

# The Ijo (Ijaw) People of Delta State: Their Early History and Aspects of Social and Cultural Practices

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## Abstract

This paper is a historical exposition of the Ijo people of Delta State in the South-South and Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria. A literature gap exists on these groups compared to their kith and kin in the States of Bayelsa and Rivers, also in the Niger-Delta. Thus, motivated by this, the author employs a descriptive and analytical schema to present the early history of these people with regards to their origins, migrations and settlement patterns. The study also examines aspects of their social and cultural practices. At the end, it is observed that, these groups, like their other Ijo counterparts in the central and eastern delta are equally of considerable antiquity in the Niger-Delta spanning over 7,000 years, blended with a rich heritage that has been developed over time.

**Keywords:** Ijo (Ijaw), Origins, Delta State, Antiquity, Eponymous, Migrations, Settlements

## 1. Introduction

In this study, the attention is on the Ijaw (Ijo) people who are located in the local Governments of Patani, Bomadi, Burutu, Warri North, Warri South and Warri South West in Delta State of Nigeria. In all there are fifteen clans (Ibes) which includes the following: Egbeama (Warri North), Ogbe-Ijo (Warri South), Gbaramatu (warri South West), Isaba (Warri South West), Diebiri (Warri South/ Burutu), Obotebe (Burutu), Seimbiri (Burutu), Tuomo (Burutu), Ogulagha (Burutu), Iduwini (Burutu), Operemo (Bomadi/Burutu), Mein (Bomadi/Burutu), Tarakiri (Patani), Kabowei (Patani) and Kumbowei (Patani).

Together, these groups constitutes what Alagoa (1972) in his division of the Delta into eastern, central and western zones along physiographic, linguistic and ethnic lines as, the Ijo clans of the western Delta and fringe. Apart from the general outline of their geography, the broad themes covered here, are their traditions of Origin, migrations and settlements; their economic and political systems in pre-colonial times as well as their social and cultural practices with regards to birth, marriage, death, festivals etc.

## 2. Geography

The area covered by this brief survey extends from the east of the Benin River (Warri North L.G.A), in the west of Delta state and the Niger Delta up to the Kabowei settlement of Abare (Patani L.G.A), on the west Bank of the Forcados. Thus, the area bordering on the estuaries of the Rivers Benin, Escravos and Forcados represents the home of the Ijo of Delta state. This area is bordered in the south by the Atlantic Ocean and the Nigeria state of Bayelsa, in the north by the Urhobo, in the west, by the Itsekiri and in the east by the Isoko and Ukwuani (Asabase).

It has been observed that the entire delta area is divisible on physical terms into three belts. These are: the sandy beach ridges, the salt-water swamp areas and the fresh water swamp areas (Alagoa, 1972:12). Alagoa posits that these belts correspond to differences in the nature of the water, type of deltaic soil deposited and in vegetation. Accordingly, they are also belts along which the lives of the communities change, population densities differ and occupations suitable to the particular environment are carried on. With particular reference to our area of study, Ijo communities such as Ogulagha and the Gbaramatu settlements occupy the area of the sandy beach ridges. Further inland, most of the communities in the local Governments of Burutu, Warri south west, and Warri north inhabits the salt-water swamp belt. Lastly, the Ijo communities in Bomadi and Patani L.G.As are within the fresh water swamp belt of the Delta.

### 3. Traditions of Origin, Migrations and Settlements

One apt general observation that can be made of the Ijo in general is that they are of considerable antiquity in the Niger-Delta. Much of the evidence for this is drawn from Alagoa's use of the linguistic parameter which establishes a separation of the Ijo language from that of its immediate neighbours by about 7,000 years. Moreover, Alagoa's findings based on the oral traditions of the people suggests a pattern of movement from the central Delta (approximating present day Bayelsa State) to the west (Delta state) and east (Rivers State). In this sense therefore, the central theory of Alagoa's postulation is that the Ijo's are of central Delta Origin (Okorobia, 2009) and with time spread out or migrated westward and eastwards to settlements in present day Delta and Rivers states.

