IGALA IN DIASPORA AND THEIR ROLE IN NATION BUILDING SINCE THE PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD

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Abstract

The establishment of Igala society as one of the earliest kingdoms in the Niger-Benue confluence following its independence from the Jukun Kwararafa Empire, preceded the coming of the Europeans. Its emergence as a pre-colonial naval and infantry power led to the exodus of its people across the rivers Niger, Benue and Anambra respectively out of its traditional triangular settlement. Thus, the legitimacies of such settlements have to do with the theory of early arrival, otherwise known as autochthonic argument, diplomatic negotiation and power. Whereas some of such settlements were assimilated to their bigger neighbours' cultures, others were adulterated from their original Igala culture. This enhances common social structure between them and their neighbours. This essay is an in-depth study of such acculturation, with a view to bringing out the role and contribution of the Igala people in diaspora to nation building. The study employs both primary and secondary sources of data. Historiography is used to obtain information from archival documents while in-depth interview was employed to source information on the nature of Igala people in diaspora. The secondary sources involve reviews of earlier publications related to Igala people by various authors.

Keywords: Igala people and culture, Niger-Benue confluence, Igala in Diaspora, Nation building.

Introduction

Stories of the origin of most African societies have always pointed to migration from one place, either by conquest or by symbiotic relationship particularly commerce and the search for fertile grounds that could aid agriculture. Sometimes migration can take place as a result of family ostracisation` having committed societal taboos such as adultery, arson, theft among others. Prior to the formation of modern states all over the world, migration from one area to another, especially the unoccupied area, was natural and this led to evolution of villages which later metamorphose to towns and cities. In pre-colonial Africa, it was survival of the fittest as people moved in groups, families and lineages to suitable places either for economic or social reasons. But with the passage of time, there was migration by symbiotic relationship. This could be seen either in cases of asylum given to an ostracised person or family by another community or society, or in cases where some are integrated into another community as a result of marriage or maternal descent. In the evolution stages of villages and towns formation, Ade Obayemi had argued as a historian and an archaeologist that evidence from glotto chronology dating proved that some languages or ethnic groups today were the same some thousands of years ago, but because of geographical differences informed by migration and the search for better life, marked differences among them now exist today. One example of such formation is the Kwa-Congo group of languages, comprising the Yoruba, Igala, Itsekiri, Idoma, Bini and Nupe.[1]

The foregoing is a proof that at a particular period in pre-colonial history of Africa there were no ethnic differences. A proof of linguistic evidence among the aforementioned groups still exists till this day. For instance, the major differences between Igala, Ebira, Idoma, Toruba among others in many common words arise from intonation (tone of voice) or interference of position of the month organs during

[1] Ade Obayemi in Obaro Ikimi (ed) 1980: Group work of Nigerian History, Ibadan: Heineman Pub P.151.

articulation of words. This was mainly informed by long pre-historic separation. So the earliest form of migration could be seen as a product of separation. In this case migration in African societies can be classified into three major stages namely: the pre-colonial stage which also has some sub stages such as:

i. Evolution of ethnic identity as a result of separation.
ii. Rise of kingdom or empires and
iii. Diasporic migration or features.

The second major stage was the colonial stage as a result of its taxation policy. For instance, the Igala in Igboland migrated as a result of the indirect rule taxation policy which was heavily resisted in Igboland. The third stage was the post-colonial stage mainly brought about by migrations as a result of massive demand for labour at independence which actually started during the colonial period. This stage greatly facilitate nation building in Nigeria as the Igala people in diaspora participated in several developmental projects within their domain.

Conceptual Clarification

The word diaspora as a product of migration is derived from Greek word *diaspora* and it simply means the scattering or dispersion of a people. It thus implies that diaspora is the relocation of a group or parts of original inhabitants from their aboriginal place of abode to another setting entirely. Such locality could be far or near to their ancestral home. Though not the same thing as exile, the two words have been used synonymously by scholars. People in diaspora tend to hold to their religion and customs in the hope of joining their kinsmen on the other side one day. It follows therefore, that diasporic people do show resilience in their cultural practices and traditions. This is manifested in their dietary habits, dressing styles, ability to maintain their language and hand it down to subsequent generations. The close ties that diasporic communities maintain with their homestead are remarkable and perplexing.

Diasporic situation could be created by breed captivity resulting from wars, while some could be as a result of exile. In this case the people were often subjected to develop in refugee camps where people

suffer from particular persecutions and discriminations, like their inability to intermarry from the host community and restricted right to ownership of lands. Such situation fires the desire of diasporic communities to want to go back, or form a stronger solidarity with their descent. This was the case with the Jews, especially those outside Palestine especially during the Greek and Roman hegemony. In fact, it was the striving by the Jews in diaspora to maintain their racial identity and distinctiveness that eventually led to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Also, blacks who found themselves in places outside the African continent following the abolition of the slave trade in the 19th century continued to receive inspiration from the Zionist struggle that had their major aim of having their own state which they can return to. The blacks in America, for instance, were more interested in asking for social, economic and political integration in their countries of dispersion.

