

GLEAMS OF OPUAMA HISTORY: AN EXAMINATION OF SOME ASPECTS OF HER SOCIAL CULTURE

STEVE IBUOMO LARRY PhD.

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND DIPLOMACY,

NIGER DELTA UNIVERSITY, WILBERFORCE ISLAND, BAYELSA STATE.

Abstract

This paper is aimed at examining some aspects of the social culture of Opuama people. Opuama is a kingdom in Bomo Clan, Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, founded by Opu. To serve as a guide to the reader(s), the work provides an overview of the origin, migration, and settlement of the kingdom. In examining aspects of the social culture of the people, the work discusses their religious world view, marriage, burial rites, festivals, and recreational activities to demonstrate that Opuama Kingdom has been active and dynamic. The study revealed that, prior to the advent of Christianity; the Opuama people believed in the Supreme Being (God) but also worshipped a variety of gods/deities chief among them being Ikine. It was further revealed that, like other Ijo communities, Opuama people also observed traditional marriage rights before their daughters were given out in marriage. One very important finding of this study is the way the Opuama burial their dead. It was revealed that both witches and wizards and those declared free from all forms of diabolism were buried on the day of their death, the only difference been the number of days' wake keeps are observed for them after the burial. In addition, the study reveals that the people celebrate the Opuama Day Festival and undertake certain recreational activities chief among them being wrestling. This work adopts historical methods and utilizes both primary and secondary sources for the realization of the study.

Introduction

Opuama is the most populous kingdom in Bomo Clan, Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State comprising fourteen communities with a population of about 40,000 people (Larry and Daniel, 2019). These communities are located along the Silver River, a tributary of the River Nun. Opuama is bounded on the north by Fonibiri, Kayainbiri, and Emete, on the south by Akassa, on the east by Ogbia and Nembe, and west by Polobubou, Deibu and Ekeu. Opuama is further divided into four zones (*Kibiris*) namely, Odogu/Tama Kibiri, Ogila-ama Kibiri, Kemein-ama Kibiri and Akamakubou Kibiri (Promise, 2020). Opuama people speak the Bomo dialect of the Central Ijaw Group of Languages (Ozo-Mekuri et al, 2009). It is connected to her neighbours by creeks, rivers, rivulets, streams, sea, and push paths. The rivers, rivulets, streams, creeks, etc, are populated by a large number of fishes and other aquatic animals that have sustained human existence for centuries (Larry and Daniel, 2019).

Opuama is a product of a crisis which occurred at Obiama in the past. Obiama itself was

founded by Obia of unknown origin, though some refer to Benin as the ancestral home of Obia (Alagoa, 2005). There is no documentary evidence to prove when the crisis occurred, just as the precise cause of the crisis is also mixed up in myths. Various traditions of the Obiama crisis have been advanced and no one is certain which of the accounts is correct (Larry and Daniel, 2019). The Bomo version opines that, Obiama was founded by Obi. Obi bore many children among whom are Bomo and Tarakiri. A civil war broke out at Obiama as a result of the fact that some people were denied of eating the meat of a hare. This was an annual ceremony performed to ward off evil and increase fertility in women. This act was considered as a denial of a civil right by those affected and this provoked the crisis as Bomo and Tarakiri moved up to the fresh water area and settled (Larry and Daniel, 2019, Sunday, 2020).

Some scholars are of the opinion that Bomo people migrated from Obiama as a result of communal dish (wan fulo) crisis. For E.J. Alagoa, *Bomo cites the dispersal centre of Obiama as their*

place of origin... the founder of Bomo and Tarakiri (east) being sons of Obi migrated from Obiama... The twelve sons of Bomo founded the twelve component towns of Bomo. (Alagoa, 2005, 1999). S.K. Owonaro also made similar claims in his book, "The History of Ijo (Ijaw) and Her Neighbouring Tribes in Nigeria" when he said "Bomo people migrated from Obiama to settle at their present location, but the time of their migration is unknown" (Owonaro, 1949). Yengizifa Clarkson also corroborated the above claims when he remarked that, "Bomo was a descendant of Obia (Clarkson gave the name Obia as against Obi), the founder of Obiama. Obia in turn migrated from Isomobou in Wilberforce Island. At Obiama, in the course of the wan fulo crisis, Bomo and his children (Opu inclusive) fled for the second time and settled at their present location" (Clarkson, 2013).

Thus, from the traditions of origin, it was recorded that, Opu, son of Bomo, grandson of Obia founded Opuama Kingdom. Opu left Obiama with his six sons, namely, Onta, Laka, Ogidi, Ozoni, Otongbolo, Ibbu and settled at Opuama main town at about 1620AD (Memorandum on Opuama-Akassa Boundary Settlement, 2002). With the passage of time, the descendants of Opu started settling in other parts of the territory thereby forming the fourteen communities that make up the kingdom.

