

A Critical Review of Shokpeka's Account of the Traditions of Origin of the Indigenous People of Etsako

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Abstract

This study critically examines Shokpeka's account of the tradition of origin of Etsako and Okpella people and its variant, and Masagbo's traditions of origin of Okpekpe people to ascertain who the original inhabitants of Etsako land were before the arrival of Benin migrants. The question has been, who were the original inhabitants of Etsako land before the arrival of Benin migrants? How do we identify them? Was there a change in the language, dress, culture, tradition etc. of the people when the migrants arrived? Can the migrants from Benin be ancestors to an indigenous people? The purpose of this work is to attempt to provide answers. This work also question Shokpeka 's claim that the original indigenes of Etsako are the Okpella and North Ibie, speakers of the Agbelo dialect who fled to find secure abode behind the high mountains and rocks of Okpella and North Ibie due to fear of what might befall them should the Oba send an army. The methodology used in explanation is the analytical and it concludes in part that the original inhabitants of Etsako land before the arrival of Benin migrant were not only the "Agbelo" dialect speakers but those who speak the 'Iyekhe" and "Agbelo" dialect.

Keywords: Traditions of Origin, Benin, Etsako, Okpella, Okpekpe, Oba Ozolua.

Introduction

Migration

Is the movement of people away from their usual place of residence to a new place of residence either across international borders or within a state.¹ The first type are those that occur within a country while the second is external which occur across international boundaries and which is also the same as the third, international. The reason why people migrate could be economic in search for better job opportunities, social which is joining family and friend, better education, health care and better social environment. It could be political that is, fleeing persecution, violence or conflict. They could move for environmental reason due to displacement caused by natural disasters of climate change, earthquakes, and environmental degradation. The reason could also be personal ie seeking different life.²

Oral Tradition

Was used in pre-literate societies who did not acquire writing to record events. It was the main source of history. It consists of all verbal testimonies which are reported statements concerning the past, narratives, legends, anecdotes, myths, proverbs, list of genealogies, tales, commentaries, poetry, place names and precedents of law. Even amongst people who have writing, many historical sources, including the most ancient ones were based on memories of the past. They are therefore, historical sources of a special nature in that they are unwritten and transmitted orally, with the preservation of past events depending on the power of memory of successive generations. However, not all oral sources are oral traditions because oral traditions are sources which have been transmitted from one person to another through language. Eyewitness accounts, even when given orally, are not oral traditions because they are not repeated statements. They consist of hear-say accounts based on memories of events not witnessed or remembered by the author, but which he has learnt about through hear-say. There exist professional historians e.g. among the Benin and Yoruba, whose responsibility it was to relate the history of their people to the younger ones and visitors who were maintained and catered for by the palace. They could relate by words of mouth, the history of their ancestors, rulers and peoples with outstanding clarity and in some societies, lapse in memory or fabrications were punishable by death.³

Etsako Land and People

The Etsako is an ethnic group that occupies an area north of present Edo state. It lies approximately between latitude 6°17' and 7°5' north of the equator and longitude 6°5 and 7°15 East of the Greenwich Meridian. The geographical extent of the area is about 1,055 square miles and bounded on the north by Okene and Ajaokuta local government areas of present Kogi state. To its west are the Owan and Akoko –Edo Local government areas and on the east by the river Niger.⁴

It is a dialect of Edo but has its own sub-dialect of Agbelo and Iyekhe. It has three local governments of Etsako West, Etsako Central and Etsako East. The notable towns in Etsako are Auchi, Agenebode, Okpella and Uzairue. Its economy is traditionally agrarian society that cultivates yam, cassava, rice etc., engages in fishing and rich in mineral resources of limestone and precious minerals.