It must be noted that as plausible as Alagoa's theories are, they do not tell us the exact time the people came into being, rather they merely tell of migrations, movements and the formation of break away groups in more recent times. Indeed, in a recent study, Robin Horton (1997) has given some fresh thoughts on the place of the central Delta as the cradle of the Ijo people. He informs that the eastern Delta, rather than the central is in fact the home of the Ijo. Employing a combination of linguistic and archaeological sources, Horton avers that the Obolo (Andoni) region in the eastern Delta (Rivers state) is the probable home of the Ijo. With all the possible defects inherent in the various theories on the ultimate place of origin of the Ijo, to avoid confusion, each cluster of clans will be examined separately before pre-colonial economic, political and social systems are discussed.

**3.1. The Egbema:** According to Alagoa (1972), the traditions of origin of the Egbema suggest that the mother settlement Ofiniama was founded by two traders from the Mein town of Gbekebo. The two traders, Alopomini and Opiti used to stop at the site to shoot birds (Ofini) for food on their way to Ukuroama, Iko, Eko or Lagos.

There are nine traditional towns in Egbema known as Egbema Isenabiri, namely-Ofiniama, Ajakurama, Abere, Gbeoba, Jamagie/Abadigbene, Opuama/Polobubo, Ogbinbiri, Ogbudu-Gbudu and Jamagie (Alagoa, Kowe, Owei and Dunu, 2009). The founders of Ajakurama, Gbeoba, Abere and Polobubo first lived at Ofiniama for some time before they settled in their present site. Later, new groups of immigrants came from Operemo in the western Delta and founded the settlement of Jamagie. The main unifying force in Egbema traditions is the common worship of Egbesu.

**3.2. The Gbaramatu:** The tradition of origin of this Ibe raises important issues for the settlement history of many other Ijo groups in the Delta. It has been observed that Oproza; the mother settlement of the Gbaramatu is mentioned in the traditions of origin of other groups such as the Kabowei and Kumbowei. Alagoa, (1972) informs that the ancestors of the Gbaramatu migrated from Gbaraun in Apoi Ibe of the central Delta (present Bayelsa state). The Gbaramatu live close to the coast between the Forcados and Benin Rivers, with most of their settlements lying along the Escravos River and adjoining creeks (Alagoa, Kowe, Owei and Dunu, 2009).

**3.3. The Ogbe-Ijo:** According to their traditions, Ogbe, the mother settlement was founded by Ewein who came from Ekeremo in Operemo Ibe of the Western Delta in present day Bayelsa state. The Ogbe claim to have arrived at the site of Warri before the Itsekiri, and that Ewein's settlement was there when the Oba of Benin sent men after the Itsekiri migrants from Benin. Ewein's settlement grew into six compounds namely, Aruteingha, Perebiri, Ikiyanbiri, Otunibiri, Lotiebiri and Temebiri. Presently, the Ogbe are a clan of about thirty settlements on the creeks south of the modern town of Warri and Ogbe Ijo is the administrative Head-quarters of Warri South-West Local Government Area of Delta State.

**3.4. The Isaba:** Isaba traditions suggest that the founder of Isaba Ibe was Isoun whose father was Ekere who migrated from Oporemo and founded Ekeremo in Bayelsa state. Both Isaba and Ogbe trace their origin to Oporemo in Bayelsa state. Isaba comprises about 20 settlements on the Isaba creeks to the east of the modern town of Warri and Ogbe-Ijo.

**3.5. The Diebiri:** The Diebiri are an off-shoot of Seimbiri clan in Burutu Local Government Area. The clan was founded by Dio. According to the traditions, the founders moved from Oboro to the settlement near Warri. The original quarters were Etwaedumu, Egadedumu and Fiyewardumu. However, since 1995, the Diebiri have moved from the site founded by Dio to a new site at Diebiri-Batan (Ubateinghan) because of attacks by the Aladja Urhobo (Alagoa, Kowe, Owei and Dunu, 2009: 426).

**3.6. The Obotebe:** The Obotebe are one of the smallest Ijo groups in the western Delta. According to Alagoa (1972:60-62), the traditions of origin indicate relations with other groups in the central Delta. The eponymous ancestor is stated to be Ijo, father of Onido, father of Oro, father of Obotebe, father of Ogiri who founded the

mother settlement named Obotebe. It is said that the man Obotebe had lived originally at Ikibiri where a quarrel over duiker meat led to dispersal. The Obotebe is on the border-land between the western Delta and the western Limit in Burutu L.G. A. It is bordered on the west by the Ogbe-Ijo and Itsekiri, and surrounded to the east by the Mein settlements.

