Intergroup Relations in Niger Delta Communities: Reflection on Iriebe Community in Rivers State, from Precolonial Time to the Recent Past

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Abstract

The study analyses intergroup relationships in Iriebe community between indigenes and immigrants from the inception of the community to contemporary period. The article traces the origin of immigrants in the community which contributed in the sustainability and development of the area. The work used primary and secondary sources of information to generate the required data, and the qualitative approach was used in analyzing data. The paper opines that the integration as well as the incorporation of the immigrants in the socio-economic and political activities of the community was an integral development that foster cordial relationship vis a vis the rapid economic development of the community. The study revealed that the integration of the immigrants in the activities of the community started from the founding fathers and had been sustained, thus, deepening the cordial relationship and enhancing the development of the area. The study establishes that the incorporation of the different immigrant communities in the political architecture of the community had enhanced speedy flow of communication and co-operation. And that had helped in maintaining peace and order, as security issues were nipped in the bud. The study is geared towards the preservation of intergroup relationship heritage in Iriebe community and to bring to limelight, such lasting cordial intergroup relations which is contrary to what is obtained in many communities of the nation.

Introduction

This study examines intergroup relations in Iriebe community in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State. Iriebe is an Ikwerre community and a home to many other ethnic groups, such as the Hausa community, Akwa Ibom community and Igbo

community. This work focuses on intergroup relations between Ikwerre people of Iriebe and these immigrant communities that have established themselves in that area for decades, mainly for economic activities.

Ajayi and Alagoa (1980) had contended that groups migrations and contacts for economic activities was predominant before Nigeria's major contact with European traders and had continued. Also, Alagoa (1980) supported this assertion in his explanation of the intergroup trade relations that took place in the Eastern Delta in the 19th century. The foregoing suggests that intergroup relations is not a new social phenomenon in Nigeria, it is as old as the formation of ethnic groups because no group existed as an Island and as such, every limitations and shortcoming of the group encouraged immigration and interaction in order to complement the shortfalls and enhanced human survival which remains a continuum.

However, intergroup relations existed in the form of long distance trade and migration which had contributed in making ethnic and cultural integration an integral part in the evolution of modern Nigeria. Intergroup relations in Iriebe community is significantly influenced by various factors such as migrations, religions and socio-cultural interactions. The Community has not faced a serious problem that threatened her peaceful coexistence or interactions among resident groups, but there are some challenges that had existed in the course of their relationship which can be attributed to land acquisition, poverty, among others.

Furthermore, the subject matter of the study was discussed with sub-titles such as abstract, introduction, conceptual definition of intergroup relations, history of Iriebe community, the nature of intergroup relation, socio-economic and political relations and conclusion.

Conceptual Definition of Intergroup Relations

Intergroup relation has been defined in different ways by scholars depending on their discipline, experiences and interests. We will examine some of these definitions and verify their areas of common interests and analyse the parts that will help in this study. Sherif M. and Sherif C. W. have made a significant contribution in this area. As behavioural scientists, they viewed intergroup relations from the social psychological perspective and observed that, "intergroup relations are a state of friendship or hostility, cooperation or competition, dominance or subordination, alliance or enmity, peace or war between two or more groups and their respective members" (Omolumen, 2014). They further explained group as a social unit consisting of a number of individuals who stand in role and status relationships to one another and who possess a set of values or norm of their own to

regulate their behaviour towards each other in matters affecting them (Omolumen, 2014). On his part, Afigbo defined intergroup relations as a contact and interaction between groups each of which has an identity to make some inputs into the relationship, in short, each of which has some scope and area of autonomous action (Omolumen, 2014). Also, Lohor defined intergroup relations as an interaction which take place between members of different groups and societies who came in contact with one another (Omolumen, 2014). From the definitions, one identifies that,(i) intergroup relations is an interaction or contact of two or more groups, each of the different groups is not necessarily bound by a common descent but has an identity and (ii) their interactions can be that of cooperation leading to peace and development or that of competition leading to suspicion, hatred, dominance and conflict. If these observations are anything to go by, it then means that intergroup relation is not totally characterized by these two interrelated terms, conflict and violence. But that it is also characterized by harmonious peaceful coexistence that contributes to development.

