
ASPECTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN AKWA IBOM AREA SINCE 1846**Uwem Jonah Akpan***Department of History & International Studies
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Abstract

Social change has to do with the modifications of a society over time as manifested in changes in social institutions, ideas, values, technology and other products of human interactions. Indeed, the social structure of any society represents the temporary outcome of the daily adaptations to, and changes in, the relationships rather than a phenomenon or an end product. This perspective of social life reveals its adaptability through time to powerful external influences on modes of life. In Ibibio land, the paramount external force that triggered social change has been its contact with the European traders, missionaries and colonialists. Even though the management of change was successfully directed by the colonialists, the colonial cultural values and social sanctions have become deeply integrated in the fabrics of the Ibibio social life. This manifests in many aspects of the Ibibio life such as economy, politics, culture etc. The paper examines aspects of social changes that have occurred in Akwa Ibom area from 1846 when the Christian missionaries made its advent in Calabar in the Lower Cross River region of Nigeria. The introduction of the colonial rule aggravated the process. It is noted that the changes were both positive and negative. It suggests that some aspects of indigenous system should be preserved. The paper adopts a historical analytical method.

Keywords: Social change, Akwa Ibom, Christian, Missionaries, Calabar, Ibibio

Introduction

The Ibibio people of South-Eastern Nigeria have lived in their present locale for many centuries. The Ibibio consists of groups of people with a common identity and linguistic heritage. Traditions of origin unanimously agree that their forebears migrated to present-day Nigeria from the Cameroon region. However, it should be pointed out that due to certain circumstances relating to environment, dialects and politics, some of the Ibibio sub-groups have declared their distinct identity.¹ Noah observes in this respect that the insistence of separate identity is as a result of “recent nationalism flowering into historical revisionism and the desire of political aspirants to use ethnic particularism as a launching pad for their political careers.”² Despite the above observation, this paper adopts the colonial classification of the present-day Akwa Ibom area as Ibibio land,³ thus, the terms Akwa Ibom area and Ibibio land will be used interchangeably.

After their settlement, the people evolved socio-political and economic institutions which enabled them to stabilise their society over time. Politically, they operated a republican form of government, designed and practised simple administrative system which centred on the village assembly. Put differently, the political organisation of the society was based on segmentry principle. African Traditional Religion was practised. The Supreme Being was reached through some intermediaries. Secret societies such as *ekpo*, *idiong*, *ekpri akata*, *ebre* etc., helped in the maintenance of law and order. Customary judicial instruments such as *mbiam* (juju), *eyeyen* (grandchild), *ukot* (in-law), *ukang* (ordeal), etc., also prevailed in the area. In the economic realm, the people were predominantly farmers. Those in the coastal parts were naturally fishermen. Hunting was also a profitable adjunct practised by the people. Diverse cottage industries also existed. In addition, they engaged in short and long-distance trade.⁴

The Akwa Ibom people are industrious, resourceful and hospitable. The territory is a reservoir of wealth and potentials. It is like a beautiful bride beckoning on tourists, investors in mineral resources and agricultural industries. It is characterised by clement weather and a fertile land mass measuring more than 8,000 square kilometres.⁵

Since the pre-colonial era, there have been a series of interactions among the groups in Ibibio land and between them and their near and far neighbours. The people could not have lived as islands without relating with others because by nature, no society can have everything that it needs without the need for exchange. In other words, inter-group relations are sustained in the world because of the obvious fact that a major feature of society is interdependence. This basis necessitates the theory of mutual aid.⁶

Many factors sustained the robust relations between the Ibibio and her neighbours. The first was the favourable geographical condition. In the pre-colonial period, the people had open frontiers with the Igbo to the Northwest and West, the Ekoi group to the North, the Cameroon to the East and the Ijaw to the Southwest.⁷ Afigbo states that any meaningful discussion of the external contacts and relations of the Cross River “culture area” must necessarily begin with an assessment of the extent to which its geography or natural features promoted or at least permitted contacts with the neighbours. The Cross River forms part of a larger water-ways, which played and continues to play a major part in promoting wide-ranging contact among the coast dwelling people of South-East Nigeria including the Ibibio.⁸ The advent of the Europeans particularly the establishment of a permanent governmental structure in 1885.⁹ became the most potent instrument the facilitated rapid and enduring changes in the Ibibio society. The imprints remain indelible till date.

