A Discourse on Nigerian Pre-Colonial History

Simon Odion EHIABHI (Ph.D)

Department of History and International Studies, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria.
simonoehiabhi@yahoo.com 08059226385/08026263585

Abstract
There is a dangerous vibration among most post-colonial Nigerians that the unity and corporate existence of the modern Nigerian state rest on the delicate political balance between the northern and southern parts of the country. The vibration is often heightened during national engagement especially national elections. The paper is therefore an attempt to remind modern Nigerians that before the British colonial intervention, pre-colonial Nigerian people had evolved a web of mutual understanding centered on socio-economic and political relationship and interdependence. The paper adopted historical approach by concentrating and emphasizing those historical areas of similarities and connectivity among pre-colonial Nigerian people. This approach brings to the fore the convergent rather than divergent elements capable of promoting peaceful co-existence among post-colonial Nigerians.

Introduction
Nigeria is often described in glorious light as the giant of Africa. This is rightly so because of the exponential potentials of the Nigerian state in terms of population, geography and endowed natural resources. Unfortunately, these potentials have not been fully exploited because of two major factors, which are nature of national leadership production and expectation from politically elected leaders. The production of national leadership in post-colonial Nigeria is structured on the foundation of ethnic chauvinism. The resultant impact of ethnic politics is the presence of sectional minded leaders that act majorly to satisfy the expectations of their ethnic configuration to the detriment of other ethnic groups. This abnormality in national leadership is a post-colonial phenomenon unlike the pre-colonial period when the people related with the unity of collective purpose to achieve set objectives devoid of ethnic considerations. National cohesion is possible if post-colonial Nigerians would learn from the nature of intergroup relations among pre-colonial Nigerians. However, it should be stated from the outset that technically speaking, Nigeria never existed until the official proclamation of colonial imposition in the region carved out as Nigeria on January 1, 1900, and the subsequent amalgamation of the northern and southern parts in 1914 to form a single country. The official proclamation should not be understood as also the genesis of communication among Nigerians as there had been a long
history of interaction before 1900, though the people did not see themselves as Nigerians yet respected and identified areas of mutual benefits.

Erim seems to agree with others and suggest that Nigeria and by extension Nigerians had existed before the imposition of British Colonial rule. The reason for the suggestive position is that the peoples of modern Nigeria had already established various forms of trade, political, social and religious communication before European presence. It is correct that modern Nigerian people knew themselves in different ways but it is difficult to agree that they knew themselves as Nigerians or interacted with the oneness of a common Nigerian manifest destiny. There is the tendency to agree with Niven that the concept of a Nigerian identity originates from British Colonial presence in this part of West Africa.

We must not forget that the word "Nigeria" is a very modern word, before that there was no general name for this area. Some of it was called by the Europeans "Negroland" or the "Western Sudan", at one time it was almost officially called "Nigritia".

In order to actualize the objective of the discourse, the paper shall limit itself to the people's traditions of origin, state formation and political organizations, and nature of socio-economic structure. This is relevant for the purpose of emphasizing that modern Nigerians are connected in many ways before British colonial rule.

**Traditions of Origin**

It is practically difficult at this level of academic research to accurately explain the traditions of origin of the people. Most accounts are controversial, spurious and speculative conjecture. However, some of the traditions of origin of the people seem to stem from similar historical roots. A perusal of some of these accounts of traditions of origin, such as that of the Igbo and others illustrate the complexities of understanding and explaining African traditions of origins. A reference to the Igbo tradition of origin is not necessary a proper representation of Igbo people because an Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Edo, and other nations never existed in pre-colonial Nigeria. What existed were independent communities such as Nsuka, Okigwe, Umuahia, Arochukwu, but for the sake of discussion, the peoples in the south eastern part of Nigeria are commonly addressed as the Igbo people of Nigeria.

Where did the Igbo come from or where is their original point of migration? No research has adequately answered the question however; there are three popular perspectives of the Igbo
traditions of origin, which are the hamitic, negroid, and aborigine. A few scholars have used comparative cultural similarities between some practices among tribes in Israel and those in Igboland to reach a conclusion that the early ancestors of the Igbo were Jews. Such cultural practices have been listed as naming ceremony, religious rites, rituals and symbols, enterprising spirit and love for adventure. Further attempts to sustain this hamitic theory of cultural advancement is to deny the African the capacity of independently developing distinctive identity. Again, it represents a semblance of racism to argue that the Igbo migrated from the Middle East. It makes more sense to posit that the Jews may have in fact emigrated from Africa if we rely on archaeological evidence that human being may have first set their migratory journey from Africa.