The southern part of Etsako land is high forest near Anegbete in Southern Uneme. The high forest terminates in the area between Auchi and Uwepa-Uwano as semi-forest. The vegetation changes into grass savanna in Avianwu stretching to the territory of Uzairue. In the north are found the mountainous and rocky territories of North Ibie and Okpella. Etsako land is well supplied with water from the river Niger and many streams and springs. The most prominent streams are Oile, and Edio near Aviele, Ogio and Ugholomhi in Uzairue clan, Obe in Avianwu and Ofotse in Auchi the river Niger is at the eastern side of Etsako territory forming a source of communication between the people especially in Uwepe-Uwano and Igalaland. The major lakes, Ise and Edegbakele are located in Uwepa-Uwano and Uzairue clans' respectively.⁵

Traditions of Origin

The name Etsako is derived from the cultural practice of filing the incisors teeth by couples who were marrying for the first time. This means that any woman who had married before could not engage in this practice, hence it was a stigma on the part of a man who had never filed the tooth of a young woman. The word Etsako therefore means, "those who file their teeth and eleven Edo speaking clans that occupy the northern part of Edo state bear this name. These clans are, Auchi, Uzairue, South Ibie, Avianwu, North Ibie (Ibiavbo), Uwepa-Uwano, Okpella, Ekperi (Ekphe),

South Uneme and Asviela-Agbede".⁶ The Etsako are bound together by a common tradition and history of origin from the same ancestors. The oral traditions though have variant versions, have a common denominator which is Benin ancestry.⁷

Although the various traditions of origin and written records on the Etsako agree on their Benin ancestry, the reasons for migration from Benin vary slightly among the clans. It is unusual to explain origin more popularly and regularly by way of any of the migration theories. These theories are attempts to show that a people migrated from one location to another due to several reasons. The first explanation is that the migrating group was fleeing from a tyrannous imperial and imperious power. This is a case in which the ruler gets over bearing, harsh and uncompromising, enacting severe laws that force his subjects to move out of his sphere of influence to distant and favourable locations in search of peace and freedom. The second factor for migration is the search for a more fertile and habitable land. Thirdly, a people migrate in order to flee from criminal justice and escape punishment or they may migrate purely for the love of adventure in response to stories of Eldorado or land of promise lying somewhere and beckoning on those who wish to seize the day and create new opportunities for themselves. Fourthly, a migration may be the result of population congestion and there is the need to relieve population pressure from an overcrowded location. Fifthly, a people may be sheer victims of culture capture in which they claim migration from advanced center of civilization by surrendering to a known culture which they regard as superior to their own. In this case, the search for glory preferable from an established civilization. However, all these explanations and reasons for migrating are not mutually exclusive as a combination of some of them may be said to be operating in a given situation at the same time.⁸

For the Etsako, it is claimed that the reason for the migration had been oppression. It is also claimed that many, if not all the clans migrated during the reign of Oba Ozolua (1481- 1505). From the various traditions, it can be deduced that there was one migration out of which there were 'drop outs' after a long distance had been covered from Benin giving rise to Aiele, Agbede and Auchie before the group arrived at their first settlement in Uzairue. From here, the others, the ancestors' of Avianwu, Uwepa Wano, Ibie and Ekperi later moved to their various areas where they finally settled. The question here is, could there have been drop outs if the group that migrated were just two families?

The tradition claims that Omoazekpe who was the leader of the group took off from Benin because the Oba of Benin who having married one of his daughters indicated the desire to marry a second one concurrently with the first one. The refusal of Omoazekpe precipitated animosity of the Oba against him and his household including his brothers and their families. Moving out of Benin, Omoazekpe and his group first settled in Ukutegba-Iyogbe in the area today called Ikpe (Jattu) in Uzairue clan. Information reached them that the Oba was sending his men against the group forced Omoazekpe and his group to move out of Ukutegba leaving behind children of one of his brothers, Ogbe who had died at Ukutegba to minister to the spirit of their father who was buried there. It is claimed that the children left behind here are the progenitors of the quarter known today as Iyogbe (Iviogbe) or children of Ogbe in Ikpe -jattu.