The Concept of Social Change

The issue of social change has been of concern to social theorists for many centuries. Change has been observed in small as well as large social organisations over time. This idea influenced Dahrendorf to posit that “society is at every point subject to the process of change: the social change is ubiquitous”. However, in spite of the enduring concern the question of what is social change is a difficult one to answer in the scientific study of change.¹⁰

Some definitions emphasises certain aspects of change such as its magnitude or scale, others concentrate on other aspects such as continuity throughout time and space. In spite of the difference in emphasis, different theorists of social change accept that every change is subject to change. Moore views social change as the significant alteration of social structures including consequences and manifestations of such structures embodied in norms, values and cultural products and symbols. Social structures are patterns of social action and interaction identified with different social institutions such as marriage or the economy. The definition embraces small scale, large scale, cyclical and revolutionary change in its scope.¹¹

Social change is also linked to such alterations that occurred in the structure and functions of society (especially as observed in social organisation). On this basis, social change is viewed as a part of cultural change, which involves all change in any branch of culture such as arts, science, technology and philosophy. It is believed that change in one institution or area of society may have consequences on the parts of society.¹²

Ukpong lists the following as factors in social change: increase or decrease in population, changes in the geographical environment, contact with peoples of different cultures, natural and social catastrophes such as floods, crop failures, epidemic, wars and economic depressions, accidental discoveries, death or rise to power of a strong and admired political leader, are all influential in producing cultural change. Change is often observed within the context of a given period in the past. Such period can often be specified. For instance, in Nigeria, changes have been observed between pre-colonial and colonial periods

and between the colonial era and independence. On the basis of time span, short term and long-term consequences of change can be identified and analysed.

The Advent of the Europeans

Akwa Ibom has always been of strategic value to the development before the evolution of modern Nigeria. Even before the colonial era, the area had extensively supported the British Empire. Through the Atlantic slave trade, the area supplied the British with the bunch of slaves for its economy. This explains why the population of the Ibibio today is comparatively low. After the slave economy came the trade in commodities, so called - “legitimate trade”, Akwa Ibom was again the major player, supporting European firms with the bulk of palm produce. Akwa Ibom area during this period had, and perhaps still has the largest belt of oil palm trees in the world. For this reason, the area contributed significantly in making the region that is now called the Niger Delta to be known as the “Oil Rivers Protectorate” during the Empire period.¹⁴

The Colonial Experience and Social Change

The Ibibio were drawn into the colonial web as a result of activities designed to consolidate consular influence and authority over the area in the second half of the 19th century. These activities were spearheaded by the traders, missionaries and colonial administrators.¹⁵ The Consular authority of the Bight of Biafra was established in an attempt to ameliorate the increasing disputes and contradictions among the European traders and the local middlemen who controlled the trading inlets to the hinterland. The first British Consul, John Beecroft, was a trader with many years of experience in the parts to which he was appointed, and was at this time domiciled in the island of Fernando Po.¹⁶

Although, with the appointment of John Beecroft, various efforts were made to set up some machinery of administration for the people of the Eastern Provinces, Ina asserts that “it can be argued with considerable justification that the colonial period in Ibibio land commenced in the year 1885 when Britain proclaimed a Protectorate over the Niger Districts and placed it under the Consular jurisdiction of the Foreign Office in London. With the declaration of the Oil Rivers Protectorate over the Niger Districts in 1885, the area in law became part of the British colonial Empire”.¹⁷ This colonial experience evolved and gave birth to the present-day Nigerian structure which the Ibibio is a part.

