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In line with the goal and tradition of the Department of History and International Studies at Babcock University, this edition of BUJOHIS offers its readers and subscribers another opportunity to glean from evolving opinions and discoveries from research-based empirical evidences. We hope that the wealth of knowledge embedded in this volume will equip our readers and subscribers for better functionality in the process of problem solving within their milieus in Nigeria, Africa, and the world at large, while concurrently emphasising and expanding the utilitarian frontiers of historical information.

Thank you.

Charles C. Akpuh, Ph.D.
Editor, August 2019.

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PRE –COLONIAL DIPLOMATIC PRACTICES IN THE NIGER DELTA: A STUDY OF THE EASTERN NIGER DELTA AREA OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

The neglect and the undermining of the Eastern Niger Delta Area of Nigeria's diplomatic history by the Europeans is not surprising because Nigeria and the African continent suffered the same fate. Although the history of the diplomatic institution is generally as old as history itself, the early Europeans ignored the diplomatic history of African societies in general because they saw the area as backward, primitive, and barbaric in its practices and culture. This was why they referred to Africa as a dark continent. Nevertheless, the erroneous belief that diplomatic mechanisms were nonexistent until the coming of the Europeans has been debunked by scholars such as Jan Vasina among others. To further verify the reality of the foregoing claims, this paper specifically interrogated issues on pre-colonial Eastern Niger Delta diplomatic practices. Using the historic-structural and multidisciplinary approaches, the study made the following findings that: Wars and major conflicts were averted through the use of emissaries; negotiations took place before, during, and even after major conflicts; traditional rulers and influential title-holders enjoyed diplomatic immunity; there was inter-communal trades, marriages, cultural, and social exchanges across various communities encouraging multi-lingualism and co-operation among other benefits. The study further discovered that during the pre-colonial period, no community considered itself as being self-sufficient, and that the oracles were their major diplomatic tools in the pre-colonial Eastern Niger Delta. The paper, therefore, concluded that robust pre-colonial diplomatic practices existed in the Eastern Niger Delta even before the coming of the Europeans to the area.

Keywords: *Pre-colonial, Diplomatic practices, Easter Niger Delta*

Introduction

In 1885 when the British government occupied the Nigerian territory, the European traders and missionaries that were there at that time did not make any

serious effort to study the history of the area or take into cognisance the Eastern Niger Delta past activities, mainly because of their erroneous beliefs about Africa[1]. According to the Europeans, the sum total of the Eastern Niger Delta history was based on the European exploration experience with the belief that even diplomacy began when the Europeans came to Nigeria. The vacuum created by the Europeans, that diplomacy began in the 15th-century is the knowledge gap that this work intends to fill and therefore establish the fact that diplomacy was practised during the pre-colonial period in the Eastern Niger Delta Area of Nigeria. This gives insight into how diplomacy was practised in the pre-colonial period in the Eastern Niger Delta Area of Nigeria. Diplomacy, according to Chukwudike and Esin, is an art of negotiation and agreement practices across communities, towns, and societies. This is done with the aim of bringing about peace and good relationship between the communities[2]. The fact remains that in the pre-colonial period and in the Niger Delta Area, diplomacy was practiced among communities and their neighbours. In the Eastern Niger Delta area, there were well-established institutions, royalties, customs, and traditions. The traditional rulers who were the custodians of the people's tradition and culture were always involved in negotiations before, during, and after conflicts or wars. The fact that these methods of diplomacy were not documented does not mean they were not in existence[3].

Methods of Diplomatic Practices in the Eastern Niger Delta

During the colonial period, the Europeans held the tenacious and erroneous misconception that diplomacy was only conducted within the European countries. This view was held until the African historians debunked such misconceptions and established the fact that before the colonial documentation about Africa, Africans had histories preserved through oral tradition. The history of the diplomatic practices of the people was part of the oral traditions which the Europeans were unaware of. Diplomacy was actually a part of the culture of negotiation and peace-building practices among the people[4]. An important feature of treaties, which were elements of diplomatic practices, in West Africa was their sacrosanct nature. According to Elias, "African customary law shares with customary international law acceptance of the principle of *pacta servanda sunt* as basis for assurance of a valid world order". Commerce and politics played a great part in community relations particularly internal affairs[5]. Another important aspect of the West African diplomacy was the immunity which the diplomats enjoyed in the course of their duties. In fact, well recognized immunity was part and parcel of West African diplomacy at that time. The Eastern Niger Delta was not an exception in this practice[6].

