

FACTORING INTER-GROUP RELATIONS IN THE LOWER BENUE VALLEY TO CIRCA 1900 A.D

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ABSTRACT

The attention directed toward this area is probably in view of the fact that conflict among mankind seems to be escalating in almost every society, it is in view of this that studies in inter-group relation became relevant. The paper tries to examine the movements and settlement of various ethnic groups into this area with particular reference to some select groups. It also looks at the nature and patterns of their settlement which in turn affects their relations. This had so many consequences on the lower Benue valley as it shape and reshaped the nature of their relations. The paper concluded that such contact had impact on inter-group relations.

Key words: Migrations, Inter-group Relations, Lower Benue Valley, Movement

INTRODUCTION

Inter group relations in the lower Benue valley in the pre-colonial times was characterized by political, economic and security considerations, and this was the pattern up to the coming of Europeans. The numerous ethnic groups that are presently in this area are all products of prior migrations undertaken at different times. Available evidence has shown that it was during the pre-colonial period that most of the ethnic nationalities that today inhabit the region moved and settled there for various reasons. Tseror (1992:56) posited that contact between the Tiv and Jukun on one hand and Alago and Hausa on the other hand date back to the 19th century. The ethnic group found in the Benue valley is Igala, Nupe, Ebira, Tiv, Idoma, Jukun, Alago and others. During this period, these ethnic groups were engaged in various traditional activities, in addition to other social, political as well cultural practices. For instance, the Tiv and Jukun traded in grains and salt, and even the Tiv traveled to Jukun area to drink “Tashi”, a locally brewed alcohol known as “Burukutu”. The Jukun also taught the Tiv water navigation and boat making. The Alago too had a good relationship with their Tiv neighbors. Good neighborliness was seen when the Alago were attacked by the invading Chamber’s, who took away war captives and carved palace door of their chief, “Andoma”, at Keana. The Alago solicited Tiv’s assistance consequent upon which the Tiv mobilized themselves and helped to beat back the invading Kamberi forces, thereby freeing the Alago community from their invaders. This is in addition to setting those who were taken captive free and returning the carved door to the chief’s palace to the joy and admiration of the Alago. The consequence of this singular gesture was the solidification of the already existing relationship between the two ethnic groups. The good relationship between these ethnic groups soon turned sour when the Jukun and Alago began to see the Tiv as expansionist, and began to fear Tiv domination giving their numerical strength. This expansionist tendency of the Tiv has drawn scholarly comments. Erim (1984:15) captured it all when he noted

... .Troubles only began when the Tiv started to infiltrate the area in the course of their migration and expansion into area that came to be western Tiv land. Tiv wars with the Idoma whose main aim was to push the later further southward taking full control of their lands.

The Subject Matter

The term inter-group relations have been a question of debate among historians holding various shades of opinions depending on their ideological leaning. A proper understanding of the concept of inter-group relations among ethnic groups in present Nigeria would have put to rest the hot debate on the national question in Nigeria