In order to effectively establish their presence in Ibibio land, the judicial system had to be re-ordered and streamlined. As Anene has observed, the advent of the white men “led to the introduction of European laws and courts which replaced or seriously threatened the validity of the nature of laws and customs, as well as the indigenous tribunals.”¹⁸ There were judicial devices such as *mbiam* (a substance which was believed to have the power of detecting guilt and punishing criminals unless the curse was removed), *idiong* and other secret societies which, among the Ibibio, had served either as a means of establishing people’s guilt or innocence or had been used in conducting investigations were abolished. All these were generally replaced by the white man’s institutions of the police, consular courts, native councils and minor courts.¹⁹

As courts came to be established in many parts Ibibio land, they exercised tremendous influence on the lives of the people and speedily dealt with offenders of British law thereby giving practical expression to British determination to establish law and order. There was no conceivable matter that could not be made into a court case – refusal to accept British coins, objections to forced labour, refusal to pay tax, indebtedness, cruelty even to animals. British legal experts were ever ready to provide legal phraseology to every action not approved by the government. Sometimes they came in the form of ordinances and at other times they were in the form of proclamations but every aspect of British wish was often accommodated legalistically. Hence, there existed ordinances in respect of Fire Arms, Adulteration of Produce,

Observation of Local Laws and Proclamations in Respect of Land Acquisition, Native Courts, Master and Servant, Slave Dealing, Native House Rule, Native Currency, Witchcraft and *Juju*, Roads and Creeks, Importation of Cowry, Unlawful Societies and many others.²⁰

The courts had to enforce the observance of these Ordinances and Proclamations which for all practical purposes embodied every British desire. Not only did the courts help in the establishment of British rule by the enforcement of these ordinances and proclamations but also the location of a court in an area had a restraining effect on local inhabitants. According to a colonial source, a court compound was “a little oasis of quasi-civilisation”. Benighted travellers could pass the night in court premises without fear of being molested. Wherever there was a court, there was always a feeling of safety and security. Even suspects who fled to court premises quite often escaped from being lynched”.²¹

One important outcome of colonialism was urbanisation. In Ibibio land some of the earliest urban centres included: Ikot Abasi (Opobo), Itu and Oron, while Calabar in present-day Cross River State served as the headquarters of the Consular administration, the Niger Coast Protectorate, the Oil River Protectorate and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria (from 1882-1906). Urbanisation triggered agglomeration of population, heterogeneous people from diverse nationalities and ethnic groups. Indeed, the development of infrastructure in areas such as water transportation, roads, post and telegraphs, etc., facilitated the transformation of Akwa Ibom and her neighbours.²²

Alagoa sums up the colonial enterprise and its impact on the people thus:

The European colonial administrators decided to impose political authority, and to put in place their own laws and moral code. They decided that Nigerian societies were not to be perpetually at war with each other, raiding for slaves, and conducted varieties of morally unacceptable practices within their communities. Accordingly, from the late 19th century, the British unleashed a series of violent military attacks in Nigeria including Ibibio land ostensibly to install stable peace in the areas which they conceived violence to be endemic. The modern history of Nigeria was, therefore, opened by the military violence unleashed by Britain on Nigerian communities, in the hope that of establishing *Pax Britannia*, British peace! All the 20th century up to 1960 was the period of British colonial rule, during which British peace; *Pax Britannia* should have been firmly maintained. The British did, indeed, entrench their own ideas of peace making and conflict resolution which are all practised in the formal federal and state government systems of modern Nigeria, resort to military or police force, the setting up of commissions of inquiry etc.²³

The Missionary Enterprise and Social Change

Generally, religion is a great dynamic force in social life. Vital changes in civilisation are always associated with changes in religious beliefs and ideals. According to Weber, even the most incisive of the social influences which are economically or politically determined receive their stamp primarily from religious sources.²⁴ There is no wonder, therefore, that of all the agencies which have contributed to the regeneration and development of Ibibio society, missionary efforts have been the most potent.²⁵

Prior to the advent of Christianity, the Ibibio had certain cosmological ideas which formed the basis of their system of values. Central to their view of the world, and man’s place in it was the belief that the universe was peopled by diverse types of spirits, some benevolent and others malevolent – but all capable of swift and usually vindictive anger. The Ibibio religion was, therefore a compound of many elements, chief among which included adoration of divinity and ancestral worship, which almost developed into a kind of pantheism. One cannot adequately imagine today, the air of mystery and awe which pervaded

Ibibio land before the advent of the Christian message. The pre-colonial Ibibio was deeply religious in his worship even to the point of submission to the will of the gods, the ancestors and the head of the family. Indeed, everything, from the smallest stone or the humblest animal or plant, to the mightiest rock, mountain, river or tree, had an in-dwelling soul, which was deemed capable of influencing human lives.²⁶

Christianity has triggered both positive and negative impacts. The positive impacts are many, for the want of space; the activities of the Presbyterian (Church of Scotland), the pioneer Christian Mission in Eastern Nigeria, in Oku Iboku, Ayadeghe and Ikot Offiong, under the auspices of the indefatigable missionary, Rev. Alexander are worth pointing out to drive home the point.

