

MAJOR ISAAC ADAKA BORO AND THE DOMESTIC SPACE: THE FAMILY LIFE AND TEMPERAMENT OF THE REVOLUTIONARY ICON

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on a less-travelled road in the narrative about Isaac Adaka Boro, the first man to agitate for resource control in the Niger Delta through armed struggle. The paper navigates the personal, private, and domestic spaces of the Ijaw man who has been designated the revolutionary icon. Narratives about Isaac Boro are inundated with tales of his struggle to break the yoke of poverty and marginalization for the people of the Niger Delta. As such, there has been an inadvertent silence about his personal life, the very reason for which this paper is written; to fill this gap. Using a descriptive and narrative approach in exploring Isaac Daka Boro's personal space This approach of storytelling enables one to construct the experiences of Boro as a family man into an intelligible whole, as an important constituent of his entire identity. The paper contributes to narratives of revolutionary leaders in the Niger Delta, on the Ijaw discourse and the armed struggle in the Niger Delta.

Keywords: Isaac Boro, Ijaw, Marginalisation, Activism, Family.

Introduction

Isaac Boro was not just an activist; he was a husband, father, brother, and son. As such, it would be erroneous to contemplate a holistic analysis of him without incorporating his family configuration. It is thus in recognition of this necessity that this paper is written. The genealogy of Isaac Adaka Boro has been examined in a number of studies (Boro, 2007; Boro, 2013; Orji, 2013). It is therefore not necessary to dwell much on that subject here. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to point out that Isaac Boro's formative years played a large role in his evolution into a revolutionary icon. Early lessons from childhood as a headmaster's son were to mould him into an upright young man, thirsty to learn and possessing attributes of chivalry, honesty, and a sense of integrity common to his pedigree.

To understand such a bequest is to understand the importance of being a headmaster in colonial and post-

independent Nigeria. The school was the conduit for the transfer of European Victorian ideals, of which chivalry, manliness, honesty, and integrity were integral parts. A headmaster was revered as an embodiment of European mentality and thus the closest to the white man. It is therefore safe to deduce that Isaac Adaka Boro came from a family that inspired awe and respect among the local populace. Educationally, it has already been highlighted that Isaac Boro was an intelligent student who came out on top in the final years of his primary and secondary school examinations. He subsequently went on to study at the university but did not complete his studies at the University of Nsukka for reasons related to student activism.

The Benevolence Factor in Isaac Adaka Boro's Activism

Sequel to the riotous protest that followed the imposition of arbitrary school fees after the collapse of the free education

programme in what was then Eastern Nigeria, Isaac Adaka Boro witnessed the authority that was exuded by members of the police force drafted to arrest the rioting women. Although he admired their astuteness, authority, and precision, he equally loathed their oppressive tendencies against his people. His admiration of this power and authority was a motivating factor in his desire to join the police force. Isaac Boro wanted the power of the police and the ability to exercise the authority that came with it to be able to assist the Ijaw people. To this end, Boro unceremoniously abandoned his job as a teacher to join the police force, to the consternation of his father. For an activist like him, the job of a police officer and the power and authority it came with afforded him the space to engage in some form of legal activism. (Boro, 2013).

True to his motive of joining the police, Boro once used his opportunity as a policeman to defend one of his townsmen, whose canoe had been broken by a large steamboat that was attempting to berth at the waterside of his home community, Kaiama town. One cannot deny that Isaac Adaka Boro's zeal for activism in defence of the people was in part inherited from his father. In a focus-group discussion with members of Isaac Boro's family in 2013, Isaac Boro's father, Chief Jasper Pepple Boro, was described as a very benevolent man who, with the support of his wife, Elizabeth, adopted and cared for thirty-eight children, only eight of whom were his biological children. (Personal communication, April 22, 2013).

Clearly, the benevolence of Isaac Boro's parents had a profound influence on him, as he was easily moved with compassion at the sight of people suffering. He found it hard to accept societal inequality, the

economic divide, the rich and the poor, and suffering. In an interview, Charlotte Bunch, the internationally acclaimed activist, noted that:

To be an activist, you have to be clear on what you want to do and find the opportunities to do it. It's not that everything will fall into place, but if you know what you want to be doing, then you can try to create a way to do it in the places where you get a chance to be (Brooks & Hodgson, 2007).

