

TRADITION AND GOVERNANCE IN OKPE KINGDOM

**A KEYNOTE ADDRESS
DELIVERED ON**

SEPTEMBER 01, 2007

**By
HRM ORHUE I, LL.M., CFR, mni
ORODJE OF OKPE KINGDOM**

**AT THE
3RD ANNUAL CONVENTION
OF THE
OKPE UNION OF NORTH AMERICA**

**HELD AT
MARRIOTT HOTEL, COLLEGE PARK, MARYLAND, MD. USA
AUGUST 31 – SEPTEMBER 03, 2007**

Introduction

Allow me to begin my Keynote Address to the 3rd Annual Convention of the Okpe Union of North America by congratulating all of you, Okpe sons and daughters residing in North America, for establishing the Okpe Union here in the American Diaspora. Before I ascended the throne I had communicated with the Okpe Union of North America and applauded the role which all of you have played and continue to play in promoting the development of Okpe land. I urge you to keep up the good work which you have all started. Your activities have helped tremendously to positively define, sustain and advance the place as well as the interest of Okpe in the comity of Nigerian nationalities.

When your president, Dr. Igbo Natufe told me of this convention, and requested me to attend, I readily endorsed the idea and accepted the invitation. I did so for two reasons. First, it is to underscore my continuing acknowledgement of the good work which the Okpe Union of North America is doing for its members' collective image and integrity in North America, and for the Okpe people at home in Nigeria and wherever they are in the world. Second, I wanted to use the opportunity of this Convention to address you – illustrious indigenes of Okpe Kingdom – in my capacity as the Orodje. Your General Secretary, Revd. Frank Ekejija, in extending the formal invitation to me mentioned a number of possible topics upon which I could speak. The topic and the theme of “**Okpe Tradition and Governance**” attracted me immensely for obvious reasons. As the Orodje of Okpe, I take pride in talking about our tradition since I am the custodian of Okpe tradition. In the same vein, as a lawyer and former public official at the national and international levels, I have taken keen interest in the art of governance. It is therefore with your indulgence that I wish to address you briefly on the subject matter of **Tradition and Governance in Okpe Kingdom**.

Outline of Okpe History

Located in the central senatorial district of Delta State in Nigeria, Okpe is a unique ethnic nationality. It has distinctive roots in ancient history, tradition, culture, custom and language. The knowledge of our people and their ways of life derives largely from oral history; and because of its antiquity and much of the distant past was not recorded in written form, the good lot of firm knowledge about ourselves remains to be studied and researched into, for definitive conclusions about our history. For example, one characteristic of our oral history is its grave silence on the maternal parenthood of our ancestors. While we can easily acknowledge the paternity of our progenitor, it is yet a matter of challenging research about the mother or wives of our ancestors. I say these things by way of further drawing attention to one area of fundamental interest that the Okpe Kingdom, during my reign, will be challenged by research into the ways of our people.

Regardless of the preceding observation, the historical tract of the Okpe people is conclusive. Our progenitor, Prince Igboze of Bini Empire, migrated from Benin City. The migration of Prince Igboze and his offsprings took several stages. Similarly, the offsprings of Prince Igboze who are our ancient ancestors funded several settlements

which blossomed subsequently into kingdoms before they finally founded and settled at Orerokpe, the Centre of Okpe Kingdom.

First, the progenitor of the Okpe, that is Prince Igboze, migrated from Benin City and founded a settlement at Olomu which is a sister-kingdom of Urhobo. Second, Prince Igboze's son, by name Okpe moved along with his relatives and associates to found another settlement called Okpe r'Ikpere (Okpe Isoko) in present day Isoko territory. Third, Orhue, who was the most senior of the four brothers (the children of Okpe) further migrated with two of his brothers, namely Evbreke and Esezi, from Okpe r'Ikpere (Okpe Isoko) and finally founded and settled at Orerokpe. Orhue's third brother who was the second son of Okpe, namely, Orhoro, who had stayed behind during the last stage of migration moved northwards and founded a settlement called Orhoro in Isoko territory now known as Ozoro. Orhoro subsequently joined his other brothers later in Orerokpe.

