

GST 113

NIGERIA PEOPLES & CULTURE

Sarah AJIYA
Cordelia CLAYTON
Tobi JOHNSON
Dinatu B. TANKO
Felix ODOFIN
Cynthia M. SAIDU

[© 2019]



LESSON 5

Major Ethnic groups in Southern Nigeria

THE ITSEKIRI

Origin of the Itsekiri People

The people of Itsekiri claimed to have descended from *Umale-Okun* (the sea god). Some part of the Itsekiri tradition claimed a relationship with *Iginuwa*. History tells us that Iginuwa was the son and heir apparent of Oba Olua of Bini in about 1473. According to the Itsekiri tradition, Iginuwa at a time wrongly advised his father on a particular issue. The advice was so disastrous that Iginuwa became very unpopular to the extent that his people vowed never to let him succeed his father. When his father, Oba Olua, noticed the seriousness of the anger of his people against his son, he decided to arrange a kingdom outside Benin for him. This was according to him, the best way to avoid problems in his kingdom.

According to another tradition, Iginuwa was a son of one of the chiefs of the Yoruba that was sent with some chiefs and servants to an area by the sea to establish a kingdom of his own. He came from *Ode*, a Yoruba town in Ijebu Water-side. On his arrival, Iginuwa met with some Ijaws who took him along with his followers by canoe to an Island where they finally settled. To most of the Itsekiri, this settlement is known as Itsekiri Kingdom till today.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF THE ITSEKIRI PEOPLE

The Kingdom Iginuwa founded was made up and is still made up of the Itsekiri, Ijaw and a good number of other elements. Ode Itsekiri is the capital. Other settlements such as the Forcados, Escravos and Benin Rivers surround the capital. The socio-political organization of the Itsekiri people was very close to that of Benin Kingdom. The Palace and titles for instance were modeled after that of Benin Kingdom. But in the Itsekiri case, the Kingdom was ruled rather by the Olu. He alone presided over a council known as Ojoye which was made up of seven nobles or title holders. The Olu combined in himself spiritual and temporal powers.

THE URHOB0

Origin of the Urhobo People

Unlike the Itsekiri, the Urhobo people have more than one version of their Origins.

Ughelli, Aghara and Ogo Version

According to Ughelli, Aghara and Ogo, the Urhobo people originated from the Ijaw. To them, it is very difficult, if not impossible to culturally and historically differentiate the Urhobo from the Ijaw.

Uwherun, Abraka, Agbon, Oogun and Olomu Version

To Uwherun, Abraka, Agbon, Oogun, Olomu and many others, the Urhobo people are the product of the Benin immigrants. According to them, it is very difficult if not impossible to historically and culturally differentiate the Urhobo people from the Bini.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF THE URHOB0 PEOPLE

Just like the Itsekiri, the Urhobo people are found in the Niger Delta region. However, unlike the Itsekiri, the Urhobo are fragmented and live in different places in the Niger Delta area. This may be the reason why the Urhobo people, unlike the Itsekiri and Benin, have never established a

single Kingdom. Socio-politically speaking, each Urhobo Village had its own traditional institution headed by a ruler (Ovie). Just like the Itsekiri, the socio-political organization of the Urhobo people was modeled after that of Benin Kingdom.

The Ovie for instance, had a court made of prominent individuals and titleholders. Moreover, just like in Igboland, the adult male members of the Urhobo society were divided into age sets corresponding with youth, middle age and elders. Of course, each of the age sets performed specific duties in the societies.

THE IJAW

Origin of the Ijaw People

As one of the major ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region, the Ijaw people share almost the same stories of origin with their Itsekiri and Urhobo counterparts. There is no clear-cut demarcation on the history of the origin of the Ijaw from that of the Itsekiri and Urhobo.