Migration and Settlement Pattern of the Igala People

The wave of migration was of two types: internal and external migration. The internal migration was the peopling of Igalaland from other areas, while the external migration was the movement of people out of Igalaland. The earliest migration of Igala people could be seen in traditions collected by T. J. Hutchinson:

> The inhabitants originally came from a large celebrated town named Adoh in the direction of Benin and Yoruba celebrated for being the supposed residence of the gods. Egarah was the name of the king who was regnant over the Opoto people (the aborigine of this country) before their subjection to the first Attah. The latter was an elephant hunter, and used to give portions of the animal killed as a tribute to Igarra for permission to reside in the district. But impelled, perhaps, by ambition, or urged by some emergency insult and strengthened by the ascension of more of the natives of Adoh, he attacked the Opoto people under Igarrah and drove them into a country higher up the river and constituted himself the *Attah* or the "father of Egarrah. From him, twenty Attahhs have descended; and

the present king has been monarch regnant for twenty years[2].

The tradition collected by T.J. Hutchison was supported by R.G. Armstrong when he asserts that the most definite historical statement that can be made about Igala is that, they have a common origin with the Yoruba, and that the separation took place long enough to allow fairly many differences in their present related languages[3]. It should also be noted that aside from Yoruba, there were other stocks that peopled the present Igalaland, as it is a common phenomenon with the history of every tribe in the world with the ultimate or primary claim of oriental origin.

Historically, it could be taken that some Jukun people or warriors succeeded in entering Igalaland and merged with them[4]. At the peak of the Kwararafa empire, Jukun interfered with the political hegemony of the people[5]. Aside from the Jukun, the geographical location of Igalaland greatly enhanced the peopling of the area. Its immediate neighbours such as the Afenmai, Ebira, Igbo merged and became members of the Igala society. The main Edo (Benin) people who had greatly influenced Igala kingdom also peopled the area.[6] Idah as a melting pot of cultures has also attracted diversed ethnic groups from the pre-historic period. The major cause of the migration into Idah was the push factor. In other words, it was the desire for basic necessities of life that led various peoples into settlement in Idah. The lower part of Igala society also witnessed tremendous wave of migration into its land. This is because the land was and is still fertile for agricultural production. This lower part is known as *Ibaji*, which in Igala means a land located near lake or river. The historical roots of these migrations into Igala low land areas are enshrined in some of the villages' names. These include Ineme who was said to have originated

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[2] T.J. Hutchison, 1854: *Narrative of the Niger Tshadda and Benue Exploration*, London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd. p.46

[3] R.G. Armstrong in D. Forde (ed.), 1970: *People of the Niger-Benue Confluence* London: Lowe & Brydone Ltd. p. 86

[4] P.E. Okwoli, 1973*: A short history of Igala*, Ilorin: Matanmi. p. 11

[5] P.E. Okwoli, 1973: *A short history of Igala*, Ilorin: Matanmi. p. 11

[6] P.E. Okwoli, 1973: *A short history of Igala*, Ilorin: Matanmi. p. 17

from Ineme in Edo state, Ika from Ika area of Delta state, and Onugwa, an igala nickname for Nupe.

Environment has always affected the settlement pattern of people in history. Basically, therefore, the building material and the settlement pattern of pre-colonial Igala society were determined by the nature of the environment. For instance, those in the low land area of Igala built their houses with very strong materials because of the volume of rainfall. These low land areas such as Alla and Ibaji villages usually have bamboo trees embedded in the wall and also used for the roof before attaching the roofing grass. The houses here were well spaced from one another to allow free flow of water during the rainy season. All the roofs were curved so as not to retain water and in readiness for several rainfalls. It is important to note, however, that there are no significant differences from the pattern of houses in other parts of Igalaland generally.

Thus, in pre-colonial Igala society, houses were nearly all round in shape with conical thatched roofs[7]. This is especially so in the areas from Idah upward to Ankpa. The roofs rest directly on mud wall in areas where there were adequate red clay soil for building. Most houses were built either round or oblong with thatched grass roofs. Culturally, the land in which the people settled belong to the *Attah,* which implied that settlement pattern within Idah was under the approval of the *Attah*. However, in the time of war, the pattern of settlement was dictated by such circumstances as the people moved into the dense forest called *Efoko* and settled in temporary shade (shed) which was not very pronounced or visible to the enemy. This settlement pattern was a strategy against the enemy. Igala warriors do retreat back to their well protected houses in the forest after an attack. The result of this was the tent settlement pattern. However, after the war, most of them come back home for a permanent settlement pattern, while some stayed back and started the farm settlement hamlets which in most cases developed into a big village with the founder as the village head. Describing the settlement pattern in Idah, Trother observes that:

[7] R. G. Armstrong in D. Forde, 1970: *People of the Niger-Benue Confluence,* London: Lowe & Brydone Ltd. p. 86.

