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# Impact of Colonialism on Political and Socio-Economic Relation in the Niger Delta: An Example of Odual and Nembe-Brass 1900-2010

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines Odual and Nembe-Brass relations during the colonial era and how the colonial administrative units (Brass Division) enhanced intergroup relations between the two groups. Odual and Nembe-Brass are good neighbours that have been in contact since the pre-colonial era. Both groups have over the years depended on each other for economic, political and socio-cultural survival. The paper discussed the relationship between both groups with emphasis on the creation of Brass division and its impact on trade, politics, religious activities, education and social ties on one hand and the marginalization and political domination of Odual on the other hand. The paper adopts the use of primary and secondary sources of information to generate the needed data and the qualitative approach to data analysis was employed. The study reveals that Odual and Nembe-Brass relations that started since the pre-colonial era was intensified during the colonial era. The control of the Nigerian state by the colonial powers and the creation of administrative units such as Brass division promoted economic, political and social relations between Odual and Nembe-Brass. The paper established that the Brass division that promoted economic, political and socio-cultural ties between Odual and Nembe-Brass people also created a “master-servant” relationship that almost resulted to loss of Odual sovereignty and independence. It further instituted political and economic marginalization that has endured to present. The paper recommends that group relations should be devoid of political and economic domination, marginalization and subjugation and that administrative units should be used to promote intergroup relations. In moments of conflict and confrontations, diplomacy, dialogue and tolerance should be adopted to ensure peaceful co-existence.*

**Key words:** *Colonialism, intergroup relations, Odual, Nembe-Brass, Administrative units.*

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## 1. Introduction

Odual and Nembe-Brass are two ethnic groups in the Niger Delta situated in Rivers and Bayelsa states of Nigeria. The two groups occupy distinct geographical regions in the Niger Delta which has influenced their economic activities. Odual that is within the Northern Niger Delta is an agrarian society (agriculture as their main occupation) but not without other economic activities such as fishing, hunting, gathering, lumbering, palm oil production, local craft work amongst others. While Nembe-Brass that is situated in Eastern Niger Delta on the other hand is comprised of fishing communities with little or no land to carry out agricultural activities (Michael, 2016:245).

Since no group can live in isolation, it was neither possible nor realistic for any group to

ignore their neighbours situated within a region that has different economic potentials. The nature of the economic activities of Odual and that of her Nembe-Brass neighbor necessitated economic, political and socio-cultural relations. The two groups were not isolationists in orientation; the mundane needs of daily life brought them into close and continuous contacts. These contacts which were basically commercial reveal to us that none of the groups was self-sufficient, thus the increased need for intercourse and knowledge amongst them (Adoronke, 2006).

Over the years, Odual and Nembe-Brass people interacted as two independent kingdoms with each depending on the other for assistance. Pre-colonial era of their relations promoted trade, marriage contracts, social and cultural affinities and political ties (Michael, 2017). Both groups enjoyed relative peace in their dealings with neighbours which in turn promoted unity and peaceful co-existence. The relationship during the pre-colonial era was devoid of marginalization dominance and political subjugation. This does not rule out the fact that both groups experienced pockets of conflicts and confrontations as a result of trade disagreements, boundary encroachment amongst others. However, in such moments both groups adopted diplomacy, dialogue and signing of treaties (agreements) as measures to promote peaceful co-existence (Michael, 2016).

The colonial era ushered in a new administrative arrangement with Odual kingdom attached to the Brass division. The new administrative arrangement and the subsequent colonization of Nigeria made some ethnic groups to be more powerful than others. According to Ikime (2006), the creation of new administrative units such as native courts, area councils, districts, divisions and provinces was a deliberate policy of the colonial government. The creation of new administrative structures meant a new twist in intergroup relations and such arrangements invariably favoured some groups and put others at disadvantage.

Colonialism and the creation of Brass division promoted economic, political and socio-cultural relations between Odual and Nembe-Brass people on the one hand and instituted political and economic dominance which eventually metamorphosed to marginalization on the other hand (Michael, 2014). With the creation of Brass division, the relationship between the two groups that was hitherto peaceful and cordial turned to a “master-servant” relationship. The result of such arrangement was the loss of sovereignty of Odual kingdom to her bigger neighbours.

