

Socio-Cultural Relations between Abajah and Her Neighbours, 1921 – 1960

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Abstract

This paper examines socio-cultural relations between Abajah community in Nwangele Local Government Area of Imo State and her neighbours in Nwangele Local Government Area of Imo State namely; Amaigbo, and Isu communities and in IsialaMbano Local Government Area of Imo State namely; Amaraku, Anara, Amauzari, and Umunkwo between 1921 to 1960. This study intends to show the level of interactions between Abajah community and her neighbours and how they have related both in the areas of marriage, African traditional religion, Christianity, festivals etc., have affected the relations between Abajah and her neighbours. Based on the foregoing, a qualitative research method was used to unearth the relationship between Abajah and her neighbours. The study made use of primary and secondary and tertiary sources of history. The primary materials came from personal interviews conducted by the researcher, archival documents, while secondary materials were textbooks, and journal articles. Tertiary materials were works of different authors gotten from the Internet. The study finds out that relations between Abajah and her neighbours within the period understudy were cordial. The work concludes that, the people have continued to maintained mutual relationship as people that share common ancestry.

Introduction

Background to the Study

Inter/intra group relations are indeed very common among the various groups in Nigeria. One way or the other, people of different ethnic background were at one time or the other engaged in some sort of relations. At one time such relation was peaceful, at other times, conflictual. But whatsoever shape the relations assume, it is important to uphold the fact that inter-group relations existed and still exist between and among the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. The relations existed before colonialism, it continued during and even after Colonial Rule. Among the different dimension of inter-group relations in Nigeria include but not limited to the following; marriage, trade, war, politics, and exchange of cultural troupes etc.

Although, inter-group relations have an undertone of an affair between immediate neighbors, it is not limited to immediate neighbor only. However, the focus of this paper is on two immediate neighbours, namely: Abajah and her neighbours. Considering the creation of local government,

Abajah in is Nwangele Local Government Area, while some of her neighbours are found in Nwangele Local Government Area and Isiala Mbano Local Government Area, both in Imo State.

Thus, among the Abajahneighbours, the following communities are her immediate neighbours; Amaraku, Umunkwo, Amauzari, and Anara in IsialaMbano Local Government Area, followed by Isu and Amaigbo in Nwangele Local Government Area. It is important; perhaps pertinent to study the relationships that existed between these neighbours.

The concern of this paper therefore, is the socio-cultural relation between these neighbours with the aim of investigating the areas of marriage, African Traditional Religion, titles, Christianity, etc.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this paper is primarily to investigate and analyze socio-cultural relations between Abajah and her neighbours between 1921 to 1960; it will also take a look at the advent of Christianity in Abajah community and its roles in promoting inter-group relations.

Theoretical Framework

This paper will be anchored on Social-Behavioural Theory of Interdependence. This theory is considered as one of the major theories on intergroup relations because it argues favourably that closeness and harmonious livings are keys to all relationships. Interdependence theory is asocial exchange theory that states that interpersonal relationships are defined through interpersonal interdependence, which is "the process by which interacting people influence one another's experiences"¹Interdependence theory was first introduced by Harold Kelley and John Thibaut in 1959 in their book, *The Social Psychology of Groups*, and was further extended by the duo in 1978. The theory argues that in the course of interacting, the interacting groups influence one another's experiences and evidence of group manifest. The theory provides a practical framework for understanding the underlying psychological factors that motivate other individuals in which you interact (in both personal and professional settings), as well as providing a framework for understanding the underlying psychological factors that motivate your own actions when interacting with others.

Furthermore, the theory argues that closeness and harmonious living are keys to all relationships. It submits that there are rewards and costs in any relationship and that people try to maximize the rewards, while minimizing the costs. As observed by the theory, rewards are exchanged resources that are pleasurable and gratifying; while costs are exchanged resources that result in a loss.² No doubt, in the course of intergroup relationships between Abajah and her neighbours, there were rewards and costs.

