

SAFAROGBO, AN AROGBO-IJO BALKANISED COMMUNITY IN EDO STATE, NIGERIA: THE BRITISH COLONIAL LEGACY, 1915-2018

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Abstract

The Arogbo-Ijo is one of the major sub-groups of the larger Ijo nation located in the present-day Ondo State, Nigeria. While the majority of the Arogbo-Ijo communities are situated in Ondo State, a few are located in present-day Edo State, where they constitute minority communities. This study focuses on Safarogbo, an Arogbo-Ijo community in Edo State, due to recurring claims of political marginalisation and neglect. Existing scholarship has paid limited attention to this historical development. This study therefore examines the causes of the balkanisation of the Arogbo-Ijo and its implications for the Safarogbo community between 1915, when the colonial division occurred, and 2018, when *Pere Z. D. Egbunu*, the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo was installed. The historical method was adopted, and data were collected from both primary and secondary sources, including oral interviews, archival materials, books, journal articles, and doctoral theses. Findings reveal that the British colonial administration divided the Arogbo-Ijo between Ondo and Benin Provinces in 1915. While Ondo Province later became Ondo State where the Arogbo-Ijo is presently located, Benin Province evolved into Edo State, where Safarogbo is presently located. Subsequent local government and state creation exercises sustained this division, thereby reinforcing the separation of Safarogbo from the larger Arogbo-Ijo community. The study concludes that this colonial legacy contributed significantly to the minority status, perceived political neglect, and underdevelopment of the Safarogbo community in Edo State.

Keywords: Safarogbo, Arogbo-Ijo, Agadagba, Edo State, Ondo State

Introduction

Safarogbo, now located in Edo State, is historically of the Arogbo-Ijo origins, whose major communities are located in present-day Ondo State. The British colonial administrative arrangement led to their political and administrative separation. Briefly, regarding the historical evolution of present-day Edo State, at Nigeria's independence in 1960 the area formed part of the defunct Western region. In 1963, it became the fourth region in Nigeria, called the Mid-West region. It later became Mid-Western State following General Yakubu Gowon's creation of twelve states in 1967. Following General Murtala Ramat Muhammed's nineteen-state restructuring exercise, it became Bendel State. On 27 August, 1991, General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida created Delta State from the Southern part of Bendel State, while the Northern portion became Edo State.¹

Consequently, Edo State is divided into eighteen Local Government Areas (LGAs).² These are further divided into three Senatorial Districts, namely Ed'o North, Edo Central, and Edo South. The Edo South Senatorial District, our area of

¹ Ekanade, O. V. 2013. Nigerian Leaders, Proliferation of States and Federal Finance in Nigeria: 1955-1996. Sofela, B. *et al.* Eds. *Nigeria at 50: Politics, Society and Development*. Ibadan: John Archers (Publishers) Limited, pp.157-174; and Ogunyemi, A. O. 2020. Nigeria: A Review of Its History since the Pre-colonial Times. Alao, O. and Ogunyemi, A. O. Eds. *Contending Issues on Nigeria's Development Trajectory since 1914*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, pp. 23-25.

² The said eighteen LGAs are: Akoko-Edo, Egor, Esan Central, Esan North East, Esan South East, Esan West, Etsako Central, Etsako East, Etsako West, Igueben, Ikpoba/Okha, Oredo, Orhionmwon, Ovia North East, Ovia South West, Owan East, Owan West, and Uhunmwonde. See the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, as altered, First Schedule Part 1.

interest, has seven LGAs, namely Egor, Ikpoba/Okha, Oredo, Orhionmwon, Ovia North East, Ovia South West, and Uhunmowonde. Our further area of interest is the Ovia South West LGA, with the headquarters in Iguobazuwa. According to the 2006 census, the population of Edo State was 3,233,366 with the Ovia South West LGA amassing a population of 138,072.³, which is mainly inhabited by the majority Benin and the minority Ijo⁴ subgroups, is divided into ten political wards. These are (i) Iguobazuwa East, (ii) Iguobazuwa West, (iii) Umaza, (iv) Siluko, (v) Udo, (vi) Ora, (vii) Usen, (viii) Ugbogui, (ix) Ofunama [Ofiniama], and (x) Nikorogha.⁵ Again, our core interest is the Siluko ward. Apart from the majority Benin settlements, the ward is made up of some Arogbo-Ijo communities, including Foroiijohgbini, Safarogbo, Kolombo (often written as Gbelemotin by non-Ijo speakers), Bilebuowei-Ama (shortened as Bilebu, but often corrupted as Gbelebu by non-Ijo speakers), *et cetera*. Meanwhile, out of the above, the community at the core of this study is Safarogbo, with a negligible population of about 1,500.⁶

³ Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette No 2, Volume 96, Legal Notice on Publication of 2006 Census Final Results, Abuja, 2nd February, 2009, B 27. Note: Since the seven LGAs in Edo South Senatorial District are already named in the body of this work, it is considered necessary to name the LGAs in the other two senatorial districts. Hence, Edo Central has five LGAs, namely Esan Central, Esan North East, Esan South East, Esan West, and Igueben; and Edo North has six LGAs, namely Akoko Edo, Etsako Central, Etsako East, Etsako West, Owan East, and Owan West.

⁴ Ijo is written in some literature as *Izon* or *Ijaw*. But the correct spelling based on the etymology of the language is Ijo. Hence, whenever and wherever the spelling *Izon* or *Ijaw* is found in this work, it is a direct quotation from earlier works. For further details, see Alagoa, E. J. *et al.* Eds. 2009. *The Izon of the Niger Delta*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, pp. 1-3.