To achieve the essence of the study the researchers employed the use of primary and secondary sources of information to generate the required data. The data generated through our visit to libraries and archives and oral interviews were cross examined and analysed using the qualitative approach to data analysis.

## **2. Colonialism and Odual and Nembe-Brass Economic and Political Relations**

Nembe-Brass since the era of the Trans Atlantic trades has being under the influence of European merchants and cargo ships. When the British penetrated the area with the intention of ending slave trade and instituting the palm oil trade, Nembe-Brass people witnessed several political and economic intrusions and interferences.

According to Dike (1956:218); the critical years 1885-1900 witnessed the subjugation and pacification of Nigeria by British forces. During these years the impact of European industrialization hitherto restricted to the Atlantic seaboard, rapidly spread to the tribal interior. After 1885 British policy in the Delta gradually became more coherent and consistent. But the

paper protectorate proclaimed in the Niger territories had yet to be converted into effective occupation. The vague sovereignty bestowed on the great powers of West Africa by the Berlin conference was based almost entirely on treaty rights. The greater number of these treaties was obtained in a questionable manner (Dike, 1956).

Okpeh (2006:213) while trying to examine colonialism and its impact on intergroup relations observed thus;

*From 1921 to 1930 the colonial administration attempted to mobilize indigenous leadership to be entrusted with the tasks of tax collection and the maintenance of law and order. In this regard three categories of the political units were created and these were at the village level, the district level and divisional level.*

### **3. The creation of Brass Division and Odual and Nembe-Brass Relations**

The British government after the 1914 amalgamation created village administrations, district administrations and divisional administrations in the Niger Delta. Brass division was created and all the neighbours of Nembe-Brass were brought under the Brass division including Odual. In each village, village heads were appointed to manage the affairs of the people. Odual was made a sub-tribe under the Nembe-division and answerable to the divisional officer at Brass. It is worthy of note that the creation of division and the inclusion of Odual as a sub-tribe in the Brass division promoted intergroup relations. There was a closer contact and relations between Nembe-Brass communities and Odual.

This is in tandem with the views of Ogbogbo (2006:553);

*It is pertinent to note that the categorization of the various ethnic nationalities in the region, first as the oil rivers protectorate and then later the Niger coast protectorate was in such a manner that it comprised of most of what could be regarded as the geographical Niger Delta. For the first time in the people's history they were being brought under one political umbrella.*

With the merger of Odual ethnic group to Brass division, it created an atmosphere of master servant relationship. The hitherto relationship that gave rise to equity and respect for one another became one sided as the Nembe-Brass people were empowered under this arrangement to control the affairs of Odual people. The new political arrangement made Odual traditional rulers to respect and fear their Nembe-Brass counter parts. This became the genesis of Odual as minorities in the Niger Delta.

While Ogbogbo (2006) maintained that the beginning of the Niger Delta people's minorities within a given political administrative structure is traceable to the creation of the Southern Nigeria Protectorate and later on the amalgamation of 1914. We are of the view that within the Niger Delta region, the minority status of Odual also started with the colonial creations of division and the merging of bigger and smaller groups together. With this new administrative arrangement, all the commercial activities of Odual were under the control of the divisional headquarters. Prices of goods, taxes and nature of goods to be produced were controlled from the centre.

In order to effectively carryout the economic exploitation and the propagation of their religious ideas, the colonial authorities utilized western concepts familiar to them. They

introduced principles and methods acceptable to European culture. Moreover, the indirect rule system of administration adopted by the British administrators in Nigeria had a gradual but penetrating effect on indigenous society and culture (Sorgwe, 1999:219). The new administrative arrangement actually brought people from diverse groups under one administrative unit and promoted intergroup relations. Although the era of the Atlantic trade brought different groups together, no single group acted as an overlord over the other.

