Historical Analysis of the Cultural Heritage of Okpoama Kingdom: A Focus on the Chieftaincy Institution from the 17th Century till Date.

By

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Abstract

This paper is on "The Historical Analysis of the Cultural Heritage of Okpoama Kingdom: A Focus on the Chieftaincy Institution from the 17th century till date".As unique as this institution is in the day-to-day administration of Okpoama Kingdom, not much has been written about it but mentioned in passing by scholars. Something unique about the chieftaincy institution in Okpoama that this paper in tends to unveil is how this institution was able to thrive throughout the colonial era. There was nothing like the creation of warrant chiefs in Okpoama contrary to the popular notion that warrant chiefs were created by the colonial masters in all the Eastern Region. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to document the chieftaincy institution in Okpoama kingdom, its origin and the changes from priesthood to war canoe institution. It also showed how the institution had evolved from rudimentary to a sophisticated one over the years in Okpoama kingdom. Both written and oral sources were adopted in carrying out the research work. Finding revealed that the chief, is the chief security officer of the kingdom whose court is the highest in the kingdom. It also revealed that while chieftaincy institution suffered setback in some parts of the country during the colonial era, it was not so in Okpoama kingdom because they already had a governing structure called House and they used it to their advantage. So while warrant chiefs were appointed in other parts of Nigeria, Okpoama had a solid chieftaincy institution that operated during the colonial era and beyond. The only observable change that occurred during the post-colonial era was the

classification of the chief to first, second and third classes with a stipend attached to it from the government. In all, the chieftaincy institution is still highly respected and honoured by all and sundry in Okpoama kingdom. It has lasted for a long time with all its accolades.

Key words: History, Okpoama Kingdom, War Canoe House, Chieftaincy Institution, Cultural Heritage

Introduction

Okpoama Kingdom is one of the oldest kingdoms in the Eastern Niger Delta. archeological survey carried out by a team of archeologists led by Prof. E.J. Alagoa and Dr. Nzewunwa, Okpoama came into existence about 1000A.D making it the oldest kingdom in the Nembe speaking area of Eastern Niger Delta except Ke in Kalabari Kingdom (Nzewunwa, 1983).

Okpoama kingdom has maintained a systematic record of uninterrupted existence since its establishment about the 11th century A.D. As earlier stated, the kingdom founded by Okpo who became the first King of the kingdom and the town is named after him – *Okpoama* (*Okpo'*s town). The main towns and villages that make up the Okpoama kingdom are: Okpoama, the metropolis, Okpoama-Ewoama, Fantuo, Ewelesuo, Diema, Ọyẹnkịa (Ọyẹkigha or Onyekia), Opuorubo-ama, Agada ama, Isele ama, Dikuma ama, Egeleama, Elemuama, Ikei-ama, Abain-ama, Kunu-ama and Omo-ama (proposed to take off soon).

Chieftaincy institution is one of the cultural assets and peculiarities of the Okpoama kingdom. From the pre-colonial to the present time, chieftaincy institution has come to serve some major functions which can conveniently be divided into statutory (enforcement of law and order in the kingdom) and non-statutory functions (oversight functions outside the kingdom that will be beneficial to its citizens).

Before the coming of Europeans, the traditional rulers held sway not only as the recognized political rulers of the states and kingdoms in Nigeria but also as the custodians of the people's history, culture, religions and economy.

Chief (*Alabo*) is a living word among the Nembe speaking people from inception. Therefore, it is not a strange word but this work tries to put it on record to show how important the chieftaincy institution is to Okpoama and the Nembe speaking people. More importantly, there is a popular belief that warrant chiefs were in operation throughout the Eastern region in the Colonial period. This paper tried to see to what extent this was in operation in Okpoama Kingdom. It is discovered however, that Okpoama did not fall prey of this colonial antics because the kingdom had in existence a very strong chieftaincy Institution. So there was no need to appoint Warrant Chiefs. How the chieftaincy institution in Okpoama survived the colonial era is another aspect that informed this write up.

