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Occupational Migration of Apoi-Ijo People in Ondo State and Their Resilience up to Colonial Era

Fidelis ACHOBA

Department of History and International Studies
Federal University Lokoja

Muhammed Dangusau SANI

Department of History and International Studies
Federal University Lokoja

Abstract

This study is informed by the unique and attractive geographical features of the Apoi-Ijo, which provide the people with many occupational opportunities. The people of Apoi-Ijo are quite distinct from the Yoruba people of Ondo State, but are very much related to the Arogo-Ijo. The geographical location of Apoi-Ijo and its uniqueness make it to occupy a special position in Ijo historical studies for two major reasons. First, the Apoi-Ijo is the most south-western sub-group of the Ijo. Secondly, their blend of some aspects of Yoruba culture with that of Ijo makes them distinct from other sub-groups of Ijo. Migration from their ancestral home to their present abode was a natural phenomenon. It also shows resilience in their cultural practices and traditions. This manifests, especially in their dietary habits, dressing styles, ability to maintain their language and hand it down to subsequent generations with some level of acculturation, thereby making it different from other Ijo groups. This research uses primary and secondary sources. Data collected from primary sources include archival documents and in-depth interviews of some Ijo people and their neighbours, while the secondary sources embrace the review of related literature.

Keywords: Migration, Apoi-Ijo, Agriculture, Fishing, Ijo

Introduction

The area known as Apoi-Ijo in Ondo State of Nigeria is characterised by numerous creeks, mangrove swamps and islands in similarity to other parts of Niger Delta area of Nigeria. Geography plays important roles in the lives of the Apo-Ijo people as it dictates their occupations, which include timber lumbering, canoe building, fishing¹ and farming to support their immediate needs. Thus, most of the timbers exported to the Ebute-Meta area of Lagos via the sea and lagoon come from the Apoi, Arogo-Ijo and Okutipupa areas of Ondo State.

The land is bounded on the west by Oluwa and Otu Rivers and Edo State, and to the south by Igangbo and the Atlantic Ocean. In the same vein, it is bounded to the east by Ikale and to the north by River Otu. The area is approximately 200.9 square miles² with various splits of marshy land. Unlike other parts of Ondo State such as Oka, Owo and Ikare, which are hilly and mountainous, this area of study has more plain terrains. Hence, it supports the growth of bamboo trees as the land level is about eight metres above the sea level.³ This makes the area more distinct and unique compared to other parts of Ondo State.

The numerous rivers, which characterize the area, empty themselves into the Atlantic Ocean. Notable among them are the Oluwa, Otu and Shaluwa rivers. Both Otu and Oluwa rivers are navigable at all seasons of the year. However, due to the many tributaries, rivers and creeks, which attract water weeds and different types of sand, these waterways are usually cleared seasonally to make navigation more convenient.⁴ The clearing of these waterways also promotes security during navigation as it enhances visibility. The creeks and rivers naturally serve as barriers against external attack or aggression. This is because the canoe, which was the primary means of transportation to major towns of the area before and during the colonial periods, was unfamiliar to the hinterland neighbours. Thus, they were often at peace with each other except during raids for slaves.

In addition, the major roads linking the hinterland peoples to the area stretch in diverse ways. It is worthy of note that no journey to the main area can be completely made without the use of canoe or engine boat.⁵ One of the routes is Okitipupa-Igbokoda to Ugbo, Mahin to any of the major Apoi-Ijo towns such as Shabomi, Igbekebo, Oboro Ojuala, Kiribo, Ipoke, Igbobini, Igbotu and Enikorogha. There is also the Ore-Igbokoda and Benin-Ipoke route to the area of study.⁶ All these routes have the Niger Delta geographical features, which the Apoi-Ijo people were hitherto familiar with.

The geographical settlement of Apoi-Ijo in the West Coast of Nigeria is not new. This was informed by the age long settlement of the original Ijo people of the heart of the Niger Delta. E.J. Alagoa maintains that the initial Ijo settlement in the Niger Delta was between 3rd and 4th centuries BC. One important aspect of the settlement is that the availability of diverse

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resources largely influenced the people's pattern of houses. These were usually built with curved roofing sheets to allow the roofs dry quickly whenever it rained in readiness for other intermediate rains. The houses were raised above the ground level to about 1.5 and 2 metres with raffia palm or bamboo poles with thatched grass roof in most fishing islands.⁷ The fragile and simple building patterns were informed by the need to move from one place to another for fishing, especially when one location had been impoverished. This mobile settlement pattern could be seen especially in the pre-colonial period.