It is important to note at this juncture that in intergroup relations, ethnicity is a factor (Bah, 2004). Ethnicity is always inevitable in intergroup relations, it is because in the course of relationship, there is this tendency of differentiation among the groups which generates feelings or thought about "them and us".Schildkrout, (1974) in his study of "ethnicity and generational differences among urban immigrants in Ghana" elucidated on this issue when he observed that, "it is true that once ethnic communities are differentiated, they tend to develop 'content' minimally providing stereotypes about how their members differ culturally from the members of other communities." In spite of this differentiation and feelings, ethnicity in intergroup relations is not totally characterized by conflict as argued by Nnoli (Ojie, and Okaba, 2005). However, conflicts resulting from ethnicity in intergroup relations are not a reflection of normal attributes of ethnic interactions. Mafeje, in his definition of ethnicity made further clarification on this issue when he observed that, "ethnicity is an ideologically loaded concept which is not a natural outcome of ethnic existences but is all about mobilization and politicization of ethnic group identity drawing on those elements that mark out the groups such as languages, culture, territory, mode of dressing and sharing jokes" (quoted in Ebefo, 2015).

From the foregoing, we can infer that conflict or violence and peaceful harmonious interactions are important features or characteristics of intergroup relations in Africa. In essence, conflict or violence attributes in intergroup relations have been ascribed to several causes such as incompatibility of goals regarding material resources, manipulation of ethnic group against others to achieve inordinate ambitions by few persons, promotion of a group interest and collapse of negotiation tools and diplomacy (Yinusa, and Adeoye,

2005). More so, conflict in intergroup relations, with proper negotiation tools and diplomacy can be curtailed and possibly eliminated. Therefore, groups in relationship should understand their limits and live by it for peaceful relationship.

The relevance of these issues raised here cannot be over emphasized, as they will guide us as we analyze the nature of intergroup relations in Iriebe community and how it was sustained in the face of changing socio-economic activities of the area.

Brief History of Iriebe Community

Iriebe community is an autonomous community in Ikwerre ethnic nationality ofRivers State. The founder of the community, Chief Iriebe was the first son of Oroesara, who was one of the sons of Obio (Eleto Temple, 2017; Eleto Kenneth, 2017) and Obio was one of the descendants of Iwhuruonha (Ikwerre) (Amadi, 2017). It is unknown when this community was founded but facts available suggests that it was founded during the colonial era of Nigeria.

The geographical coordination of the community are latitude 4^0 52'1 North and longitude 7^0 6' 37 East (Iriebe Wikipedia, online). The community share common boundaries with Elelenwo, Akpajo, Etche, Oyigbo and Rumuokwurushi communities. The community is a host to Port Harcourt-Enugu express road as well as the old Port Harcourt-Aba express way. The community is richin oil and gas as well as vast area of fertile lands, which made farming activities a predominant economic main stay of the people. According to Temple, the rich agricultural activities of the area was one reasons why the community witnessed an influx of farming immigrants, such as the Wawa people from Enugu State, Annang and Ibiblo people from Akwa Ibom State (Eleto Temple, 2017). It is also claimed that the vast green grass land and peaceful disposition of the indigenes to the immigrants, encouraged the influx of other groups, such as the Hausa communities into the area between 2005 and 2006 (Eleto Temple, 2017; Eleto Kenneth, 2017). The massive farming activities in the area also encouraged many trading transactions, leading to the establishment of markets in the community.

The first Ikwerre inhabitants of the community and earliest Ibo immigrants believed in African tradition and cultures, consequently many African traditional and cultural practices were introduced and which contributed in fostering peaceful intergroup relations at that period. Later, the arrival of Christian missionaries into the area and gradual conversion of the people to Christianity led to the community contribution through donation of land for the building of the first church in the area, St. Pius Catholic Church, later, St. James' Anglican Church and others (Madam Eleto, 2017). The speedy

demographic expansion of the area made the government to establish a State Primary School and other infrastructures, such as State Government Rehabilitation Centre, NYSC Transit Camp, Housing Estate and Health Centre. These developments encouraged companies, individuals and federal government to also establish their presence in the area, like the establishment of Naval Quarters, Orphanage Centres, Tombim Nig. Ltd., Weafri Well Services, Alon Technical Nig. Ltd., Nigerian Nuclear Regulatory Authority, Nomo Services, to mention but few (EletoTemple, 2017).

The community is governed by a Council-of-Chiefs headed by the Paramount Ruler (Eze) of the Community (Eleto Temple, 2017). The Eze in consultation with Council-of-Chiefs and elders, administer the day-to-day activities of the community, in line with the tradition and customs of the people. For effective administration of the community, the Paramount Ruler admits some elders from the Akwa Ibom, Ibo and Hausa community in the Council, and through them the Eze establishes a communication link with the immigrant community in the area for easy governance and maintenance of peace and order.

