

Bekwarra: A historical perspective of the people, justice system, and the economy

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Abstract

Background: Due to the minority status of the Bekwarra ethnic nationality, she has received relatively little attention by scholars and researchers alike in their study on the British occupation of former South-Eastern Nigeria region.

Objective: To provide a fundamental insight into the origin, traditions, customs, and the economy of Bekwarra during the pre-colonial and colonial eras. The paper provides an insight into justice and law in pre-colonial Bekwarra and the transformation it has witnessed in an age of globalization. Furthermore, the study examines the impact of British colonial economic policies on the Bekwarra society.

Methodology: The qualitative data survey methodology was adopted. The researcher examined existing literature on the subject matter with focus on books, published journal articles as well as other Internet sources.

Result: This paper reports that the origin of the Bekwarra people spans to over 400 years ago. The people had a very high degree of tribal and linguistic homogeneity and the administration of justice in pre-colonial Bekwarra is established through generally accepted mechanisms.

Unique contribution: This study has engineered our consciousness on the need to pay close attention to issues concerning ethnic minority groups not only in Nigeria, but across the world. The study makes a case for the need to avoid focusing only on major ethnic groups because there are interesting aspects of minority groups that merit attention in literature.

Conclusion: The British economic policies brought some measurable changes into the Bekwarra society including the commercialization and commoditization of the agricultural system, and the migration of the Bekwarra youth in search of white-collar jobs.

Recommendation: Researchers should focus on other ethnic minority groups that have not been given significant attention in literature.

Keywords: Bekwarra; origin; tradition; pre-colonial; justice system; economy.

Introduction

Bekwarra Local Government Area (LGA) is a local government in Cross River State with its headquarters located in the town of Abuochiche. To the East, it is bounded by Obudu local government, to the North by Benue State, to the South by Ogoja and to the West by Yala local government areas of the State (Omagu, 2006).

There are prominent ethnic sets in the local government area which include: Beten, Unwapu, Uduo Unwagba Oli West, Oti East, Eya Aba, Eya Adie, Ika-Ichia, Udom, Atibulum, Afrike, Okpeche, Ikachor and Ochagbe (Omagu, 2006). Bekwarra people number approximately 150,000 (as at the 2006 population count) plus, they reside in the North portion of Ogoja province, in the Eastern part of Nigeria, with attached borderline to the Northern part of Nigeria. They dwell in a region at a little greater than 100 square miles and its western boundary at a

distance of few miles in the Eastern part of Ogoja town. There are limited residential associates of other ethnic groups within this area and they appear to be a very high point of dialectal equality (Omagu, 2012).

The term “Bekwarra” is applied to the particular ethnic group, and local authorities and individuals refer to it as Bekwarra. The words 'Bekworra' and 'Bekworrah' are still spelled out, but Bekwarra has been widely accepted because of its great consistency with the vocal system used by fellows of the ethnic group and its better suitability to the fairly scarce learned people of Bekwarra during the pre-colonial era (Stanford, 1967).

Historical aspects of the Bekwarra nation

The history of the Bekwarra ethnic nationality can be traced back to over 400 years ago to the family of Ogar Agba. The family was made up of the following children - Obudu Agba, Igede Agba, Ubube Agba, Bekwarra Agba. The family, at that time, lived with each other in peace and harmony until another new baby was born into the family. Historically, there was a cowry called “une-ushi” which every new born baby in the family must wear to signify the family cultural heritage and a way to welcome a new born to the family (Omagu, 2012).

The controversy which created animosity among members of the family was the case that the new born has over worn their family symbolic artifact for too long, in these regards, members of the Agba's family demanded that the so-called “une-ushi” be removed. The controversy continued to manifest until the baby was killed. This incident led to the separation of the historic Agba's family. The unfortunate circumstances which emanated as of then marked the very beginning of the Bekwarra nation (Omagu, 2006).

Bekwarra Agba afterwards comprises of Odama and Ashide who were sons of the Famous Ogar Agba. They migrated away from obudu where they all resided before the crisis to Utugwang village. Odama and Ashide with their family became uncomfortable with the unreceptive nature of the Utugwang people. The most notable amongst them was the case where the visitors requested for a drinking water from a member of the host community (utugwang) but were denied of their request. This incident prompted Odama to say in Obudu native language “bekworor” which is interpreted as “let us go”. The name Bekwarra was gotten from the phrase Bekworor and that was how they left to find themselves in the land called Bekwarra today (Omagu, 2006).

When Odama and Ashide's family arrived at the geographical area which is today called Bekwarra, some areas have already been occupied by some few families. Notable amongst them were the Agidis's family (Aladum) which are now called Ibiaragidi community, some slaves' families which form Ugboro community and so on. But no meaningful emphasis is given to these families that were existing before the arrival of the children of Bekwarra Agba in the land because there was unifying factor amongst them.

