

THE OKPE PEOPLE

Notes for Research

by

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Preliminary Remarks

The following notes are intended to engender further research on the Okpe People. The issues raised in the notes have not been researched by this writer. They are raised so as to inspire indepth research rather than to allow them to subsist as historically settled issues in Okpe affairs. These notes are inspired by reflections on the source materials which we listed at the end of this write-up. They are also inspired by our thoughts and concerns over the dynamics of contemporary Okpe society, political process and traditional administration, and the sub-economy of the Okpe people. It is well known too the great attraction which the Okpe people hold for scholarly studies as well as the political interests often demonstrated against the Okpe kingdom by persons and forces of the neighbouring polities in our sub-region. The issues in these notes are drawn largely from **13 Source Materials**. We have deliberately avoided direct references to the materials or to critique their contents. The objective is not one of a review of the materials; it is simply to point to them as sources of our inspiration or of our concerns.

At the end of the 2000 Okpe National Conference at Orerokpe organised by the Okpe Union Headquarters, the communiqué called for an establishment of an Okpe research outfit. Although, an enthusiastically patriotic youngman, now late, Mr. Haye Ogboto (may his soul rest in peace) proceeded with a project of Okpe Historical Research Scheme, the Conference communiqué was not acted upon. Mr. Ogboto's efforts did not materialise. Incidentally, and perhaps fortunately, the OKPE VOICE, inspired by the Okpe Union of North America, has now embarked upon a similar and perhaps broader

project of establishing an **Institute for Okpe Studies**. There are huge challenges for the Institute as indeed for all persons who are concerned about Okpe affairs.

Origin of Okpe

An insightful historian has correctly observed that if “there is any aspect of the history of the various peoples of Nigeria about which no one can speak with any exactitude, it is that which deals with the origins of our peoples”. There is tremendous confusion about the narration and analysis of the origin of the Okpe people. One confusion is the lack of clarity between the origin of the Okpe people and the origin of the Okpe kingdom. The kingdom is the establishment of the governance system of Okpe monarchy as distinct from the community of Okpe as a people. The Okpe people might or could have existed before the kingdom. It is true though that certain historic peoples or communities originated from the fact of the action of having been founded by their kings or rulers. In the case of the Okpe people, there seems to be an absence of proper historicity and even of logic of simultaneous existence of the people and their kingdom. Indeed one gets the historic sensitivity or intuition that the Okpe people existed before their monarchy of Orodjeship and hence of the kingdom, that is, the domain of their king. Or do we have an egg and chick situation here? Therefore, we have a foundational issue for research in Okpe as to the origin of the **people qua people** and of the kingdom as an established monarchy.

It seems that the Okpe people are an ancient community, and they probably existed before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ; yet it is very difficult to put researched fingers on the ancientness of the Okpe **people**. There is enormous unclarity in even the dates or time frames of the origin of the **Okpe people** both in connection with oral traditions of the migration of their forebears through distant and various territories before they settled at Orerokpe, and subsequently organised their polity and crowned King Ezezi I as the pioneer Orodje-Okpe. Dates and time frames have been bandied between the 12th century through the 16th and 17th centuries (these are years after the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord – indeed under 900 years ago!!). Are the Okpe kingdom and Okpe people really so youthful? The origin of the kingdom by the institution of the Orodje monarchy

as evidenced by King Ezezi I requires to be further researched. We need to further interrogate the source materials much more closely than has, so far, been done. In doing so, however, we need to be reminded of the counsel by a great historian that historical data, stories and narrations, particularly oral traditions of origin, which scholars use are themselves created by other people such as those who narrated the stories of origin and of migration to colonial officers (the Colonial Intelligence Reports of the 1920s and 1930s) and to subsequent researchers. The research scholar should therefore seek to know about those who created the documents; the profiles, antecedents and circumstances which influenced the oral narrators and their narrations. This is in order to be careful and be guided by consciousness of the likelihood of prejudice, bias or partisanship in story-telling about the past and about oral traditions. It is to guard against latching on to a single document or story source and even to a series of documents or story sources without subjecting them to close scrutiny and possible scholarly cross-checks.