Location of Okpoama Kingdom

The Kingdom is bounded on the North by the *Onitoru*, in the East by St. Nicholas River, on the South by the Atlantic Ocean and in the West by the mouth of River Bento (*Tonton Toru*/Brass River). The environment of the Kingdom is made up of salt water swamp and the soil is black silt (Maduabibi, 2000).

The Kingdom is covered with creeks and rivulet crisscrossing the length and breadth of the kingdom that is why the kingdom was noted for her fishing occupation and called Big Fish town during the colonial era due to the abundance of fishes supplied to the European on the coast. In his Journal of 1857 Niger Expedition, Bishop Crowther mentioned: There is a village near Nembe, called Okpoma or Fishtown, and ruled by Obasi as quoted by (Alagoa, 1960). The kingdom experiences two seasons dry and rainy season. The dry season starts from November and ends in March while the rainy season starts in April to October. It was during the dry season that the people make a huge catch because the salinity is high and the fishes enter the rivers and creeks.

Precolonial Administrative Set Up

Okpoama like other Nembe speaking Kingdoms and other Eastern Niger Delta Kingdoms had developed their own unique form of administration distinct from Western and Eastern European civilizations. In the northern Nembe of the earliest periods, there were the Olodiama, Oboloama, and Onyoama communities. These communities were autonomous entities that carried out independent political decisions and had religious taboos exclusively sacred to each of them.

The Kings of those settlements were known as pere –priest-kings. Hence, Olodiama was ruled by Olodiama Pere, Oboloama was ruled by Oboloama Pere and Onyoama by Onyoama pere. The title *Pere* means King-Priest. Hence, they were Kings at the same time priests of the national god.

Okpoama's northern Nembe speaking neighbouring settlements of Olodi, Obolo and Onyo after some communal troubles became a unified polity under one Kala Ekule (Alagoa, 2018). After the unification under Kala Ekule, there was a shift of leadership to a man, Ogio. Ogio's origin is traced to the Mini - Ogbia area (Alagoa, 2018). The Ogio's dynasty was brief. It spanned from Ogio to Peresuo his son, then to Peresuo's sons and Obia and Basuo successively (Alagoa, 2018).

Then came the next phase, Ogbodo the son of Obia took over as Amanyanabo but a protracted dispute for the throne with Mingi the son of Basuo ended up in the Kingdom separating to two separate kingdoms - Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri. Mingi's dynasty had been ruling in Ogbolomabiri till date while Ogbodo moved to *Bassambiri* and his dynasty began ruling there. In Okpoama, in the earliest periods, governance was by gerontocracy- ruler ship by age. The oldest sane person takes over the reins of power at the demise of the King (Alagoa, 1995).

Another source however stated that:

> The political history of Okpoama is divided into two principal parts which may be further subdivided into four. The first epoch which is the beginning started with Sikaka, Okpo's successor. In this Era, leadership was based on age… In the second phase, the age criterion was jettisoned, and succession criteria shifted to competence. In addition, succession came to be defined in a specific social and political group. This second period was an ecclesiastic era. Kings were installed from the shrine of the traditional national god- *Kalaorowei* (Robinson, 2011).

The first Era according to the traditions had Okpo, Sikaka, Ibelubelu, Nende Tia, Kpekiya, Sai, Osungu, Onu, Akirigbo, Gboro and Bouyai/Boya, (while the second phase of evolution of the monarchy started with King Orukari Akirigbo. According to Robinson in an unpublished manuscript:

> This period began with the reign of King Orukari Akirigbo. The classification of this period as the middle period is not based on a further change of dynasty but on change in the method of selection and installation. However, this second period saw the taking over of political control by the priesthood of tradition national deity- Kalaorwei. Through Orukari's ingenuity, the god became central to governance. This era saw the age criterion giving way to competence.

