

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF YENAGOA FROM RURAL SETTLEMENT TO URBAN (STATE CAPITAL) CENTRE

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### Abstract

*One fundamental objective of Historical scholarship is to chronicle the past in man's progress in the society with regard to his development in all facets of life. It is an undeniable fact that there is an "unbiblical cord" relationship between the past and the present. It is in the light of these indices that this paper examine Yenagoa and its stage-by-stage strides from a rural and remote settlement in the Northern fringe of Nigeria's Niger Delta to a bustling Urban centre and now 'housing' the capital of Bayelsa State since 1996. It is an historical exposition of an urban centre that travelled through the "thick and thin" from a deep and remote past to the present. The investigation of its settlement, growth and development from about the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the essence of this paper.*

### Introduction

History is basically a study of man's past in relation to his social and physical environment. His achievements, pitfalls and successes on immigration and development, growth and establishment of varied institutions of human endeavours. History examined the development trend of all facets of human and societal perspective in holistic dimensions.

It is in recognition of this all important field of study that the growth and development of towns and urban centres have taken centre stage in historical discourse. The history of Yenagoa from a rural farming/fishing settlement with a sparse population in ancient period, to the attainment of a striving urban state capital status has caught the attention of scholars. This paper therefore, takes a reflective look at the historical stride of Yenagoa from its remote period traversing centuries to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Yenagoa (variantly called Iyeniagho or Ye-na-gwa) is constructed from Yen and Oguo. Yen in Epie language means home; and Oguo was the founder of the home. Thus Yenoguo in Epie's language means Oguo's home. The name was later changed by the British Colonial officers to Yenagoa (Yakie, 2010). It has since embraced other sister communities in the Epie/Attissa kingdoms to attain its present status. The town Yenagoa is located along the Ekole River, which is a branch of the great River Nun. It is a town in the Attissa Kingdom of Bayelsa State. Yenagoa is bounded in the West by the neighbouring communities constituting the Ekpetiama and Gbarain clans, on the South by Ogbogoro, on the North by neighbouring towns such as Ovom, Onopa and Amarata and on the East by Swali, a sister community which speaks the same language, culture, tradition and all tribal obligations with all towns making up the Attisa Kingdom of which Yenagoa is an integral part.

Yenagoa town prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a serene community endowed with bounteous agricultural potentials and rich and valuable cultural heritage of festivals, rites such as New Yam festival (Adiafia), fishing and marriage rite, circumcisions, death and burial rites. In contemporary Yenagoa setting however, it now host varieties of other culture and traditions occasioned by the emigration of diverse people from other parts of the Niger Delta to swell this community. Now, Yenagoa is not only a homogenous community, but an heterogeneous society consisting of people from Urhobo, Isoko, people of different Ijaw clans, Igbos, Yorubas,

Hausa and so on, which has changed its status to a cosmopolitan town. It is now the host town of the capital of Bayelsa State of Nigeria.

### **The Yenagoa People, Origin, Migration and Settlement**

Yenagoa and its people are ancient settlers along the Ekole creek, which is an arm of the River Nun. It is an Attissa settlement with some level of mixed breed from neighbouring communities such as Epie, Ijaw and Ogbia. The people speak the Epie-Attissa language, which is a branch of the Edoid group of languages of the Eastern Niger Congo which is also a part of the Niger Kordofarioan (Wilfred Brugu Patterson, 1983). The Epie-Attissa language is quite different from those of her closest neighbours of Ijaw and Ogbia, but has close affinity with the Engenni and Degema languages in River State. All these languages are classified under the larger Delta Edoid language sub-family. The people are peace-loving, withdrawn and sometimes addressed as part of the "Inland creek dwellers".

Yenagoa consist of seven sub-divisions or units which sum together to forms the aggregate whole. These settlements are named after the original founders. They include Fankpo, Fankile, Erigba, Fankpolu, Kalifa, Peletia and Fekumo. They were said to have migrated from their stop-over station of Aguobiri.