The history of origins of African peoples has, in recent scholarship, developed a historiography of autochthony. Rather than the stories of migrations from the Middle East through Egypt, and in the case of our peoples through Ife and Benin to their settled locations, the ecology and other conditions of life's survival and livelihood tend to favour the proposition that peoples sojourned from no where. Research is now much more inward oriented about the origins of peoples than the outward inspirations of their origins. Indeed, the Niger Delta region appears to be more conducive to human growth and evolution than the northward landscapes. In the case of Okpe, there are enormous confusions about how they settled at Orerokpe after tortuous migrations from Ife through Benin, Izon escravos, Olomu, Okpe-Isoko and through Agbarho to Orerokpe. There is even the suggestion that the people of Ukpella in Edo north might also have been another source of our people's migration to Orerokpe. In all these story sources, we have very discordant versions of movement by the Okpe people. We certainly have a research challenge here to deal with.

In a similar vein, the Okpe historic icon called Igboze is said to have been a prince of the Benin kingdom, who fled or migrated with his siblings from Benin; yet

Igboze is also said to have been a migrant from Ife through Benin. There is no reasonable time frame in Igboze's migrations and in whose company or entourage he moved from place to place. There are conjectures about hostilities, sheer adventurism or search for justice and productive livelihood as the causes, aims, objectives and reasons for Igboze's multiple migrations. Obviously no human being or legend could have been so involved in frequent migrations for periods spanning 100, 200 or many more years.

Traditions of Okpe origin are grossly silent about the parenthood of Igboze other than the vague reference to he, being a Benin prince. Since he did not drop from heaven like the Yoruba folklore of Oduduwa, who then was Igboze's father? Who was Igboze's mother? Did Igboze not have siblings? Igboze is said to be the father of Okpe, yet there is a version in Olomu tradition of origin which poses that Igboze had no child, and therefore no child or children of Igboze could possibly have founded any kingdom or developed a community of people anywhere. Granted that Okpe was the child of Igboze who is said to have been the father of the four brothers who subsequently founded the Okpe kingdom, that is, Orhue, Orhoro, Evbreke and Esezi, are these four brothers of the same mother or of different mothers? Research and the traditions of origin have so far been silent on these issues.

Similarly, no one has pointed out the wives of each of the four brothers. If the Okpe nation developed as the Okpe kingdom was being established, it was unlikely that the wives of the four brothers could have been Okpe natives themselves without the probability of incestuous relationships. From where could they have come? Who were the mothers of the first line or direct descendants of the four founding Okpe brothers?

The traditions of origin talked about Okpe being related to or having also founded the other kingdoms or communities of Olomu, Ozoro, Okpe-Isoko, etc. We need dedicated research about the historic linkages among the communities or kingdoms allegedly related to the Okpe people of Okpe kingdom.

Gender Bias in Okpe History

Okpe history and Okpe affairs are laced with tremendous gender bias. This is understandable in its context of a patrilineal society. The systems of inheritance and of traditional governance are tilted against the female gender. The importance of this issue for research derives from its implication for modern society of which Okpe is part. It is arguable whether Okpe society would ever absorb the abnormality or cultural abomination of a woman being an Orodje-Okpe and even far less so when a man cannot be an Orodje-Okpe from his female lineage. Yet the role of woman in the development process of modern societies including governance affairs has become very critical and widespread. Research should be devoted to the complexity and continuing functionality of Okpe traditions and the gender issue.

Okpe Nationalism or Okpe Ethnicism(?)

Is Okpe Urhobo? This is a sensitive issue for research which could add value to the perspectives and activism of those of us who, in a larger context, are Urhobo nationalists. Yet the distinctness of the Okpe people from their fellow Urhobo compatriots cannot be over-emphasized, especially with reference to the distinctness of the Okpe language from the other clusters of Urhobo languages and the general Agbarho version. Okpe is the largest of the 22 (now 23) Urhobo ethnic nationalities. It is a fact that in the comity of Urhobo people, Okpe experiences seemingly cultural and linguistic alienation. Without necessarily provoking undue Okpe nationalism or Okpe ethnicism as against Urhobo nationalism we need to learn more by increasing our research spectrum and understanding of the peculiarity of the Okpe people.