The arrival of Odama and Ashide marked the beginning of the Bekwarra nation. Their children scattered all through the length and breadth of the geographical boundary of the small nation. They have the same language, cultures, traditions and values. All this explains why they remain many similarities between the people of Obudu, Mbube, Igede and Bekwarra in terms of tradition and language up till today (Omagu, 2006).

The Bekwarra nation just like the traditional Igbo culture recognizes the elderly. The hamlet is comprised of numerous mixtures. Every compound is based on patrilineal connections. Prestige is given to the male irrespective of the family being polygamous or not. The first son in the family is regarded as the head and all the family's inheritances would be entrusted to him. The

first son represents the family's power. The younger ones are expected to always give respect to the elder siblings. This supremacy and esteem given to the older sibling is one of the fundamental beliefs among the Bekwarra's and the Igbo's. Elders are usually valued and respected. Elders are often moved to for advice both in good and bad times for guidance. It is required of a leader to speak the truth at all times. A leader can also be a noble individual who directs concluded traditional activities both within the family compound and in the village. Conclusively, it is safe to say that the Political System of Bekwarra is segmentary, a typical fairness, and a fortification of the entire members of the family or kindred against any form of injustice (Omagu & Amaechi, 2014).

Economically, the Bekwarra people are mostly farmers, who grow different kinds of yams, bananas, maize, cocoa, rubber trees and coconut palms. Most of the indigenes are farmers whose produce are sold across the region as well as outside. Bekwarra land is bequeathed with a rich cultural heritage. The major traditional celebration of the Bekwarra people is the New Yam Festival (*Ipem Ihihe*) which is held on the first Saturday of September yearly (Olofu, 2014).

Law and justice in pre-colonial Bekwarra

In the pre-colonial Bekwarra, traditional leaders played an important role through their offices in the usual administration of their territory and the lives of their folks. The multifarious functions were exercised sometimes by elders or councilors, or communal groups or judicial institutions or state in accordance with customary law. Indeed, the legal systems of traditional African societies were extremely diverse and in some cases there were no units or offices that coincided with the western concept of judiciary (Omagu & Amaechi, 2014). Among Bekwarra people for instance, the mechanisms of social control and legal system is bestowed on traditional leaders, congress of chiefs, age grades, chiefs, ancestral cults, religious bodies, local deities and many others. These institutions usually employed different mechanisms which were all geared towards peaceful coexistence of members. In Bekwarra judicial system, resolution is habitually the primary purpose of such settlements since that would be the only favorable and desirable result of resolution of dispute between parties that are closely related and need each other (Omagu & Amaechi, 2014). This clarifies that the head of the family listens and decides on family offenses. However, if the head of the family could not solve the problem, he or she would have to call all the elders to solve the issue. Similarly, the council of elders of the family will decide the matter if the suspect and the victim were from the same family. The wrongdoer and the survivor would both have to stand up for their families and say the truth to the elders of the congregation. Representatives of each ethnic group will be appointed to provide brief testimony from both sides. Traditional leadership played a crucial part in African life and, historically, in the political bodies of pre-colonial African states. It integrates the conservation of the values, principles and practices of the African people, while also highlighting the central modes of social governance and administration. The position of the head was checked and accepted by the Council of Chiefs and the willingness to protect against misuse of authority demonstrates that those in power have the ability to dictate. As in many African towns, the representatives of the Chief Council (Ikem Udiara) in Bekwarra are the heads of various families (Omagu & Amaechi, 2014).

The laws in Bekwarra, like many other non-educated citizens, were unwritten and may be divided into two classes: lawful exclusions propagated by leaders or ascending from overall condemnation, and restrictions which are determined on magic-religious consent. Thus, there were also religious and church restrictions, in addition to local restrictions. But since there is no clear distinction between the two, it's hard to tell where the first one ended and where the trial

started. There is a clear sense of justice between them, possibly because of the deep relationships that existed between kings and their subjects, which meant that justice and adherence to law and order were the foundation of their success. There is little distinction between the rulers and the courts, since they are closely related to the people's rulers. There is a very profound sense to the concept of justice, originating from the Ultimate God, and originating down to people through the intercession of the ancestors. It is because of this conviction that people follow the laws of the land because they conclude that any aggression against the dead ancestors should be against them (Omagu & Amaechi, 2014).