This brief history of Iriebe shows that the community is a conglomeration of various groups that have lived together over time and fostered effective intergroup relations that have enhanced a gradual development of the community.

The Nature of Intergroup Relations

Intergroup relations in Iriebe community is very interesting, following the understanding and maturity of various ethnic groups inhabiting the area. The community is owned by Ikwerre speaking people of Iriebe descendants, with vast area of fertile lands. So their major economic activity is farming. Due to small population of Iriebe indigenes, they occupied a small proportion of their land mass close to their boundaries with Akpajo and Elelenwo, where they lived in closeness for proper security and interaction. The migration of other tribes into the community helped the natives to effectively occupy and secure their vast land, and effectively cultivate it. The immigrants were given strategic portions of land to build temporary structures and cultivate, as well as employed to assisting the indigenes as labourers in their own farms. The indigenes adopted these strategies by using the immigrants for easy policing of their lands against encroachment by neighbouring communities (Ogachi Eleto, 2017). Having secured their vast land through the help of the immigrants, the indigenes in appreciation started selling portions of their land to wealthy immigrants to build permanent structures, as such, they too became part of the community. This development had contributed to the reason why many wealthy indigenous families shifted from their old residential areas to new sites where they now

build family estate, thus, spreading development as well as effectively occupying the area against encroachment or trespass by neighbouring communities.

The Igbo immigrants were the first to establish in the community (Madam Eleto,2017). Perhaps, this was due to the fact that the community is close to the Ngwa clan of Igbo, which is located at the other side of the Imo River with the Ndoki speakers of Oyigbo. It is surprising here that the Igbo tribe that was claimed to have first come in contact with Iriebe community was not those from Ngwa rather it was the Wawa people who migrated from Enugu. However, Afigbo, (1980) in his study of "Igbo Land Before 1800" had noted series of migrations and wanderings among Igbo groups and families, leading to founding of new Igbo settlements and contacts with other groups. This might explain how that Wawa people came in contact with Iriebe community. It is claimed that the Wawa people were farmers and have helped in the cultivation of many farmlands in Iriebe for themselves and for the indigenes. Their stay in the community contributed in the security, expansion and development of the area, as they midwife the migration of other tribes into Iriebe, especially the Annang and Ibibio people of Akwa Ibom (Madam Eleto, 2017). It is unknown when these immigrants established at Iriebe community, but according to Madam Eleto, the Wawa people established before the Nigerian Civil War, while the influx of the Annang and Ibibio people into the community was witnessed shortly after the civil war, and during this period, the Wawa people had left the area following the unfavourable circumstances of the civil war.

The Akwa Ibom community took over the roles of the Igbo community in the area, so the indigenes did not feel the absence of the Igbo community in their area at that period especially in the area of economic activities. The warm reception the first set of Akwa Ibom immigrants received from the Iriebe indigenes contributed to the reason why they encouraged more of their people into the community. This suggests that the immigrants maintained a constant relationship with their native home. Like the Igbo immigrants, these people were strategically located in the community. The first place they settled was known as Ikpe camp. As their population increased, some were moved to settle at other strategic areas later known as Quarter camp (Eleto Temple, 2017).

The persistent influx of Akwa Ibom immigrants led to the increase of their population, consequently, contributed to their demographic dominance of the area vis a vis the socio-economic activities of the community. They serve as a source of manpower to the indigenes, particularly in the area of farming activities, and in return for portions of land from indigenes for their own cultivation. One of the major crops cultivated in that area at that time was Okra. Shortly after the contraction of the Port Harcourt-Enugu express road

a small market was established at the community along that road for the sale of farm produce, particularly vegetables, dominated by Okra, a development that earned that market the name Okra market which exists till date.

However, the market attracted traders within and outside the state for the purchase of fresh vegetables on daily basis, thus, the influx of traders to the area, consequently, earned that part of the road a junction called Okra market, probably for easy identification of the market by traders.

In all the camps where the Akwa Ibom immigrants were settled in the community, among the first people to settle there, the oldest man in their midst was made the camp leader. He oversees the camp and liaised with the paramount ruler of Iriebe community for effective dissemination of information necessary for the maintenance of law and order, as well as the complementary relationship which had enhanced a robust intergroup relationship in the community (Eleto Temple, 2017).

