

**The Bekwarra and Tiv Relations in the
Central Nigeria of Benue State from
Pre-colonial Period up to 1960**

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**Published in Mandyang Journal of Central Nigeria Studies, Late
Harmattan, ISSN 1595-7839. A Publication of Department of
History and International Studies, University of Jos, Nigeria,
2017, 76-86.**

Abstract

The paper attempt an assessment of Bekwarra relations with her Tiv neighbours from the pre-colonial period up to 1960. The study affirmed that Bekwarra and their Tiv neighbours from the earliest time never lived in isolation of one another. Indeed, during the pre-colonial and colonial time, they mediated ethnic relations and social interactions among each other. The whole process of this group relation is engendered and determined by multiple factors some of which were economic, political, and socio-cultural as well as shared historical experiences and developments emanating from colonial rule. The paper established that, two outstanding factors however challenged the existing relations between Bekwarra and her Tiv neighbours within the period under study. The first being slave

trading activities characterized by frequent raids slaves by slave hunters in both societies between the 17th and 18th centuries. The other was wars fought between the two societies, resulting from the new political and economic measures introduced by the British colonial government in Nigeria in the 20th century. The ability of these societies to resolve these conflicts further promoted relations between them up to 1960.

Introduction

There is no society anywhere in the world that can be said to be completely self-sufficient, therefore existed without contact with another society. Assessing the situation in Nigeria, Agabi observed that, "Nigerian people were overtime integrally weaved through centuries of shared historicity."¹ The Bekwarra were not isolated from this development. Indeed, during the pre-colonial and colonial time, they mediated ethnic relations and social interactions between several of their neighbours including the Tiv to the north.

The whole process of this group relation is engendered and determined by multiple factors some of which were economic, political, and socio-cultural as well as shared historical experiences and developments emanating from colonial rule. In the Nigerian area, all these factors have in one way or the other long before its existence as modern state, played important roles in bringing together people of different ethnic and linguistic background.

The Bekwarra-Tiv relation however was not unity and cooperation all the time. Both societies had raided each other of slaves in pre-colonial time. They had engaged one another in wars resulting from the new political and socio-economic order introduced by the British colonial government in both areas in the 20th century. The effective application of existing conflict and peace management processes to resolve these challenges further promoted relations between Bekwarra and her Tiv neighbours up to 1960.

Bekwarra and Tiv Relations in Pre-colonial Time

A number of economic factors gave rise to and promoted Bekwarra relations with her Tiv neighbours in pre-colonial time. This

¹A. Agabi, "The Igala Response to Colonial Destabilization and Fragmentation", Falola, T (ed) in *The Dark Wave: Perspective in Colonialism in Africa*, Academic Press, Carolina (USA), 2005, p.101

development was induced by the nature of pre-colonial economy associated with all societies in Nigeria. According to Abubakar:

Production in all societies went above the subsistence level, and the surpluses had to be disposed. There was also specialization of economic activities in every community and one occupational group often needed the product of another.²

The above is an indication that, the Bekwarra and her Tiv neighbours were not self-sufficient in all that were required by both societies. Hence economic contact was fashioned out between the two to lay hands to what were lacked in both areas. Consequently, trade became one major activity that brought the Bekwarra and her Tiv neighbours in to contact with each other. Tiyambe put it broader when he opined that:

Of all the economic factors that promoted and continue to promote inter-group relations in Nigerian area trade was the most important. Both local and distant trade was major activities that brought together people of differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds.³

This long distant trade was what facilitated the relationship between Bekwarra and the Tiv of the Benue Region in pre-colonial time.

It is important to note that by the last of the 19th century, both societies had established much stabled border markets to facilitate exchange of goods and services demands of both groups. The Ugidi market in Gakem village and the Agbo market in Vandeikya played an important role in this regard. They encouraged and straightened good relations among the two societies up to the colonial period.

This two markets according to Omagu, D.O,

Remained the meeting point for the exchange of products between Bekwarra and Tiv traders. In this trade, Bekwarra palm oil, palm wine, iron implement, salt obtained from the Iyala group

² I. W. Abubakar, "Economic Factors and Intergroup Relations in Nigeria," Ifamoshe, F (ed) in *SHAPA: Journal of Historical Studies*, A Publication of the Department of History, University of Abuja, vol. 1, No 2 &3, October,2009, P.4.

