

## CHIEFTAINCY INSTITUTION IN POST COLONIAL KOLOKUMA CLAN: AN EXAMINATION OF THE CHANGING ROLES OF TRADITIONAL RULERS

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### ABSTRACT

*Chieftaincy Institution is an age long phenomenon in practically all parts of Nigerian. It was the profound establishment of this institution, especially in Northern Nigeria that partly accounted for the introduction of the indirect rule system of government in Nigeria. In Kolokuma clan of present day Bayelsa State, Chieftaincy Institution as instituted today, is a recent development. Essentially, pre-colonial Kolokuma communities were segmentary, autonomous, and classically democratic. The people did not evolve a centralized political authority until the advent of colonial rule which brought them together under a central leadership. The post-colonial period witnessed remarkable changes in chieftaincy institution in the clan. A committee was set up in 1975 to enquire into the classification of Chiefs and identification of clans in River State. This consequently led to the transfer of power to make and unmake chiefs from the people in which power resides to the apparatus of government. This work, therefore, is designed to examine the institution in Kolokuma clan in post-colonial times. Kolokuma clan is one of the clans that constitute Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Area of Bayelsa State and comprises nine communities. Primary and Secondary sources of data will be utilized for this study and it will be historical and analytical.*

### Introduction

Kolokuma clan is one of two clans that make up the Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. It comprises nine communities/towns namely; Ayibobiri, Igbedi, Kaiama, Odi, Okoloba, Olobiri, Sampou and Seibokorogha. All these towns are situated along the banks of River Nun, a tributary of the great River Niger. The towns cover an area of about 10-30 square kilometers (Obubo 2005). The area is bounded in the North by Opokuma clan, on the South by Kabou clan, East by Okordia/Zarama and West by Gbarain clan. The prevalent climate in the area is dry and wet seasons with rains almost all through the year. The wet or rainy season begins in March, reaching its peak around September and terminates by November. In April and May the rains come in violent storms, destroying and pulling down trees, crops and house roofs. At that period, it is also accompanied by heavy down pour of short duration when several inches of rain may be recorded within an hour. Around August, there is a brief dry period or break usually known as "August break" ("Awanra" in Kolokuma) (Obubo 2005).

Due to the geographical location of the area, it experiences more rainfall compared to other parts of the country. Rain falls throughout the year, the only difference is in the degree of rain experienced each month. The area is also vulnerable to annual flooding. There are two separate and distinct annual floods in the area which are distinguished both by their causes and periods of occurrence. The first is due to local rainfall while the other is caused by flood water coming down the Niger. The dry season starts from around early November and lasts till March every year. The influence of the harmattan in this area is not severe compared to other areas or regions and may last only for a few weeks in December and January. During this period the sun is usually high and intense, but the high temperature and humidity favor quick plant growth. This is the period when farmers clear the bush for farming and later burn it for planting after the early rains which soften the soil for cultivation (Obubo 2005)

The farmers produce a large variety of crops, in particular, yam, cassava, maize, cocoyam, plantain, banana, pepper, groundnut, etc. The area is not only blessed with a rich soil but with abundant natural resources. This is one area in the Niger Delta where farming is more important than fishing. However, when the work on the farm is reduced, some men supplement farming with fishing either along the nearby creeks or in the main river – River Nun.

Kolokuma traditions, as recorded by S. K. Owonaru (E. J. Alagoa, *The Land and People of Bayelsa State* 1999), stated that the father of Kolokuma was a man called Ndo. Ndo settled among the Mein and finally among the Igbedi Creek. The Igbedi Creek settlement was a place called Agadagbabou. This became the dispersal centre of the various Kolokuma settlements that moved out to the Nun River. Accordingly, Owonaru stated that the original home of Ndo before migration was Ile-Ife. He said Ndo left Ile-Ife for Benin and it was from there he migrated to his present abode many centuries ago (E. J. Alagoa, *A History of the Niger Delta* 1972). The “sons of the eponymous ancestor of the Kolokuma, named in various versions of tradition as Kolokumaowei, Kala-Okun and Aluku, eventually led the people out of Igbedi Creek into the Nun (E. J. Alagoa, *The Land and People of Bayelsa State* 1999).