Okpe Ancestral Capital Town of Orerokpe

The founding of Orerokpe as the ancestral capital township of the Okpe people and Okpe kingdom is unique in many respects. Although, it is said to have been discovered as a fertile farming and hunting territory by the eldest of the four sons of Okpe, **Orhue**, yet deriving from Orhue's invitation to his other three brothers to join him in settling down, Orerokpe has been accepted in the traditions of origin, as having been jointly founded by the four brothers. The name **Orerokpe** means the town of Okpe; yet

Okpe as a person never arrived at Orerokpe in his tortuous migratory sojourns. Why did the descendants of Okpe who founded the Okpe kingdom and through whom the Okpe nation developed decided to name and call themselves Okpe and not any of their personal names, for example, Orhue who actually is said to have discovered the settlement? Why is Orerokpe not named **Oorerorhue**? We need to satisfy ourselves on these matters through research and understanding with logic and sensibility.

Okpe governance under the pioneer Orodje-Okpe, Esezi I, is usually described as “wicked, despotic, tyrannical, barbaric, etc”. The consequence of bad governance was the collective assassination of Esezi I. Even the leaders of Esezi descent were said to have participated effectively in the plot and assassination; yet they were said to have been persecuted by the descendants of the other three brothers. Orerokpe was said to have been close to a civil war experience which resulted in its desertion and near desolation. Why were Esezi’s descendants really persecuted and why did the descendants of the other brothers also desert Orerokpe? Couldn’t any social force have taken firm control of Orerokpe and of Okpe governance from Orerokpe? Although described as the “best organised and traditionally administered” ethnic group in the sub-region at the beginning of colonisation and colonialism between the 1850s and 1920s, yet this was the epoch of fragmented Okpe governance among such power contenders or pretenders as Chief Odorume, Chief Diemor, Chief Anovba and Chief Odjegba.

Was Orerokpe really a virgin territory uninhabited by human beings at the point of its discovery and founding by the four sons of Okpe? Were there no human beings other than the four founding brothers and their families who might also have been indigenous to the Orerokpe territory and who were subsequently assimilated into Okpe nation? How did the Okpe nation develop with distinctive language and administrative structure?

The Other Okpe Towns or Settlements

When descendants of the four Okpe founding brothers moved out of Orerokpe in a series of waves to other parts of Okpe territory, as it were today, did they meet virgin

farming lands, forests, streams, rivers, etc? Or did they get across, or find and interact with other human beings in the new settlements which historically became absorbed or assimilated into the Okpe nation? It is a matter of fundamental research interest to further interrogate the oral traditions of origins of the various Okpe settlements such as the Ughoton – Jeddo - Ugbokodo axis; the Mereje - Okwetolor – Okobia axis; the Inume – Oku – Adagbrassa axis; the Okokporo – Ugborhe – Okwovu – Ugbukurusu axis; the Aghalokpe – Arhagba - Oviri – Umiagwa axis; the Amukpe – Sapele axis; the Oha – Ugolo – Adagbrassa – Odjedi axis; etc. The few areas which, so far, have been researched or whose traditions of origins have been gathered have thrown up elements of confusion, contradictions and even potentials for emergent conflicts. Some are said to have been founded by descendants of one Ruling Quarter; and others are said to have been founded by an admixture of descendants of two and even three Ruling Quarters. Time frames are often ignored in the story sources. We have here a huge cocktail for research.

