

OKOROMA CLAN IN THE MIGRATORY AND SETTLEMENT HISTORY OF OGBIA

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Abstract

Okoroma, regarded as the melting point of Ogbia and Nembe Cultures has carved a distinctive nature for itself. The history of Okoroma as a region and people in Bayelsa state of Nigeria dates back to about the 13th century or perhaps even before. The origin of the migratory and settlement history has been credited to Ogbia, which homeland is located at the middle belt region of Nigeria. The Sojourn of Ogbia and Okoroma into the Niger Delta region was interlaced with contacts with different groups which helped to fine-tuned their cultural heritage. Decades after their settlement, waves of migrants from neighbouring communities poured into this region, enlarging its demographic and cultural outlook. Contemporary Okoroma is therefore an amalgam of groups of people that migrated and settled in this region at different time of their history. Okoroma therefore possess the genetic flavor and enculturation of Ogbia as well as the sociological appearance of Nembe and other contemporary migrants into this region. This discourse is therefore an insight into the Ogbia factor in the migratory and settlement history of Okoroma.

Introduction

Okoroma (formerly Okoroma District 1979-1983) is located at the center of Nembe Local government Area of Bayelsa State, in the Niger Delta region. It is bounded by Nembe on the East, Ogbia on the North, while Brass (Tuwon) and Akassa are located at its Southern part. On the Western side, it is bounded by Boma clan in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.

Okoroma lies approximately between longitude 68°11 and 60°20 and between latitude 4°25N and 4°30N of the equator (Amaebite 1986). This area lies some few kilometres from the Atlantic coast of Brass. Okoroma is about twice the size of Brass Urban Council (1979-1983 and about two-third that of Ogbia).

Okoroma is located within the delta region of Bayelsa State and because of its proximity to the Atlantic Coast; it shares the climatic characteristic features of Brass and Akassa, their Southern neighbors.

Okoroma lies within the low pressure belt in January and high pressure belt in July. The warm and wet tropical maritime air mass dominates the area. The land and sea breeze brings a cooling wind effect to the area in the day. The total rainfall

in the area is about 370cm compared to the 380cm in Brass (Amaebite, 1986).

There are four seasons in the areas. These include the long wet season which starts from mid-march and last till July. This is the season of heavy rainfall and high humidity. Plants are evergreen during this period which marks the beginning of the planting season, the short dry season falls within the August break while the short wet season starts from September to October. Rainfall is not heavy as in the previous rainy season. Finally the long dry season starts from November to Mid-March. This is the period when the harmattan is felt in Okoroma.

In terms of relief, Okoroma falls within the coastal zone. It stretches from the salt water area to the brackish water area of the mangrove forest. There are numerous creeks in the area. Towns and villages are located in these creeks. The prospecting for crude oil in the area shows evidence of sedimentary rock. The above concise account of the geographical features provided the setting in which the activities (history) of the Okoroma people took place.

Ogbia on the other hand is located on the Northern fringe of the Niger Delta, boarded by

Engene in the North, Southern Ijaw Local Government in the West, Oduval in Rivers State in the East and Nembe in the South. The area has the natural setting of the Niger Delta. The area is also criss-crossed by water-ways; the Brass River, Ekole, Kolo Creek and Agboin Rivers. The land slopes South-West, which result in the usual flooding of the Ikole River during the flood season from September to October. The flooding of the Ikole is usually destructive though it fertilizes its banks. Crops planted therein grow and matures easily before the next flood season as a result of the rich soil deposits (Alagoa E. J. et al (eds), 2009).

Ogbia experiences two seasons: These are the dry which runs from November to April and the Wet season which occurred from May to October. The climate in Ogbia also experienced the August break briefly which occurs for a few weeks. The land is evergreen, though there existed also mangrove and raffia trees in its Southern parts, where the water is brackish. The Northern and central parts of Ogbialand are endowed with fresh water swamp which gradually matured into the tropical rain forest zone along the kolo creek (Alagoa, E. J. et al, 2009).