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today. But as Ajayi (1984) has argued we cannot understand the problem of integration within and among the component peoples and culture in the pre-colonial period. To a large extent, the study of this past has been largely ignored and that may explain why in our survey of daily happenings in our various communities, there abound countless tales of ethnic clashes that rage on and on with hardly any solutions in sight. These clashes are basically on the land question, Intra/inter ethnic feuds, boundary disputes e.t.c. Historians and social scientist have looked at the concept of inter-group relations from various points of views. Ikimi (1988:11-16) argue that the national question can only be understood within the context of the two new religions in Nigeria. (Christianity and Islam). In other words, traditional African religions have been neglected. But what really do we mean when we talk of inter-group relations? To answer this question, Afigbo, (1987:18) explains thus: "it presupposes contact and interaction between groups each of which has an identity, each of which has the capacity to make some input into the relationship, in short, each of which has some scope and area for autonomous action thus involving giving and taking". Inter-group relations lend credence to the inter-dependency of individuals, communities, as well as ethnic groups for survival and sustenance. To Afigbo, people need others to exist as their interactions are reciprocal to each other. Thus, this concept could be used to explain the relationship between Tiv, Jukun, Alago, Idoma and others in the lower Benue valley. This manifested in inter-marriages, trade, art and craft and even defense. Usman (1998:12) therefore opine that, inter-group relations should not just be seen in the context of two main religions, Islam and Christianity, but it is a multifaceted and dynamic concept such as the political, economic, technological and cultural. Other scholars have contested that it was as a result of colonialism that people started looking at themselves in terms of either Christians or Muslims, which affected the level of our integration in the contemporary period. It must be noted that prior to the introduction of the two world religions, the people in this region and indeed the whole Nigerian area were interacting in all aspects of human endeavor. The bloc between north and south are a major issue of inter-group relationship because earlier than the colonial period, the various nationalities in Nigeria had not seen themselves in the political divide of north and south. Usman (1998:15) however, differed in opinion with most of these scholars on the ground that, they did not look at the concept of inter-group relations using the political economy approach, and therefore reduced the study into ethnic, religious and even political dimensions and not necessarily based on the holistic approach. He asserts that;

‘Human beings who believe in Sango, Orisa, Ubangiji, Chukwu, Allah and worship the deity in various places and in various ways, do not fall from trees or are carried around by the wind. They are reproduced by the manual and mental labour of human beings in regular relations with one another, and with natural objects. Neither do human beings obtain their political identities in any other place, or in any other way outside the process of their own reproduction, the production of means of sustaining human life and the reproduction of others’.

Pre-colonial Africa societies was characterized by identities whose allegiances and loyalties revolved around the lineage, the clan, and chief and cultural practices relating to the specific institutions and not to ethnicity. An ethnic appellation of Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, and Igala etc were laid during the colonial period and largely devolves into the post colonial era. Both Ranger and Asiwaju (2005) have shown that under colonialism, various factors helped in the invention of tribes where they did not exist. It is hoped that with an analytical study of these groups, it would be clearer for a contemporary student of our society that some of the present conflicts that have become so turbulent must have found their roots in the misconception of the approaches to the understanding of our past.

Movements into the Lower Benue Valley

The lower Benue valley has been described by various scholars from different views. Ochefu (2002) the lower Benue valley is used as a geographical expression to describe the last 300 miles of the River Benue. Okpeh (2008:33) the Tiv is the largest ethnic group in the region. Numbering nearly four million people, they occupy the northern and southern banks of the river Benue from Makurdi in Benue state to wukari in Taraba state. They are also in Nasarawa and Plateau states. Despite conflicting theories regarding their origin and migration, there is a general consensus on the fact that by the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Tiv had

started expanding into the middle Benue valley from the Cameroon highlands. This dispersion however, brought them into direct contact with different ethnic groups in this region including the Chamba, Kuteb, Jukun Yala, Eloyi, Bekwarra, Igede and Idoma, among many others. The Tiv dispersal in this area was caused by many factors, which include the demographic changes, the question of land and general insecurity. All these factors are seen to have taken their toll on the Swem hill settlement, compelling them to migrate downward into the middle Benue valley.

He further asserts that, the Tiv presence in the middle Benue valley during this period cut off groups like Idoma from the Kwararafa confederacy. In this connection, it may be argued that the buffer this constituted insulated the Idoma from being affected by the political upheavals in Kwararafa. As a result of this, further migration to the east was permanently terminated. Ter Avav has suggested that the Tiv, in that regard, could be said to have quarantined the political independence of the Idoma during this period by protecting them from the vagaries of the Kwararafa paramountcy.