Conceptual Clarifications:

Traditional Religion:

In talking about the African Traditional Religion, the perspective of the researcher goes beyond the simply sociological aspect of religions - though religion engages the major portion of the world's population through advocating for justice, peace and humanity. Traditional religion

speaks about our relationships to one another as human beings; that means our relationships among ourselves but also in relation to coming generations - and through them to the whole of creation.³The traditional beliefs and practices of African people include various traditional religions. Generally, these traditions are oral rather than scriptural, include belief in supreme creator, belief in spirits, veneration of the dead, use of magic, and traditional medicine.⁴Religious and cultural pluralism has been a prominent feature in human societies and this became intensified with the impact of modernity. The phenomenon of such pluralistic experience presents opportunities as well as challenges.

In the words of Emile Durkheim “There are no religions which are false”,⁵ furthermore, he stated that “Religion performs the key function of providing social solidarity in a society. The rituals, the worship of icons, and the belief in supernatural beings “excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states”, this according to him bring people together, provide a ritual and symbolic focus, and unify them.⁶ This type of analysis became the basis of intergroup relations. The existence and persistence of religion on the basis of the necessary function it performed in unifying society. John Mbiti underscores the important belief and sense of the community among traditional Africans. According to him, in traditional Africa, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. Whatever happens to the individual is believed to happen to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. ...⁷. In the case of Abajah and her neighbours, African Traditional Religion helped in creating a strong sense of common or shared values very important for holding a culture together in unity. These shared values undoubtedly contributed to shaping cultural identity.

Diplomacy:

The meaning of diplomacy is further complicated as even in its purest sense, the word has two general meanings: in the policy sense, that is “a government’s diplomacy”; or the operational sense, the conduct of business between and among governments; conducted through bureaucratic institutions and processes.⁸ The former is loosely intended to refer to a country’s “foreign policy”, hence the confusion, while latter is the activity of a country’s foreign policy bureaucracy. It is the instrument of communication, not the message communicated; a means to an end and not the end itself.⁹The term “diplomacy” has been used by statesmen and scholars, historians, sociologists etc., since the founding of nation-states to describe the aspirations and goals of sovereign entities in the international arena and in the study of intergroup relations. Today, diplomacy is applied at the international, national, and local levels by foreign ministers, military strategists, academicians and community leaders to discuss the vital interests of their countries and communities in ways suggesting that everyone understands precisely what they mean and will draw correct inferences from their use of the term. Nothing could be further from reality.

The study of inter/intragroup relations would not be complete without understudying the role of diplomacy in the interactions between various communities or ethnic groups. Diplomacy, which also means the application of tact, and cunning, was applied to bring to an end the border wars of Abajah and some of her neighbours. It served as a negotiating tool to achieve peace amongst the Abajahneighbours during the times of conflicts and wars.

The practice of diplomacy existed and still exists because of the continuous and constant need for intermediation and negotiation among human groups.

Socio-Cultural Relations between Abajah and Her Neighbours: 1921 To 1960

Abajah and her neighbours mentioned in this dissertation related in a number of ways before the advent of Christianity in the community in 1921. Societies like the *Ohadibia*, *Ogbuehi*, and *Okonko*, helped to foster relations between Abajah and her neighbours. African Traditional Religion and Christianity also played great parts in cementing relations. These relations, which go way back in history, manifest through marriages, cultural festivals and activities, and also wars. The interactions have been peaceful most times and hostile at other times. On inter-group relations, Afigbo argues that different Nigerian ethnic and cultural groups sought through their richly varied traditions of origin and migrations and through accounts of the rise and expansion of their socio political system, to preserve, inter-alia, their perceptions of the relationships which existed between them and their neighbours.¹⁰ In fact, relations among the Igbo have always been based on some factors either relating to common historical origins, ancestry or to a common language, tradition, and custom, religion, belief system, trade and festivals, among others. These factors tend to bind people closely together but can also lead to war.