The Ijaw ethnic group accounts for a sizeable percentage of Nigeria's population. You also need to know that they are located along the coastal belts of Southern Nigeria from the Forcados to Bonny River, long and extensive years of interaction with various neighbours have greatly influenced their traditions thereby leading to differences in the cultural assumptions of component Ijaw groups. They are mostly identified as Western Delta Ijaw (*Gbaramatu, Mein, Iduwini, Arogbo, Egbema* (Bassan), *Apoi Ijaw*); the Central Delta Ijaw (*Apoi, Furupagha, Olodiana Ijaw*); and the Eastern Delta Ijaw (*Bonny, Elem Kalabari, Nembe* (Brass), *Okrika*). Some scholars have come up with different Ijaw traditions of origin. These scholars include Kenneth Dike (1956), G.I. Jones (1964) and E.J. Alagoa (1972). Dike ascribed the establishment of Ijaw politico-religious institutions to the commencement of trans-atlantic trade around the 15th Century, while G.I. Jones modified this submission by propounding claims of migration from Eastern Delta pinning it to the period of or before Portuguese contact with the region (1450-1550). On the contrary, Alagoa, an Ijaw, brought up 'Mein tradition' to assert migration from Central Delta to Eastern Delta. Archaeological studies sponsored by Alagoa to settle this controversy provided a more concrete information. The results showed that Eastern Delta Ijaw communities were settled far ahead of the Central Delta region. They belong to the Niger-Congo linguistic subgroup and they speak *Izon*. The eastern Ijaw group, however, speak *Kalabari*. The western Delta Ijaw also speak Edoid languages while the Ogbia clan, the Andoni as well as the Obulom speak Cross-River languages.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF THE IJAW PEOPLE

Socio-politically speaking, the traditional Ijaw did not develop any centralized system of government. For some scholars, this might be so because the Ijaw were scattered in small fishing settlements in the creeks of the River Niger. The "House System" characterized Ijaw societies. Ijaw people were traders especially fishermen. The traditional major Ijaw states were Bonny, Kalabari, Ibrika, Opobo and Brass-Nembe.

The Amanyenabo (village head) is chosen from a single descent group of the entire male population that seats in three age grades.

In Ijaw cosmology, a High God (*Tamuno*) is acknowledged. An ancestor cult similar to that of the Igbo also exists. Being riverine people, there is a strong belief in the water goddess (*Owu*) that plays certain roles in human affairs. The Ijaw, over the course of their history are reputed fishermen, canoe builders, salt manufacturers and above all elaborate and extensive merchants and traders, well known for the establishment of merchant houses.

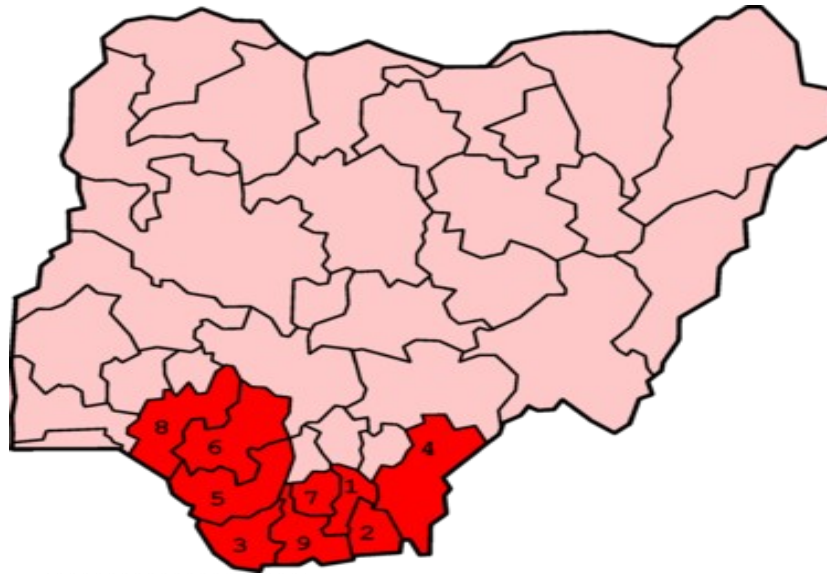


Figure 2.12: Niger-Delta