Adeleye (1971:2) the Jihad led to the expansion of the Hausa traders, artisans and missionaries in the region. As Mahadi Adamu has elaborately demonstrated, the increase in the activities of these categories of Hausa in this region during the course of the nineteenth century can be traced to the Fulani Jihad. Okpeh (2008:36) this led to several demographic migrations into different locations. This was how some groups like the Bassa Nge and Bassa Komo, the Alago and the Idoma, Agatu crossed the river Benue to the southern bank. Other refugees swelled the populations of Umaisha, Igbedde and Lokoja.

According to Keana (2004:3) the Alago after the collapse of Kwararafa Kingdom left the area under their leader "Andoma" and settled at Idah, but when disagreement arose between the Igala and the Alago "Andoma" had no option but to depart Idah with his people through Idomaland and finally settled in their present location in the 17th century. Some settled at Doma while the other group led by Andoma's younger brother, Akyana Adi, left and established the present Keana town which he named after himself. From the stand point of inter-group relations, these migrations had serious implications on various ethnic groups during the period under study. Disagreements over land began to feature more prominently in the people's relations with one another. Although sometimes these land disputes were resolved amicably, at other times they degenerated into open confrontations

Inter-Group Relations in the Lower Benue Valley

Many historians have written a lot on the lower Benue valley, and this may be as a result of the nature and character of the relationship between the various ethnic groups in the region. There were interactions among the groups at different levels. For example, after Keana was founded, its leaders maintained traditional, social, political, spiritual relationship with their Jukun kin with regard to chieftaincy. The council of kingmakers selected the Osana, and in keeping with tradition, usually informed the Aku of Wukari of the elected king. As a complement of the good relationship, there was an annual exchange of the salt and cloth between the Osana and the Aku

Igiri (2005:65) the relationship between the Jukun and Tiv was very cordial from the beginning. This led to the Tiv acquiring skills in canoe making, sea navigation, and the brewing of local beer "Tashi". The Tiv, on the other hand sold locally made clothes and grains to the Jukun. The relationship was further cemented by royal visitation. The Tiv have also copied this idea of kings from their relationship with the group mentioned. The views of Akiga and Makar (1994:89) on the emergence of Tor-Agbade in Tiv politics differs. It is a fact that it brought changes into the Tiv political system. It could be argued that the "drum chief" did not receive authority from the Jukun to rule the Tiv people, but the Jukun great magicians gave "drum chiefs" mystical power to enable them (drum chiefs) exercise control over their subjects. Agba (1990) captures it all. The Jukun were hunters and were also occupied with fishing along the riverine areas. Inter-marriage also features prominently among them. The Tiv bore Jukun names like "Agyo, Asebe, Atoshi, Aku" while the Jukun bore Tiv names like "Terwase, Terhembra, Torngu" e.t.c. It is an established fact that the Jukun and Tiv formed what is known in Tiv as "Ikyav" meaning friendship for drinking purpose. The visit of this "Ikyav group was done interchangeably on their respective market days. Otite (1999:12) maintains that there were no instances, of records of wars fought between the Tiv and the Jukuns in the pre-colonial times. The two groups united to fight external attacks/aggression.

Keana (2004:6) the relationship between the Tiv and Alago was cordial. The Alago encouraged Tiv migration into their territory. This development prevented the Hausa who wanted to extend their sovereignty over them. When war broke out between Alago and the Hausa, the Alago had to seek for assistance from their Tiv neighbours and this brought about total victory for the Alago over the Hausa, Alago invited the Tiv over their invaders, the Kamberi, who migrated to settle in Lafia.