The four brothers, that is, Orhue, Orhoro, Evbreke, and Esezi, in this order of seniority, as our oral history has it, are the legendary founders of the Okpe Kingdom. These are the children of Okpe and the grandchildren of Prince Igboze who, as I already adverted, migrated from Benin City. Subsequently, development in Okpe society, economy and polity resulted in the establishment of various settlements by the four founding brothers of the Okpe Kingdom. As the kingdom grew and developed, the kingdom became designated and composed into the Four Ruling Quarters that correspond with the Four Founder Brothers. In contemporary times, to be legitimately acknowledged as an Okpe person (whether male or female) one must trace one's ancestry to one or more of the four founder brothers of Okpe Kingdom. You may have observed that I have carefully and deliberately avoided the issue of dates in Okpe history even when the kingdom is known to have become well established by the 15th Century. It cannot be said that the Okpe people emerged in human history from that Century. The Okpe people are ancient. Therefore the issue about dating the affairs of the people and the Okpe Kingdom call for greater research.

The Okpe territory is approximately 200 square miles. The headquarters of the kingdom is Orerokpe where the Orodje (Monarch or King) of Okpe resides in his Palace. It is usually from the Palace that the Orodje administers and governs the Okpe people according to Okpe tradition and custom and, in contemporary times, as prescribed by the laws of Nigeria and of Delta State. The Okpe people are the most populous monolithic ethnic nationality in Delta State. Their territorial neighbours are Agbon kingdom, Agbarho kingdom and Uvwie kingdom. The Okpe kingdom is clearly separated by rivers and waterways from the other communities of Itsekiri, Oghara, Mosogar and Idjerhe (Jesse).

For administrative purposes, the Okpe kingdom has long been organized into 12 districts. These districts consist approximately of 150 towns and villages. The districts are, in alphabetical order: Aghalokpe, Amukpe, Arhagba, Elume, Mereje, Orerokpe, Oha, Ozue (Okokporo), Sapele, Ughoton, Ugolo, and Ugborhe. These administrative districts are headed by district heads who are Ekakuro appointed by the Orodje. They oversee the

welfare of the Okpe people as well as all persons and structures which are resident or located in the districts on behalf of the Orodje.

As very peace-loving and hospitable people, the Okpe kingdom has, for centuries, maintained good relationship with our neighbouring communities or kingdoms with whose people we have close socio-cultural and economic ties, as well as extensive and deep marital relationship. Various ethnic nationalities are attracted to Okpe land because of our policy and practice of peace and hospitality, which the Orodje extols all the time and for which our people are very well known. Our economy and society are also very conducive for productive activities in all traditional and modern walks of life.

Let me also mention briefly that although the Okpe kingdom covers the two local government areas of Sapele and Okpe, our people and communities are located in towns and villages presently and wrongly included in some neighbouring local government areas, for example Ohorhe in Uvwie Local Government.

As I have already mentioned above, our people are rooted in migration from the Bini kingdom. This historical experience is similar to most other ethnic nationalities of the Western Niger Delta. Of all these nationalities however, Okpe history, language, tradition and culture are closer to those of Bini which form part of the Edo group of languages. Let me use this opportunity to challenge Okpe historians, ethnographers, linguists and others who are interested in the correct works on the affairs of Okpe to initiate research into all aspects of our people. In this connection, I would like to commend the Okpe Union of North America for awarding scholarship to an Okpe indigene to specialise in the study of Okpe language at the Delta State University, Abraka. It is my hope that awards of this kind will engineer comprehensive research and teaching of Okpe history and language in Okpe land and even beyond the Okpe territory. I recognise the importance of language in the sustenance of a people's tradition. I therefore lay serious emphasis on the study of Okpe language which invariably will include more studies of Okpe history. One significant thing that identifies any person with a particular area in this world is the language the person speaks, the food the person eats and the manner of the person's dressing. Non-indigenes may not do these things but when indigenes are unable to identify themselves properly with these characteristics, they lose a lot of their identities. It is for this reason that the Okpe kingdom under my reign is increasingly laying strong emphasis on the capability to speak the Okpe language before accepting to confer the title of Okakuro on befitting Okpe sons.