The area, like many other parts of Nigeria, enjoys two seasons. The rainy season starts in March and subsides in November while the dry season begins immediately after the end of the rainy season and ends in February. However, since this area is very close to the sea, it is largely influenced by South-West trade winds making rainfall more regular than the hinterland areas. The harmattan usually lasts for a short period.⁸ In addition, it is important to note that the people inhabit the most tropical rain belt of Ondo State with numerous fresh waters flourishing in the place with cool weathers especially in the evenings. This is because of its nearness to sea and its vast lowland area. Some parts of the land are marshy, thereby making transportation to such areas difficult. However, such marshy places usually have irregular proportions of arable land, and along the beaches, there are flourishing coconut trees.

Also, the migration of the Apoi-Ijo sub-group from Kolokuma of Brassarea shows the receptiveness and industry of the people when one imagines the distance from their present abode. In fact, such migration must have taken a long time of an uneven journey in the course of passing through some other peoples of the Niger Delta. Aside from that, for them to have settled for long in the present area without frequent wars between them and their Ikale, Ilaje and Edo neighbours demonstrates their spirits of adaptation and tolerance, which are lessons for the Nigerian State.

Origin and Migration

The Apoi-Ijo people are a sub-group of the original Ijo people of the Niger Delta. They occupy the riverine part of Ondo State, very close to the Atlantic Ocean with numerous creeks and rivers as mentioned earlier.⁹ The

word Apoi denotes a dialect of Ijo adulterated language coined from Apoi creeks. This differentiates them from the original Ijo, Yoruba, Ilaje and Arogbo Ijo languages. It is therefore, a manifestation of a geographical name. However, there are series of historical accounts regarding the origin and migration of the people. While one of these accounts links the origin to the Ijo Brass of the Niger Delta, another links the people to Ile-Ife (Yoruba origin) and Benin.

The first version, which claims Brass origin has it that the Apoi-Ijo were originally Brass Ijo people, who left their Brass home on fishing expedition to Ukomu and from Ukomu to Apaka, half a kilometre from the site of Kiribo.¹⁰ At Apaka, five persons were elected leaders, who led the migration from there to the Apoi creek for further fishing expedition. This version says these five leaders at Apaka were Ogulabiowe, Ebeli, Ogoto, Fate and Apu. The process of dispersal from Apaka led by Apu took several years to Apoi creek. This was because the migration was an occupational (fishing) one. However, by the time they got to Apoi creek, the five leaders founded the first five major villages which later became major towns. These were Igbotu, Shabomi, Kiribo, Oboro, Enikorogha, Ojuala, Igbekebo and Igbobini.

In addition, four other leaders who later led another fishing expedition founded the remaining four towns of the nine Apoi-Ijo settlements. These were Ojuala, Igbekebo, Igbobini and Ipoke. This account further stressed that Ijo-Apoi and Arogbo sub-groups left their Niger Delta Brass around the sixteenth century in the wave of migrations to the far West of the Niger Delta. Thus, they adjusted to the physical resources, ecological setting and climate which they met and which were not really different from those of their original home. This claim of Brass origin to an area of Ukomu, from there to Apaka and thereafter to the present abode was as a result of various economic, political and social factors.¹¹

Thus, several years of socio-economic and political activities witnessed the dispersal, which resulted in the formation of the nine major towns of Apoi-Ijo confederacy today.¹² The historical development had three phases. First was the migration from the original Niger Delta Brass home to Ukomu. Second was from Ukomu to Apaka and third from Apaka to Apoi, the present abode. The nature of the geographical environment,

no doubt informed these stages of uneven migration until they got to their current satisfactory geographical environment. Nevertheless, all the aforementioned towns of Apoi except Igbekebo are sited on minor creeks. In other words, all are islands except Igbekebo.

The claim of Brass origin was an expression of central Ijo descent. To corroborate this account are the records of Apoi tradition by E. J. Alagoa, which specifically named Kolokuma in the Brass area as the place of origin. This account states that the number one hero of Apoi-Ijo, who led the first wave of migration was one of the seven sons of Kalaokun (ancestor of Kolokuma and founder of the Opoidani lineage of Kolokuma) who left his grandfather Ijo (Kalasuo) to Apoi creek in the most western part of the Niger Delta.¹³ However, internal evidence gives the affirmation that the Kolokuma tradition actually refers to the migration of one subgroup of Ijo from the heart of the Niger-Delta to western Niger-Delta of the Apoi creek.¹⁴

The second version of Apoi-Ijo origin asserts that Ojo from which Ijo was derived was one of the grandsons of Oduduwa, the ancestor of the Yoruba. But having had a quarrel with his father, he decided to seek new settlement far from his father. However, before his departure, he asked his father for a crown as a prince. In response, his father told him to go to any riverine area and look for cowries to make the crown. Ojo without delay, left with his supporters through Benin via Ode Ado where the migrants built a canoe. This, they used to convey themselves to Kolokuma creek in the Niger Delta area. When they arrived there, they met a group of fishermen called “Gbenian” and they settled amicably with them because the people were hospitable.