Isaac Adaka Boro clearly had a fire burning in him, and the desire to remove the yoke or chains that held the Ijaws bound to a life of penury and neglect was enormous. In his own words:

Year after year, we were clenched in tyrannical chains and led through a dark alley of perpetual political and social deprivation. Strangers in our own country! Inevitably, therefore, the day would have to come for us to fight for the long-denied right to self-determination (<http://kayodeogundamisi.blogspot.com/2008/02/issac-adaka-boro-seven-day-revolution.html>).

True to his activist temperament, Isaac realized that being a school teacher was not the right platform to launch his cause, so he decided to go for what he wanted rather than wait for it to be handed down to him, something that was improbable in this case. Fired by the passion to make a positive change in the lives of his people, Isaac Boro decided to equip himself first through education. He studied hard to ensure he passed the required examinations for the Nigeria Police Force. With a target in mind, the young Boro voraciously imbibed the training and

skills offered by the Nigeria Police.

Isaac Adaka Boro honed his leadership skills during this period. One of the key factors in his leadership was his ability to establish support among the Ijaw people, especially the youth. Like many renounced activists, he had great oratory skills that were well-known and applauded. And like many political activists, he had the ability to sway the crowd. This was a trait he himself recognized and, indeed, perfected. He was not modest about it. In his days of student activism, he himself acknowledged his oratory skills when he said, "I know that if it meant talking alone, of course, my tongue would take care of that." His communication skills were useful in sensitizing the people and gathering support for his cause of liberation. He succeeded in prodding the easy-going, politically latent people of Ijaw ethnic nationality to political consciousness and the need to demand their rights. To this extent, it would not be wrong to describe him as a leader who provided a learning environment for people of Ijaw descent to transform or reverse their set beliefs.

Besides Isaac Adake Boro's tenacity, there was another quality that stood him in good stead: he was a man undeterred by failure and disappointment. Boro was a man who knew how to push forward despite setbacks until he achieved his goal. This quality demonstrated his ability to focus on set objectives. His single-mindedness of purpose was what enabled him to become not only the student union president of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, but also the first non-Igbo student to achieve this feat. His doggedness was also referred to by his brother, Gelsthorpe Boro, who recounted Isaac Boro's persistence in helping him get the correct answer to his chemistry homework.

According to Gelsthorpe:

He seemed to declare a state of emergency on the problem...No going out and no eating until the problem was solved. He crossed into the school building and solved the problem on the chalkboards in one classroom after the other. He moved out to the most quiet part parts of the school compound with a piece of stick and continued solving on the road (Boro, 2007; 2013)

The chemistry incident demonstrates quite a few things about the late revolutionary icon. First, it shows, as already noted, his persistence in going after what he wants and his determination to succeed. It also demonstrates a genuine desire to alleviate the marginal, socio-economically dispossessed status of the Ijaw people and his belief in education as a conduit for such transformation. And it points at Isaac Boro as a man who thrived on attention and welcomed the accolades with no modesty.

The Niger Delta should be solely reclaimed by the Ijaw, as stated by Boro. For punishment "for the sins of (their) Race," state officials of non-Ijaw ancestry were singled out in particular. According to Tebekaemi (1982), the looting of non-Ijaw-owned businesses in Yenagoa was aggressively promoted. The revolt was put to an end after only twelve days, and Boro and his soldiers were captured and put in prison for treason. Others have argued that Boro's actions were more of a provocation than an actual attempt at secession, despite the fact that his stated goal was to use the revolution to rebuff what he believed to be an illegal Igbo-led coup at all costs.

The prevailing situation was altered

by the coup in July 1966. After receiving a pardon in August 1967—one year and six months after the start of their campaign—Boro, Owonaro, and Dick were all enlisted in the Nigerian military to, in Boro's words, "free people from Biafran occupation" (O.Samuel, Personal Communication, July 2002). They were joined by Ijaw migrants from as far away as Ghana who had been trapped in and around Lagos after being evicted by the administration of Busia. With plenty of room to work with, Isaac Boro assembled a squad of 1,000 "ill-disciplined, hastily trained Rivers men" who joined the Third Marine Commando Division in Bonny (Obasanjo 1980).

