

The City- States of the Eastern Niger Delta

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1. Background and Environment

“The Niger Delta” is a term used specifically to describe the terrain watered by the River Niger, which flows to form a delta on the Atlantic Ocean (Allen & Wells [1902] 391; *Nedeco Report* [1960] 6-7). The areas between River Forcados to the west and River Real in the east form the actual delta of the River Niger. The term “Niger Delta States” came to be used to identify the four eastern city-states of *Nembe* (the Brass of the European records), *Elem Kalabari* (the New Calabar of the European records, also known by its praise names of *Owame* and *Kengema Kalabari*), *Okrika*, and the *Ibani*, anglicized “Bonny” by the Europeans. The Ibani are also known to their neighbours as *Okoloba/Okoloama* (Fig. 1).

These city-states are bounded to the west by other Ijo sub-groups of the Niger Delta and to the east by related Delta periphery groups such as the Obolo (Andoni or Idoni), the Ogoni and the Ndoki. The Ibibio and the Efik state of Calabar (old Calabar of the records) are still further west, beyond the Ogoni and the Andoni. To the north are such groups as the Oduai, Engenni, Abua and the Ikwerre at the centre, and the Isoko, the Itsekiri and the Urhobo at the extreme western Delta. Three physical belts cover the entire length of the Delta region which affect the lives of the people, their occupation and their culture: (1) the sandy beach ridges, (2) the salt water swamp, and (3) the fresh water swamp.

Because the sandy beach ridges rise between two to five feet above mean high water level, islands are formed close to the Atlantic. Ibani (Bonny) is on the inner edge of one of the sandy ridge islands. The Kalabari town of Ke and the Nembe towns of Okpoma, Odioma and Twon (Brass) are located on islands on this sandy beach. The entire beach is dotted with islands, some small and others large, as Bonny is. Immediately behind the coastal beach ridges is the salt water swamp; it is much more extensive than the sandy beach and is the typical swamp environment usually associated with the Niger Delta. This area has a high level of flooding. It is in this area that many of the Ijo groups are located, including all of Okrika,

most of Nembe and Kalabari. Above the salt water swamp is the fresh water swamp, wider and longer than the others and home to most of the central and western Ijo groups.

This is the ideal area for salt-making and fishing as well as the construction of canoes. On the other hand, the people in the fresh water swamp engaged in small-scale farming coupled with fishing. Since the area witnesses seasonal flooding which deposits silt, farming is the ideal occupation. The vegetation is tropical rain forest which is the home of several trees including the palm oil and raffia.

2. Language

Who are the Ijo? The various groups known today as the Ijo (Ijaw) speak dialects that are recognizable as the Ijo language. Each of the four Niger Delta states of Nembe, Elem Kalabari, Okrika and Ibani/Bonny speak a dialect that can be identified as Ijo. According to the English linguist, Kay Williamson, an authority on the Ijo language, the language forms a distinct subgroup within the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo family of African languages which include the Yoruba, the Ibo, the Edo, the Urhobo and the Itsekiri, all in modern Nigeria (Williamson [1968] 124-30; Greenberg [1963]).

3. Early History: Migrations and Settlements

The origin of the Ijo ethnic group in Nigeria is shrouded in mystery. Each sub-group has its own tradition of movements within the heartland of the Niger Delta itself. Many of them claim connections with Benin but the historical evidence to support this is quite scanty (Alagoa [1972] 187). Each Ijo group developed its own peculiar social-political characteristics in response to its circumstances, but all were bound together by their common language and culture.

Nembe. The early settlers of what came to be known as the city-state of Nembe were what Alagoa calls proto-Ijo (Alagoa [1972] 124-6). Different

waves of movements into the Nembe area had apparently resulted in the final establishment of six settlements or quarters. These settlements have all disappeared. Ekule was the name of the ruler of the most senior quarter, Olodiama. His name came later to be used for all six quarters. There were also two settlements to the north and east, both within ten miles of the metropolis from which Nembe subsequently expanded. According to tradition, the name of the tenth king was Ogió. His reign is dated around 1639, and he is reputed to have gained control of the city/metropolis. All surviving Nembe royal genealogies begin with him. This period witnessed the cooperation and eventual unification of the old quarters. Several factors were conducive to the process: political unrest caused by the Itsekiris, the myth of their powerful god and his sword, as well as the external threat of the continued military thrust of the Kalabari towns of Kula and Bile, both to the east of the Nembe. Later a civil war split the city into two factions. King Ogbodo and his followers moved to found yet another settlement at Bassambiri. As a result Nembe had two settlements and two monarchies, who at the beginning of the nineteenth century claimed supremacy, Ogbodo at Bassambiri, and Mingi at the Nembe city.²

Elem Kalabari. To the east of Nembe is the Kalabari region of which Elem Kalabari became the most important settlement, functioning as the headquarters of the entire sub-group. The city-state dominated a large territory and, like the Nembe metropolis, the settlement was split up into as many as seven sections/quarters, each with its own ruler and individual genealogy. The inhabitants were all Ijo-speaking.

Traditions have it that the Endeme (Kalabari quarter) traced their origins to the central Delta from where they had moved through the northern Delta fringe to the head of the New Calabar (New Kalabari) River near Amafa, an Ikwerre town which the Kalabari still call *Obu Amafa*. They all agree that the Endeme were of Ijo origin, tracing their ancestry to Kalabari, allegedly a son of *Mein* who had broken away from the Mein, the ancestral home of *Ogobiri*.

Due to pressures from local inhabitants as well as the search for areas to exploit for trading purposes, the Endeme/Kalabari group left Amafa and moved southwards. Economic opportunities necessitated the move into Owame or New Calabari. This site (now called Elem Kalabari or Old Shipping) is a few miles from the mouth of the larger and more navigable estuaries, the New Calabar River, originally called Rio Real da Kalabari. The Endeme/Kalabari group were well placed for contact both with the Europeans and with

the hinterland markets. They now call themselves Kengema (Horton [1969] 46).

A document of 1620 mentions a king of Calabar (Rey de Calabar) and a king of the Rio Real (Rey de Rio Real). The kings referred to are those of Elem/Kalabari and the Ibani/Bonny, and they are described as war lords and friends of the Portuguese (Brasio [1955]). They respected each other though they were often engaged in close competition for the overseas trade. The fact that the Portuguese were impressed by these monarchs shows that the monarchy must have predated the seventeenth century.