Historically, in 1885 Europeans and the Eastern Niger Delta began the practice of sending envoys to foreign courts for observation and giving reports on even political matters[7]. With the influences that were gradually gaining grounds all

over the Niger Delta, leaders at that time saw it useful for exchange of envoys. The major reason that diplomacy became important was because of expansion and population growth[8]. Robert Smith, in 1976 in his book titled "Warfare and democracy in the Pre- colonial West Africa" explained and established the fact that diplomatic activities occurred among the various societies or communities[9]. The study of Alagoa in 1976 in his book titled "The Niger Delta States and their Neighbours" has, in a way, demonstrated that Oron, Calabar, and Ogoja among other major towns had diplomatic relationships. This was because no society or community was self-sustaining or self-sufficient. The diplomatic relations with communities was sustained and this helped communities to maintain cordial relations among themselves[10].

In the Eastern Niger Delta, there were creditable diplomatic ties. Diplomacy was carried out by different categories of individuals depending on the situation at hand. The traditional rulers were seen as great diplomats. Some elders who were title holders were also seen as diplomats. In the pre-colonial period according to an oral informant, the war between some communities in Ugep Local Government Area and some communities in Obubra Local Government Area of Cross River State was settled through mediation between the two communities by their leaders. Most disputes in the pre-colonial period resulted from land or boundary disputes[11]. Most times, village council members of the two or more communities helped to resolve the conflicts with long lasting effects[12]. The results of the negotiations manifested through series of meetings being held by the council members. The emissaries of both communities held truthful negotiations to settle their differences. It was a common practice in the Eastern Nigeria, as was highlighted in Achebe's Novel "Things Fall Apart", to see that great personalities in the pre-colonial communities used emissaries in the negotiation of peace between their communities. It happened for instance when the villages of Umuofia dispatched emissaries including Okonkwo to demand for a boy and a girl as reparation. This negotiation resulted in averting a major war as the Mbaino community acceded to the request of Umuofia. Most of the time, Chiefs enjoyed diplomatic immunity because of their privileged statuses[13].

Another mechanism of diplomacy during the pre-colonial period in the Eastern Niger Delta was the oracle. Oracles were also used as diplomatic tools because some elders were confirmed as diplomats after their acceptance by the oracle. In those days, special mission's trips were embarked upon for reconciliation between communities. *Ekpe* was a cultural institution found also among the Annang and the Ibibios in the Eastern Niger Delta area. The oracle appeared in masks with a naturalistic appearance. It permeated the political, social, and economic spheres of the people. *Ekpe* in Efik is called leopard, which was constituted into a cult, with its members being very powerful and using their power to enforce law and order in the society. *Ekpe* society was known to have settled many cases and disputes among

communities and among members of the group. The diplomatic means a approaches were handled by the leaders, who had the capacity to judge cases, gi capital punishments, to maintain peace and order in the society. The members we men with great means who could really meet the needs involved in the practices. A much as they possessed political authority, they also participated in social activitie and interacted with their ancestral spirits[14].

Pre-Colonial Diplomatic Relations among Eastern Niger Delta Communities

It is important to note that, the pre-colonial origin is associated with migratio and settlement of the people. Through interactions between and among differen communities, associations and relationships began to grow. In some cases, the communities that interacted actually migrated from their places of origin to new settlements because of trade, wars, or search for greener pastures. This aspec translated into cultural exchanges. For example it has been proven that Osokom migrated from Eastern Boki in Cross Rive State. Population growth, hunting, and other agricultural pursuits began to desiccate the area, this made people to look fo new settlements. Ogoja , Yache, Ikom, and Mkum are believed to have traditiona links and that they migrated from the Benue valley into the upper Cross River regio Places like Ugep and Obubra among others are said to have been formed by peopl who migrated from Cameroon across Nigeria's border. Other places such as Eket Oron, Obolo, and Annang in Akwa-Ibom State are also linked to the same root o Cameroon across Nigeria's borders[15]. In the process of their interaction, diplomatic relations and good economic and social ties emerged among several communities. The Efik are the largest ethnic group in the area and occupy the southern part of the Cross River[16]. The different communities were arranged into appropriate clans with their different political authorities. The Efik and the Ibibio had a very strong cultural identity, which has assisted the communities to live in harmony with each other. All these areas have a lot of multi-ethnic groups with different dialects but they also have cultural similarities[17].