On a general note, the area is characterized by thick forest which stands far away from settlement and also around shrines and cemeteries, while the area around settlement have savanna traits because of human activities. There are varieties of games which included rodents, monkeys, Antelopes, bush pigs, elephants, gorillas, crocodiles, alligators, etc. Reptiles include snakes etc. the dug out canoe is a vital means of communication in the various rivers in Ogbia.

The Migratory History of Ogbia and Okoroma

There are various views on the migratory history of Ogbia and Okoroma. However, a more objective historical study shows that Ogbia was the progenitor of Ogbia/Okoroma ethnic nationality. Ogbia's migration is traced to the kingdom of the Igalas and/or the Idomas. According to source (Amiebi, 2011) Agoin, Doki and Ayazi migrated through the semi-savanna

zone and got to the Engenni area of the present Rivers State where both Doki and Agoin departed for greener pastures.

Agoin on his part settled at the Egenni area for a while, and in the process got married to an indigene of Engenni. This union produced Oboinya (corrupted to Ogbia).

Oboinya gave birth to Okoroma. Oboinya died and was buried at Engenni, but Okoroma migrated southwards until he arrived at Akinikoromobe. From there, he headed to Ogbia Otokolo (Ogbia Island) where they settled and carried out their fishing activities.

However, this area was not conducive for habitation because of the rough waves and turbulent wind which continued to surge on the island. Because of these discomforts Okoroma left Akinikoromobe and travelled farther inland and arrived at Imbiakpaba (Burma). From Imbiakpaba he reached Otu-Okoroma, later renamed Ologoama by the people of Nembe.

It is probable that before arriving at Otu-Okoroma, Okoroma and his team of migrants might have traversed through Benin to Iselema (Warri). This view had given the misconception that Okoroma and Ogbia had their origin from the Great Benin Kingdom. According to this school of thought, Ogbia, the founder of Ogbia Kingdom emigrated from Iseleman in the Benin region as a result of slave raid, the fear to face the brunt of the Oba whose son died in one of the wars of expansion and also the ambition to colonize new territories. It is therefore generally accepted that Ogbeyan (Ogbia) was the founder and common ancestor of the Ogbia ethnic group and the Okoroma people, all of Bayelsa State. This Benin connection is made even more formidable because of the reference that is made to Oba's town (Benin) in Ogbia Folk tale and fable which prove that Ogbia/Okoroma had some historic link with Benin.

It is also suggested that Ogbia on leaving Benin and Iselema (Warri) arrived at Orumabiri, Nembe. Ogbia left the Nembe area with his family and later settled at Ogbia Toru-Otokolo by Orukiri and

Agokiri, an island at the estuary of the Ogbia River. It is said that the reason for the migration were said to be slave raiding, search for virgin land and the need to acquire more lands. This tradition also maintains that Oloi and Okoroma were sons of the eponymous ancestors, Ogbia. Both are distinguished in two settlements under the names Okoroma and Oloi. Their offspring later founded all the settlements of Ogbia. However, their exact genealogy differs from place to place and from informants to informants (Josiah, T. M., 2018). Okoroma was said to have moved to the present site of the town, named Otokoroma after the death of his father (Daniel Ebi Collins, 2017).

From this settlement sprang all the member towns of the Okoroma group. Okoroma settled here and gave birth to many children who later scattered and founded different settlements. These new settlements that sprang up from Okoroma included Oguama (Oroweiamama), Akakumama, Eminama, Dorgu-Ewoama, Abulabiri, Ogbogolo, Otokpoti, Anyama, Akipelai, Amadugoama (Okiki), Ologaga, Agudama, Ilogiama, Alagbafama, Ikasikarama, Abobiri, Imiringi, Akalabagi, Abilabie, Okodogu, part of Otuasega as well as some parts of Ijo towns such as Odi, Peremabiri and Otuan (Alagoa, E.J. 1964).

After the death of Okoroma there was said to be an epidemic of influenza that led to the dispersal of Okoroma's children who spread out and founded the settlements stated above. A closer examination of the process however revealed that there might not have been an epidemic, but the dispersal became necessary as a result of population explosion and the need to acquire sufficient land for farming. Ologo was the only person that remained at Otu-Okoroma, and it was him that the Nembe traders met and called the town - Ologoama (Ologo's town). (Personal interview with an Informant, Alagoa, 1985).