In 1699 James Barbot and Grazihier visited the Elem Kalabari settlement and met "King Robert" of whom they reported that he was "a good civil man, about thirty years old". In his negotiations with the European traders the king was supported by "three leaders", presumably "house leaders".³ Thus kingship as well as the House/lineage system must be institutions developed among the Kalabari at Elem Kalabari before the seventeenth century, and probably in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The House/lineage system was a peculiar Ijo system which reached its highest stage of development among the four eastern Delta states.

Okrika. Unlike her sister city-states of Nembe and Elem Kalabari, the Okrika do not have a record of having once been settled outside the present city-state. The Okrika island is occupied by the two main settlements of *Okrika Town* and *Ogoloma*. Each has internal factions which strongly disagree over the early origin and history of the settlement. The controversy is usually centred around the two groups of *Tuboniju* (Traders) and *Koniju* (Fishermen).

Ibani/Bonny. Of all the Ijo groups the Ibani/Bonny are those who have suffered most from the overseas trade. The traditions of origin are similar to those of Nembe, Elem Kalabari and Okrika. The original homeland was the central Delta area of *Okoloba* and *Tubaratoro* (Owonaro [1949] 53). The other Ijo groups, especially the Kalabari, still call the Ibani people "Okoloba".

There is no doubt whatsoever about the basic Ijo culture, customs and dialect of the Ibani people. Although the Ibani became bilingual due to the influx of slaves into the city-state, the Ijo-Ibani dialect survived and is still spoken in Finima, Kuruma, Kalai-Ibiama, Ayam (Peterside), Abalamabie, Isileogonu, Otuokolo as well as by the Allison lineage in Bonny Town.

Before 1700, at a time of crisis, Bonny turned to a new ruler, Perekule (anglicized Pepple). His dynasty

ruled Bonny to the end of the nineteenth century. Even though the city-state period ended in the nineteenth century, the traditional ruler of Bonny is still from the Pepple House. Perekule ensured continuity and consolidated the legitimacy of the new dynasty by marrying the daughter of a previous king, Dappana-Amakiri, and he was succeeded by the two sons of the union, *Fubara* and *Opubo*. Perekule and his son Fubara seem to have ruled Bonny for most of the eighteenth century. Barbot met Perukule in 1699 and Opubo is recorded to have succeeded Fubara in 1792. Barbot described Perekule (Pepprell) as “a sharp blade and a mighty talking Black”.⁴ If this was indeed Perekule, then his reign must be one of the longest ever attested, beginning in the late seventeenth century.

From what we can see, the changes connected with the overseas European trade resulted in the setting up of new dynasties in all the four Delta city-states of Nembe, Elem Kalabari, Okrika and Ibani/Bonny; and Olfert Dapper described all four states as being established kingdoms in the seventeenth century (Dapper [1688]).

4. Organisation of the City-States

The western and central Ijo was a stateless society, based on the autonomy of each settlement. The *Pere* or high priest was the religious leader. There was no central political institution other than the village assembly (*amagula*) with the oldest man wielding authority as the *Amaokosowei*.

The Eastern Delta city-states or kingdoms retained

the basic Ijo structure but expanded and developed into “city-states”, as Dike called them, or “trading states” as G.I. Jones called them. The political leader and chairman of the General Assembly was no longer the oldest man but the *Amayanabo* (owner of the town) chosen partly for his personal ability and partly because he belonged to the lineage of the founder. At assembly meetings, the Amayanabo and his chiefs were seated separately from the youths, *asawome*.

These changes were to a large extent the result of trade. Living along the coast with fishing and salt-making as their main occupations, the eastern Ijo had to supplement their food with provisions obtained from intensive trade with the people of the hinterland. They exchanged their fish and salt for food with the people of the hinterland, and it was not long before a class of professional merchants emerged (Horton [1969] 45). Thus before the advent of the Portuguese in the fifteenth century, the infrastructure for the Atlantic trade was already in place.

Nimi Wariboko ([1997] 29-30) is even of the opinion that the immigration of people from other Ijo regions into the Eastern Delta State settlements was caused more by the need to exploit economic opportunities than by the endeavour to escape wars or the need to found new settlements. In the case of Elem Kalabari, a group of merchants moved from the Amafa settlement into Owame or New Calabar (Elem Kalabari) to find and exploit economic opportunities. The result was a boom of the lineage system of the typical Ijo village. Each individual House/lineage leader adapted to the new realities by making his children, relatives, trading associates and slaves form what one could call a

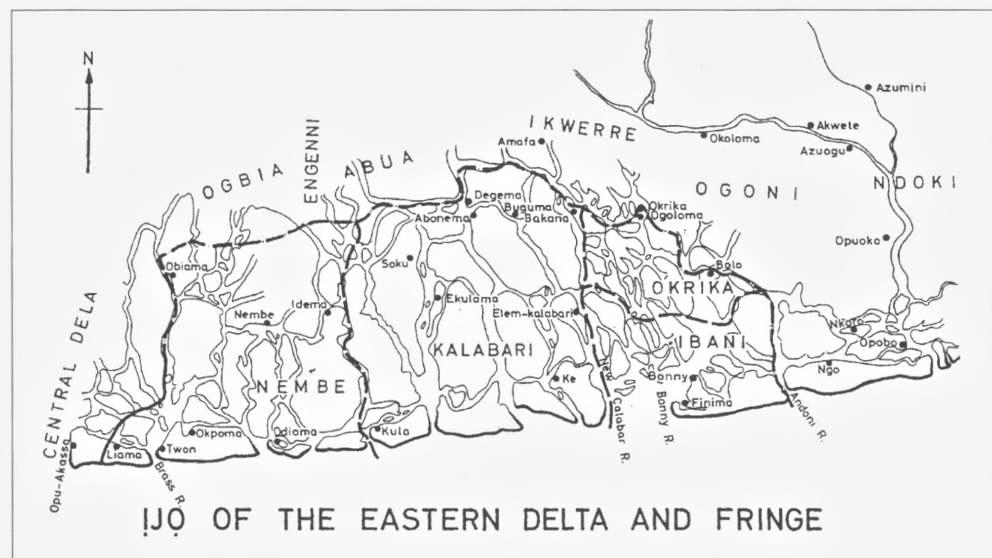


Fig. 1. Map of the Niger Delta city-states.