Okpe Mode of Dress and Other Cultural Artefact

Although part of the cultural milieu of the coastal peoples of the Niger Delta, the mode of dress of the Okpe person (man or woman) and more especially the mode of dress of Okpe Chiefs (Ekakuro and Ehovwore) stand out the Okpe personality very distinctively. Okpe have, in recent times, added other cultural artefacts like coral beads, etc. We are not sure of the origins of these cultural artefacts. Very nice as they may seem, yet do we really have any historically industrial sites, regardless of crudity, in which these cultural artefacts were fashioned into modes in Okpe before recent times? Are these not simple adaptations of colonial economic bi-products? What is really uniquely Okpe about the Okpe dress and cultural artefacts? We are challenged to call for some research into the Okpe mind and Okpe psyche in this seemingly cultural creativity or cultural aridity.

Some Okpe Governance Issues

We are challenged for now to draw attention to three issues in Okpe traditional governance which further research would enhance. The first is on **Succession to the**

Okpe Throne. Happily the report of the 4-Persons Committee set up by the Udogun-Okpe in 2004 on this matter with Gen. Patrick Aziza (Rtd.) as Chairman and which recommendations were fully approved by the Udogun and successfully utilised in the succession exercise of 2004 has very fortunately settled the major issue for research. The point will also be consolidated soon when the **Okpe Constitution** is approved by the Okpe-Agbameni. **The only point now of interest for the sake of history is the politics of the twist in the order of succession.** It is well known that when in 1945, the Orodje throne was resuscitated, the Okpe people agreed to begin from where they had stopped by the assassination of Esezi I. We know as a benchmark that Esezi I was crowned as the pioneer Orodje-Okpe although he was the youngest of the four brothers. The rotation was therefore to prop from bottom to up or from the youngest to the eldest. This was to say, after Esezi, it would have been Evbreke, then Orhoro and Orhue in this ordering. And so in 1945, the Esezi Ruling Quarter was allowed to start all over again to relink with the abruptness of the reign of Esezi I. Interestingly, the **Okpe National Constitution** of the same year, 1945, which was attested and signed by accredited leaders of the four Ruling Quarters and the new Orodje then, Esezi II provided for the order of rotation as follows:

Esezi (who was already on the throne); Orhoro, Orhue and Evbreke. Evbreke which was the second youngest was thus, bypassed for Orhoro; and so, Orhoro Ruling Quarter provided the successor to the throne in 1972 as Orhoro I. This issue has been mused among those who are expected to know what happened with more cloud and obfuscation than with clarity and desire to promote understanding. Research should further interrogate the issue for correctness and comprehension of Okpe history.

The second governance issue of research interest is one that deals with princes, princesses and chieftaincy title in Okpe. It has been articulated that an Okpe prince and princess need not be bestowed with the title of Okakuro and Ohovwore. We do not seem to find the tradition or rationality for this viewpoint. The late Orhoro I (may his soul rest in peace) proceeded to endow his children who were born on the throne and outside the throne with chieftaincy titles. The Okpe people need to come to terms with a clear position on this issue, that is, whether princes and princesses need to be bestowed with the additional title of Okakuro or Ohovwore. In the same vein, research should draw

attention to who is a prince or princess in Okpe. Broadly speaking, every free born Okpe man or woman (there are no more slaves today) is a prince or princess by the fact of his or her ancestral roots in one of the Ruling Quarters. But this is an over-stretch of the point for all Okpe persons to be called princes or princesses. **Therefore, in a narrower sense, a prince or princess should be a direct offspring of an Orodje.** But even here, research should establish whether children born outside the throne can be called princes or princesses when at the time they were born, their father was not an Orodje. It may well be proper to speak of the appellation as applicable only to the Orodje children born while on the throne. We need however, to educate ourselves properly by way of articulated reasoning backed up by research and tradition, if any.