> There are on a rough computation about 2,000 huts, with a probable population of 8,000 to 9,000. On all sides the plantations are kept in nice order... The palace is situated in the most secure place, being naturally protected towards the river by the abrupt and precipitous cliffs, while, on the other sides, are the surrounding villages as well as an intermediate thick mud wall, which encloses it perfectly. It is, moreover, guarded by a militia, armed with spears, a few muskets, and swords.... The higher classes observe the same protective system as the Attah, having the huts of subordinates and slaves, and often a clay wall, surrounding them, so that in the event of an attack their persons or houses are less exposed. The streets are very irregular and numerous; the principal market is held in the Attah's or northern division, on a clear level space, shaded by numerous trees.[8]

From Trotter's description, it is obvious that the settlement patterns were scattered and thrown together without proper planning. Communication and interactions in the society were in most cases through the foot paths in between houses, which were narrow and rough.

However, it is important to state that the home-stead (*unyi*) was the earliest settlement patterns in Igalaland. It comprises the husband, his wives, children, his unmarried siblings and some relatives. The family head is the head of the *unyi* (home-stead). The *Ofigbileli* (The patrilineage): comprises two or more home-steads. In the *Ofigbileli*, the oldest family head that founded the settlement automatically became the head of the patrilineage settlement. Membership of this settlement is strictly on kinship ties. In-laws and slaves were also accommodated, on the ground that they knew their limits in important matters.[9] The clan was an elaboration of both the home-stead and the patrilineage. Their origin can be traced to the same root. The clan settlement enabled

[8] H.D. Trother, cited by R.G. Armstrong in D. Forde (ed.), 1970: *People of Niger-Benue Confluence*, London: Lowe & Brydone Ltd. pp. 86-87.

[9] J.N. Ukwedeh, 2003: *History of the Igala Kingdom C 1534-1854*, Kaduna: Arewa House, A.B.U. pp. 25-56

kinsmen to settle in larger numbers. The next early settlement pattern in Igalaland was the metamorphosing of villages into town. This settlement pattern evolved from exploration and exploitation of resources in its immediate environment. These settlements were usually dominated by farmers who were very mobile, and who in pursuit of development moved into remote vegetation to enhance their occupation. Migration thus became the major contributing factor that led to the fusion of these hamlets. In this way, many immigrants arrived, and their coming gave rise to conflict of interest that could not be handled by the home-stead. The other reason was that, development, which caught up with villages to form town pattern, will serve as a barrier for external invasion because of large settlement.

The basic difference between town and the three earlier settlement patterns was that the town had urban status and it also had elaborate political system. It is possible that urbanism in the plains of Idah dates as far back as the first millennium A.D. This urbanisation was centered on the *Igala-mela* communities. By the turn of the 15th century A.D. it had attained a level that made the various groups of *Igala-mela* to come together to enable them tackle the problems developing from the increase in population and competition for the available resources.[10] The early Idah settlers enjoyed protection because of its vantage location. The Rivers Niger, Ocheche, Anambra Ofu, and Inachalo, served as natural barrier against external aggression. On the north, she was protected by a huge forest. The steep hill and the high cliffs made it impossible for invaders to make a surprise attack. This is because from the cliffs, the people could sight at far distance any stranger coming into the kingdom, especially from the opposite direction.[11]

The migrations that led to the creation of *Igala mela* settlement within the area that became Idah were made by different individuals at different times. One of such was the *Achadu* clan of Igala Ogwa. The *Etermaihi* lineage is another. The popularity of the Achadu clan version notwithstanding, the *Etermaihi* lineage was probably the first to

[10] J.N. Ukwedeh, 2003: *History of the Igala Kingdom* C 1534-1854, Kaduna: Arewa House, A.B.U. pp. 25-56

[11] *Interview* held with Ochidi Omaga, aged 80, ex-farmer at Idah, 27/7/2011

settle in the *Igala mela* clan. This claim has since become a subject of controversy. There is a version that claims that *Agbenyos* was the first leader of *Igala mela.*[12] Though the available traditions are not enough to reconstruct the chronology of the earliest settlement, other related evidence shows that leadership of the *Igala mela* clan had formed clan to clan pattern of settlement since the beginning of the history of Igala.[13]

The *Igala-mela* settlements are today located not too far from the *Attah's* palace at Idah, the centre of which is in Oji-oko, a few kilometres south-east, east and north-east of Idah. Other settlements within the *Igala mela* territory include: *Ogbogbo, Oforachi, Okpachala, Etutu, Ajire, Ojuwo, (Ofukolo), Ufokolo Obagwu-kolo, Ojiagba, Alade, Ukpo, Emachi and Okotikpa.*[14] Although *Igala mela* settlement later developed into *Igala megwaka*, meaning eleven Igala, but the former later overshadowed the latter.