Thus, they were accommodated by their Ijo neighbours, and they practised their major occupation which was fishing. As time went on, the spirit to come nearer home, made him to search for the cowries. Having found some, he made a princely crown for himself. The exponential population growth of his group, which arose from inter-marriages with their neighbours made them to search for a new settlement nearer home. Thus, the migration, which took place in the sixteenth century was via Otanama area of the Benin Kingdom through Ukomu and Apaka¹⁵ and thereafter to Apoi creek where they settled till this day.

The third version, which cites Benin as the place of origin links it to the Ijo claims that Ndo was the founding father, an Edo citizen who left Ado-Benin to Ekpete and from there to Igbedi creek where he and his followers made permanent settlement in the Niger Delta.¹⁶ Thus, with this claim, Apoi-Ijo links their ancestral migration to Benin descent. This claim is a common phenomenon among peoples of the Niger-Delta. It could be closely related to the impact of the old Benin Empire on the peoples of the western, central and eastern Niger-Delta.

However, E.J. Alagoa has also argued that the claim of Benin descent among various groups of Ijo is inconsistent. This is because by 1938, many central Niger Delta traditional leaders who claimed Benin as their ancestral home were far more than the previous years, “that it is now no more than a cliché”.¹⁷ He argued further that the claim of Benin origin is merely of a psychological satisfaction informed by their inability to know their place of origin and migration. Thus, it is common for any group, which does not know its origin to link it to any recognized distant empire or kingdom to maintain reputation and independence.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it should be noted that interaction and connection between the two groups cannot be denied, even though their Benin origin has no justifiable evidence so far in all spheres of their life.

The claim of Ile-Ife origin, which followed the Benin account is a little bit in the same vein. This is because the Benin people themselves claim Ile-Ife as a source of their dynastic migration and even pay homage to Ile-Ife as ancestral home, to the extent that in the past, Benin Obas were buried in a royal cemetery in Ile-Ife. This claim is owed to the controversial Prince Oromiyan who once ruled Benin in an interregnum capacity. Thus, E.J. Alagoa states that there is no doubt that the Apoi-Ijo group is affiliated, encouraged and influenced by their Yoruba neighbours, but that does not make them Yoruba by origin.¹⁹ The Ife account or claim is closely related to that of their Ilaje neighbours on Ife, as their origin according to Ilaje Intelligence Report.²⁰

Furthermore, the claim of Ile-Ife does not have sufficient evidence; rather it is just an oral tradition account among the people.²¹ This is because there is a great variation between the two groups in natural resources, spiritual and occupational endowment. A typical Apoi or

Arogo-Ijo man can stay beneath the river for a considerable length of time. Before the coming of the Christian Missionaries, the worship of water gods and goddesses was their principal religion unlike the Yoruba people. To Stride Ifeka, the proliferation of the Ijo people from the heart of the Niger Delta to Western Niger Delta was for two centuries, from 16th to 17th centuries²², an occupational one. Therefore, it is obvious that there is always a regeneration and assimilation of cultures over hundreds of years, which must have enhanced a harmonious relationship between the two groups.

The Apoi Ijo are a sub-group of Ijo, but their long settlement in the present area has made them to adopt aspects of the Yoruba culture. Perhaps being a minority in the old Western region of the Yoruba territory must have informed their claim of Ile-Ife descent. It is also pertinent to note that the adoption of Yoruba values has overtaken most of the people's original customs. But one thing remains till this day; the tradition of the Kolokuma Brass. Another thing very important to note is that the real Ijo Kolokuma of which the Apoi subgroup originated from is, perhaps the language that has little or no mixture of some other languages in Nigeria. This proves its early inhabitation in the Niger Delta area. E.J. Alagoa has also highlighted that the Ijo people generally settled in the original home of the heart of the Niger Delta three or four thousand years before the advent of Christ (BC).²³ Therefore, its Apoi-Ijo claim remains undoubted. On the contrary however, S.K Owonaro, a notable historian claimed Ife is the origin of the father of all Ijo people having Ojo who was one of the sons of Oduduwa as the ancestral father of Ijo.²⁴ But there have been no linguistic, socio-political and economic proof to succinctly justify this claim. It is quite clear that the Apoi-Ijo are a sub-group of Ijo whose original culture has been adulterated, because of neighbouring influences.

Patterns of Original Settlement

Throughout the vicissitude of history, the settlement pattern of any group is determined by the nature of its environment. Thus, the building materials and the settlement pattern of the Apoi-ijo were influenced by its environmental flora. The parent towns of Apoi-Ijo are situated in the hinterland with a distance of about ten nautical miles from the creeks

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where there is adequate dry land for building purposes.²⁵ On many creeks, minor islands are used for small fishing transit settlements. The nature of buildings here is temporary, and they consist of 7 to 8 feet grass-roofed, bamboo-walled houses in batches²⁶ of various camps according to occupational partners and relatives. Some are in the shape of wooden deck bed with thatched roof over low level water.

