

Impact of Colonial Rule on Inter-group Relations Between the Benin and the Esan Peoples of Nigeria

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Abstract: *This paper examines the impact of British Colonial rule on inter-group relations between Benin and Esan communities. British contact with most Nigerian states, kingdoms and empires in the twentieth century had far reaching effect on inter-group relations. However, the extent to which colonial rule impacted on inter-group relations amongst the peoples of Nigeria has not been given its proper place in the existing literature. With the use of primary and secondary sources, the paper discusses the conquest and imposition of colonial rule on Benin and Esan and how these impacted on the social, political and economic relations among the people. Benin and Esan had hitherto enjoyed varied degrees of relations - from cordial to hostile – especially in the pre-colonial period. However, the emergence of colonial rule and the socio-political and economic policies initiated by the colonial authorities further added new dimensions to the relationship between Benin and Esan as both gravitated from independent to dependent status.*

Key Words: Inter-group Relations, Ethnic Identity, Colonial Rule, Colonial Prejudice.

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Introduction

Colonial rule in Nigeria had important implications for inter-group relations. It meant, among other things, that people had to take into account ideals, interests and institutions arising not only from their indigenous experiences and sanctioned by their traditions and usages, but also those introduced and imposed by new rulers¹. The actual consequences of colonial rule on the dynamics of inter-group relations in Africa did not capture the imagination of scholars until perhaps, very recently. All along, it would seem that attention was duly focused on the political, social and economic consequences of colonial rule and the significance of these for the emerging nation². As a result, issues regarding the implications of these changes on the cosmology of these societies on the one hand and the nature and character of human relations among them on the other, were either taken for granted or, in fact, deliberately ignored. The problems that emerged from this posture were twofold. Firstly, for a fairly long time, the changes and continuities in inter-ethnic relations which colonial rule eventuated in these societies remained largely misunderstood and unappreciated. Secondly, problems of nation-building as they relate to the National Question in these nations could not be appreciated, articulated and addressed. All of these affected the growth and development of the African continent for quite some time.

¹ A.E. Afigbo, *The Igbo and their Neighbours*, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1987, p.79.

² We have found such an approach in the following works: I.F. Nicolson, *The Administration of Nigeria 1900-1960: Men, Methods and Myths*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969; P. Margery, *Lugard, The Years of Authority 1908-1945*, London, Longman, 1960; W.R. Crocker, *Nigeria: A Critique of British Colonial Administration*, London, Longman, 1936; J.S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1960 and L.R. Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emerging African Nation*, London & New Jersey, Princeton, 1963. It should be added that while not denigrating their contributions to the understanding of the impact of colonialism on the African continent, they failed, however, in the significant area of relating the analysis to the evolution of inter-group relations.

However, scholars of culturally plural societies were soon to prove that, for an objective understanding of the contemporary structure and patterns of inter-group relations in heterogeneous societies such as Nigeria, an appraisal of the place of colonial rule in the trajectory of this process is necessarily important³. Therefore, although an essentially economic and political phenomenon, colonial rule left behind its trail a plethora of developments which had serious implications on the evolution of inter-group relations in Nigeria. It is against this background that this paper attempts a discourse on the process of the establishment of colonial rule in Benin and Esan and its impact of this on the peoples' relations. Although not an area for which the colonial administration appeared to have had any particular strategic economic interest, developments in Benin and Esan were greatly influenced by policies formulated against the background of broader considerations, with regards to the colony and protectorate of Nigeria. The discourse will therefore situate Benin-Esan relations within the mainstream of British colonial rule. It attempts to illuminate in due course, the nexus between colonial administrative and socio-economic policies and the changes in the Benin-Esan relations. This is done within the context of the military conquest and subjugation of the people, colonial prejudices and the resulting social, economic and political changes which helped shape the relations amongst the peoples.

Benin and its northern neighbour, Esan (Anglicized Ishan), are located in south central Nigeria. Pre-colonial Benin was made up of a single and powerful kingdom which was head by the Oba. The kingdom was, as is today, been comprised of seven local government areas, namely Egor, Ikpoba-Okha, Oredo, Orhionmwon, Ovia East, Ovia West and Uhunmwode. Pre-colonial Esan on the other hand, although culturally homogenous, was politically fragmented as they were made up of about thirty autonomous kingdoms each of which was headed by the Onojie (pl.

³ See Immanuel Wallerstein (ed.), *Social Change: The Colonial Situation*, New York, Wiley, 1966; C.W. Anderson et. al., *Issues of Political Development*, Eaglewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall Inc, 1967, pp. 15-85 and J.S. Coleman, *op. cit.*.

Enijie). Today, Esan has been carved into five local government areas, namely Esan West, Esan Central, Esan North East, Esan South West and Igueben.

British Conquest and Colonial Prejudice against Benin and Esan

Although the British appeared to have had contact with Benin and Esan dating as far back as the sixteenth century or even earlier, not much impact had occurred in either area until the first quarter of the twentieth century⁴. The military conquest and subjugation of the Benin and Esan peoples by the British appears to have been inevitable. This is because the event itself was part of the grand imperial plan to conquer the various polities within the Nigeria area. This plan involved among others, the removal of all resistance to the installation of British rule, the expansion and consolidation of British authorities over the peoples of Nigeria as a *sine qua non* to the establishment of the imperative objective conditions for the actualization of the economic objectives of European imperialism. Consequently, it would appear that colonialism detested the existence of a free people because although Esan, unlike Benin kingdom, was not an area for which the British had any particular strategic interest, yet it was forced to suffer the bitter lessons of colonial conquest and subjugation like the other Nigerian polities. This should however, not elicit any surprise because the contradictions of the capitalist economic system with which Britain was entangled during this period necessarily meant that force was a fundamental feature of her relationship with the various Nigerian polities.