Canoe House which in essence was a trading company. Competition was the key. Each House had to be thriving, dynamic, profit-oriented and able to establish other Houses while still keeping its links with the parent House. The situation became so fluid that a junior House that became more prosperous could even absorb an older House. An unprofitable and unsuccessful House was broken up or merged with another. In times of external aggression each House furnished men and provisions to defend the city-state. The House, especially in the Kalabari context, was also a political and administrative unit. Each House had a chieftaincy stool and its own emblem. To keep up the population, many women were married off, many children produced, and many slaves brought in. It was also open to migrants to join. If a chief died, his successor succeeded to the House and its emblem, and received allegiance from the members. The smaller Houses numbered anything from 300 to 1,000 members; others, such as the royal Houses, numbered many thousands.

The Canoe House was also a military organization whose able-bodied traders were equipped with arms and fought as soldiers. The leadership of the House went to someone who inspired respect and was known for his initiative and commercial ability. He had to be a man of substance. Capital accumulation was the main incentive behind the trade, especially in Elem Kalabari and Bonny. The society was an open one. A man began by being an assistant either in the long distance hinterland trade or in the Atlantic coastal trade. If he was enterprising, he could sell his own goods alongside those of his Head. On the coast, goods were usually given in trust by the Europeans. Trust was absolutely essential, and a man dug his own grave if he proved to be untrustworthy.

In Bonny the organizational changes took place during the reign of Perekule (Pepple) who, according to the Bonny elder, Fombo, was an innovator who departed from the accepted norms. The king made one Allison Nwaoju, an Ibo slave, an *alabo*, i.e. chief. This Allison, being of slave origin, could not by tradition rise through the lineage system to such a position. By promoting him king, Pepple opened a new chapter in Bonny's history.

As successful traders came into wealth and prominence, they tended to build their own Houses as offshoots of the older Houses which had been based on lineage descent. These new leaders consequently became House Heads (Alapu) who were able to equip war canoes to help the king in his wars. In Elem Kalabari and Bonny they had the privilege of sitting in the

king's council. The reform of the House system seems to have reached its climax in the eighteenth century.

The Trust system was well adapted to the administration of the House system and became what has been called "the lending bank". The European traders provided the middlemen with manufactured goods which they could sell in the hinterland in return for slaves, palm kernels and palm oil. The entire business transaction was based on mutual trust – integrity and honesty being the essential values. The House Head became the guarantor and was responsible for all traders within his House who received the "trust" for sale inland. House flags bearing the insignia/symbol of the House Head went ahead whenever the traders went on board the European ships to transact business. Today the former city-states still use the flags of the individual Houses.

The trading skills of the Elem Kalabari people are attested in, for example, a report written in 1699 by James Barbot, the Captain of the English frigate, *Albion*. It was said of the Kalabari monarch that "He gave us to understand that he expected one bar of iron for each slave more than Edwards [the captain of another English ship] had paid him. He also objected to our metal basins, mugs, beads and other goods and said they were of little value at the time." The negotiations continued the next day as the king would not reduce his demands; and it was only after he had struck a bargain that an agreement was reached. Barbot continued: "We had a conference with the king and principal natives of the country about trading and this lasted from three o'clock until having thirteen bars of iron for a male and ten for a female" (Barbot [1732]).

The powers of the Amanyanabo were increased by the Atlantic trade. He was the king who ruled the city-state and its citizens. He represented them in their relations with the European traders. It was he who received the "comey"⁵ and other dues for protecting the European traders, and who introduced the Heads of the Houses to the Europeans. As each of the city-states grew in size, population and wealth, the king's position, power and prestige rose correspondingly. He was never an absolute ruler but not just a mere figurehead. The kings of Elem Kalabari and Bonny were both wealthy and powerful. The power of the House Heads, however, grew *pari-passu* with the power of the Amanyanabo and there was always a latent instability caused by the increased wealth and influence of House Heads. According to Horton, the assembly of House Heads and the Amanyanabo was not particularly successful in maintaining order and regulating

conflict, and throughout most of its life as a trading community Elem Kalabari remained in a condition of chronic instability (Horton [1969] 52).

5. The Culture and Religion of the Niger Delta City-States

It has been claimed that one of the most profound and interesting changes occasioned by the European trade on the Niger Delta coast was the adaption of the Ijo Wari (House) system to serve new ends. Trade had become the most important economic pursuit of the people. Building up the House took different forms. One such form was the *Iya* marriage rite. Generally speaking, the Ijo were – and are – matrilineal in the sense that unless special rites took place, a woman kept her children in her lineage. The husband could only claim them if he had paid a substantial dowry and performed the necessary and very expensive rituals. But a man needed to incorporate his children into his own House for purposes of labour and trade. The hinterland trade was linked with the European trade and both needed many hands. Acquisition of wealth was extremely important in an open society. An enterprising young man, even if he was initially handicapped socially by being a slave or a descendant of slaves, faced few obstacles if any, in improving himself economically and socially as well.

So the performance of the *Iya* ceremony on his wife/wives signalled his new status in society as a respectable and influential person. The ceremony was costly and if he was able to perform it on many wives, the better for him, as all the children from such women belonged to him. In Kalabari society, for example, it was a sign of weakness not to be able to claim one's own children. Many powerful and wealthy chiefs would not agree to give away their daughters in marriage in accordance with the *Iya* ceremony but preferred to buy male slaves for them so that the children would remain in their own House. Also, a freeborn who married a slave of another House was said to have "wasted his seed" because he could never claim his children through *Iya* ceremony on the slave who forever belonged to the House or the owner who had "bought" her.

The usual *Iya* ceremony was an unannounced declaration that the young man's next step was to take a chieftaincy title. At the appropriate time when he thought he was rich enough, he would become an *alabo* (chief). He was then required to provide a contingent of armed men or a war canoe with a crew of about thirty able men who could assist the city-state in

times of war. These men would have to sit in the canoe at the sea-front where the Amanyano (king) and the assembly of chiefs, accompanied by their followers, could inspect the canoe and the soldiers. The review took the form of a celebration in which the whole city was involved. The candidate must satisfy the community that none of the men in the fighting-canoe belonged to any other person. He also had to provide guns and ammunition. It was only after this ceremony that the real inauguration ceremony took place. The candidate must have the backing of the leader of his main House, who had the privilege of "raising his hand" to indicate his approval and support for him in the assembly of chiefs. However rich a man was, and even if he was free-born, his hand had to be "raised" by the leader of his main House, and that is still the case today. Such sponsorship was vital to his promotion to the position of chief. So, in spite of the openness of society, and although social mobility was encouraged for enterprising young men, there were/are still restrictions that prevented the "nouveau riche" from arrogating power; and no one, however rich, could ever become the Amanyano.

