

ESEZI I



*His Royal Majesty Ezezi I
Orodje of Okpe Kingdom
(Reign: in the 17th century)*

Okpe Kingdom was founded by four brothers, Orhue, Orhoro, Ebreke, and Ezezi, the sons of Okpe and grandsons of Prince Igboze of Benin, who had migrated from Benin and founded a kingdom of his own at Olomu. When the brothers decided to establish a kingship system in Okpe Kingdom, the eldest, Orhue who would have been the first Orodje, disqualified himself because of his advanced age. Given the constant quarrels between the second son, Orhoro, and the third son, Ebreke, it was agreed that the youngest, Ezezi, be installed as the first Orodje of Okpe Kingdom.

In establishing their kingdom, the founding brothers did not envisage an absolute monarchy but a king in council who will rule with the support of an Otota (*Speaker or mouthpiece of the Okpe Kingdom*) and an Udogun Okpe (Okpe Supreme Council). Ezezi I ruled in the 17th century. He was a strict ruler whose administration of the kingdom was characterised by a series of brutalities against his subjects. According to the Writs of Summons of Orerokpe Land Case cited by Osume, under Ezezi I the Okpe Kingdom was “firmly organized” and the Okpe people “developed organized defence of Okpeland.” Ezezi I was a powerful ruler whose “influence later led to a show of power...which generated hatred in the Okpe people.” (See Osume, *The Okpe People, forthcoming.* and Asagba, *The Untold Story of a Nigerian Royal Family, p.31*). As a result of his dictatorial rule, there was a widespread condemnation of his administration by the population. Consequently, a conspiracy to assassinate him was hatched. On the appointed day, the conspirators lured him to a meeting in the palace and sat him on a

nicely decorated throne. Under the throne was a concealed pit covered with fragile fragments. Nearby the venue, a group of the conspirators was boiling pots of oil and water. Immediately Ezezi I sat on his throne and fell into the pit, the conspirators quickly poured the hot oil and hot water on him. As he laid there dying, he was alleged to have cursed that the Okpe will “never be re-united under” an Orodje. (See *Mebitaghan, A Brief History of Okpe Kingdom, p.6*) It was not until 1945, almost 300 years later, before the Okpe had another Orodje.

The Interregnum: 17th century - 1945

From the assassination of Ezezi I in the late 17th century to 1945, the Okpe were without an Orodje. This long interregnum revealed the character of the Okpe people. They did not permit any one to usurp the throne, and neither did they fragment into separate principalities. That the Okpe people elected to remain as one, in a kingdom without a king, was a testimony of their commitment to their nationality and common ancestry. For example, there was nothing preventing the ruling houses to install their respective Orodjes. It is instructive to note that, out of the more than 250 ethnic groups that constitute Nigeria, only three have defined kingdoms under their respective monarchs. These are the Bini, the Okpe, and the Itsekiri. Each of the other ethnic groups has multiple kingdoms and kings. This phenomenon makes the Okpe a unique nationality in Nigeria.

Restoration of the Okpe Monarchy

The Okpe had always wanted to restore the Orodjeship, but did not seem to have the enabling conditions to do so. While they had prevented usurpers to the throne since the assassination of Ezezi I, the need for electing an Orodje with non dictatorial tendencies remained critical to the Okpe. But the impetus for a restoration of the Orodjeship seemed to be the decision of the Itsekiri to also restore their kingship (Oluship), following their interregnum of almost 100 years. As one of the ethnic groups with whom the Okpe share a common boundary and historical relationships, there was concern in Okpeland that a revived Itsekiri Oluship could pose some challenges for the Okpe people. (See, *Mebitaghan, A Brief History of Okpe Kingdom, p.21*).

The pioneering role towards the restoration of the Orodjeship was played by a group of Okpe nationals based in Lagos. They established the Okpe Union of Nigeria on July 16, 1930, as the umbrella organization of the Okpe people to cater for, promote and defend Okpe interests. Following the restoration of the Itsekiri Oluship in 1936, the need for restoring the Orodjeship became more urgent with the Okpe Union. A delegation of the Okpe Union, which included Messrs Odiete, Rhabor Abeke and J. E. Biokoro, was dispatched to Okpeland to discuss the issue with Okpe leaders. While the leaders were receptive to the idea, they however remained fearful of the possibility of electing an Orodje who could be a dictator as Ezezi I. When the Okpe leaders finally agreed to restore the Orodjeship, they defined the procedures and took measures to appease the spirits of Ezezi I who had cursed the Okpe at his death. The appeasement, as advised by an oracle, was for the Okpe to elect the next Orodje from the Ezezi Ruling House. It must be stressed that, this appeasement was not a vote “to favour primogeniture” or “the hereditary system” as claimed by Mebitaghan (see *A Brief History of Okpe Kingdom, p.80*), but a traditional ritual to reconcile with the spirits of Ezezi I, in order to eradicate his curse on the Okpe. The Okpe leaders underlined the rotational system of electing their Orodje as part of the procedures they established in 1945.