

## PROGRESSIVE UNIONS AND THE COMPETITION FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF IFON, ILOBU AND ERIN PROGRESSIVE UNIONS, 1940-1970

Abimbola O. ADESOJI

*Department of History, Obafemi Awolowo University*

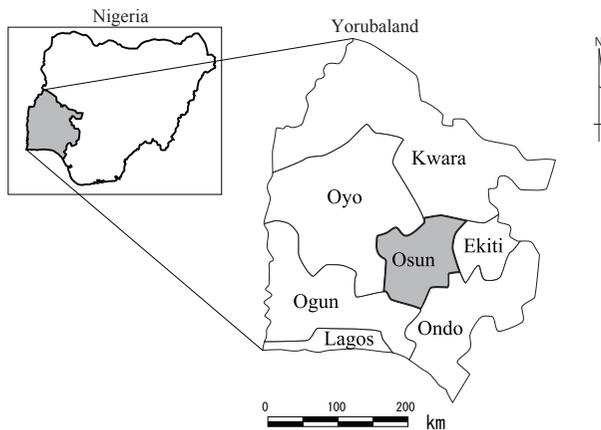
**ABSTRACT** Ifon, Ilobu and Erin are three closely located Yoruba communities that emerged at different times. The circumstances of their emergence and growth determined, to a very large extent, the pattern of their relationship, which was characterized by suspicion and mutual antagonism. This situation was particularly true of Ifon and Ilobu. The colonial government's management of the relationship among the communities reinforced the antagonism. It was into this hostile pattern that the Ifon, Ilobu and Erin Progressive Unions emerged in the 1940s. The desire of the unions to advance their respective communities resulted in the competition to draw the greatest benefits to each of those communities. This development sped up the rate of development in the three communities. It nonetheless reinforced the problem of mutual antagonism and accusations of marginalization and alienation by the aggrieved parties. This paper examines the emergence of the progressive unions in Ifon, Ilobu, and Erin, their activities vis-à-vis their objectives and how these have served to promote the competition for communal development in the three communities. The paper also considers the impact of their activities on the promotion of community development and concludes that healthy competition could bring about speedy development, while possibly generating some negative developments by the way such competition is engaged in.

**Key Words:** Progressive Union; Development; Community; Competition; Antagonism.

### INTRODUCTION

Progressive unions are known by different names in different communities all over Nigeria. These include Town Unions, Patriotic Unions, National Unions or Societies, Descendant Unions, Development Unions or Associations, Improvement Societies or Leagues and Welfare Leagues (Omoni, 1984: 6-7). Generally speaking, these unions, often with the denomination Egbe, conceived of "progress," "improvement" or "development" in terms of the provision of basic amenities required by the inhabitants of the society. These unions have been referred to, erroneously, as tribal unions (Coleman, 1965: 213; Hodgkin, 1956: 86). This terminology is misleading in the sense that the membership of the unions was usually restricted to people from the same village, town or at most sub-ethnic origin. Also, the stated objectives of these unions mostly did not cater to interests beyond the area or group indicated by the names.

Nnoli (1976) traced the emergence of kinship and communal unions particularly in the urban centers of Nigeria to the period between 1918 and 1928. Their emergence was occasioned by the need to seek security in the highly



**Fig. 1.** Map of Yorubaland in the States of Western Nigeria

individualistic and insecure urban centers. The unions therefore became avenues for ensuring mutual aid and leadership, providing for common welfare, security, credit, and, more importantly, offering a basis for links with the rural areas. Nnoli (1976) contended further that ethnic identity became salient and significant in Nigeria between 1928 and 1948, a period dominated by the years of Depression and the Second World War. Not only did the socio-economic competition become keener, relations among groups became more strained. This was because the Depression halted the expansion of the governmental sector in the economy, and government reduced its activities in 1931 after some attempts at deficit spending. This led to a severe retrenchment in both government and private enterprises. In addition, the wartime controls during the Second World War resulted in wage ceilings and price controls. In addition, between 1939 and 1942 the cost of living rose by 50 percent in the urban areas. This resulted in unrest, culminating in the general strike of 1945. More importantly competition for scarce socio-economic resources intensified. The resultant insecurity produced certain developments. First, many more people sought solace in communal solidarity. The effect was about a six-fold growth in the number of urban-based communal associations and a ten-fold increase in their membership between 1928 and 1949. It also resulted in the emergence of ethnic group-wide associations as individuals sought the support of all those who spoke the same language. This led to the emergence of all inclusive communal unions between 1928 and 1948. These included the Ibibio Welfare Union (1928), the Urhobo Brotherly Society (1931), the Ibo Union (1936) and the Yoruba Language Society (1942). Although organized in urban centres, they later set up branches in the rural areas (Nnoli, 1976).

In Yorubaland, the emergence and growth of these unions have been linked with certain factors. One such factor was the poor understanding by the British colonialists of the traditional institutions and practices of groups within Yoruba-

