

ORAL ARCHIVES ON EKPEYE KINGS AND RULERS, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Kingship in Ekpeye is barely a new development. This makes it learning and developing process. Though this process has lasted for a century, the Ekpeye people are yet to perfect the entire customs and tradition. This paper examined the segments of the Kingship as it is practice and documents same for posterity. Interestingly, most of the segments are not used to the people and have not been adopted properly in everyday use. This paper becomes an eye opener for the people from those who know the system very well and unto those who desire to know the system of Ekpeye Kingship.

INTRODUCTION

The King or a Traditional Ruler in Ekpeye Culture holds in high esteem all his peoples' way of life. He parades all the regalia of his people in culture, custom, tradition, history, beliefs, proverbs, folklore, poems, etc as legendary. He also represent as the head of the traditional religion. However, there is a spiritual diviner who usually consult the gods and the ancestors for the way forward. The coming of Christianity and civilization has not changed anything in these forms but may have only modified them. This is because, these believes are deep seated norms. Strong believes in 'Totem Animals' as the Spirit Beings of the Ancestors as an example are still the practice of this tradition. A case study is the 'Edeoha Sacred Beings', a totem sacred sculptures which appear once in seven years. The events for the appearance of these sculptures are usually very overwhelming. An Ekpeye King or Ruler may die but the stool or title remains. Through royal ancestral tradition and regalia, these positions are immortalized. These regalia are usually sacred ancestral objects that identify and epitomized the ethnic identities and history. This institution embraces the totality of the culture. However, this creates problems most times. The King or Ruler becomes a source of punishment, judgment and rewards. In order to fill these many roles, social groups, clan heads, royal kin and others are co-opted into ruler ship.

OBJECTIVE

The Ekpeye clan is one of such clan with Kings and Rulers. This institution is historical and highly resourceful. It was a story of trade, war, slavery, capitalism and imperialism, and resistance. These events culminated in the crowning of a legend and a man of high reputation, King Nworisa as the first. He was first appointed leader, later as a chief, before he was finally made a King. This happened at about the 19th century. This position became necessary in order to protect the empire, the people and the culture of the Ekpeyeland from the foreign invaders. Today, this institution has continued to survive the difficulties of time and cultural heritage sustained. We have considered this paper very necessary because the current decline in old age among this people. Worst still, those who are a life are those who cannot read or write. We have said that the tradition of this people are persevered in songs, proverbs, folklores, poems, beliefs, etc which always demand the presence of someone who knows. Why this culture places value on the people, the people are without education.

These are some the problems that inspired this paper. It is a means to explore and document as much as possible the oral archives in this culture, especially the way it concern Kings and Rulers. It is also to provide further frameworks for Ekpeye history writers.

LITERATURES

Some scholars in Africa have said that Kingship came to Africa from two perspectives. One group led by Charles G. (1997) related Kingship in Africa from ancient Egypt through the Nile into Eastern Africa, and eventually to West Africa across the Sahara. Another group originates Kingship in Africa from the Sub-Saharan Africa which later spreads to Egypt and near East. However, there is no reason to believe that African Kingship had a single geographical source. Independent invention is a more attractive and plausible theory to believe, according to Encyclopedia of Africa (1997). Africa propagated their culture through various oral forms as basis of their literature to transmit knowledge and also help in explaining abstract objects. These means were in various forms, such as songs, parables, tales, folklores, poems, proverbs, believe systems, etc. These means helped to preserve their knowledge as much as possible. Some previous European writers have published Africa as a people without any documented culture, perhaps unknown to them these other forms. Others have also published from miss-interpreted information. According to Obot P'Bitek, (1970).

'They dress up African deities with Hellenic robes and parade them before the European world. They now claim that African deities have all the attributes of the Christian God'.

Unfortunately, successive African scholars have continued in this spirit, trying to become what they are not and placing themselves where they do not belong.

