gods for sparing their lives and to ask for their blessings. The Igue festival was also used for offering sacrifices to some shrines in the palace. Igue festival also presented the Bini

people with the opportunity to drive out evil spirits (*Ubi*) and bring blessings (*Ewere*) to every home in the kingdom.

The Igue festival was also celebrated in Agbor. Agbor is a farming community where elaborate preparations are made to mark the beginning of a new farming year. These preparations culminated in the preparation of one of the most important festivals which was called the Igue festival. Before the celebrations began, the Obi-in-Council which was made up of the Obi and his chiefs met to choose an acceptable day that the festival would be celebrated. On the eve of the festival, the oldest man in the family performs a mini celebration known as “Igwo Isi” This was performed with one kola nut, native chalk, a plate of dried meat mixed with palm oil, and a drink (native gin or palm wine) Parents and their children would then assemble in the Ehi shrine where the celebrant broke the kola nut and prayed for the well-being of the family. This was followed by the breaking of the coconut; after praying, the juice was sprinkled on the heads of all those present starting from the chief celebrant to the youngest. The activity of *Igwo Isi* was then rounded off with the sharing of dried meat cut into little pieces mixed with red palm oil (*Ngwo*). The native gin was served to adults and the lump of native chalk was broken into pieces and rubbed on the foreheads of those present while the closing prayer was being said. The celebrant prayed as he appeased the spirit of the departed members of the family, he also asked for good health and a fruitful farming year. At the end of the prayers which was with incantations and invocations by calling their names and titles, the food and meat were shared according to the ages of those present.¹⁹ These festivals were widely patronized and visited by people of the different kingdoms.

Emorho/ Iwagi Festival- Another festival that was celebrated in both kingdoms was the New Yam Festival called *Emorho*, (New

Yam) in Benin, the festival was essentially agricultural. Yams for thousands of years had been the staple food of the people of Benin and Agbor. *Emorho* was therefore designed and celebrated as essentially a thanksgiving festival, giving thanks to God for the harvest of their new yam and granting them food security as well as the sustenance of life in the land.

Emorho was the festival of harvest and the first sale of the new yams and their general consumption. It was during this festival that the Oba, the heads of families (*Erha*) heads of extended families (*Okagbee*), and *Edionwere* (Village or Community heads) took leadership roles; dignitaries from other kingdoms also attended the festivals including the Obi of Agbor.²⁰ The people of Agbor called the new yam festival “Iwagi”, (festival of yam) the festival was celebrated between August and October by the people of Agbor to mark the start of the new harvest and to give thanks to the god of the farm (*Ifejokwu*).²¹ It was only after the new yam festival had been celebrated that the people of Agbor were allowed to harvest their yams for either domestic or commercial use. The Igbontor, Ake, and Idumuodin villages of Igbanke celebrated the new yam festival (Egu) on the same day that the people of Agbor celebrated their festival.

Osiezi Festival: Oligie and Ottah villages of the Benin Kingdom have the *Osiezi* festival just like the people of Agbor, this festival is celebrated once every three (3) years. It was instituted by Dein Ebonka. He saw the celebration of the *Osiezi* festival as a gesture of goodwill to all mankind. The ascension of the Dein to the throne was marked with relative peace. This enabled the people to start thinking of activities that made them happy. The *Osiezi* festival was usually a period of reunion of the living and the spirits of the dead and offered friends and well-wishers of Agbor people the opportunity to share the hospitality of Agbor. The festival lasted for a two-market week

period. That is eight (8) days²². The week for the festival was announced by a proclamation from the ruling Obi after meeting with members of the council of elders from within the kingdom. As soon as the date was announced, the indigenes of Agbor prepared for the various roles they had to play during the festival. Specific roles were assigned to different villages that made up the kingdom. For example, the *Idumu Oza* and *Idumeni* people are the Obi's blacksmiths. They are saddled with the responsibility of making the Obi's symbol of authority, (Ada and Ebeni). Another village in Agbor that has a specific role to play is Aliagwai.

The people of this area were required to carve mortar and flat pepper grinders (Odo and Nkpite), which they ceremoniously sent to the King's palace.²³ Only a special wood was used to make these utensils, the Iroko wood (login). The *Alihagu* people were the night guards. They were expected to stay with the Obi during the mandatory period of seven days of confinement. They made a peculiar sound that was expected to ward off evil spirits and intruders. The village of *Alizomor* was charged with supplying a type of protective leaf known as Iwase. Which was soaked in a bathing bowl provided by the *Aliagwai* people. The *Mma-umudan* bathe with the solution during the seven days of confinement for protection against the evil spirit. While the people of *Alisime* were in charge of decorating the palace with special plants known as *Awaran*.²⁴ With these preparations in place, the ceremony began. As against the celebration of the festival in September in Agbor, the people of *Olihe* celebrated theirs in November. Festivals were another avenue in which both kingdoms showed their ties of brotherhood. As mentioned earlier, one important festival that was celebrated between them was the Igue festival. This festival was simultaneously celebrated in the two areas between Christmas and the New Year.²⁵ During festivals and other

celebrations in both kingdoms, children and Adults wore their best attires and joined in the celebration.²⁶