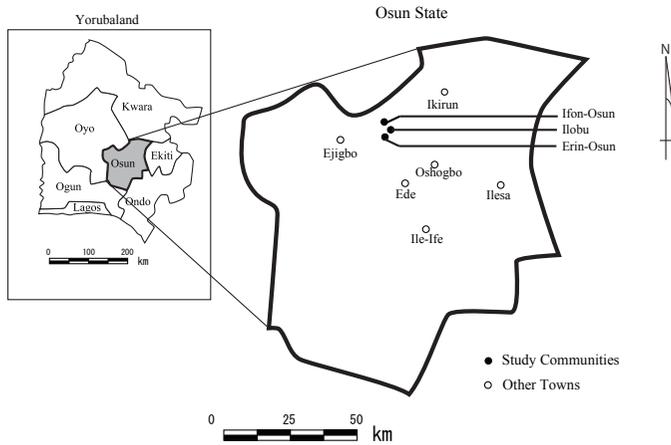


Fig. 2. Map of Osun State showing the Study Areas

land which resulted in wrong assumptions on the part of the government. One example was the belief that traditional rulers in pre-colonial Yorubaland wielded tremendous power which could be exercised at will. This led to the confusing distortion of the traditional political arrangement. In particular, the elevation of the traditional rulers above their advisory councils and their constitution into the Sole Native Authority exemplified in Oyo resulted in the flagrant abuse of power with its attendant consequences (Atanda, 1973: 193-198). Unlike what obtained before the advent of colonialism when traditional rulers were *primus inter pares* in their relationship with their council of chiefs, the colonial government conferred on the rulers the power to recommend the appointment, suspension and dismissal of chiefs and those who became members of the native courts. With the elevation of the Alaafin over the Oyomesi Council (the Supreme Council of State) for instance, the Oyomesi neither ruled with the Alaafin nor had the chance to act as a check on his power. Rather members of the Oyomesi had to curry the favor of the Alaafin in order to be able to get remunerative posts. Besides, the exclusion (or non-consultation) of the leaders of the indigenous population from decision-making processes, particularly as it affected their communities, created a strong feeling of distrust in the people (Atanda, 1970: 17-19; Omoni, 1984: 2-5). The resultant hostility degenerated into discontent and protests, which were channeled through these unions, among other pressure groups (Omoni, 1982). Not surprisingly, the activities of the unions led to the involvement of more people in a re-organized native authority system (Oyediran, 1973: 382-386).

The second development has to do with the creation of divisional councils as “federal councils” in the 1930s (Atanda, 1973: 187-189).<sup>(1)</sup> The involvement of these councils in development programs for their areas of jurisdiction facilitated the emergence of town or sub-ethnic unions and the intensification of their activities in two major ways. First, there was the burning desire on the

part of these unions to provide essential modern amenities considered necessary for better living in the towns and villages. They therefore joined hands with the councils to provide these amenities. On the other hand, some of the unions saw the traditional elite that dominated the councils as being conservative and not being fully committed to the socio-economic transformation of their communities. In the first place, most of the traditional elite were illiterates who had no clear idea of what modern development entails. In addition, they were more interested in preserving their entrenched positions and the benefits accruable therefrom. The traditional elite therefore saw the modern elite represented in the progressive unions as a threat to the preservation of the status quo. Oftentimes, conflicts between the traditional rulers and some of the progressive unions could be explained from this perspective. Consequently, the desire to facilitate the rapid socio-economic transformation of their communities spurred the progressive unions to regard themselves as watchdogs to monitor the activities of the traditional elite.

The Ifon, Ilobu, and Erin Progressive Unions were formed at different times between 1941 and 1947. Beyond the promotion of the welfare of members, these unions sought to accelerate the process of infrastructural development of their respective communities. The desire to advance the interest of their respective communities brought them into close competition with one another. This development unwittingly and indirectly reinforced the spirit of mutual antagonism that characterized the relationship among the communities before the emergence of these unions. This was particularly the situation between Ifon and Ilobu.

#### HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS, COMPETITION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The process by which local communities pursue development has attracted considerable interest in literature. This is not unconnected with the tremendous importance attached to bringing about development at community level, using diverse means. Modernization was central to colonialism and produced at the local level individual and group desires for what was termed advancement. Peel (1978) maintained that among the Yoruba, the thirst for "development" was reflected in the variety of terms employed to explain the concept, the most important of which was Olaju. Olaju literally means "to open the eye" but metaphorically means "enlightenment." It is a social state or process of increased knowledge and awareness which is a condition of greater effectiveness and prosperity. Other related terms include Ilosiwaju, Itesiwaju, Idagbasoke and Atunluse. Idagbasoke according to Peel (1978) has the sense of "rising up" or "growing" similar to the English concept of development as maturation.

Building on the contribution of Peel, Warren et al. (1996: 43-49) adopted two of the terms used by Peel in a list of Yoruba development concepts. These were "Ilosiwaju," defined as progress, and "Idagbasoke," defined as develop-

ment. Trager (2001: 147-148) however found that "Itesiwaju," meaning "to bend" or "inch forward," was a better term than "Ilosiwaju" which means "to move forward." Trager (2001: 147-148) also posited that development and progress were the same word in Yoruba, which meant to progress in every facet of life and to move toward attaining one's goal. Among the Ijesa, who were the focus of her studies, development has multiple meanings. For many it refers to concrete physical evidence of progress and improvement such as the construction of a town hall or palace, the building of a school as well as improvements in water supply or roads.

The various terms used to describe the concept of development, show clearly that the Yoruba people valued development and employed different means to bring it about particularly at the community level.

One major means of bringing about development at the community level was the formation of associations. As observed by Fadipe (1970), the tendency to form associations and corporations is very strong among the Yoruba. These associations are formed for the purpose of promoting and protecting common interests in the field of politics, economy, religion, recreation and enjoyment. Fadipe (1970) further observed that the involvement of the Yoruba people in organizations of all types were an important part of their culture. These numerous organizations and societies ranged from occupational, religious, and age groups to social clubs of all types. Hometown associations, arguably one of these organizations, became veritable means of mobilizing for development. Indeed, the attraction and promotion of development became the *raison d'être* for these associations. Yet there does not seem to be scholarly agreement on the origins, motives, and *raison d'être* of hometown associations which suggests that despite commonalities, hometown associations have peculiarities relating to their origins, interests, and compositions, and have contributed to the competition among them.

Barkan et al. (1991), Trager (1992) and Honey & Okafor (1998) saw hometown associations as constituting a significant source of local-level development activities. Indeed, they saw that these organizations constituted a significant, though overlooked, part of the civil society in contemporary Nigeria. Specifically, hometown associations were seen as indigenous institutions with a community base (Blunt & Warren, 1996). Indigenous institutions were defined as those that arose from endogenous rather than exogenous sources. Indigenous institutions, according to Blunt & Warren (1996), tended to be invisible to the outsider but were most inclined to have and to use local knowledge to respond quickly to changes, to handle conflict, and to create climates of opinion influencing behavior. Corroborating this, Honey & Okafor (1998: 11) stressed that hometown associations were "important institutional resources that are part of the indigenous knowledge system." Consequently, they bore eloquent testimony to the creativity, adaptability and responsiveness of indigenous knowledge systems. In the same vein, Trager (2001) stressed that hometown associations were clearly indigenous in the sense that they developed in Nigeria and that no one from outside came along to help or encourage their formation. While stressing

that they were not in any sense primordial, she contended, however, that they represented just one of the ways in which people utilize and act on their hometown connections. Another important means is the community-day celebration through which the Ijesas in particular (like other Yoruba groups) have drawn on traditional ideas in a creative way.