The Negroid tradition of origin traces the people from the Niger-Benue region. It is argued, using linguistic evidence that this region once housed speakers of the kwa sub-group language, which included the Yoruba, Edo, Ijaw, Idoma, and Igbo. That it was from there these various groups began to migrate and developed distinctive language structure in the process of migration and settlement. In spite of the migratory history of the people, Anigbo draws attention to an aspect of the Igbo origin that should be properly contextualized, which is seeking to know if the people that eventually settled in the East of Nigeria arrived at the region as Igbo-speaking or they became Igbo-speaking after settling in this zone. The answer is outside the scope of this study, but it is important to posit that the Igbo-language is restricted to a sub-group in Nigeria, which gives the impression that there could have been a surviving culture of Igbo trait in the south east before the migrants joined them, which may have resulted in the development of a distinct language. The aborigine perspective supports Anigbo argument that the Nri-Awka-Orlu complex was probably the earliest centre of Igbo settlements in Southern Nigeria, and that it was from there that waves and waves of migrations set out to occupy the other portions of present day Igboland.

The traditions of origins of other communities are not fundamentally different from those already identified. Among the Benin, there are various perspectives that stem from the migratory account of Egharevba;

Many, many years ago, the Binis came all the way from Egypt to found a more secure shelter in this part of the world after a short stay in the Sudan and at Ile-Ife, which the Benin people call Uhe.
Tradition says that they met some people who were in the land before their arrival. These people are said to have come originally from Nupe and the Sudan in waves. Egharevba’s account of the Benin tradition of origin brings out some interesting connection with those of the Igbo. How did the pre-colonial Nigerian people come to the idea that most of them migrated from the East? Egharevba’s Sudan may have been the Niger/Benue confluence because of the linguistic evidence that the Benin language belongs also to the kwa-subgroup of languages dispersed from this region. Reference to Ife in this instance conveys the impression that the peoples that settled in the Yoruba and Benin regions of modern Nigeria may have migrated within the same period from the centre of dispersal at the Niger-Benue region. This similarity in the Igbo and Benin traditions of origin could be accepted as drawing a common line of family- hood among these people.

The same observation is made of the Yoruba of south western Nigeria. History has it that one of the accounts of traditions of origins talks of an eastern migration, especially from Mecca to its first recognized site at Ile-Ife. Such account is no longer popular as argued by Atanda, but that the probable region of dispersal could be the same Niger/Benue conference already established. Be that as it may, a brief discussion of the Yoruba eastern migration theory will further strengthen the core of these discourse that Nigerian people have more in common. Bello’s account of the origin of the Yoruba locates the people’s migration from the Middle East. That Yoruba are descended from the Bani kanan and the kindred of Nimrud. Yarub ibn Qahtan drove them out of Iraq to west wards and they travelled between Misr and Habash until they reached Yoruba. The Yoruba must have passed through various pre-colonial Nigerian communities before settling down in the present site. This is the message conveyed by Johnson, in line with Bello. According to Johnson;

The Yoruba are said to have sprung from Lamurudu, one of the kings of Mecca, whose offspring were. Oduduwa, the ancestor of the Yoruba, the kings of Gogobiri and of the Kukawa two tribes in the Hausa country. It is worthy of remark that these two nations, [Hausa and Yoruba] notwithstanding the distance from each other still have the same distinctive tribal marks on their faces; and Yoruba travelers are free among them and vice versa, each recognizing each other as of one blood.
The salient point from Johnson’s account is the continuation of the long line of connection among the three major and dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria, namely: the Eastern factor in their traditions of origins. What that suggests for national development is simply for intellectuals to emphasize this area of convergence of the Nigerian people than focusing on the minor issues of divergence.

