

ISOKO PEOPLE OF THE NIGER DELTA:

YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

By

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**Paper Prepared for the
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Geography of the Isoko People

Geographically located in the Southeastern part of Delta State, Nigeria, Isokoland is made up of two local governments; Isoko North with Ozoro as headquarters and Isoko South having Oleh as its headquarters. Isokoland is bounded to the north by Kwale, to the south by the Ijaws, and to the east by Ndokwa/Ndosimil; and to the west by the Urhobos. There are a total of 17 clans in Isokoland namely 1. Aviara, 2. Ellu, 3. Emede, 4. Emevor, 5. Enwe/Okpolo, 6. Erowa/Umeh, 7. Igbide, 8. Irri, 9. Iyede, 10. Ofagbe, 11. Oleh, 12. Olomoro, 13. Okpe, 14. Owhe, 15. Oyede, 16. Ozoro, and 17. Uzere. Isokoland is considered one of the most densely populated areas in Nigeria; 800 people per square kilometer compared to 320 for Delta and 208 for Nigeria. Current estimated residual population is 950,000 with another 600,000 in the diaspora within and outside Nigeria. It is also believed that over 350,000 Isoko permanently reside in Ndokwa East local government of Delta State and Sagbama local government in Bayelsa State respectively. This will mean that there are approximately two million (2 m) Isoko people in the world. They are a peace loving and very honest people with limited records of conflicts between them and their neighbors.

The total area occupied in the Central Niger Delta is estimated to be 1,2000 square kilometers. This is the equivalent of the geographical area covered by Yaba and Surulere combined, in Lagos State. Climatologically, the Isokoland is located in the tropical rain forest area of the Niger Delta, much of which has been degraded as a result of deforestation activities over many years including crude oil exploitation. And like other inhabitants of the Niger Delta, they all experience the rainy and dry seasons of the tropics living just five degrees north of the equator. The rainy season starts in May and ends in October while the dry season starts in mid November and ends in April. A short dry spell occurs in August and is referred to as "August Break." These seasons may now be affected by climate change as the rains often come late and fall harder than usual. It should be noted that in 2012, the occurrence of the 50-year flood reminded us of these possibilities along with other suspected human causes in the upper Niger and Benue rivers.

Historical Origins Including Migrations.

As reported in the 2014 IANA Convention under “The Isoko Nation” and based on oral history, and also reported in Professor Ikime’s history book, there were four major pathways of migration which resulted in today’s Isokoland. These pathways appear to have started around 1490 AD ending about the late 1700 AD as the early colonialists invaded the Benin Empire and other smaller kingdoms coupled with maltreatments and internal wars. These four pathways include: a) Eweri the founder of the Emedes migrating from Benin and arriving around 1490; b) Erowa, Uzere and Okpe also migrating from Benin and arriving around the early to mid 1600s; c) Ancestors of Iyede left Benin and arrived between 1650 and 1700, while about the same time or shortly thereafter, Ozue is said to have led another group of migrants from Benin to present day Aviara; d) Meanwhile, in the early 1700s the last group migrated from what is today Eastern Nigeria across the River Niger to constitute Igbide, Enwhe-Okpolo and Umeh. And as we know from history and even today, human migration is a dynamic process. So while these four major pathways led to what is now Isokoland. Additional migrations from other areas may have also occurred. For example intra migrations may have occurred in later years to form other communities such as Irri coming from Uzere, Araya from Aviara, Ofagbe and Ozoro from Okpe, Emevor, Owhe and Iyede-Ameh from Iyede, Owhelogbo and Ellu from Owhe, Aradhe and Ovrode from Ellu even though Ovrodians dispute this migration route for the Ovrode people. It should be noted that in this dispensation I have purposefully left out the interrelationships of other tribes like the Urhobos, Ijaws, Itsekiris and Nodosimili/Abohs with our Isoko ancestors and present day descendants with regards to inter ethnic marriages. Hence one could conclude that most Isokos trace their origins back to Benin.