Geographically, Yenagoa is located in the central Niger Delta fringe along the Ekole River. The vegetation around Yenagoa is classified as rainforest, dense equatorial forest and fresh water swamp (Sorgue, C.M. 1985). Sorgue maintains that this area inundated with oil palm trees, silk cotton trees and Mahogany trees. The region is also noted for its variant raffia palms, fresh fish ponds and lakes. The River Ekole and the Epie creek are to the Yenagoa people as the "River Nile is to the Ancient Egyptians". The River Ekole and the Epie creek are flooded between the months of June and October every year, making life unbearable for the people. They had to readjust their lifestyle during the flood period. Farmlands, residential and traditional business centres would be flooded; but at the receding of the flood, nature would once more "smile on the people" as the alluvial deposits along the banks of the river and creek rejuvenates the soil and make possible the cultivation of food crops such as Cassava, Sugar cane, vegetable of various kinds, cocoyam of various species.

In terms of the origin and settlement of the Yenagoa people, Egharevba (1968) suggests that there were aborigines in this area before the Benin migrants. However, a second wave of migrants entered this area that happened to have migrated from the region of Benin. Accordingly in the days of Yore, the Oba of Benin, some defeated Benin warriors in Battle afraid of the penalty that awaited them at Benin, escaped to Aguobiri were they settled among their host. However, a communal crisis arose at Aguobiri which made the Yenagoa faction to migrate to their present settlement. It is suggested therefore that these new migrants might have imposed their culture and superiority on the aborigines, acculturate them and both groups of people fused together to form the present Iyenioguo (Yenagoa) people.

### **Traditional Socio-Political and Economic Arrangement and Development**

Prior to colonization and the incursion of foreigners into Yenagoa, the administration of the area is bound together with religion and justice. These duties were inseparable and practically undistinguishable. The laws and traditions of the pre-colonial era were said to have been handed down by the ancestors who served as watch dogs. In the light of this, the ancestor "Otouyom" was believed to have played a dominant role before the advent of European colonialism in Yenagoa.

During this period the *Ibeneken* or community leader with his council of elders known as *Gbanipregbeni* acted as the mouth piece of the ancestors and gods of the land to settle disputes, offer sacrifice, lead the people to war, promulgate laws as directed by the gods and

ancestors. The Ibeneken was usually the oldest man in the community and the Gbanipregeri were the oldest men from the respective compounds or quarters known as Ipeli.

The actual administrative structure of pre-European era falls within the purview of the Age grade system. Children under the age of 15 did minor duties in the communities, those between 15 to 20 organized communal duties such as clearing the village paths and sweeping the public square and those between 21 to 40 years had the responsibility of constructing public building such as markets stalls, roads, and in the case of men, formed the core of the fighting or military force.

The family was the main socialization institution in Yenagoa. Other socio-cultural activities such as marriages, circumcision, death and burial rites had close affinity with the family system.

In pre-colonial Yenagoa there were two types of marriage; the *Offinalomu* or big wealth marriage any the *Ofina-Idu* or small wealth marriage. The later form of marriage was the most popular in the area that was contracted between the family of the groom and that of the bride. Before a man and woman could be married, the parent of the man or groom would approach the parents of the proposed bride through an intermediary known as *Obirauvie*. If the proposal is accepted by the bride's family, a date is set where the bride wealth was paid and the marriage consummated (Kenigbolo, 2017). The value of the bride wealth was once measured in terms of woven cloth (Usineme) and later casks of oil. The casks or puncheon of oil had a fixed exchange rate in terms of western trade goods such as cases of gins, pieces of madras and kegs of gun powder.

Traditionally, the bride, after the payment of the bride wealth was not allowed to have any sexual relationship with the groom until the bride was circumcised. Circumcision was held highly in traditional Yenagoa society. Circumcision was usually done at the water front and after the event; the girl is led to the house of an elderly woman who is not her relative in order to nurse the wound. She was also provided with other maidens (younger in age or her age grade) who were yet to be circumcised, together with the husband lived with the nurse and her family in the house of the nurse until the wound was healed. During his period, the husband was expected to provide provisions required by the nurse and the young helpers. At night the circumcised girl slept with her legs placed across her husband's body and he equally escorts her to ease herself when the need arose. The feeding of the circumcised girl, her husband, the nurse and the young attendants is borne by the bride's family with assistance from the groom. Entertainment of the groom and bride during this period involve story telling (folktales), teaching and counseling on marriage life and how the couples would be initiated into adult hood once the wound was healed.

Once the girl is healed from the circumcised wound, the couples are led to the husband's house where they begin their marriage life under the watchful eyes of the husband's extended family.