Impact of the Pre-Colonial Diplomatic Economic Activities in the Eastern Niger Delta

The fundamental reason for the pre-colonial economic interactions was trade. Trade gave people the opportunity to migrate from one place to the other. In the pre-colonial society, no community was self-sufficient. Most communities depended on other communities to meet their needs. It was difficult for any community either rich or poor to have all it needed[18]. Every pre-colonial society, no matter the level of self-sufficiency, had to trade with its neighbours and this was paramount to the survival of these communities. Trade in the Eastern Niger Delta went as far as the Benue valley through various trade routes[19]. The various routes helped to boost trade, especially

along the routes through the Cameroon Mountains to Ikom, Obubra, Itigidi, and Itu. There were trade routes between the Igede people in Obi Local Government Area of Benue State and the Igbabu in Itakpa in Ogoja Local Government Area of Cross River State, because they had close contacts and affinities with each other. According to Afigbo, most attractions of the people were mainly trade. Trade brought people of different cultures together. This became paramount, no matter the level of self-sufficiency of the communities. The people of the Eastern Niger Delta traded with the Cameroonian people and trade brought good relations among them[20]. There were other routes that linked Cameroon to Yala, Ezza, Afikpo, Arockukwu. These routes also extended to Ibibio land[21]. There was a natural integration among the people of the area because of the waterways and the roads linking the neighbouring communities. These routes helped the different communities to move across other places to improve commerce and good neighbourliness. Most of the communities were trading in ivory, yams, cam-wood, salt, and domestic animals. The domestic animals included chicken and goats among others[22]. It is also important to note that teaching of various crafts was common among the Ibibio and this attracted people from neighbouring communities to learn new crafts. Such crafts included canoe building and maintenance, production of wooden beds, pottery, weaving, pestles and woodcarving, which promoted eventually a greater level of specialisation among the people. This practice encouraged cordial and sustained close diplomatic relationship between the Ibibio and her neighbours. Language was an important cultural tool for diplomacy, which really helped foster inter-group relations. Efik and Ibibio languages fostered good diplomatic ties among them, especially the core vocabularies and explanations which further promoted conjugal benefits from the diplomatic intercourse that existed between the people[23].

Salt was an important item of trade in the area because of the rivers and the seas surrounding the area. During this period, salt was used as the currency because of its value, but later in the 19th-century salt became only an item of trade[24]. Even so, the value of salt made it an important item which attracted different people from Benue and Igbo land to trade with communities in the Eastern Niger Delta. Old Calabar communities traded with Agwuagune and even with people as far as the Aro people[25]. Traders from Onitsha travelled very far to trade with the Easter Niger Delta people. Even the Tiv people exchanged their goods with the Ogoja and Obudu people especially for salt, because the Tiv people were not good in the production of salt. The use of mats in market places was useful to traders, because mats were most times used to place items in the markets and was also used for sleeping by the people and the traders. Mats were locally made by the Ogoja people and was an important necessity for traders. The people of Ugep traded with the Obubra people while the Efik and Ibibio people purchased their goods from Ikom, Ogoja and Ugep. The ecology of the Efik and Ibiobio people made them specialists in the production of sea

foods such as fish and crayfish among others. It was also recorded that Ekoi people traded with the people of Ugep[26]. Another principal commodity of trade that was lucrative in the Eastern Niger Delta was palm oil. The palm oil trade grew significantly to aid the pre-colonial economy. This was common because the Eastern Niger Delta area was known for abundant palm trees. This also made the people specialists in palm wine production[27]. Places such as Ogoja, Bekuarra, Ikoi, Akampa Calabar, and Boki among others were good in the production of palm wine. Palm trees formed the canopy over the densely inhabited areas of Akampa and palm wine was a common drink in the area. The pre-colonial diplomatic relation among the people was encouraging and a lot of cordial relationship grew within and among the people. This cordial relationship was beneficial to all the communities in spite of their little differences and the economic activities gave room for exchange of commodities[28].