Social Cultural including language, marriage and religious activities

The language spoken by the Isoko people is Isoko. Like many minority languages, Isoko faces a future of uncertainty and may be threatened of going into extinction. However, the Isoko Development Union (IDU) has initiated efforts for its restoration (see section on challenges and opportunities). The Isokos observe several sociocultural activities and norms. For example, the typical Isoko marriage is undertaken in three steps: firstly the groom along with his own family members (5-10) visits the family of the bride for introductions and declaration of his intentions. Drinks and kola nuts are exchanged with money to support these. During the second visit, the groom presents gifts to the girl’s father, who then summon his daughter to ask if she knows the man and would want to marry him. Upon her agreement to marry him, the gifts will then be accepted. Following this, a list of required items is given to the man for purchasing or paying the equivalent in cash. Customarily, the future father-in-law introduces the man to about 5-10 members of his family and another 3-5 family members of the future mother-in-law. It is required of the groom to visit these family members one after the other and fulfill every request demanded of him. During the third visit, a date for the bride price is fixed. It is on this day that both the bride and groom’s families will together agree on the bride price after negotiation. A traditional wedding date is set and is greeted with celebration leading up to when groom and bride become husband and wife.

Religiously, most Isokos have become Christians even though traditional worship still thrives across the land. Oghene is the word for God in Isoko. Indeed in some Christian worship particularly in the Catholic denomination the influence of Isoko traditions can be visibly observed. The Isoko people believe that death is not the end of an individual and his relationship with family and loved ones. It is simply a transformation from a physical life form to a spiritual one. This is the basis of ancestral worship that the course of life is cyclical rather than linear.

The Isokos observe a number of festivals annually or biannually. Among these are Owise-Owhe festival in Owhe, Eni festival in Uzere kingdom, Abame festival in Igvide, the Ogrri festival in Okpolo-Enwhe, Urie Independence Fishing festival of Emevor, the Idje Fire festival of Ozoro and Emevor respectively, Omode festival of Irri, to name a few. Thus each of the 17 clans celebrates one or two festivals annually. It is interesting to note that the Owise-Owhe festival has been researched and documented in a Ph.D. dissertation recently awarded by the Department of Art History, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, Wales. Thus the sociocultural activities of Isokoland are gaining worldwide audience.

Education

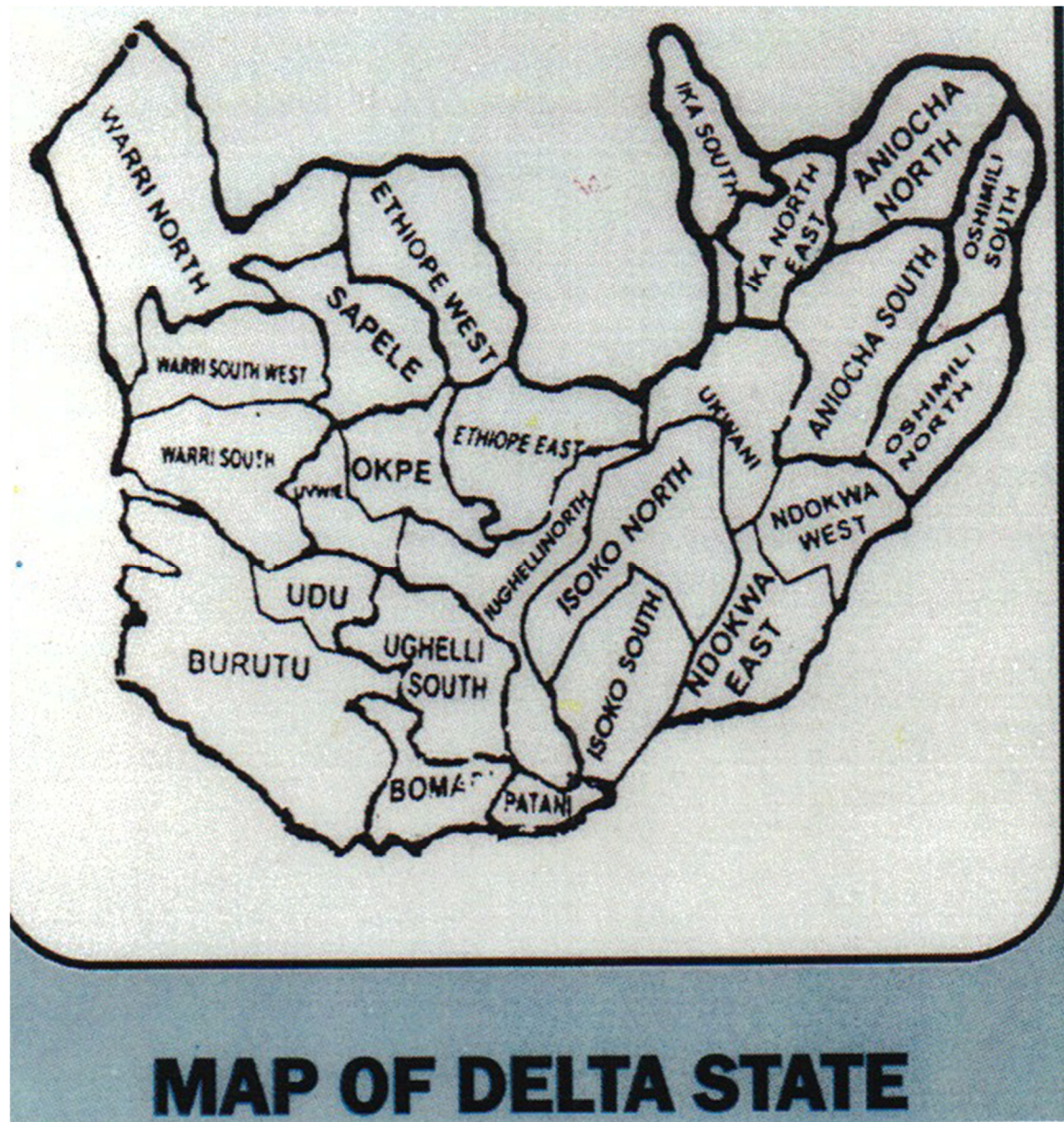
The Isokos have always recognized the value of education as this was seen as a way to make progress. In the early years emphasis was placed on the training of teachers that eventually resulted in a glut of such teachers in Isoko communities. As opportunities and diasporan migration increased, educational diversity resulted and today, Isokos can be found in all professions from law to medicine, from engineering to accounting, from business to the academic arena as professors. Secondary and post-secondary educational institutions can be found throughout Isokoland. These include Notre Dame College, Ozoro; James Welch Grammar School, Emevor; Saint Joseph Teachers College, Ozoro; Saint Michael's College, Oleh; Anglican Grammar School, Ozoro; Ofagbe Technical College, Ofagbe, among others. The Delta State Polytechnic, Ozoro and the Delta State University Campus in Oleh constitute the main post secondary institutions.