According to E. J. Alagoa, the number of settlements on the Nun River banks has been a further source of divergent traditions. There is a pull between traditions of common origin of all Kolokuma settlements and having multiple traditions of origin. Owonaru implies that the migration out of Agadagbabou was championed by the seven sons of Kolokuma’s ancestor – Kala-Okun. These seven sons were; Aba, Buru, Egbe, Ise, Ofo, Olou, and Opoi who founded the seven lineages of Abadani, Burudani, Egbebiri, Isedani, oloudani, Ofodani and Opoidani. To these lineages were added those of Egbedani founded by Egbe (E. J. Alagoa, *The Land and People of Bayelsa State* 1999). Owonaru posits that Osuodani was founded by “Eweli, an immigrant from Iboland”, he was a blacksmith. It was this man that founded present day Ayibobiri.

With regards to the migration, settlement and origin of the Kolokumas, it is not uncommon for groups to claim descent from places that have great prestige. The widespread claims to Benin origin merely reflected the prestige of the Benin Kingdom, and its influence over some of the mainland parts of the Niger Delta. Ile-Ife was cited as a place of origin by Owonaru probably because he learnt even Benin claimed Ile-Ife origin for their kings. The oral traditions of the Ijo groups of the Niger Delta suggest that the periods of their possible first

entry into the Niger Delta are so remote that they cannot be remembered in their traditions. The movements that can be remembered and are recounted are mainly traditions of migration within the Niger Delta from one part to the other (E. J. Alagoa, A History of the Niger Delta 1972). It is possible to identify a number of primary and secondary centers out of which migrations took place, mainly from the Central Niger Delta. Pre-colonial Kolokuma clan was classically democratic, segmentary, and autonomous. Each town was self-governing and did not regard any other as superior to the other. Significantly, the town was the main unit of political organization during this period.

### **Chieftaincy Institution in Post-Colonial Kolokuma Clan**

The post-colonial period witnessed remarkable changes in chieftaincy institution in Kolokuma Clan. It is a known fact that the Eastern Region during the colonial era had a House of Chiefs, where chiefs from various parts of the region represented their people; this continued even after independence. However, with the military takeover and the subsequent creation of River State by the Gowon's government in 1967, Kolokuma clan became part of River State. By this time, political consciousness had been fully aroused among the chiefs; consequently, a chieftaincy edict was passed in 1978, which established a Council of Traditional Rulers in River State. A committee, comprising of T. N. Tamuno and E. J. Alagoa was, set up 30<sup>th</sup> June, 1975, "to enquire into the classification of chiefs and the identification of clans in River State. Later, after the fall of the Gowon administration, two others were included in the committee, namely; E. J. Nwala and F. O. Nwafor, by the military governor of the state – Col. Zamani Lekwot in 1976.

The committee took pains to make elaborate preparations for the successful execution of this important assignment. It distributed many copies of its questionnaire which contained important information on the terms of reference. Interested persons and communities were asked to submit memoranda and they granted oral interviews on questions relevant to the work of the committee. Terms of reference on the classification of the chiefs were:

- i. The area of the communities over which each chieftaincy exercised authority.
- ii. The status and functions of each chieftaincy in the area of authority and the traditional method of selection of incumbents to each chieftaincy title in its area of operation.

Inherent in the above terms of reference laid the inquiry about powers, privileges and functions of the chiefs which the committee was to find out. And the information needed was to be supplied by each of the communities of the chiefs (Namene 1997). The committee was faced with a lot of challenges in the course of its duties. However, it was able to come up with such recommendations which were presented to the government about the classification of chiefs. It recommended among other things that there should be graded and ungraded chiefs. That there should be three or four classes of graded chiefs and that the government should give recognition to graded chiefs only (Namene 1997).

As a follow up to the recommendations of the committee, chieftaincy tools were classified in order of grades. Registration of chiefs began, subject to government review from time to time, as may be necessary and the report was made public. It will be pertinent to note some of the salient points contained in the committee's conclusion.