In the colonial period, mobile canoe houses were also built and put over water with kitchen and sleeping provisions inside. But it should be noted that those who live in temporary creek and island settlements also have permanent houses in the towns where they stay during festivals and when the water tide overwhelms the temporary settlements. The roofs of the houses are curve-shaped to enable them dry on time when it has rained, in readiness for another rain.

At the main land settlement, solid houses of mud walls, strong thatched roofs which could last for several decades were built, comprising of a parlour and several bedrooms. The houses were well spaced from one another at about seven metres. However, with the present trend of events, such houses can only be seen in remote villages while the major towns flourish with cemented apartments with corrugated roofs. One pertinent fact is that the Apoi-Ijo people are more interested in living on the mainland than the cold creeks and islands.

Indigenous Socio-Political Organisation

The indigenous socio-political organisation of the Apoi-Ijo subgroup is a dynamic one. In the pre-colonial period, the head of each town was an Olori, a Yoruba word meaning a leader or a head, which with the advent of colonialism was changed to Baale.²⁷ Every Baale of each of the nine major towns was chosen from among the dignified elderly men. But before the adoption of Baale, the Oloris wielded a lot of power especially during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. During that time, they served as consultants and producers of slaves in the obnoxious evil trade which bestowed wealth and great influence on the leaders. Aside from that, every Olori being a representative of his native town people in his relationship with the European slave merchants, collected export duties and protection taxes from the dealers. Thus, his authority was enhanced in relation to other sub-

leaders like clan head and Otu group head. Otu group is an association formed by mutual consent of young people for feasting, fishing and charm making in the case of communal crisis. The association is voluntary and there is no formal initiation ceremony.

Another important area to note was that each time an Olori or the head of the town wanted money for sacrifice, public atonement or assistance of any kind or public nature, he had the right to call upon the members of an Otu group through its head who mobilized its members to raise fund based on their ability.²⁸ In response, these members give necessary assistance according to the group's capacity. In addition, members show commitment and allegiance to Otu by reporting any trouble in the town to him who in turn fed the Olori of the town with his subjects' report. On the appointment of Olori, Otu or other important traditional stools, it wasn't, and is still not hereditary. This was because the struggle for political supremacy made the leadership succession not dynastic, but based on capability and the will of the majority. Thus, after the death of an Olori, his eldest son received no appointment to the throne.²⁹ All the responsible men were eligible to the throne except foreigners, slaves and deviant men. So, every elected Olori had enormous duties to perform. One, he judged and settled disputes among his people. Two, he presided over the sharing of a deceased man's property. Three, he carried out sacrifices for atonement in case of the outbreak of an epidemic like chicken pox, small pox and a host of other ailments. In addition, he ensured the cleanliness of the town by giving out instructions for the cleaning of town centres and bush paths leading to the town whenever the need arose.

The Apoi-Ijo also had a village assembly just like the Igbo as part of its socio-political organization. In this case, however, the oldest member of the village presided over the assembly but the executive leadership resided in the spokesman. This political component also comprised some other specialized offices such as those of the messenger, town crier, priest of the village deity among others. There were also units of social and political divisions, which were also subdivided into sub-wards, household or family, but were not comparable to the village assembly as the voice of the village assembly was more powerful. For instance, if an Olori became despotic or

acted unsatisfactorily, the village assembly had the power to reprimand, sanction or fine him.³⁰ But in a case where he refused to comply, the people would decline to follow him. He thus became a toothless bull dog or a mere figure head.

One other area worthy of note in the Apoi-Ijo pre-colonial political system was that there was no regular offer of title like its Ikale neighbour.³¹ However, there were Ijamo titles in Ajaqba and Orieqie title in Ijuoshun. These titles among others were granted to the citizens by the Olori or anybody he felt would be loyal and useful to the community. Each town, community or village had political autonomy in the pre-colonial era as there was no centralised authority. In the appointment of an Olori, it was principally the duty of elders. Women had little or no significance, as they were limited to their traditional and domestic responsibilities.

Change, Continuity and Adaptation during European Occupations

Aside from the preceding point of change, the Apoi-Ijo socio-political organisation witnessed other tremendous changes with the advent of Christian Missionaries and the British colonial rule. In this era, the remaining six towns had churches of different denomination and schools in all the major areas of Apoi-Ijo. Between the 19th and 20th centuries, many youths and few old men had begun to abandon some of the traditional beliefs and institutions, which were at conflict with the new Christian faith they had embraced. Thus, the adoption of foreign names for baptism became a common practice among the people. By so doing, the practice of polygamy gradually became unpopular among devout Apoi-Ijo Christians. The introduction of Christianity brought many other changes to Apoi-Ijo communities. Before this time, Oborowe was regarded as the tutelary god of the people. But with the introduction of Christianity, except for the ardent worshippers, people began to see Oborowe as an idol. Even the festivals were considered as the worship of idols by some Christians. However, Islam on the other hand has not found any reasonable foothold in Apoi-Ijo communities till this moment.³²