The Benefits of the Pre-Colonial Diplomatic Relations

There were many benefits derived from the pre-colonial diplomatic relations in the Eastern Niger Delta. The people acquired knowledge from each other. The delicacy called *epang koko* was common among the Efik and the Ibiobio, but through interaction, the people of Ikom, Boki and other surrounding communities learnt how to prepare this delicacy and this has become a very popular food item among the people of the Eastern Niger Delta. Diplomatic relations among the people encouraged harmony and peaceful coexistence among the communities. The peaceful trading activities that existed at that time generated great and tremendous commerce that gave room for exchange of ideas and contributed to the growth and development of the communities. The networking among the traders and the people also allowed for the expansion of trade and the economy. Traditional marriage was a very important aspect of the culture that often brought communities together. This generally promoted good relationship and enhanced integration among the people. Inter-marriage promoted loyalty and removed all forms of suspicion and grievances. For example a Chief whose daughter got married to a man in another community will naturally not allow the escalation of conflicts between the two communities. Therefore, peace was made paramount through inter-marriages. According to Akpan, mixed marriage was very common especially among the people and this facilitated multi-lingualism because of constant visits. These visits were usually by family members who went with kola-nuts, palm wine, and foodstuffs. This established good and lasting relationships among the communities. It is pertinent to note that traditional marriage was one of the ways people migrated to other places, especially among the female folks. Women moved from their communities because of marriage and lived with their husbands, leaving their parents and relations[29]. Inter group or mixed marriages were very common especially among the Efiks and the Ibiobios in

the present day Cross River and Akwa-Ibom States. Yahe and Yalla communities in Cross River State among other communities also had the same practise of mixed marriage[30]. The said inter-marriages affected the women more than the men, because the women departed from their parents to join their husbands in other communities.

Settlement of disputes occurred fast and more easily in communities where inter- marriages had taken place. This was a distinctive feature to pre-colonial diplomatic relations because it brought strong alliances. Bekwara and Yala people of Cross River State were known for their peaceful co-existence and joint communal projects that fostered good relationship among them. Adoption of other cultures in the pre- colonial diplomatic relations encouraged culture contact and sharing of cultural values. As it is often said, culture is dynamic in nature because of the frequent contacts communities have and the tendency to copy cultures that have values in addition to the existing ones. Culture can be transmitted because of frequent interaction with other communities. Most communities borrowed their culture from others. For instance, Boki was prominent for the production of yams, which other communities like Ogoja and Ikom emulated thereby leading to intensification of yam production in their communities[31].

It is important to note that, it is not common for human beings to live together without conflicts. Conflicts sometimes encourage crisis when growth and development is taking place among the people or in the society. Following these conflicts especially if they were not resolved effectively, there could be destruction of property, mayhem, and loss of lives, eventually slowing down development. There were inter-tribal wars between communities which eventually encouraged diplomacy and inter group relations among the various communities due mainly to how well the conflicts were resolved. It was recorded that the Yakurr and Ikori people had several conflicts and this eventually brought mutual co-operation and good relationship among them. This peace and harmony occurred following several settlements of disputes and the reconciliatory efforts of the people[32].

Conclusion

In conclusion, pre-colonial diplomatic practices in the Eastern Niger Delta were very relevant and therefore contributed in no small measure to the development of peace for progressive human co-existence in the area. The diplomatic practices curbed excessive conflicts and violence among communities. In spite of the differences in their cultures, the people were able to manage their diversity. The linguistic barrier gave room for fundamental differences which helped in the mutual respect of their different cultures. Pre–colonial diplomacy historically emphasised and encouraged inter marriages among the different communities and trade in the pre-colonial period. It also sustained relations among communities in the Eastern Niger Delta area.

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