**3.7. The Seimbiri:** According to Alagoa, (2009) the ancestral home of the Seimbiri lies near the town of Ikibiri in the central Delta. The Seimbiri named Oromo the first ancestor with Seimbiri, Ogbo and Ikibriwei as his three sons and Temezebai as a grand son of Seimbiri. The migration to the west occurred in the time of Ogbo, and was said to have been occasioned by a case of Murder. During the movement to the west, the group first settled at Oboro with later off-shoots to Inikorogha and OkpoKunu.

**3.8. The Tuomo:** The Tuomo are a small compact clan all of whose towns are situated close together on the Bomadi creek. According to Alagoa, the traditions of Origin indicate relationship with both the Effurun and the Gbaramatu and that their migrations seem to have brought them into contact with many other people in the western Delta.

**3.9. The Ogulagha:** According to Alagoa (1972), Ogula traditions of origin states that the common ancestor "Ogula" "dropped out of the cloud" at Okibo on the west bank of the River Ramos at the site of the fishing village of Idumukpamu. Ogula came with a wife Ereara. He later left the Ramos and died at the new settlement of Ogula or Ogulagha on the Forcados estuary. He had four sons namely; Sabagoni, Ikiriaba, Orugboabala, and Akiri. Orugboabala migrated into the Itsekiri area and founded the town of Orugbo near Ode Itsekiri.

**3.10. The Iduwini:** The traditions of origin of the Iduwini do not mention a place of origin outside their present location. According to Alagoa (2009), the available traditions name the Iduwini town of Amatu (meaning, the origin of towns) as the place from which all other towns of the sub-group sprang, the migrations moving westwards to the Forcados River from Amatu.

**3.11. The Operemo:** Alagoa informs that Operemo traditions states that the ancestor, Ekeremo came from the central Delta town of Oporoma. There was a fight between the section in which Ekeremo was leader and another section named Angiama. Ekeremo's people lost and fled the town to settle at Oru-Ekeremo and subsequently settlements such as Amabilo, Nodoro, Ekeremo and Ojobo (presently in Delta state) were established.

**3.12. The Mein:** The majority of the Mein live along the Forcados River in Burutu and Bomadi Local Government Areas of Delta state, with Kiagbodo as the most prominent settlement. According to Mein traditions (Alagoa, 1999), the eponymous ancestor, Mein lived at Benin and moved to Aboh to avoid wars. He then left Aboh with a large following due to conflicts, and settled at Ogobiri in the Sagbama –Igbedi creek (present day Bayelsa state). It was from here that further movements occurred mainly due to disputes and over-population, leading to emigrations to the western Delta.

**3.13. The Tarakiri:** This group is located in Patani Local Government Area of Delta State. Their traditions according to Alagoa (1999) reveal that the ancestor, Tara was a brother of the founders of Kolokuma and Opokuma (Central Delta). Their father, Ondo lived at Benin, but fled to Aboh and eventually to the site of the present Ogboin town of Amatolo in the Sagbama – Igbedi creek (central Delta). Due to disputes, the Tarakiri moved out of the creek to Orua in Sagbama Local Government Area of Present day Bayelsa state. At present, the Tarakiri settlements in Patani Local Government Area of Delta State are Oduophori and Odorubu.

**3.14. The Kumbowei:** The Kumbowei settlements of Agoloma, Angiama (Toru-water side), Angiama (Bulu-Inland), Amatebe, Apelebiri (Toru-water side) and Apelebiri (Bulu-Inland) are all in Patani Local Government Area of Delta State. Alagoa (1999) informs that the traditions of this group names Kumbowei its founder as a brother of Kabowei, both being closely related to the Gbaramatu of the Escravos River and the Gbarain of the central Delta in Bayelsa state.

**3.15. The Kabowei:** According to the Kabo and Kumbo traditions collected by Rutherford (Alagoa, 1999), the Kabo, Kumbo and Gbarain all came out of a single settlement in the Kabobulou creek founded by Oproza. When kabowei succeeded his father, he made things difficult for his brothers. The disputes forced Kumbo and Gbarain to move out of the early settlement to their present sites in the central Delta. The Kabowei towns in Delta State are Patani (Federated), Abare, Toru Koloware and Bulu Koloware.

From the various accounts, one can discern that the origin of the Ijo (Ijaw) and their occupation of the Niger Delta is more of a central to west movement in the case of the Ijo people of present day Delta State of Nigeria.