King Orukari coming to the throne found a new capital for the Kingdom, designing and instituting of a new administration and social structure, instituting of a pragmatic immigration policy of assimilation and affiliation, a religious evolution and establishing external relationships that took Okpoama closer to the other Nembe speaking people of the north. He successfully made an external diplomatic move, the emergence of monarchical dynasties of the Nembe speaking people located at Okpoama's north. Thus, O.I.B Robinson (unpublished) asserted that:

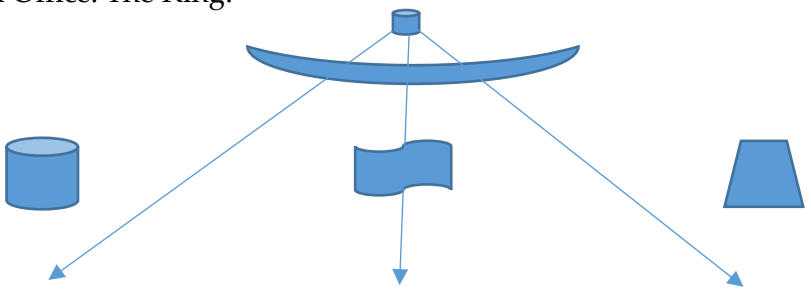
> Orukari's eminence is evident in his founding of a new capital for the kingdom. He reorganized and structured the socio-political and religious structure of the Kingdom. In fact, he created the socio-political institutions, enacted laws, introduced and implemented policies that ensured cohesiveness and the community became attractive…Orukari's contributions are so pivotal… The Eminence of King Orukari qualifies him to be tagged: The Decisive Architect and founder of contemporary Okpoama Kingdom.

In this second phase of monarchial evolution Orukari became the King (Amanyanabo) and he set up a socio-political structure that became unique to Okpoama. Orukari created political offices and appointed prominent individuals to occupy those offices. He then tied these political offices to the priesthood of the national god. Accordingly, those who occupy these political offices also served as elders of the community and administrators (Alagoa, 1995).

Pyramid of traditional Priesthood Offices

OSUN PRIESTHOOD ORUKARI(King)

Royal Office. The King.



MINA ALABO-PEGIYAI EFEKE ALABO-ESENI OKURU ALABO-AGUMA

Domestic affairs office. The entertainment/hospitality office Treasury or Financial office

The following were the offices created by Orukari and their duties:

1. *Osun Alabo*: This is the Royal Office. The occupant was the King, *Amanyanabo,* the Head of the priesthood that coordinates activities.
2. *Mina Alabo*: This was the Domestic Affairs ministry whose occupant was responsible for domestic matters.
3. *Efeke Alabo*: This office was the Hospitality/Entertainment and the occupant takes care of hospitality and entertainment matters.
4. *Okuru Alabo*: This office was the treasury or Finance ministry and the occupant is the custodian of the Treasury.
5.

These duties were performed both for the Kingdom and the priesthood. Hence, in this period, the administrators of the kingdom were also priest of the god- *Oru alapu*. In addition to creating these offices, symbols representing each of the offices were forged and placed in a conspicuous place in the main shrine of the god.

Consequently, the *Osun* Royal priesthood was represented with an Ivory tusk; the *Mina*, domestic affairs priesthood represented with a native stool-*igbu*; the *Efeke*, Hospitality/Entertainment priesthood represented with a mat; and the *Okuru*, Treasury or Finance priesthood represented with a leather bag made from leopard skin.

As stated by Alagoa (1995), the head of the administration was the *Osun* priest who coordinates the affairs of the Kingdom and the activities in the priesthood. Hence, the Kingdom became ecclesiastical in administration. The pioneer *Amanynabo*, King and *Osun* was King Orukari Akirigbo. While the Domestic Affairs and *Mina* priesthood was first occupied by Pegiyai, the Hospitality/Entertainment and *Efeke* priesthood was first occupied by Eseni; the Treasury or Finance and *Okuru* priesthood was first occupied by Aguma. This change in political structure organized around the traditional religious system is likely to be a 17th century event.