Sorgwe (1999:224) while looking at the new administrative arrangement and its impact on inter-group relations opined that;

*The principle of bringing different ethnic groups together adopted as a basic colonial administrative technique served integrative social functions. People of different ethnic backgrounds were, through the administrative arrangements, brought into more intimate contact. For example, the Ijo speaking people of Nembe, Akassa, Southern Ijo and Northern Ijo; the Epie Atisa; the Ogbia and Zarama came to see themselves together in Brass division and later Yenagoa province.*

The division by the colonial government made Oduai to be part of Brass. This arrangement made Oduai people to depend on Nembe-Brass for virtually all major decisions. As the administrative headquarters, all economic and political decisions were taken at Brass and such decisions were taken to the sub-tribes for implementation by the village heads (Ola-Daniel, 2013). The court of equity at Brass became the final point for commercial disputes and the Oduai people who violated commercial agreements were made to travel to Brass and resolve such disputes.

According to Alagoa (1964:34), the court of equity, Brass River was established before 1870. In that year the revival of a case previously settled by the Brass court of equity at the colonial court at Cape Coast raised the general question of competence of all courts of equity. The court of equity served as a centre for the resolution of commercial conflict until May 12, 1886. The life of the court of equity came to an end with the declaration of a Niger protectorate. The court received on May 12, 1886, a copy of the West African Order in Council of March 26, 1885. This order had ruled all courts of equity superseded by a consular court. Regulations for the new court were drawn up by Acting Consul Harry Johnston in June 1886 and he called it a governing council to manage the local affairs of Brass (Nemns, 1935).

Apart from the court of equity and governing council the native courts were also established to carryout judicial functions by the colonial government in Brass division. The native councils represented a system of indirect rule which sought to establish forms of local administration through the traditional authorities. Under this administrative system the gerontocracy that was in operation in the various village communities collapsed. The colonial government began a system of recognizing the leaders in the villages whom they designated village heads (Sorgwe, 1999). This new system altered the old political structure and almost resulted to breakdown of law and order. In order to effectively manage the new structure and to avert lingering political imbroglio, the colonial government put up the native courts and local police force.

According to Sorgwe (1999:220-221) in the Brass division,

*Native courts exercised jurisdiction across several villages and ethnic sub-groups .... The policemen executed the judgments of the native courts and the councils. They also help to prevent crimes in the areas of their operation.*

In Odual the Emelego Native Court and police station was established in 1926 and high degree cases were transferred to the Brass Divisional headquarters. In the area of Christianity and Education, the colonial government through the Brass Division established schools and missions in Brass Division. The Delta Pastorate (Affiliated with C.M.S) was the only mission that operated in the Division. Rev. D.O.C. Ockiya was the missionary and manager of the schools (intelligence report Brass Division, 1924). The missions and schools also played vital role in intergroup relations. Brass and Nembe people had the first schools in 1868 and 1877 respectively and as such were privileged to be educated earlier (Webster, 1923).

By 1868 king Okiya of Nembe had invited Bishop Crowther to do at Twon-Brass and eventually at Nembe, what he had done at Bonny. Thereafter, formal western education advanced side by side with the spread of the gospel. For example, an industrial school was opened at Twon-Brass by the missionaries in 1897 (Nwideeduh, 1999). With the early educational opportunities available in Brass and Nembe, Odual people resorted to sending their children to school.

According to Ola-Daniel (2013);

*Odual people had their early education in Nembe-Brass. The educational opportunities promoted intergroup relations between the two groups. The Odual people who attended St. Luke Ogbolomabiri were; Maxwell Peters, Idabere Kpulobo, David Ogisi, Ola Daniel, Sylvanus Ogisi and many others.*

**Fig.1: Odual Native Court Building**



**Note:** Emelego Native Court building and Colonial Officials quarters in deplorable condition.

**Source:** Field trip. **Date:** 21/04/2014.

It is generally believed by the Odual people that Nembe-Brass people discriminated against the Odual people in the schools. This according to M.M. Peters was a calculated attempt to discourage the Odual people from going to school. In almost all the examinations, Odual people will fail while their Nembe-Brass counterparts will pass. This has led to the popular remarks of;

Odual	Afailer
Nembe	Passier

But in a swift reaction, Ola-Daniel (2013) a pioneer student of Odual origin and an informant upheld that;

*The Odual people actually failed. There was no discrimination against Odual students. He opined that he, Ogisi and many others passed. It was the Nembe-Brass educational opportunities that exposed them to Western education.*