With the passing of time, many of these settlements left Okoroma and constituted Ogbia clan while others pitched camp with the Ijos of Boma clan. Okoroma clan was thus reduced to few settlements.

The Akassa raid of 1895 and subsequent British retaliation on Nembe witnessed an influx of people into Okoroma land (Amaebite O. 1986).

The new migrants helped in the re-peopling of Okoroma. Many chiefs and House heads in Nembe came down to Okoroma and requested for land for resettlement of their subjects, the area becoming a safe haven to save their people from British imperial onslaught. In this direction, chief Kein requested land from Ologo and founded Isounkiri, and Youkorogha founded Sangakubu and Piri-Sangakubu. These settlements must have been founded around 1895 when the British attacked the Nembe kingdom.

Some members of Amain House in Nembe settled in Ologoama while Egbelu and some of his people ran to take refuge at Akakuma-ama. However, prior to the foundation of these settlements, there were a few settlements established for the purpose of trade. These settlements are Alagoa Tereke (Itorueke), Basoukiri, Tengikiri, Ombukiri, Ekperikiri, Igabukir Kiminini by Ockiya of Nembe for the purpose of cultivation of yam in 1871 while some people from Obiama settled at the present site of Sabatoru before 1871.

There is another tradition about the foundation of Okoroma linking Ogbia from its root. According to this tradition, during the British punitive expedition against the Benin Kingdom in 1897, some Benin war lords ran and took refuge in this area.

Prominent among them were Akumute and Obunya (Ogbia). On their arrival and settlement, Akumute gave birth to Akakuma, Ida, Adoin and Amain, while Obunya gave birth to Okoroma from whom sprang up Ologo, Ogu Abo, Aki, etc (Amaebite, C. O. 1986).

Tradition strongly upheld the view that it was Obunya (Ogbia) that established the Okorma clan. Today, Ogbia clan has many sub-groups. They are Olei group, Okoroma group, Oboloma group, Odinade group, Tarakiri group, and Obutoru group.

The composition of the various settlements in the Ogbia sub-groups is as outlined below:

The Olei (Oloibiri) group comprised of Oloibiri, Otuogidi, Otuobi, Otakeme, Amorokeni, Emeyal one and two, Otuasega, Elebele, Otuoke, Ewoi and Otuedu.

Another sub-clan or group is the Okoroma group. This group is composed of Ologoama, Otuogu (Oguama), Eminama, Dorgu Ewoama and Akakumana. The rest are Otuabo, Otuabula, Kolo one, two and three, Imiringi, Agudama, Epebu, Otukpein, Ewema, Otuaganagu, Ologoghe, Anyama, Oneubum, Otuogori, Otuokpoti, Otuegwe one and two. As noted earlier on the first five communities in this group in collaboration with the Nembe migrants now constitute the Okoroma clan in Nembe Local Government area of Bayelsa State. The rest have pitched camp with Ogbia Local Government Area.

The Oboloma group is another sub-group in Ogbia. It comprised of Oruma and Ebelebiri and a faction in Otuasiga.

The Odinade sub-group in Ogbia is made up of communities such as Akipelai, Emakalakala, Opume, Okoroba and Idema. Okoroba is now in Nembe Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. However, the historical tie still exist despite the new political balkanization.

Typical members of the Tarakiri group include Okodi, Ologi and Akoro. From the Obutoru group emerged the Epebu community (Ama-Ogbari & Ekndayo 2017).

Okoroma clan had thus come to stay as an autonomous clan made up of several related intertwined communities. From the inception of the clan, the people had evolved a way of administrative themselves. The basic administrative structure remained the Ibe (clan) at the top. Ama (community) polo (compound or ward) and wari (the extended family). The Ibe bears the name of its progenitor and it is the highest political body in Okoroma. It represented an historical, social-cultural and geographical unit.

The Ibe had an Ibe Digibo-Obenabhan at the head of the administrative machinery who was assisted by a deputy.