The *Ohadibia* society, an association or society of traditional medicine men was introduced into Abajah community from Amauzari at the beginning of the 20th century.¹¹ This society was a dreaded one in the community because of the enormous magical powers the members possessed. While the society lasted, there were rules and regulations guiding the conduct of the members. The members made sure that no member tarnished the good image of the society or other members through false claims. Divination amongst the members was prohibited on *Eke* days.¹² The members of the *Ohadibia* society cured the sick and also prepared charms and amulets for people. They also fortified people against poison, witchcraft and other diabolical attacks; there were soothsayers among them also.¹³ Pa Raymond Ekezie noted that Abajah became a religious pilgrimage of sort as people from neighbouring communities flooded Abajah in search of solutions to their problems from these members of *Ohadibia* societies who possessed and wielded so much magical powers.¹⁴ According to Pa William Uzoma, some of the men from neighbouring communities who came to Abajah during this period in search for the magical powers of the members of the *Ohadibia* society ended up marrying some women from Abajah.¹⁵ He further stated that *Ohadibia* society played a great role in inter group relations between Abajah and her neighbours during the period under study.

The *Okonko* Secret Society: The *Okonko* Secret Society according to Nze Chima Amadi¹⁶ was introduced into Abajah community through its members who were resident Amaraku during the period. The members who possessed enormous magical powers were initiated into the society by dead of the night. Nze Charles Njoku¹⁷ corroborated the account given by Nze Chima Amadi, he, however added that the members never harmed any innocent person, rather, they were consulted when disputes arose between one or two members of the community. He went further to say that the members were impartial when settling disputes. On inter group relationship; the *Okonko* Society cemented relationship between Abajah and Amaraku community especially amongst those who belonged to the same society.

The Ogbuehi Society: The *Ogbuehi* Society according to Nze Onyewuchi Iwuajoku¹⁶ had its origin in the pre-colonial period. According to him, human heads were used to bury the dead bodies of Nzes in the community. This trend continued till 1950, when Chief Hilary Iwuoha, a prominent Nze died. Account given by his only surviving son, Chief Anokwute Iwuoha¹⁸ states that his father instructed them to use cow for his burial rather than heads of human beings, thus, from 1950, the culture of using human heads for the burial of Nze title *Ogbuehi* society stopped, hence the formation of the *Ogbuehi* Society. This custom later spread to other neighbouring communities like Isu, Amaigbo and Amauzari respectively. Chief Emma Nwosu¹⁹ noted that killing of human beings to celebrate the death of an Nze started in Abajah and later spread to other communities.

African Traditional Religion

African Traditional Religion in Igbo traditional society partakes fully of all the features of world traditional religion, including its beliefs, sacred myths, oral qualities, strong appeal to the hearts of adherents, high degree of ritualization, and possession of numerous participatory personages such as officiating elders, kings, priests, and diviners. Before the advent of Christianity, Africans worshipped the Almighty God. However, their method of worship was through various deities. Abajah and her neighbours being part of the larger African society engaged in African Traditional Religion as well.

The people of Abajah community originally worshipped two gods: *Ezeala-Ogwugwu* and *Okwara-eligwe*.²⁰ Their shrines were located at the *Nkwo-onyeukwu* (now *Orie-Abajah*) market square. According to Nze Thomas Nwadike²¹ the third god, *Ezealakatam* was introduced to Abajah community by a woman from Amauzari in IsialaMbano Local Government Area of Imo State who was married to an Abajah man before the 20th century. *Ezealakatam* shrine according to Nze Thomas Nwadike was a dreaded one in Abajah community and attracted a lot of adherents from very far and wide. He went further to compare *Ezealakatam* to the dreaded *Okija* shrine. Corroborating the account of Nze Thomas Nwadike, Nze Oparaeziuka noted that deities in Abajah community attracted people to the all walks of life and served as a means of inter-group relations.²² These people who according to Nze Charles Amadi,²³ deities like *Ezeala-uhie*, *Aja-ala* Umuokpu, *Iyi-Oforetc* were introduced into the community through Abajah's neighbours. In his account, there were no churches then, the people saw the deities as the easiest means to reach *Eke-kereuwa* (God the Creator).