³ Z. Tiyemba, *A Modern Economic History of Africa*, vol. 1, Coesria, Dakar, 1993, p275.

inhabiting west of Bekwarra border, were sold to the Tiv in exchange for their locally manufactured cloth, wooden tobacco pipe, camwood chair, livestock, wooden mortar and pestle, local brewed beer, dried fish and slaves.⁴

The routes for this trade were the Gakem-Vandeikya and Obudu-Tsar in Mbaduku via Vandeikya axis where Agbor market is situated. The Tiv had applied the same routes to sell their slaves during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Exchange among the two neighbours was carried out essentially by Barter.

As indicated by Olofu,

Since goods were not easily exchanged by Barter, both sides prior to the period of colonial rule had developed a monetary system to facilitate exchange. The currencies in circulation at both sides were manila, iron bar, cowries, and trips of cloths.⁵

One other significant factor that promoted Bekwarra and Tiv relations was agriculture. Farming at both sides formed the major occupation of the larger society. Essentially, farming required mass labour organization, if adequate food must be produced to feed the population. Labour according to Agber, formed the integral part of the production forces of society.⁶ Consequently, both employed several forms of labour to meet their demands. Among the Bekwarra and their Tiv neighbours, the household formed the basic units of labour mobilization. Insufficient labour and the need for mass production led to emergence of migrant as well as slave labour in both areas.

Such labour were supplied by the Tiv who came to Bekwarra land beginning from the month of November to February when yam heaps were made.⁷ In his study on the Tiv society, Uji, W, recorded that, the

⁴ D.O.Omagu, *The History of the Bekwarra People of the Upper Cross River State, 1908-1960*, Ushie Press, Calabar, 1987, pp.17-19.

⁵ G.o.Olofu, 'A Socio-political History of the Bekwarra People of the Upper Cross River Valley, 1900-1960, MA Thesis,' Department of History, University of Abuja, 2010, p 57.

⁶ K. Agber, 'European Commercial Enterprises and Underdevelopment of Tiv Land, 1900-1960', Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, University of Jos, 1994, p48.

⁷ E. Abua, Cited in Ologu G. O, *A Socio-political History of the Bekwarra People*, 2010, p44.

Tiv land had been one of the earliest destination of the Bekwarra migrants north-wards⁸. He however simply associated their movement to the growing influence of the markets on the border areas and towns like Vandeikya, Tsar, Adikpo, Ushongo, Ihugh, Gboko and Makurdi. He did not see reason outside trade for such movement. But what we should also note here is that, majority among this migrants were the Bekwarra ethnic group whose major occupation was farming.

They had up to the period after 1960, remained stationed in places like Gboko, Guma, Makurdi, Adikpo, Vandeikya, Zakibiam etc. It is this group that has been instrumental for the importation of some varieties of food and fruit crops from Tiv land in to Bekwarra land. Today, some species of yam such as Ebo, Efala, and mango fruits which remained dominant items among the Tiv are added variety to indigenous Bekwarra crops which have helped in sustaining life.

The indication here is that, both migrants had greatly helped in transforming the agricultural economy of both societies. This is evidence from the fact that more food was produced to feed the growing population in both societies. In addition, the surpluses of both areas had encouraged and promoted trade relations among the two societies, therefore foster greater co-operation in a wider perspective between Bekwarra and her Tiv neighbor over time. In this sphere,

culture diffusion, in the area of language, farming techniques, dance styles, festivals, and ritual ceremonies was wide spread in both societies. Also, both the Bekwarra and Tiv had long history of inter-marriage between one another.⁹

Both oral and written records in both societies about slavery and slave trade suggest that both societies like societies in other parts of Africa had practiced domestic slavery long before the emergence of the Trans-Atlantic slave in the 16th century. Slavery among the two societies was for both domestic and economic venture. Both kept slaves for the provision of cheap labour for the production of food enough for both

⁸ Uji, W.J, 'The Role of Migrant Groups in the Economic Development of Tiv Land c 1900 to Present,' Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, University of Abuja, 2009, p188.