The names of the communities are; Odogukunu, Tamakunu, Aba-ama, Ipiri-ama, Aya-ama, Duke-ama, Ogila-ama, Akpomu-ama, Kemein-ama, Tugo-ama, Akama-ama, Ayou-ama, Fierigbe-ama, and Oki-ama. It is with this understanding of Opuama's historical background that the study shall discuss some aspects of the peoples' social culture such as Religious World View, Marriage System, Burial Rites, Festival and Recreational Activities.

Religious World View

The importance of religion in the human race cannot be overemphasized. Man and religion are two inseparable phenomena. Man is nothing without God. Through the ages, African people have always believed in the existence of a

Supreme Being-God. Thus, the traditional African man- the Opuama man acknowledged and believed in the existence of a supreme God, *Ayiba*, who was self-existing and created the heaven and earth. Prior to the advent of Christianity, African Traditional Religion was the concept of worship in the kingdom. Traditional religion is as old as the first set of people who settled there. They explained their experience religiously in the light of the environment such as streams, swamps, and lakes. The people tried to tackle the many problems of human life like sickness and death through religious practices. The people's concept of natural disaster, mishaps, post-mortal life, destiny and spirits were other factors that influenced the religious thoughts of the people. The people worshipped their ancestral gods and deities. *Ikine* was their national god handed down to them by their fore bearers. The *Opu-Ada* or *Egbe* house contains all the deities of the kingdom. Apart from *Ikine*, the people of Opuama also worshipped *Osain*, *Binipele*, etc.

These deities were actually treated with utmost respect not until the introduction of Christianity. Now, the kingdom can be addressed as a Christian kingdom because greater percent of the populace are now Christians. The first church in Opuama was Saint Stephen's Anglican Church which was founded or established by missionaries in the second half of the 19th century. Saint Stephen's Anglican Church was followed by the Scripture Union that came in the 1950s. The next was Cherubim and Seraphim and in the 1980s, Zion Church also came to the kingdom. The kingdom witnessed an influx of Pentecostal churches from the 1990s and beyond. Presently, there is a countless number of Pentecostal churches in Opuama kingdom (Laye-Atimi, 2020).

In addition to the foregoing, it is expedient to note that Opuama also have certain customs and beliefs. Put differently, the people of Opuama have customs and beliefs that they have observed from time immemorial. They are naturally strong and tend to hold their customs and beliefs in high esteem. Any attempt by any individual to go against the normal course of events was adequately punished. For the purpose of clarity,

customs are the whole body of usages, practices, or conventions that regulate social life. It could also be seen as a traditional and widely accepted way of behaving or something that is specified to a particular society, place, or time (Merriam-Webster, 2012).

The people of Opuama have always believed that in the first month of the year, tribute should be paid to the god of the four-river. This has been an age long practice by the people. In the course of the tribute paying, a white sheep, dry gin (*kaikai*), soft drinks and other materials are taken to the four-river as sacrifice, symbolizing the driving away of evil from the kingdom to the sea (Alakere, 2020). There is also the *Iguni-igbe-ye* practice. This practice also takes place in the first month of the year. This practice is about community cleansing or sanctification. Within the period of the cleansing exercise, no stranger is allowed to enter any of the fourteen communities of the kingdom. Palm fronds are tied from one end of the communities to another, signifying that work is going on. A two days old chicken and cloths are tied at strategic locations in the communities while a spiritualist (juju priest) performs the sacrifices for the sanctification of the various communities (Alakere, 2020).

It is also believed that birds like vulture and eagle should not be eaten in the kingdom. Vulture is forbidden by the people of the kingdom not because of any spiritual problem that will come along with eating it but because it feeds on dead carcasses of both animals and human beings. The eagle, on the other hand, was seen as a god by the traditionalists in the kingdom. Thus, the people, who until the advent of Christianity were adherents of the traditional religion forbids to eat the eagle because it symbolises their god. More so, it was the belief of the people that, the *Ovou* (oath) of peaceful co-existence taken between Nembe and the Opuama people, the eagle was used as sacrifice hence it should not be eaten in the kingdom (Alakere, 2020).

According to HRH, Oki Samuel Francis, paramount ruler of Oki-ama community, when he was still a boy, there was a stranger who went for hunting and came back with corpse of an eagle.

After flogging the stranger as punishment for killing the eagle (their god) and bringing it to the community, the community asked him to buy some items for cleansing of the land to avert calamity from befalling the land. The stranger complied and after the cleansing, he was asked to leave the community (Oki, 2020). However, it must be noted that, with the passage of time, and the subsequent introduction of Christianity into the kingdom, most of these practices are no longer carried out in the kingdom.