⁵ Uchendu-Ozoka, U. 2000. *Nigeria's 4th Republic: A Compendium of the Executive, the Legislators and the Judiciary*. Abuja: Nigerian GONG Printing and Publishing Company Ltd., p. 821.

⁶ Note: The National Population Commission is yet to release the community by community break down of the 2006 Census; therefore, the said 1,500 estimated figure for the Safarogbo community, is based on the 138,072 population of Ovia South West LGA (which has ten political wards and twelve polling units).

On a further significant note, the historical root of the Arogbo-Ijo is traced to the central Niger Delta of Gbaraun in the present-day Southern Ijaw LGA of Bayelsa State.⁷ While the bulk of the Arogbo-Ijo communities are found in the present-day Ese-Odo LGA of Ondo State, South-West geopolitical zone, the Safarogbo community is found in the Ovia South West LGA of Edo State, South-South geopolitical zone. Briefly put, the British Colonial rule laid the historical foundation for its balkanisation, and the eventual administrative separation. British colonial administrators used the natural geographical feature of Benin, Siluko, and Oluwa Rivers to separate Safarogbo community from her Arogbo-Ijo brothers, who are located on the other side of Oluwa River. Remarkably, the tripartite confluence point, called *Debobogha ita* (Debobogha junction-he who is not loyal, will not pass), is the central point of the balkanisation. Therefore, at the dawn of the British colonial rule, the Safarogbo among other Arogbo-Ijo communities earlier mentioned, and Egbema-Ijo communities were arbitrarily partitioned into the defunct Benin Division of Benin Province, while majority of the Arogbo-Ijo communities were located in the defunct Okitipupa Division of Ondo Province, Western Region.⁸

Arguably, on grounds of her balkanised political situation, thereby leading to a negligible minority status in Edo State, the Safarogbo community is yet to attract adequate attention

⁷ Alagoa, E. J. *et al.* 2009. The Western Delta Limit. Alagoa, E. J. *et al.* Eds. *The Izon of the Niger Delta*. Port Harcourt: Onyoma Research Publications, pp. 406-408.

⁸ Oral interview held with High Chief Israel Timi Emokenighan, 60 years, retired Civil Servant, and High Chief Bilebu of Erubiri, Arogbo, 14 June, 2022. Note: Egbema-Ijo communities, namely, Ajakurama, Ofiniama, Gbolowoso, Abere, Gbeioba, Nikorogha, *etc.* are found in Ofiniama and Nikorogha political wards of Ovia South-West LGA of Edo State. As a matter of fact, Egbema-Ijo communities are today partitioned into the present-day Edo and Delta States.

of scholars. This paper, therefore, intends to fill the gap by interrogating some salient aspects of this neglected balkanised community. The paper is divided into seven sections. Section one is the introduction. The second section provides the historical roots and meanings of the word, balkanisation. The third section discusses the geographical location of the Safarogbo community while the fourth section traces the historical origins of the Safarogbo community. The fifth section focuses on their internal administrative structure, religious beliefs and political development. The sixth section examines the economy of the Safarogbo and relations with her neighbours, while the seventh section is the conclusion.

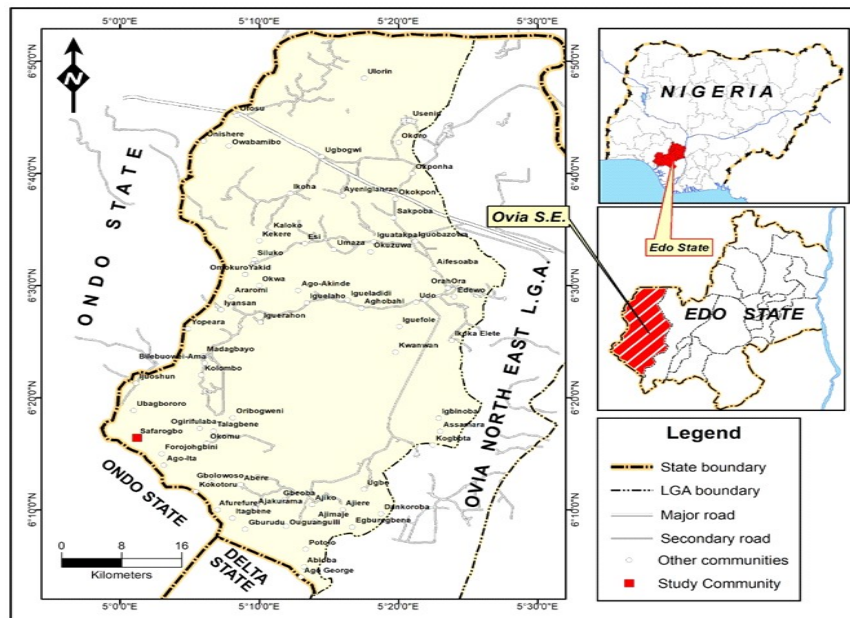


Figure 1.1: The Map of Ovia South West Local Government Area of Edo State, showing the Study Community (Safarogbo).

Source: Department of Geography, Faculty of the Social Sciences, University of Ibadan, 2022.