Explaining the Hausa traditions of origin may not be as straightforward as others already discussed because of the peculiarity of the region. For the sake of presentation, the Hausa region covers all the communities that are now located in the present north west and north east regions of modern Nigeria. There about three accounts of tradition of origin and the most popular account is that of the the Abuyazidu’s (Bayajjida) legend. It has been expressed that the earliest states in Hausaland originated from Abuyazidu who was a migrant from Baghdad in the Middle East, and that due to a family feud, he had to leave Baghdad, and he stopped at Bornu and married Magira, the daughter of the king. With time he left Bornu and finally got to Daura where he married the Queen of Daura after killing the snake that prevented the people from fetching water from a well. That his son Bawo, gave birth to six sons that established and organized the people in this part of the north into the six states of Daura, Kano, Zazzau, Gobir, Kastina and Kano.11

What we intend to achieve with this narrative of traditions of origin is to demonstrate that pre-colonial Nigerian peoples have a rich traditions of origins that connected all of them together, even if reference is drawn from the middle east source of origin. The bulk of the people of the middle belt and north eastern parts of Nigeria are said to have migrated from the Bantu and Chad regions respectively.13 The traditions of origins of the other peoples in the south south region are influenced by the three dominant groups of the Yoruba, Benin and Igbo. For example, elements of the Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ijaw and Delta Ibo traditions of origins are spiced with distant ancestral connection with the three big groups,14 while some of the people of Ibibio are believed to have migrated from Cameroon.15 As already emphasized, a close study of the various traditions of origins indicate a bond of oneness among the people, which is also observed in the peoples system of state formation.
State Formation and Political System

Attempt at logically explaining the evolution or processes of state formation in Nigeria exposes the fact that no single theory can explain the origin of the state satisfactorily. Though political thinkers of various generations have attempted to explain state formation through some of the following theories; esoterism, agreement, and conquest, but these thinkers have not reached a consensus on the factors responsible for ancient state formation. Hypothesis about state formation may have developed from studying identifiable characteristics of the state.

Morgan argues that the evolution of the kinship family system began with the domestication of the physical environment by the human species. As they migrated in bands around the globe, they formed themselves into different groups of consanguinity, walking, working and living together. Their mastering of the environment, according to Morgan, developed a hitherto unsuspected source of wealth and created entirely new social relationship which developed into independent household community headed by the male with exclusive right to their properties. It is believed that the state system evolved from this process. While Morgan’s explanation depicts the probable processes of state formation in Europe; Parkes focused his discussion on the Americas.

For Parkes, yet to be identified factors may have compelled American ancestors to have spread outwards in a series of waves of migration. The American Indians, in their course of migration settled into a large number of different tribes who spoke different languages and were politically independent of each other. Their differences did not deter them from responding to natural challenges as one Indian people of Mexico, because then people evolved from the same cultural bed. Even a glossary study of the processes of state formation in precolonial Nigeria is not different from the already discussed scenario. Within the Nigerian geographical zone, scholars have added their perspectives on state formation in precolonial Nigeria. Let us consider the views of Obayemi, Erim and Obata.

Obayemi has grouped the processes of state formation into two categories: those he refers to as mini and the others as mega. In the Nigerian situation, Obayemi explains mini states as settlements or groups of settlements without powerful royal dynasties or highly centralised governments, lacking urban capitals, and much smaller both in territory and in population. Such mini states as found in the middle belt, communities in Edo, Niger Delta region, Ondo and
Kogi states in modern Nigeria, but with no reference to the Igbo. While the mega states are opposite to the mini states because of the presence of royal dynasties highly centralised political systems and large urban capitalé Interestingly, Obayemi seems not to have emphasized some of these mega states. Obayemi draws our attention to the fact that mini and mega states coï existed probably due to the following hypotheses;

i. that mega states influenced the formation of mini states,
ii. mini states are break away from mega states
iii. both groups are two different distinct political and social entities
iv. mega states evolve from mini states.

A clear understanding of the various traditions of origin pre-supposes that the heroes in these traditions of origins settled in places where human habitation had taken firm presence. What these heroes did was to re-organize the people under a form of government desired to meet the exigencies of the period. Therefore, state formation involves processes determined by the knowledge and skills of the main organizer in response to real and imagined human and natural challenges. In line with Obayemi's presentation but with some more details, Erim and Obata identified three categories of pre-colonial political system. The non-centralised (Igbo, Ibibio, Ijo, Idoma, Tiv etc), centralized with fairly extensive political structure such as Kanem Bornu, Kano, Katsina, Edo, Sokoto and Onitsha with kingship titles of Emir, Oba, and Igwe. The empires or kingdoms are those centralized states that incorporated several other states to have a large territory and vassalage such as Benin, Kanem Borno, Sokoto and Oyo. Obata shares Erim classification of empires or confederacies, centralized states or kingdom, and the non-centralized with the same characteristics.