Slaves and Citizenship

The House system was fully geared to the manumission of slaves. The basic ceremony was to shave the slave's hair and to cut the nails on both hands and feet. The new hair and nails indicated the manumitted slave's new personality and change of status. Former slaves were usually given new Ijo names. The male slave was now integrated into the household and given a "new mother", usually an older member of the House. Thereafter he was treated as her son, and all the members of the House treated him as their brother. A male slave was given a wife, and a female a husband. Children born from manumitted slaves were integrated into the House system.

Ekine and Sekiapu

It was imperative for a new slave to acculturate as quickly and completely as possible. Speaking the dialect with a foreign accent, for example, provoked ridicule in the community. Furthermore, acculturation led to increased social mobility in an open society which encouraged enterprising and intelligent young men. There were societies and clubs in the city-states which helped to accelerate and encourage the acculturation process for the new slave. In no city-state did this become an art so much as it did among the Elem

Kalabari. The *Ekine* was a club of masquerades, for the artistically-endowed citizens. They must have the ability to dance and understand the intricacies of the drum language which was an embodiment of the historical events of the ancestors of the state, the “praise names” of the various ancestors.

The members *sekiapu* (dancers) must dance according to the particular rhythm of the drum, and be able to “point with their walking-sticks” accurately to the appropriate areas or shrines called for by the drums. As there were about thirty-three shrines of the heroes, it was not an easy task to perform. But it was, and still is, a beautiful sight to watch *sekiapu* perform. A dancer who failed even on one call was publicly demasked and ridiculed. The only prerequisite for joining the *Ekine* society was the ability to acquire the dancing skills, and so an intelligent slave could climb the social ladder and be finally “accepted” if he performed well. *Ekine* involved knowing the culture and idiomatic phrases of the Kalabari and the complicated drumming rituals. Success in *Ekine* meant the seal of approval and full citizenship. Members of *Ekine* were feared and respected especially as they also assisted the Amayanabo/king in the performance of his duties and the administration of justice. They punished thieves and other social offenders, enforcing a code of conduct on their members, and were highly in demand to collect debts.⁶

Peri Ogbo

The Peri was an association of successful warriors found in all the Niger Delta States. In some, the association was one of head hunters whose principal endeavour was to catch and kill men, especially in times of war. In order to become a member, one must have killed an elephant, or a wild animal, or captured a man alive, or killed a man. By such deeds of valour the warrior earned instant respect in the community. It was not a society for the faint-hearted. The members possessed the sole right to wear certain distinctions, such as eagle’s feathers; they had the privilege of drinking with their left hand; and they performed a special peri (war dance) at the death of a member or the Amayanabo/king, or at the close of a war in which they had fought. They were always prepared to defend the state or execute dangerous missions secretly. In the last war between Kalabari and Nembe in the early 1990s, these warriors did a great deal of damage and the Kalabaris decimated the population of the Nembe.

Okrika society was slow to adopt the *Peri Ogbo*

and *Ekine/Sekiapu*, but the Okrikas had other institutions which served similar purposes. *Sekini*, for example, was a masquerade society of warriors which also served as a *court of appeal* empowered to pass a sentence of death on murderers and to punish other undesirable elements of society. The *Kiriowu* had the authority to punish misdemeanours committed by women, while another female society, *egbele irieme*, protected women’s rights. Among the Kalabari, there also was the fearful *egbelegbe* female society, entrusted with functions similar to those performed by the two societies in Okrika. Another unique association among the Kalabari was a group within the *Peri Ogbo* called *Koronogbo* (the club of the strong) which one could call “an inner circle”. It is difficult to ascertain when this group emerged but it probably was in the heyday of the slave trade. Their one mission was to terrorize poorly acculturated persons in the society. On certain nights, they prowled the streets and challenged everyone they met. Those challenged were asked to state their names and their mission, and if they betrayed a non-Kalabari origin, they were killed on the spot. For the Kalabari, one result of the activities of the *Koronogbo* was to promote the acculturation of foreigners, which was an important process in a slave-trading society.

Bonny, on the other hand, did not have such a society and did not attach the same importance to acculturation. Consequently, the inhabitants “lost” their language or, at best, became bilingual, whereas the Kalabari society was kept intact. The Kalabari culture remained unadulterated. The influx of Ibo and Ibibio slaves did not affect the community. Elem Kalabari remained as “pure” as the other Kalabari towns and villages that did not participate in the Atlantic slave trade. Both Nembe and Okrika (to some extent) kept their culture and language. Nembe became involved in the slave trade comparatively late, and her society did not witness a large influx of slaves as did the other city-states. In all of Kalabari history, there was no incidence of a slave revolt.

National Deities

Religion played an important role in the city-states. They all had national gods and sometimes “subsidiary gods”. The Nembe, Okrika and Bonny had war-gods as their tutelary deities.

In the case of **Nembe**, the adoption of *Ogidiga*, brought in by the Itsekiri, resulted in the abrogation of the individual gods worshipped by the different sections/quarters and by the other towns that finally made

up the Nembe state. Because of the famous *Ada* sword Ogidiga was said to be more powerful than the other gods, who became acknowledged as the “sons and daughters and even wives” of Ogidiga. The subjugation of these gods under Ogidiga of Nembe enabled the city-state to expand and incorporate the outlying areas without much bloodshed. The relationship between Nembe and Okpoama, for example, was sealed when Okpoama “accepted” that *Kalaorowei*, the community’s god, was the son of Ogidiga, now the national god of the city of Nembe and the kingdom. The affinity in both language and culture was now seen as “a child of Ogidiga”. *Ogidifariye*, the rock deity of Oruokolo, was “a son” of Ogidiga and so on (Barbot [1732] 380).