The Ama (Town or village) is the next administrative structure after the Ibe. Each Ama in Okoroma was autonomous. There are laws that govern all aspects of life without the interference from the Ibe. The Ama is headed by the Amayanabo (owner of town). Next in the administrative structure is the Polo. The Polo is the next important unit in the political set up of the Ama. Each polo consisted of an amalgam of numerous clusters of wari. Each polo is headed by a compound chief. The compound chief presided over all meetings of the polo and settled disputes within the polo.

Within the polo was the Wari (House). In Okoroma, the Wari consist of various extended families that were brought together by blood relation and kinship ties. In most cases the Wari bore the name of the founding ancestor. The Waridabo saw to the general welfare of member of the Wari, held meeting, and discuss common issues concerning the House.

This was the setting of Okoroma before the advent of colonialism especially in the late 19th century. During this period Okoroma became an amalgam with neighbouring ethnic nationalities such as Nembe, Ogbia, Akassa, Southern Ijaw, Northern Ijaw and so on. This merger was merely an administrative convenience for the British colonial administration.

During the 20th century Okoroma was given a native court to dispensed justice. However, it was short lived and the native court was moved to Ayama in Ogbia district. At the threshold of independence Okoroma was a local council. Okoroma Local Government Council became an identifiable unit of administration. Okoroma Local Council had 21 seats which represented towns and villages. Below is a distribution of the seat representing towns and villages in the 1950s and 1960s?

Towns/village	seat
Oroweiama	2
Ekperikiri	2
Ibobio	1
Iyalakiri	1
Eminama	1
Akukumama	2
Ologama	2
Ewokiri	1
Alagoakiri	1
Fatumakiri	1
Tengikiri	1
Basuokiri	1
Sounkiri	1
Aburukiri	1
Sangakubu	1
Piri sangakubo (sangakubu Terelema	1
Total	21

Source: Charles Onoye Amiebi, 2011

When the second republic came on board in Nigeria, the civilian administration enacted the first Act of Parliament on Local Government Administration. Part of the provision of this act was the Local Government Area into five autonomous districts. These included Nembe, Ogbia, Okoroma, Akassa and Brass/Okpoama Urban districts (C.O. Amiebi, 2011 p. 6).

Okoroma District was constituted and made up of fifty-eight towns villages and fishing ports/camps. These towns and village became the bases of the Kingdom and as recognized by the law of the rivers state government in 1981. They are Ologoama (Headquarters and sead of Oguama, Eminama, Akakumama, Dorgu-Ewoama, Ekperikiri, Akariakiri, Ombukiri Ibobio, Obakilolo, Egbekiri, Sounkiri, Oyagerekiri, Sangakubu, Piri-Sangakaubu, Alagoakiri, Basuokiri, Tengikiri, Ombukiri II, Burma, Mbiakpabau, Aikiama, Dongoi, Elepa, Patakoti, Asuogha, Mansokiri, Micah-Kiri, Obiama, Onabugo, Segikiri Igbogonyakiri, Agokiri, Mbasikiri, Onibugo, Oni, Kanrakiri, Sabatoru, Kiminini, Igabukiri, Amapogu, Itabalagono, Isonosono, Ewelwusuo, Iniatiri, Okokokiri, Iselema, Golubokiri, Kaigokiri, Amalaghakiri, Walter kiri, Karagbene, and Alagoba efeu.

In 1993, Brass Local Government Area was split into three Local Governments, Brass Local Government Council, Nembe Local Government Council and Ogbia Local Government Council. Okoroma fell into Nembe Local Governmetn Council therefore becoming a component part of Nembe Local Government Area, and in 1999/2000 the administration of Alamiyeseigha in BAYels State created 24 Development centres (smaller local government councils), with Okoroma, tereke as one of the Local administrative centres.