In the overall analysis, state formation process in pre-colonial Nigeria shows that all mega or empires evolved from mini or non-centralized states. The single most important factor in the emergence of big states rested solely on the ability and capacity of a strong willed personality to incorporate other societies. The various traditions of origins demonstrate that the founders of the various communities began by first establishing their presence in a single or small community before extending their territorialities. In spite of the different state structure and political organizations, the systems served the needs of the respective states and people. This fact
Lugard recognized as he built the colonial indirect rule system on the foundation laid by pre-colonial Nigerian political thinkers. Niven records

Lugard did not upset the system of rule he found in these territories. He realized that there was not only great good in it (with some evil), but also that the local people knew and understood the system and could and did work it easily and willingly.\textsuperscript{32}

The solid foundation of pre-colonial political system provided the opportunity for these states to be involved in socio-cultural and economic exchanges.

**Socio-Economic and Political Relations**

There is no need emphasizing the fact that there was a high level of relations among the people as demonstrated in their traditions of origins. This connectivity is also displayed in their socio-economic and political engagements. The pre-colonial Nigerian people not only exchanged goods and services, but also diffused their religious belief practices among themselves. It has been suggested that the popularly and culturally accepted Ifa divination practice of the Yoruba came from a Nupe, Ifa priest called Setilu, who taught the people \textit{the mysteries of Ifa worship.}\textsuperscript{33} In the area of acts, archeological evidence suggest that the brass, beads and bronze culture of Ife and Benin are younger in age, but closely associated with similar but older ones of the Niger-Benue confluence.\textsuperscript{34} This fact Ajayi and Alagoa had earlier established that the Niger-Benue confluence must have been the centre of iron technology before dispersing to other parts of Nigeria including the Yoruba, Edo, Niger Delta and Igbo states.\textsuperscript{35}

Trade connections among the various pre-colonial Nigerian people have been given due attention in most historical discourse. However, it is important to state that evidence abounds of the long distance trade in horses and kolanut between the Hausa and Yoruba, Igbo and Nupe region, and exchange of goods especially palm oil between Benin and the Niger Delta people. For example, the Yoruba people obtained their horses, cloths and slaves mainly from the Hausa and their neighbours, even the military capacity of the Oyo army was strengthened by those horses supplied and maintained by them. Much has been said about the Benin-Ife pre-colonial political relations, which is shrouded in controversy, but what is indisputable in the Benin-Ife connection is the strong dynastic political relation between them in pre-colonial times.\textsuperscript{36} Study on the Aro people and its popular Aro-Chukwu shrine shows that the Aro state was formed out
of the processes of inter-group relations among the Igbo, Ibibio and Akpa people who are believed to be the early founders of Aro chiefdom.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{Conclusion}

A history of pre-colonial Nigeria exhibits the close inter-connection of modern Nigerian people before the advent of British colonial rule. The people related on the basis of active communities' engagement devoid of ethnic sentiments. They understood their sphere of influence and respected the differences in their neighbours way of life. As human, conflicts were bound to be notice but such conflicts of war were provoked not by ethnic egoism but economic determinism. The people evolved a workable political, socio-economic and religious system that served the corporate interest of their entities. The traditions of origins, state formation, socio-cultural and economic relations of the pre-colonial people suggest that, perhaps the Nigerian people had begun the remotest processes of instituting a federation of multi-ethnic cultures before the British invasion and eventual official colonization that began from January 1, 1900 and ended on October 1\textsuperscript{st} 1960. It is therefore germane to emphasized that colonial policies were not responsible for the interaction among the people but were responsible for bringing the people under one overwhelming political institution. Nothing was wrong with the pre-colonial practices of the people, but it was merely economic imperial concerns that determined the balkanization of the friendly inter-group relations among the pre-colonial Nigerian people by the British colonial government with the imposition of alien rule.
References


13. J. A. Lavers, Kanem and Borno to 1808, in Obaro Ikime (ed.), in Obaro Ikime (ed.), Groundwork of Nigeria History, p. 188.


20. Ibid., p. 54.


22. Ibid., pp. 60-61.


24. Ibid., p. 5.

25. Ibid.


27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.