In another colonial assimilation, Idowu (1973), states that, *'direct colonial indoctrination has been so effective in many areas that the aboriginals have come to see themselves as grasshoppers in their own eyes, despising whole-heartedly, their own native cultures and religious values in alternatives.'*

This adulterated frame of mind made Africans un-interested in themselves, losing consciousness of the past and also missing the focus. This has made many non-African writers to describe African cultures in derogatory unacceptable terms. Within this understanding, a traditional ruler or king in Ekpeye holds the highest insignia of cultural or political authority in his clan or community. According to Aborisade (1979) *'a traditional ruler means the traditional head of an Ethnic unit or clan, who for the time being holds the highest traditional authority'*. There were attempts also by the European traders to perpetuate Kingship lineage by encouraging the children of the Obas, Chiefs, and the Emirs to be educated. Anomolaran (2002) said *'the provision of Western education to the society made a great difference, as the people saw themselves in relation to some political institutions.'* The organizational structure that brings the Chiefs together has some defined goals and activities, especially from their leaders. Ralph (2000) had further stressed that *'authority roles can be distinguished from non-authority roles'*. Therefore, conflict could arise when these forms were abused.

In Rivers State, the consciousness of the Rivers Province led to the birth, of Rivers Council of chiefs in 1953. *'The life and activities of this Council was however short-lived'* according to Alagoa (1999). It however re-emerged as Rivers Chiefs, with Francis O. Alagoa, Mingi X of Nembe becoming its first chairman.

At the end of the Nigerian civil war, the government of Rivers state under Alfred Diète Spiff considered it necessary to classify and upgrade various chieftaincy stools to identify the clans. This was between 1970 and 1973. This also resulted in the chieftaincy Edict No.5 of 1978 which allows for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd class chiefs, Etepkpe (2009).

ORAL ARCHIVES IN EKPEYE

Introduction

History has given an account of man on earth to be about 500,000 years, while civilization accounts for 6,000 years of writing and printing, ELIS (1970). Unfortunately, in Ekpeye Kingdom, this civilization started barely late in about 700 years ago. When the civilization entered this Kingdom, it was also not well received. It was initially perceived as Western education and inferior to the traditional education. This attitude led to a few educated men in Ekpeye. This as a result could not place on record good written information from Ekpeye norms and practice, hence the urge for these oral archives on Kings and Rulers. The paper also used Resource persons who were interviewed and the information stored in Audio Tape. There were pictures also taking for this purpose. Below are the interpretations of our result.

Classification of Chiefs

First in the line of interview was a paramount ruler and also a King maker by name Ogwuegbe (2011). He narrated that by his calculation, Ekpeye age bracket could be counted at twelve centuries, which is about 1,200 years. Another source traced the age to when Oba Ewuare of Benin Kingdom was on the throne 1440 AD. This period is however calculated at 573 years. It was also noted that this Benin history that came to Ekpeye was a migration that met some people already living in this area. Instead, the migration of Akalaka to Ekpeye from Benin at this time rather influenced the dating history of Ekpeye Kingdom. The Ekpeye cleavage has the challenge of an archeological history in order to prove the actual age information.

Establishment of Schools in Ekpeye

In a cluster of Primary School education origin, it was also discovered that reading and writing came to Ekpeye barely 100 years ago. Below is a list of 9 schools in Ekpeye taking from the Rivers State Ministry of Education, Zonal Office, Ahoada. They are:

Name	Date	Years
1. State school, Ogebe	1909 – 2013	104
2. Govt. Primary School, Ahoada	1910 – 2013	103
3. State School, Edeoha	1912 – 2013	101
4. St. Paul's State School, Ahoada	1936 – 2013	77
5. S.D.A Primary School, Ahoada	1945 – 2013	68
6. State School, Ihuowo	1946 – 2013	67
7. UPE School, Edeoha	1957 – 2013	56
8. County High School, Ahoada	1957 – 2013	56
9. Govt. Girls Sec. School, Ahoada	1984 – 2013	29

Kingship Perspectives

On the Kingship perspectives, Chief Ogwuegbe traced it to King Nworisa of Ogebe Town in Upata Clan. This man whose community lives at the river bank had close relationship with

King Jaja of Opobo, and other Kalabari Kings. This friendship with other Kings and also because of his prowess at home, he was later made a King. This action also became necessary in order to have someone who will protect the interest of the Ekpeye people and also serve as an intermediary with the European traders along the oil rivers. It was also said that this King resisted all forms of European exploitation. In his wish to protect the interest of his people, he became notorious which led the white men to plan for his deportation to Degema where he finally died in exile. He was later succeeded by his son-in-law, Eze Ashirim Unoshi 11, after a period of time. It has also been noted that from the time Ashirim became the King, many other Kingship positions emerged. These included one each from the four clans in Ekpeye, namely; Ubie, Igbuduya, Akoh, and Upata. This nomenclature has further increased into more Kingships such as; Ehuda clan, Igbuobi clan, Ukani-ula clan and Ulakor clan. Each one of these clans now has a King. This brings the total number of Kings in Ekpeye to nine divide and rule, including His Royal Majesty, King Robinson O. Robinson, Eze Ekpeye-Logbo 111. There are also other Lineage chiefs, High chiefs, Village chiefs and family chiefs.