Meanwhile, the tradition claims that another Omoazekpe's brother by name, Azama was moved by compassion for Ogbe's children who were to be left behind in hunger and fear, decide to remain with them with his family. Traditional folklores and lyrics recognize Azama as a praise name of Ipke (Jattu), the clan headquarter of Uzairue clan, because of this bold step that is claimed for Azama in the oral tradition. Omoazekpe and his group that moved out of Ukutegba arrived at a place now named after him at Afashio and settled there. The oral tradition also claim that from here, the ancestors of Avianwu, Uwepa Uwano, Ekperi, Noth and South Ibie and Southern Uneme

took off to found their different settlements as a result of difficulty in feeding or quarrel that arose from it among the brothers. Later on, the family of Omoazekpe left in Afashio became too large to feed from one pot so, the elder sons were advised to move away with their families from Afashio while Omazekpe, his wife and possibly the younger sons remained at Afasio. The name Uzairue means “a place of takeoff” is descriptive of the movement from the settlement of Afashio and later became applied to the nineteen villages which the tradition claims were founded by the sons of Omoazekpe and his brother Azam.⁹

When the Oba wanted to marry Omoazekpe second daughter and he declined, he became an adversary of the Oba. When Okpella wanted to marry the same girl, he became a hindrance to the Oba desire and faced the risk of being eliminated. Though oral tradition did not say if they moved away at the same time, we can assume that they moved at the same time because they faced the same risk. So when Omoazekpe fled with his family including his father, brothers Azama and Ogbe, Ikpomaza would have fled with his family and son at the same time and arrived at Ukutegbe –Iyogbe or Jettu in Uzairue.¹⁰ We can support this position with the following statement. “When information came to him of the Oba planning to send his men, it forced Omoazekpe and his group to move out of Ukutegba.”¹¹ This group refereed to here would be Omoazekkpa, his brother and Ikpomoza and family.

Where then was the point of separation. After moving from Ukutegba and arrived at Afahio and settled there, the two families became too large to feed from the same pot and quarrel ensued. To settle the rift, the elder sons of Omoazekpe were advised to move away with their families from Afashio. so they moved and founded Aviauwun, Uwepa Uwano, Ekperi, North and South Ibie and Southern Uneme.¹² Okpella would also have moved but instead of moving out alone, he moved with his father and arrived at the place now called Okpella to settle down.

Okpella Land and People

Okpella is located in the northern part of Edo state in Nigeria, in Etsako along Benin-Abuja federal high way road. It is one of the three main towns that make up Etsako East Local Government Area of Edo State. Okpella is known for its natural mineral resources, which include limestone, calcium, and granite, and attract investors for the people. Okpella Kingdom is located between latitude No 7 12’ and No 7 022’ and longitude E006 015’ and E006. 023’ of the equator. The area is an eastern extension of the Igarra schist belt which is part of the southern Nigerian basement complex. The area is blessed with granite genesis, Meta sedimentary rocks and pan African intrusive sedimentary rocks. Meta sedimentary rocks occurring in the area which include garnet biotite schist, marble and calc- silicate, genesis, quartzite and banded iron formation. The pan African intrusions include granite, chanockite, hybrid rock, pegmatite, aplite and basic dykes.¹³ Okpella is divided into two sections –Ogute and Oteku. Ogute is made up of eight villages: Ogute-oke, Udiegua, Imiagwese, Imieghiele, Awuyewi, Okhu, Iturogbe and Imiekurei. Oteku consists of Iddo, Afokpella, Iyeluwa, Kalasa, and Ogiriga.

Tradition of Origins

The variant version of the traditions of origin from Benin as told by the Etsako of Okpella attributes their movement from Benin to fear of persecution from the then reining Oba of Benin. The tradition claims that their progenitor by name Ikponmwosa meaning ‘I give thanks to God’, later corrupted to Ikpomaza migrated from a place called Ekae in Benin during the tyrannical rule of Oba Ozolua. Oral tradition has it that Ikponmwosa or Ikpomaza left Benin with his beautiful wife Eveva who was a twin. His departure was said to have been hastened by attempt by royal forces to take his

wife. He decided to move very far away beyond the area the Oba had powers over.¹⁴ Another version which is in line with the version recorded by Shokpeka claim that Ikpomaza had a son called Okpella who wanted to marry a certain girl (presumably Omoazekpe second daughter) whom the Oba also had marital interest. This evoked disaffection between the Oba and Ikpomaza who fearing that the Oba might do away with his son, fled with him and other members of his family.