The conquest and occupation of the Benin kingdom and Esan was characterized by wanton display of brute force by the British⁵. This

⁴ For details of early contacts see A.F.C. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897*, London, Longman, 1977.

⁵ P.A. Igbafe, *Benin Under British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on An African Kingdom*, London, Longman, 1979, Chapters 2 and 3; J.I. Osagie, "Colonial Conquest and Resistance: The Case of Esan People of Benin Province of Nigeria", *Canadian Social Science*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2014), pp. 82-89.

excessive brutality and violence instilled in the Benin and Esan a sense of bitterness, distrust and aloofness towards the colonial administration. As we shall subsequently see, this engrained negative feelings among the people throughout the period of colonial rule, a development that helped shape the people's perception of themselves and their relationship with other Nigerian groups⁶. But before we go into the details of this, let us first of all examine colonial government's attitude towards Benin and Esan if only to establish its dialectical relationship with the peoples' ethnic consciousness.

Colonial policies and actions in Esan reflected a deep-seated prejudice against the people. The consequences of such preconception were such that the people acquired the unpleasant stereotype of being singularly stubborn, ill tempered, intransigent and lawless. The reports of colonial administrators about the people will illustrate this point. For example, in one of his letters to the Divisional Officer, Ishan Division, in 1916, Lord Lugard observes: "I am fully alive to the fact that the Ishan, based on report from Benin Province, in fact the whole people in your Division, are probably the most difficult in the southern provinces⁷."

As late as 1931, A.T. Wright, who carried out a comprehensive anthropological investigation on the Ishan, generalized that the people were very rebellious and adamant to changes and, in fact, knew little or seemed to care little about their past⁸. Such examples are endless. Such was the scope of official prejudice against Esan and, in fact, that was a fundamental factor in the colonial government's conception and shaping of negative attitudes towards the people throughout the colonial period. Some informants believe that some of these preconceptions were based on the reports given to the officials by the Benin elites which cannot be substantiated. However, these highly prejudiced feelings against Esan were

⁶ T. Osadolor, cited in J.A. Bernard, *The Nigerian Peoples: Perception and Interaction*, Lagos, Tech Books, 1975, p. 11.

⁷ National Archives Ibadan (NAI), CSO 26/2/File 14617 Vol. 6, Benin Province 19A, "Intelligence Reports on Benin –Edo Areas", redacted by A. Frampton.

⁸ NAI, BenProf, "Ishan Division, Anthropological Investigation, 1931", redacted by A.T. Wright.

attributable to a number of factors which were, at that time, preponderant features of the nature and pattern of the relationship prevailing between the Esan and the colonial administration. The first of these factors was the nature of the conquest of Benin and Esan which was particularly brutal. This, in virtually all cases, elicited prolonged and ferocious resistance from the people.

The recklessness with which the administrative officers in charge of such military campaigns carried out the conquest and occupation of Benin and Esan was so conspicuous that, in 1909, an Assistant Resident at Uromi had to warn the junior officers in the following unmistakable terms: "I wish this tour to be a pacific one. This military escort is not for offensive purposes and it is only sent as a protection for you. I do not wish this to be taken as a punitive patrol"⁹. The end result of this forcible occupation of their lands was the resolute dislike of the colonial policies and authorities by the people. The savage brutality that characterized the occupation of Benin and Esan produced, on the part of the people, bitterness, distrust and aloofness towards the colonial administration and, later, at independence it created suspicion among the people¹⁰.

Furthermore, far from alleviating relations between the administration and the people, the influx of 'aliens', particularly the collaborative activities of some Benin Chiefs who served in Esan as 'agents' or 'warrants Chiefs' for the benefit of the invaders worsened the situation for Esan. The reasons for Esan hostility towards Benin have been examined before and in several other works¹¹. Suffice to say that cordial relationship that Benin had with the colonial authorities in the course of pursuing their activities in Esan was rather offensive to the people. To the Esan therefore, it was the case of an old foe returning in the company of another, more powerful enemy. Such attempts were however interpreted by

⁹ See G.S. Victor, "The Establishment of Colonial Administration in Benin Kingdom", M.A. Thesis, University of Jos, 1989, pp. 96-98.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ C.E. Okojie, *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People*, Benin City, Ilupeju Press, 1994; J.I. Osagie, *op.cit.*, pp. 82-89.

the British to mean the ‘primitive’, ‘atavistic’, ‘stubborn’ attributes of people adamant against civilization which must be eliminated¹².

Ignorance about the nature and dynamics of Benin and Esan societies and socio-political institutions was also partly responsible for the British administration’s prejudice against the people. This was manifested in the colonial assumption that the people were backward and lacked model political institutions through which they could be effectively governed according to the basic principles of an indirect rule system of administration. But this is hardly true because long before the arrival of the Europeans, the Benin and Esan had developed socio-political and economic systems in which included monarchy that were the custodians of the norms and values of the society. In some instances, institutionalized organs of governments such as the *Oba* (Benin) and *Onojie* (Esan) royal and non-royal families had emerged, the complexity of which does not even merit the concept of politically unorganized. The problem with this type of socio-political organization was that all the organs of government were fused together in such a way that to subtract one from the others meant the abrupt destruction of the whole system. The dynamics of this system clearly eluded the colonial government which was obviously fascinated by the Emirate system in the far northern Nigeria. As for the Esan, they naturally refused to cooperate with the colonial authorities. For while they did not understand the reason for British conquest and occupation of their land, they were even more confounded that the British attempted to rule them through some Benin chiefs as collaborators – who they (the Esan) considered as their traditional rivals and enemies depending on the circumstances of their relations¹³.