One prominent feature of Okoroma political history was the institution of the Obanobhan of Okoroma (king of Okoroma). The pioneer Obanobhan was Chief Simeon Dienagha who was appointed in 1973. He was dethroned after two years in office, and the elders and stakeholders of the five original Okoroma communities in Nembe Local Government Area (others in Ogbia Local Government Area), namely Ologoama, Oguama, Eminama, Akakumama and Dorgu-Ewoama elected a new Obanobhan of Okoroma. The representatives of the five communities in the election that brought Amiebi to office as the Obanabhan in 1975 included; Solomon Ovoh of Akakumama, Olali Begold Gbalibofa Alagoa of Ologoama, Robinson Aboh of Eminama, Samuel B. Oweifa Ibokolo of Dorgu Ewoama and Claud Otobo of Oguama.

The second Obanobhan of Okoroma Kingdom HRH Charles Onoye Amiebi hailed from Eminama, was born on the 15th of May, 1936. He was an Accountant by training and became a commissioner in the government of Chief Melford Okilo of Old Rivers State of Nigeria. He was also a special adviser to Melford Okilo who was then the Minister of Commerce and Tourism of the Federal Government of Nigeria from 1979-1983.

As noted, at the exist of some communities to constitute the Ogbia area. Okoroma clan was drastically reduced to five communities. However, other settlements came into existence, courtesy of Nembe emigrants into the Okoroma region. These

settlements, their founders, and reasons for their establishment are tabulated below;

settlement	Founder/Settler	Purpose
Emokiri	Chief Thomas P. Ockiya and Moses Anagha Berena	Trade
Alagoa Tereke	Edward Alagoa	Trade
Basuo Tereke	Basuo	Trade
Tengi Tereke	Iruo	Trade
Sounkiri	Chief Naterebo	Safety/Security
Sanga kubu	Chief Nath H. Yekorokgha	Timber/ lumbering
Piri Sangakubu	Chief Piri	Trade
Burukiri	King Josiah Ockiya	Farming (yam cultivation)
Okokokiri	Ofeteigoli	Safety, Trade
Ibo	Chief Opuene	Safety, Trade
Ibobamu	Chief N.H. Yekorogha	Safety
Ekperikiri	Chief James Spiff	Farming
Egbekiri	Macdonald	Agriculture (Piggery, rubber and kolanut plantations)
Kari Burukiri	Chief Kari	Farming
Ikurusiam	Chief Thomas Ockiya and Moses Ananagha Berena	Safety

Source: Charles Onoye Amiebi, 2011

This is the Okoroma that has crystalized over the years to a unique clan with rich traditional values. It is a place where the two cultures of Ogbia and Nembe came into fusion. Thus Okoroma is an embodiment of Ogbia and Nembe cultures which are clearly portrayed in such activities as taboos, marriages and death rites, ceremonies, traditional laws, festivals recreations and so on.

Evaluation of the Tradition of Origin, Migration Settlement, and Conclusion

The traditions were in agreement that there were waves of migrants from about the 15th century to the region and it was possible that movement was in north-south, and west-east direction. Records also revealed that migration might have started from the middle belt region into the Benin Kingdom. Benin Kingdom might have served as a stop-over station, transiting to the present location of Okoroma. There is some truth in the Benin connection probably because of the role played by Obama (obatown) in the folklore and tales told in Okoroma. Perhaps it is because of the strong historical ties between the Benin Kingdom and Okoroma that the present flow station at Okoroma

is named Obama flow station. Historical linguistics also revealed that many words from Isan and Owen group of people in Edo states are similar with the words in the Ogbia dialect. Therefore, there is no doubt Benin played a crucial historical role in the affairs of Okoroma, and indeed Ogbia.

There is also no doubt Ogbia was actually the father of Okoroma, and Okoroma indeed gave birth to children that dispersed later and founded settlements in the present Ogbia area and some sections and quarters in other ijaw speaking areas.

The traditions also agreed on the foundation of the Nembe Settlements in the area due to commercial activities, Security, and other economic activities and particularly because of the British/Nembe war of 1895. It is also worthy of acknowledgement that the British punitive expedition of 1897 on the Benin kingdom also have great impact on the influx of migrants into this region. However Okoroma clan of today consists of people that migrated to this region at different times for different purposes. The amalgamation of these divergent people with their socio-cultural, political,

and economic ventures brought to bear a people and a clan that sprout into carving a space in world history.

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