Naming Ceremonies- The people of Agbor and Benin believed that the strongest cement that can bind a man and a woman together as husband and wife was a child. To them the pomp and colour of the ceremony were carried out to honour the child, it was not surprising therefore that they spared no cost in the preparation of this ceremony. The naming of a child was of great importance in both kingdoms, the birth of a baby into a family was heralded with joy. The naming ceremony of a male child was different from that of a female child. A male child was named after seven (7) days while a female child was named after five (5) days in the kingdoms of Benin and Agbor. Great importance was also attached to the names that children bear, in many cases, names were given by families asking for something from God, or to thank Him for what he has done, or on the day the child was born, or after the market day which the child was born.²⁷

That was why, it was common to hear names like Sunday, Monday, Friday, Ekeh, and others. The people of Agbor and Benin gave their children names that celebrated the child. The Benin traditional naming ceremony is usually performed on the seventh day after birth. Before 10 am, family elders, and very close friends prayed to God for a long life, good health, and prosperity for the child and his parents. The people of Agbor and Benin bear similar names like Edobor (A place will favour me), Oselobue (God), Osabuohein (God forbid), Ehima (God Knows), Ehiedu (God leads me), and others that were borrowed from the people of Benin. Benin people believe that a name is a veritable pointer to what a child becomes in life.²⁸



Burial Rites- The notion of burial rites and ceremonies varied from place to place, ethnic to ethnic all over the world.²⁹ This may be the result of the different norms and cultures that were inherited from their various ancestors. Charles, Howard, and Vos rightly stated that: “burial is the manner of disposing of dead bodies, in biblical times this varied from country to country. In Egypt, the outstanding burial practice for nobles and royalty was the unique method of embalming”³⁰; while Rites are any customary observance or rituals.³¹ Some issues come into consideration during burial ceremonies in the Benin Kingdom, some of these depended on the rank of the deceased in the society. Quite naturally, the burial of a king had the most pomp and ceremony, followed by the *Enogie* then the wealthy and ordinary citizens. The custom in Benin Kingdom was for the burial to take place inside the house, a deep grave was dug in one of the rooms and the body was laid at the bottom of the grave.

The body of the deceased was first of all washed and shaved, cowries were tied around the wrist, all members of the family were present at the burial, and the sons-in-law of the deceased came with gifts for the deceased family. If it was believed that a man died from some juju, his body was tied and exposed to the juju.³² The deceased in Agbor was buried in the middle of their compound, the middle of the sitting room; or any of the vacant rooms. Those who were believed to have committed serious crimes against the community or her “gods” were thrown into the bush without the benefit of having a decent burial. It was the duty of the youths in both kingdoms to dig the graves during burial ceremonies. After five years, the family gathered again to

celebrate and perform sacrifices for the deceased. This activity was known as the second burial.³³

An important burial practice that was upheld in both kingdoms was that elders did not attend the burial ceremonies of the younger generation. Regardless of the relationship that existed between the deceased and a person, even among family members, the older person stayed away from the burial preparation. It was a grave abomination for an older person to see the corpse of a younger person. This was especially so in the case of a parent and their children. The natural sequence should be that the younger generation buries the old.³⁴ Another practice during burial ceremonies that was prevalent in both kingdoms was the practice of saying a prayer for the soul of the dead, these prayers are said in the dialect of the people. The people of Benin say their prayers in the Benin dialect, while the Agbor folks say their prayers in the Ika dialect, as the corpse is lowered into the ground, the prayer entreats the spirits and the “gods” to be merciful to the departed soul and forgive whatever shortcomings it may have had.³⁵

Reincarnation- Reincarnation, also called transmigration in religion and philosophy, is referred to as the rebirth of the aspect of an individual that persists after physical death. The belief in the reincarnation of individuals who have previously died is prevalent in South Asia, Middle Eastern religions, and East Asian traditions. In many religions, it is believed that the soul does not die, rather it is capable of leaving the body and living again in a new body.³⁶ The term transmigration means the passing of the soul from one body to another after death. The term reincarnation is derived from the Latin term that means “entering the flesh again” To know if a child was reincarnated in Benin, the people performed a practice known as “*Izomo*” This is carried out on the seventh day of the newborn. An

investigation is carried out between the sixth and the seventh day, and the parents of the child made consultations to find out if the child is a re-incarnated member of either of the families. At the beginning of the ceremony, the mother sat with the child on her lap and sang the “slow” song, after this the *Okagbee* (master of ceremonies) called for the following items which he used to make the consultations: one cup of water from the river, dried *Ewi fish*, some quantity of honey, alligator pepper, table salt, 20 kola nuts, one big tuber of yam, dried antelope hind leg, coconut, and one keg of palm wine³⁷. They then proceeded to perform some cultural rites to ascertain if the child is reincarnated or not, if not, the parent and those gathered then proceeded with the naming ceremony of the child.