The Historical roots and meanings of the word, Balkanisation

The word Balkanisation, is derived from the name of the historic Balkan Peninsula, which was divided into various infinitesimal nations in the early twentieth century. However, balkanisation as a word is said to have been coined by the famous English editor James Louis Galvin. But Arnold J. Toynbee in 1922 credited it to German Sociologists describing the result of the 1918 treaty of Brest-Litovsk as its root of origins. Meanwhile, either way, the reference is to the political situations in the Balkans *circa* 1878-1913, when the European section of the Ottoman Empire split up into small and warring nations.⁹ Simply put, the word Balkanisation is derived from the Balkan Peninsula situation in which the Balkan Peninsula and the people were partitioned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into a number of mutually unfriendly territories.¹⁰ That is, to balkanise simply means to divide into small and antagonistic groups, as was the political situation of the Balkans. Therefore, it is from the above that the Safarogbo's partition, and its eventual location in the present-day Edo State, can be likened to the Balkan mutilated political situation, hence, the application of the usage in this paper. Differently put the inhabitants of Safarogbo who are historically part of the Arogbo-Ijo, but now balkanised into the present-day Edo State, dominated by the majority Edo-speaking group. Thus, within the context of this work, the

⁹ Toynbee, A. J. 1922. *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey: A Study in the Contact of Civilisations*. London: Constable and Company Ltd. <https://www.scibd.com>. Accessed online on 12-05-2022; The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language-Encyclopedic Edition, 2010 Edition, Typhoon Media Corporation, pp. 108-109; and Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary 2002. Federal Street Press, A Division of Merriam-Webster, Incorporated Springfield, Massachusetts, p. 135.

¹⁰ George, F. 2009. *The Ijaw Question in Global Historical Perspective*. Akure: Stebak Books and Publishers, pp. 15-16.

balkanisation of the Safarogbo community invariably led to her negligible and minority status in Ovia South West LGA of Edo State.

Geographical location of the Safarogbo community

Safarogbo, placed in Siluko ward of Ovia South West LGA of Edo State, is unlike most Ijo riverine communities, located on land. Hence, just by the southern side of the Benin River¹¹, it can be reached by land and river. That is, Benin River passes by Safarogbo to terminate or meet the Siluko and Oluwa Rivers at a junction called *Debobogha ita*, near Arogbo main settlement. The community, Safarogbo is bounded in the East by Okomu in Siluko ward of Ovia South West LGA of Edo State, South-South geopolitical zone; in the West by Foroiijohgbini, a satellite community of Safarogbo; in the North by Bilebuowei-Ama, and Kolombo in Siluko ward of Ovia South West LGA of Edo State; and in the South by Itaitagbini (equally an Arogbo-Ijo community) in Ese-Odo LGA of Ondo State, South-West geopolitical zone, directly opposite Safarogbo while crossing the Benin River. In fact, the people of Itaitagbini, among others, such as Kurukurugbini, Gbeinbogbini, Okorobobigbini, Foroiijohgbini, and others (all not on land) are satellite settlements of Safarogbo community, having their family buildings both at Safarogbo and Arogbo main settlement. As a matter of fact, with the exception of

¹¹ The name, Benin River, was so named because it was only through it that Benin City could be reached in the old days. Joao Alfonso, a Portuguese and the first European to reach Benin named the River *Rio Famoso* (the beautiful river). The Dutch, English, French, and other Europeans called it Benin or Argon River, and eventually later changed to Benin River. See, Salubi, A. 1960. The Origins of Sapele Township. *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Volume 2 (December) 115-135. As a further note, though it is called Benin River, the area in question (the mouth of the river or lower course of the river) was never historically under the direct control of the Oba of Benin during the pre-colonial period.

Forojohgbini, all the above listed satellite settlements are in Ese-Odo LGA of Ondo State.¹²

Tradition of origins of the Safarogbo community

As earlier pointed out in this paper, Safarogbo is historically an Arogbo-Ijo community, which origin, like an umbilical cord, is tied to the Arogbo-Ijo story of migration. It was the British colonial administrative arrangement on grounds of administrative convenience that separated the community from her Arogbo-Ijo parent. Therefore, as it is with other groups, the Arogbo-Ijo people have their own tradition of origin. According to Alagoa, the origin of the Arogbo-Ijo is traceable to Gbaraun, in Apoi creek of the central Niger Delta in the present-day Southern Ijaw LGA of Bayelsa State, South-South geopolitical zone. The historical migration, led by the crown Prince Perebiyenmo, son of Ogbonu, with overwhelming followers, was in search of a better area for fishing and more congenial habitation. The first place of settlement was Oporoza in the present-day Gbaramatu Kingdom of Warri South-West LGA of Delta State.¹³ The geographical location of Oporoza was considered unhealthy in terms of territorial defence against external aggressors and, thus, Perebiyenmo and his followers had to move to Ekpetonron (near the present-day settlement of Opuba) about 1100 AD. Pointedly, the entire geographical coverage of the said Ekpetonron is now known as Ukparama, which means a settlement with substantial structures erected with woods firmly pegged into the ground in conformity with the dictates of the ecological system. Today, the area is extensively

¹²Oral interviews held with High Chief Emotimi Ekuayemiyenkunmo Birinimibofa, 65 years, retired Civil Servant, Ofiniege Close, Egbesubiri, Arogbo, 2022; and Hon. Job Bunawariebi Amiyenkunmo, 55 years, Civil Servant, Amiyenkunmo Compound, Telemobiri, Safarogbo, 15 May, 2022.