For Honey & Okafor (1998), hometown associations which play a central role in the process of building sustained and participatory development, were based on ties of kinship and ancestry, as well as products of immigration and urbanization, and therefore of contemporary vintage. Given that associational life was and remains an important part of Nigerian social structure, hometown associations have evolved into the most visible form of that associational life. Although they vary in many respects, these associations have a few common properties, a crucial one being that they have significance both at home and abroad. At home, the focus is on improvement, while the specifics of what is to be improved and who decides could be the subject of debate or prolonged deliberation. Abroad, the focus is dual, maintaining connections with home but also providing a supportive environment for people in a place where they are regarded as strangers (Honey & Okafor, 1998). By examining the wider relevance of these associations, the authors brought out clearly one major reason for the continued relevance of these associations. However, Honey & Okafor (1998) used the term hometown association only to refer to apex organizations that encompassed other smaller groups, whereas Trager (2001) used the terms hometown organization and hometown association to refer to all groups with a hometown or home region base.

For Olowu & Erero (1996) there was no distinction between indigenous and exotic institutions. Home organizations and other organizations, be it occupational or service, were all local organizations with important but merely differing roles. What mattered most to them was that local organizations were involved in development efforts and that their relevance or irrelevance depended on their history, circumstance and personalities in each area. By relevance or irrelevance, they meant whether or not these institutions had meaning for the local population. However, other scholars have made clear distinctions between indigenous and exotic institutions, beyond mere differences in roles, the most fundamental being their endogenous nature and their unwavering commitment to the issue of community development. The idea of lumping all local organizations together is obviously a major shortcoming of this contribution.

#### THE IJESA EXPERIENCE VIS-A-VIS IFON, ILOBU, AND ERIN EXPERIENCE

In her study of the Ijesa, a Yoruba sub-group, Trager (2001: 98-99; 103-105) found that the Egbe Atunluse Ile Ijesa (Ijesa Improvement Society) founded in 1922 covered and operated in the whole of Ijesaland. This association obviously sought to bring development to Ijesaland, but, in doing this, the focus was mainly on Ilesa, the political, economic and geographical center of the

region, and by far the largest settlement in terms of population and territory. Meanwhile, the inability of the Egbe Atunluse Ile Ijesa to extend developmental activities to other Ijesa communities, apart from portraying itself as largely an Ilesa-based organization, contributed to the emergence of similar associations in other Ijesa communities. This among other factors explains the declining membership and fortune of the Egbe and its eventual ineffectiveness. Although this development affected the perception of unity among the Ijesa, it nonetheless brought about “development” nearer to the hitherto “neglected communities.” Not only were new local government areas created for the Ijesa in the 1990s, some traditional heads who were originally Loja (chiefs of small Ijesa communities) were elevated to full Obaship status. In addition, the smaller communities that until then looked up to Ilesa for leadership began to look inward and raise funds for the development of their respective communities particularly for the construction of town halls, palaces, and community banks. Implicitly, healthy competition among hometown associations in Ijesaland promoted community development.

The development in Ijesaland is somewhat similar to what obtained in Ifon, Ilobu, and Erin. There are, however, basic differences. While the Ijesa, irrespective of their different communities, appear to be largely homogenous particularly in terms of their dialect and their relationship with other Yoruba sub-groups, the people of Ifon, Ilobu, and Erin appear otherwise. Although they speak the general Oyo dialect of the Yoruba, they traced their origins differently. In the contemporary period, however, the different Ijesa communities are also trying to trace their origins to different sources. This development, according to Peel (1983) may be connected with the desire for independence as well as the need to promote development in their respective communities. More fundamentally, the Ijesas initially belonged to an apex association, the Ijesa Improvement Society, and later formed other hometown associations to rival, albeit indirectly, the apex association. In contrast, this was not the situation in Ifon, Ilobu, and Erin which formed their progressive unions independently. These peculiarities make the study of their histories interesting. Fundamentally, these peculiarities particularly the *modus operandi* of the three hometown associations that emerged in the three communities derived from the manner of the emergence of the three communities. Thus, the hometown associations only built on what obtained in the area albeit in a more refined manner. It is these dynamics that this study seeks to probe.

## IFON, ILOBU, AND ERIN: FOUNDATION AND HISTORY

The three communities of Ifon, Ilobu, and Erin were founded at different times between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are conflicting claims regarding which of the communities was the first to have been founded. Available evidence, however, show that Ifon was the first to have been founded (Adesoji, 2003). Originally located north of Osun River, it is presently bounded

by Ogbomoso to the north, Ikirun to the east, Ede and Oshogbo to the south and Ejigbo to the east. It was mainly populated by migrants, who after leaving Ile-Ife, settled in different places and intermingled with different groups before arriving at Adikun, about 68 kilometres south-west of Oyo-Ile (Law, 1977: 36). The unfavorable conditions of the settlement, particularly the hegemonic struggle of Oyo, eventually forced the group to migrate to such places as Ifon-Eega, Ifon Ere, Ifon Baale and Ifon-Dile at different times between the fourteenth and the nineteenth centuries (Olatoye, 2000: 1-17). Ifon-Osun grew out of Ifon-Dile.

Ilobu emerged around the same time and in the same region from a nucleus populated by a group of Oyo and Nupe elephant hunters, who were attracted to the region by the prospect of hunting. Other migrant groups settled in the region at different times before the nineteenth century. These migrant groups were, however, not properly organized until the emergence, in the late eighteenth century, of Ayonu, a prince of Iregba and maternal grandson of Olufon Laojo, who succeeded in establishing a dynasty (Adesoji, 2003). The emergence of the Ayonu Dynasty, apart from ensuring the organization of different groups in the region, gave Ifon a kind of leverage over Ilobu, which was regarded originally as being part of the domain of the Olufon.<sup>(2)</sup> The Yoruba wars of the nineteenth century led to a large-scale movement of people into Ilobu which resulted in its expansion, such that by the late nineteenth century, the two communities had become closely located (Adesoji, 2003). Not surprisingly, the close location of these two communities as well as the peculiarity of their histories, among other factors, introduced mutual antagonism into their relationship.