⁹ Olayi, O, Age 65, Civil Servant, Anyikang Village, 13\12\2016.

consumption and market. Among the Bekwarra, a man's prestige and honour was based on the number of slaves he kept.¹⁰

Commenting on the same issue among Tiv society, Ndera, J. D, is of the

view that, a man was regarded in the land as a shagbaor (man of honour) and was held high in esteem based on the number of slaves he owned.¹¹

The Bekwarra over time had depended on slaves obtained from her Tiv neighbours for supplementing her labour demand. Meanwhile iron implement were the major exchange values for the slaves by the Bekwarra. However, with the introduction of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in the 16th century and its intensification between the 17th and 18th centuries, slaves became more a commercial item than a necessary instrument for labour supply to both societies. Consequent upon this, slave raiding became a common feature that characterized relations between the Bekwarra and her Tiv neighbours up to the early part of the 19th century when slave trade was abolished.

A study of slavery activities in Tiv land provides an insight on thus:

Akika (the first Tiv Christian to have known how to read and write in both English and Tiv languages and son of a slave dealer Sai Deikpe) who was born in 1898, maintained that, His father was a blacksmith and a member of a slave raiding gang. He further indicated that, all his elder brothers had slaves because of the slavery activities of his father and his group in such clans like Shangev Tiev, Gire, and Ge. Akika pointed clearly that, his father and his gang were dangerous slave dealers to the extent that, their names when mentioned alone was a terror to the Udam (nick name for the Bekwarra) people of Cross River State.¹²

¹⁰ Omagu, *The History of the Bekwarra People*, p38.

¹¹ J.D Ndera, 'In Search of Archaeological and Historical Evidence of Slavery in Tiv Land from the Earliest Time to the 20th Century, Terhemba, W, (ed0) in *Lapai Journal of History, A Journal of the Department of History*, Ibrahim Babaginda University, Minna, vol. 7, no 1, 2013, p15.

¹² J. D.Ndera, 'In Search of Archeological and Historical Evidence of Slavery in Tiv Land from the Earliest Time to the 20th Century, Terhemba, W. (ed), in *Lapai Journal of Central Nigeria History, Department of History, Ibrahim Badamasi Babaginda University, Minna, Vol 7, No.1, 2013, p15.*

The Obudu via Bekwarra- Ogoja road was said to have been the major route for the frequent slave raiding activities. More revelations on the activities of the slave raiders are given by T. Makar. According to him,

The Kunav people from the lineages of Mbayoungo and Mbaduku are known to have organized incessant raids on the Obudu- Ogoja road where many Hausa traders and several other Tiv and Udam people were killed or captured in to slavery.¹³

During the period:

It was not common to go to farm alone, or walk on the road at a very odd time; otherwise, this Irko (Tiv people) will catch you and sell you out into slavery. A number of Bekwarra elders became rich and rose to prestigious positions in the society because of the many slaves they were able to keep. They had always partner with outsiders to raid and bring to them slaves from other areas like the Tiv land, Iyala, Ebebi (Ogoja area).¹⁴

Information from Tiv land had it that, "in southern Tiv land, slaves was sold to the Udam (Bekwarra) people of present day Cross River State through slave dealers from the Tiv clans of Gaav, Kunav, and Shangev, neighbours with whom they interacted."¹⁵

Both societies were not unaware of the lucrative nature of slave business in the coastal communities. In this regards, a number of warriors emerged, many of who wait in bush part and capture members of their neighbouring villages in to slavery.¹⁶

Even though no evidence of war was reported by both societies up to the beginning of the colonial period, Pre-cautionary measures by both

¹³ T Makar, 'The History of Political Change among the Tiv in the 19th and 20th Centuries', Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History, Amadu Belo University, Zaria, 1974, p35.

¹⁴ Okpaku USHIE, Age 70, Farmer, Anyikan-Iye Village, 20\11\2014.

¹⁵ J.D Ndera, 'In Search of Archaeological and Historical Evidence of Slavery in Tiv Land from the Earliest Time to the 20th Century, Terhemba, W, (ed) in *Lapai Journal of History, A Journal of the Department of History*, Ibrahim Babaginda University, Minna, vol.7, no 1, 2013, p.17.