Marriage System

Marriage is the state of being united to a person of the opposite sex as husband or wife in a contractual relationship recognized by law (Merriam-Webster, 2012). Aristotle identified the sexually approved relationship between man and woman as compulsory commission already ordained by nature. According to him, marriage is a relationship between man and woman ordained by nature. Here him:

There seems to be friendship between man and woman ordained by nature. For the human being by nature is more disposed to live in pairs than in polis in as much as the household is prior in time and more necessary than the polis, and the creation of children is more common with other animals. Among other animals, the community extends only this far (to the creation of children), (not only) for the sake of reproduction but also for various aspects of their lives, putting their individual talents into the common good. On account of these things, there seem to be both usefulness and pleasure in this sort of relationship (Mukherejee, 1991).

From the above, it is evident that marriage is an important pre-condition for the sexual pleasure of both man and woman and even an obligation of nature to humanity.

The marriage system of Opuama is akin to the rest of Ijo land. Firstly, the man will approach the girl and at other times, send someone who knew the character of the girl to approach her for the suitor. Initially, the girl might refuse and use that period to assess the behaviour, character and attitude of her suitor.

With pressure and determination from the man, the girl will accept to marry him if he met her standards and that will set the pace or first step of marriage. After accepting the offer of marriage from the man, she will demand for certain things from the man, such as rain boot, umbrella, cloths, lantern, necklace, etc. After taking these symbolic items, she will proceed to inform her parents of the man's intention.

The next stage is what the Opuama people call "*Dau Bei*", knocking of door in English. During the *Dau Bei*, the man would come with his relatives and items like soft and hot drinks, cigarettes, snuff, kola nuts, alligator pepper, etc to the family of the girl he wants to marry. Normally, the *Dau Bei* usually takes place in the palour or sitting room of the family house of the girl because of the fact that the marriage has not been made public. The girl's (bride's) family will entertain the delegation and ask them for the reason of their visit. At this point, the man's family would announce the purpose of their visit. After stating the purpose of their visit, the girl would be called to confirm if she is aware and accepts the man's proposal. If the answer is in the affirmative, the next stage of the marriage will commence.

In this stage, drinks will be presented and libation will be made. The libation is normally done by the father of the girl or the oldest man in her family. He will bless the union with long life and prosperity. The payment of dowry or bride price which symbolizes that both the man and woman have been legally married will be done officially. The father of the bride will expressly tell the groom's family the amount of money he will take as bride price and it will be paid by the groom's family after negotiations (Laye-Atimi, 2020). Thereafter, celebration and merriment allows. But it must be noted that, with the passage of time, this marriage system is gradually becoming moribund as this practice has changed greatly. Today, Opuama people contract both Christian and Court Marriages. This is in addition to the *Du* system of marriage, an age long marriage system in which a man inherits his late brother's or relative's wife. Even the *Du* marriage system is

going extinct as people are no longer subscribing to it.

Burial Rites

Human beings are mortals and as a result, death is inevitable. In Opuama, when someone dies, the person is buried that same day, whether the person is a man or woman, old or young and there are two ways of burying a deceased person. If the person was confirmed to be fetish, diabolic, witch or wizard, etc, the person was taken to the evil forest for burial. The process through which you know who fetish, diabolic, which is or wizard was through their confession or the *Ibebe* (*Obobo*) process. Some persons do confess their involvement in fetish and diabolic activities close their death. At other times, the *Ibebe* has been used to find out such people.

The *Ibebe* process has been used for ages in Opuama Kingdom to know if a person is fetish, diabolic, or the person is a witch or wizard. The *Ibebe* is a structure made with palm fronts. At the death of a person, the *Ibebe* is brought to inquire from the gods if the person was fetish, a witch or wizard. The *Ibebe* was carried by four persons with a juju priest (spiritualist) standing in front of it, whose duty it was to inquire from the gods about the status of the deceased. If the person is not a witch or wizard, fetish and diabolic, the *Ibebe* would turn three times to the right but if the person is indeed diabolic, fetish, a witch or wizard, it would turn three times to the left. After the confirmation, such a person is taken to the evil forest for burial, a wake keep, two days for men and three days for women will be organised in his or her honour, though depending on the age of the dead person. At the expiration of the wake keep, relatives of the deceased would shave their hairs to show that they have lost a loved one and the properties of the deceased would be shared among the people of the family (Laye-Atimi, 2020).

On the other hand, if the person is without blemish, that is, if the person was not diabolic or fetish, a casket will be provided by the entire community and the person will be taken to Opuama main town, the ancestral home of the Opuama people. The person so taken will be

buried in one of the seven compounds, particularly the compound the person belongs. Furthermore, if the person died at old age, a night wake keep called "Osen Dein" will be organized for the deceased. After this wake keep, a big (flamboyant) wake keep of three days for men and four days for women follows. Thus, as against the practice in some Ijo clans and communities where witches and wizards are thrown into the river or buried in the evil forest without celebration, the Opuama people celebrates all at death, be it a witch or wizard, fetish and diabolic. The only difference is in the number of days such celebration would last as stated above.