Erin was the last major settlement to have emerged within the same area in the late nineteenth century. It was populated by migrants mostly from Erin-Ile, who left their original home due to insecurity occasioned by the Fulani rampages which made such places as Ofa, Ajase-Ipo, and Erin-Ile, among others, uninhabitable (Adesoji, 2003). There are conflicting claims as to whether the Olufon, the traditional ruler of Ifon, or Olobu, the traditional head of Ilobu, gave them the land they settled. It is clear, however, that by the early twentieth century, the community was already established. Erin was not involved in the struggle for supremacy in the region mainly because it was the last settlement to emerge in the region. It therefore occupies limited land. This perhaps explains why its inhabitants moved far beyond the community to establish cocoa plantations.

## BACKGROUND OF THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN IFON AND ILOBU

Two major issues characterized the struggle for supremacy between Ifon and Ilobu. These are the issues of ownership, control and usage of land, and the exercise of chieftaincy authority. These issues generated various forms of actions and reactions from the two communities. In particular, the problem of land ownership, control and usage generated many court cases beginning in 1924, when Captain W.A. Ross, the Resident of Oyo Province made a pronouncement

on the matter.<sup>(3)</sup> Interestingly, litigation over land between Ifon and Ilobu continues to the present. Similarly, the chieftaincy issue generated various forms of protests including petitions to the colonial government and the rejection of Obaship candidates several times.<sup>(4)</sup>

The struggle for supremacy between Ifon and Ilobu, no doubt worsened the relations between the two communities. In the first place, aggrieved or dissatisfied parties sought redress at different levels, which prolonged and compounded the problem. This manifested in the plethora of court cases between Ifon and Ilobu over land matters and the inability to fill the vacancy for the Olobu for more than three years. In the process, the attention of the two communities was diverted from meaningful efforts that could have brought development to the communities. Besides, rather than focusing on and promoting activities that could have benefited the communities, the colonial government was embroiled in the disputes between Ifon and Ilobu at different levels and at various times. The implication of this history is that the growth and development of the two communities were negatively affected and grossly retarded (Adesoji, 2005). This explains why the elite emerged in the 1940s and thereafter clamored for the provision of social amenities and facilities as provided in the neighboring communities such as Oshogbo and Ikirun. Furthermore, the rancor between the two communities put the colonial government in a dilemma regarding how to group them for administrative purpose, more so that the communities themselves did not want to be grouped together because of their differences (Western State of Nigeria, 1966). This was the scenario into which the progressive unions emerged.

## EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF PROGRESSIVE UNIONS

The Ifon, Ilobu, and Erin Progressive Unions emerged at different times between 1941 and 1947. Ifon was the first of the three communities where a progressive union emerged. The Ifon Progressive Union (IPU) was founded in 1941. It became known by 1942 when it sought and was granted recognition by the colonial government.<sup>(5)</sup> The union emerged with the following objectives: facilitation of the progress of the community, promotion of cooperation and unity among Ifon indigenes, protection of the interests of Ifon indigenes, encouragement of mutual understanding and cordial relationships between Ifon and her neighbours, settlement of misunderstandings among the chiefs and assisting the chiefs in the administration of the community.<sup>(6)</sup> There were fourteen founding members.

The Ilobu Progressive Union was formed between 1944 and 1946 at Ilobu with the following objectives: encouragement of the spirit of harmony and goodwill among the rulers and the different social classes in the community, promotion of cooperation with neighboring towns, facilitation of the progress and improvement of Ilobu through the provision of practical leadership, encouragement of the masses to be educationally conscious, and enlightenment of

farmers for improved and productive yield.<sup>(7)</sup> By 1949, the union applied for the colonial government's recognition.

The Erin Progressive Union (EPU) was the last union to emerge from among the three communities. It was formed by twenty-five men in 1947 with the following objectives: promotion of the spirit of cooperation and brotherliness among members, socially and politically safeguarding the interests of its members, amicable settlement of misunderstanding among members and/or the chiefs of the town, convening regular meetings to discuss all problems confronting the town, advising and helping the chiefs on matters affecting the progress of the town, fostering unity among the union and/or the chiefs, and working for the general education of the masses in order to prevent Erin from falling behind educationally.<sup>(8)</sup> The colonial government in 1947 recognized the union.<sup>(9)</sup>

It is clear from the above that the progressive unions in the three communities had one major goal, which was the socio-political development of their communities. The relationship of the unions with the colonial government was cordial. This was evident from the recognition sought by the unions and granted by the colonial government. In addition, the colonial government kept such amicable ties to the unions that the colonial officials were invited to some of the union meetings.

The unions also maintained cordial relationships with the traditional rulers of their communities. The case of Ifon was even spectacular as the Olufon Bamikesa recommended the Ifon Progressive Union to the colonial government. The case of Erin was, however, different as the Erin Progressive Union was not properly recognized until 1949 by the Elerin, the traditional ruler of Erin, due to some reservations he had about the union. The reservations of Elerin Oye-bode was due mostly to his suspicion about the activities of the union and its membership. In particular, the Elerin feared that the union activities could erode his influence and authority in the Erin community. It thus took the constant prodding of the colonial government before the Erin Progressive Union was recognized.<sup>(10)</sup>

## REORGANIZATION AND CHANGE

Available evidence shows that the progressive unions in the three communities underwent some periods of reorganization and transformation, which eventually placed them in better positions to contribute meaningfully to the progress of their communities. The reorganization was the outcome of the unions' responses to the challenges they faced. In particular, the inability to achieve set objectives due to loose membership composition and structure necessitated the need for properly defined membership, goals, and objectives, as well as structure. This explains why the Ifon Progressive Union became known as Egbe Omo Ibile Ifon, Ifon Literate Society and, later, Ifon Progressive Union at different times between its formation and 1960. It is now known as Ifon Progressive Association. Similarly, the Ilobu Progressive Union became known as Ilobu