The contradiction here is the account of who the Oba wanted to marry as it contradicts Shokpeka's account. The Oba could not have nursed the desire to marry Ikpomaza's wife "Eveva" who was the mother of Okpella and who had the desire to marry Omoazekpa's second daughter that the Oba had an interest in. So we take the account as recorded by Shokpeka as the true position of things even though the value of an account of an event is not based on face value but on facts.

The tradition goes further to say the movement from Benin was during the time of Oba-Ewuare i.e. between 14th and 16th century. Having traveled for many months, Ikpomaza and his team camped at Umar, near Ojah in Akoko-Edo Local Government Area of Edo State. It was from here they sent Otu and some people to the neighborhood for a better site and Iojase, one of the areas discovered, was preferred. It was when Ikpomaza and his team settled in Ijase that he had his only son 'Okpia' the father of Okpella. Ikpomaza gave birth to Okpella in Benin. Okpia, later corrupted to Okpella lived with his parents at Ijase and they soon came in contact with the people of Dkhu who settled not very far away from their home. Relationship between them was unfriendly because they spoke different dialects. Ikpomaza died and was buried at Ijase; his son Okpella instituted the pilgrimage to his grave yard during the all-embracing "Otu" or "Idaechie" festival. This is celebrated till today in Okpella.¹⁵ This again contradicts the Benin version which said that Ikpomaza had Okpella while in Benin and had grown up to marriageable age.

Okpella married a woman called Ogieumah and they had three children – two boys and a girl by name Nte, Ase, and Ekuri, respectively. When the boys were of age, they got their wives from the neighboring people. The love the parents had for the only daughter made them refuse to give her to a man in marriage. Her lover/husband came to settle with her in her father's house where she gave birth to the people of Imiekuri (the descendants of Ekuri).

Ase the second son was very adventurous and while on a hunting expedition discovered Eku, another suitable site for settlement for him and his family. Ase was nicknamed Oteku never returned to his parents but had children in his new place, who became the founders of the three settlements in Ukhomuyhio (Afokpella), Iddo and Ogiriga. Ute the senior son of Okpella remained with his parents and gave birth to the founders of the settlements of Ogute, Awuyemi, and Imiegiele. "They also met two aborigine groups which are Okhu at Amori cave and Ekpema also at Ekpema rock. These aborigines' languages were similar to that of Okpella, The word Okpella was a corruption of Okpea. This was a consequence of British imperialism in Nigeria of which Okpella was an integral part".¹⁶

Okpekpe Land and People

Okpekpe is located in Etsako East Local Government area of Edo state Nigeria. It is about 25 kilometers or 16 miles north east of Auchi. It has a population of about 3155 inhabitants.¹⁷ It is located on latitude 7.2 (7° 12' ON) and longitude 6.47(6° 28' E) 354. ¹⁸ Okpekpe is one of the thirteen clans which make up present-day Etsako local government area of Edo state and one of the three districts which comprised the Kukuruku division created in 1919 during the period of colonial rule, the others being Iviosakon and Akoko Edo. It is about 18 kilometers west of Agenebode and 18 kilometers north east of Auchi. It shares common borders with Igbirra people

of Kogi State on the north across river Obu. The physical feature of Okpekpe is made up of highlands with its mountainous rocky crags. These hills extend to Okpella and Imiegba in a sort of broken chains. The clan was formally occupied by a stubborn thorn bush locally called “Okpekpe” which covered the plateau. The thorn bush, numerous hills and deep valleys gave the place natural defense against external aggressors. The original name of the place was “Ortsele” because the people are addressed as “Imai- Ortsele”.¹⁹

The area is well supplied with water from springs, rivers and streams of which river Obe, Obu and Ogio are the most important. River Obu which has its source from Kogi state meanders through Okpella, Uzairue, Okpekpe, Imiegba, Fugar, Ekperi and finally terminates at the estuary of the parallel to river Obe and also terminates into the river Niger. The springs and streams serve as natural reservoirs from which the people fetch their house hold water. Most of these streams are seasonal and flourish only during the raining season but soon dry up at the onset of the dry season. The others are the offspring of water from a rock or ground at the base of some high hills such as the Adogbe and Okokovia streams of Okpekpe.²⁰