¹⁶ Eneji, Edward, Age 56, Ukpah Village, 27\11\2016).

societies became eminent. Oral information gathered from both societies indicates that both had lived in suspicion of one another for a very long time. This emerging factor as observed by Ogar

challenged the existing socio-economic relations between the Bekwarra and her Tiv neighbor. It also slowed down economic and commercial activities in both areas.¹⁷

Commenting on the same issue, Akwaji Olofu indicates that, many villages in Bekwarra land in view of the happenings in our boarder with Irko (Tiv) were advised to avoid long distance farming areas. Also long distance trading activities were often halted in those areas where regular slave raids occurred.¹⁸

Bekwarra and Tiv Relations in the Colonial Period

The earlier section has been an examination of relations between Bekwarra and her Tiv neighbours or what might be termed inter-group mechanism in pre-colonial period of the people's history. It is however important to understand in this discuss that it may be misleading to present the picture of Bekwarra Tiv relations as if it was unity and cooperation all the time. We have seen that both sides had raided each other of slaves in pre-colonial time, though with no event of physical war recorded, but both societies had lived in suspicion of one another overtime. What we saw was greater fear of enslavement among peoples living in boarder areas. The consequent of this was the general slow down of socio-economic activities in both areas as long distance farming areas were often discourage. Also a long distance market was no longer regular in both societies.

Bekwarra-Tiv relations in the period under colonial rule must be understood in the context of the existing relations and the changing realities in colonial time. The British colonial power in Nigeria in her effort to meet the economic demand of imperial Britain enforced the production of cash crops in all societies in large quantities for the up keep of their industries in Europe. The production of Palm oil and kernel was predominant in Bekwarra meanwhile; groundnut and benniseed remained the major cash crop products in Tiv area. Throughout the period:

marketing conditions placed more emphasis and greater value on these crops than the people's food crops Moreover, the people

¹⁷ Ogar, Peter, Age 60, Farmer, Beten Village, 7\12\2016).

¹⁸ Akwaji Olofu, Age 55, Married Woman, Nyanya Village, 08\12\2016.

were forced to give almost desperate attention to the production of these cash crops because British rule created a lot of social and economic demands on the people (like education and taxation) which could only be met by using the new currency that came with colonial rule.¹⁹

Efforts by the colonial government to adjust the old institutional structures threw up fresh tension between the various Nigerian groups. It is no longer news that, the working of the indirect rule policy of the British government in Nigeria created problems for inter-group relations in many areas. Such problems were the grouping of people into provinces, divisions, and districts, which was followed by appointment of 'warrant chiefs' over them.

Another area where indirect rule system created problem for inter-group relations was the creation of what came to be called 'colonial boundaries', which altered the natural boundaries preferred by the people. What followed was the commercialization of land which was a clear evidence of the collapse of the traditional structure of gaining access to land. Throughout the Nigeria area, there was a general out cry of land scarcity with severe consequences.

Land generally in Africa as Olofu ,G.O noted:

Is an important factor in the social and economic life of the people. Land unites people in to a community and defines their status in economic, political, cultural environment. Land by African tradition, is a principal factor that enforces a link between the living and the dead, hence it affects the people both materially and spiritually.²⁰

The above affords us the explanation for the violence that attends land disputes in most part of Nigeria during colonial time and be young. The overall issues according to Okechukwu, I "lies in the commercialization

¹⁹ T. Falola, A. Mahadi, et al, *History of Nigeria in the 20th Century, 3rd Edition*, Longman Publishers, Nigeria, 1919, p.36.

²⁰ G.o.Olofu, A Socio-political History of the Bekwarra People of the Upper Cross River Valley, 1900-1960, MA Thesis, Department of History, University of Abuja, 2010, p24.

of land, population density, collapse of traditional structures of gaining access to land ..."²¹

The British who imposed this form of administrative structure in the areas did not take in to consideration the existing political structure and inter-group relations before establishing the new order. Akinwumi observed that, "it was built on this neglect that the different groups reacted sharply against the new structures."²² One of the major issues then was how best to secure group interest in a new and rapid socio-political and economic order. The attempt by the various societies to answer this question resulted in to hostile relations between neighbours. In most areas, land cases continued to remain a source of conflict among societies. The most important of such cases was Bekwarra and her Tiv niegbours in the north central Nigeria area.