Parapo and Ilobu Improvement League at different times. It is now known as Ilobu Descendant Union. In the same vein, the Erin Progressive Union was known as Egbe Atunluse Erin at a time in its history. In fact, the Erin Community Development Committee was founded in 1967 to take over from the disbanded Executive Committee of Egbe Atunluse Erin, which was accused of mismanaging the funds of the Union.<sup>(11)</sup>

It appears therefore that the need to resuscitate the dying or slumbering unions and revitalize them for better performance brought about this change of names at different times. Further, the change in the names of the unions between the period of formation and 1960 appeared to reflect phases in the unions' existence. For instance, Ilobu Parapo connotes the existence of an umbrella association with wider membership, while the Ilobu Improvement League and Egbe Atunluse Erin expressed the actual mission of the unions, which was the improvement of their communities. In the same vein, the Ifon Literate Society is a reflection of the predominance of the educated people in the union. The objectives of these unions, however, remained relatively similar, with membership changing in composition depending on the period of their rejuvenation. However, none of the unions emerged at different times in each community as rival unions, but rather emerged in succession.

## MEMBERSHIP

Generally, the membership of the unions in the early period of their emergence was not differentiated. Consequently, different categories of people belonged to the unions in the three communities. Membership therefore ranged from artisans, traders, religious leaders to community and opinion leaders as well as the educated elite. However, the period toward the attainment of self-rule and thereafter was characterized by the increased involvement of the educated elite in the affairs of the unions. This may be connected to the anticipation of the demands as well as the benefits of self-rule. The educated elite would probably have considered themselves worthy for both appointive and elective positions by virtue of their knowledge and exposure. This mostly explains the use of the unions by the elite as a launching pad for their involvement in party politics. The involvement of the educated elite in the affairs of the unions was no doubt significant, because the unions became more refined and focused in their approaches.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH TRADITIONAL RULERS: IFE DISTRICT AND IFON, ILOBU, AND ERIN COMPARED

Meanwhile, the need to promote the welfare of members and facilitate the development of their respective communities were central to the emergence of the town unions in Ife District as it was in Ifon, Erin and Ilobu. Besides, the

town unions in Ife District like Ifon Erin and Ilobu were initially formed by a small nucleus of people but the membership later expanded and underwent a period of transformation which eventually led to their domination by the literate members.

The emergence of such unions as Ipetumodu Progressive Union, Modakeke Progressive Union and Origbo Youth League, all in Ife District were propelled by their communities' motivation for autonomy. In particular, the dominant position of Ile-Ife in the district aroused the opposition of other groups including the Origbo and Modakeke communities. The Origbo communities, comprising Ipetumodu, Yakoooyo, Moro, Asipa, Akinlalu and Edunabon, acknowledged the overlordship of the Ooni of Ife, the traditional ruler of Ile-Ife and the most prominent ruler in the district. Nevertheless, they saw themselves as a distinct group from the Ifes. They therefore expected some measure of autonomy in the administration of their towns and villages (Omoni, 1984: 17-23). Not surprisingly, the emergence of these unions provided a platform for the articulation of their position. On the other hand, the relationship of the Modakeke Community with the Ifes had always been hostile. This hostility peaked in 1851 and 1882 (Olaniyan, 1992,) leaving a legacy of communal rivalry which still exists today. This difficult period made the youths, the educated elite, and the wealthy traders to work towards creating a forum through which their plight could be addressed and effectively tackled. The end result was the emergence of the Modakeke Progressive Union.

However, unlike what obtained in Ifon, Ilobu, and Erin, the relationship of the Ife unions with the traditional rulers in Ile-Ife was very hostile. The unions challenged the Sole Native Authority system, a creation of the British colonialist government. This system incorporated the Ooni, as well as the other traditional rulers in Yorubaland, and had turned the lesser chiefs into mere sycophants. The Egbe Omo Ibile Ife in particular, also demanded accountability in the running of the Ife Native Authority. The refusal of the Ooni to allow for openness generated a crisis beginning March 1949. Although the Ooni used his influence and power to suppress the union, the issues raised by the union, as well as other grievances from other unions and groups, were resolved by the 1952 Local Government Reforms undertaken by the Western Regional Government. Specifically, the reforms reduced considerably the powers of the traditional rulers, including those of the Ooni, and led to the replacement of Native Authorities by local councils with elected representatives (Akinrinade & Akinjogbin, 1992).

## INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Evidently, the Progressive Unions in the three communities made efforts to contribute to the socio-political development of their respective communities. In the first place, they did not tolerate the lack of amenities and poor state of the limited infrastructure. Their claim was that their communities should enjoy basic

amenities as do other communities in Osun Division, particularly Ikirun and Oshogbo. They clamored for the establishment of a town council to represent the interests of Ilobu, Ifon, Erin, and Ilie.<sup>(12)</sup> They succeeded in creating awareness about their communities with a view to drawing the attention of the colonial government to it. Specifically, the unions made noticeable contributions to the development of their communities. For example, Egbe Atunluse Erin undertook the construction of the Erin-Ede road.<sup>(13)</sup> In the same vein, the Ilobu Post Office and Ilobu Community Center were constructed by the community under the direction of the Ilobu Progressive Union.<sup>(14)</sup> Similarly, a postal agency was built through the activities of the Ifon Progressive Union in Ifon.<sup>(15)</sup>

Beyond influencing the provision of social amenities and the maintenance of infrastructure, the activities of the unions in the three communities of Ifon, Ilobu and Erin had the cumulative effect of promoting competition among the communities. Consequently, in the process of trying to outpace one another, the unions continued from where the traditional elite of these communities left off. There appears to be no adequate record on the contributions of the unions to the tradition of mutual antagonism that characterized the relationship among the three communities. This was due to the poor record keeping habit of the unions as well as the fact that the founding fathers of the unions were no longer alive. This notwithstanding, it appears that the emergence of the union in one community indirectly influenced the formation of similar unions in other communities. This was the trend in the three communities beginning with the emergence of Ifon Progressive Union. In addition, one major objective of almost all the unions was the promotion of cooperation and cordial relationships with neighboring communities. It is thus clear that the unions were not formed to engage in conflicts with neighboring communities. At the same time, it appears that the demand for amenities and provision of infrastructure by one of the unions often resulted in similar demands or the struggle to obtain such amenities or infrastructure by others. Thus, the unions competed for the attention and support of the colonial government.