- i. Government has decided to accord due recognition to traditional rulers at a level compatible with modern democratic government.
- ii. As much as possible, traditional rulers would be allowed adequate scope and facilities for performance of their legitimate traditional roles in the community (Namene 1997).

The application of the above statement infers the transfer of power to make and unmake chiefs from the people in whom power reside to the apparatus of government. Government now graded chiefs and also decided who should and should not be chief – it recognized and rejected chiefs. However, it was through this process of selection and classification of chiefs in River State in 1978, that the Ibedaowei Stool was consolidated in Kolokuma Clan as it given a first class recognition. Even here, the oral information on the status of the stool varies. For while Chief Victor Meli stated that the stool was given second class recognition (Meli 2010), Chief Asangba and Pastor Yeibaki said it was first class recognition that was given to the stool (Asangba, 2010, Yeibaki, 2010). However, the Ibedaowei stool (clan head) of Kolokuma became very pronounce through this exercise.

By his classification as first class chief, the Ibedaowei, was expected to be given the same privileges and entitlements as his colleagues. Besides, first class was the highest grade of chiefs, thus becoming a first class chief was important as it placed the Ibedoawei above the lower class of chiefs and by implication gave him a higher prestige. Also of importance is that, by the time of this exercise, the Ibedaowei's stool had become vacant as the incumbent Chief A. A. Ikiba had passed on. Consequently, there was need to conduct another election to fill the vacuum. According to informants, the entire communities in Kolokuma presented candidates for the selection which was held 1978. It was a delegate-election and five persons represented each community/town in the clan. The contestants were; Obere Subai (Kaiama), Christopher Alazigha (Okoloba), S. A. Erezigha-Seibokorogha, Park (Sampou), Ayawari Gberi (Igbedi) and F. G. Aganaba (Odi), etc. (Stanley 2009).

All the contestants according to Millionaire Asangba were asked to address the people in both Ijo and English languages. Similarly they were given documents written in Ijo and English languages to read. At the end of this exercise, which was part of the screening exercise of candidates; F. G. Aganaba stood out among other contestants. Eventually, when the proper voting took place, he emerged the winner and was consequently installed as the Kala-Okun II, Ibedaowei of Kolokuma clan (Stanley 2009). It will be necessary to emphasize that the chieftaincy during this era was no longer based on gerontocracy but on literacy, that is, it was people who could read and write that were elected or selected to become chiefs. Consequently, the councils were also made up of literate people, thus, gerontocracy that administered the land in pre-colonial Kolokuma clan was abolished. The same electoral process elevated HRM, King Mozi Onya Agara, in 2003 at the demise of F. G. Aganaba (all clan heads in Bayelsa state are called His Royal Majesties).

With the creation of Bayelsa state by Gen. Sani Abacha in 1996, the then military government of Col. Paul Obi set up a commission headed by Gabriel Okara, to re-classify chieftaincy stools in the state – this commission was still working when democracy was

restored again. This committee was asked to continue its work by Chief D. S. P. Alamiyeseigha, the first civilian governor of Bayelsa State. The recommendations of this commission led to the consolidation of the Ibedaowei stool as a first class stool. The Ibedaowei (clan head) as the name implies was and still the head of the clan. Kolokuma clan has nine towns and the Ibedaowei oversees the affairs of the clan. He is the chairman of Kolokuma council of chiefs and presided over their meetings. The Amananaowei, on the other hand, administers a particular town in Kolokuma clan. Each of the towns in Kolokuma clan had their Amananaoweis and these formed the Kolokuma Council of Traditional Rulers.

Another significant development in the institution especially in the 1970s, with the heightening of political consciousness by the chiefs, was the emergence of the Amadaowei stool in Kolokuma communities. This stool evolved as a result of the emphasis on the literacy as a criterion for dealing with government. The old men who were the Amananaoweis of their various towns in Kolokuma clan were illiterates; they could neither read nor write and as such were declared unfit to represent their communities effectively when dealing with the government. There was also the need for someone to represent them in the traditional ruler's council, in River State, someone who was literate and articulate and this led to the evolution of the Amadaowei's stool in some Kolokuma communities.