The Family Life of Isaac Adaka Boro

Isaac Adaka Boro had several women in his life. His first wife was Rosaline, from the Agidi family in Ossiama, in the Sagbama Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Isaac met Rosaline when he was posted to work in Lagos as a police inspector. He married Rosaline, and they had two children, Esther and Felix Boro. Isaac and Rosaline's marriage was short-lived. Misunderstandings over career paths seemed to have played a part. In an interview with some members of the Boro family in Yenogoa, Isaac Boro's brother Gelsthorpe pointed out that Rosaline's father was insistent on his daughter joining the Nigeria Police, but this was vehemently opposed by Isaac, who argued that he was already a member of the police corps and it was not a place for a woman (B. Gelsthorpe, Personal communication, April 22, 2013). Again, one sees a glimpse of his views with regard to gender roles. For him, women had set roles, and this was within the domestic space. To be fair to Isaac Boro, he was not alone in this line of thinking. In post-independence Nigeria, gender activism was

still latent. However, despite Isaac Boro's insistence, Rosaline eventually joined the Nigerian police and grew to become a Chief Superintendent of Police at the time of the field survey.

The misunderstandings and eventual separation and divorce would seem to have been amicable because they did not result in the severance of ties between Isaac and Rosaline. In a focus group discussion with Isaac's siblings, they recalled that Rosaline continued to visit the Boro family after the divorce, sometimes in her police uniform. She was said to be quite solicitous towards members of the family, sometimes helping out with the children. (Personal communication, May 17, 2013) This cordiality between Rosaline and Isaac's family reflects positively on Isaac's role as a husband and also shows the level of maturity between the two people. The socio-cultural milieu of that era should not also be ignored; children were assets in a marriage and bestowed dignity on the mother. The children could also have been a driving force behind the continued relationship between the two estranged lovers. For Isaac's family, however, there was one reason, and as they stated, it could only be a woman who has been treated by a man who would extend a hand of friendship and love to her former husband's family.

With his first marriage shattered, Isaac Adaka Boro found love again with a young woman Martina Ogunade, a Yoruba woman, the relationship resulted in the birth of a girl, Bunmi Alangi-erefa Boro, but did not lead to marriage. When Isaac remarried, it was to a young woman named Georgina, Isaac first met her in Surulere, Lagos, in the home of her elder sister, Mrs. Koin, who was married to a relative of Isaac, Mr. Frederick Koin. It was love at first sight.

In Georgina Boro's words, when Isaac first saw her, he promptly told her sister and brother-in-law that he would marry her when she was older, and this promise was kept when she turned 14. Isaac got permission from her father, who was in Ghana at the time, and the marriage was finalized.

When asked what married life was like; of being married to Isaac Boro, Georgina recalls her marriage to Isaac Boro whom she used to call I. J. as a bitter-sweet experience:

Sweet... because, he treated me as a special gem, precious in his eyes. He always wanted the best for me. He promised I would go back to school once the struggle was over. Bitter because I shared his pain and passion towards the Niger Delta people. He wanted justice for the Niger Delta (B. Georgina, Personal communication, April 22, 2013)

Certainly, Georgina was quite young and inexperienced when she married Isaac. Her bitter experience and frustration during the revolution could be attributed to the situation of having to compete for her husband's attention and passion with his burning passion for the liberation of the Ijaw people. As she herself says:

I got married at a very early age shortly before the 1966 coup. I was thrown into the struggle as I began to witness late-night meetings of IJ and his close aides. He confided in me what the meetings were all about. I was scared, being young and naive. I did not understand what was happening. My expectations were suddenly turned around, but I had to support my husband in his fight for freedom (B.

Georgina, Personal communication, April 22, 2013).

Dubbed the wife of the revolution, Georgina's marriage to Isaac coincided with his life as an activist and revolutionary advocate for a republic of the Niger Delta, or that which was his ultimate goal, the creation of a state. With Isaac's death at the war front, fighting for the Nigerian army against the Biafrans, Georgina became a widow and, only two weeks later, gave birth to a girl named Deborah Boro.