The third governance issue of immediate research interest relates to the officially designated titles for certain chiefs in the kingdom. We know of the 1962 Chiefs Law which gazetted the title of “The Ogoni of Okpe” and “The Okpo of Okpe”. Other chiefly titles are gazetted only for the purpose of issuance of certificates to the chiefs in Government recognition of Okpe kingdom as possessing a First Class Monarchy. We need to know the basis and utility of the two specially gazetted titles in the kingdom (aside from the Orodje-Okpe and Otota-Okpe); and incidentally these two special titles are from the Evbreke Ruling Quarters. There are also other curious titles which assume the image of monopoly of descent of the Ruling Quarters. In addition to Ogoni and Okpo, there are Odorume, Udugbeme, Odubu, Ugbo, Owhere, Uwheibor, Diemo, Okpagma and Odjegba. We need some research into the historic placement of these titles in the sense that they appear nebulous, errant, irritant, discriminatory and vexatious. In a different sense, they are unduly self-serving with tinges of nuisance value for other chiefs in the Ruling Quarters. We certainly need some research into this matter particularly whether we need to have special chiefly titles which can be linked to specific kingdom qualities, utilities, functionalities or special modes of socio-economic and politico-cultural activities in the kingdom or in the Orodje Palace.

In recent times in the traditional governance of the Okpe people, the kingdom has acquired an administrative structure of twelve districts. We are not sure when this district structure actually started. The Chiefs (Ekakuro) appointed by the Orodje to oversee the

districts have become important elements in the traditional governance of the kingdom. At a time they were wrongly referred to as dukes. The concepts of duke and dukedom certainly do not apply to the Okpe people. Happily, these concepts have gradually been dropped from our Palace lexicon. But we have a fundamental issue which requires the urgency of research as well as the urgency of being settled. The twelve districts as they are today, seen from the perspective of the four founding brothers of the Okpe people or the four Ruling Quarters have assigned only one district to **Orhue**. The Mereje district encompasses mainly **Orhue** Ruling Quarter. Incidentally, it is the largest of the twelve districts in terms of population, number of towns, villages or settlements and of the size of the territory. **Esezi** Ruling Quarter encompasses the district of Ughoton which also includes Jeddo and Ugbokodo. Although, elements of Esezi Ruling Quarter can be found in Ugolo district (for example, Odjedi) and also in Inume leading to Sapele, from the point of view of the twelve districts, **Esezi** is like **Orhue** being assigned only one district. The remaining ten districts namely: Aghalokpe, Amukpe, Sapele, Ozue, Arhagba, Inume, Ugborhe, Ugolo, Oha, and Orerokpe are distributed unfairly or unjustly or unreasonably between largely **Evbreke** and **Orhoro Ruling Quarters**. We are not aware of any reasonable grounds for the administrative traditional governance of the Okpe kingdom in which two Ruling Quarters alone share between themselves ten administrative districts. Rather unfortunately, **the new Okpe constitution which will soon be approved by Okpe-Agbameni** will contain and carry forward this rather unjustifiable division of the Okpe kingdom into twelve districts in which **Orhue** and **Esezi** have only one district each. The kingdom has a live-wire issue here to interrogate and to settle urgently.

Research Issues of Contemporary Urgency

We wish to draw attention to a few major issues of urgent research interest in Okpe society and economy. We believe that the Okpe kingdom and especially His Royal Majesty, Orhue I, Orodje of Okpe as well as other leadership forums will derive strength and content from concrete research findings in their advocacy roles and relationships to the federal, state and local governments; to agencies and actors of the public sector and private sectors in Okpe, and especially in attempts to alleviate the problematic issues of peace and security, unemployment and crime-control in contemporary Okpe.

- The Okpe environment and sub-economy are in very bad shapes. The consequences of the oil and gas industry particularly the exploitation of gas and the over-spills of petroleum products from the multiplicity of carriage-way pipes through Okpe land are causing enormous damage to the environment. Farm products for cash and foodstuff have been grossly affected by the oil and gas industries. Similarly, the do-or-die political economy of sharing community funds from the oil companies has induced horrible intra-community crises and criminality in Okpe.