¹³ Alagoa, E. J. *et al.* Eds. 2009. *The Izon of the Niger Delta...*, p. 407.

occupied by the ancient settlements of Akpata, Opuba, Ajapa, Amatibi, Asere, Bolowou, Otuwokubu, Pina-Ama Zion, Ukpe, and many others.¹⁴

After a brief stay at Ekpetonron, specifically for a period of two *Peres* (Kings), namely *Pere Perebiyenmo* Ogbonu, and *Pere Tabaimotimi Perebiyenmo*, the third Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom, *Pere Barakunmo Perebiyenmo*, moved the administrative headquarters to the settlement of Arogbo.¹⁵ Subsequently, many other new settlements were thereafter founded, under the traditional headship of the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo kingdom. Specifically narrowing down the conversation to the historic origins of Safarogbo, the children of Odigbala, namely Okoti (male), popularly known as Safigha; Diyeghaje (male); Okpolodu (male); and Letuwa (female), led by the eldest son, Okoti (a war lord with intestinal fortitude), departed Arogbo, and eventually founded Safarogbo. The settlement was initially christened 'Safigha-Ugbo', which was derived from Safigha, an Ijo name of the founder, and *Ugbo*, Ijo word meaning forest. Thus, collectively means 'Safigha's forest or land'. Safigha-Ugbo, was eventually corrupted over the years to read and sound Safarogbo.¹⁶

Although the above migratory story is widely accepted by the people of Safarogbo, there is another story existing as well. According to the second account, when the children of Odigbala moved out of Erubiri, in Arogbo, in search of a new settlement for fishing and canoe carving, they actually met a certain man whose true identity was not clearly unveiled. The

¹⁴ Peretei, I. K. 2014 Revised Edition. *Arogbo Ijo People and Events*. Abuja: Mentors Communications Limited, pp. 3-6.

¹⁵ Eshofonie, G. A. 2009. *The Arogbo Ijaws of Nigeria*. Lagos: Gabson and Sons (Nig.) Enterprise Publishers and Educational Materials Suppliers, p.8.

¹⁶ Oral interview held with High Chief B. A. Amiyenkunmo, 61 years, former Vice Principal, and the *Amananawei* of Safarogbo, Amiyenkunmo Compound, Telemobiri, Safarogbo, 17 May, 2022.

man claimed original ownership of the land as his hunting forest. Since, such issues, if not properly managed, often led to avoidable crises, Safigha, the leader of the group, therefore, entered into negotiation with the thingamajig, and a monetary compensation was amicably reached and effected with him. Consequently, ownership was, thus, transferred to Safigha and his blood relations. Based on the agreement, the settlement became known as 'Safigha-Ugbo'. That is, 'Safigha' simply means not owing debt, and 'Ugbo' means land or forest in Arogbo-Ijo dialect. The above name, Safigha-Ugbo, therefore, literally means the land in which they are not, owing debt.¹⁷ These two versions are concurrently, existing among the inhabitants of Safarogbo community since time immemorial.

Internal traditional structures, religious beliefs, and political development

At the initial time of the founding of the settlement of Safarogbo, the administrative head was known as the *Ama-Okosuwei*. In Arogbo-Ijo dialect, *Ama* means village or town, while *Okosuwei* means the oldest or eldest man. *Ama-Okosuwei*, therefore, simply means the oldest or eldest man in the village or town. The primary daily governance rested with the *Ama-Okosuwei* and his Council of *Okosu-Abu* (elders). Above all, age was the necessary criterion in the choice of these elders. This system of governance known as gerontocracy was later discarded, and replaced with the title of the *Amananawei* of Safarogbo. Hence, the traditional head of Safarogbo

¹⁷ Amiyenkunmo, B. A. 1986. A Short History of Safarogbo in Ovia Local Government Area of Bendel State. A Long Essay Presented to the Department of History, College of Education, Benin City, in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements Leading to the Award of N. C. E. Certificate, pp. 1-2. Note: At the time the above Long Essay was written in 1986, Safarogbo was under the defunct Ovia LGA of Bendel State, now under Ovia South West LGA of Edo State.

community is now known as the *Amananawei* of Safarogbo (owner or head of Safarogbo). The choice no longer rested on the age of the person, but bravery, wisdom, practical knowledge on communal issues, among other related leadership traits in accordance with modernity.¹⁸

On a significant note, though Safarogbo is administratively placed in Edo State, but in respect of traditional, chieftaincy, and other related issues of cardinal importance, they are under the traditional head of the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom in Ondo State (a First-Class Traditional Ruler in the Ondo State Council of *Obas*). Anchored on the above, the *Amananawei* of Safarogbo (hereinafter called the *Amananawei*) is installed by the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom (hereinafter called the Agadagba), whenever vacancy occurs. Therefore, the *Amananawei* owes total allegiance to the Agadagba. Similarly, all quarters chiefs and other minor chiefs of Safarogbo are appointed or installed by the Agadagba based on the recommendations of the *Amananawei*. As a matter of fact, the *Amananawei* dutifully attends to all matters concerning the community, with particular respect to daily governance and welfare of the people. Above all, all intractable communal issues which for one reason or the other, the *Amananawei* fails to successfully resolve, are referred to the Agadagba for necessary mediation.¹⁹

Administratively, Safarogbo community is formally divided into three *biris* (quarters), namely Safabiri, Taribiri, and Telemobiri. Hence, in traditional hierarchy of governance, the three quarters chiefs (in equal status) are next to the *Amananawei*. The primary responsibilities of these chiefs are

¹⁸ Oral interview held with High Chief Bamiwo Agadigha Amiyenkunmo, 61 years, former Vice Principal, and the *Amananawei* of Safarogbo, Amiyenkunmo Compound, Telemobiri, Safarogbo, 17 May, 2022.