Extrapolating from the above, it is possible that the reputation of Benin and Esan as being difficult Administrative Divisions that the people acquired during the formative years of colonial rule was the function of at

¹² G. S. Victor, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-35.

¹³ O. Matthew, *Conflict and Incorporation in Colonial Nigeria: The Integration of the Esan*, Lagos, Aspire Corp. Ltd., 1975, pp. 39-56.

least three factors. Firstly, the way and manner the people were conquered was recklessly brutal. Secondly, the people's response to this imposition was prolonged and fierce. And thirdly, British conservatism was based on the unscientific concepts of racial superiority¹⁴. The prejudice, however, influenced the colonial government's perception of the people and hence their attitude towards them. It is in this sense that the government's attitude to the evolution of the people's ethnic identity cannot be ignored since it was important in the shaping of ethnic consciousness among the Benin and Esan. In fact, the evolution of colonial policies in Benin and Esan had fundamental implications in the political context and on the people perception of themselves. The colonial government attitude towards Benin and Esan in particular created a sense of alienation which in turn gave rise to ethnic consciousness which was based on what psychologists call the in-group/out-group relationship between the Benin and Esan, the colonial government and the other ethnic groups in Nigeria. The in-group, the psychologist tells us, is:

“One's own reference group, the individual is nurtured within this groups, develops group norms and values and personality. To him what happens to his group is the best. It becomes his little world. Those who do not belong constitute the out-group, the group that he castigates and stereotypes as foreigners in order to

¹⁴ M.M. Tukur, “The Imposition of British Colonial Domination on Sokoto Caliphate, Bornu and Neighbouring States 1897-1914: Reinterpretation of Colonial Sources”, Ph.D. Dissertation, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1979.

demonstrate between the in-group and the out-group¹⁵”.

The point, therefore, is that the colonial government’s attitude towards Benin and Esan had serious implications on their relationship, on the one hand, and between them and other Nigerian ethnic groups on the other. In one dimension it altered the pre-colonial contexts of these relations. At another level, while widening the pattern and scope of these relations, the people no longer controlled its internal dynamics. This was now in the hands of the colonial authorities which manipulated it according to its fundamental economic interest. It was these changes and continuities in the people’s – Benin and Esan – relations during the colonial rule that became central variables in the evolution of ethnic and political identity that came to dominate Nigerian politics in the course of time¹⁶.

Colonial Administration and Political Changes in Benin-Esan Relations

Following military conquest, haphazard attempts were made to establish the rudiments of a local administration in Benin and Esan. This was based on the system of indirect rule developed and first introduced in the Northern Provinces by Lord Lugard. In what appeared to be series of memoranda, Lugard formulated his famous policy of indirect rule, integrated to mean the rule by colonial administration through the existing indigenous institutions. In conceptualizing the basic tenets of indirect rule and their application, Lugard was basically concerned with the structure and functioning of the emirate system in Northern Nigeria. As a result, he made no attempt to bring forward any separate sets of ideas concerning the

¹⁵ For analysis of the application of this theory in Nigeria during the terminal phase of colonial rule, see I. Nzimiro, “Origin of Ethnic Ideology in Nigeria”, *Current: An International Features Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 9, 1993, pp. 16-35.

¹⁶ A Saheed, “Inter-Ethnic Relations and the Problems of Discrimination in an Urban setting: A Case of Ijebu Settlers in Colonial Ibadan 1893-1960”, B.A. Long Essay, Department of History, University of Ibadan, March, 2004.

application of indirect rule in the non-Muslim areas of the Northern Provinces. Quite the contrary and as J.A. Ballard points out, “the effective content of Lugard’s policy was its insistence upon assimilating the administration of ‘Pagan’ areas to the emirate model [...]”¹⁷.

How this was to be done will be discussed subsequently. Let us examine, at this juncture, the basic features of this ‘emirate model’ into which the administration of the ‘Pagan’ areas were to be encapsulated, if only to show their incompatibility. According to J.C. Maxwell, the Fulani led emirates of Nigeria possessed what has been christened the ‘close system’ of political structure¹⁸. In this system, the highest political offices were usually reserved for close relatives of the ruling class – in this case, the Emir and his ruling lineage. An important feature of this system was the existence of a commoner class, the *Talakawa*. This class was excluded from participating in the top government positions of the Emirate.

Another feature of this system was the religion of Islam which, as an ideology, explained the context of values and the social relations based on patrimonial rule, against which agitation was not geared, but within the system, as the clientele jostle with each other for the allocation of scarce resources and in which status stratification defined the legitimacy of ranks¹⁹. Consequently, the normative expectations of the environment under the influence of Islam provided an integrated system of relative social rankings among the emirates. This model, particularly its hierarchical arrangement, is akin to what takes place in Britain, where status was explicitly defined in a hierarchy of vertical ties. It was, therefore, surprising that the emirate model was ranked highly by the British. In fact, they were so fascinated with the model that it became the yardstick which determined

¹⁷ Cited in R.O. Adebayo, *Incorporation of Ethnic Minorities in Colonial Nigeria: The Case of Yoruba and Benin Peoples of Western Nigeria*, Lagos, Newman Academy, 1986, p. 12.

¹⁸ J.C. Maxwell, *The Spread of the Fulani Emirate in Eastern Nigeria*, London, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 56.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

the type of centralized system of government which they established even in areas such as Esan, where a non-centralized system existed.