It was also noted that in Ekpeye, no Kingship position is taken by heredity. It is never from father to son. People are usually either elected or recognized into them according to personality and Legendary. This is highly reserved because of the responsibilities that come with these positions. Over the time, elections into these positions have remained peaceful and resolute.

Forms of Greeting

In his response, Elder Simeon Oduku(2012) said an Eze or Chief is crowned on personal recognition. He is chosen because of his outstanding character and contributions to the growth and development of his immediate community and Ekpeye as a whole. The processes are the same at any level. At Ekpeye, the first community which represents as the first son acts as the King maker. At other levels, it is the first family in a community or the second as the case maybe. These positions act as birth right and are not usually contestable. This elder also stated the forms of greetings in Ekpeye among the Ezes and Chiefs. The greetings are slated according to classes. From the highest to the lowest receive greetings in the form of 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 time for the lowest. The highest class is the Eze Ekpeye-Logbo who receives five times greetings by prostrating, namely;

1. Eze Ekpeye
2. Eze Ekpeye
3. Eze Ekpeye
4. Eze Ekpeye
5. Eze Ekpeye Logbo

The clan Ezes receives greetings four times also by prostrating, namely;

1. Eze Igbu
2. Eze Igbu
3. Eze Igbu
4. Eze Igbu-Ukani-Ula

The Lineage Ezes have three times greetings also by prostrating, namely;

1. Eze Emene
2. Eze Emene

3. Eze Emene Echi Odhio

The High Chiefs and Village Chiefs receive greetings two times, also by prostrating, namely;

1. Eze Unuma
2. Eze Unuma Ekpeye 1, or
 - i. Eze Nwe – Ula
 - ii. Eze Nwe- Ula Edeoha.

The family chiefs are honoured with one greeting also by prostrating, namely; Eze Nwe-Obodo. You can add his family name if you know it, if not, at this level, it is accepted.

RESPONSIBILITIES

Chief Wilcox Ugboji (2012) stated that the responsibilities of the chiefs are so many to the communities and Government. He however enumerated the followings;

1. Peace settlements between husband and wife, as well as other members
2. Settlements of Land disputes
3. Sustenance of culture and tradition
4. Punishment of civil offenders
5. Administration of community matters
6. Protection of Government / Community projects
7. Providing Links between Government and Community. Etc

These responsibilities are usually shared among the levels of Chieftaincy institutions. Cases of criminal nature are referred to the police for court jurisdiction, while civil cases are handled traditionally by experienced people. Benefits are also issues in Ekpeye chieftaincy institution. Chief Ugboji (2012) confirmed that lower chiefs in Ekpeye are not paid money from any quarters. They are only honoured and respected in the community. But higher chiefs who are either in 1st, 2nd or 3rd classes are paid monthly from the Local Government resources. This is perhaps due to the roles they play in local governance. Mr. Uchi Ojikpo (2012), a community activist said chiefs do not play ritual roles in the community. This is because ritual roles are usually been performed by diviners who have direct relationship with the gods. Therefore, every family or community have diviners who perform these activities when the need arises. He also said the death of a king is not commonly announced. This is because some issues have to be settled. This could take some time but not more than a day. When it is finally settled, the death is announced with some canon shuts for as many times as the bereaved can afford. This is followed by youth rampage. Perhaps, side by side with the youth rampage will be the women group singing round the town in praise and adoration of the dead king. This mood will continue until the King is finally buried and a seven day burial rites performed.

CONCLUSION

The Ekpeye kingship suffered continuity for sometime after the death of king Nworisa because of the circumstances that surrounded his death. It was also noted that this king also operated his kingship in secrets and as a sole administrator which made it difficult for another person to easily accept the position. However, in 1960 according Amini-Philip (1994) a son - In -Laws of the first king accepted the throne and was crowned accordingly by the Government of Rivers

State. He was king Ashirim Unoshi 11. This king who was himself an educated man brought so much innovation to Ekpeye Kingship. He also brought so much wisdom, structure, accessibility, and democracy to its process and installation, which paved the way to what we now have as Ekpeye dynamic kingship institutions.

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