Notable conflicts among Bekwarra and her Tiv neighbor in the period were the 1911, 1914, and 1925 respectively. Contending issue in these conflicts was land encroachment perpetuated by the Tiv.

Precisely, on February 1911, the Gakem and Beten sub-clans jointly raided the Uti-sub-clan and killed two Tiv to avenge the murder of their kins-men. The situation was only brought under control by the intervention of the colonial forces only for it to resurface in July, 1914 following Tiv reprisal.²³

During the period, "warriors of both sides were used. Battles were fought in farm land areas, trade routes, resulting to the destruction of lives and farm crops. In most cases, shrines were destroyed."²⁴ To arrest the devastating effect of this war a meeting was called as reported by Ebuara,

²¹Okechukwu, I , Aguileri-Umuleiri Conflict in Anambra State, Thomas Imobishe (ed) in *Civil Society and Ethnic Conflict Management in Nigeria*, Spetrum Books, Ibadan, 2003, p.186.

²¹O. Akinwumi, "Colonial Administrative Structures and its Impact of Intergroup Relations in Bornu," in A.A. Aliyu and A. Ochefu, (ed) *Studies in the History of Central Nigeria Area*, vol.1, CSS, Ltd, Nigeria, 2000, pp.563-576

²³ V, Ebuara, *The Impact of Colonial Rule on Bekwarra People of the Upper Cross River State , 1908-1960*, Degree Project, Department of History, University of Calabar, 1985, pp35-36.

... called for a combined meeting between Mr. G.G Frasey, (D. O), Abinshi Division and Mr. G.G. Shute, (D.O), Ogoja Division, held in August, 1914 at Afikpo aimed at arresting the situation.²⁵

Such adjustment was however made to the existing boundaries without considering its implication on the customs and tradition of the various groups inhabiting the affected areas. Even though no serious conflict had been recorded between Bekwarra and her Tiv neighbours up to 1960, both had watched over each others' border with much concerned.

On the outcome of the meeting, Ebuara reported:

The Tiv paid the sum of 30 pounds as compensation to the Bekwarra as charges for land trespass. In addition to the above, a district boundary was drawn through the establishment of a forest reserved along the boundaries from Gabu to Gakem. The District boundary defined in 1914 was further marked out with a fresh by a continuous dyke from Nyanya –Obudu hill, a distance of 2 and ½ miles.²⁶

It will be misleading to present a picture of Bekwarra-Tiv relations in colonial period as if it was conflicts all through. Indeed, noted in this study is that, the geographical area of the central Nigeria area had over time served as a cultural watershed in the history of Nigeria. Based on the fact that Bekwarra shares a common boundary and relations with the Tiv people, Tiv land had been the earliest destination area of the Bekwarra migrants. Most of the earliest migrations were favoured by the growing markets on the border areas and towns like Vandiekya, Tsar, Adikpo, Usongo, Ihugh, Gboko, and Makurdi. However, following the advent of colonial rule, the character of migration changed.

²⁴ Agene Ushie, Age 54, Civil Servant, Unwapu Village, 10\12\2016.

²⁵V, Ebuara, The Impact of Colonial Rule on Bekwarra People of the Upper Cross River State , 1908-1960, Degree Project, Department of History, University of Calabar, 1985, pp.35-36.

²⁶ V, Ebuara, The Impact of Colonial Rule on Bekwarra People of the Upper Cross River State , 1908-1960, Degree Project, Department of History, University of Calabar, 1985, p.39..

Colonialism by its nature created some measures that came to foster and straighten Bekwarra and Tiv relations even though they were not deliberate. Colonial economic policy emphasized cash crop production and taxation in many Nigerian areas. This had devastating effects on the various in Nigeria.²⁷

For the Bekwarra, it did not only change the socio-political landscape of the area, it changed the direction of the indigenous economic system. From 1930s, Tiv land at this point became a receptive centre and destination for the Bekwarra migrants.