On the other hand, all the missionaries that accompanied the white men to Odual were Nembe-Brass people. In fact, Nembe-Brass missionaries propagated the gospel in Odual and also planted missionary schools. Rev. Ockiya posted Mr. L.G. Wari from Brass to Odual (Emelego) and Mr. Ezekiel Obori to Emago-Kugbo and later Okolomade. When the missionaries established schools in Odual; Emelego 1926 and Okolomade 1926 the already existing cordial relationship made the missionaries to post Nembe-Brass teachers to Odual. Prominent among them were Daniel Ikoko, Alfred Spiff, S.L. Ikoko, Pst. Ogiriki, and Okia who translated the New Testament to Nembe language and taught Odual people how to read with Nembe language (Ogbakiri, 2013, Newington, 1938, Nemns, 1935).

#### **4. Effects of Colonial Administrative Structure (Brass Division) on Odual and Nembe-Brass Economic and Political Relations**

The creation of Brass Division had a lot of impact on the economic, political and socio-cultural lives of Odual and Nembe-Brass. Economically, the colonial administration liberalised the trade between Odual and Nembe-Brass. As earlier stated, the 1895 Akassa attack and counter attack by the European destroyed the position of the people of Nembe-Brass but the colonial administration did more justice to it. With the new economic policies and high demand for palm oil, kernel and timber, Odual people were encouraged under the protection of Brass Division officer to trade freely as long as they abide by the rules. By 1899, the Royal Niger Company (RNC) had its charter revoked. It became an ordinary company, the Niger Company, later renamed the United African Company (UAC). This paved the way for other companies to compete against it. In short the fall of both the Nembe middlemen and the Royal Niger Company changed the pattern of trade. It became a free trade area for all companies and communities which made it possible for the hitherto marginalized Ogbia, Izon, Akassa and Epie Atissa communities to have direct business links with many European firms (Sorgwe, 1999:223).

Odual also experienced high profit and economic boom during this period and wealthy traders emerged and competed favourably with their Nembe-Brass counterparts. According to Furoko (1922) the trade liberalization increased the profit margin of the various producing communities who could now reach the European merchants directly, and at a cheaper price than

when they passed through the Nembe middlemen. Before long, the class of wealthy traders which had hitherto been restricted largely to the Nembe communities became much more wide spread throughout the entire state (Okorobia, 1999:209).

This new arrangement brought in wealth into Odual and expanded the relationship with her neighbours. The Odual merchants were also encouraged to produce palm oil, kernel, rubber and other commercial crops in exchange for European goods. The people produced the palm oil and kernel for sale to the European trading firms and brought confectionaries, cloths, salt and other European manufactured goods in return. As time went on, some people became specialized in buying and selling the European wares and this became their sole occupation (Sorgwe, 1999).

Again the colonial administration created boundaries through the conglomeration of various groups. This in turn instituted land disputes especially between Odual and Nembe-Brass. This was a major defect of colonialism on intergroup relations as opined by Okpeh (2006:343);

*Colonial administrations political and administrative reforms took little or no cognizance of pre-colonial patterns of group contacts and interactions... the boundary delimitations they carried out provided the basis for antagonistic co-existence.*

The colonial administration in Brass Division played a dual role in promoting Odual-Nembe-Brass relations during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the one hand, colonialism brought the various ethnic groups together under one umbrella and as such instituted closer economic, political and socio-cultural ties. The economy of Odual was liberalised and more group contacts established. The economic barriers were removed and through improved transportation system both groups had closer relations. Again, the colonial administration encouraged missionary activities and the introduction of Western education. The missions and mission schools further promoted intergroup relations between Odual and Nembe-Brass. Odual people lived and schooled in Brass while Brass-Nembe missionaries and teachers lived and worked in Odual and this in turn cemented the relationship between both groups and also promoted intergroup marriages and cultural activities. The administrative structure put in place also promoted group contacts and interactions as there was exchange of man power between both groups (Webster, 1923).