#### SUPREMACY OF ILOBU PROGRESSIVE UNION: PRE-DISPOSING FACTORS AND EFFECTS

The Ilobu Progressive Union appeared to be the most assertive of the three unions. The influence of its members outside Ilobu as well as their concern for Ilobu community could have contributed to the nature of the union. The Ibadan branch of the union was particularly relevant in this regard. For instance, it severely criticized the councilors representing Ilobu on the Oshogbo District Council for not showing much interest in the development of Ilobu. It therefore called for the election of active and vibrant representatives during elections. More importantly, it demanded better salaries for the Olobu and his chiefs.<sup>(16)</sup> Although there was no record to show that this request was granted, it appears that the Olobu had an edge

**Table 1.** Population Figures of Ifon, Ilobu, and Erin on the Basis of 1935-1936 Tax Nominal Rolls

Community	Adult Males	Estimated Total Population
Ifon	1,101	3,964
Ilobu	2,161	7,779
Erin	1,167	4,201

Source: Intelligence Report on the Oshogbo District of Ibadan Division compiled by I.F.W. Schofield (1936).

over both the Olufon and Elerin in terms of salary. The Olobu's higher salary may be also mostly due to the large population of Ilobu, which could have contributed to the amount raised as tax in the community (see Table 1). As with many Nigerian communities during the colonial era, the amount raised as tax was a strong determinant of the salaries paid to traditional rulers.

In addition, the reopening of the boundary dispute against Ifon by Ilobu in 1953, after about thirty years of the acceptance of the Ross boundary, can be linked to the activities of the Ilobu Progressive Union, which became more vocal and more committed to the cause of Ilobu development in the 1950s. Ilobu had in 1924 accepted "the Ross Boundary," an arrangement that demarcated the boundary between Ifon and Ilobu. This was, however, jettisoned by Ilobu in 1953 on the grounds that the arrangement was purely administrative, and not legally binding.<sup>(17)</sup> The ferocity with which Ilobu pursued the boundary issue from 1953 even to the present, would have been as a result of the emergence of a zealous group within the Ilobu Progressive Union totally committed to the cause of Ilobu development.

The cases of Ifon and Erin appeared different. Beyond low population, there were other factors which led to their neglect by the colonial government. These included the strong attachment of Ifon and Erin to traditions and their slow and poor response to colonial policies and programs. More importantly, the progressive unions in these communities were not strong outside their traditional domains. Also, they appeared to exist in the shadow of their traditional rulers. They could thus be seen as appendages of the traditional elite who, because of their level of education and awareness, were grossly limited in terms of ideas and the influence they could wield. This could have accounted for why Ilobu became central to colonial policies, structure and dispersion to other communities, including Ifon, despite the traditional importance of Ifon among the three communities.<sup>(18)</sup> The case of Erin was different, but the branch of its progressive union that was formed at Ibadan was more of a trading association, as seen in its name, "Erin Descendant Trading Association." Though it raised issues such as the re-establishment of the Native Court at Erin, following a period of suspension, it appears that its economic motive was paramount.<sup>(19)</sup> The implication was that both the Ifon and Erin Progressive Unions were not as vibrant as the Ilobu Progressive Union. Beyond projecting Ilobu above the other two communities, the level of development witnessed in Ilobu could obviously not be

divorced from the vibrancy of its progressive union.

The elite in the progressive unions were initially from different backgrounds, but later were dominated by the educated class. They contributed inadvertently to the competition among the three communities, and, in the process, provided platforms which fostered mutual antagonism that had started before their emergence. They rivaled one another in the provisioning of infrastructure, and engaged in healthy competition in that they succeeded in contributing to the development of their respective communities in the process of trying to outpace one another. More importantly, in their desire to draw the attention of the colonial government to their respective communities, they made certain demands which either infuriated others or made them oppose such demands outright. In a way, therefore, their activities encouraged the festering of mutual antagonism which predated their emergence.

#### ELITES IN THE PROGRESSIVE UNIONS AND PARTY POLITICS

Meanwhile, with the emergence of political parties towards the period of attainment of self-rule in Nigeria, the elite in the three communities participated actively in political activities. Obviously, their desire for active participation in politics was influenced by the need to provide adequate and credible representations for their communities with a view to further projecting and defending their communities' causes. Two political parties, namely the Action Group (AG) and the National Council for Nigerian Citizens, formerly National Council for Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC), had followings in the three communities. The AG however had a greater following than the NCNC. This was evident by the fact that all the seats contested in the three communities were won by the AG.<sup>(20)</sup> One major reason for this development was the perception of the political parties by members of the three communities. The AG was seen and accepted as the party of the Yoruba because its leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, was a recognized Yoruba leader. The NCNC on the other hand was seen as the party of the Igbo and therefore did not enjoy much acceptance. This development is corroborated by the assertion of Nnoli (1976: 18-19) that ethnic group identity coincided with political party identification. Consequently the AG had large followings in the three communities, while the NCNC was a minority party. Representatives were therefore elected on the platform of the AG first to the Oshogbo District Council to which the three communities initially belonged, and later to the Irepodun District Council, to which the three communities were later grouped. It is thus clear that participation in partisan politics did not cause any division among the three communities. Rather, the elite used it to draw development to their respective communities and more importantly to advance their personal and career interests. The division of communities along party lines, which would have fueled further, mutual antagonism among the three communities, was non-existent. This perhaps explains why the relationship among the three communities until the end of the First Republic in

Nigeria was manageable, and did not degenerate into open or armed conflict.