Measured opinions and cultural norms attempt to satisfy the need for people to protect life and property. (Adejumobi, 2000). The large proportion of traditions, cultural norms and restrictions are aimed at preserving the locality and fostering peace and stability (Tonukari). Traditional Africans accept that legal structures are promised and sponsored by spirits, especially ancestral spirits. (Adejumobi, 2000). Belief in Atabuchi (Supreme God) as the purveyor of human existence, working through such intermediaries as ancestral spirits and the elders as the lynch pin, motivated all to obedience. It is clear that people believe in the interdependence of moral values. Money may be collected or a refund may be requested. But they reinforce that principle through supernatural powers and the support of the invisible. As such, the gods, including the traditional priests, and the special masks representing each god or ancestral spirit, are involved in the implementation of local law as well as morality in many traditional African cities; they issue orders and participate in the recovery of the legislation granted to payers. The method of dealing with criminals was controlled by a centralized system with practices and structures. Each society is conscious of the effects of pending disputes. As a result, every individual group has built an official and unofficial process to resolve disputes (Falola, 2000). The mechanisms used in Bekwarra to address crimes in a number of areas as described by Omagu and Amaechi (2014) are elucidated as follows.

Marital/family tension

The family unit is the first major identifiable framework by which the people function politically and socially. It has vibrant and biological acquaintances with the community since it is its foundation and encourages it recurrently through its duty of service to life. It is also within the family that first school of social virtues is found and that is the animating principle of the survival and improvement of community itself. Thus, aside from being sealed in on it, the family is, by nature and talent, exposed to other families and to society, and undertakes its social responsibility.

Lawful marriage dissolution through divorce is frowned at, a marriage could be dissolved on grounds of infertility, adultery and theft. If a woman is adjudged guilty of adultery, the man has a right to ask for his bride-wealth which must be paid back to him. A man caught committing adultery was bound to pay compensation to the husband of the woman through members of his age-grade. The fine collected is used to buy some sacrificial items to appease Ndem, the deity of social morality and sacred guardian of all marriages in Bekwarra.

Inheritance issues

The handover of property from the real owner to a successor after the property holder is deceased provides another avenue through which the Bekwarra justice system is practiced. As a result, justice is most at times practiced as a result of parity rather than impartiality. It is based on this

practice that the property of any man who died without a will is passed onto male children alone. In the absence of male children, the inheritance would be passed onto his brothers. Indeed, indigenous proverbs and metaphors such as ‘Only cock crows, a hen does not crow’ or that a child can only play with his/her mothers’ breast and not his/her father’s testicles explains some of these thought systems about women. It is pertinent to note that the society seems to devote more inheritance rights on men than women who are regarded as temporary and soon to be married out of the family. At the same time, a wife’s right to claim her husband’s property is non-existent because it is believed she is not heritable. Inheritance is thus believed to belong to males on whom it is thought that the weight of family duties and maintenance rests. For example, while a part of the inherited assets is under the management of the wife, for the benefit of the male children in particular, the wife is taken to be a pure agent of it.

Stealing

Stealing is dreaded and taking items relevant to the essential interests and livelihood of people, such as cultivated crops, is an aggressive act (Tonukari). Evidently, criminals are punished with the seriousness that their crimes warrant. In order to reestablish the status quo, rather than penalty, the fines typically concentrate on repayment. However, traditional justice forums can sometimes, demand a return to the owner double the amount of stolen property, "especially when the perpetrator is arrested," and penalties can be imposed. Imprisonment did not occur for any offence as a punishment. Capital punishment however, almost always on underage criminals, but never on women or children.

Land disputes

In the pre-colonial and independent times, the dynamic interplay of land as both an economic resource and as a foundation for the political superstructure cemented, connected and broke ties between nations, ethnic groups, faiths, genders and classes (Mufeme). Bekwarra’s method of shifting cultivation and the dire economic condition provoked tensions over land as farmers left land fallow for some years to allow it regain fertility. Although crises over land are often amongst the most bitter sources and forms of conflict, peaceful settlement was considered the best option. Land related conflicts could be resolved by heads of families, or voiced in positions of trial before the chief and elders. Bekwarra's conception of justice derives from their cultural background, therefore, territorial disputes or crimes are resolved by a council of elders. In the past, the use of tools, such as wood gotten from palm and coconut trees, this could endure the adverse effects of extreme weather when modern signposts were not used.

Communal clashes

Inter group relations were based on the assumption that there were codes and rules to guide the actions and activities of groups, that one state recognized the leadership of another and that there were avenues by which to conduct politics. No African community could be treated as an island, removed from other communities. In fact, the political and economic survival of each community depended on how well it could manage the relationships, either of friendship or of hostility that it maintained with its neighbors. Among the major features of this relationship were trade, diplomatic relations, exchange of political and cultural ideas, and war. The pattern of inter-group relationship that existed between Bekwarra people and their neighbors was first dictated by circumstances, the chief only influenced it positively or negatively as these circumstances presented themselves. Although tension and insecurity are not uncommon in inter-group

relationships, the maintenance of peaceful relations in the immediate vicinity are all too common among Bekwarra and its neighbors.