Capitalized in restructuring existing traditional institutions in Nigeria, had created new units of administration which came inform of districts, divisions, and provinces. Following this new models of administration, Makurdi province was created and attracted migrants from Bekwarra along side with other linguistic groups in search of colonial jobs. They had settled and co-existed with their Tiv neighbours, which fundamentally facilitated inter-group relationship between the two *societies*. Between 190 and 1960, more Bekwarra migrants had found their way crossing the Benue River in to Markudi and even beyond.²⁸ During this period, "there were different forms of labour which include skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labour."²⁹

All this categories were recruited and employed by the colonial government for the construction of roads, railway, and public buildings, among others. Others had engaged themselves in wage labour in farms, and trading activities. It is evidence that, by the 1940s, Bekwarra men and women became middlemen in the marketing of agricultural products in the area. (Uji) has observed that after the Second World War, there was the development of roads and the introduction of lorry transport business by the colonial administration in Nigeria. This gave impetus to Igbo and Hausa migrations to Tiv land. The Bekwarra were not an

²⁷ D.N. Ajiji, *Colonialism and Inter-group Relation in the Central Nigerian Area: The Afizere Story*, Aboki Publisher, 2011, p.30

²⁸ Ushie , G.O, Orji-Mba, and Olofu, G.O, 'Work Songs and Resilience of Bekwarra Farmers of Giza in Kadarko and Kawo in Doma of Nasarawa State', Being a paper presented at a Historical Society of Nigeria 2014 North Central Conference Arts Theatre Complex, Benue State University, Makurdi, November 18-21, 2014.

²⁹ (Manvwat, M.Y, (1985) cited in Abubakar, I. W, 'Economic Factors and Inter-group Relations in Nigeria' Ifamoshe, F (ed) in *SHAPA: Journal of Historical Studies*, A Publication of the Department of History, University of Abuja, Vol 1, No 2 &3, October,2009, p.4.

exception even though they were not observed by Uji. There were lorries owned and operated by the Bekwarra, a few to mention were: **Oshen Transport**, owned by Chief I.I. Morphy, and **Abere-You na-Atabuchi**, owned by Afen Omang. These lorries made movement easier for they had overtime conveyed people to and from Bekwarra and Tiv land spending few hours on roads.³⁰

In the cultural spheres, acculturation which is one of the major impacts of immigration was highly accommodated among the Bekwarra and their Tiv host communities. It has continued to be a major phenomenon among the two societies to the present time. Bekwarra style of housing, cassava production, its processing into gari and akpo, farming techniques, are copied by their host communities.

The Bekwarra in the other hand did not only accommodated and adopted the farming of crops like millet and guinea corn common among the Tiv,

Drum dance and music, masquerade, common in Tiv land diffused to Bekwarra land. Related to this was the Tiv and Bekwarra language which is widely understood and spoken by most Bekwarra communities in the border areas.³¹

Conclusion

Whatever way one tends to define Bekwarra –Tiv relations from the earliest period to 1960, one thing is certain. In spite of the tensions which pre-colonial and colonial relationships among the two societies recorded, trade and commerce has continued to bring the two societies together through the multiplicity of markets across the two borders areas. Through this contact, cultural ties had over the time flourished between the two societies, thereby encouraged and facilitated relation between Bekwarra and their Tiv neighbours.

The study observed that, the problem that the British colonial administration in Nigeria created for different groups in the Nigeria area was a measure that demands reaction by any group. The issue here was not to judge who is right or wrong. It was just a matter of how best each

³⁰ Ukani Peter Ogar, Age 60, Trader, Lafia Town, 10\12\2016

³¹ Ukani Edward Eneji, Age 67, Civil Servant, Lafia, 10\12\2016.

could secure its group interest to meet the challenges emanating from the changing political and socio- economic setting. Bekwarra and her Tiv neighbours were not left out of this intrigues, yet, the impact of this has continued to yielded positive result owing to the measure of cordial relationship that inter play through various forms of contact between the two societies up till the present time... It is hope that the other Nigerian societies would learn a lesson from this development and strengthen relations with their neighbours in present time.