¹⁹ Oral interview held with Hon. Naighan Okoro, 49 years, Civil Servant, Odigbala Compound, Safabiri, Safarogbo.

to attend to all needs of their respective quarters. Furthermore, just like the case of the *Amananawei* (referring matters beyond him to the Agadagba), all matters the quarters chiefs failed to amicably address are expressly transferred to the *Amananawei* for settlement. Apart from the above three quarters chiefs, the minor chiefs in all the quarters, handled cases in their respective *jitus* (families). And, disputes they were unable to affably address, are often referred to their respective quarters chiefs for adjudication. Meanwhile, it is considered necessary to point out that, High Chief Bamiwo Agadigha Amiyenkunmo is the current *Amananawei* of Safarogbo, installed by His Imperial Majesty, *Pere* (Barr) Zacchaeus Doubra Egbunu, Opukutu III, the Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom. In a similar vein, in respect of the three *biris*, the present head of Safabiri is Chief Johnson Gbanawei; Taribiri is headed by Chief Felix Bekewei; while Telemobiri is headed by Chief Obeke Gbadia. As earlier disclosed, all were installed by the Agadagba based on the recommendations of the *Amananawei*.²⁰

As revealed by Yayu, the Ruling House in respect of Arogbo-Ijo Chieftaincy is the Perebiyenmo Ruling House. And, as an internal administrative mechanism for effective coordination and unity, the Perebiyenmo Ruling House has seven historic lineages, with their distinctive heads. These are as follows: **Tabaimotimi**, headed by High Chief Sunday Songhoron; **Egberi**, headed by High Chief Ebenezer Titiboh; **Mapala**, headed by High Chief Idameji Afun (late); **Asun**,

²⁰ Oral interview held with High Chief B. A. Amiyenkunmo, 61 years, former Vice Principal, and the *Amananawei* of Safarogbo, Amiyenkunmo Compound, Telemobiri, Safarogbo, 17 May, 2022. Amiyenkunmo further reveals that the *Amananaweis* of Safarogbo so far are: (i) Kusahan, (ii) Salakpa Uyaboerigha, (iii) Amiyenkunmo Solomon Juweigha, (iv) Joseph Ajinde Gbadia, (v) Aseye Ibebenimowei, and (vi) Bamiwo Agadigha Amiyenkunmo, the incumbent. Meanwhile, it must be noted that Amiyenkunmo, and all other sources engaged in the course of writing this paper, failed to provide the surname of Kusahan. Hence, the surname is probably lost to history.

headed by High Chief F. Derigbe Nuren; **Ereh**, headed by High Chief Sunday Erepaghamini Yayu; **Okorobiti**, headed by High Chief Zebulon Okubananawei Abisere; and **Odia**, headed by High Chief Jonathan Worimegbe (late). Remarkably, the traditional head of Asun lineage, High Chief F. Derigbe Nuren, hails from Safarogbo, and residing at Safabiri in Safarogbo, our area of historical discourse.²¹ The above clearly shows that the traditional and chieftaincy organisation of Safarogbo community is an integral part of their parent Arogbo-Ijo administrative structure. After all, the *Oba* of Benin right from the British colonial period to date refused to accord recognition to the Chieftaincy institution of Safarogbo. Hence, their traditional ties to the parent Arogbo-Ijo historical roots.

The belief in the veneration of the departed souls or ancestors is very strong among the inhabitants of Safarogbo. Hence, as a practical demonstration of the above, they have a sacred ancient structure erected for consulting or reaching out to their ancestral forefather, known as Odigbala. On the background of how Odigbala became a deity, it is a truism that the said Odigbala in the course of the Arogbo-Ijo's migration from the central Niger Delta, actually joined his ancestors somewhere in the present-day Oporoza, Delta State. Thereafter, it was his children, as earlier stated, namely Okoti (male), Okpolodu (male), Diyeghaje (male), and Letuwa (female), who survived the precarious migratory journey to their present-day Safarogbo location in Ovia South West LGA of Edo State. Eventually, when the children of Odigbala, led by Okoti founded Safarogbo, calculated to immortalise their legendary father, who was a *generalissimo*, Odigbala shrine was built in his honour. Therefore, Odigbala was transmogrified

²¹ Oral interview held with High Chief Sunday E. Yayu, 77 years, retired Principal, and the Head of Ereh Lineage of Perebiyenmo Ruling House, Erubiri, Arogbo, 15 May, 2022.

into a deity generally known as *Opuduwei* (ancestral spirit). On how Odigbala was deified, it is necessary to unveil that when he died in the course of their migration as earlier pointed out, his finger nails were cut off and stored before the burial. Hence, it was these *remains* (finger nails) that were traditionally used to invoke the *teme* (spirit) of Odigbala, and ceremoniously reburied at Safarogbo. The site of the burial is where the sacred Odigbala shrine is erected.²²

Ab initio, the custodian of Odigbala shrine was called Odigbala *kariwei*, with no formal chieftaincy title in the modern sense of the world. In line with modernity, and in order to have a central and effective administrative way of veneration, they eventually appointed a chief priest with the identity known as Chief Odigbala of Safarogbo. As such, the first Chief Odigbala of Safarogbo was Chief Adaun Ugbodougha; the second was Chief Lude Tonwerigha; the third was Chief Fokitei Elijah Foroijoh, and the fourth, and the current is Chief Joel Adaun. On the belief of the efficacy of the Odigbala deity, the people often consulted the revered deity on grounds of infertility, stealing related issues, disagreement on critical communal issues, the general welfare and progress of the community, among other burning matters beyond human comprehension.²³

On the *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* of the sacred Odigbala deity, vows are made with fowls, bottles of ogogoro, goat, *etc.* And, whenever such vows are fulfilled, the materials or objects of such traditional covenants are presented by the

²² Amiyenkuumo, B. A. 1986. A Short History of Safarogbo in Ovia Local Government Area of Bendel State...pp. 2-3.