Challenges of the Bekwarra traditional justice system

The advent of Christianity and adoption of colonialism in Africa marked a turning point in the methods of Bekwarra traditions and aspects of cultural order and resolution of conflicts. Christianity replaced old ways and it introduced new values, new theory and practice on the issue of enforcement and effectiveness of law which was not accepted by the Africans. This development may have been hinged on the cultural arrogance of the British which saw African institutions and its crucial evaluation and rituals as opposed to the values and strategies of better governance (Clarno & Falola, 1998). To this effect, the missionary strategy of incorporating Christian elements became the single most important attempt to suppress African culture. The option to introduce Warrant Chiefs had a set of repercussions for the local area (Njoku, 2005). Initially, influential people were not elected by the people themselves. Other powers intervened and appoint them to the people, thus reorganizing the powers and entities of their respective governments. Whenever the colonial officer was satisfied with them, they didn't need to have worries about their people. Due to the way they are held, these civil servants themselves have little or no faith in their own people (Njoku, 2005).

Effects of British colonial economic policies

The colonialists have actively followed such reforms in line with colonial interests, this have been at the expense of the Nigerian people since the British gained political and administrative control over Nigerian affairs (Alemazung, 2010). Two major problems however confronted them at the early stage of their occupation of the Nigerian region. One was the lack of adequate manpower, secondly deficient reporting and means of transportation for the smooth running of the region. In the event of the on-going situation, the British colonial government in all parts of Nigeria chooses to govern the peoples through their existing rulers (Olofu & Naankiel, 2014). Where these officials were not seen, they were forced to establish so-called 'Warrant Chiefs.' As anticipated, with the support of Western leaders, the British want to boost the Nigerian economy in order to ensure that their economy is secure. In this regard, the British colonial power in Bekwarra put in place several structures and institutions thoroughly groomed in the world-view as postulated by the colonialist (Ebuara, 1985).

It could be recalled that communalism remained the major mode of production among the Bekwarra and it dominated the entire economic landscape up to the colonial conquest (Omagu, 2012). Trade and other commercial activities were carried out, farming remained the bedrock of the Bekwarra economy up to the colonial period. The conquest and subjugation of Bekwarra land by the British introduced the capitalist system into the mainstream of the Bekwarra economy. The bedrock of the capitalist economy was the monetization and commercialization of the Bekwarra economic system through the instrumentality of cash crop agricultural system and the policy of taxation, where modern money became a fundamental and crucial in defining economic and social relations (Olofu & Naankiel, 2014). The colonial administration, using compelling and manipulative means, promoted the manufacture of certain commodities at the level of output like palm oil and kernel, beni-seed, and groundnut in large quantity. The objective of the British is clearly understood as articulated in the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce Conference in 1917 that: all energies of the local people should be directed towards the production of raw materials,

but they should be encouraged to produce greater variety and greater quantities of the produce of their respective society. So far, the outcome is that exporting these commodities has increasingly become a big part of the colonial economy in Bekwarra. This to a large extent set the pace for the integration of the Bekwarra economy into the capitalist system, though with outright neglect to modernizing the agricultural base of the Bekwarra economy (Olofu & Naankiel, 2014).

Conclusion

The Bekwarra people have a very high degree of tribal and linguistic homogeneity and her administration of justice in pre-colonial Bekwarra was established through techniques that are commonly recognized by kings, elders' councils, age classes, leaders, ancestral communities, religious norms, local gods and so on. The different social control mechanisms cover a wide range of cases spanning from felony to such serious offenses as murder. The unfortunate thing, however, is that the method of social control in Bekwarra has gradually been weakened into ineffectiveness following colonial incursion. The methods of social control fashioned after European models have been adopted in its place.

Similarly, the British colonial administration in Bekwarra adopted the introduction of certain economic policies as necessary ingredients to legalize colonial rule in the land and prepare a way for the full integration of the Bekwarra pre-colonial economic system into the British capitalist type. In return, these economic measures had brought some measurable changes into the Bekwarra society. They include commercialization and commoditization of the agricultural system, and the migration of the Bekwarra youths in search of white-collar jobs.

Recommendations

Researchers should other ethnic minority groups that have not been given significant attention in literature. It is recommended that more reliable articles with broader horizons on different aspects of the Bekwarra people should be published in order to improve knowledge. It is further recommended that the Bekwarra ethnic nationality should take advantage of the economic opportunities available in the area and to command and control the direction of their economy. It is essential to note here that there is no study without limitations. In the current study, the basic limitation is that the researcher focused only on one ethnic minority group. Further studies should be expanded to include more minority groups.

Conflict of interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest whatsoever as regards this paper.

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