According to a 1931 colonial report:

The Oku are Ibibio people, as are also to Ayadehe....There is intermingling...in the whole area, the Native Court common to all and the church and school managed by Rev. A. Cruickshank of the Scottish Mission who has been at Ikot Offiong for more than 50 years and in whom all the villages concerned take equal pride.²⁷

According to the report:

The Oku have been on their present dwelling site for more than 70 years. The missionaries met them settled in their villages. The missionary, Rev. Z. Baillie, opened a mission station at Ikot Offiong in November 1858 and was joined by his brother John in July 1861. They taught the inhabitants to make bricks and built a house in 1863, and a church in 1864, while in the same year, an Oku chief at Ikot Abiyak built a church of native construction at his own expense. At this time British rule was carried on from Fernando Po by Consuls who arrived at Old Calabar. These missionaries were followed by Dr. Robb B.D. and Mr. Lawson. Dr. Robb translated the Old Testament and the first part of *The Pilgrims Progress* into Efik. Rev. Cruickshank, O.B.E., who celebrated his jubilee this year (1931) among them, met them owning a few slaves, and sometimes interceded between master and slave. The country has been much influenced by the missionary and the Government.²⁸

It is reported that the missionaries' established churches in each town; and the majority of the people could read Efik, and church committees decided many of the petty disputes of the villagers, such as adultery, debts, and "back biting". Many matters naturally went before Rev. Cruickshank and his elders, "as he is greatly respected, speaks their language thoroughly, has helped sufferers medically and spiritually for so many years". Government prevented many wars, and large cases against Uruan, Ayadeghe, Efik and Itam were settled in the Government courts. A native court was opened at Ikot Offiong in 1900.²⁹

The report also states:

The Oku inhabit an area of 25 square miles...a total population of 2068. Owing to the close contact of the European missionaries of the United Church of Scotland for over 70 years, and their mutual confidence with the Oku, not only has about 90 per cent of the population has been Christianised, but one could say that 15 per cent are able to read and write Efik, and 30 per cent can understand English. It has been customary for Mr. Cruickshank, missionary of the United Church of Scotland, to keep continually about 40 boys in his compound for schooling and many of these have gone out into Government services, and into various other walks of life in other districts. A school has been

established at Ikot Offiong to which the Oku have gone, since 1864, which was sometimes closed for lack of funds. Later on schools were opened in the Oku villages of Ikot Abiyak, Ikot Ntuen, Ikot Esia, Ikot Essien and Ika. About two central schools was organised at Ikot Offiong by District Officer Mr. Brooks, who himself contributed and induced the Ikot Offiong and Oku to support the school, which is now an assisted school.³⁰

The report adds that:

In the nominal rolls supplied for taxation purposes in 1927, the occupations of some of Oku in strange lands are most interesting. The small town of Ikot Ada Akpan contiguous with Ikot Offiong had 70 taxable male adults but many of these were strangers or factory staff: yet, this town had a son studying Law in America, seven working at various places on the railway, three similarly in the Custom Department, four in different provincial administration offices, an engineer, and mission teachers. The same is true of the other towns.³¹

With the advent of Christianity, the enduring religious practices of the Ibibio were altered. Abasiattai recalls that:

Christian missionaries and Ibibio converts subverted Ibibio Religion by deprecating it as heathen and ungodly. Some, notably the “spiritual” missions, coupled their verbal deprecations with physical destruction of Ibibio religious artifacts, shrines and sacred places, sometimes, forcibly. One notable example was the desecration in 1941 of *Amasa* sacred spring by members of The Apostolic Church, Nsukara. The fact that Christian iconoclasts thus, defiling religious objects were not immediately struck dead or otherwise overtly punished by the deity or *ndem* in question, as many Ibibio had expected did not help the cause of the Ibibio religion. It rather weakened the faith of its adherents and rendered them susceptible to the Christian influence.³²