The non-fertility of some parts of the region made them to have scattered settlement patterns in the search for fertile area. This is a proof that the area they abandoned must have been cultivated continually for several generations. Some of these people later moved to fertile areas by the River Niger, which became known as Ogwa Ega and Alla. The settlement pattern of these people is different from the upland pattern because of the flood that usually accompanied rainfalls[15]. In the Ibaji areas of Igalaland which were basically villages and hamlets situated along the lower Niger River, the building materials and the settlement patterns were determined by the nature of the environment. Huts were built for temporary settlement in various fishing and farm islands in readiness for the annual flooding which was a constant phenomenon in such areas. The nature of building here consists of 7 to 8 feet grass roofed bamboo walled houses in batches of various camps according to

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[12]J.N. Ukredeh, 2003: *History of the Igala Kingdom C. 1534-1854*, Kaduna: Arewa House, A.B.U. p. 36

[13] J.N. Ukredeh, 2003: *History of the Igala Kingdom C. 1534-1854*, Kaduna: Arewa House, A.B.U. p. 32

[14] J.N. Ukredeh, 2003: *History of the Igala Kingdom C. 1534-1854*, Kaduna: Arewa House, A.B.U. p. 35

[15] *Interview* held with Mr. E.K. Edimeh, Aged 75, former Chairman Idah LGA at Idah 9/10/10.

occupational partners and households.[16] Within the period of study, mobile canoe houses were also built and put over water with kitchen and sleeping provision inside. S.C. Ukpabi has given a graphic description of this. He expressed thus:

> The people over ancestors met fishing at the bank of the Niger were purely Igalas. They were following the Niger all the way from their place to Onitsha. So they don't normally come to the upperland. They remain there. They have their building in their canoes.[17]

It should however be noted that those who have such temporary settlement also have permanent homes where they stay when the water tide overwhelmed such settlement.

On the mainland area of Ibaji, were solid houses of mud wall roofs which could last for over a decade. The conical shapes of the roofs were meant to avoid leakage during the rainy season which was usually very heavy. The inner structure of the house has been described as:

> a parlour square and rectangular in shape; having two inlet and outlet doors. The bedrooms were situated by the two sides of the parlour[18].

Thus, the houses in Ibaji were spacious both in structure and in relation to one another. They were built side by side with one wide street, with a village square to enhance celebrations of different kinds. The village square has been described as an important feature of an Igala society. It is called *Ukpologwu* or a meeting ground.[19] It acts as a social, religious, political and cultural arena for the community. It is mostly situated at the most accessible part of the village. In the village square, issues that

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[16] *Interview* held with O. Achoba, aged 73, a traditional historian at Idah 9/9/08

[17] S.C. Upbabi, cited by Chika Abanobi, 2009: "Onitsha: World Headquarters of Business" *Sunday Sun Newspaper* p. 30

[18] *Interview* held with O. Achoba, aged 73, a traditional historian at Idah 9/9/08

[19] N.O. Okpe, 2005: *Social and Cultural Identity of An African Society: The Igala people of Nigeria*. Iko Verlogkom, p. 204

concern the well-being of the community are discussed. Festivities and ceremonies are also organised and conducted at the village square.

In the Ankpa area of Igala, the fertility of the soil accounted for the massive migration of people, especially close to the tributaries of the River Anambra.[20] For the building of their houses, puddles from clay were used for the walling as they can conveniently dig as much as they want near the site of the proposed building. And for the roofing, they obtain thatch from the surrounding grasses, especially the types that are suitable for this purpose. While it is true that the houses in this part of Igalaland could be compared to the types in the northern and parts of eastern Nigeria, a situation which may have resulted from the proximity of these two places to Ankpa, a noticeable difference exists, in that houses in Ankpa, like most parts of Igalaland are conical in shape as against the purely roundish types in the north, and the slightly rectangular model in the east. In describing the types of houses obtained in pre-colonial Igala society, Armstrong compared them with those of the Idoma nation, with a slight difference. According to him, houses in Igala differ from Idoma houses in that:

> Instead of their roof beams resting directly on the mud walls, they usually rest on a ring of vertical posts which stand just outside the wall, or are sometimes embedded in it.[21]