However, the Ilobu elite exploited the advantage of its relatively large population to dominate both Ifon and Erin (see Table 1). Starting with the Oshogbo District Council, Ilobu was allocated seven wards whereas Ifon and Erin were allocated four and three wards, respectively (Western Region Government, 1960). In essence, Ilobu had the total number wards of both Ifon and Erin wards combined. The same arrangement took place with the creation of Irepodun District Council in 1960. The dominance of Ilobu was further strengthened particularly in terms of producing the chairman of the Council or the highest number of councilors. This also resulted in uneven development as the provision of amenities and other benefits were concentrated in Ilobu. The remaining two communities therefore felt alienated. This explains why as far back as 1976, Ifon clamored for a separate local government outside Irepodun Local Government as a way of securing its freedom from Ilobu domination.<sup>(21)</sup> This was not to be until 1996 when Orolu Local Government was carved out of the old Irepodun Local Government for Ifon community (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1996). The demand for separate local government is also responsible for the recent agitation for the creation of Ajoda Local Government by the Erin community.<sup>(22)</sup>

It could thus be seen that the participation of the three communities in partisan politics did not result in open conflict. But the efforts by the modern elite in Ilobu to dominate the political process in order to derive more benefits, did not promote healthy inter-community relations. Rather, it served to drive a wedge between communities, and resulted in the alienation of both Ifon and Erin. As such, the period during which the three communities were together was characterized by suspicion and unhealthy rivalry, resulting in the strong desire and struggle for freedom particularly by the Ifon and Erin communities.

Meanwhile, the ascendancy of Ilobu to prominence, assisted by its elite in the progressive unions, could be traced to its efforts to throw off the yoke of Ifon control particularly in the 1930s. This was because Ifon had exploited the advantage of superior historical tradition, particularly the Ayonu dynastic tradition, to dominate Ilobu, evident in the appointment of some Olobu by successive Olufon. Then, in March 1940, Ilobu chiefs rejected further involvement of Olufon in the appointment of Olobu.<sup>(23)</sup> The Olobu vacancy was not filled for more than three years until Sanusi Araoye eventually emerged, without any input from the Olufon.<sup>(24)</sup>

The collapse of Nigeria's First Republic did not put an end to the activities of the modern elite, as they continued to advance the interest of their communities. Community-based secondary schools were established, beginning with Ilobu Secondary Commercial Grammar School in 1972, that served the three communities (Western State of Nigeria, 1972). In 1974 the Ifon/Erin Community High School was established mainly to serve both Ifon and Erin communities (Western State of Nigeria, 1974). It is located in Ifon-Osun. The circle was completed in 1978 when Erin Community High School was founded to serve the Erin community (Oyo State of Nigeria, 1978). The efforts at establishing

separate schools in different communities were not borne out of crisis but out of a genuine desire for the growth and development of their respective communities. Moreover, the communities tried to outpace one another in terms of the organization of the schools and influencing the posting of qualified and experienced teachers to the schools.<sup>(25)</sup> It would appear therefore that the precedence set by the activities of the elite in the progressive unions particularly in the 1950s became a reference point in the allocation of socio-economic and political benefits in the period before and after the attainment of political independence in Nigeria.

## IMPACTS OF THE UNION ACTIVITIES ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The impact of the progressive unions' activities on the development of the three communities could be broadly divided into positive and negative impacts.

### POSITIVE IMPACT OF COMPETITION

The unwillingness to encourage joint ownership and management of facilities, where applicable, occasioned by genuine desire for development of their respective communities, resulted in the demand for the provision of separate facilities by communities that did not have them. This approach no doubt quickened the pace of development in the three communities. This was because in the absence of any worthwhile commitment by the colonial government to the provision of infrastructure or amenities, the communities took their destinies in their own hands and vigorously pursued the task of developing their respective communities. This explains why most of the infrastructure and facilities available in the communities for a very long time, such as roads, schools, community centre and postal agencies, were provided through communal efforts. The relative smallness of these communities, the leadership and mobilizing ability of the unions, as well as willingness of the people in the communities, may have made the feats recorded possible. It is possible that each of the three communities would have moved at its own pace in the absence of any serious competition to outpace one another. It is nevertheless plausible to argue that healthy competition, most of the time, resulted in a quickened pace of development.

Meanwhile, in the process of trying to draw the greatest benefits to their respective communities, the Ilobu Progressive Union was the most assertive. This perhaps gave Ilobu an edge over Ifon and Erin. Ilobu therefore became a center from where development spread to the other communities. More importantly, Ilobu exercised dominance in politics. Not surprisingly, the precedence set in the 1950s became a reference point in the allocation of socio-economic and political benefits for a long time thereafter. This explains why Ilobu dominated the other two communities until a separate local government was carved out for Ifon. It also explains why Erin is agitating for a separate local govern-

ment. Ilobu no doubt used this superior position to advance its interest.

### GROWING ANTAGONISM, ANIMOSITY AND MARGINALIZATION

However, the competition spearheaded by the progressive unions from the 1940s helped to reinforce the spirit of antagonism that characterized the past relationship among the communities. This is particularly true of Ifon and Ilobu since about 1900 when Ilobu gained a position of eminence, a situation which Ifon detested. Efforts made by the colonial government to manage Ifon-Ilobu relations only worsened it. The feeling of animosity was therefore still very strong at the time the progressive unions emerged. The modus operandi of the unions, while not directly supporting or promoting animosity, indirectly fueled it, as the unions struggled and lobbied to draw the greatest benefits to their respective communities. The disparity in the level of development of the three communities generated envy and reinforced the spirit of competition. This explains why for a very long time, the problems between the two communities persisted. Not even the placement of the two communities in separate local governments could solve the problem permanently. The boundary dispute between the two communities is still pending while the issue of seniority between the Olufon and Olobu is being resolved. In particular, the Olufon was recently made one of the six Vice-Chairmen in the reconstituted Osun State Council of Obas and Chiefs. This development confirms the supremacy of Olufon over Olobu.

Furthermore, the activities of the Ilobu Progressive Union prepared the ground for the marginalization and the consequent alienation of both Ifon and Erin. Ilobu's advancement program, pushed with such zeal by its members, resulted in a series of "firsts", at the expense of Ifon and Erin, and as such assured the dominance of Ilobu, a position she enjoyed for a very long time. It was this dominance that created the feeling of marginalization in both Ifon and Erin. The consequence was the demand for separate identities by the two communities.

### CONCLUSION

Progressive unions, known by various names in different Nigerian societies, emerged at different times to contribute to the socio-economic and political transformation of their respective communities. In Yorubaland, in particular, the need to enhance the provision of infrastructure and social amenities was a major factor in their emergence. This was the case with Ifon, Ilobu and Erin Progressive Unions.