The newly created stool of Amaodaowei, according to Alazigha, was expected to function like a prime minister and leader, holding brief for the Amananaowei (Alazigha 1996). The Amadaowei was expected to convey the message of the Amananaowei to the State Council of Traditional Rulers. He served as mouthpiece between the government and the people of his community. It was his duty to receive government officials and report to the Amananaowei. Similarly, he was expected to attend government functions and ceremonies while the Amananaowei took care of all traditional affairs (Manimiekumo 2010). The Amadaowei stool was elective and open to general campaign and balloting. It was not restricted to any of the members of any special family within the town. The only exception was that slaves and persons who claim dual citizenship may not be elected (Manimiekumo 2010). The Amananaowei works through his counselors made up of compound heads which constitute his council. In the same vein, the Ibedaowei's council comprises of Amananaoweis from the various towns in the clan.

With the passage of time, particularly in the 1990s, when Gabriel Okara's commission was set up to reclassify chieftaincy stools in Bayelsa State, and called for memoranda from interested communities, some communities in Kolokuma clan prepared and submitted memoranda requesting for the recognition of the Amananaowei stool as against the Amadaowei stool. This was a response to the lingering chieftaincy crisis in some towns in the clan where the Amadaoweis had become so powerful and had usurped the powers of the Amananaoweis because of their closeness to the seat of power. In the case of Odi, the Amadaowei stool had been given recognition in the 1970s during the reclassification exercise of Prof. Tamuno's committee as against the Amananaowei stool that the community applied for. Consequently, it was the Amananaowei stool that was given second class recognition during the exercise.

Other stools that got reclassification and recognition in Kolokuma clan during the exercise were; Amananaowei of Kaiama (second class), Amatugu of Igbedi (third Class),

Amananaowei of Okoloba (third class) and Amananaowei of Seibokorogha (third class) (Alazigha 1996). Thus, out of the nine communities/towns in Kolokuma clan, five received recognition and classification, while the remaining four are ungraded chiefs. But this time, the Amananaowei was no longer the oldest man but a literate, someone who could read and write and make an effective representation of the village or community to government and other fora. Furthermore, the criteria for occupying this stool was embedded in the constitutions of the various communities as constitution writing became the order of the day. Almost all communities in Kolokuma clan now have a constitution which guides the administration of towns/villages (Warikoru 2010). It is expedient to state at this juncture that, the chieftaincy crises in Kolokuma are caused by the people themselves. They created the Amadaowei stool in these villages to enable them have representatives in the Traditional Rulers Council to deal with government on their behalf because the Amananaoweis were illiterate. Thus, the dilemma is that, they created titles in a soil not suitable for it, this is what has resulted to crises in these communities.

### **Changing Roles of Traditional Rulers in Post-Colonial Kolokuma Clan**

With regards to the role or functions traditional rulers played in post-colonial Nigeria in general and Kolokuma clan in particular, there is no constitutional role provided for them in the Nigerian Constitution. In fact, the local government administration in Nigeria, as enshrined in the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and repeated in the 1999 constitution, is in the hands of the elected chairman and his councilors. The above situation has made E. J. Alagoa to posit that the usurpation of authority from the traditional rulers by federal, state, and local government after 1960 is responsible for the inability to apply traditional rulers means of conflict resolution in settling disputes that break out in our domains (E. J. Alagoa 2002).

In spite of the pathetic situation traditional rulers in the country found themselves, government at various levels acknowledge the existence of traditional rulers in Nigeria up to present time – but acknowledging their presence is one thing, giving them power is another. Presently, they have no power and are at the mercy of the government. However, the federal, state and local governments in different ways try to increase the quality of their lives. Governors, Ministers and other government officials, both appointed and elected, pay courtesy calls to traditional rulers and appeal to them to help maintain peace, law and order in their domains (Yeibaki 2010). Today, most, if not all states, have a Council of Traditional Rulers which meets at regular intervals and convey their opinions on various matters to the government of their state. The Ibedaowei of Kolokuma is a member of this council in Bayelsa state. Similarly, he is the co-chair of Kolokuma/Opokuma Council of Traditional Rulers. This Council comprises Amananaoweis from both Kolokuma and Opokuma clans; while the Kolokuma Council of Traditional Rulers comprises Amananaoweis from Kolokuma towns.