On Tradition and Governance

The concepts of *tradition* and *governance* are interfaced. They have always enjoyed intellectual discourse. Sometimes, tradition is made to refer to only elements of old and ancient relics of the past, which may even be fetish in contrast to the elements of life which are modern. In the context of this address, **tradition is a system and the way of life of a distinct people or nationality**. It is the sum total of the way a people is governed, the beliefs and customs of the society and the institutions and values which influence the behaviour of the people. **It is in this sense that governance itself is part of**

a tradition. We can therefore distinguish traditional governance from modern governance as systems in the process of growth and development of society. As a system, governance consists of institutions, processes, rules and regulations, values and norms which a people or nationality institutes for themselves to manage the resources and even also develop the resources of their society. Therefore, governance addresses from time to time the social, economic and political dimensions of life and even the traditional, cultural and customary activities of society. In the Nigerian context, it is the transformation of our kings or monarchs from the pre-colonial times to the contemporary Nigerian system that has given rise to the institutions and symbols of the past as being referred to as traditional rulers. In the Okpe Kingdom, whereas the Orodje-in-Council exercises all powers and authority including executive, legislative and political powers, in pre-colonial times, these important dimensions of governance have been taken over by modern governance in Nigeria.

For example, HRM Ezezi I exercised all-inclusive powers and authority. This has not been so since the kingdom was resuscitated in 1945. There are now distinct spheres of governance which the Orodje does not deal with. For example, The Orodje has nothing to do with maintenance of a military or combat force, judiciary, prisons and even taxation of indigenes, yet the Orodje, like other traditional rulers in Nigeria, is a very influential authority in his assistance to modern governance by the federal, state and local governments in the maintenance of law and order, peace and security, and the mobilisation of our people for productive engagement in government. The Orodje is always helping the modern day authorities to ensure that good government exists for good livelihood of our people, for agricultural production, industry, commerce, business and social life.

Some Aspects of Okpe Tradition

Proceeding from the above description of tradition, the system of values, institutions, beliefs, norms, etc, has a crucial role to play in the growth and development of a society. Indeed, tradition is the bedrock of a society as it advances and imperceptibly controls the forms and contents of livelihood of a people. This view of tradition applies to most organised societies and nations of the world, such as England or Britain, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and even the Jewish nation which today, apart from the State of Israel, straddles many other states of the world. Societies are governed within the sets of norms and essential values in their tradition.

Respect for tradition is a prerequisite for growth, development and advancement of a people. While tradition, as a system evolves with the dynamics of societal development, the core elements of tradition remain as defining factors which differentiate one society or nation from the other. For example, irrespective of their similarities in the level of economic and social development, Britain and Japan, which have constitutional monarchies, differ tremendously arising from the way history and tradition have mediated their values, norms and institutions of governance.

The Okpe people are patrilineal in family structure. Perhaps this is the reason, as I tried to indicate earlier, that our oral history tends to play down on the matrilineal side of the Okpe people. Inheritance is by primogeniture, that is, inheritance is anchored upon the first male descendant. In Okpe, the heir to the family is not expected to lord authority over all the offsprings of the family. He is only first, although an important first, among all the children. This explains why the male heir is regarded as “the **priest**” (Owharan) of the family, that is, where and when the ancestors are being worshipped or venerated. In the absence of the first male born, then any other male descendant regardless of age functions in that capacity. In Okpe, no female can play the role regarded for the male child in accordance with the traditions, yet female descendants are never disinherited in Okpe, not even after many years of successful marriage to other families. Female descendants are in certain respects very precious to Okpe family.

In Nigeria, respect for tradition is expressed differently in the different ethnic nationalities. However, each nationality jealously acknowledges respect for elders, leaders, and traditional institutions such as the Monarch or Chief. Even among the Igbo nationality which scholars often claim to be “stateless,” or “a cephalous” that is to say, which does not have original monarchies, they equally acknowledge the role of elders, leaders and traditional authorities. Yoruba tradition requires a Yoruba person to prostrate before monarchs or elders.

In greeting the monarch or Orodje, according to Okpe tradition, there are specific protocols the person must observe. The male Okpe person greets the Orodje by kneeling down on his left leg and placing his right elbow on his open left palm, as he says three times:

“Umogu!” The Orodje responds, “Ka’ada!”

“Umogu!” The Orodje responds, “Ka’ada!”

“Umogu!” The Orodje responds, “Ka’ada!”

Sometimes people add “**Wu ne sun tor**” meaning your reign shall be long and prosperous for the kingdom.