The House System in Okpoama Kingdom

The term House as socio-political unit has been given various definitions, of recent, Nimi Waribugo asserted that the canoe House is a Corporation (Wariboko, 2007). I. B. O. Robinson (12011), simply defined the House as a socio-political institution which existed as an organ of government within the Nembe speakers even before it became defined with its trade and military functions. To him, the terms Canoe House and War canoe House were only descriptions of later functions of the term House, *Wari* in Nembe which were based on economic and political exigencies at points in the evolution of society. The House to him is the term for groups of families and segmentation of communities into socio-political units of society. What is now commonly known as a 'House' is a collection of families – at remote families, but those founded by children of the same mother or their slaves.

The House was a group of families including children, nephews, brothers, pons, asylum seekers and slaves grouped into a sociopolitical unit ruled by the family head (*furo tibibo*) which later became chief. At the first instance as a trading merchant group controlled by the head chief during the long-distance trade period, later this trading merchant group metamorphous to a war canoe (omungu-aru) to defend the community when inter-communal crisis broke out and at the same time they engage in trade.

Before the long-distance trade, there was the House as a socio-political institution. The existence of the House appears to have predated both the internal and trans-

Atlantic trade. Hence, the initial Okpoama Houses were priestly groupings, *Wari*-Houses.

Similar to the Monarchy, the Okpoama House institution has a unique history. It was in the reign of King Orukari Akirigbo that the foundation of the institution was laid. Alagoa (1995), succinctly put it as follows …..and the development of the institution of house and others were therefore, prefigured in the reign of *Orukari*.

Again, just as in the monarchical evolution, the community during King Orukari's era was socio-politically organized around the four political priesthoods that he created. Hence, four socio-political units of affiliation, association and administration: the *Osun*, *Mina*, *Efeke*, and *Okuru* groups emerged.

The heads of the priesthoods became the leaders of the socio-political groups that emanated from this arrangement. By this arrangement Orukari-the King's group became the *Osun* group; the Pegiyai's group became the *Mina* group; the Eseni's group became the *Efeke* group; and the Aguma's group was the *Okuru* group.

These groups were made up of biological descendants, nephews and non-biological social and fictive descendants of the pioneer leaders and administrators. Among the social and fictive members are those that migrated into the community to worship the traditional national god-*Kalaorowei* for one reason or another. Some came as pawn, others as seekers of refuge. These ones were assimilated into the various groups by a strategy which when completed put aside the citizenship of the refugee's original place of origin and confer on him the citizenship of Okpoama. The immigrant, when all rituals are completed, become fully assimilated and absorbed into one of the four groups and through that group into the larger Okpoama kingdom. Alagoa (1995) described the strategy as follows:

> in those days, anyone seeking the protection of *Kalaorowei* was required to touch one of the emblems of priesthood in the shrine: *Odu* (elephant tusk) for the *Osun Alabo*; *Mina* (stool) for the *Mina Alabo*; *Okuru* (Ritual bag) for *Okuru Alabo* and *Efeke* (Ritual mat) for *Efeke Alabo.* If the seeker touched *Mina* he came under the direct protection of Pegiyai who was *Mina Alabo*.

By this means all immigrants came to belong to one of the four priesthoods and socio-political groups of affiliation administered by the pioneer head and there after his successor. *According to Robinson* (2011).

…Orukari's policy of assimilation and association ignited the easy naturalization of immigrants who were given the opportunity to satisfy their natural economic, social and political quest without hindrance.

The socio-political organization of Okpoama could only be properly and definitely discussed from the 17th century, during the reign of King Orukari Akirigbo. The seven hundred years before King Orukari was monarchically a gerontocracy (leadership by elders). And not much is known about the socio-political groups of affiliation. However, King Orukari's reign saw the deliberate creation of political offices and groups of social affiliation. These were structured around the religious system of that time hence; the first socio-political groups were priestly and their Heads were priests-*Oru Alapu* of the *Kalaorowei*.