²³ Amiyenkunmo, B. A. 1986. A Short History of Safarogbo in Ovia Local Government Area of Bendel State...pp. 2-3; and Oral interview held with High Chief Bamiwo Agadigha Amiyenkunmo, 61 years, former Vice Principal, and the *Amananawei* of Safarogbo, Amiyenkunmo Compound, Telemobiri, Safarogbo, 17 May, 2022.

concerned person to Chief Odigbala, who in turn poured libation to the Odigbala deity as a show of appreciation in line with the vows made. The people religiously believe in the potency of the Odigbala deity thus, it is held in high esteem. The Odigbala shrine is considered sacred, as such, women on their menstrual periods are never allowed to enter it, neither men who had sexual relations with women, regarded as unclean. On the contrary, if the above traditional norm is violated, the culprits are expected to pay necessary prescribed fees to Chief Odigbala for him to purify the shrine to avoid its wrath.²⁴

As revealed by Mama Taritei Forojoh, right from *ab immemorabili*, evil doers are not committed to mother earth in the land of Safarogbo. Rather, such questionable deceased persons are abnormally *buried* in a secluded and dreadful evil forest known in Arogbo-Ijo dialect as *seibou* (evil forest). In fact, the said *burial* is described as abnormal or irregular because they are not properly buried in the real traditional sense but unceremoniously and as a mockery thrown into the said *seibou* for the consumption of wild animals and birds. The victims or such evil doers are known in the following ways while on earth or after death: those who confessed of their evil doings on death bed; those the traditional *igbadagha* revealed such evils committed while alive; and those whose corpses could not enter the sacred Odigbala *wari* (house) or shrine. It is the traditional belief of the people that the land of Safarogbo, is guided by the sacred Odigbala deity, hence, the burial of evil doers is tantamount to defilement or contamination of the land, with its grave consequences.²⁵

²⁴ Oral interview held High Chief B. A. Amiyenkunmo, 61 years, former Vice Principal, Amiyenkunmo Compound, Telemobiri, Safarogbo, and the *Amananawe* of Safarogbo, 17 May, 2022.

²⁵ Mama Taritei Fokitei, 99 years, (wife of Chief Fokitei Elijah Forojoh, the third Odigbala of Safarogbo), Egbesubiri, Arogbo, 2 June, 2022.

The above notwithstanding, with the introduction of Christianity to the community, the people are today members of various denominations. The first church established was the Saint Andrew's United Native African Church, Safarogbo, founded on Tuesday, 25 April, 1922 (now known as Saint Andrew's First African Church). The founding fathers were Amiyenkunmo Solomon Juweigha, Erijah Ibon, Thompson Gbadia, Okorobobi Osiyai, Eyenghan Kighilly, Jonah Tuweke, and Temi Tuweke. The second, the Pentecostal Zion Church Mission, Safarogbo, was founded by the Most Senior Apostle Prophet Julius Ororogha Ereiboh, on Thursday, 15 May, 1969. The third, the Celestial Church of Christ, Safarogbo, was founded in 1984, by D. O. Forojoh, Elder Benson Okorobobi, and Elder F. Derigbe Nuren (now High Chief Asun of Asun lineage of the Perebiyenmo Ruling House, Arogbo). The fourth, the Deeper Life Bible Church, Safarogbo was founded in 2003, by Steward Ege. The fifth, the First Baptist Church, Safarogbo, was founded on Wednesday, 19 October, 2011, by Eworigha Teremini. The sixth, the Living Faith Church (aka the Winners Chapel), Safarogbo, was founded on Sunday, 9 June, 2019, by Evbuon James.²⁶

In respect of educational development, the first primary school, the United Native African Primary School, Safarogbo, was founded in 1935. The name of the school was changed to Oha Primary School, Safarogbo, by the government. The name 'Oha' has an Edo identity hence strenuous efforts were made by the community to change the name to reflect the Ijo identity but failed. The above visibly shows the domineering attitude of the majority Edo-speaking group, calculated to obliterate the Ijo identity in the then Benin Division. Apart from the above

²⁶ Oral interview held with High Chief B. A. Amiyenkunmo, 61 years, former Vice Principal, and the *Amananawei* of Safarogbo, Amiyenkunmo Compound, Telemobiri, Safarogbo, 17 May, 2022.

government owned school, there are private schools as well in the community. These are Ijaw-Ibe Model College, Safarogbo, founded in September, 1996, by Messrs Bamiwo Agadigha Amiyenkunmo, Japhet Gbadia, and Hon. Job Bunawariebi Amiyenkunmo (now defunct); Faith Model Nursery/Primary School, Safarogbo, founded in January, 2001, by Famous Abudu; and Community Secondary School, Safarogbo, founded in September, 2015.²⁷ The above demonstrates that in respect of educational development, the community has no functional secondary school. This invariably affects their level of educational development. The closest secondary school to them within Edo State, with no good road network is Gbelebu Secondary School, Gbelebu, founded in 1980.

On the place of Safarogbo in the politics of Edo State, they are yet to have a fair taste within the political space of Edo State, on grounds of their marginal status. The people have one polling unit, located at Oha Primary School, Safarogbo, with code 011 (PU: 12/15/05/011), in Siluko ward of Ovia South West LGA.²⁸ After all, politics is a game of numbers. As

²⁷ Oral interview held with High Chief B. A. Amiyenkunmo, 61 years, former Vice Principal, and the *Amananawei* of Safarogbo, Amiyenkunmo Compound, Telemobiri, Safarogbo, 17 May, 2022.

