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Tracing the Origins of Bonny: *The Complex of Igbo and Ijo* Connections

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**“Water play Bonny For Oko Jumbo”
Jonathan Adagogo Green (Ibani
photographer). 1895-1905. British
Museum.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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The Bonny people, often referred to as the Ibani (Igbani or Ubani), have a complex history that reflects a rich blend of indigenous and migratory influences. The name “Ndoki,” which is derived from the Igbo phrase *Ndi anyi-na-ado-ke* (“What are we quarrelling for?”), is a reminder of a deep historical connection and a resolution of disputes among these groups. It is essential to explore the debates surrounding the origins of the Bonny people, as the towns of Akwete, Azumini, Umuagbayi, and Bonny itself have been central to this discussion.

The origins of the settlers who came from Akwete and spread through the Azumini to Bonny have long been contested. Recent studies by scholars like E. J. Alagoa and A. Fombo have intensified this debate. These authors, while trying to establish the Ijo cultural roots of the eastern Delta states and assert Ijo cultural nationalism, have without intention acknowledged that the Igbo were among the first inhabitants of Bonny. This recognition is based on irrefutable evidence showing that Ndokiland was home to the Igbo people long before the Ijo arrived. Alagoa and Fombo, while disputing the version of Bonny-Ijo traditions that claim the Ndoki were Ijo immigrants, acknowledged that the Igbo’s presence in these towns was longstanding. They observed that the Ndoki people spoke Igbo and that some early settlers, such as Okpara Ndoli, a priest-king of Bonny, carried Igbo names, which indicates Igbo origins.



“Play of late Chief Ogolo of Opobo – men dressed in ritual costumes.” – Arthur Tremearne, c. 1913. MAA Cambridge. These appear to be Ọkọnkọ masks. These masquerade is also played in Southern and Southeastern Igboland showing shared heritage with the Ibani/Ubani.

Despite this acknowledgment, Alagoa and Fombo dismiss the theory that Bonny’s inhabitants are of Igbo origin, offering instead an explanation for the prevalence of Igbo language in Bonny. They attributed this linguistic influence to the influx of Igbo slaves in the 19th century. However, this theory is contentious. Historical and linguistic evidence contradicts their claims, with British traders like Capt. John Adams and Capt. Hugh Crow, who both visited Bonny between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, noting that Bonny people were predominantly Igbo or descended from them, speaking Igbo or a variant of it. Capt. Adams observation in 18th century and Capt. Crow’s affirmation, alongside those of other early European visitors like William Baikie and modern researchers like Arthur Leonard, Percy A. Talbot, Charles K. Meek and Kenneth Dike, further confirm that Bonny was founded by Ngwa-Igbo settlers.

English.	Eboe.	Igbò.
a large ship	owba coocoo	ugbo (h)kè ukwu
a small boat	ewba wanta	ugbo nwa ntà
pig	asa	???
goat.....	agoe	eghu
monkey	waka	???
fowl.....	ocuecoe	òkukò
parrot	eacha	??? (che)?
fish	asoe	azù
dog	ecotta	nkítà
beef.....	annoe	anụ
bread	achecha	àchìchà
yam	gee	jì
water	menney	mini
spirits	myabecca	manya bèkè
cocoa nut	accobecca	akụ bèkè
palm oil.....	mano	mmanụ
salt	ownoe	nnu
pepper.....	usoe	osò
cold	oyee	oyi
death	awawo	??? onwunwu?
surprise	awamea	??? (wam) e?
tub	athasa	???
a severe beating.....	pem pem coocoo	pem pem (h)kè ukwu
a moderate beating.....	pem pem wanta	pem pem nwa ntà
sleep.....	owry	??? ura
large.....	coocoo	(h)kè ukwu
small or little.....	wanta	nwa ntà
bad.....	gorranjoe	jòrò njo
good	adcema	àdì mma
warm.....	oco	okụ
no	ofurry	??? ò furi?
look.....	laguana	??? lègwana?
get up	lecota	likòta?
go below.....	gemalla	jèma àlà
give me.....	wetta	wèta
come here	beca	bà

Ụbanj Igbo, the Igbo spoken on Bonny Island in today's Rivers State, recorded by the slave trader Captain Hugh Crow from the late 18th century, from "Memoirs of the late Captain Hugh Crow of Liverpool." some of the words might be from other languages like Ibani Ijo.

The connection between Bonny and Igbo culture goes beyond language. Historical records reveal that Bonny's rulers in the early centuries were of Igbo origin, as seen with the first priestly-king, Okpara Ndoli, and later kings, such as Okpara Ashimini in the 16th century. Furthermore, the fifth king, Asimini, gave his daughter in marriage to the ruler of Azuogu, an Igbo town, and their daughter, Edimini, became Queen Kambasa of Bonny. These early kings, including Kamalu, an Igbo by birth, continued to rule Bonny for generations. This historical continuity of Igbo leadership in Bonny strengthens the argument that the town's rulers were primarily of Igbo descent.

Alagoa and Fombo also argued that the origins of the Ijo people in the central Delta remain unclear. They admitted that the Ijo founders crossed through southern Igbo towns before eventually settling in Bonny. How does this sound? According to Ennals, the Ijo migration

took place over centuries, during which they were influenced by Igbo culture. It is likely that the Ijo who eventually settled in Bonny had already been acculturated into Igbo society, making their migration to Bonny part of the broader Igbo historical narrative.

In contrast to Alagoa and Fombo's viewpoint, scholars like Leonard offer an alternative tradition that traces Bonny's origins back to the Ngwa section of the Igbo people. One legend recounts that Ala-gba-enyi, a hunter, ventured from Azumini Creek on a hunting expedition and eventually settled in Bonny, where he established his lineage. Another tradition from Umuagbayi tells of a man who had two sons, one of whom stayed behind while the other moved to Bonny. These traditions, along with the typical Igbo names of the early settlers, suggest that the founders of Bonny were indeed of Igbo stock.

Further evidence comes from the linguistic and cultural practices in Bonny, which align more closely with those of the Igbo than with the Ijo. Despite the Ijo presence in the region, the historical and cultural significance of the Igbo cannot be overlooked. Alagoa's theory, which emphasized the 16th-century Ijo migration to Bonny, fails to explain why the governance, culture, and commercial life of Bonny were so heavily influenced by the Igbo for centuries prior.

In conclusion, while the Ijo played a role in Bonny's development, particularly as traders and intermediaries, the Igbo are undeniably the foundational people of Bonny. Their early leadership, linguistic imprint, and cultural dominance point to the fact that Bonny was, at its inception, an Igbo town, established by settlers from the Ngwa region of Igboland.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odiike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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