The activities of the unions promoted the spirit of competition among the communities for the development of their respective areas. This involved borrowing developmental ideas across community lines. It also involved seeking

to advance their respective community interests. At the same time, the rivalry among the three communities before the emergence of the unions was reinforced, where the allocation of benefits to the communities was the reference point. It would seem that the creation of separate local governments for the communities brought the respite prevailing presently. While healthy competition could speed up the rate of development, the *modus operandi* of the unions at the same time generated negative developments with grave consequences.

## NOTES

- (1) National Archives, Ibadan (NAI) CSO 26/2 12723, vol. II, Annual Report on Oyo Province (1934) 5-6.
- (2) Oyo Prof 1/2813/113-116 vol. I, Report of the Oyerinde Committee into the Ilobu Chieftaincy, 26 December 1941.
- (3) Oyo Prof 1/1 1695, Letter from District Officer, Oshogbo to the Resident, Oyo Province, 25 May 1924.
- (4) For a full discussion on Chieftaincy problems between Ifon and Ilobu see Abimbola Adesoji, "Colonialism and Inter-Community Relations: The Ifon-Ilobu Example" *History in Africa* 32 (2005), 1-19.
- (5) Osun Div. 1/1 676/37 Letter from Olufon Bamikesa to the Assistant District Officer, Ibadan Northern District on the formation of Ifon Progressive Union, 4 December 1942.
- (6) Osun Div. 1/1 676/39, Letter from Olufon Bamikesa to the Assistant District Officer on the formation of Ifon Progressive Union, 13 January 1943.
- (7) Osun Div. 1/1 1138/1, Letter from General Secretary, Ilobu Progressive Union to the Assistant District Officer, Oshogbo, 1 July 1949.
- (8) Osun Div. 1/1 979/1, Letter from Erin Progressive Union to Assistant District Officer, Ibadan Northern District, Oshogbo on the formation of Erin Progressive Union, 14 April 1947.
- (9) Osun Div. 1/1 979/4, Letter from Assistant District Officer, Ibadan Northern District to Messrs. David Olaniyan and Others, Erin Progressive Union, 23 April 1947.
- (10) Osun Div. 1/1 979/14, Letter from Assistant District Officer, Ibadan Northern District to Messrs. Thomas Oyelade and Matthew Abioye, Atunluse Progressive Union Erin, 25 May 1949.
- (11) Osun Div. 1/1 676/7-9, Letter from J Afolabi and others for and on behalf of Egbe Omo Ibile Ifon to the Assistant District Officer Oshogbo, 21 May 1948; Osun Div. 1/1 676/11, Letter from Ifon Literate Society to the Assistant District Officer Oshogbo, 6 July 1948; Oral Interview with Alhaji Jamiu Adeniyi Isola Adepoju (65) Akeyo House, Akeyo Compound, Ilobu, 10 May 2002; Oral Interview with Chief M.O. Anwo (70+) Oshogbo Road, Ilobu, 10 May 2002; Osun Div. 1/1 979/13, Letter from Atunluse Progressive Union, Erin to the Assistant District Officer Oshogbo, 18 May 1949; Oral Interview with Alhaji Sulaimon Adegboye (67) Agiri-Emu Compound, Erin-Osun, 4 August 2002.
- (12) Osun Div. 1/1 1138/17, Letter from J.S. Efunkunle Esq., Assistant Secretary General, Ilobu Progressive Union, Ibadan to the District Officer, Osun Division, Oshogbo, 17 January 1955; Osun Div. 1/1 1138/18-19, Letter from J.S. Ola Efunkunle Esq. to His Highness, Sanusi Araoye, the Olobu of Ilobu, 17 January 1955.
- (13) Osun Div. 1/1 979/13, Letter from Atunluse Progressive Union Erin to Assistant Dis-

- trict Officer, Oshogbo, 18 May 1949.
- (14) Oral Interview with Chief M.O.Anwo (70+) Founding President, Ilobu Descendant Union, Oshogbo Road, Ilobu, 10 May 2002.
  - (15) Oral Interview with Mr. Layi Olaniyi (47) National Secretary, Ifon Progressive Association, Plot 2, Block 10, Aladanla Layout, Ile-Ife, 7 October 2002.
  - (16) See note 12.
  - (17) Iba Prof. 1/1 770, Proceedings of the Ikirun Native Court on Ifon-Ilobu Boundary Dispute, 22 February 1955.
  - (18) Oyo Prof. 149 vol. II, Memorandum from the Assistant District Officer to the Senior Resident Oyo Province, 1 March 1932.
  - (19) Osun Div. 1/1 979/17, Letter from Secretary, Erin Descendant Trading Association, Ibadan Branch to the District Officer, Oshogbo, 4 May 1950.
  - (20) Oral Interview with Alhaji Sulaimon Adegboye (67) Agiri-Emu Compound, Erin-Osun, 4 August 2002; Interestingly, Alhaji Adegboye also participated in the election as a councillorship candidate on the platform of the NCNC.
  - (21) Oral Interview with His Highness, Oba Ilufoye Olatoye Orisatoyinbo II, the Olufon of Ifon-Osun (56) Olufon's Palace, 5 July 2002.
  - (22) Oral Interview with His Highness, Oba Yusuf Omoloye Oyagbodun II, Elerin of Erin-Osun (52) Elerin's Palace, Erin-Osun, 15 May 2002.
  - (23) See note 2
  - (24) Oyo Prof. 1/2813/206-207 vol. II, Letter from the Acting Secretary, Western Provinces to the Senior Resident, Oyo Province on the Ilobu chieftaincy, 16 June 1943.
  - (25) Oral Interview with Alhaji Jamiu Adeniyi Isola Adepoju (65) Akeyo House, Akeyo Compound, Ilobu, 10 May 2002.

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Author's Name and Address: Abimbola O. Adesoji, *Department of History, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, NIGERIA.*

Email: [aadesoji@oauife.edu.ng](mailto:aadesoji@oauife.edu.ng), [aadesoji2@yahoo.com](mailto:aadesoji2@yahoo.com)