The Chairman and councilors which make up the local government come from towns, each of which has its Amananaowei, and the clan has an Ibedaowei. Thus, by relating with the chairman and councilors, the Amananoweis and Ibedaowei influence them to pursue policies and undertake projects that are beneficial to the area. In other words, in today's circumstances,

the traditional rulers of Kolokuma clan are involved in the development of their areas by virtue of the influence they have on their subjects who run the local government and their people who run the state (Philips 2010).

It is also worthy to note that traditional rulers still play a part in the adjudication of cases in Kolokuma clan. Heads of families still settle cases between family members. Even cases of theft are still handled the traditional way if the parties involved desire settlement at home. More so, matters that have to do with traditional religion, festivals and customs are strictly under the control of the traditional rulers and priests. With regards to religion, the position of the chief priest of Kolokuma Egbesu is no longer in existence as the last priest died in 1930. Since then no one has taken that position. According to oral tradition, some of the sacrifices that were performed during the purification exercise of the priest were barbaric; hence, with the establishment of colonial rule in the clan, it became impossible to perform some of these rituals (Philips 2010). Usually, at the death of an incumbent, when the god as usual selected its priest, it was difficult to install one and since then the position has been vacant. What exists now is the office of 'Orudosieowei', who pours drinks at the shrine for the god. This person receives worshippers that come to the shrine and pours libations on their behalf to the god. He also performs other functions that are assigned to him. It is this person who, in conjunction with other worshippers, determines when the Kolokuma Egbesu festival is held annually.

Similarly, traditional rulers in the various Kolokuma communities ensure that the traditional festivals of their communities are observed or celebrated every year. Planning committees are inaugurated in these communities, which work together with the traditional rulers to ensure that the festivals are successful. During these celebrations, the traditional rulers ensure that the singing of songs, dances, wrestling and other such activities that depict their culture are showcased. More so, tradition rulers, especially family heads, ensure that all traditional marital rites are observed when they give their daughters in marriage.

Economically, the Amananaowei still holds the land in trust for the communities. Monies accruing from the use of community land, lakes and pits also go to the Amananaoweis who hold it in trust for the communities and such funds are used to meet community needs. Similarly, compound and family heads also appropriate compound and family land to members of their compounds and families during farming seasons. As usual, they do this in conjunction with other adult male members of their compounds and families. The harvesting of palm fruits is still free to all able bodied men irrespective of which compound or family owns the land. The same is applicable to the gathering of wild mango – ogbono.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude this discourse on chieftaincy institution in post-colonial Kolokuma clan, it is worthy to note that, despite the changes that have taken place in local governance, traditional rulers have continued to make themselves relevant. What they have lost to the Federal, State and local governments in terms of legal powers they have reclaimed in terms of informal influence and the reverence with which their people still treat them. Let me quickly add that, due to the nascent nature of centralized leadership in Kolokuma clan, the Ibedaowei and Amananaweis that emerged are not as powerful and respected as the Sultan/Emirs in the

North, the Obas of Benin and Yoruba-land, the Obi of Onitsha, the Amayanabos of Eastern Ijo groups and the Obong of Calabar, etc.

There was also the problem of illiteracy and language. While Yoruba Obas may be illiterate several years ago, their language was adopted in the councils, they did not have to be literate nor speak English to be accepted. But in the Eastern Region and later, Rivers and Bayelsa states Traditional Rulers Councils, there were language barriers as the people speak different dialects/languages; hence, the emphasis on literacy which led to the emergence of the Amadaowei position in Kolokuma towns. The evolution of the Amadaowei for example undermined the power of the Amananaowei and this was caused not by government but by the people themselves in Kolokuma clan. More so, it is difficult to impose a monarchical structure on a segmentary/republican structure, for there is no fertile soil for it. This is also the problem with Igbo societies – nobody is accountable to a higher authority. This partly accounts for the weak state of institution in Kolokuma clan with its resultant effects.

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