These compliments are then followed by the normal greeting in Okpe:

“mi di guo-ḡ!” meaning I am on my kneel, to which the Orodje responds, **“Vḡn rḡn do!”** meaning, get up with grace, thank you.

An Okakuro greets the Orodje in the same way but without kneeling down, but by placing the clenched right fist, not elbow, on the open left palm.

The case of the female Okpe person is not significantly different from that of the male, except that the female kneels down with both legs to express greetings and compliments to the Orodje.

The Okpe people, as I already said, always respect their elders. The first thing a younger Okpe does in the presence of one who is older, is to say, **“mi di guo-ḡ!”** (*I am on my*

knee.), whereupon the older person responds, “**vẹn rẹn do!**” (*Please rise; thank you!*) It is against Okpe norms for a younger person to accept this kind of greeting from one who is older. That is why, when two persons are unable to ascertain the elder of them, they usually will contend themselves with the simple salutation: “**do’o**” to each other, meaning mutual greetings. “**Do!**” in Okpe is a general all purpose greeting. Apart from its usual meaning of exchange of greeting, it also means, depending on the circumstances, thanks or **welcome** or **sorry**.

The Orodje symbolises the tradition, norms and customs of the Okpe people. Before I ascended the throne on July 29, 2006 (gazetted by the Delta State Government with effect from July 08, 2004) I had to greet my elders in accordance with the Okpe traditional norm. But since July 29, 2006, everyone in Okpe including my biological elders, some of whom may be present here at this Convention, now greet me in accordance with Okpe tradition, as I described above, by repeating “**Umogun!**” It should be noted that they are not greeting me as a person but as the royal symbol of the Okpe throne which I now occupy. The throne is the institution of authority and power in the context of traditional governance and administration of the Okpe Kingdom.

Okpe Governance

Good governance must include the following key elements: accountability, transparency, and participation. As the custodian of Okpe tradition, which includes customary law, I am accountable to the Okpe people in the governance of Okpe Kingdom. This accountability is different from the one associated with elected political officials who rely on the electorate for their subsequent elections to office. As the Orodje of Okpe, I do not face any periodic elections from the Okpe people. However, in my capacity as the Orodje of Okpe, I am bound by tradition and the customary requirements of the throne to ensure that the policies of Udogun-Okpe take into consideration the imperatives of accountability, fair play, equity and justice in Okpe governance. A government must be transparent in its management of a country’s affairs. Similarly, the administration of Okpe affairs under my reign is transparent. This is ensured by providing all Okpe citizens access to information on the deliberations of Udogun. The structure of traditional governance provided below offers all Okpe indigenes the right to participate in the administration of Okpe affairs. This is achieved through participation in the administrative districts and village levels.

The Okpe people are reputed to be the best organized ethnic nationality for administration and governance within its immediate geo-political area, second only to the Bini Kingdom. The administrative machinery set up by the pre-colonial Okpe people was so sound that it has generated intellectual interest among scholars. The Orodje, who is the traditional and customary head of the Okpe people, exercises his powers through three bodies, namely: Udogun-Okpe (Okpe Supreme Council), Okpe Traditional Council, and Okpe Assembly. The decisions reached at these bodies are communicated to the people as the decisions of Orodje-in-Council.

Udogun-Okpe: This is the highest decision-making body in Okpe Kingdom. It is the supreme organ for the traditional administration of the Okpe Kingdom. It consists of:

- Orodje of Okpe as Chairman
- Unu Okpe (Speaker of the Okpe Kingdom)
- Okpako-Ekakuro
- All Ekakuro-Okpe (Note that honorary Ekakuro are not members of Udogun)
- Ilotu
- Arijo

Okpe Traditional Council: This is a creation of law by the State Government to make rules and regulations for the good governance of the Okpe people. It consists of:

- Orodje of Okpe as Chairman
- Unu Okpe
- Okpako-Ekakuro
- Twenty six Ekakuro appointed by the Orodje from the Four Ruling Quarters.
- The chairmen of Okpe and Sapele Local Government Councils.