Another area of change in the economic institution is the people's involvement in crop farming compared to the 19th and the first phase of

the 20th centuries. Nowadays, agricultural produce from the area is now sent to other parts of the country for sale.³³ These include plantains, cocoyam, cassava, groundnuts among others. In addition, palm seed plantation is now a big economic activity as they have palm oil processing industries at Igbokoda, Igbobini, and Ojuala among others.³⁴

On the social life of the people, many changes have occurred. First, block cement houses with corrugated zinc roofs abound in all the nine major towns, while the bamboo-wall, and thatched roof are now limited to island settlements and few other villages. In fact, building of fine modern houses is now a healthy competition among the people.³⁵ The language spoken by the Apoi-Ijo people is another area where changes have taken place. The Ijo language has virtually been forgotten by the people, except names of fishing tools. Even the aged people can no longer remember more than a few words and probably the names of few objects in Ijo. It is not impossible that the introduction of Yoruba as a subject in the primary and secondary schools at the expense of Ijo had contributed to this trend.³⁶

It is also important to note that the Apoi-Ijo have recognized the fact that there is the need to complement fish consumption by adding meat to food as a variety hence, this has led to communal hunting of grass cutters, antelopes and other wild animals till this day. Today, not only do they eat bush meat, it is also a big source of income to the hunters and marketers.³⁷ Moreover, the traditional Apoi-Ijo dressing or attires are not the same today as they used to be. The tying of wrappers by men has gradually metamorphosed to wearing of knickers and trousers. In addition, even the wearing of robes by men is now giving way to modern long sleeved shirts and kaftans.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the Apoi-Ijo people are very receptive to changes just like any other ethnic group. Every sphere of their life is responsive to changes. As has been noted, the people have allowed both the political, economic, social and religious aspects of their lives to change with time. It is also worthy to note that even though there was much of social change, it does not mean that the people have lost their identity.

One thing very imperative to mention about the economic trend of the people is that by the 20th century especially in the 1970s, the area became one of the geographical settlement which occupied a pivotal position in the economy of modern Nigeria. Today, the largest revenue generated in Ondo State is from the crude oil in the Apoi-Ijo area. The area of study was also one of the areas in Nigeria that attracted British occupation because of its coastal nature. The Portuguese had earlier influence on the people when they had contact with the Benin Kingdom in 1472AD.³⁸ Thus, the people had served as intermediaries between the peoples of the hinterland and the European slave merchants.³⁹ Besides, the area was seen by the Europeans as the gateway to the hinterland trade. It was against this background that, as at the time the slave trade had to be abolished because of industrial revolution in Europe, there was the need to replace it with legitimate trade. Consequently, after the abolition of slave trade, legitimate trade in palm oil, cocoa, groundnut oil was introduced. But it should be noted that palm oil trade was the real trade that flourished in the area between the Europeans and the people.⁴⁰

There is no doubt that the European contact had tremendous impact on the people. Nowadays, most youths no longer adhere to the worship of water gods and goddesses because of the influence of the European Christian missionaries. The leading Christian churches in the area are: Catholic and Anglican. However, there other churches springing up as modern Pentecostal churches, but they have no much impact as do the Catholic and Anglican churches.

Apart from the religious impact, their contact with the Europeans also equipped them with the art of warfare. To back up this point is the simple fact that today, one could still find *Eturu*, an ancient European gun used by the Apoi for wars preserved in a local or traditional museum.⁴¹ This could be seen in their middle ship in buying, acquiring and raiding slaves for the people to protect themselves against such aggression.

In the colonial period, the people, for the first time in history, heard of a District Commissioner established at Lekki, but he never visited them, yet the Apoi chiefs paid homage to him. On 14th August 1897, a traveling commissioner Erhardt established himself at Igbobini,⁴² one of the principal towns for the consolidation of this new political development. He

was succeeded by J.H Ewart who later transferred the headquarters to Ese-Odo in May, 1899.⁴³

By 1902, Major Reeve Tucker summoned all the Apoi-Ijo chiefs and founded the Apoi-Ijo confederation with a central council and Baale of Igbotu as the president. However, it should be noted that during that time, when there was no Kalashuwe, the people never acknowledged any overlordship by the Osemowe of Ondo. Up to 1928, when the Okitipupa Native Administration was formed, the district was administered from Ondo.⁴⁴ In 1916, Governor General Lugard had minuted that, “an endeavour should be made to select a paramount chief for the Apoiljo”.⁴⁵ Consequently, in 1917, the Baales of the nine towns elected Jubo of Oboro as their central chief. This was the beginning of a traditional political landmark in the Apoi-Ijo confederacy. To this end, Jubo the central chief elect was recognised by the District Officer, Mr. Findlay as the Head of the Apoi-Ijo people and he assumed office as a crown head on 5th of May, 1917.