Political Activities

For many years, the Urhobos and Isokos were considered as one people with similar dialect and hence in some history books they are called the Usobos of the Niger Delta. In other books they were referred to as Eastern Urhobos. Both the Urhobos and Isokos have strongly rejected these designations. From a recent publication of Otedo.com (Otedo Web and Graphic Solution), I quote "In 1951, the Richards constitution came into operation in Nigeria. The Western Region Delimitation Commission created two Constituencies from Eastern Urhobo Native Authority (NA), and elections to the Western House of Assembly were conducted by electoral college system on individual and personal basis although political parties were behind the candidates. Late Chief James Otobo from Uzere Kingdom of Isoko and Chief Mowarin for the other side of Eastern Urhobo. NA. both contested and won their elections to the Western House of Assembly, Ibadan." In 1957, after winning the 1954 elections, Chief James Otobo influenced the creation of the Isoko District Council (IDC) from Eastern Urhobo. This marked the

beginning of Isoko as a recognized distinct ethnolinguistic group as opposed to its categorization as an Urhobo dialect.

Upon the creation of the Midwest Region in 1963 coupled with the formation of local governments within the new region, the IDC became a full -fledged Isoko Local Government with its headquarters in Oleh after it was resolved between Ozoro and Oleh. By 1975, the local government was approved to award two separate license plates, Midwest Oleh (ML) and Midwest Ozoro (MLO). Following the creation of Delta State in 1991 and the corresponding formation of new local governments within the new state, the one Isoko Local Government became two: Isoko North and Isoko South with headquarters in Oleh and Ozoro respectively. Today, the political map of Delta State shows that Isoko North and South are bounded to the north by Ughelli North and Ethiope East local governments, to the south by Patani local government and the Atlantic Ocean (Bight of Benin), to the east by Ukwani and Ndokwa East local governments, and to the west by the southern part of Ughelli North local government.



Economic Activities

Traditionally, the economy of the Isokos has centered around subsistence farming, fishing, teaching and minor commercial trading with intra and inter village and/or town market days dominating these commercial activities. The staple food crops include cassava and yams. There is also the widespread production of palm oil and palm kernels. Women form a large proportion of the farming population. They also engage in trade of food crops for cash to meet other basic household needs. On market days, it is common to see Isoko women peddling their assorted goods around neighboring villages. The establishment of the Polytechnic at Ozoro and Delta State University campus in Oleh

resulted in a modicum of increased economic activity. The newly built Ozoro sports stadium is considered one of the most modern as well as one of the largest in Nigeria. This should enhance economic activity in the area especially during sporting events. Popular mode of transport is the motorcycle and bicycle. Inter-city travel is by bus or car. Roads particularly inter-city roads are being improved to facilitate economic activity.