Among the **Elem Kalabari**, the female goddess Owemenakaso (variously called Awomenakaso and Akaso) was originally worshipped by the Korome/Krome group within Elem Kalabari metropolis but was subsequently adopted by the Endeme/Kalabari group. The unification of all the sections that made up the Elem Kalabari city was made possible by the specific demand of Akaso. She became the “mother” of all the various gods and goddesses of the Kalabari clan, and that happened even where the different towns and villages retained their own local deities. She was the highly honoured and accepted national goddess and was invoked especially when the clan faced external aggression. The adoption of a female god who opposed war and bloodshed set the Kalabari apart from the other states. They claimed that “Akaso was the youngest sister of Britanna of the British who ruled the seas” and that gave them an extra reason for the “feeling of superiority” for which the Kalabari, even today, are known. The Kalabari’s were also regarded as “Englishmen” by their neighbours because of their “civilized behaviour”. Even though they had *Okpolodo* as a subsidiary war god, the adoption of Akaso, who gave them high moral instructions, tended to make the Kalabari a peace-loving and fun-loving people. The claim was that though Akaso hated wars and bloodshed, she never lost a war, which also gave the Kalabari a feeling of invincibility. Their desire for peace, however, was not totally divorced from their passion for wealth which depended on trade which, in turn, depended on peace.

Akaso’s fame spread far and wide. If blood was shed on the land, the land must undergo spiritual cleansing by the high priest of Akaso. That also protected Elem Kalabari and the subsequent Kalabari towns from engaging in civil wars.

Among the **Bonny**, the institution of a national-

god, *Ikuba*, was established early on in her history. *Ikuba*’s symbol was the monitor lizard (iguana) associated with the Andoni, the eastern neighbour of Bonny. Tradition has it that the founder of Bonny Town, Alagbariye, was himself a king/priest of the god *Ikuba* during the formative years of the city-state and that Queen Kambasa built the god “a house of skulls” after the Bonny had defeated the Ogoni in a protracted war. It was not long before the worship of *Ikuba* became established. *Ikuba* was a war-god whose intervention made Bonny flourish in her commercial activities as well as in her military exploits. The “House of skulls” built by Queen Kambasa was soon filled with skulls. New markets had to be procured, and the one closed by the Elem Kalabari must be forced open. *Ikuba* was kept busy by sacrifices to ensure the victory and success of the Bonny while more skulls were added to the shrine.

The iguana worship by the Bonny was mentioned as early as 1699 by Barbot in his account. During the nineteenth century, the lizard, like a sacred cow, was allowed to roam freely in the streets of Bonny (Alagoa [1972] 187). But in 1867 King George of Bonny ordered that the lizards in the city as well as in the shrine should be killed, and in 1898 Chief Waribo Pepple demolished the famous “house of skulls” and the brass cast of the monitor lizard which was hung at the entrance to the shrine was handed over to the missionaries.

Each city-state had its own “house of skulls”. While for Bonny the national god, *Ikuba*, had its shrine full of skulls, the Kalabari had an altar for war trophies including the skulls of those captured and killed in war. This altar was the *ebeka* shrine at Elem Kalabari, and the cult was unconnected with the national deity, Akaso. The Nembe had their house of skulls at the *egbesu* shrine at Nembe.

For the **Okrika**, the offices of king and priest were separated quite early in their history. Both Opu-Ogulya of Ogolima and Oputibeya of Okrika and Oko who founded Okochiri (Oko’s bush) on the mainland functioned as secular rulers and were not priests. *Fenibeso* who also came from the mainland took over the priestly functions. At his death *Fenibeso* was deified and became the war-god of Okrika. Unlike the national gods of the other city-states who were “mythical figures”, *Fenibeso* was a powerful pirate on the mainland. At his death, because of his many exploits, he became the main symbol of unity in the internal religious rites of the clan as well as in external wars.

6. Structure, Population and Growth of the City-States

Irrespective of differences in size and population the city-states had many things in common, including the basic Ijo structural patterns. None of them was walled. The physical environment with its high humidity, heavy rainfall and swampy terrain – prone to periodic flooding – was unsuited for the building of city walls, and in this respect they were different from the cities in the kingdoms of the forest and savannah regions of West Africa. Also, the location on islands and along the coast provided them with the necessary natural defence against attacks, especially from people unfamiliar with the riverine terrain.

The city of Nembe was a conurbation composed of six quarters/wards, called Ekulema Sondiabiri, “the community with six quarters”. In the sixteenth century none of these was more than five hundred square metres in size. The whole of Nembe is about two and a half kilometres by one and a half. The old quarter of Olodiana which was the core of Nembe is today the cemetery at Bassambiri. The settlement pattern changed with the expansion of Nembe towards the north and the south-east. In the early days there were plantain and banana plantations in the northern part of the city. (Plantain is a food crop loved by all Ijo, especially the Nembe). In the sixteenth century Nembe had around one thousand inhabitants and was comparatively smaller than Bonny, which in the same period was called “grand” and had a population of 2,000 persons. On the other hand, Nembe had more opportunity for expansion than Bonny with its position near the Atlantic. Nembe depended on Elem Kalabari and Bonny for its external trade but more people moved into the city concurrently with Nembe’s acquisition of a larger territory and extension of its external trade. The town of Brass/Twon – situated some forty-five kilometres from Nembe city and inhabited by Nembe-speaking people – was gradually brought under control, thus enhancing the political influence of Nembe State.

As it grew in wealth and power, Nembe also came to dominate the neighbouring towns and villages, principally the towns of *Egwema*, *Liama* and *Orukolo* situated between Nembe metropolis and *Akassa* to the west. Nembe now possessed a territory within a radius of 25 miles from the urban centre, dotted with small towns and villages and interspersed with plantations for local consumption, although most of the foodstuffs still came from the fresh water zone of *Ogbia* and *Abua* westwards and northwards of Nembe city.

While some like *Twon* speak the Nembe dialect, others speak a different dialect, close to the *Akassa* dialect, especially the *Okoroba*, *Idema* (Iduma) and *Agrisaba*, collectively referred to as *Mini*. The proximity of the powerful Elem Kalabari kingdom as well as the activities of the *Bile* ruler in the Kalabari region to the east of Nembe caused many of these villages to come under Nembe. The population became diversified and increasingly urbanized. The Nembe dialect became the *lingua franca* even as far as *Obiama* to the extreme north west and *Idema* to the east of the Nembe metropolis.