#### **4. Pre-Colonial Economic System**

The Ijaw had been mainly fishermen. The mainly riverine environment divided between the salt water and fresh water belts determined to a great length the basic economic system of the various groups. The differences between the parts ensured that the inhabitants of the lower delta (salt water belt) have had to exchange their fish and salt for the vegetable produce of the upper delta (fresh water belt). According to Alagoa (1972), the salt water belt group never produced more than a few plantains and coconuts in backyard gardens. On the other hand, the groups of the fresh water belt farmed their river banks after floods receded each year depositing rich silt. They farmed water yam, plantain, bananas, cassava, cocoyam as well as peppers, okro, sugar cane maize and other crops in smaller quantities.

Basically, the fish industry was the main stay of the economy in pre-colonial times. According to Nyananyo, Daminabo and Aminigo, (2009), the aquatic ecosystem in Ijo Land and throughout the Niger Delta support a rich diversity of fish and shell fish resources. They inform that the Ijo operated mainly in artisanal (small scale) fishery which is labour intensive, and that the people used mainly simple fishing implements and dug out canoes built by them. On the whole, the industry was dominated by men who controlled the aspect of fishing while women controlled the processing and marketing of the fish. The main technique for preserving the fish is smoke drying.

The Ijo also developed flourishing commerce with the Europeans from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The articles of commerce in this overseas trade were purely indigenous articles such as alligator pepper, palm oil, and palm kernel and timber products. In latter years, the Ijos were to participate fully in the triangular slave trade because of their control of the water ways.

#### **5. Pre-Colonial Political System**

Generally, the Ijo are regarded as a non centralized group. Ikime (1980) has characterized the Ijo political system as that of a fragmented society in which the village group made up of people who claim descent from a given ancestor through the male line constitutes the bases of governance. Essentially, the village is divided into quarters which are lineage groups usually founded by the various sons of the founder of the village. Each quarter is in turn made up of extended families each of which normally lives within a definite compound. In such a compound would be a man and his wives as well as grown-up sons and their wives and children. The compound represents the smallest unit of political and social organization amongst the Ijo.

Writing of the political structure among the western Ijo-our area of study, Alagoa as quoted by Okpevra (2005) informs that: "... the oldest man is automatically the head of the village community. He becomes the Ama-Okosowei, town-elder and Chairman of the village council, Amagula. The executive duties of the village council, Amagula, were, however, performed by a younger leader, the Ogulasowei or spokesman. And in religious matters too, each village had its priest, Orukarowei, and the ethnic unit, Ibe, comprising a number of villages, had a chief priest, Pere. The Pere presided over the annual gathering of the Ibe members at the shine of the group god. ... The Ama-Okosowei's village administration was the unit of political organization in the western Delta, the ties of the Ibe consisting of a common dialect, usually a common group god, and the belief in common ancestor.

On the whole, the basic Ijo political system in pre-colonial times was a stateless organization based on the autonomous settlement, devoid of a centralizing force.

#### **6. Pre-Colonial Social and Cultural Practices**

The number of clans or Ibese examined in this discourse coupled with scope limitations will not allow for a holistic assessment of the social and cultural practices of all the groups identified here. Moreover each clan (Ibe) differs in their make up. However, one general understanding is that, the various groups each believe in a common ancestor for the sub-group. Also, a religious base of common identity is provided by the worship of a single national god. Again, all members of the clan observed the prescribed taboos and attended the annual or occasional festivals under the supervision of a high priest. Most, if not all the groups examined here celebrates an annual festival mostly in commemoration of the beginning of the local calendar year, yam (crops) or the national deity. Be that as it may, below is a cursory examination of the social and cultural practices of two groups the **Kabowei** and **Iduwini** as it concerns matters of birth, marriage, death and annual festival.

**6.1.** As has been said earlier, the Kabowei are in Patani Local Government Area of Delta state comprising the towns of Patani, Abare, Bulu-Koloware and Toru Koloware. The rest of their kith and kin are in Sagbama local government area of Bayelsa state.

#### **6.1.1. Marriage in Kabowei:**

According to Guanah (2007), there are five types of marriages in Kabowei. These are; (a) Ekie-ere (simple marriage), (b) Fei-ere (big dowry marriage) (c) Tei-ere or Agbai-ere (concubine/Lover), (d) Kore-Weri Koru (Suspended marriage), and (e) Tebe Tiemo (Forced marriage).