The significance of this phase of administrative experiment to the Benin and Esan societies needs to be emphasized. In the first place, since it was part and partial of the administration's plan to centralize authority along the lines of the emirate model, it contributed to the revival of the institution of excess and unchecked power of the Oba and Enigie in Benin and Esan respectively. These institutions, like in the past, activated the unifying potentials of the people and their political awakening. However, the new dispensation resulted in checking the excessive use of powers which were given to the rulers by the colonial authorities. Some Benin and Esan elites resisted these abuses and took evasive action to deal with adamant rulers, but this was not an easy task because of the backing they got from the colonial authorities²⁰.

Colonial Rule and Socio-Economic Changes in Benin-Esan Relations

The establishment of the British administration in Nigeria saw the implementation of Western economic and social policies which greatly transformed both the structures of traditional Nigerian societies and the outlook of the Nigerian peoples. J.S. Coleman contends that it was the tempo and character of these changes that created situations and attitudes which predisposed many Nigerians to racial consciousness and nationalist activities²¹. It has been observed that the diffused (or refracted) process of mobilization gave rise, in the critical moments of the colonial period (roughly between 1920 and 1950), to a feeling of identity with sections and ethnic groups rather than with a Nigerian Nation²². As we shall see, the Benin-Esan experience runs counter to K.W. Deutsch's concept of social

²⁰ Interview with Chief Mosegbe Imagbosoria, 73, Retired Civil Servant, Benin City, 2009.

²¹ J.S. Coleman, *op.cit.*.

²² C.T. Adamu, *The Edo and Majority Groups Politics in Western Nigeria*, Benin City, Godson Publication, 1968, p. 26.

mobilization in a number of important respects²³. However, before we analyze this theme in detail, let us first of all look at the social and economic variables that facilitated the incorporation of the Benin and Esan societies into the colonial modern sector and how this factored into their patterns of relations.

The first of these was the development of economic infrastructures such as roads and bridges. In Benin and Esan, road construction appeared to be the first infrastructure to have been given serious attention by the colonial authorities. The reasons for this are not farfetched. In the first place, since its development depended almost entirely on the exploitation of human and natural resources of the indigenous people, it was the cheapest investment from the perspective of the colonial authorities. Second, road contributed tremendously in addressing the practical and immediate administrative and political problems confronting the colonial authorities in Benin and Esan during the early phase of colonization. On the basis of these two factors, Eyo's argument that these roads were purely for administrative convenience serving as links between the various divisions²⁴ is, basically, correct.

The first major road constructed in Benin-Esan link was completed in 1921. This was the 123 kilometre Benin – Ekpoma Road which linked Esan with Eastern Nigeria. During the same year; the roads linking Esan and Auchu were constructed. Thus Benin-Esan became linked with other communities in Nigeria through road networks within the land²⁵. Together with construction of bridges, the construction of roads completed the

²³ K.W. Deutsch conceptualized 'social mobilization' as the process by which major cluster of old social economic psychological commitments are eroded and broken and people become available for new patterns of socialization and behavior. Thus, the original images of mobilization implies two distinct stage: (a) the stage of uprooting or breaking away old settings, habits an commitments and (b) the induction of mobilized persons into some relatively new patterns of group membership, organization and commitment. See K.W. Deutsch, "Social Mobilization and Political Development", *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 55, No. 3, (September, 1961), pp. 493-514.

²⁴ For more details see S. Donaldson, "The Economic Foundations of the Esan Society 1860-1960", M.A. Thesis, University of Jos, 1986.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

process of the integration of Benin-Esan into the emerging political economy under colonial rule with a number of fundamental implications for their relations with their neighbours²⁸. For example, roads facilitated the consolidation of colonial rule by making possible the formation of Benin and Esan Divisions as part of the Benin Province of Western Nigeria. Road construction also helped to generate a sense of common identity amongst the people. In this regard, it can be argued that the emergence of Esan Division and Benin Province deepened the structures of inter-group relations between the people of Benin and Esan. However, this was the variable that premised their political and ethnic consciousness during the period under review for, as one analyst rightly contends: “[...] the establishment of Benin Province and Esan Division marked a watershed in the evolution of Benin-Esan political consciousness [...] the unification made both people conscious of their cultural, linguistic and other socio-economic affinities [...]”²⁶.

Furthermore, the construction of roads helped open the area under review to the outside world by linking them with the East, West and the Middle belt. Consequently, this led to the acceleration of the exchange of goods and services as well as ideas between Benin and Esan on one hand and between them and their neighbours on the other. Besides, the new roads made long distance journeys easier, safer and more attractive than had been the case in the pre-colonial times. This encouraged Benin and Esan traders to break the barriers of their immediate environment and visit distant centres of economic enterprise with relative ease²⁷.

The boom in the export of foodstuffs and cash crops continued despite the problems caused by the outbreak of the Second World War. The volume of the commodities exported from Benin and Esan during the period of The War was quite considerable. This was partly the result of the agricultural officer’s propaganda in favour of increasing food and cash

²⁶ S.T. Amadasun, “The Edo and minority Politics in Post-Independence Nigeria”, M.A. Thesis, University of Benin, Benin City, 1985, pp. 19-26.

²⁷ O.A. Demond, “Politics and Socio-Economic Change in Benin Province, 1900-1955”, M.A. Thesis, University of Lagos, 1985, pp. 20-28.

crops production, especially given the demand for foodstuffs to feed the armed forces. This was facilitated by good road networks.