²⁸ For the record, Siluko ward has twelve Polling Units, namely, (I) Siluko, Siluko Primary School (PU:12/15/04/001); (II) Siluko, Siluko Grammar School (PU:12/15/04/002); (III) Siluko, Siluko Postal Agency (PU:12/15/04/003); (IV) Abieyi, Abieyi Primary School I (PU:12/15/04/004); (V) Abieyi, Abieyi Primary School II (PU: 12/15/04/005); (VI) Iguagbado, Agbado Primary School (PU: 12/15/04/006); (VII) Madagbayo, Omazaye Primary School (PU: 12/15/04/007); (VIII) Ejide Water Side, Dauyomo Primary School (PU: 12/15/04/008); (IX) Gbelemotin Inland, Dominju Primary School (PU: 12/15/04/009); (X) Efor-Okomu, Efor Primary School (PU: 12/15/04/010); (XI) Safarogbo, Oha Primary School (PU: 12/15/04/011); (XII) Gbelebu, Gbelebu Primary School (PU: 12/15/04/012). Ovia West LGA Polling Units/Wards. <https://www.medianigeria.com>. Accessed online 22-06-2022.

a result, since the colonial period to independence in 1960, no Safarogbo person ever held any elective and appointive political position in the then Benin Division of Benin Province in the defunct Western Region.²⁹ Again, since the time of Mid-West Region (1963-1967), Bendel State (1976-1991), and Edo State (1991- 1995), none had a taste of political and elective position at any level of governance. As a tip of the iceberg, the first Safarogbo man to hold political office in the state, albeit for a very brief period, was Hon. Job Bunawariebi Amiyenkumo, who was elected as a councillor in Ovia South West LGA of Edo State (1996-1997), under the Zero party era of Sani Abacha. The second Safarogbo man appointed as a Senior Special Assistant to Governor Adams Aliyu Oshiomhole of Edo State, between 2008 and 2016, was Chief Omoh Tonwerigha; Mr Victor Kowei was appointed as a Special Adviser to the Chairman of Ovia South West LGA, while Mr Towei Bekewei is the current Chairman of PDP, Siluko ward, in Ovia South West LGA of Edo State.³⁰ It is, therefore, not surprising that the community is known for its history of unattended gravamina about poor or lack of infrastructural development, and an obvious denial from holding sensitive positions in the governance of the state.

The economy of the Safarogbo and relations with her neighbours

With respect to the economy of the community, the major occupation is fishing. First, as riverine dwellers, they carry

²⁹ Oral interviews held with Hon. Job Bunawariebi Amiyenkunmo, 55 years, Civil Servant, Amiyenkunmo Compound, Safarogbo, 15 May, 2022; Hon. Naighan Okoro, 49 years, Civil Servant, Odigbala Compound, Safabiri, Safarogbo, 17 May, 2022.

³⁰ Oral interview held with High Chief B. A. Amiyenkunmo, 61 years, former Vice Principal, and the *Amananawe* of Safarogbo, Amiyenkunmo Compound, Telemobiri, Safarogbo, 17 May, 2022.

out fishing activities in both retail and commercial scales. Common fishing gear used in their traditional ways include spear, machetes, fences and stakes, traps, hooks and lines, and a variety of nets. For instance, spear and machetes are wounding gear used for piercing and transfixing fish. On the other hand, fences and stakes are used as barriers to control the tide of the water and the movement of fishes, thereby aiding their catching or capturing in large quantities. They are either used independently or in conjunction with other related fishing gear.³¹

Specifically, traditional fishing traps are made from forest materials, which are in abundance in the study area. They are used in the harvesting of various types of fish or fishes in the rainy and dry seasons. Hooks and lines are used either baited or un-baited, and lines have single or many hooks, depending on the intended purposes. Similarly, the main fish processing method employed by the Safarogbo community is the traditional smoke-drying. In this process, the comparatively small fresh fishes (in Arogbo-Ijo dialect, such as *toru-iyoro*, *bou-iyoro*, *epele*, *olumo*, to mention but a few) are pinned together and the large fishes, such as *eba*, *ekeu*, and so on, often cut into chunks prior to smoking, are heated at high temperatures using firewood as the traditional energy source. The economically friendly traditional smoking *eris* (kilns) are simply constructed with *bana* (mud) or other related materials, sourced locally. The kilns are either placed inside or outside the vicinity of the kitchen or home as applicable.³²

³¹ Oral interview held with High Chief Emotimi Ekuayemiyenkunmo Birinimibofa, 65 years, retired Civil Servant, Ofiniege Close, Egbesubiri, Arogbo, 15 May, 2022.

³² Oral interview held with Hon. Job Bunawariebi Amiyenkunmo, 55 years, Civil Servant, Amiyenkunmo Compound, Telemobiri, Safarogbo, 15 May, 2022.

In addition to fishing, other economic activities the people of Safarogbo actively engaged in commercial scales with big economic impact on the community are farming, lumbering, tapping of raffia palm, marketing, canoe-carving, and trading. Significantly, patronised by her neighbours, Safarogbo, strategically located along the Benin River, has an ancient market. The Safarogbo people also patronised other neighbouring markets such as the Agadagba-Obon (an Arogbo-Ijo market) in Ese-Odo LGA, the Ikale markets at Iju-Osun, and Akotogbo in Irele LGA of Ondo State. The means of getting to all the above markets is by canoes via Benin, Siluko, and Oluwa Rivers.³³

In respect of road network, though quite rough, there is an un-tarred road linking Safarogbo, via Udo to Benin City.³⁴ On the historical origins of the said road network, Amiyenkunmo submits thus:

The...most laudable social development of the recent past embarked upon by the community is the construction of a motor road. The #50,000 road construction was embarked upon through a special levy system to raise money to take off its 10 kilometre road. The idea of having a motor road was first tabled on the 28th of July 1974 but its coming to reality was as a result of 'Safarogbo Aposi Apo Belemu

³³ Oral interview held with Hon. Naighan Okoro, 49 years, Civil Servant, Odigbala Compound, Safabiri, Safarogbo, 17 May, 2022.