This societal organization remained until the mid-19th century. The next stage of evolution took place in the 19th century and evidently it was a response to the exigencies of the trans-Atlantic trade. The institution at this period fits what several scholars like N. Woriboko have described as "corporation", "canoe" and "war canoe House" (Wariboko, 2007).

Establishment of A War Canoe House in King *Obasi* era.

Establishing a war canoe in King Sagbe Ekpele Obasi's era entails the acquisition of wealth and slaves to man the war canoe in the mid-19th century.

King Orukari era of establishing a chieftaincy house and the period of King Obasi differ greatly. In King Orukari's time, A person was appointed priest and administrator while King Obasi era was administrator and war lord.

The basic differences between the priestly house structure and the war canoe organization is the acquisition of wealth as factor of owning a House. King Obasi having received apprenticeship in Bonny and Nembe (Bassambiri) provided the guideline or procedure for individuals, males to be conferred with the title of war-

canoe Chief and political head of his own group. Here is an outline of the requirements and procedure of attaining the status of war canoe Chief and owner of a socio-political group. As obtainable in all the Eastern Niger Delta Kingdoms of Kalabari, Okirika, Bonny, Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri– Nembe, the one who is desirous of owning his own House must acquire wealth.

> …the candidate for chieftaincy must be a person of good standing, by virtue of a noble birth, of wealth, or of influence; at any rate he must be a person who is able to provide, to man, and to maintain a war canoe (Captain Wauton's Note on Nembe, 1923).

Additional requirements are the owning of humans, his biological children born from women married with big dowry, slaves or domestics servants who are task bearers, and nephews (descendants of his sister from *kala-anga-* small bride price marriage). These human requirements were numerically placed at thirty to thirty-four males. These are used to man his large trade and war canoe.

Besides those human resources and manpower requirements, the one desiring of owning his political group, must have the capacity to acquire a strong, new large canoe that will carry these number of persons at once. He prepared the canoe according to traditional demands and brings it to the water front for inspection and approval by the designated authorities. When the canoe is approved, the people that will be members of his house will board the canoe.

The first person to board the canoe is his nephew (his sister's son). He mounts an area prepared in the canoe termed "gun powder deck" (*fọụn ọpụrụ*). Strangers such as slaves or domestic servants whose loyalty has not been tested are not allowed to mount this decked area for obvious reasons. Such strangers could easily be swayed or connive to burn down the canoe causing an upset.

After the nephew had taken his position in the war canoe, the rest persons as enumerated above, particularly the domestic servants then took their various positions marked out in the boat to show that the required number to fit out a war canoe was met.

In the pre-colonial period, the King, Chiefs and Priest of the traditional deity were invited to inspect what has been presented. In Nembe Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri the *Ogidiga* priest did the inspection. In Okpoama the King, Chiefs and the Priest of *Kalaorowei* carried out this task. If these people were satisfied, the candidate desirous of owning a House and the status of war canoe Chief was formally asked to go for a test.

In this test, the candidate was presented with a tuber of yam *ḅurú* and a cannon ball, *imbi*. While the yam represents his consciousness in providing food for his household, the canon ball represents his willingness to protect and defend the kingdom in case of an outbreak of war with other community. It is a sign of valour and readiness to always uphold the sovereignty of the kingdom.

On choosing the canon ball, he (the chief to be) has passed the test so, the King hands over the ball-*omungu-aru imbi* to him. He (the candidate) has become a war canoe Chief. Jubilations, celebration, and merry making followed. The talking drum would call out his adopted praise title intermittently throughout the period of feasting. This feast lasted for about three days. Hence forth, the candidate has become a political head of the social group of affiliation that he had formed. The group is recognized as a House and he as the progenitor or founder of it.