Unfortunately, Jubo’s reign was short-lived as he died in 1928. After his demise, a great dispute arose between the towns of Oboro and Shabomi on who should produce the next crown head, otherwise known as Kalashuwe, the equivalent of an Oba. Due to this development, the unity of the nine towns split in the following lines: Oboro, Igbekebo and Kiribo supported Oradi of Oboro, whereas the remaining six towns: Igbotu, Igbobini, Ipoke, Shabomi, Ojuala and Enikoroghaa supported Oto of Shabomi. The argument of the first group was that Oboro was the home of the deceased royal father and as such, that historical antecedent should be maintained. On the other side of the coin, the second group claimed that the migration of Toro Abukuba from Kolokuma formed the nucleus towns of Shabomi and Oboro. Therefore, Shabomi and Oboro have equal right with any other towns that were contesting for the throne.

After series of arguments and historical analyses, Oboro and Shabomi were alternated as homes of any supreme head of the Apoi-Ijo confederacy. Consequently, Oto of Shabomi was elected as the central chief, Kalashuwe by 1922.⁴⁶ In the same year, the District Officer, Mr. J. A Mackenzie proposed that a constitution should be drafted which would sanction formally that the towns of Shabomi and Oboro that produce the Kalashuwe should also elect Baales like any of the principal towns of the confederacy.⁴⁷

Since then, the Apoi sub-group agreed to have a central monarch as previously mentioned from the two groups of royal families that alternate the royal leadership. These royal lineages are: (i) Ebeli-Dumu of Oboro (ii) Ogele-Dumu of Shabomi.⁴⁸ But this was not without considerable difficulty and crisis as the Igbobini people, who felt cheated put up a protest that they were the third royal family group. This claim was however credited to the Barate lineage of Igbobini. Barate was said to be a one-time leader of Apoi-Ijo before the appointment of Jubo and as such, they too have the same right with the two other groups.

One other important thing to note was that after the death, burial and funeral rites of the general crown head (officially known as Kalashuwe), all the Baales, elders and all the dignified people of the confederation would gather in the town of the eldest man. There they would discuss and elect a new Kalashuwe in accordance with the constitution. After that, they would proceed to the home of the elected head and perform the coronation rites accordingly. Having given him a royal dress, the people would chant: Shuwe! Shuwe!! Shuwe!!! repeatedly. This implies an abbreviation of Kalashuwe which means “our god”! “our god”!! “our god”!!!. Thereafter, the crown head would be taken to the ancestral home at Apaka to remain there for three months without seeing the sky and anybody except the priest for divine power. When this period expired, the next is the installation ceremony at Igbekebo.⁴⁹ Thus, till this day, Kalashuwe remains the central authority for the Apoi-Ijo people, whereas the Baales remain leaders of their various domains.⁵⁰

Traditional Economic Institutions

The geographical network of lakes, creeks, rivers, streams, lagoon and the sea dictate the major economic occupation of the people, which is fishing. Locally made nets from cotton thread, tied raffia palm bark, which was pulled from one edge of the lake to the other were used for fishing. Bamboo, palm back, and water cages were also used with bait of roasted corn inside or small live fish to attract bigger ones into the cage. In addition, there were large-size hooks locally made by blacksmith for catching of big fishes having baited them with smaller fishes, earthworm and some attractive fruits. In the areas of low water level swamps, sharp

cutlasses were used to cut down the swamps and to catch the fish with cutlass.⁵¹

Another occupation was canoe construction. In the colonial era, there was a canoe licensing office. Aside from the building of canoes, the dressing of them was another source of revenue to the people.⁵² It should be noted that the riverine peoples of Nigeria, especially the Ijo people built canoes for economic, social and political reasons. Economically, canoes were used for fishing, displaying of wares for sale while on water and also for transportation of goods and services. The movement of canoes on flowing streams, rivers and creeks rests on the natural laws of floating along the water current and through the use of wave banner to enhance sailing along the movement of the wind. Socially, canoes were also dressed for festivals like marriage ceremonies, and water initiation of infants. Politically, they were used for wars. However, the use of canoes on the waterways linked many communities and contributed tremendously to the development of inter-group relations and socio-economic development. The canoe market itself was a big source of wealth to canoe marketers and builders to the extent that the colonial government imposed canoe license as cited earlier.⁵³

There was also basket weaving as an economic industry. Palm tree branches were cut and used for the production of baskets of various sizes. Baskets were used to carry and store smoked fish and farm produce. For those who were involved in this industry, it was a means of livelihood. The palm branches were also used for the production of brooms for both domestic and commercial purposes. In the colonial and postcolonial eras, school children also engaged in the production of baskets and brooms as part of extracurricular activities. The cordial relationship between them and their neighbours such as the Ikale, Ilaje Edo and among others encouraged commerce. They attended common markets with these neighbours where they sold their goods and in turn bought farm produce such as yam, cassava, melon, maize, and cocoyam. The rivers, creeks, lagoons that characterised the area were no barriers to its inter-group relations, a situation which resulted into the socio-political and economic dynamism of the people.