According to Abasiattai, the principal means of conversion to Christianity was Western education. This was highly prized by Ibibio parents as providing the means for employment and income in the modern Nigerian economy and colonial civil service or in the missions and preachers and teachers.³³

Chessman also observes that overwhelming flow of European influence through the means of Western education thus:

Nearly every village has a mission. The Qua Iboe has the Northern and Eastern part, the Methodist by agreement with the Qua Iboe work in the West and South, while the Roman Catholic refuse all agreement and cover the whole area. The Niger Delta Pastorate has a church in Egwanga and a very good Methodist school in Egwanga, Ibekwe and Ete. The Roman Catholic has started a big school in Nnung Asang. These all go to the Lower Middle or old Standard VI. There are numerous bush schools with infants and primary 1 and 2 classes. About 50 percent of the people are Christians. The African churches, which do not insist on monogamy, are obtaining a big hold and are serious rivals to the European missions with their rigid insistence on it. One foresees the time when they will probably be predominant. At present the European ones retain their hold largely by better organisation and provision of better education.³⁴

It thus became apparent that Christianity's relentless advance could not be halted or reversed. Hence, adherents of Ibibio religion could not but tolerate the new faith, which helped to diminish, but not eradicate conflict. As most pupil converts were brought up in the Christian way of life, they cared little about-indeed in many cases despised – Ibibio religion, its rituals and ceremonies, which began to lose their religious aura and significance.³⁵

The early missionary did not flinch, in spite of the uphill task that awaited them. Fired by the idealism of faith to which they ascribed the enlightenment and technological achievements of their countries, they perceived no wisdom in compromising with indigenous customs and institutions. The new wine of European Christianity had to be put into new bottles. That means, their passionate resolve was to create, through Christianisation, a new social order to replace the pagan customs and “primitive” institutions of the old society. Clearly, the advent of missionary propaganda marked the beginning of a new era in Ibibio – an era in which the dynamic socio-political changes became more the produce of external than internal influence.

Thus, Offiong observes that:

The first and most fundamental agents of European influence in Ibibio were the missionaries who attempted to convert people to the Christian religion. This brought about a serious conflict which often resulted in open confrontations. The chiefs were the custodians of traditional morality; the preaching of the missionaries and their proselytes was a direct assault on the practices led by the chiefs. So the attack of the missionaries and their converts on the traditional practices was a clear affront to the status and prestige of the chiefs. All through the colonial enterprise in Nigeria, missionaries led the attack against traditional institutions, because they stood between them (missionaries) and the work of converting the people to Christianity.³⁶

Social Change and Inter-group Relations

Long and fruitful socio-economic contacts existed between the Ibibio and the Efik beginning from the pre-colonial era. After moving away from the Ibibio parent stock, the Efik established some settlements in the present-day Cross River State. They first settled at Creek Town from where they moved to co-habit the present-day Calabar, (which later became the seat of the colonial government in the Cross River region) with the earlier settlers such as the Qua and the Efut. Because of its advantageous geographical location at the mouth of the estuary of the Cross River, the Efik became one of the earliest groups to benefit from the impact of the trade with Europe. They revolutionised their social and political organisation, grew very wealthy on the slave trade and won for themselves immense economic power in the interior.³⁷

Subsequently, the Efik dialect of the Ibibio language was adopted as the medium of communication by the Presbyterian missionaries who translated the Bible, hymn book and related literature into it. It was also used as the medium of instruction as well as a language of trade in the Cross River region. Eventually the Efik exercised economic, political and cultural hegemony over the Ibibio.

The Igbo neighbours, especially the Cross River Igbo, Bende, and Azumini related with the Ibibio. However, in the colonial period, the Igbo elite in the defunct Eastern Region unleashed strong wave of marginalisation and oppression on the Ibibio which adversely affected the relations between them. Other Ibibio neighbours include the Ogoni, though domiciled in present-day Rivers State, they share the “East-West” theory of origin and migration with Akwa Ibom people. Put differently, the Ogoni, like the Ibibio, trace their origin from the Cameroon area. Extensive contacts and socio-cultural borrowings had taken place between them. A section of the Ogoni still lives in Ibibio land.