N.O. Okpe observes that this method of building houses in pre-colonial Igalaland, was necessitated by the environmental condition of the region with its often excessive heat.[22] He notes that some people still preserve the traditional method of building houses which is more heat protective.[23] Of importance here is that with the round form of building, Igala were not used to walling their compound. Compounds were not

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[20] J.N. Ukwedeh, 2003: *History of Igala Kingdom, C1524-1854*, Kaduna Arewa House, ABU, pp. 52-23

[21] R.G. Armstrong, 1955: The Igala: In *People of the Niger-Benue Confluence; Ethnographic Survey of Africa* London: International African Institute, p. 86

[22] N.O. Okpe, 2005: *Social and Cultural Identity of An African Society: The Igala people of Nigeria*. Iko Verlogkom, p. 204

[23] N.O. Okpe, 2005: *Social and Cultural Identity of An African Society: The Igala people of Nigeria*. Iko Verlogkom, p. 200

normally fenced or walled round as the case of Igala neighbours such as the Idoma and some parts of the Igbo. However, palaces or chiefly compounds were walled. Compounds in Igalaland were simply demarcated from each other with each of the houses at the edge of the boundary, thereby creating a natural courtyard in the middle where the family reception chamber, known locally as *Atakpa* was built. With this pattern of settlements, families were easily differentiated.

Talking about families, it is pertinent to point out that the basic unit of settlement in Igala society is the clan which comprised several compounds made up of members of immediate nuclear families. The development of several clans into a village gives rise to a town, referred to as *Ewo*. In spite of this, the traditional settlement pattern that obtained over much of Igalaland can be associated with the system of residence in small, scattered, and non-permanent hamlets. In the low-lying area, annual flooding restricted settlement to a few higher ridges, making the pattern to be compact, large and permanent villages. In the upland area, houses were more of mud-brick walls for the purposes of war and defence.

Apart from the influence of topography and ecology, another factor that affected settlement in Igala society was the paternal lineage. This is in line with the fact that the mainstay of the Okpoto 'tribe' was the family. The head of the family was the immediate chief and different families were governed in this way instead of territorial districts. This made the man in the west to regard his family chief in the East as his chief in spite of the proximity of the other chiefs who did not hail from his family.

In summary, the early settlement pattern and social organisation of the Igala-Akpoto was based on the available environmental resources and the climatic condition of a place which varies from place to place. It is also worthy of note that, the traditional settlement patterns have never been static. They have always adapted to change, which is the only permanent phenomenon in human life and nature in general.

Igala People in Diaspora

To the right bank of the river Niger, a good number of the communities have Igala origin and some of them still retain Igala language. For instance, Aja-Okuta was peopled by Igala descents and this is seen in its

Igala name, "Aja-Okuta", meaning market located on rocky area. In present day Benue state, most settlements in Adoka clans retain Igala tribal mark and language. While Abo-Otukpa speak Igala language till this day.

In the north-east of Aja-Okuta across the river Benue in the present day Nasarawa state, pockets of Igala occupational settlement abound. Many have even been assimilated into Arago and Doma societies.[24] The location of Igala town, Bagana in Kogi State, at the bank of River Benue facilitated this migration. At Lokoja which is diagonally south of those communities in Nassarawa State, it was peopled by three ethnic groups namely, Igala, Oworo-Yoruba and the Nupe peoples. At the peak of old Igala kingdom, Lokoja, Kakanda, Ebiraland and some parts of Nupeland were assimilated into the Great Igala Kingdom. The Nupe Kingdom was said to have been founded by an Igala prince who, having been empowered by his father, Attah Igala, with all royal insignia of office, sailed up the Niger with his subjects and founded the Nupe Kingdom. This is not surprising because of the proximity between Abejukolo Ife in Kogi state and the settlement mentioned above. Southward after Aja-Okuta is the Onyokum village opposite Agbenema village in the Ebira geographical part of Kogi state, which still speaks Igala till date. Apart from this, there are a number of significant occupational settlements before a big village known as Ake, an Island of the River Niger. These villages are today placed under Edo State because of proximity to it.

Directly opposite Government Reservation Area (GRA) in Idah is an Igala big village in Edo State known as Egoli. This village and Agenebode are almost joined together as a result of urbanisation. The people migrated from Idah for farming and fishing occupation. On the same right bank of the River Niger that has Edo State which is south of Egoli and southwest of Idah are a number of big villages whose impact are felt in one of the biggest markets in that state known as Ojigono or Illushi market. These villages include Ifeku which fell after its war with

[24] A. Obayemi in O. Ikimi (ed) 1980, *Groundwork of Nigerian History*: Ibadan: Heinemann p. 151