The Future of the Isoko people: Challenges and opportunities for Isokoland beyond the era of oil and natural gas.

The question to ask is what does the future hold for the Isoko people and Isokoland. To answer this question we must look at some of the challenges that have plagued and continue to dominate us as a people. In my opinion these challenges include: 1. Endangerment of the Isoko language; 2. Religious activities which threaten the Isoko culture; 3. Poor infrastructure, including environmental degradation, and lack of industrial activities that make for the poor economy in Isoko local governments; 4. Functional Education; 5. Very poor health facilities in both local governments; and 6. Leadership and unity among Isoko people in Isokoland and in the Diaspora. So what is the way forward to take advantage of the opportunities presented by these challenges.

Preserving the Isoko Language

Like many minority languages throughout the world according to the United Nations Education and Scientific Organization (UNESCO), the Isoko language is facing the possibility of extinction. In 2016, during the “Isoko Language Revival, Communal Union on Rescue Race” the President of the Isoko Development Union (IDU), Chief Amadhe Idu, urged a conscious effort at speaking Isoko when he said “Everybody in Isoko is beginning to realize that both the Isoko language and ways of life are gradually dying out. Isoko people no longer speak Isoko; those outside Isokoland speak English to their children rather than Isoko. Even those living in Isokoland also speak English to their children; for example, if a parent wants his or her child to get him or her water they prefer to say “Go bring me water,” for a child born in Isoko.” Now the IDU is collaborating with various groups especially the Elona Development Foundation to provide funding for a new Isoko curriculum that has been currently approved by the Federal Ministry of Education and will be used in schools within the two Isoko local governments.

Churches and prominent linguists from the College of Education, Warri and others have supported these efforts. Therefore, it is incumbent on IANA to join this crusade by reactivating the efforts initiated several years ago by the former BOT Chairman, Mr. Odih Ewoterai, and link such efforts with the IDU to become a global effort. And as the Chairman of the IDU Isoko Language Committee (IDU-ILC), Mr. Vincent Omorie, rightly concluded “We ask all Isoko people to support this drive towards reviving and strengthening the language for its longevity so it doesn’t die out. This is an obligation we owe posterity – that the way our forefathers handed the language down to us is also the way we must hand it down to our children and their children’s children. That is what good parents do – preserve a legacy; the language is our legacy.” It should be noted that a people without a language are forever lost.

Moderating the impact of Religious Activities on the Isoko Culture.

While it is true that most Isoko people practice Christianity and Missionary Schools have played significant roles in the education of the Isoko populace, yet the Christianity as practiced today is in itself becoming a threat to the culture of the Isoko people. As one author recently wrote “With due apology to the few persons who devotedly go into Christianity for the sake of communal responsibilities, the main agent disintegrating the Isoko nation is the Church.” Continuing, this same author concludes that “In an era where other tribes, societies and nations, small or big, weak or strong, are carrying out cultural revival, Isoko nation, in an amazing absolute ignorance, is driving away her unique culture in the guise of Christianity, well intended but wrongly and satanically practiced, that may at last, going by the way we are carrying its worship in the most hypocritical manner may not lead us to God.”

Like the Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, Yorubas and other serious people of the world we must through reasonable approaches preserve and promote our cultures. Thus it may increasingly become necessary to remind our new religious leaders, pastors and bishops that although countries like India accepted relevant technology, education and political administration of the British, they maintained their cultures. There is nothing that should prevent our worshipping at Mass or Church Service on a Sunday or weekly bible study, from enjoying our different Isoko Festivals or respecting our traditional elders and seniors in our Isoko communities at home and abroad.

Enhancing the health care system in order to improve the health of the Isoko people.

Isokoland lacks the necessary health system to provide effective health for the Isoko people. Dispensaries, Health Clinics, Maternity clinics among others are in very poor state. Even the main General Hospitals in Oleh, Owhelogbo and Ozoro are inadequately staffed and equipments are very much short supply. It will be recalled that in 2015, the immediate past President General, Pa Duke Osima and current Vice President General of IANA, Mrs. Bridget Famogun jointly presented two operating tables (one each) to the Oleh and Ozoro General Hospitals respectively on behalf of IANA. Similarly a none profit organization of Diasporan Isoko people especially from North America visits Isoko annually to perform health education and treatments while providing health supplies to identified towns for each given year.