Okpe Assembly: This is an assembly of representatives of all Okpe people. Generally speaking, it is through the Okpe Assembly that decisions of Udogun are communicated to the Okpe people. It consists of:

- Orodje of Okpe as Chairman
- All Udogun-Okpe members.
- Ehovwore-Okpe (Female Chiefs)
- Representatives of the twelve (12) Okpe Districts or village groups.
- Representatives of Okpe institutional stakeholders as recognized by Udogun-Okpe such as the Okpe Union

The Orodje presides over meetings of Udogun Okpe. In his absence, the Unu Okpe presides over meetings of the Udogun, but whatever decisions reached are brought to the Orodje for his assent.

The above organs represent the system of administration in Okpe Kingdom.

Title Holders: Permit me to use this opportunity to explain certain categories of title holders in Okpe Kingdom.

- **Okakuro-Okpe:** This is a male holder of the traditional title of Chief (Okakuro) in Okpe Kingdom, who is a male descendant of one of the Four Ruling Quarters of Okpe Kingdom. He is a member of Udogun-Okpe.
- **Ohovwore-Okpe:** Is a female holder of the traditional title of Chief (Ohovwore) in Okpe Kingdom, who is a female descendant of one of the Four Ruling Quarters of Okpe Kingdom, or whose husband is an Okakuro. She is not a member of Udogun-Okpe but she is a member of the Okpe Assembly. She can however be invited to Udogun by the Orodje-in-Council if need be, and participate in various ceremonies at the Orodje Palace and in the Kingdom.

- **Honourary Okakuro-Okpe:** Is a male holder of the traditional title of Honourary Chief, who is not a male descendant of any of the Four Ruling Quarters of Okpe Kingdom. To be conferred with the title of an Honourary Okakuro, such a person should have been involved in Okpe activities which advance the socio-economic and political well-being and interests of the Okpe people.
- **Honourary Ohovwore-Okpe:** Is a female holder of the traditional title of Honourary Chief who is not a female descendant of any of the Four Ruling Quarters, or whose husband is not an Honourary Okakuro as defined above. To be conferred with the title of Honourary Ohovwore, such a person or her husband should have been involved in Okpe activities which advance the socio-economic and political well-being and interests of the Okpe people

As you all know, colonialism and the governance system of post colonial Nigeria have greatly reduced the independence of monarchs and weakened their jurisdictions in the administration and governance of their respective kingdoms. For example, as the Orodje of Okpe I lack the powers to appropriate the resources in Okpe Kingdom for my people. This function was usurped by the British and, since independence in 1960, has been taken over by successive Nigerian and state governments. Thus, in terms of managing the resources of Okpe Kingdom to address socio-economic and political challenges in Okpe land in the process of governance, what I do as the Orodje of Okpe, is to facilitate social and economic activities to ensure that Okpe people obtain their fair allocation within the Nigerian polity, from the three tiers of government. I bring the concerns of Okpe people to the appropriate government authorities without engaging myself in partisan political activities. The main political in-fighting to achieve this goal is left to the class of Okpe political leaders in their respective political parties, and at the various levels of government – local, state, and federal.

Conclusion

The survival and sustenance of a tradition depends on the people of that society, especially the educated elites. Any language that is threatened by extinction can hardly sustain the tradition of the people, without the active involvement of its people to promote its use. It is difficult to sustain tradition without a language. I have directed Okpe and Sapele Local Governments to pass by-laws to make the learning of Okpe language in primary schools in the Kingdom compulsory. In addition, a prominent Okpe son is trying to establish a **Centre for the Learning of Okpe Language** in Orerokpe. I am also looking for some one who can do the same for Sapele. You, Okpe elites, have a crucial role to play in this process. I notice that the promotion of Okpe Language is featured in your activities. You should hold fast to it.

You have witnessed the importance of tradition in the societies you reside in North America and in Europe. You must resist the temptation to discard your Okpe tradition in favour of foreign tradition and culture. Begin from your homes by speaking Okpe to your spouses and children. Give your children Okpe names, dress in Okpe attire (at least at social gatherings), and entertain your guests with Okpe dishes and Okpe music.

Let me, once again, thank you for hosting this Convention, the 3rd in a series of the Okpe Union of North America. I urge you to remain good ambassadors of Okpe Kingdom and of Nigeria in North America. You should endeavour to touch base. Do not forget your root. Invest in the Kingdom.

I wish you successful deliberation throughout the Convention.

Thank you and God bless.

HRM Orhue I, CFR, mni
The Orodje of Okpe Kingdom of Delta State, Nigeria.

College Park, Maryland, USA.
September 1st 2007