³⁴ Oral interview held with Hon. Naighan Okoro, 49 years, Civil Servant, Odigbala Compound, Safabiri, Safarogbo, 17 May, 2022. Note: The name, Benin River, was so named because it was only through it that Benin City could be reached in the old days. Joao Alfonso, a Portuguese and the first European to 'discover' Benin named it the River Rio Famoso-'the beautiful river'. The English, French, Dutch, and other northern European called it Benin or Argon River. See, Salubi, A. 1960. The Origins of Sapele Township. *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Volume 2, Number 1 (December) 115-135.

Gboloi' of Lagos Branch that set the whole machinery in motion. This body...resided in Lagos was [chaired] by Mr. S. C. Amiyenkunmo, and Joshua Akiri as the scribe, supported by Agent Ikpoho, Benzy [Benjamin] Akiri, and young radicals and fast thinking boys who were the energy resources of the above mentioned persons. With their progressive move and with the unflinching support of all sons and daughters..., the project was executed...As the construction was in progress, plans were going as to launch as special an appeal fund. The launching ceremony was [chaired] by Mr. J. J. Soriwei while the then Sole Administrator of Ovia Local Government Area, Mr. J. O. Obasuyi was the Special Guest of Honour. The total amount realised in the launching was #5,496.15k...³⁵

As a community mostly surrounded by Ijo neighbouring communities, the inhabitants of Safarogbo have long standing cordial and harmonious relationships with her neighbours in all spheres of human engagements. These are commercial, traditional and chieftaincy, socio-cultural, among other relations that are beneficial to all interacting communities. For instance, on market relations, the ancient Safarogbo market has been patronised by all her neighbouring communities. These are Itaitagbini, Adoloseimo I, II, III, Jeribeni, Ijejekubu, *etc.* (all in Ese-Odo LGA of Ondo State). Significantly, the Egbema-Ijo communities of Ofunama [Ofiniama] and Nikorogha wards in Ovia South West LGA of Edo State are not left out in commercial relations with the people. In this ancient market, the age-long *iyekojujudo* (trade by barter) is still very much in existence, with its resultant benefits. In a similar vein, the people of Safarogbo patronises the not too far Agadagba-Obon (market), which is by far the most

³⁵ Amiyenkunmo, B. A. 1986. A Short History of Safarogbo in Ovia Local Government Area of Bendel State..., pp.18-19.

populous market in the area with a good road network. Others which are of economic benefits to them are the Iju-osun and Akotogbo markets along Siluko River in Irele LGA of Ondo State.³⁶

Concisely, though the British colonial rule administratively separated Safarogbo from many of the Arogbo-Ijo communities, its' geographical contiguity with other settlements across the present-day Edo, Delta, and Ondo States, greatly created adequate rooms for mutual relationships. For example, commercial relations between Safarogbo and her neighbours have been of mutual benefits to all from time immemorial. Again, instances of inter-marriages with her neighbouring communities, are just too numerous to recount from the pre-colonial period to date. As a celebrated royal example *par excellence*, High Chief (Mrs) Ebimini Eperetun, nee Foroijoh, the first *Ibe Yinghin* (the first wife of the kingdom) of the immediate past Agadagba of Arogbo-Ijo Kingdom (1976-2007), *Pere* D.M.E. Eperetun, Aagah II (1946-2007), hails from Safarogbo community. Above all, while *Pere* Eperetun was from Mapala lineage of the Pereniyenmo Rule House, *Ibe Yinghin* Ebimini hails from Asun lineage of the Perebiyenmo Ruling House.³⁷

Conclusion

The study has examined important historical, political, and socio-cultural aspects of the Safarogbo community. The paper demonstrates that although Safarogbo was historically an integral part of the larger Arogbo-Ijo group, British colonial administrative arrangements separated the community from

³⁶ Oral interview held with Moses Okoro, 60 years, businessman, Akoriko Close, Gbeinbogbini, 14 June, 2022.

³⁷ Oral interview held with Rotimi Bowei, 50 years, Community Leader, Biagbini 1, Arogbo, 15 June, 2022.

other Arogbo-Ijo settlements for administrative convenience. Consequently, Safarogbo was placed under the defunct Iyekeovia District Council of Benin Division, now within Ovia South West Local Government Area of Edo State, while most Arogbo-Ijo communities were incorporated into the defunct Ese-Odo District Council of Okitipupa Division, presently located in Ese-Odo Local Government Area of Ondo State.

The study further reveals that this colonial balkanisation contributed significantly to the minority status of Safarogbo community in Edo State, with important political consequences. Their relatively small population weakened their bargaining capacity within the political structure of the state and contributed to perceptions of marginalisation, and neglect. This situation partly explains the community's limited access to influential political positions in Edo State. As indicated in the study, the highest political office attained by an indigene of Safarogbo in the history of Edo State politics has been that of Senior Special Assistant, with limited political influence and developmental impact on the community. Owing to its minority status, the community has also faced considerable challenges in competing politically with the dominant Edo ethnic majority. Consequently, infrastructural development and social amenities remain comparatively limited when contrasted with neighbouring Arogbo-Ijo communities in Ondo State.

Despite this administrative separation, Safarogbo has continued to maintain strong historical and cultural ties with other Arogbo-Ijo communities, particularly in social relations, traditional institutions, chieftaincy practices, and religious life. However, relations between the Safarogbo community and sections of the dominant Edo group have remained strained in certain respects. For instance, the Safarogbo traditional institution had not received official recognition within the Edo

State Council of *Obas*. Furthermore, claims by the *Oba* of Benin that the people of Safarogbo are customary tenants have been strongly contested by the community, which maintain that it is the indigenous owner of its ancestral riverine territory. The continued non-recognition of the Safarogbo traditional institution has therefore reinforced the community's historical and cultural attachment to the wider Arogbo-Ijo identity.