While it is true that the responsibilities for managing these hospitals lie with the Delta State Ministry of Health, it is crucial for our Isoko leaders and organizations to identify alternative approaches to improve the health of Isoko people. It should be noted that health education is key to making this happen. I have read some where that “A Healthy Nation is a Wealthy Nation!” So it should be with the Isoko people and the Isokoland.

The Way Forward for Economic Development and Sustainability in Isokoland

It is a sad commentary when it is realized that Isokoland was the second region where crude oil was discovered in 1959, from Uzere, after Oloibiri in 1956. Today, Isoko has more than 140 oil wells, yet there are no major infrastructural developments, minimum motorable roads, no bridges of any significance. Natural gas and solid minerals

like silica are available in abundance yet there are no industries to mine and process these. Food crop production and local fishing have been declining rapidly. This has been largely attributed to environmental degradation especially soil damage resulting from frequent crude oil spills from pipelines belonging to some of the major oil producing companies (including Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), whose pipeline network transversed the landscape). This led to large-scale frustrations with Shell Petroleum Development Company, and has resulted in skirmishes and kidnappings for ransom in some neighboring communities in the immediate past. The SPDC has now moved all its production off shore. In a separate document, Ambassador Eloho Ootobo noted with disbelief how the 40 years of Oil-dominated Political Economy of Nigeria had very little positive impact on the people of the Niger Delta particularly the Isoko people. Isoko has MINIMALLY benefited from the NNPC, DESOPADEC, NDDC, The Amnesty and Delta Ministry. Against this background of the petty economic activities, massive unemployment of youths is very high, the quality of life is low and below the standard of living recommended by the United Nations Development Organization, and poverty is rife in Isokoland.

So what is the way forward? I am proposing what I call the “Transformation of Isokoland” through the following items: 1. Establishment of three to four cottage industries; 2. Establishment of two to three multipurpose and mechanized farms to sustain the cottage Industries ; 3. Establishment of an Ecotourism Board, and 4. Enhancing the Educational system through functional education.

Establishment of three to four cottage industries: a. A Cassava Processing Factory in one of the two local governments. Farmers will form a cooperative for supplying the factory to ensure sustainability. Products will include garri, starch, cassava cakes, etc. Caution is advised given the recent history of cassava project failures. It is one of the easiest root and tuber crops to grow. Please note that this is one of the crops that our women currently convey to different market days so it will be quite easy to organize them into a cooperative of women cassava producers and marketers with the Cassava Processing factory as a ready market for their produce. b. Multipurpose Feed Mill that will produce feed for the fast developing poultry and fish production sectors. c. A small wood processing factory to convert all the old rubber plantations and others into productive forestry and agricultural enterprises. The rubberwood can be converted into furniture, adhesives and even paper products following adequate treatments, instead of being used mostly for firewood as it is currently being done. d. A modular glass factory to utilize the abundant sharp sand (silica) in Isokoland. The modular glass factory will produce small to medium sized bottles, drinking glasses and specialty glasses commissioned by the IDU, ELO, and IANA to name a few Isoko centered organizations. Items a – d will benefit immensely from the presence of the Delta State Polytechnic, Ozoro and Ofagbe Technical College, Ofagbe. In order for these cottage industries to function effectively, there will be need for an efficient energy supply system. I am proposing that this energy come from our abundant God given sunlight, in spite of the availability of tremendous amounts of oil and natural gas in Isokoland. Two SOLAR ENERGY FARMS (one in each local government) should be established. We have enough technical talents locally and in the diaspora to accomplish this goal. Isokoland is only 1,200 square kilometers, therefore providing such solar energy will more than meet the needs of the cottage

industries while satisfying the needs of the indigenes for constant and dependable energy supply. These are what most Cities and Counties have done and continue to do in many developed and industrial countries. The initial cost for these Solar Farms could come from the Isoko Reserve Funds (IRF) suggested later in this paper. Sustainable energy supply is sine qua non for effective development and productivity.