Among the significant changes brought by this network of roads was the increase in the economic and social interactions between Benin and Esan and between them and their immediate and distant neighbours²⁸. Thus, while Benin migrants poured into Esan communities and forests, Esan migrants inundated Benin communities and forests in search of livelihood. Traders, artisans and labourers from distant neighbours such as Urhobo, Isoko, Itsekiri, Igbirra, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba came to Benin and Esan to ply their trade. Benin informants are unanimous on the fact that, soon after the colonial authorities created the necessary infrastructure, the people found themselves interacting with those they hitherto never imagined they would come into contact with²⁹. This was how Benin and Esan came to acquiesce in the reality of inter-group relations under colonialism; a reality they could neither influence nor control. Another important dimension of this development was the influx of people from distant ethnic groups into Benin and Esan.

However, this rapid expansion was to become a serious source of conflict between the Benin and Esan, and consequently a problem for the colonial authorities. The point we are trying to make here is that in addition to deepening the scope of contact between interacting groups, the development of economic infrastructures changed a lot of cross-cultural and other exchanges that affected the people's perception of each other. One sphere in which this manifested stridently was in the commercial sector. Benin and Esan would appear not to be comfortable with the entrepreneurial enterprise of these ethnic groups who, from 1930s, seemed to have dominated the commercial and administrative life of their territories, particularly that of its headquarters, Benin City.

²⁸J.B. Ojiako, *An Economic History of Mid-Western Region*, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1965, p.28.

²⁹ Interviews with Chief Edo Osagie, 80, retired school principal, Igbade Aigbohian, 90, Farmer, Simon Edeki, 75, Church Pastor, Madam Doris Osunobu 60, Civil Servant, Inibokun Esanagbedo, Businessman at Benin City, Uromi and Ekpoma, March, 2008.

It is in this respect that the improvement of transport and communication that followed the conquest and incorporation of Benin and Esan altered the people's relations with their neighbours. In one context, the concentration of social and economic infrastructure in Benin City, transformed it into the urban hub of the Province and, therefore, a sort of 'melting pot' for the various ethnic groups in the country. One interesting development arising out of this was that political awareness in Benin and Esan started in Benin City. In a sense, this is to be expected because the cosmopolitan outlook of Benin City and its urban composition created conditions which tended to produce not only new social relationships and wider opportunity for social contact, action and interaction, but also different and conflicting value systems and social conditions³⁰. For instance, as the Esan and other immigrants from different ethnic groups increasingly concentrated and interacted in Benin City, so did the demand for social and economic services increased.

Given the overall austere environment of the colonial political economy, the stage was already set for an outbreak of open antagonism between Benin and these groups. Simultaneously, there was the impact of the depression of the 1930s which economically incapacitated most of the people. For an essentially agrarian population such as Benin and Esan, the great depression crippled many homesteads and made them increasingly vulnerable to capitalist exploitation. As studies have shown, economic crisis of the 1930s increased the suffering of the Benin and Esan peasants by exposing them to the vagaries of the international capitalist economic system on the one hand and, at the same time, rendering them vulnerable to the predatory activities of local capitalists on the other³¹. In the attempt to cope with the economic hardship of the depression, many immigrants diversified into active farming. According to some analysts, this move brought them in direct competition with Benin and Esan farmers who had

³⁰ J.B. Ojiako, *op. cit.*, p.48.

³¹ S.C. Jeremiah, "Colonialism and the Introduction of Cash Economy in Benin Province and Environs 1900-1959", M.A. Thesis, University of Benin, 1987, p.20.

hitherto been the sole suppliers of foodstuffs to the immigrant population. The immigrants also attempted to buy land from the distressed Benin or Esan people. To them, selling of ancestral land to non-indigene was quite unthinkable but, when faced with grinding and agonizing poverty, even previously unthinkable things could come to mind³².

Another change that Benin and Esan experienced during the colonial period was the establishment of a monetary economy. Systematic taxation (both through threat and coercion) and the introduction of a common currency and entrenchment of the capitalist concept of profit as a goal were all significant elements in the historic shift from an almost wholly subsistence economy to a predominantly monetary economy. Generally, colonial tax assessment in Benin and Esan started in 1913³³. Soon after the ordinance of Land Law was put into place, the colonial authorities adopted a more serious and rigorous system of assessment. This involved the effective usage of the Oba, Enijie and their chiefs. They assisted in the census of the people from house to house. They also visited farms, measured the area covered by crops and calculated the whole crops and the yield. On the basis of this assessment, they estimated the annual income earned by each person and imposed a fixed tax based on this.

Generally, Benin and Esan resented the idea of paying taxes. This problem was further compounded by the refusal of the authorities to collect taxes in kind or to accept local currencies. This resentment generated by the taxation system was, however, soon to be transferred to colonial rule as a whole. As Osaze observes, “it was the taxation policy of the colonial administration which was the most serious cause of discontent with colonial rule in Benin and Esan⁴¹”. Not only was the concept of taxation foreign to the people, there were also problems caused by the scarcity of British currency with which these taxes had to be paid. In addition, the crude and arbitrary assessment methods adopted by tax collectors aroused widespread

³² A.A. Peter, *Change and Continuity in Colonial Nigeria*, Ibadan: Ashley Publication, 1989, p. 60.

³³ A. Agbontaen, “Benin and their Neighbours 1900-1960”, M.A. Thesis, University of Lagos, 2000.

resentment. For example, one account indicates that adolescents had their pubis checked in public and the presence of pubic hair was considered as evidence of maturity and adulthood³⁴. Esan, like their Benin neighbour naturally resisted all these abuses, and took evasive action. While some either abandoned their homes or simply went to their farms only on days set aside for tax collection, others were less diplomatic about the matter and openly defied the tax collectors. Resistance to colonial taxation is, therefore, an important theme in colonial Benin and Esan history.