From this moment, he has become a Chief who qualifies to send his men to war. In addition, as the founder, the House, he formed bears his name and any of his successors as Head of the group, bears his name as suffix. Hence after the demise of Omo, his successor Asapurabo and all those that follow him add Omo as part of their name. The present head of the Omo House is addressed as Chief (*Alabo*) Duanyu Olali Kaliai-Omo. The present head of the Isele House is known as - Chief (*Alabo*) Boute Levi Felagha-Isele. Boute Levi Felagha is his personal name but on installation on the Isele Chieftaincy stool, he added Isele.

In the 19th century, it appears the drinking of wine using the left hand was a classified action, a status symbol. The newly approved war canoe Chief is prohibited from drinking with his left hand until the ritual, *peri- pele* is done. The *peri pele* ritual is carried out with a person captured in a war. After performing this *peri pele* ritual he will not only wear a bead bearing a central large one, but also

Oka on the wrist of his right hand and also drink with his left hand. The *peri pele* ritual is performed to demonstrate courage in war. It is a demonstration of how a war victim was captured. The victim was then sacrificed to the gods.

Peri pele ritual was not only for the *Omunguaru-alapu*, war canoe Chiefs, the pioneer Heads and the successors of the priestly groups also perform the ritual. The only distinguishing feature was the use of the spear, javelin, *begere* in the case of the priestly House Heads and the sword, alapu *Ogidi* in performing the ritual. Some individuals are both owners and Heads of Houses and priest of the god and are entitled to perform both the *begere peri* (spear ritual) and the *alapu Ogidi peri (sword ritual)*. The *Ogidi peri* apparently was performed by those who used canon and guns in wars.

Okpoama Kingdom Chieftaincy Institution in The Colonial Era

The 19th century through the 20th century was a period of change. According to E.J. Alagoa (1995),

One of the areas that was greatly affected and radically change was the social, political and religious institutions. This includes the House. There was a great proliferation of Houses in the Nembe speaking area and Eastern Niger Delta communities in general. Hence, at the peak of the trans-Atlantic trade the House institution experienced an unprecedented expansion. In Okpoama, the institution expanded to seven additional Houses which emerged from the four priestly groupings.

However, as British interest moved from commercial to political collaboration and to political conquest, disaffection between the British and the indigenes became frequent. This downward trend became more obvious after the conclusion of the Berlin conference to partition Africa for trade territories by the political powers in Europe.

The British on acquiring the Niger Delta area turned a previous political collaboration to political conquest. Due to differences bothering on trade agreements, Okpoama allied with other Nembe speaking Kingdoms to engage the British in a two phased war in 1895. In this year (1895) the Nembe people waged war against the British because they {Europeans] blocked their middle man's

position from the hinterland and other trading activities and also levied them heavily by increasing the price of commodities on some trading items. Thus, they felt that the Europeans wanted to take away food from their table so they fought them at their depot at Akassa which was known as the Akassa war or raid.

Though the Nembe speaking Kingdoms had an upper hand in the first phase, they became the hunted in British reprisal attacks. One of the consequences of this event was the complete subjugation of the indigenous socio-political institutions under British control. When the Nembe speaking Kingdoms fought against the British in 1895, there was no king at Bassambiri. The monarchical institution had not been instituted at Twon. Accordingly, there was no king at Twon. King Obu of Okpoama and King Fredrick *Koko* of Ogbolomabiri ran into hiding. King Obu became sick and died in that state. *Koko* died later in 1898 while in hiding.

It was about twenty-eight years after that *Amanyanaongu,* Kings, were installed in various Kingdoms of the Nembe speaking people. *Bassambiri* was the first to install a king in 1924 Albert Iruo Olali Oguara, *Okpoama* followed by installing King Okiringbo in 1924-27 and Ogbolomabiri installed King Anthony Ockiya in 1926-39. These kings were installed into the new era of colonialism.

Colonial Imposition and the Okpoama Stool

Europeans first arrived Brass area in the 15th century, and began trading on slaves, textiles, spices and other products. By the 19th century, the Europeans began to export palm oil, driven by demand for machine lubrication as part of the industrial revolution. The area was named the British Oil Rivers Protectorate from 1885 when it was expanded and became the Niger Coast Protectorate. The core Niger Delta was incorporated into the Eastern Region in 1906.