The Hausa community is another group of immigrants in Iriebe. They are a well-organized group, the indigenes allotted a distinct area for them to stay due to their unique economic activities. They organized themselves in two groups: the livestock market and foodstuffs market (Eleto Temple, 2017). The heads of these groups constantly liaise with the paramount ruler of Iriebe for effective administration of the community (Eleto Kenneth, 2017). The economic activities of the Hausa have also contributed to the influx of traders from other parts of the state and neighbouring states into the community for trade and business. The two areas they occupied in the community-cattle market and yam market, had been among the most economically important areas in Iriebe, particularly the yam market which accommodates a very large population of the Hausa community in Rivers State and consequently led to the naming of that particular section of the Port Harcourt-Enugu express road as yam zone junction. The nature of intergroup relations in Iriebe is such that the different groups co-existed and complemented one another in socio-economic and political activities.

Socio-Economic and Political Relations

Iriebe community is a home for a variety of ethnic groups. The different groups that migrated into the community were interested in the economic potentials of the area, which is predicated on the vast fertile lands that is rich for agricultural activities.

The groups peaceful coexistence, interaction and synergy of ideas contributed in the fast economic development of the area. The area is fast becoming one of the economic hubs of

Rivers State, following the massive farming and trading activities in the area. People travelled from other parts of the state to buy all kinds of agricultural produce at Iriebe, such as the fresh vegetables and many other produce moved from other areas into the community particularly in the yam zone and cattle markets. Cows and yams are among the produce imported into the community and sold in her different markets. The vast green grass-land in the area enables the sustainability of the cattle by the owners as they wait for buyers. The rearing of cattle in the area is one major activity that other ethnic groups engage in conflict with the Hausa community, due to the damage of farmlands and crops by the cattle in the process. But the mechanism of relationship established by the paramount ruler and the leadership of the Hausa community, including the cattle market executives, helps quickly to resolve these issues and avert violent confrontation between groups and as such it deepens understanding among them and has enhanced the rapid development the community is enjoying (Eleto Temple, 2017).

The robust economic activities of the area are fast attracting human and infrastructural development. There is influx of people from other part of the country into the community. Some acquired lands from the indigenes, where they built residential houses for their personal and commercial use. Others are establishing small scale industries and businesses such as sachet and bottle water factories, bakeries, block industries, paint manufacturing factories, electric pole industries, restaurants, guest houses, private schools, pharmaceutical stores, private clinics to mention but a few. These developments are being carried out by people of different ethnic groups and have helped to create jobs for the youths, strengthened development and fostered peaceful intergroup relations necessary for nation building.

As noted, the presence of the state, federal government and private investors into the area has contributed to peaceful intergroup relations in the community, as it has helped in encouraging the diffusion of ideas and culture among the different ethnic groups, and has contributed to the rapid development of the area. According to Temple (2017) from the economic activities in the community as can be seen in the major markets, the immigrants dominate particularly in the commercial transactions, we only provide a conducive environment necessary for peace, order and cooperation among the traders. Also, in all the small scale industries and businesses they also dominate, mainly because of their higher population, a development that even made us to engage many of their youths to take our quota in these companies" (Eleto Temple, 2017).

Social relationship among the ethnic groups had been one that is engendering peaceful coexistence since the inception of group relations in the area. The early Ikwerre inhabitants

of the community and immigrants were predominantly African traditionalists. This encouraged various African traditional practices such as Egelege dance, Ekpo dance, Member dance and Atilogwu dance (Eleto Ogechi, 2017; Eleto Kenneth, 2017). These cultural practices were indigenous, exception of the Ekpo dance. The membership and participants cut across different ethnic groups in the area because the indigenes encouraged others to join. The Ekpo dance was alien to Iriebe. It was introduced by the Akwa Ibom community, and was not prohibited or abhorred, but encouraged by the indigenes. These cultural practices contributed in fostering cultural integration and better understanding among groups. However, following the advancement of the Christian missionaries into Iriebe and the mass conversions that followed almost all the cultural practices were abandon, apart from the Ekpo dance that is fast losing members (Ogechi Eleto, 2017; John Udo, 2017). Before Christianity in the area, intergroup marriages were not encouraged because of prejudices and fear among the groups (Eleto Ogechi, 2017). This was common among the indigenes, due to the fact that they lack adequate knowledge of the immigrants, and so, developed the phobia of giving out their daughters to them for marriage, as well as marrying their own daughters.