Elem Kalabari was situated to the east of Nembe in the largest region of all the four Delta States. It became an ideal area not only for economic growth but also for internal trade. Situated not far from the mouth of one of the larger and more navigable Delta estuaries, Elem Kalabari had a large hinterland to the west, north and south. In the seventeenth century it became the most urbanized of the city-states and traders from the outlying villages flooded Elem Kalabari. In the early sixteenth century it had ca. 2,000 inhabitants living in 309 houses, and thus equalled Bonny in size and population (Anene [1966] 42-3). Elem Kalabari covered an area of three square kilometres and was slightly bigger than Nembe. There were scattered fishing villages all around; and – as in the other city-states – the population grew steadily in step with the growth of trade.

Competitive trade, wealth and military power became obvious both in Bonny and Elem Kalabari. The latter began to exercise control over the surrounding towns and villages within what is called the “Kalabari region”. *Tombia* and *Old Ifoko*, which hitherto had their settlements close to Bonny, moved close to Elem Kalabari in the late eighteenth century. They could no longer withstand the pressure from Bonny. The ancient Kalabari town of *Ke* at the entrance of the Rio Real was brought under Elem Kalabari. The activities of *Agbaniye Ejika*, a famous ruler of the Kalabari town of *Bile*, resulted in widespread dispersal of people settling in the Kalabari region which, again, affected immigration within the Nembe region into the Nembe metropolis and its outskirts. Elem Kalabari gathered those scattered by the *Bile* ruler. Before the end of the city-state period in the nineteenth century, Elem Kalabari came to rule over thirty towns and villages. Her expansion incorporated peoples of *Bakana*, *Bukuma* *Obonoma*, *Udekema* [*Degema*] and many others who spoke a dialect between *Engenni* and *Abua*. The *Ido* group brought under her domination had initially been settled at

Andoni east of Bonny, but were driven into the Kalabari region because of attacks from Bonny.⁷

Bonny, which later became the most powerful of the city-states, was called the *grand* because it was situated on a big island. According to the Portuguese Captain Pereira, the population was around 2,000 (Anene [1966] 27). The city grew up around the northern tip of the island and possessed a large territory towards the Atlantic coast and towards the island of Finima across the sea. Bonny was narrow towards the north, bulging at the middle and spread like a bird's tail towards the south. East of the city, across the estuary, were some scattered islands towards Elem Kalabari. This became the natural area of Bonny's expansion. Here again were the scattered plantations, especially of plantain and banana, as well as fishing ports. Bonny is wedged in between Elem Kalabari to the west, Okrika to her immediate north and the *Andoni* to her east. Consequently, territorial expansion was blocked. As in Elem Kalabari, there were over 300 houses in the early sixteenth century, according to the account of the Portuguese captain Pereira; by contrast with Elem Kalabari, Bonny could not expand because of her location, and Bonny's attempt to subdue the *Andoni* failed. To the south was the Atlantic Ocean. Nevertheless, the urban population of Bonny increased because of her location and the trading opportunities it offered. Before the end of the city-state period she had been flooded by an influx of slaves of various origins, especially the *Igbos* settled north and west of Bonny. The effect of this was that Bonny became bilingual – both Ijo- and *Igbo*-speaking. In the nineteenth century Jaja and several chiefs left with their followers to establish themselves at nearby Opobo to the east of the *Andoni*, and thereby decreased the population of the city-state (Anene [1966] 27).

To the immediate north of Bonny was the city-state of Okrika, very much like Bonny, with a territory consisting of pockets of small islands. Okrika city is at the northern-most tip of this flat spread of islands. Ogoloma is on the south of Okrika city, side by side. Expansion was towards the south as the *Ogoni* were settled at the immediate north of Okrika as well as the *Ikwerres*, both of whom had relations with Okrika. There was a third settlement of *Okopiri* on the mainland. In the early sixteenth century Okrika was described by Captain Pereira as a "district near Bonny". Its population was definitely smaller than those of Bonny and Elem Kalabari, probably between 900 and 1,000, and definitely less than 2,000. Like Bonny, Okrika's outward expansion was limited. Sur-

rounded by such powerful neighbours as Elem Kalabari and Bonny to her west and south respectively, and by hostile neighbours like the *Ogoni* and *Ikwerre* to the north and north-east, Okrika depended on the small villages and fishing ports around her for plantations, and on the area of Abulama for actual expansion. The latter, the Abulama people, had hitherto settled at Borikiri at the southern end of Port Harcourt and *Ikwerre* land and they supplied the Okrika with foodstuffs like yam and cocoyam. She was persuaded to move into the Okrika area and is today part of the Okrika ethnic group. Okrika's population grew at a faster pace than that of Bonny, her more powerful neighbour, although Okrika island in the city-state period was less than three square kilometres.

The Lay-out of the City-states⁸

Each city had a main road (*Opu-etela* in the Ijo language) which cut across the length of the city-state, and in this respect it conformed to the physical lay-out of a typical Ijo village or town. The road usually started at the waterside (*Owusara*). Each city-state had a market square to the left or right (or both) of the main road so that the market itself was strategically situated and easily accessible. The market was just an open square and, except for a few stalls here and there made with bamboo sticks and thatch, most of the space was unbuilt. People did not invest in building permanent structures in the markets. Because of heavy rains which could wipe out structures, those who did build used inexpensive materials. Markets started in the morning and were closed between ca. 2 pm and early evening. All Ijo towns had night markets; and women used paraffin lamps to illuminate the market place.

The King's [Amanayabo] palace was always built close to the city's centre and away from the square. The market square area became the heart of each city-state. Even today, all social activities, including the popular assembly in times of national crisis or general meetings, take place in the open square in Bonny, Okrika and Nembe. Today Elem Kalabari is divided into the three main towns of *Buguma*, *Abonnema* and *Bakana*, but the same pattern is followed in each of these towns. The Amanayabo's palace is in Buguma, not far from Buguma's main square which is also the market.