In the first instance (Ekie-ere), the consent of the bride and parents is sought through a middleman who is normally a member of the bride's family. If the bride-groom or his parents can do the contact, the custom still requires a middleman at the point of paying the dowry (Bride price). The duty of the middle man is to serve as the surety of the marriage and also to see that his sister/relation is given out to a responsible man and that his friend (bride groom) is not disappointed in the marriage.

#### **6.1.2. Birth in Kabowei:**

In Kabowei, the people appreciate the fact that children are a gift from God. The role of the local midwife and local Doctor (medicine man) is regarded and appreciated. One common problem and feature of birth in Kabowei is the issue of disputed pregnancy. When two men unknown to them have separate contacts with a female and results in pregnancy to which both claim at the same time, then the matter is referred to the elders of the Community for arbitration.

What is to be done customarily is for both men to be invited to the scene when the female is in labour for delivery. Either men or their representatives must buy a bottle of gin together and each will libate to the ancestors to help determine whose child it is that is in the womb of the female. Each of them does the libation separately calling on the child to come out of the womb if it is his and if not his, it should remain in the womb. Truly, if it is party A's child, it will come out immediately. On the other hand, if party B evades this practice, it means the pregnancy is not his.

#### **6.1.3. Death in Kabowei:**

Just as they have a clear understanding of birth, the people also appreciate the fact that on an appointed day, man will leave this world to the unknown. Basically, there are two types of announcement of death in Kabowei.

First, if the oldest man in the community dies, no immediate announcement is made till the family gets water from the river where a big fish had bubbled. This water is used to bath the deceased before formal announcement is made with canon shots.

On the other hand, a commoner's death is immediately announced with wailings and weeping's from family members. Also in Kabowei, the deceased are buried in locations determined by cause of death or circumstance as follows:

- (a) Adult --- Dweibou or approved cemetery
- (b) Accident and related death – Seibou or wilderness, normally across the river on the opposite side of the settlement
- (c) Small pox, yaws, death with pregnancy – Seibou
- (d) Wizards and witches – are never buried they are thrown into the river.
- (e) People without child are buried silently without any ceremony.

**6.2.** The Iduwini are in present day Burutu Local Government Area of Delta State.

#### **6.2.1. Marriage in Iduwini:**

According to Preboye (2005), in Iduwini, the suitor and members of his family approach either an uncle or a very prominent personality in the family of the bride. This family member then calls a meeting of other close members of the family including the bride's father to break the good news. This, it must be said is similar to the middle man role in Kabowei as we saw earlier.

In Iduwini, it is said that the groom and his family members will have to make many trips before the bride's family consented. After this, a date was fixed for payment of the bride price with accompanying singing and dancing after which the groom takes his bride home. On arrival at the husband's place, the merry-making continued sometimes for days.

### **6.2.2. Birth in Iduwini:**

In Iduwini, when a woman is about to be delivered of a baby, she returns to her parents' home where she remains until she gives birth. During this period the husband will always be visiting the in-laws with loads of food stuffs for the up keep of his wife.

Delivery takes place in the presence of a mid wife Known as "EREZIMORE" and the mother of the pregnant lady only. After the birth, the husband and the mother's relatives bring palm wine and gin for merriment. Plenty of presents are given to the midwife who at the point of delivery in the house usually gives the baby the first bath. Three days after birth, the child's hair is shaved and four days later, the mother's hair is also shaved. The mother is then allowed to leave her parents' home to return to her husband's place. Sometimes, the child is named on the day of birth, if the father is present, or the naming is done on a later date.

### **6.2.3. Death in Iduwini:**

Preboye (2003) informs that contrary to the beliefs of other groups, death is looked upon by the Iduwini as the end of all things. The people do not believe in reincarnation or any form of after – life. They believe that their parents, when they die are transformed to spirits and ascend to meet Tamara "GOD" and from there, they guard and look after their children and family members still living on earth.

In Iduwini, the death of an old man usually calls for elaborate celebrations. This is the time the special masquerade "Agula" comes out to entertain. The ceremonies usually last for seven days with the corpse preserved for about three days before the burial with native herbs. On the seventh day, all the children of the deceased must compulsorily shave their hair as a mark of respect for the deceased.

## **7. Conclusion**

The Ijo clans (Ibes) of present day Delta state emerged in pre-colonial times claiming origins to mostly locations in the central part of the Niger Delta. They also exhibited economic, political and social structures similar in nature to a large extent but with distinctive local characteristics.

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