Religion in the community contributed in deepening understanding as well fostering peaceful integration. Contrary to what Borok, (2016) identified in his study of "Intergroup Relations in Jos", where religion contributed to conflict, which made intergroup relations unbearable. The building of churches in Iriebe community contributed in bringing different groups together as they worship in one place, has enhanced socialization. Presently, Christianity is the dominant religion in the community, and apart from St. James' Anglican Church Iriebe, all other churches in the area such as St. Pius Catholic Church, Christ Faith Church, Full Gospel, Assemblies of God, The Apostolic Church, Lutheran Church, among others, are dominated by immigrants (UdousaFrancis,2017). This development had helped in creating better understanding among the various groups, and as such, had facilitated intergroup marriages (Eleto Ogechi, 2017).

School is another institution that had contributed in fostering intergroup peaceful relation in Iriebe. State Primary School Iriebe was one platform that promoted mass socialization and integration of children of various groups together. This development gave room for a better understanding among them from childhood. The dominance of Akwa Ibom children in the school contributed to the dominance of Annang language in Iriebe community. The understanding and communication in Annang language by the indigenes had built trust and a sense of belonging among the groups and contributed to the enhancement of inter-group marriages which have enhanced cordialintegration. According to Temple, "it was when we were going to primary school together with the Akwa Ibom children that one of

our male relations had Akwa Ibom girlfriend that later became his wife" (Eleto Temple, 2017).

Political relationship among the ethnic groups had also contributed in fostering peaceful integration among groups in the area. Despite the numerical dominance of Iriebe by the Akwa Ibom community, the political authority of the area is dominated by the indigenes, who rule over the community through their paramount ruler (Eze) and his Council-of-Chiefs. In the Council-of-Chiefs, the paramount ruler admits representatives of other ethnic groups as members, for easy dissemination and gathering of information necessary for maintenance of peace and order in the community (Eleto Kenneth, 2017).

In the same vein, the paramount ruler after necessary consultations bestows honorary chieftaincy titles to some immigrants who have contributed in the maintenance of peace and development of the community, such as Akaekuchiowa I, Eyikawune Iand Ikewune I of Iriebe. These titles have been bestowed on distinguished persons from the Hausa community and others (Eleto Temple, 2017; Eleto Kenneth, 2017). However, this development is spurring immigrants in Iriebe to work for the development of the community because of the benefits attached to the recognition. This gesture had also contributed to peaceful integration among groups in the area.

Furthermore, in the larger political settings of the country which Iriebe is part of, the paramount ruler and his Council-of-Chiefs allows the politicians in the area to freely go about their politicking business as long as it does not infringe on the peace of the community.

Conclusion

Iriebe is a community with a small indigenous population and a vast area of fertile land. The economic potentials of the community particularly in agriculture, has been the major reason for the influx of immigrants into the area over the years. The warm reception and peaceful disposition of the indigenes also contributed to this development.

However, intergroup relation in Iriebe is not characterized by conflict, though there are some hiccups. Many factors were responsible for the peaceful intergroup relations witnessed in the area over the years, such as the fact that both the indigenes and the immigrants understand the benefit of their peaceful relationship, which has helped them build a consciousness that enables them maintain a bond in the course of their relationship over the years, and consequently contributed in transforming the area into a cosmopolitan setting.

Nevertheless, ethnicity was also a factor in intergroup relations in Iriebe, as identified in the formations of ethnic social clubs. The clubs seem to be encouraging and assisting their members in achieving economic success and improve their status as a group. Schildkrout, identified a similar situation in his study of "Ethnicity and Generational Difference Among Urban Immigrants in Ghana" (Cohen (ed.), 1974). More so, his identification of many smaller ethnic groups in Mossi identity was also the case in Iriebe, where many smaller ethnic groups exist under an Akwa Ibom identity. But generally, as Charsley, noted in his study of "The Formation of Ethnic Groups", ethnicity in Iriebe can be likened to a matter of promoting interests, in this case the interest of culture (Cohen (ed.), 1974) and exchange of jokes between different cultural groups at the strange and bizarre nature of one another's customs (Cohen (ed.), 1974). On this situation, violence had not occurred because such jokes have not been taken too far or manipulated by the elites to achieve a goal. Consequently, the peaceful intergroup interactions in the area of trade, politics, agriculture and socio-religion, have created better living conditions that enhanced sustainable development, which fostered cohesion and unity that existed amongst them.

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