Ohiare (1988:58) observes that, most of the people's oral traditions trace their origin from the Kwararafa or the Jukun. The Mada, Kantana, Rindre and Egon traditions are full of account of having some form of

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relations with the Kwararafa or Jukun. Other groups that had Kwararafa/Jukun influences were the Igala, Igbirra and Nupe within the Benue and Niger valley. According to Varvar (2003:13) the economic activities gave rise to large scale inter-mingling. This also resulted into inter-marriages. These marriages produced a new breed of people whose loyalty transcended the narrow tribal loyalties of their ancestors. This intermingling and inter-marriage promoted the diffusion of culture and helped to bind the various peoples together. There was thus a cross-fertilization of ideas among the various peoples. Boston (1972:101) captures that, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Igala were commercially the most important group in the Niger-Benue confluence area. With extensive network along both rivers and immediate hinterland, the strategic location of the Igala people and their capital, Idah, enabled them to trade with the Ebira, Idoma, Nupe, Igbo, Hausa, Benin and Old Oyo. Igala land was an area of vast agricultural surpluses and was noted for its high quality palm oil, cloth, dyes, medicinal herbs and iron products. Most of this inter-group relation turned sour later. Conflict is an integral part of inter-group relation. Migration and settlement of ethnic groups is necessitated by the survival philosophy, hence the need for inter-dependency. These conflicts continued until their contact with Europeans.

European Contact and Its Impact on the Lower Benue Valley

European contact with the lower Benue valley occurred in two phases. The first phase occurred in economic intercourse. Ochefu (2002:482) this period was however limited due to climate and other environmental factors that encouraged interaction and trade relation. The second phase occurred at about 1850. This was when the British government sponsored an expedition led by Dr. W.B Baike with the task of exploring the Benue from Dagboh to Adamawa. The second phase of contact was the advent of colonialism in the lower Benue valley representing the transition from commercial interest to the establishment of colonial structures and institution. The fact of this transition was embedded in the logic of imperialism of the twentieth century.

Contrary to what some scholars want us to believe, Makar (1994) African rulers and their people were not prepared to surrender their sovereignty and independence to the European invaders. They neither gazed with folded arms nor stood at akimbo in the face of European incursions into their enclaves. Africans responded in several ways and the responses took different patterns largely informed by the peculiar circumstances they found themselves. Many African leaders engaged the invaders in belligerent, internecine and rancorous warfare, using all available weapons at their disposal. However, the European interference in the internal political organization of the lower Benue valley was orchestrated by a subtle metamorphosis from a primarily commercial interest to a direct political domination. Thus, the hitherto resistance posed by the indigenes was overcome by a radical military onslaught. The effect of this contact was therefore multifarious. The Benue valley people lost their political independence to the Europeans. They became British subjects. Traditional rulers were replaced and a new leadership status quo was established. Among the Tiv for instance, the British appointed ambitious young Tiv to rule in place of the traditional ruler as a compensation for their role as agent of subjugation. The issue of marriage was addressed. Traditional ways of giving bride prices were changed to money economy. Also among the Tiv, exchange marriage involving a woman of a very bad character to someone else was introduced. Trade monopolies which were taking an intense competition were entrenched. Cheap European cotton, clothes and other item produced littered the market. Poor indigenous consumers preferred European products and caused a serious decline in profit. Thus indigenous industries like textile, blacksmithing e.t.c. started declining.

Makar (1994) noted thus:

The coming of the European had some indirect influence on the political and economic situation of the people. A wide range of goods including salt, a scarce commodity that was in great demand in the land, were brought and sold for sheanuts, benniseed, cotton, pepper, ginger and ivory. These items were brought by the European including iron bars, beads, gunpowder, machetes, flasks, tin boxes, looking glasses, and a variety of cotton cloth.

Ochefu (2000) maintains that, one of the important innovations that took place during the contact was the introduction of money to replace barter. Ochefu maintained that Goldie was able to introduce a sophisticated system of barter called scale of value. They calculated and fixed the value of commodities like palm oil or ivory in English currency and gave African the equivalent of Manchester textiles, salt or alcohol.

CONCLUSION

The paper has examined the movement of various ethnic groups in the Lower Benue Valley. It has demonstrated that different groups had lived mutually or otherwise and dealt with each other in that manner. It equally noted that conflicts were part of inter-group relations in the Lower Benue Valley until European contact and subsequent colonization'

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