Establishment of two to three multipurpose and mechanized or semi-mechanized Farms to sustain the cottage Industries mentioned above. Sustainability is key to long-term developmental success. This is very important to maintain an effective supply chain. The mechanized farms have to be evenly distributed in both local governments to ensure the success of the defined cottage industry. This will also provide our youths with the much needed jobs and increased productivity.

-Establishment of an Ecotourism Board to carryout Fish Festivals such as the Lake Ebe Fish Festivals. The Board will be charged with the responsibility of coordinating all the many clan festivals and make Isokoland a tourist attraction throughout the year. It will provide an opportunity for such tourists to undertake special tours to the Ovies and their Kingdoms/Clans thereby helping to promote the Isoko culture while enhancing effective economic activities.



**AN EXAMPLE OF A MULTIPURPOSE EQUIPMENT FOR
THE CASSAVA COTTAGE INDUSTRY**

Other items that could make for the Isokoland to become an economic hub for the central region of Delta State will include—Clean up of polluted sites using bioremediation (both phyto- and molecular) approaches. We may also add a mini-hi-tech company – a small silicon valley. Conducting urgent Tree Planting Schemes and Programs, for beautification, aesthetics and environmental health. Isokoland urgently needs Entrepreneurs to invest and build a solid foundation for the empowerment of the youths of Isokoland. For this to happen Isokoland needs peace and unity among all the clans and its peoples within Isokoland and in the Diaspora – in-country and out of country as it becomes the new industrial and progressive location of the Niger Delta specifically, Delta State particularly and Nigeria generally. **WE NEED SIGNS THAT READ: WELCOME TO ISOKOLAND: WE UTILIZE ALL OUR GOD GIVEN NATURAL RESOURCES”** placed at each entry point into our two local governments.

To accomplish the goals and way forward stated above it will be important for the Isoko leaders both inside and outside Isokoland to institute quality and functional education for our children and youths. Quality and functional education are only as good as their practitioners. Presently, IANA is collaborating with the Ibrede Community in North America to construct a six-classroom building in Ibrede. Therefore empowering the next generation of Isokoans means making Isokoland a viable place to live, while providing them with the necessary skills and competencies to thrive anywhere in the world.

I am proposing the raising of three to five million dollars over the next five to seven years. If accomplished, it will allow for the Isokos to remove themselves from the dependency on oil and natural gas. Any allocation of funds from the state or federal governments will simply be a bonus that will then compliment Isoko Reserve Funds (IRF). A seven-member Board of Trustees (BOT-IRF) should be set up to manage the IRF. I like to suggest the composition of the BOT should come from 7 highly respected and honorable Isoko people (3 Isoko North and 3 Isoko South respectively regardless of whether they reside in Isokoland presently or they are in the diaspora). The seventh member of the BOT-IRF should be the Chairperson and be a rising youth, 25 – 35 years old, in his or her profession. The BOT-IRF will operate from the newly built Isoko House by the IDU in Isokoland. It will function to set priorities for development issues, potential scholarships for Isoko children and youths to attend technical schools and post secondary institutions in order to produce the necessary skills needed to drive the economic engine that will result from what has been outlined in this paper. The IDU and other respected Isoko organizations locally and in the diaspora such as IANA will serve as an advisory council to the BOT-IRF.

Conclusion

Their geographical location coupled with a very rich history, language and culture and in spite of the challenges they have faced over the last 50 years even while being a major contributor to the Nigeria’s economy, the Isoko people see life not just for living but also as an anthem of celebration. They are a compassionate, honest, peace-loving, hardworking and deeply religious people, always with a joyful song in their hearts. Utilizing quality and functional education to harness the tremendous natural and agricultural resources could transform Isoko land into an economic hub of Delta State

beyond oil and natural gas. My proposal of raising three to five million (\$3m - \$5m) dollars over the next five to seven years, if accomplished, will allow for the Isokos to remove themselves from the dependency on oil and gas. Any allocation of funds from the state or federal governments will simply be a bonus that will then be added to the Isoko Reserve of Funds. IANA teaming up with IDU, IDYA, EAI and ILS can lead the way in getting the necessary resources other than oil and gas to provide the next generation of Isokos excellent quality and functional education that will enable them to thrive in Isokoland and in the diaspora, as well as allowing for economic sustainability and enhanced welfare of life in Isokoland.

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An abridged edition of this paper appears in the Program Book of the 2018 IANA Convention.



LAKE EBE, OVRODE IN ISOKO NORTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Picture taken by Professor Oghenekome Onokpise, in 2012. Note how fresh the lake appears.

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