Another aspect of Agbor culture worth mentioning was the belief in reincarnation. It is related to Ancestral worship. The people of Agbor believed that once a person dies, he goes to Hades (the land of the dead) for purification before coming back to the earth through birth.³⁸This process of coming and going back (reincarnation) continued for as many as fourteen times to complete the circle. This belief led to serious and careful handling of the body of the deceased. Before it was buried, prayers and incantations were said on behalf of the deceased. For example, if the deceased had no children while he was alive, prayers were said to enable him to have as many children as possible when he came back to the living world. Where the deceased is presumed to have been killed by a witch or wizard, the spirit of the dead was directed through incantation to fight back and eliminate the suspect. At times, a piece of stick or cutlass was put in the deceased hand to enable him/her to fight her adversaries. In general, the traditional post-mortem is performed on the deceased body to make sure that when such a person reincarnates, he does not fall prey to the same fate that befell him.³⁹

Religious Belief(s) – Every nation or tribe has its way of acknowledging and worshipping God, the Almighty. The history of religion is as old as man himself. Even among the most primitive civilizations, there was evidence of worship of some forms. The New Encyclopedia Britannica says; As far as scholars have discovered, there have never existed any people, anywhere, at any time, who were not in some sense religious”.⁴⁰ Human history bears testimony to the fact that religion has existed since the beginning of the life of humanity on earth. This shows that the beneficent God supplied mankind with guidance simultaneously with its creation so that it may not have to grope in the dark and night and walk the way of the law. The people of Agbor and Benin have a common religious belief.

The idea of one Supreme Being called *Oselobue* assisted by the lesser gods was based on the belief that God was too mighty to be approached by mortals. The smaller gods are the medium of approach to God based on the belief that God was too big to be approached by mortals. Before the coming of the Europeans and Christianity, people from the two kingdoms worshipped idols modelled in the shape of humans, carved wood, pieces of iron (*Ogun*), and shrines. It was instructive to note that most of the shrines in Agbor had the same outlook as those of Benin. Some of the items that were found there were white bells and rattle staffs placed on all ancestral shrines. Ivory tusks and commemorative brass heads were made specifically for royal altars⁴¹. These items may have been purchased from the various markets held by the different kingdoms. After all, they both frequented each other’s markets. Many of the juju shrines found in Ika areas came from the adjoining Edo areas, the mode and days of worship in the shrine were the same, it was on *Eken* and Afo market days.⁴²

Before the coming of the Europeans, the Oba's palace and the Dein of Agbor's palace were the focal points for rituals that were conducted in their honour. One of the objects unique to Benin art is an *Ikegobo* or "altar to the hand" which celebrates the accomplishments of exceptional individuals.

Ancestral worship was also common in both kingdoms. In more recent times, the people of Agbor and Benin worshipped in the same churches and religious centres domiciled in the kingdoms where they reside.

Similar Chieftaincy and Kingship Ideas- On chieftaincy and kingship issues, an identical approach was evident. Kingship in Agbor was as it was in Benin, it is hereditary. It is passed from the father to the first surviving son. They inherited the succession to the throne of the crown prince immediately after the incumbent joined his ancestors. By tradition, like in Benin, must be a male and not female.⁴³ No woman has ever and will ever in the future be a king in Agbor or Benin.⁴⁴ Many of the chieftaincy titles found in Agbor were believed to have been borrowed from Benin—titles like the *Uzama*, and the *Idibodein*. In Agbor, there existed some smaller chiefs that were called the *Obi*. They performed similar functions to the Enogie in Benin.⁴⁵

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that the two communities were in contact with each other, even before the advent of colonialism. It may be difficult to trace when these relations began, but what is clear is



that these contacts brought diverse benefits to the people of Agbor and Benin. The people of Agbor and Benin share a common boundary, quite expectedly, they had contact with each other, this contact led to borrowings from each other so that to date, it is difficult for a stranger to tell apart the people of the two kingdoms. The significance of these exchanges is that it has led to the area having a standard culture and way of life. It influenced the celebration of festivals in Agbor, such as the *Osiezi*, *Igue*, *Iwagi* and *Igbose* festivals. The only disadvantage perhaps, is that the relationship between the kingdoms has sometimes been unfriendly due to the desire of the Benin leaders to exert their influence over the people of Agbor. Nevertheless, the people have had a long period of cooperation and friendship which has lasted for many centuries.

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