Colonial taxation was also an important factor in the development of migrant labour in colonial Benin-Esan society. Indeed, the compelling demands of a monetary economy which started with cash taxation and, gradually, came to include the desire for cheap European manufactured consumer goods both forced and enticed some Benin and Esan to seek paid employment. Many leading scholars of Benin history have attested to this fact³⁵. For example, in his analysis of labour in colonial Benin-Esan, Egharevba has established a critical nexus between the colonial administration's taxation policies and the phenomenon of labour migration in Benin and Esan³⁶. The difficulties associated with paying taxes in the face of mounting economic crisis and arising from the contradictions in the colonial political economy compelled many able-bodied Benin and Esan to seek wage employment in the Native Authority, the railway and road construction sites, on the Plateau minefields and coal mines in Enugu and the cocoa plantations in Western Nigeria.

The point, therefore, is that although the impact of the colonial economy on Benin and Esan is generally believed to be indirect and accidental³⁷, it is instructive to note that the development of the monetary

³⁴ For details see Archer Bestman, I.B. Stella, *Contradiction in British Colonial Economy*, London, Longman, 1987, p. 60.

³⁵ J.O. Onyemakinde, "A History of Indigenous Labour on the Nigeria Railway 1895-1945", M.A. Thesis, Bayero University, Kano, 1990.

³⁶ Interviews with Chief B.A. Ewalefoh, 80, retired revenue collector, Benin City; Chief T. Imasotan, 76, retired local government staff, Lagos and Pastor Patrick Edugie, 80, businessman at Benin City and Uromi, March, 2008.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

economy produced significant changes, which impacted tremendously the nature of the people's relations among themselves and with their neighbours. For instance, it loosened or, in some cases, extinguished the cooperative ties that hitherto bonded the individual to his clan or lineage members. Lineage bonds were greatly undermined by the strong temptations of individuals to pursue profit and by the extra-lineage opportunities which stimulated the movement of people from their villages to urban centres such as Uromi, Benin City, Agbor, Warri or Sapele. Some even moved from these areas to other parts of Nigeria. Furthermore, the shift to a monetary economy led to the drift towards wage employment in colonial Benin and Esan. Although statistical data is lacking in this regard, after the Second World War, a large number of young men in Esan Division and Benin Province were engaged in one form of wage labour or the other³⁸.

On the basis of these developments, it is possible to conclude that the search for wage labour gave an important impetus for contact and interactions between Benin and Esan, as well as with their neighbours, during the period under review. It was also a contributory factor in the phenomenon of urbanization in colonial Nigeria. The Benin and Esan who migrated to the major urban centres in the country met and interacted with Nigerians from other ethnic groups. Through this process, they got their outlook on life generally broadened and, on returning to their communities, they brought in new ideas which influenced the peoples' perception of themselves and their neighbours. The socio-economic and political realities in these urban centres, where colonial policies separated different ethnic groups, were of particular relevance here. In some far Northern towns for example, the separation of Nigerians along ethnic, religious and geographical lines (*Birni* for the sons of the soil, *Tudun Wada* for Muslim settlers and *Sabon Gari* for Christian settlers) had the tendency of

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

generating ethnic exclusiveness and “particularism” amongst Nigerians³⁹. When one correlates this fact with the conflicting claims of the various ethnic groups, particularly the cases of Benin and Esan, it becomes very obvious why ethnic associations were such a preponderant feature of these towns.

However, the single most important event contributing to social and economic change in Benin and Esan during the colonial period was the opening of mission stations and schools in Benin City and some parts of Esan. There were also government established schools in various parts of these communities, starting from 1905⁴⁰. This marked the beginning of Christian Missionary activities and, more importantly, of Western education in Benin and Esan. From modest beginnings, it was going to expand rapidly throughout 1918 and into the next decades, after the Roman Catholic Mission and the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) entered the field. These missions provided opportunities for Western education in Benin and Esan. The spread of Western education gathered momentum after the Second World War. By 1948, there were about 139 junior primary schools and 53 senior primary schools spread across the Benin and Ishan Divisions⁴¹. The first of these colleges to be established in the Province were Edo College and Immaculate Conception College in 1948 and 1950 respectively. In the Esan Division it was not until 1955 that a secondary school, The Annunciation Catholic College in Irrua, was established. Before now, many Benin and Esan youths attended schools in Yoruba towns and cities, especially in Ibadan and Lagos. Many graduates from these schools became teachers or Native Authority employees in Benin and Esan, while a few moved to the major urban centres in the country,

³⁹ See R.W. Osadolor, “The Establishment of Colonial Administration in Benin and Esanland, 1906-1943”, PhD Thesis, Department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria, 1985.

⁴⁰ For a comprehensive account of the activities of these missionary bodies, see B. Edosehe, “History of Modern Education in Benin Kingdom 1922-1975”, M.A. Thesis, University of Calabar, 1983 and T. Amadasun, *Western Education in Midwest State*, Lagos, Aptech Technology, 1988, p. 10.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

particularly Lagos, Ibadan and Kaduna, to take up employment⁴². Coleman argues that one of the most revolutionary influences taking place in Nigeria since the beginning of the European intrusion has been western education. Additionally, although the European influence was felt directly by only a small minority of the population before 1951, its evolution and continuity during crucial formative years made it far more effective and penetrating than the superficial economic and social aspects of culture contact⁴³.