Anegbete in 2004. The dispute which remotely started in 1992 over boundary demarcations escalated into a war that almost swept away the entire village through the use of superior fire arms by hired fighters.[25] Others that are connected to Ifeku are, Okpatawo, Okwoshimili, Adagefuoja, Ukpodu, Alla-Odianwu, Iyegbi and Owoli. Today Ifeku society has an intellectual group to foster unity and development. A little southwest are: Ojigono, Oloshi and Ogwuma all in Edo State. In Esanland of the same state, a big town known as Ugboha has a common social-structure with Igala. This is seen in their masquerade which originated from Idah. Thus, at the point of every festival, the masquerade grove takes the direction of Idah the capital of Igala kingdom. Also some pockets of Ugboha people in the same Esanland speak Igala. In the course of this relation, some pockets of Igala people were assimilated into Ugboha society.[26] Also, a small town known as Ukpaja, not far from Ubiaja claim Idah descent as reflected in their salutation ida, na zen, meaning people from Idah the capital of Igalaland.[27] To further buttress this descent, is their political union known as *Alubi* with *Ayah*, Iyano, Iteh, all in Ibaji Local Government Area in Kogi State.

To the Southwest of Nigeria, Jacob Abdullahi,[28] has argued that the Igila town in Osun state was of Igala descent. This is because the word Igala has been diversified into several names, such as Igila, Dangara, Egara, Tagara, Akpoto and so on. In addition to that, in the course of his interview with the people along with his research team, the people narrated that Igala is enshrined in their communities' name, Igila and not Yoruba. Subsequently, they embraced themselves and took a re-union photograph as shown below:[29]

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[25] Interview held with Elder Joel Etiaka, aged 52 an Ifeku student at Ifeku 9/03/2008.
[26] Interview with Chief Giwa of Ugboha, 20th October, 2018.
[27] Interview held with Mrs. Elizabeth Ebhodache aged 52 at Ukpaja 11/03/08.
[28] Jacob Abdullahi 2006, Anyingba *The First Nigerian people,* winners studios. Nigeria Ltd. P. 138
[29] Group Interview with the People of Igila Town in Osun State in Jacob Abdullahi (2006), *Anyingba The First Nigerian People,* Winners Studios.

A Re-Union Picture with our Brethren (Igila) in the Ancient Igila Town, Osun State



Source: Jacob Abdullahi 2006, Anyingba *The First Nigerian People*, Winners Studios. Nigeria Ltd. P. 138

In the Southeast and Southwest of the river Niger, there are some Igala villages in Delta and Edo States respectively which include Ebu town and its nine villages centralised under the King of Ebu known as Onu Ebu. This was modelled after its ancestral nine Igala confederacy otherwise known as Igala-Mela,[30] an indication that they migrated from Igala. The word *Ebu* means temporary shelter in Igala language. It could also mean the father of the other eight villages which make up *Ebu*. The title of its leadership is *Onu*, an Igala word meaning king. Others with their subordinate chiefs and Igala titles are: *Okemokwuru*, (*Okakwu* of *Okemokwuru*), *Aganike* (*Okakwu* of *Againike*); *Ogo* (*Akpala* of *Ogo*); *Iyagoshimili* (*Iyi* of *Iyagoshimili*); *Ekpeko* (*Akpala* of *Ekpeko*); *Uchebe* (*Ojoko* of *Uchebe*); *Ugolo* (*Akpala* of *Ugolo*); *Amoma* of *Ugele* (*Ebije* of *Amoma Ugele* and *Odobo*.[31]

There is another town with Igala origin in Delta State. It is called Illah. Its original Igala name was Alla, meaning an alluvial settlement close to the river bank. It is today adulterated as Illah, though some people still call it Alla.[32] The nine villages in Illah also attest to

[30]J.O. Chiadikabia, 2004: *Asaba:People and Tradition*, Asaba: Chiadix Venture, p. 9
[31] Field Work, 20th July, 2016.
[32]*Interview* held with Barrister Ochei Chima aged 57 an Illah Elder 9/06/09 at Illah

the fact of its original home of Igala-Mela political system as stated above. The Igala ethnic tie with Illah people was demonstrated by Colonel Sule Apolo, an Igala man who led a federal troop to Illah during Nigerian civil war by saving them from destruction, having heard the people and their masquerades speaking Igala language. In an apparent anger that the Igala in diaspora have been forgotten by their indigent people, Barrister Ochei Chima, an illustrious son of Illah challenged an Igala elder, that the Igala is one nation that has forgotten its people in diaspora, especially his home town, Illah. This challenge was a call for integration and strong solidarity among the Igala people in diaspora, with the main stock of Kogi State. Furthermore, J.O. Chiadikabia traced the origin of Igala in Asaba after his investigations as follows:

> The son of Onojaoboni is the legendary Nnebisi. His father, Onojaoboni, came from Igala. He was a prince from the royal house of the Attah of Igala. Onojaoboni was accused of plotting against the throne and consequently, he was banished from the royal house. He then departed the royal house and sailed towards the west bank of the River Niger until he came to an area where he met Anyanwu. This area is where Asaba is situated. Onoja Oboni's Igala name was later changed by Anyanwu to an Ibo name, Ikenga[33]. He further stated that from the lower Niger area, Onoja Oboni and Agai-Idoko clans migrated deep into the Niger Delta towns of Aboh and lower Niger town of Ossomari and founded them[34].