Ancestor worship

The Igbo society believes in character and has very strong belief in life after death. Mbiti²⁴ posits that when a person dies, his soul or spirit wanders around the bush, until his relations perform the necessary and befitting burial rites. The waiting stage before the incorporation of the deceased into the world of the dead is called *transitional period of the deceased*. The ancestors, the Igbo believe, wield tremendous powers of blessings and power of curse. After the interment of a fulfilled elder, and after the obsequies must have been completed, the family usually the *okwara* (the first male child in the family), erects a shrine and creates an *ogugu* (*ofof* like sticks) for venerating the spirit of the dead through prayers and sacrifices. The Igbo, according to Ilogu, believe that sometimes the dead ancestor may reincarnate into their

agnatic families.²⁵ They believe that the dead ancestors do not come back in their original forms; rather, they become especially interested in the newborn child, who they say may inherit some of the ancestors' characteristics. The ancestor becomes the tutelary spirit of the child and sees to the well-being of the child. The Igbo regard these ancestors as the special guardians of morality and create shrines in their honor, as well as creating symbolic references to their existence. Abajah and her neighbours through ancestral worship related during the period under study.

Prior to 1921, Abajah and her neighbours had social and cultural interactions; these interactions were made possible and simplified because they are contiguous neighbours. Contiguous nature of Abajah and her neighbours also promoted marriages amongst them. These marriages were largely peaceful. The researcher's paternal and maternal grandmothers hailed from Amaraku and Umunkwo respectively both in Isiala Mbano Local Government Area. It was easier for these neighbouring communities to intermarry in the past. According to NzeChima Amadi²⁶, the idea of marrying from these neighbours was to save cost and time of long trekking and prevent hazards that would have arisen in the case of long journey. Pa William Uzoma in his account on inter-community marriages stated that most of them chose neighbouring communities to marry for two reasons; one, it was easier for them to visit their in-laws place to complain about the ill-behaviour of their wives; secondly, proximity made it easy for them to send a stubborn and adulterous woman packing.²⁵ These neighbours too married Abajah's daughters.

Apart from marriages, Abajah and her neighbours related culturally. Festivals like *Owu*, *Okorosha*, *Mmanwu*, *Ogwugwu*, *IgbaNta*, *Ekeleke*, *Edere*, *Okorogbo*, *UriAmuma*, *Edere*, *Alikiri* served as points of contacts and interactions among these neighbours. Most of these festivals were borrowed from these neighbours of Abajah. Pa Raymond Ekezie²⁷ had it that Umuokwaraku kindred in Umudiagba village Abajah borrowed her *Owu* dance from Ekpe in Isu one of Abajah's neighbours. Sir John Onyeiwu²⁷ stated that *Ogwugwu* festival celebrated before the beginning of farming season by Ozuoha and Amaudara villages in Abajah was borrowed from Amauzari in IsialaMbano local government area of Imo State. *Ogwugwu* festival which was celebrated with much fanfare in Abajah usually attracted tourists from neighbouring communities and beyond. He stated further that, apart from *UriAmuma* of Umuokpu village that was not borrowed, other festivals celebrated in Abajah were borrowed from the neighbouring communities. Apart from the *Owu*, *Okorosha* and *Mmanwu* festival still being observed in Abajah and that of her neighbours, other festivals are no longer being celebrated today.