This is true for Benin and Esan as it is for virtually all ethnic groups in Nigeria. In the first place, the search for Western education was a factor of contact between Benin and the Esan. For example, a number of Esan youths were schooled in Benin City. It was this small group of emerging Esan elite that were the first to become socially mobilized. Given that they were the first to realize the subordinate status of the Benin and Esan in Western Nigeria, they consequently championed the people's quest for a political identity⁴⁴. Therefore, it was this category of persons that first initiated the move for the formation of a pan-Edo politico-cultural association as a social vehicle for the mobilization of the people in their quest for political emancipation in Western Nigeria⁴⁵. For this category of people and the other sections of the Benin and Esan groups, the hostile and exploitative dispositions of the colonial state had become increasingly unbearable. While nationalist ferment sharpened the consciousness of the people, they increasingly experienced brutal manifestations of colonial imperialist exploitation in the society. Indeed, the persistent failure of the colonial government to meet the economic and social welfare needs of the people contributed to galvanizing anti-colonial forces in the Benin and Esan society.

⁴² Interview with Chief A.F. Ughulu, 75 years, Retired Civil servant, Lagos, 2008.

⁴³ S. Udeze, *The Edo and Minority Group Politics in Western Nigeria*, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1975, p. 128.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ See S. Ojieagba, "Migration and Intergroup Relations in Nigeria during the 19th and 20th Centuries" in Y.A. Ochefu, A.D. Igirgi (eds.) *Studies in Nigeria History and Culture*, Makurdi, Aboki Publishers, 2002. For a wider dimension see Okwudiba Nnoli, *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*, Ibadan, Vantage Publishers, 1989.

The spread of Western education alongside missionary activities in Benin and Esan played an important role in the enhancement of the people's relations with their neighbours. Through these contacts and interactions they learned more about the other Nigerian groups as compared to the pre-colonial period. The spread of Western education also brought many immigrants into Benin and Esan, most of whom became teachers, Native Authority employees and agents to the European companies which operated in the areas. Western education was, therefore, an important factor in the history of Esan-Benin relations throughout colonial rule, for it contributed immensely in changing the people's attitude towards the new order. This development helped accelerate their integration into the modern age⁴⁶.

Post Second World War Developments and the Benin-Esan Relations

A major feature of the post-war development was the constitutional reform that allowed political independence in Nigeria. Arising from the significant impact they had on the character of inter-ethnic relations in the country, it is important to examine critically their trajectories and implications for the peoples of Nigeria as a whole and for their relationships with each other. The position here is that the constitutional reforms that characterized the decolonization process in Nigeria generated inter-ethnic and inter-regional animosities which, in turn, undermined age-long inter-group relations in the country⁴⁷. This was the case because, although the struggle for independence brought many people together, generally, the nature of the decolonization process, its fundamental objective and affiliation with ethnicity spawned inter-ethnic acrimonies among Nigerians.

⁴⁶ See P. Gilford, R.W. Louis (eds.) *Decolonization and African Independences, 1960-1980*, Yale, Yale University Press, 1988 and "Inter-Group Relations in Nigeria", External Studies Series, Ibadan, Department of Adult Education, University of Ibadan, 1992.

⁴⁷ O.S. Adamu, *The Benin and Majority Ethnic Politics in modern Nigeria*, Benin City, Oduma Publications, 1985, pp.10-15.

Let us take Sir Arthur Richards's Constitution of 1946 as an example. The Constitution had three basic objectives which Richards outlined as: promoting the unity of Nigeria, providing adequately for all the diverse ethnic groups which make up the country and ensuring greater participation by Africans in their own affairs⁴⁸. Contrary to these enumerated objectives, however, the Constitution only served to encourage ethnicity and regionalism. Indeed, by using the region as the basis for political organization and mobilization, the Richards Constitution only laid the foundation for an unwieldy federation, with one region twice as big as the other two combined in size, area and population. Thus K.O. Dike could not have been more correct when he anchors the origins of regionalism and ethnicity in Nigeria to the Richards Constitution⁴⁹.

John Macpherson's Constitution was not radically different from the previous ones. It consolidated the regional establishment by assigning legislative authority to the Regional Houses of Assembly. It also established Regional Executive Councils and granted greater autonomy to the three regions. One important element of the Constitution that should be mentioned is the concessions it granted to the regional political leaders and nationalists, who, in their attempts to broaden their stronghold on the unfolding political process, resorted to appeals to sectional and primordial sentiments. The dimensions of these appeals were unprecedented in the annals of the country's political history. This served to accelerate intra and inter-regional political rivalries and conflicts, which manifested themselves in minority separatist agitations and the fierce competition for dominance by the majority ethnic groups⁵⁰. The 1954 Oliver Lyttelton's Constitution completed the emerging trends by ensuring the establishment of an unwieldy and unbalanced federal structure in Nigeria.

The issue here is that the regional politics and the contradictions of the decolonization process introduced a new dimension in the socio-

⁴⁸ K.O. Dike, *One Hundred Years of British Rule in Nigeria, 1851-1957*, Lagos, Federal Ministry of Information, 1957, p. 43.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

political relations among Nigerians. Indeed, the regionalization of the country as of 1946 produced three administrative units dominated by the ethnic hegemonies, namely the Hausa-Fulani in the North, the Igbo in the East and the Yoruba in the West. The same groups also controlled the political sub-systems of these regions. Arising from the fact that these regions were basically ethnically heterogeneous, the phenomenon of regionalism created a stratified society in the sense of the term used by H.S. Morris, in which:

“...every member of the society is forced into the relationships of incorporation with some members of the society and into relationships of transaction that are also relationships of superiority and inferiority with the other members of the society in respect of jointly and sectional held assets [or values]⁵¹.”

It was in the bid to alter this unbalanced relationship that ethnic minorities challenged the *status quo* throughout the three regions. This also became a critical component of their relationships throughout the period of decolonization and even after. The specific case of the Benin and Esan in the Western Region would support this point.