The above was earlier buttressed by J.S. Boston when he stated that, "the lower Niger towns of Aboh, Okpaiye, Umuolu, Onya, Ndoni, and Ossomala were of Igala Origin.[35] Some notable scholars like K.O. Dike supported this view. According to Dike, "Ossomala, Oko, Odekpe and

[33]J.O. Chiadikabia, 2004: *Asaba: People and Tradition,* Asaba: Chiadix Ventures, p.9
[34]J.O. Chiadikabia, 2004: *Asaba: People and Tradition,* Asaba: Chiadix Ventures, p. 9
[35]J.S. Boston, 1960:" Notes on Contact between Igala and the Ibo" *JHSN* Vol. 2 p. 54

Umuolu originated from Igala".[36] R.N. Henderson also favoured this Ossomala's claim of Igala origin in the following words:

> The migration from Igala areas in the North appears to have been more extensive than those from Aboh and its vicinity in the South. Some penetration of the lower river by Igala fishermen have occurred very early for a few of the river bank. Ibo communities claim their founders encountered Igala fishermen camping by desired sites and Igala themselves say that such towns as Okpaiye, Umuolu, Onya and Ndoni were originally Igala speaking people. Much later, organised flights took place from Igala country and its peripheries, and one of them is detailed in the oral traditions of the towns of Ossomala, Odekpe and Oko.[37]

Elizabeth Isichei was more emphatic about the origin of Ossomala. She expressed her views this way:

> A whole chain of Niger Towns claim Igala origin or have quarters which trace their descent from Igala. Illa, a cultural melting pot of different people has Igala quarters and Igala is still spoken by its masquerades. Oko and Odekpe also claim Igala origin but the most important state founded by Igala in this way was Ossomari. The earliest version of its traditions recorded almost one hundred year ago, states that it is said to have been peopled by the Igaras originally as a trading station of markets.[38]

Thus, it is common to hear that a number of villages in Anambra west local governments speak Igala language till date. These include Unoma, Alla, Ijam, Igbedo, Adamagwu, Igbokenyi, Odekpe, Ode and

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[36] K.O. Dike, 1976: *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 26

[37]R.N. Henderson, 1976: *The King in Every Man.*New Heaven and London, YaleUniversity Press, p. 68

[38] E. Isichei, 1976: *A History of the Ibos*Ibadan: Longman, p. 54

so on. Ijam is the headquarters of Anambra West Local Government Area. This shows how important and strategic the Igala communities are in Anambra State. Shortly after these communities is Ononoh, a small town by Anambra river which is a mixture of Igala and Igbo peoples, even though the Igala in this community had been assimilated. According to the tradition collected by S.C. Ukpabi at Onitsha, the Igala were the people that were fishing at the Niger by the time Onitsha people came to settle there. Ukpabi further acknowledges that there were some villages in Onitsha that spoke Igala in the past; that the loss of Igala language in Onitsha, may have been as a result of acculturation and interaction between the peoples; that Ogbodu and Ogboru, two out of the nine villages that make up Onitsha are of Igala descent; and that one of the outstanding monarchs of Onitsha, *Obi Eze Aroli*, was the son of an Igala woman called Enubi.[39]. He noted that the Igala group must have followed the Niger all the way from their ancestral home, Idah to Onitsha. Commenting on the dispersal of the Igala people, S.C. Ukpabi affirmes that:

> Onitsha is made up of three groups of people. The first are the Edo, the Eze Chima's team. The second, the Igala, who were fishermen on the Niger during the arrival of the Edo people. The third were the Igbo who moved from the hinterland for the purpose of commerce.[40]

Supporting the story of Igala dispersal, Eugene *Chukwura*, an Asaba elder, affirmed that the early settlers in Asaba were the Igala and Edo.[41] Igala communities in Asaba include Umukwu Ata, and masquerades such as Ukpuwe, *Age and* Nweze *Umu* have been said to be of Igala origin.[42]

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[39] S.C. Ukpabi quoted by Chika Abanobi, 2009: "Onitsha: World Headquarters of Business" *Sunday Sun Newspaper*, June 28, p. 30.