On the contrary, the colonial administrative structure laid the foundation for internal colonialism with Brass serving as the administrative headquarters; Odual became an appendage of that administrative arrangement. During this period Odual depended on Nembe-Brass authority for virtually all her actions and this instituted marginalization, discrimination, exploitation and above all unequal relationship and neglect.

Okpeh (2006) observed that;

*This neglect which was the logical consequence of the inherent contradictions in the colonial political economy was further compounded by refracted integration of the society into new order and socio-economic milieu. It was this official discrimination against some groups that placed them at a comparatively disadvantage position in the competition for and distribution of the national rewards of wealth, status and power. This situation became the status quo even after independence.*

## 5. Impact of Economic and Political Relations on Odual and Nembe-Brass in the Post-colonial Era

The post colonial Nembe-Odual relationship followed the line of the pre-colonial and colonial relations. The Oluasiri, market and land dispute between Kalabari and Nembe has been a major platform for intergroup relations. As long as the Oluasiri and Soku dispute remains Odual and Nembe-Brass will also relate cordially because the Nembe-Brass people depends solely on Odual testimony in court. Apart from the aforementioned, Nembe-Brass people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century still live and do businesses in Odual especially canoe carving, farming, fishing and other commercial activities. This corroborates the testimony of Jeremiah Lucky a Nembe-Brass indigene living at Ekago settlement in Odual. According to Lucky,

*I have lived in Odual since 1995. I came through kingdom Timipiri and the relationship between Odual and us has been very cordial and friendly. The people that came before me and even those that came since the olden days have always said Odual people are good neighbours.*

He visited Odual as a result of information he gathered and the wealth of those that came before him and that between 1995 and 2010 he has carved over 3000 canoes and sold same to Odual people and Nembe-Brass people at Oluasiri. According to Lucky, he has never had any conflict with odual people and that majority of the people that presently live in Odual are from Egweama, Beletiana and Liama. There are strong intergroup marriages between both groups and Oluasiri is a major market for trade transactions.

**Fig.2: Assorted beads from Nembe-Brass traders**







**Note:** Beads were some of the precious materials Odual people bought from Nembe-Brass and Kalabari markets. These beads were used as part of dressing for important occasions or functions, cultural dances, traditional marriages, female circumcision, and waist decoration by women. These dressing patterns are some of the aspects of Kalabari and Nembe-Brass culture that was borrowed by the Odual people. At present Odual men and women use expensive beads as part of their dressing during important functions.

**Source:** field trip. **Date:** 20/05/2013

## **6. Conclusion**

The Nembe-Brass Odual relations since the colonial era to 2010 has enjoyed peace, cooperation and mutual understanding and the changing nature is as a result of external trade, colonialism and political relations and administrative units created by the colonial government. Both groups have benefited from each other through trade, marriages, education, religion, health care and politics. Nevertheless, both groups have also had moments of confrontations, conflicts and disputes over land and scarce resources. But the use of diplomacy, dialogue and tolerance by the Odual people and the big brother role of Nembe-Brass people have prevented outbreak of wars.

The impact of intergroup relations on both groups has resulted to economic growth, political affiliations, and socio-cultural affinities among others. Nembe-Brass has over the years through collaboration with the colonial government and her military strength exploited Odual resources without putting into cognizance the impact on their host (Odual). The wealth and fame of Nembe-Brass can to a large extent attributed to her relationship with Odual and the

exploitative mechanism adopted in the past. However, what the Odual people are today in terms of wealth, education, politics, religion and health care is to a large extent the by-product of Nembe-Brass and Odual relationship. The mutual benefits of both groups through long years of contact cannot be over-emphasized. It is pertinent to note that the creation of Bayelsa state contributed to the extinction of major Nembe-Brass settlements in Odual. The creation of Bayelsa in 1996 created more economic and political opportunities for the Nembe-Brass people but Oluasiri still serve as a major market and meeting point for both groups and as such a major link for intergroup relations. To sustain a peaceful co-existence between groups, administrative units such as local government councils should not be used as an avenue to marginalize the smaller groups that form part of such units rather should be used to promote intergroup relations. The use of dialogue, diplomacy, tolerance and signing of agreements should be adopted as conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms in intergroup relations especially between minor–major relations such as Odual and Nembe-Brass.

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