Okpekpe is in north Ibie and its people belong to the homogenic group of people called Afemai, a group of people living in the northern part of Edo state in the south - south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Afemai people occupy six local government areas, Etsako West, Etsako East, Etsako Central, Owan West, Owan East and Akoko Edo. This makes up what is called Edo north senatorial district. Afemai language is a Ghotou- Uneme, Yekhee language belonging to the north central branch of Edoid languages.²¹ They inhabit a land bordered by the river Niger to the east, Etsako West to the West, Auchu to the south and Kogi state to the north. Okpekpe is surrounded by Imiegba, Itsukwi, Imiakebu, Ebelle, Okeko, Ukhomedokhai, Ikpelli, Ukho and Mughe. The clan headship rotates between the Apa and Ede family title holders.

Traditions of Origin

The people of Okpekpe like their other counterparts are believed to be descendants of refugees from Benin. Their traditions relate of oppression by an Oba which cause a general flight of Etsako people to their present settlements. Details of those traditions indicate that the events described must have occurred during the reign of Oba Ozolua in the 15th century.²² However, another variant exist which claim that the people of Okpekpe migrated from Benin before any other clan in present Etsako. This same tradition goes further to stress that they migrated with the southern Ibies. Ogogo the founder of Okpekpe is said to have fled Benin with his father Ibie after their involvement in a civil war in which the Oba was wounded. Ibie first settled at Ivbie Napfe in present day south Ibie where Ogogo left him to seek better watered lands at Apana in present day Uzairue clan. He later left Apana to the north east and settled in an uninhabited area near Okpekpe now stand. He had four son Otsele, Egba, Isokwi and Akebu who later founded the four villages that now constitute the northern Ibies.²²

As a result of this traditions of origin, these four North Ibies identify themselves with the South Ibies by annual sacrifices performed by Okpekpe on behalf of the others as she is believed to be the senior among the North Ibie villages. The sacrifices always include- foodstuff, a dog, a- he goat, ears of corn and millet, two small pots of oil and native beer called “Onyo Ivbie” and a tortoise. They are sent as sacrifice to Ivbie-Napfe in South Ibie to foster the link.” It should be noted however, that in spite of this popular claim of migration from Benin, there is evidence of an aboriginal element in the area before the migrations took place. Such traces can be found in the four villages that make up north Ibie namely Okpekpe, Itwokwi, Imaikeye and Imiegba.”²³

Migrants as Ancestors

A common feature in these traditions of origin is the flight from Benin and common ancestry of Benin. Hence Shokpeka said "since the entire Etsako clans are unanimous in their claim of origin from Benin, one cannot dispute it"²⁴ We have defined Migration as the movement of people away from their usual place of residence to a new place of residence either across international borders or within a state. A migrant would therefore be someone who moved away from his usual place of residence to a new place of residence either across international borders or within a state. For the migrants from Benin, we can identify them as Omoazekpa and Family, father, his brothers Ogbe and Azama and their family and the family of Ikpomaza. They travelled together because they shared the same fear of Oba eliminating them which he had the powers to do at this point in history. They did not stop in Esaland because it shares boundary with Benin kingdom. Hence, they moved afar off to Etsako land which showed their level of fear and desperation. They then settled at Ukutegba before news came that the Oba was sending an army and moved to Afashio. This migrants could not have been ancestors to the people they met on ground because an ancestor is defined as "one from whom one is descended and who is usually more remote in line of descent than a grandparent or a progenitor of a more recent or existing specie or group."²⁵ If the migrants are ancestors, it imply that they gave birth to the people they met and existing in the areas. Therefore, they cannot be ancestors on the basis of Omoazekpa and Ikpomaza link except there is another link.