Festivals

The Opuama people are known for their annual "Opuama Day Celebration" which comes up on the 1st of June every year and runs till 3rd of the same month (1-3, June). The festival started in 1970 due to the change of name of the kingdom from Seibiri to Opuama. The change of name was necessitated by the that, the name Seibiri, did not portray a good image of the Opuama people. Since the change of name of the kingdom, it has become an annual event for the kingdom to celebrate. During the celebration period, sons and daughters of Opuama from different parts of the world will converge at Opuama to showcase their cultural heritage, thereby immortalizing the change of name. On the 1st of June, cultural dance groups such *Igbelegebele*, *Ikpiri*, *Ogbo*, *Asugbo*, *Iboo*, etc will be in attendance to entertain the guests. Wrestling, match pass from the four secondary schools and fourteen primary schools, and football matches will light up the occasion (Deo, 2020).

Top government functionaries were also in attendance to have a glimpse of the celebration. For instance, in the 41st anniversary of the Opuama Day Celebration in 2011, the then Governor of Bayelsa State, Chief Timipre Sylva used the occasion to advice the people of the Niger Delta to give peace a chance in order to engender development in the region, describing violent agitation as a passing phase in the history of the Niger Delta struggle. He was optimistic that, with the victory of former President Goodluck

Jonathan in the 2011 presidential elections, the marginalization, neglect, and underdevelopment faced by the people of the Niger Delta will soon be addressed (Daily Independent Newspaper, 2011). He made this statement against the backdrop of the rising insecurity in the region before the declaration of the Presidential Amnesty Programme by the Late Yaradua's administration. The insecurity was necessitated by the militant activities of the Niger Delta youths who suffered deprivation, marginalization, neglect and abandonment in the hands of successive governments and oil companies.

Besides, the Opuama Day Celebration which is the main festival the Opuama people celebrate, as Christians, they also observe Christmas and Easter Day celebrations. As it is well known, Christmas is celebrated by Christians in commemoration of the birth of Jesus Christ just as Easter is celebrated to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In addition to the celebration of Christmas and Easter, the people of Opuama also celebrate the New Year Festival that is celebrated on the 1st of January every year.

Recreational Activities

The people of Opuama are rich in recreational activities. Prominent among such recreational activities is the traditional wrestling. This sport of wrestling is an important sporting activity of the Opuama people. Wrestling is highly priced in the kingdom and wrestling champions earned respect in the society. Wrestling is accompanied by singing and dancing of special drumming to encourage the wrestlers. This adds colour to the occasion.

Opuama organizes wrestling competitions among themselves during Christmas, Easter, Opuama Day celebrations and other events to foster cordial relations among her people. At times, Opuama people go beyond their boundaries to organize wrestling competitions with neighbouring communities such as Peremabiri, Aguobiri, Kayainbiri, Eniwari, etc and this creates unity and bilateral ties among the communities for peaceful co-existence. In the 1950s, Opuama had wrestlers like Laye Igbo, Ikpuruke Guruku,

Robert Agele, Benjamin Odeke, Dimari Gilspine, Godwill Peter, Kari-pere, Jebby Ogiri, Oupele Gbiri, Monday Bedi, Job Goliwei, Ismail Dickson, Owei Ini, Oruama Okototo, etc. while the last three decades has produced new breed wrestlers like Peter Igbolo, Agadaga Amain, Rostom Bogomo, Engineer Opuigoni, Fineman Gbene, etc.

Another recreational activity evident in Opuama is dancing accompanied with sing songs. There are various dancing groups scattered all over Opuama. Such dancing groups include, *Igbelegbele* Dancing Group at Odogukunu/Tamakunu, *Ikereogbo* Dancing Group of Ipiri-ama, *Inboho* Dancing Group of Kemein-ama, *Oue-Ogbo* Dancing Group of Tugu-ama, *Arugo-Ogbo* Dancing Group of Oki-ama, etc. Almost all the communities in Opuama Kingdom has one dancing group or the other as dancing reflects the first name of their ancestral father "Se" meaning dance in the Izon language (Samuel, 2020).

Conclusion

This study has examined has some aspects of the social culture of Opuama people. In order to make the readers familiar with the area, the work provided the location and a brief history of the people. In this regard, the work provides a historical overview of the people's origin, migration, and settlement as a guide to readers to have some insight about the location and historical background of the people. Thereafter, the work examines some aspects of the social culture of the people.

In this regard, it looked at the religious world view of the people, marriage system, burial rites, festivals, and recreational activities. From the discoveries made in the course of this research, it is obvious that Opuama Kingdom had a well-established social culture that was not static but dynamic and active.

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