The high consumption of local gin known as “Ogogoro” and palm wine “Oguro” by the people and neighbouring communities encouraged their production for both local and commercial purposes and was also another source of revenue. The Ogogoro itself was and is still being produced from fermented palm wine.⁵⁴ The excess of this products were commercially transported to other parts of Yorubaland through the water highways or roads.

One other aspect of economic life worthy of mention is the production of salt in commercial quantity, which they sold to their neighbours in exchange for floricultural products. Apart from consumption, salt was also used for the preservation of fish in the process of sun drying or smoking them. Thus, salt occupied an important area of the people’s economic life at both subsistence and commercial exportation. The salt industry was necessitated by the presence of salty waters. Thus the production of salt was done by boiling salty water until the water evaporated while the salt substance settled at the pot base. This salt market interaction enhanced inter-group relations between the people and their neighbouring chiefdoms during the pre and postcolonial times. Salt was also produced by trapping the salty sea water in large holes at high tide and allowing it to evaporate in the sun. Then, the salt-encrusted mud would be scooped out, mixed with water and drained through funnels into calabash. The subsequent evaporation would filter the salt free from impurities. Thus, the Apoi-Ijo and other Niger Delta peoples in general met their domestic salt needs and had a significant surplus to market to their hinterland neighbours.⁵⁵

Pottery and sculpture are other areas which are worthy of mention. These were encouraged by the availability of laterite and mouldable red soil in some parts of the upland area along Igbokoda and Mahin boundary. Items of pottery were used for cooking, serving, preservation of images of the gods and goddesses in their shrines and also as gifts to important visitors. In addition, they were also used for the preservation of valuable goods and also as cooling vessels for water and other edibles. The production involved moulding, firing and sunning. They were of aesthetic appeal while the excesses were sold to Edo and their Yoruba neighbours. It should also be noted that this industry was mainly women’s business.

From all the aforementioned, it is glaring that the Apoi-Ijo precolonial and colonial economy was diversified, and virtually all spheres of their economic lives were practical in nature. However, the people were economically limited in scope by the availability of natural resources and climatic factors. In the vast lowland and islands of swamps and numerous waterways, the traditional economy has largely been limited to fishing, salt making, boat building, raffia mat production and rice production. In spite of this geographical endowment, the people like any other sub-group of Ijo were never isolated from the people of the hinterland as the coastal and long distance trading across the hinterland and to the desert was well established even before 1500.⁵⁶ Their transportation and communication were largely restricted to the use of canoes prior to the modern age because of the numerous navigable waterways.

In the area of slave trade commercial activities, they served mainly as middle men between the European slave merchants and other peoples of the Niger Delta and the hinterland peoples especially the Edo and Yoruba. Some of the European goods such as mirrors and clothes which were brought to the coast during the said trade were in turn sold to the peoples of the mainland. The slaves also served as domestic help and farm labourers. However, after the abolition of the slave trade, most of the ex-slaves in any part of Apoi-Ijo territory and those of their neighbours were assimilated and incorporated into the socio-cultural organisation of the people.⁵⁷

Conclusion

The Apoi-Ijo is a sub-group of the original Kolokuma people of the Brass area of the Niger Delta, who now inhabit the riverine part of Ondo State where crude oil is explored today. This historical antecedent was informed as a result of the similar ecological nature of the place to that of the original Ijo of the heart of the Niger Delta, which the Yoruba and their Edo neighbours to a great extent were not endowed with. It is therefore against this background that the area was hitherto unoccupied before the arrival of the Apoi-Ijo.⁵⁸

The area itself has three main geographical features, which dictate the various occupational endeavours of the people. First are the main bodies of

waters up to the Atlantic Ocean, which are used for the traditional fishing occupation. Second are the marshy swamp lands where cat and mud fishes are usually caught and also a place where the people usually plant rice before the rainy season and thirdly the mainland savannah and forest where they carry out cultivation of crops.⁵⁹ As for the migration to the present geographical area, the traditional occupational factor was an overwhelming one, from the natural resources available to the occupation of the people till date.⁶⁰

Before the oil exploration and exploitation of the area, it has been sparsely populated. Even till date the human traffic is less compared to the neighbouring towns of Okitipupa, Ikale among others. This is because the Niger Delta people and few riverine Yoruba people such as Ijebu and Awon that are used to such geographical environment, are far from the Apoi-Ijo settlement. Thus, the influx from such areas has been very little with no significant impact on the people's activities. The Ife claim of descent does not really hold water if one goes by the people's marine way of life. Nonetheless, a sociological study of man's adaptation to any foreign environment may not completely put the oral tradition account claim of Ife out of place.