[40] S.C. Ukpabi quoted by Chika Abanobi, 2009: "Onitsha: World Headquarters of Business" *Sunday Sun Newspaper*, June 28, p. 30.

[41]Interview held with Eugene Chukwura 60 years, a politician on the 28/06/2009 in Lagos

[42] Interview held with Elder Eugene Chukwura: 60 years,a politician, 28/06/2009 in Lagos.

Its strategic geographical advantage on both sides of Rivers Niger and Benue and around their confluence had made the Igala to be highly mobile as the two great rivers were the major highways in the pre-colonial hinterland Nigeria. In the process, cultures were exchanged between them and other groups, especially the Yoruba, Nupe, Ebira, Edo, Idoma, Tiv, Jukun and Igbo. The linguistic affinity, coupled with certain cultural traits especially in the aspects of respect and greetings, further confirms the age-long relationship between the Igala and the Yoruba. In Igala land, just like the Yoruba, the male bows or prostrates to greet an elder, while the female kneels down. Respect signs in both Yoruba and Igala are of high premium among the peoples. This may not just be mere outcome of diasporic contact, but the result of a common origin.

In Enugu state, the Igala people also abound. The whole of *Ogwurugu* town in Uzo-Uwani Local Government Area which has nine villages just like the nine aboriginal Igala, speaks Igala language. Some pockets of Enugu Ezike speak Igala language, while Ete, Eka-Iyi, Unadu, Omashi, Itchi, Ogwurute and Ibegwa-Aka speak Igala and claim its descent. Ibegwa Aka, Unado, Itchi are close to Akpanya while Okwurogbo community also in Kogi State is a border town to Enugu Igala speaking communities. It is therefore pertinent to note that among the Igbo people, the word *Umu-olu* is synonymous with Igala descents in Igbo land. These, villages and towns are found in both Igbo-Eze North and South Local Government areas of Enugu State. According to Chika Abanobi, the migration from Igala land to Enugu was also due to the pressure and threat from the Fulani in the 19th century and this boosted the population density in Nsukka area[43]. Describing the location and features of the Igala, Hutchinson observed that:

> At Onitsha, on the left side of the River, the Abo territory terminates and Egarrah country commences, extending up the Tshadda to Abasna, a distance of at least one hundred miles. On the opposite side Asaba terminates the Aboh Kingdom, which stretches from the Benin Creek, coming

[43] S.C. Ukpabi quoted by Chika Abanobi, 2009: *Sunday Sun Newspaper*, June 28, p. 30.

> out of the Waree country, to this place, a distance of about sixty miles. The Aboh dominion (*sic*), exist very far inland; as the king of Benin claims sway from his town to within forty or fifty miles of the confluence. The Egarrah country on this side commences at Assabaa, and extends to Buddu, up the Niger, where the Nufi country begins, but the distance I am unacquainted with.

Conclusion

The Igala migrants were active in economic development of their new settlements area. They invested their money and energy in building houses, canoe, trading, crop farming and other allied industries such as blacksmithing, hunting and animal husbandry. The effect of this local development was the building of primary and secondary schools during the Christian missionary and colonial occupation of Nigeria up to independence. Aside from the above, the internal consequence of these economic activities on pre-colonial Igala history was the massive in-flow of people into Igala land. Another point of note is that the cliffs along the Rivers served as natural barriers against enemies' aggression, especially the forces of its immediate neighbours across the Niger.

Thus, in as much as we have Igala people as indigenes of other states of Nigeria, so also do we have other ethnic groups which have been assimilated into Igala society. For instance, being a melting pot of commerce and culture, many ethnic groups such as Hausa, Yoruba, Nupe, Ebira, Jukun, Idoma, Igbo, Afemai and Edo, were also absorbed into Igala society as a result of intergroup relations. It is therefore, pertinent to note that in order to enhance unity among various ethnic groups in Nigeria today, pockets of ethnic groups who settled among other larger ones for a period of ten years and above should be fully assimilated after such a long period of settlement. This vicissitude of history is a natural phenomenon as the aborigines themselves are also product of migration. A good example of this lesson can be drawn from United States of America, which has the highest number of integrated ethnic groups in the world, occasioned mainly by colonialism, slave trade and other commercial occupation. Finally, it is safe to conclude, that the strategic location of Igala at the base of the confluence between the rivers Niger and Benue gives her an opportunity to develop

political, social, economic, religious and indeed linguistic relations with all her neighbours. It was the intergroup relations that existed between Igala and her neighbours that influenced the migration of Igala people to other parts of present day Nigeria and till date, Igala people have continue to relate peacefully with all her neighbours. To sustain this peaceful relationship, there is the need to continually maintain a sense of communal and individual values, and respect for one another's culture, beliefs, customs, traditions, religion and occupation, as this would enhance the spirit of tolerance for harmonious living.

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