Indigenous People of Etsako

If there were people who lived in Benin kingdom and Esaland during these periods, there were also people who lived in Etsakoland during the period. We recall that Masagbor noted that, "that in spite of this popular claim of migration from Benin, there is evidence of an aboriginal element in the area before the migrations took place.such traces can be found in the four villages that make up north Ibie namely Okpekpe, Itwokwi, Imaikebu and Imiegba"²⁶ Shokpeka also argued that "if the traditions are accepted because of the unanimity of the claim and the presence of names of places mentioned in these traditions in the clans, the assumption that the lands to which these migrations moved were virgin and unoccupied land is debatable. Evidences abound to prove that the area had been occupied by indigenous groups before the said migrations poured into the area"²⁷ When the migrants from Benin moved out, they left behind their houses, well of water, farms and some harvested crops. We assume they were armed with dane guns, bow and arrow, hoe and cutlass, food stuff and water. They practiced no farming as they were on the move in Esaland being too close to Benin hence moved far to Etsako. On arrival at Ukutegba, what they carried would have been exhausted unless they replenished them as they moved through Esaland through buying. On arrival at Ukutegba, they met people and the people they met would have welcomed them with provisions of food, water and shelter as the pattern of living in Africa in pre- colonial era, was a communal one where people catered for each other especially strangers. Even if they arrived during the farming season, they had no land on which to farm until given one, and when given one to farm on, it would have taken them at least three months to harvest their first crop " Archeological evidence reinforces these views of an indigenous population inhabiting the area before the migrations from Benin which cannot be referring to the primary settlements of the area but of secondary migrations. If human habitation can be proved to have been present in Benin at the Stone Age period, these conditions fostering it in Benin existed in other areas of the forest belt also."²⁸

The story or information that the Oba was sending his army against the migrants which made them to leave their first place of settlement could not have been given to them by any other than the original inhabitants. Another proof of existence of an indigenous population is the absence of musical sounds in Benin language from that of Etsako. The extent to which the Etsako dialect is different from that of Benin language, some common vocabularies notwithstanding, shows that a large indigenous population was already settled in this region before the movement of the Benin group into the area. The titles of the early rulers of Etsako “Okhaimoh” which means “analyzer of Issues” is another proof that an indigenous population existed before the arrival of the migrants and the population had effective governments headed by “wiserulers.”²⁹

Having established that an indigenous population existed in the area, the question now is, who were they and what was the indigenous dialect? Shokpeka identified them as those who speak the ‘Agbelo’ dialect of north Ibie and Okpella. This position is based on movement of a small group of original indigenous people who moved to find secure abode behind the mountains and rocks of Okpella and north Ibie fearing what might come upon them should the Oba send an army against the migrants from Benin. “The dialects spoken by the north Ibies and Okpella could be called the indigenous one.”

This position is debatable because having earlier argued that “ the story that the Oba was sending an army could have been made up by the indigenes who did not like the presence of the strangers and so wanted to get rid of them by inventing the story.”³⁰ Should this be the case, the original inhabitants would not have to move because they invented or concocted the story and knew it was false. Therefore, the indigenous people cannot be said to be only those who speak the dialect of north Ibies and Okpella i.e. “Agbelo”. Since the original inhabitants who spoke the ‘Iyekee’ dialect did not have to move, we can therefore conclude by saying that the indigenous people of Etsako are those who speak the “Iyekee” dialect in the present Etsako West, Etsako Central and parts of Etsako East Local Government Area, and the “Agbelo” dialect of Okpella and North Ibie of Etsako East local government area.

Even if the story was true and some indigenes moved to find safe haven behind the mountains and rocks of Okpella and north Ibie, they were “very small groups”³¹ that we can assume was about 10-20 percent of the population leaving behind 80 – 90 percent. Those who moved would have been the Iyekee dialect speaking people who on arrival would have been completely absorbed by the indigenous people they met leaving no traceable impact of them on society. For the percentage that did not move, they would have completely absorbed the migrants from Benin in a culture capture and the migrants were totally assimilated into the society leaving no traceable impact. Hence there was no change in language, dress mode, culture, and tradition of the people they met. This is because the small group of migrants from Benin could not have displaced the percentage that did not move.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the indigenous people of Etsako and traditions of origin. The purpose is to put in proper perspective the identity of Etsako people using the various traditions of origin of the people. It concluded by saying that the migrants from Benin cannot be regarded as ancestors to Etsako people, that there existed an indigenous people who lived in Etsako land before the arrival of Benin migrants and that the original indigenes of Etsakoland are those who speak the Iyekee and Agbelo dialect.

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