In addition, it is therefore quite obvious that the Ife claim conflicts with the claim of the original Ijo-Kolokuma of Brass in the heart of the Niger Delta. This poses a challenge to historians to carry out more research on the people's history. However, from all the available evidence, it is clear that the Apoi-Ijo are a sub-group of the original Ijo-Kolokuma of Brass who still have many Ijo words mostly in their aspects of occupation, festival and religious interactions especially in their belief in water deities. A few examples of these words are: Ann (fishing net), Peri (a type of music among the Ijo of the eastern Niger Delta), Shuwe (a small god or creator), PuOwei (water god), Kalashuwe (central monarch) among others.

However, the evolution of a centralized monarchical system of government during the colonial period was of political significance. Prior to that period, the Apoi-Ijo sub-group like the original Ijo was not centralised, but characterised by independent autonomous communities with a house rule system.

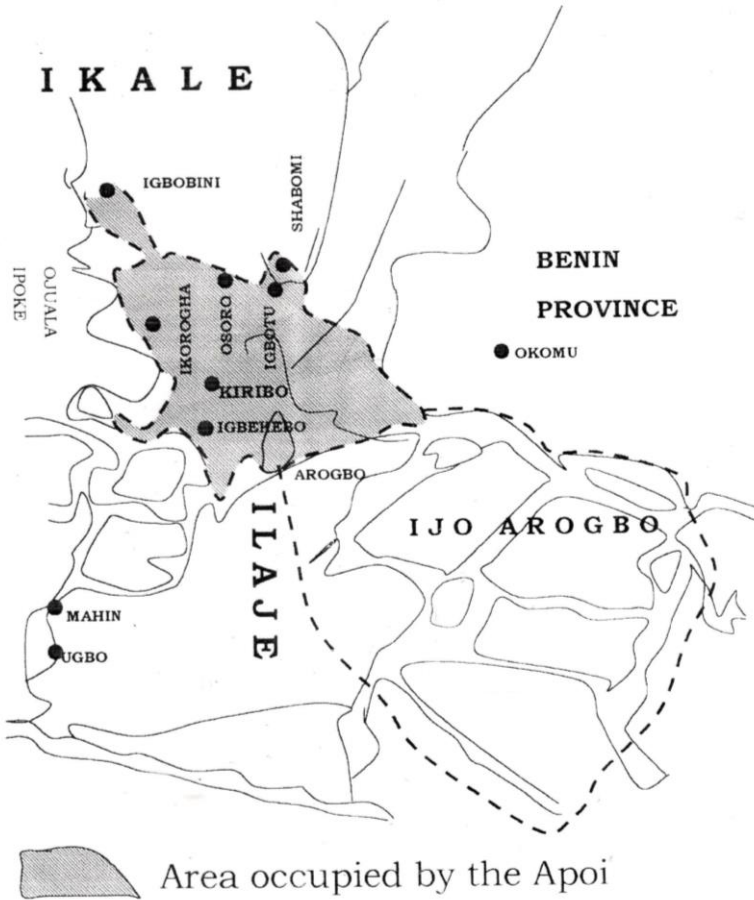
Another area of historical significance was the shift from fishing as a major occupation to hunting of animals such as rabbit, grass cutter, antelope, and the cultivation of food crops. The development of food production has brought about the development of markets in areas of Apoi-Ijo's territory. In addition, it enhances formation of communities and the development of healthy populations. In the long past, Apoi-Ijo communities were quite far from Igbokoda, but today, the distance is not too long because of agricultural advancement. It is therefore imperative to note that the people have never been static in terms of occupational endeavours.

One other significant thing is that the Apoi-Ijo history is a continuous and a unique type. This is because there are series of historical developments from the original descent up to the present stage. The area is always evergreen with vegetation which enhances diversified occupations. The atmosphere is very unpredictable especially in the dry season as it can rain any time. In addition, from the foregoing natural endowment, the people thus become highly receptive to changes in all facets of life especially in the economic aspect. In all realities, they have undergone series of significant changes which have enhanced the people's adaptive life.

Lastly, one significant point is that Apoi occupies a special position in Ijo studies, because it is an extreme western sub-group of Ijo who have adopted some Yoruba language and blended it with that of Ijo in their daily communication. In this case, its identity is not definite, as it is between Ijo and Yoruba, but more of Ijo.

APPENDIX

THE APOI-IJO AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS



SOURCE: AN EXTRACT FROM FILE NO. 1024, OKITIIPUPA DIVISION ONDO PROVINCE, NATIONAL ARCHIVES, IBADAN (NAI). P.54

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