The Opobo (Umani) also related extensively with the Ibibio people following the establishment of Opobo Kingdom in 1869 by King Jaja – a prominent diplomatic figure in the Niger Delta in the late 19th century. The challenge of his trade monopoly led to the Ibeno-Opobo War of 1881. The war triggered many changes in Ibibio land, including the advent of the Qua Iboe Mission.³⁸ The Bonny, Okrika and Kalabari groups are the major Ijaw groups that have related with the Ibibio since the pre-colonial era.

The essence of the contact between the Ijaw and the people of the hinterland has been captured by Dike. He states that “every item of export trade in the port of Bonny was a product of the tribal interior and the carrying trade on which the prosperity and greatness of the Delta states rested, linked their fortunes directly with those of the producers of the tribal locations”.³⁹ Abaraonye opines that cassava, which has now become a major staple food in Ibibioland was introduced into Ibibio land from the Ijaw area.⁴⁰ The Ijaw also borrowed some secret societies from the Ibibio. *Ekpo* masquerade still exists in Kalabari.⁴¹ Also; several external forces were also thought to have contributed to the Spirit Movement of the 1920s in Ibibio land, including agitation by the Christ Army Church. Some leaders of the church in Degema Division were reported to have been active in Itu District.⁴²

The Cameroonians were not left out in the “unending” web of interactions with the Ibibio which eventually facilitated social change. According to Udo, the Igbo, the Ijaw, the Ekoi and the Cameroonians came to better their lots in Calabar a long time ago. Some of these returned to their homes while others remained behind and made Calabar their new home, inter-marrying and adopting Efik culture, dialect and names.⁴³ In the process, they related deeply with the Ibibio.

Of vital importance to the growth of inter-group relations and the European trade was the growth in importance and in distribution of voluntary associations of prominent men and women especially among the trading communities. These associations in Ibibio land were of several types. In one type called secret societies because their rites and lore were carefully concealed from non-members, membership was open to all adult men (and less commonly adult women) and generally acted to support established authority by restraining the fissiparous tendencies of lineage organisations. In some places, these societies replaced village councils of elders as the primary structure of international governance.⁴⁴

Another type of association had a more limited membership, being open only to a quasi religious position of influence and power. Men and women whose loves demonstrated unusual achievement (of which economic success was one type) could obtain special titles recognising their achievement and granting them powerful roles as political leaders, judges and peace makers. The fact is that the structures based on association like those of descent were very important in explaining changes in political organisations which occurred as a result of the expansion of trade in the 18th century.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Social change is also associated with alterations that usually occur in the structure and functions of society (especially as observed in social organisation). In this connection, social change is considered as an aspect of cultural change and involves changes in areas such as arts, science, technology and philosophy, etc. Change in one institution or area of society usually have consequences on the other parts of society.

It should be noted that since the pre-colonial era, there have been series of interactions among the Ibibio and between them and their near and far neighbours, some which have been mentioned in this study. The people could not have lived as islands without relating with others because by nature, no society can have everything that it needs. The interactions to some extent triggered various aspects of development in Ibibio land.

However, the advent of the missionary enterprise and European administration had significant impact on the people and the area. These Western agents of change altered the traditional Ibibio economic,

social and political institutions and organisations. For instance, Christianity replaced the worship of ancestors and veneration of deities and other aspects of indigenous religious practices which the Ibibio engaged in with its own peculiar doctrine and rituals. The introduction of Western education brought unparalleled revolution to Ibibio land. This led to the emergence of a new crop of educated elites who took up employment in the available government and corporate institutions that were created by the agents of change. The change also manifested in the urbanisation experience of many parts of Ibibio land.

The change also affected the indigenous judicial system of the Ibibio. The Native Courts that were introduced helped in the establishment of British rule and its ordinances were used in the enforcement of diverse impositions including payment of taxes, objections to forced labour, indigenous oath taking, etc. European laws and courts which replaced the indigenous system gravely undermined the validity of the nature of laws and customs. It should be mentioned that the Western type of education has overshadowed the indigenous system of education of the Ibibio. In all the change has come to stay with both positive and negative impacts.

Notes

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