Account on the Origin of Christianity in Abajah

Account given by Pa Raymond Ekezie²⁹ the missionaries who brought Christianity to Abajah community came into Abajah through Umuokpu in 1921, but the first church in Abajah community was built at Umudiagba village, Abajah through the effort of Pa Michael Ohaegbu who was among the early Christian converts in Abajah. The account has it that he embraced Christianity very early while on apprenticeship at Emekuku and followed the missionaries to Uzoagba community in Ikeduru Local Government Area to establish St. Joseph's Catholic Church Uzoagba in 1916. Pa Michael Ohaegbu was able to convince the missionaries from Emekuku to visit his village and start a church as there was none in the area and also due to long distance his people trekked to worship God on Sundays. Early Christian converts from Abajah

and her journeyed to Emekuku and Uzoagba every Sunday to listen for worship. According to him, 'it was like going to Jerusalem to see Jesus'.³⁰ To make the building of the church in Abajah community easier, Pa Michael Ohaegbu provided some plots of land for the subsequent building of the church named St. Michael's Catholic Church, a name he adopted after his conversion and baptism.³¹ The building of the church ended the religious pilgrimage to Emekuku by indigenes of Abajah community. After erecting the structure, Pa Michael Ohaegbu relocated and settled finally in the village with the sole aim of propagating the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Corroborating the account of Pa Raymond Ekezie, Pa Columba Orjiako stated that Abajah indigenes who in contact with the missionaries either at Onitsha or Emekuku must have brought Christianity to the community prior to 1921, but one thing he is sure of is that the first Catholic Church in Abajah community was built in the year 1921.³² and that St. Michael's Catholic Church at Umudiagba Abajah served as worship center for early Christian converts in Abajah community and that of their immediate neighbours till 1936 when St. Gregory's Catholic Parish, the first to have a residential priest in the person of Rev. Fr. D. Hackett was inaugurated in 1937. Nze John Onyeiwu³³ stated also that the choice of Umuezeobollo in Amaigbo community in siting the first parish and the subsequent placing St. Michael's Station under St. Gregory's Parish Amaigbo in 1937 was as a result of sabotage by some members of Abajah community who thought that by having a resident priest in their midst will stop their polygamous lifestyles.

In the account of Mr. John Oleru on the history of Christianity in Abajah community, the missionaries stepped their feet in Umuokpu village in 1921 because Umuokpu serves as a gateway to many Abajah's neighbours in Isiala Mbano Local Government Area of Imo State. The choice of Umudiagba as the first the place where church was built in Abajah community was at the insistence of Pa Michael Ohaegbu and other prominent sons of Abajah at that time, who believed that building the church at Umudiagba would serve as a consolation to him.³⁴ Furthermore, he narrated that some of his like Lazarus Nwaozuzu, Justin Onagwu and Emmanuel Odoemenam who were among the early Christian converts in Abajah community all wedded at St. Joseph's Uzoagba due to lack of any Christian church in Abajah community.

Christianity in Abajah was not rosy at early stage, as it faced a lot of oppositions and met stiff resistance from prominent members of the community, especially from amongst the members of the Ohadibia, Okonko and Ogbuehi societies. The members of these dreaded societies saw Christianity as an affront to him for the preaching varied from what they were used to know and practice at the same time.³⁵ Pa Michael Ohaegbu also suffered persecutions from his kinsmen for his actions. Nze Onyeiwu further stated that the doggedness of Pa Ohaegbu led to the spread of Christianity in Abajah, thus in 1928, Umuokpu village built their own which they named Holy Rosary Catholic Mission.

In 1937, St. Gregory's Catholic Church located at Umezeobollo, Amaigbo was inaugurated. With the subsequent, inauguration, the Catholic churches in Abajah community fell under the administration of the St. Gregory's Catholic church with Rev. Fr. Hackett of blessed memory as its first administrator, Abajah remained under the administration of St. Gregory's Amaigbo, till 1964 when Isu parish was carved out of St. Gregory's parish, Amaigbo. Upon the creation of Isu Parish under Owerri Diocese, Abajah fell under Isu Parish located at AbohIsu along Isu/Anara Road. The ceding of Abajah to Isu was for administrative convenience of the Catholic Church. Abajah remained under Isu Parish till 1994 when two parishes were created in Abajah community, namely; St. Michael's Parish Umudiagba and St. Aloysius Parish, Ozuoha, Abajah. The migration of Abajah people to Isu and Amaigbo before the creation of the parishes

helped in cementing relations amongst them. During this period, they were all perceived to be one entity despite having come from different autonomous communities.