In each city pathways on both sides led from the main road to the various compounds of the lineages. A lineage was made up of several wards. There was an ancestral shrine (*Igbu*) at the centre of each lineage

quarter – this was how Benin city/kingdom was organized. In front of the shrine was an open space where lineage meetings were held. The shrines were built of burnt clay or an acacia-type of wood and were lower in height than the dwellings. The roof was thatched. The shrines housed the religious objects usually associated with the founder of each lineage. Each lineage had specially initiated persons who functioned as mediators between the dead ancestors and their living descendants. The ancestors were not directly worshipped but appealed to or invoked especially if the lineage was threatened. The national deity in each of the city-states was equally housed in a similar building close to the city centre.

The people built their houses in each lineage/quarter in a semi-circular pattern around an open space where the shrine was situated. Materials for houses in the early period were burnt clay and thatch, easily obtainable in the Niger Delta. Others used an acacia-type of wooden sticks gummed together with clay. This type of wood could withstand decay in the tropics. The typical Ijo house had a large room for the family and the bedrooms were off this large room. The toilet facilities were always built outside the homes, usually at the water front. Men and women had separate bathing places at the back or side of the house. The floor of the homes were plastered with burnt clay overlaid with mats made with raffia and such other materials, and merchants began to use corrugated sheets for roofing. Brick houses came late in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By the latter date two-storey buildings began to be erected for the colonial administrators as well as the houses of the Amanayabos and the wealthy merchants.

The tombstones in the city-states make very interesting reading, especially in the city-states of Nembe, Bonny and Okrika which still retain their old sites. Elem Kalabari moved away from its old site to found three big towns instead. In the early period the practice was to bury the chiefs in large canoes covered with another canoe. Since this took up a lot of place, burial began to take place in a specific room of a chief's house. The third stage was when they began to bury important citizens in front of their houses and to place a tombstone over the grave. The tombstone of King George Pepple the First, for example, is centrally located in Bonny. Therefore, in these three city-states tombstones are placed all over the city. Elem Kalabari carried the practice to its new sites but not quite on the same scale. In Buguma, the new capital and the seat of the king, the chiefs have their own burial island separated from the burial site of the commoners. Both

islands are off the shore of Buguma. A visitor to these sites of Niger Delta city-states finds an amazing array of shrines and tombstones.

7. The End of the City-States

The wealth of the coastal city-states of the Niger Delta depended on internal trade coupled with the European trade; and the demise of the city-states began with the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807. This ushered in a gradual loss of independence. What was now encouraged by the British government was the legitimate trade especially in palm oil. Those who kept up the slave trade moved westwards, away from the Rio Real and River Bonny area to the Brass River which hitherto had been of no importance for the European traders. Both the European slave traders as well as their Nembe associates had to avoid the British squadrons which patrolled the coast. The character of British activities along the coast had changed and measures were taken to terminate the slave trade. Squadrons patrolled the Niger Delta coast using Spanish Fernando Po as a naval base for the punitive expeditions (Anene [1966] 46). In 1839 a treaty was signed with Bonny (Anene [1966] 166-72).

A change of British policy towards the city-states occurred with the appointment of John Beecroft in June 1849 as the British Consul for affairs of the coast. British authority was thereby established on the coast. None of the states, small as they were, could withstand the might of Britain. The weakness of the House system also became apparent. Its strength depended on its wealth and its cohesion, composed as it was of chiefs, freemen and slaves. In a society pre-occupied with trade, even the king had to compete with the House chiefs and acquire wealth in order to continue to command the respect due to him. The crisis erupted in Bonny. William Dappa Pepple the Fourth ascended the throne in 1837. The two leaders of the rival Houses of Manilla Pepple and Annie Pepple surpassed the royal House in wealth; and central authority was weakened by the activities of these wealthy men of the opposition. Also British "Courts of Equity" were established but the white supercargoes occupied the chair in a monthly rotation. In 1854 Beecroft deposed the King of Bonny and installed a puppet successor. In 1855 the puppet King died and Bonny was left with no indigenous ruler. A regent was imposed (Anene [1966] 166-72). British consular authority rapidly superseded indigenous authority. The new king, George Pepple, reigned from 1866 to 1888; but he could hardly exercise any

authority over his powerful subjects. The *de facto* rulers of Bonny were the ex-slaves Jaja and Oko Jumbo. Civil war broke out in Bonny in 1869. Jaja moved out with his loyal followers and established himself in a new but strategically located settlement of Opobo. From here he could control the hinterland markets, which traditionally had been under Bonny's control. By their support of the powerful chiefs the British stripped the monarchy of its powers and Bonny never recovered.

The situation at Elem Kalabari was similar to that of Bonny. Politically the city-state continued until 1879. The king had forbidden the acceptance of the "Trust system" which the British supercargoes had exploited with devastating consequences in Bonny and old Calabar. The King's command of the chiefs was an additional irritation to the British. In all the Niger Delta States the competitiveness associated with the House system entailed political instability. At Elem Kalabari, Will Braide of the Barboy House became extremely prosperous and was consequently seen as a threat to the king, whose desire to cut him down to size resulted in Braide evacuating his House in order to occupy a new site, now called *Bakana*. Unlike Jaja in Bonny, he did not cause a civil war but nonetheless Elem Kalabari kingdom was split. Another group of chiefs led by Bob Manuel moved away to the present site of *Abonnema*. The King and the remaining chiefs finally left with the *Akaso* (national goddess) shrine to establish themselves in *Buguma*, which became the new capital/headquarters of the Kalabari people. An undeclared guerilla war among the Kalabari necessitated the intervention of the British Consul, Hopkins, as trade was interrupted and canoes and goods constantly seized by the feuding chiefs. Hopkins invited the warring chiefs on board a warship and asked Jaja of Opobo, the king of Okrika and some Bonny chiefs to act as arbitrators. As a result was signed "A perpetual treaty of peace" between chief Will Braide, the Head of the Barboy House, and the king and chiefs of Kalabari.

In the period leading up to the Berlin West African Conference (1884-5) the British were eager to sign treaties with the coastal peoples and proclaimed the Oil Rivers Protectorate over the Niger Delta Coast. After 1884 Nembe was included in the area over which the British government proclaimed a formal protectorate. The Nembe rulers initially refused to sign a treaty with the British which would limit their domination of their own traditional hinterland markets. The Nembe area now controlled the palm oil trade. The ambition of the consular authority was to

control the hinterland markets and break the power of the Niger Delta middlemen. This brought them into collision with Bonny, Elem Kalabari and Okrika as well. Consul Hewett's ambition to extend the boundaries of the protectorate took him to Okrika which, not being on the coast directly, was an entrepôt for the palm oil produce from the hinterland. In July 1888 Hewitt signed a treaty of protection with the king of Okrika to safeguard the trade of Bonny as Okrika lies north of Bonny. His attempt to subdue the King of Okrika failed but nevertheless demonstrated that the independence of the city-states had declined. They had all come under consular jurisdiction of the British.