In the making of Western Nigeria, the British created a ‘core’ area comprising of the Yoruba majority group and a ‘periphery’ area which was made up of the disparate minorities groups territorially located in the Edo and Delta areas. The core/periphery distinction and the ethnic connotation attached to it by the colonial authorities had both linguistic and territorial significance. Another aspect of the majority-minority differentiation was

⁵¹ H.S. Morris, “Some Aspects of the Concept of Plural Society, *Man: New Series*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1967), pp.169-184.

the distribution of socio-economic facilities factor. Largely because the Yoruba majority dominated the Western Regional Assembly, most social services and infrastructures were situated in their area. Resistance by the Benin, Esan and other minority ethnic groups to these attempts remained a factor in the nature of relationships which existed between the two, the Yoruba and the other major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

By the time regionalism became a feature of Nigerian politics, the damage appeared to have already been done. This was the case because, given the politics of resource control and allocation, as well as the disputes that characterized the struggle to dominate the centre, political power was conceptualized as both purpose and mechanism. This was what gave rise to the “majority group ethnic nationalism”⁵² that created the impression that they would take complete control of power in the regions and at the centre. This major group chauvinism, consistent with the basic assumptions of “capture theory”, saw the relegation to the background of the minority ethnic groups in the emerging power matrix taking place in the regions and at the centre⁵³. This was the situation in which Benin and Esan were evolving in Western Nigeria during the decolonization period. Together with other minority groups in the region, they began to agitate for their separate identity. Thus, it was the fear and fact of being dominated by the majority ethnic groups in the general scheme of things that compelled minority groups in the three regions to demand for separate regions of their own during the decolonization movement.

This development had serious implications on inter-ethnic relations in the emerging Nigerian nation. Thus, the dawn of party politics after 1945 provided another forum for the enhancement of previous patterns of contact and interactions between Esan and Benin and between them and the

⁵² E.E. Osaghae, “Ethnic Minorities and Federalism in Nigeria”, *African Affairs*, No. 90 (1991), pp. 234-259.

⁵³ This is particularly true of their relationship with their Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa neighbours in the southern and northern Nigeria. Traces of suspicion and deep animosity were also visible in Benin relations with the Esan, one of their most formidable neighbours. For more details on these, see A.E. Afigbo, *The Igbos and their Neighbours*, Enugu, Fourth Dimension, 2006, p. 186.

Yoruba, the majority in the region. Although Benin and Esan initially identified with the Eastern based political party –the National Council of Nigerian Citizen (N.C.N.C.) –, the regionalization of the politics of nationalism as of 1946 created a tensed atmosphere. This gave rise to suspicion, hatred and, eventually, conflict among the people on the one hand, and between them and Yoruba’s Action Group (A.G) of the Western region on the other⁵⁴. Although the people continued to relate with those of the Western Region, the politicization of ethnicity through regionalism and the activities of Nigerian politicians during this period greatly undermined the Benin-Esan timeless relationship. Thus, as K. Post and M. Vickers tersely observed:

“The nationalist movement as a political force in Nigeria was a short-lived phenomenon, whittled away in the early 1950s by the primordial demands of cultural sections, which influenced both the masses mobilization in the crucial decades of the colonial period-roughly 1920-1950 was diffused [...] in such a way as to produce a feeling of identity with section, rather than with a nation⁵⁵”.

One of the consequences of this phenomenon was that by the time independence was finally granted in 1960, the nature and character of inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria had altered significantly. As the specific case of Benin-Esan has clearly shown, the forces of modernization that accompanied *Pax Britanica* gave momentum to inter-group relations.

⁵⁴ For details see K.W. Post, M. Vickers, *Structure and Conflicts in Nigeria*, Bungay, The Chaucer Press Ltd., 1973, p. 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

However, the competition that it engendered between the ethnic groups was defined in communal terms. Although the people still maintained a broad network of personal relationships, the ethnic particularity that these relationships increasingly assumed in the general scheme of things remained an important feature of Benin- Esan relations in the twentieth century. Thus, in a specific way, colonial constitutional arrangements were something of a paradox. On the one hand, they sought to provide a framework for greater interactions among Nigerians and, on the other hand, they engendered inter-group tensions, suspicions and rivalry⁵⁶.

Conclusion

The point, therefore, is that although colonialism undoubtedly provided a new platform that deepened contacts and interactions between Benin and Esan, it also created conditions that increasingly made inter-group relations essentially antagonistic. As we have been able to show so far, this feature of interaction became even more prominent during the terminal phase of colonial rule in Nigeria. Indeed, the political elite of regionalism and the dynamics of majority/majority politics pushed ethnic groups further apart. This reinforces the theoretical concept that, although colonialism as a factor of contact drew people together into a single social system, it also divided them into new dynamically related groupings.

Given that Benin-Esan were only marginally significant to the strategic economic considerations of the British and never being a serious raw material producing area from the perspective of the colonialists, it remained one of the most neglected and underdeveloped parts of colonial Nigeria. This neglect, which was the logical consequence of the inherent contradictions of the colonial political economy, was further compounded by the forced integration of society into the new socio-economic order. It

⁵⁶ R.T. Ahmed, *Genesis of Inter-Group Tensions in Colonial and post- Colonial Nigeria*, Lagos, Macmillan, 1969, p. 136.

was this official discrimination against these peoples that placed them in a considerably greater underprivileged position in the competition for distribution of wealth, status and power. This, in turn, reinforced the people's ethnic particularity, especially as they related to the other, more privileged groups in the scramble for scarce resources within the colonial economy. Even after independence, not only has the basis of Benin-Esan relations changed, but indeed the structure, nature and character of these relations has fundamentally altered with very serious implications for the integral reality of the polity and its citizens.

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