Abajah people did not attend Catholic Church alone during this period. According to Hon. Bethram Ucheka, before the Church Missionary Society (CMS) was introduced in Abajah, some indigenes of Abajah had already started to attend C.M.S church services at Anara. He mentioned names like Robinson Onyeocha; Sampson Uregbulem both of Okwenafa village in Ozuoha Abajah, a village that share common boundary with Anara in Isiala Mbano Local Government Area of Imo State.³⁶ The Church Missionary Society was introduced in Abajah in September 1937. There are two versions of the introduction of the Church Missionary Society in Abajah. One version has it that CMS came into Abajah through Umunkwo community. This version was given by Godfrey Obialo³⁷ and John Echefu³⁸. Another version has it that CMS came into Abajah through Anara. This version was given by Mr. Charles Amadi³⁹ and Chief Justin Dike⁴⁰ both of Ozuoha village in Abajah. There is no general consensus as to how CMS came into Abajah community; one factor that is worth noting is that CMS entrance into Abajah was as a result of inter-group relations.

Christianity has been intricately with the history and formation of African society which Abajah and her neighbours are part of. Throughout its long history, the Church has been a major source of social services like schooling and medical care. Schools were introduced in Igbo land by the missionaries, they also built hospitals. Abajah community had access to western education through the help of the missionaries that came from Emekuku in 1921. Having built a church at Umudiagba village Abajah, Umuokpu was the choice of the missionaries for the building of school which the locals nicknamed *otaakara*. The choice of Umuokpu village was because the village shares boundary with most Mbano communities, it is also a gateway to other parts of the state. According to Nnaoma Columba Orjiako,⁴¹ western education was introduced into Abajah community so as to consolidate the gains made by church; it was also a method they used in propagating the gospel. According to him, the choice of Umuokpu was because Umuokpu is a gateway to Amaraku and Umunkwo communities. It is worthy to note that western education was one of the tools used by the colonial masters in Nigeria. The school brought to Umuokpu by the missionaries was later moved to Ozuoha Abajah, the argument being that Ozuoha is centrally located in Abajah community, hence the renaming of the school from Holy Rosary School Abajah to Central School Abajah. Umuokpu village, through communal effort built a primary school in 1959.

Central School Ozuoha Abajah and Community School Umuokpu Abajah, two foremost schools in Abajah community attracted students from Abajah's neighbours and through that way cemented relationships amongst these neighbours. The building of schools in Abajah community and her neighbours encouraged the likes of Rev. Mgrs. Justin Onyenemegam from Abajah and late Mgrs. Batholomew Ahaneku to join the seminary as they were ordained catholic priests in 1966 and 1967 respectively.

It is evident that Christianity played a great role in inter-communal relations amongst the communities under study. Catholic religion came into Abajah through Emekuku and later spread to Amaigbo and other neighbouring communities. Thus, Isu, Abba, Umuoze and Abajah were all formerly under St. Gregory's Parish in Amaigbo. Prior to the siting of a Parish in Abajah

community and having a residential priest as a pastor, St Benedict's Catholic Church at Amaraku served as a centre of worship for the villages of Ozuoha, Addi and Umuokpu all in Abajah because of its proximity.

Conclusion

Relations between Abajah and her neighbours during the period under study was very a peaceful. Both African Traditional Religion and Christianity provided were tools for inter group relations. Marriages also promoted inter group relations amongst these neighbours.

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