By the establishment of the Royal Niger Company the situation deteriorated progressively. The Nembe put up a fight to control their hinterland markets. From its headquarters at Akassa, south-west of Nembe, the Royal Niger Company did everything in its power to monopolize the trade of the region. One of its methods was to introduce fixed prices in order to eliminate the Delta middlemen. In January 1895 Akassa was raided and attacked by the Nembe and, in retaliation, the Nembe were attacked and the town and villages were reduced by the agents of the company. The Nembe seaport of Brass/Twon was burnt down. Even after its capture the Nembe people kept up their resistance in an attempt to prevent the Royal Niger Company from dominating the hinterland and monopolising the trade. Hundreds of Nembe were killed and hundreds others fell victims to an outbreak of smallpox.

In 1895 the Niger Coast Protectorate was divided into three administrative districts: an eastern, a central and a western. The central zone consisted of Opobo, Bonny, Kalabari and Nembe/Brass. Each district was to be under a secular officer, assisted by a district commissioner and an assistant district commissioner. The new pattern of administration involved the elimination of the separate identity of the traditional Niger Delta States. This decision by the British became the first step towards an amalgamation of the many groups in the region and the beginning of a new territorially based political unit called Southern Nigeria. In 1896 the new administrator, Ralph Moor, had the King of Okrika and the priest of the Okrika national god deported to Degema in the Kalabari region. Many houses were burnt down and a fine of fifty pounds sterling was imposed on Okrika to pay for the services of the troops. A "native" council was set up from which the King of Okrika was excluded. Each Okrika chief selected to be in the council was given a "warrant" of membership. The British policy was to form

“Native” councils of obedient chiefs. The King of Kalabari was also removed from the Native council set up there because the kind of independent leadership he exercised among his chiefs within the council was inconvenient for the British.

In 1899 the British Foreign Office transferred the control of the protectorate to the Colonial Office and the charter of the Royal Niger Company was abrogated. Thus the twentieth century was opened with the Colonial Office consolidating its rule not only over the Niger Delta but throughout Southern Nigeria. The city-states had lost their independence. They were to function as local administrative units but were deprived of their self-government. Their history was now part of the colonial history of a larger unit, Southern Nigeria, and after 1914 part of Nigerian history. Their power and existence as states collapsed with the collapse of their role as middlemen between the British traders and the hinterland markets.

Conclusion

From their dispersed central Delta Ijo areas the Nembe, Elem Kalabari, Okrika and Bonny/Ibani migrated into an environment which enabled them to develop from fish and salt-boiling communities into centralized city-states comparable to the ancient Greek *poleis* and other historic city-state cultures. The changes they underwent were profound. They developed institutions and invented social structures which, to a large extent, were different from those of the central and western Ijo peoples. In these two regions settlement in villages and a decentralized political structure persisted unchanged and limited the opportunity for growth. Among the city-states, on the other hand, opportunities abounded for the growth and development of both the state and the individual. Trade became the most important economic activity and was constantly expanding. The changes, which gradually became visible as the trade intensified, resulted in the immigration of more people into the region. The process was further accelerated by the external European trade and culminated in the trans-Atlantic trade in slaves. European goods flooded the region and the markets of the inland as well as the hinterland. Centralization became a necessity to cope with the demands of trade. The village president or leader did not have the necessary skill and position to handle the transformation of society which resulted from the enhanced importance of trade. Kingship – an institution known from other parts of the region – was the accepted and logical response. Furthermore, the

House system was developed and became more dynamic than the typical lineage system of the average Ijo community. Alongside this development was the formation of associations that dealt with issues resulting from the rise of the city-state. Slaves must be assimilated and acculturated to be integrated into society. A city-state like Bonny, which paid little attention to such an integration, paid dearly when her language was lost. Elem Kalabari, on the other hand, became a typical example of a city-state which was able to tame the effects of the slave trade and remained “truly Kalabari”.

The openness of the society in each of these states was an incentive for individuals, slaves as well as free-born, to rise on the socio-economic ladder. Political power could be acquired as they became chiefs. New Houses could be established as wealth, intelligence and integrity replace birth, as the criteria for political power and becoming a House leader with a following.

The Amanyanabo (King) was respected more because he represented the state *vis à vis* the Europeans. His position was enhanced because he obtained an additional stipend paid by the European traders. He thereby had the opportunity to be more wealthy than the leaders of the Houses.

The national deities were cultivated and “worshipped” because of the qualities and characteristics each society expected from them. Conflicts and wars took place intermittently but not to the extent of disrupting trade, which had become the driving force in the formation and administration of these city-states.

Notes

1. Dr. Kingta Irene Princewill lectures on European history at the University of Ibadan. Her Ph.D. Thesis is on the *Fante and the European Trade on the old Gold Coast in the second half of the 18th century*. She has done some work on the Ijo people, being a Kalabari and a direct descendant of King Amachree the 1st of Kalabari.
2. Prof. E. J. Alagoa the oral historian from Nembe has made extensive study of the entire Ijo nation group of Nigeria. His contribution to the historiography of the Ijo people is unequalled. Together with the late Chief Fombo, the custodian of Bonny history, *A Chronicle of Grand Bonny* was written on the early history of the Ibani people.
3. Barbot (1732) 462. This work contains James Barbot’s “Abstract of a Voyage to New Calabar River or Rio Real in 1699”. John Barbot himself made his Voyages in 1678 and 1682.
4. Barbot (1732) 462; Jones (1963) 397 cites “Memoirs of the late Captain Crow” for King Opubo’s accession (London and Liverpool [1830] 43).
5. Comey is the commission which the European traders paid the

- Delta rulers for allowing them to trade on their coast. Comey was paid by each ship on each trip to the coast.
6. G.T.H. Kimble's translation of: Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis, by Duarte Pacheco Pereira (London 1937). At p. 132 the date of compilation is set at 1508.
 7. Oral history of the various sub-Ijo groups.
 8. Anene (1966) 32-3.

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