- As a result of the preceding issue for research, there is gross spoliation of the ecosystem. Firm research in this area would enable the Okpe kingdom to call attention with concrete evidence to the relevant authorities for remediation of Okpe ecosystem.
- Although, it is a general phenomenon in the Niger Delta, the centrality of Okpe community as a meeting territory between the activity sectors in the escravos and in the upland areas have made Okpe land a disproportionate concentration of unemployed able-bodied men and ladies with the accompaniment of complex activities of crime and criminality. Sadly, crime and criminality are becoming unique industries or businesses and thereby creating terribly negative image for the Okpe people.
- Although also a matter of general application yet with curious impacts of the collapse of the education system, Okpe now experiences a crisis of value and morality. There are implications of this crisis for youth development with appropriate consciousness of Okpe society and community.
- Finally, the Okpe kingdom is heavily challenged by complex social forces from our neighbouring communities, and in particular the vexatious incursion of anti-Okpe activism from Itsekiri forces on the Sapele – Ugbore – Inume – Mereje - Ughoton sector; forces from Uvwie extraction and indeed Uvwie establishment in the Osubi – Okuokoko - Ohore sector; and those from Agbon ethnic nationality encroaching on and provoking the Okpe kingdom from Olukobare – Okuloho – Umiagwa sector. All these are particularly problematic and urgent. There is need for thorough systematic engagements in Okpe relationship with these neighbours. If for nothing, at least for the Okpe kingdom to stand firmly in possession of its own God-given resources, collective re-assurance and image profile. We can see a lot of problems ahead for all Okpe sons and daughters and as usual, culminating at the Orodje Palace.

Conclusion

As we indicated in the preliminary remarks, the issues which have been indicated above have not been researched into by this writer. Both the historical and contemporary issues have tremendous relevance for the Okpe people, the Okpe kingdom and the

welfare of all people including non-Okpe people who are resident in Okpe land. We hope that some of us somewhere and somehow would make meaningful contributions to the relevance of the research issues indicated for the good of Okpe kingdom.

(Opuraja, Delta State, Nigeria: October 25, 2007)

Source Materials

The underlisted materials are, to my knowledge, the **most relevant** books and related pieces on **The Okpe People**. The Colonial Intelligence Reports, some of which I have accessed, have been used lavishly by various writers on **The Okpe People**. I have seen and read two manuscripts yet to be published, but for ethical reasons, I have refrained from listing such manuscripts.

1. Onigu Otite: **Autonomy and Dependence – The Urhobo Kingdom in Modern Nigeria**, 1973.
2. Onigu Otite: “Okpe”, in the two editions of **The Urhobo People**, edited by Onigu Otite, 1982 & 2003 respectively.
3. Onigu Otite: “Development of Okpe as Exemplar of Urhobo History” in **History of The Urhobo People of Niger Delta** (UHS) edited by Peter Ekeh, 2006.

(Note: Professor Onigu Otite did original doctoral research on **The Okpe People** in the late 1960s and early 1970s from which work he has published many high-worth academic and intellectual articles and the book on **Autonomy and Dependence**).

4. Charles Osume: **The Okpe People**, 2006 (This author has indicated his desire to do a “series on the Okpe People based on extensive research work” for which he earned his doctoral credentials.
5. Charles Osume: “Get off the Backs of My Children” (no date).
6. Wilson Ometan: “The Origin of Okpe Ethnic Group”, **Okpe Forum**, 2006.
7. Isaac S. Mebitaghan: **A Brief History of Okpe Kingdom**, 2001.
8. Omoakpor Ofogba: **The Okpe People and the Orodje**

Question (no date).

9. Joseph Asagba: **The Untold Story of a Nigerian Royal Family – The Urhobo Ruling Clan of Okpe Kingdom**, 2005.
10. Vincent Edefejirhaye: **Repairing Desolations of Many Generations – Olomu Case**, (2006?).
11. David O. Dafinone: **“A Profile of David O. Dafinone”** in his 80th Birthday Programme of Celebration, 2007; and **“A short Biography of the late Chief Tom Omueya Dafinone”**, 1996 (Programme of the burial event of Chief T.O. Dafinone).
12. Patrick Aziza & Others: **Report of the Committee Set Up By Udogun Okpe**, 2004. (The Committee was set up “to look into the order of succession to the throne of Orodje of Okpe...” The Report contains six annexures of historical and contemporary value).
13. George Orewa: **The Report Enquiry into Orodje of Okpe Chieftaincy**, 1968.

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