The European entered into protection treaties with the leaders of the area. By this the rulers were made to place the kingdom under protection of Europeans powers as most of them were illiterate and did not understand the contents of the paper they were signing.

During the colonial era, when taxation was introduced in 1928, the *Amanyanabo* (king) was asked to perform unpleasant duties by the colonial administration. The

chiefs were asked to collect tax and pay same through the *Amanyanabo* to the Native Administration. The Chiefs were used by the colonial masters to perform these strange activities on behalf of the colonial masters.

with the introduction of taxation in 1928…and the repeal of the Road and River Ordinance, the *Amanyanabo* was expected to collect the tax and pay it to the Native Administration (Afigbo, 1972).

Before the colonial era, the authority of the chiefs covered areas like mediating between people, state, enhancing national identity, resolving conflict, maintaining law and order etc. But during the colonial time, it became depended on the colonial authorities who were enforcing what was known as indirect rule. In this system the colonial masters rule through indigenous agencies.

The Chiefs played important roles in the administration of the country or protectorate. They were not allowed to disobey government orders. In this era, the chiefs were not allowed to come out publicly to condemn or fight against the government or colonial masters. They rule in line with the British colonial policy and ensure that they were implemented. They maintained law and order, supervised communal labour and projects. Due to the traditional institution that was existing then in the whole of the Nembe speaking area, there was no appointment of warrant chiefs like in Ibo land, where they had no recognized chiefs, so the British appointed became known as warrant chiefs.

The case of Okpoama was unique almost similar to what was available in the emirate model of administration in the northern part of the country, the British found an existing political institution that made the establishment of colonial administration very easy. The chiefs were already in existence in Okpoama. So the chiefs fitted well into the British colonial administrative structure. They become part and parcel of the Native Authority Ordinance, Native Treasury Ordinance and Native Court Ordinance.

These (the chiefs) who were made part of the colonial administration, executed colonial policies in their area of jurisdiction under the supervision of the colonial masters. The British established native authority and appointed the traditional

rulers to settle disputes. They tried offenders by the law and imposed the appropriate punishment, on the directive or supervision of the colonial masters. It was during this period that traditional rulers were given power to collect taxes. These taxes were later paid to the Native treasury, which provided fund to finance the local administration and development projects. Licenses and market tolls were also issued and the fees paid into the treasury. Fines from court were also paid into the Native Treasury. Although the chiefs were being used by the colonial masters to perform their duties, they still perform their day-to-day activities of their Houses. Meetings were called to deliberate on matters that affects the House and members.

The Effect of Colonialism on The Monarchical System in Okpoama

The change affected both the socio-political order and the belief system of the indigenes. With the conversion of Kings to Christianity, conflicts of interests' wade in. As a result, the influence of the traditional religion began to wane.

In Okpoama, the change to Christianity resulted in setting aside of the tradition/religious ways of installing kings. Of course, the old traditional religious system fought but was ultimately set aside. King Richard Okparan Tubu who was installed King in 1929 resisted being installed as *Osun* priest. He therefore ruled the kingdom as a secular king (i.e. ruled outside religion or not following religious ways) but only succumbed to pressure from the traditionalist about three years to the end of his reign through death in 1945.

However, a breakthrough came at the installation of his successor, King Poute Rowland *Elei* in 1957 (who was a regent after the death of Richard Okparan Tubu, Okpo XVIII in 1945). The Christian party had become strong enough and Elei was installed as a secular king and remained so throughout his reign. From thenceforth, the installation of kings from the shrines of *Kalaorowei*, the traditional god was discontinued.