Georgina describes Isaac Boro as a caring and loving husband who is sensitive and responsive to her needs. In his memoirs, one is able to discern his emotional state, and it was obvious that he missed his family. On those occasions, when his emotions threatened to get the best out of him, he had to mentally discipline himself to focus on the revolution. In one such instance, during Operation Z-takeover of Yenegoa, as they were in the house of one of the tax collectors, Isaac narrates how he became emotional with the thought of his wife:

My mind flashed to my wife and I was imagining how she would remain cuddled in her bed. Anyway, there was not time for emotions or nostalgia now. The die was cast (Boro, 2013).

Isaac Boro the Brother

In an interview with the Jasper Boro family, Isaac's siblings described him as a loving brother. His generosity was something they all benefited from. They described his habit of coming home with presents for everyone. On one occasion, it was two bicycles to help alleviate the long distance of walking to the neighbouring villages on errands; on another instance, it was mattresses so each child could have his

or her own bed. This love was reciprocated on his visits home. He was usually welcomed several yards from the house by his siblings, who ran with shouts of joy to meet him.

Margaret, Isaac Boro's sister, remembers with nostalgia how he liked her and her sister to accompany him on errands to buy snuff for their father and how he used to hold her by the hand while carrying Comfort on his shoulders. For Gelsthorpe, Isaac's younger brother, Isaac was the best brother a person could have. According to him, "I couldn't have had a better brother. I started enjoying him at age six" (B. Gelsthorpe, Personal communication, April 22, 2013).

From the available evidence, Isaac was greatly admired and loved by his siblings for the love and warmth that he showered on them. Gelsthorpe fondly remembers that Isaac always wanted to eat his meals from the same plate as his younger ones whenever he was at home from school. David Boro, another younger brother of Isaac Boro, remembers being taken to the cinema and watching shows from Isaac's shoulders. Also significant in their memories of Isaac Boro were the pepper soup nights that he organized for them. According to Gelsthorpe and David Boro, what usually followed was a feast of crap prepared by Isaac himself.

What can be discerned from these musings and trips along memory lane is a picture of a happy home, with Isaac playing the role of a caring big brother. Isaac was also remembered as a disciplinarian, touching upon the controversial subject of his anger. When asked about that, this family argued that Isaac was a man who abhorred lies and disruptive behavior. According to Gelsthorpe, he never lost control of his emotions when trying to

discipline anyone.

In spite of his family's efforts to debunk the labelling of Isaac as hot-tempered, there are many accounts that demonstrate incidences of his display of anger. Although Isaac, it would seem, was a very loving man who was sensitive to the needs of people around him, he also had a temper that was legendary. One could benignly argue that some form of anger is a common trait among activists in the sense that passion and anger could be seen on the same continuum. Nonetheless, Isaac Boro had a temper, which in some ways was channeled towards the state and other groups that kept the Ijaws chained to the yoke of poverty and neglect. To stir up and sustain resistance, emotion plays a part, and within this emotional space, anger cannot totally be excluded. The question, however, is whether we have the ability to positively harness that anger. In their work on *Space for Emotion in Spaces of Activism*, Brown and Pickerill argue for the need to 'sustain activism through emotional reflexivity'.

Conclusion

In the course of his brief life, Isaac Jasper Boro has become entrenched in the collative memory of the Ijaws as an enigmatic hero. Albeit, in this and other essays, Here, the researcher has attempted to reveal his identity, arguably, in ways previously glossed over. In this paper, there has been an effort to unravel the "family man" in the person of Major Isaac Jasper Boro. I have observed that before and beyond the revolution. Isaac Boro had a father who was hardworking and caring; a stepmother who was accommodating and generous; as well as loving and welcoming brothers, sisters, and other relatives. I have also explained that he was a kind and

humane son, brother, husband, and father who was sensitive to the needs of his immediate family and others. Nevertheless, I have also expressed the fact that Isaac Boro has the other side of him. He was human and could be very angry if provoked.

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