As the people started acquiring education, they refused to be installed as priest of the god. Even to be king of the kingdom because the people does not want to associate with the traditional religion for the simple reason that they have seen the light. A good example was that of King Obasi who was marked for leadership by

the national god of Okpoama. He ran to Bassambiri and stayed with his brother. Even at Bassambiri the threat of appointment as priest continued and therefore decided to move farther afield to Bonny. He became the guest of the Oluamabo family. At Bonny, a tragedy occurred, his host's son died mysteriously and on enquiring through divination, it was found that the death occurred because of him (*Obasi*). Based on this, they persuaded him to return home to take up the kingship of the Kingdom. On return he was appointed Amanyanabo (king) *osun alabo* of Okpoama 'it was in such circumstances the Sagbe came to the throne as osun alabo and Amanyanabo of Okpoama'

The House as a socio-political institution has also evolved in response to exigencies of the time. First was the attempt to define the House by the British administrators. It was first seen as an exclusively slave trading organization. It appears the British went ahead to regulate the system. Based on this premise, proclamations were published to that effect, (a) …the proclamation for the better maintenance and guidance of the trade system … in 1899' 'to maintain intact the Native System of House Government and to establish cordial relations between the chiefs….. (b) …the Native House Proclamation was enacted in 1902, …every member of the house who refused to submit 'to the control, authority and rule of the head of his house in accordance with native be law and custom' was to be liable to prosecution… on conviction to a fine … or imprisonment … (c) … a head of house provided that if he neglected his customary duties to his house members he was to face prosecution. Finally, it appears the House rule ordinance was repealed, making it look as if the House system itself had been abolished. However, the system mutated and took various forms in structure and function until the present day. The system started with the priesthood and later changed to the war canoe house or house rule system.

In Okpoama, the chieftaincy started as priestly institution. In the mid- 18th century, an aristocratic class emerged and flouted war canoes. These became heads of military units and founders of socio-political units. The House institution was expanded. However, it is proper to note the following as stated by Alagoa (1995)

> This separate existence in the priestly grouping was not abrupt and total. The Seven war-canoe chiefs, *omunguaru-alapu*, could not begin to operate outside the customary systems of alliances and

affiliations the earlier grouping continued to operate, alongside the claims of the new omungu-aru leaders to independent identity…it was obviously from about 1935… that the final break into distinct house groupings came into political reality.

However, it appears these war canoe houses did not crystallize until sometime in the 20th Century and operated in the various priestly groupings. Accordingly, from the Orukari Osun group, Omo, Obasi, Isele, Tamunobere and Obu War-Canoe-Houses, chiefs emerged. In the Pegiyai mina group, Digiboerigha war canoe House emerged while in Aguma's *Okuru* group, the Iti war canoe House was formed. "Noteworthy is the fact that even at this stage of evolution these Houses remained under the old groupings and operated as part of those groups." (Dickins, 1932).

The breakup into the distinct war canoe Houses was a result of centrifugal forces operating in a very fierce form due to the new legal and political order imposed by the colonialists. Leadership disputes pushed the people to the extent of severing relationships. The Pegiyai *Mina* group was also affected by this new trend. Disputes in the group ended in *Ayah*'s descendants becoming a distinct House after protracted legal tussle. Hence, in the 20th century, distinct Houses as mentioned above emerged from the four priestly groupings and began operating separately. This of course was not the end of the expansion of the institution.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the chieftaincy institution was a body of authority that governed the kingdom. It formulates rules that governed the kingdom and conduct the affairs and life of the people. It is the law making body that also penalized the offenders or any one that commit crime in the kingdom.

The work also revealed that the chief is the chief security officer of the kingdom whose court is the highest in the kingdom. It also revealed that while chieftaincy institution suffered setback in some parts of the country during the colonial era, it was not so in Okpoama kingdom because they already had a governing structure called House and they used it to their advantage. The British colonial masters found it as a solid foundation upon which they built the colonial super structure.

They did not have to go through the process of getting warrant chiefs. For this reason, too, Okpoama did not suffer from nefarious activities of warrant chiefs as in other parts of Eastern Nigeria. And indeed it worked out well for them, however to the detriment of the people in some ways.

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