The second type of marriage - the *Ofoinalomu* become important only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in response to the wealth orchestrated by oil and kennele trade which in turn created social differentials and the need for inter-village alliance necessary for security and profitability in trade. The *Ofoinalomu* was usually contracted between the people of Yenagoa and Ibos and other people outside the Epie-Atissa confirment.

Apart from the marriage institution, death and burial rites are also held highly in Yenagoa. In the past, before the formal announcement of death through the shooting of cannons or otherwise, consultation was made of the dead/deceased to ascertain the deceased possession or otherwise of witchcraft. Proof of innocence of witchcraft was celebrated with cheers and cannon shots while possessor of witchcraft or wizard was hauled away to ignomous

burials. In most cases consultation with the deceased is carried out to ascertain the cause of the dead, place of burial, property sharing formula etc.

Death and burial rites involves all and sundry in Yenagoa in the past. Ways of burying the dead varies according to the status and cause of death. In traditional Yenagoa society the juju priests were buried in separate cemetery consecrated to them and is accorded the highest burial rites. Slaves were buried without celebration and are buried at designated place set aside for them. Deceased persons found to have been possessed by witchcraft were not accorded ceremonial burials. Their corps were not wrapped or caged in coffin, but rolled in mats and buried at sandbanks or slope of banks of river prone to flooding (Kenigbolo, 2017).

The celebration of the New yam festival called **Adiafa** in Yenagoa is a key activity in the socio-cultural life of the Yenagoa people. The celebration of **Adiafa** festival is usually undertaken annually to appreciate the gods for a good and profitable harvest, especially water yam, which was the main food crop of the people, but also to honour the ancestor for having providing the people with safety and surplus. It was widely believed that non-celebration of this festival might lead to a poor harvest subsequently, until the ancestors are appeased. As such, the event is commemorated annually in the month of July.

Activities during the celebration include wrestling competitions, dance and eating competition, pouring of liberation, street procession, etc. guests and participants were entertained with varieties of dishes and drinks throughout the duration of the festival. Young ladies used the opportunity of the festival to adorn their bodies and garbed themselves in rich colourful attires, while the young men make a spectacular gallery of the traditional outfit befitting the occasion.

Economically, since the pre-colonial period economic activities were sub-grouped into farming, fishing, hunting and trading. The fresh water zone of Yenagoa is endowed with rich clayish soil which extended to merge with the hinterland. The vegetation in the region is mainly tropical rainforest and forest products such as high trees and raffia palms abound. Farmers in this area thus cultivate tree and food crops.

Farming in Yenagoa was done on three types of farmland. These were the Otoro, Obule and the Itiabazi farmlands.

The otoro are mainly farmland located on the banks of the Ekole River and the Epie creek. The Otoro are mainly owned by men, but cultivated by the women. The Otoro farm in Yenagoa were mainly cultivated between late November through to march when the waters on the banks have receded. By the month of June when the flood water start rising on the banks of the river and creek, the women starts harvesting their products. Harvesting of crops usually take up to 3 months that is, from June to August. Crops cultivated on the Otoro land include cocoyam, yam, cassava, okra, sugar cane, sweet potato, groundnuts and pepper and the cultivation of the Otoro farm is done annually since the soil is enriched with alluvial deposits from each successive flooding (Barugu Patterson, 1983).

The Obule farmland stretches from where the Otoro farmland stopped upland. Farming of the Obule land starts from January to March. Unlike the Otoro farmlands that needed no clearing, grasses allowed to die, dried and burnt. The felling of trees was done by the men and other male helpers. The cultivation of crops was however done by the women. The Obule farmland did not recognize any standardized system of bush fallowing and the land was cultivated as many times as possible with the soil retaining its fertility. The fertility of the soil is sometimes enabled by alluvial sediments from run off waters flowing from the swamps to the river during very heavy rains but equally stopped flowing when the rains stop. Crops usually cultivated on the Obule farmland included cocoyam (Okile), Adia (water yam), Alabulubu (three leave yam) and Ediobo (Cassava). Other minor crops such as plantain, pepper, okro and banana were equally cultivated.

The Itiabazi farmlands are located deep in the forested area in Yenagoa. Like the Obule farms, the itiabazi farms did not have a particular period for harvesting crops. These farms were sometimes referred to as Ogba and were mainly cultivated by men. Most of these farms were prone to high flood. Crops planted on these farms included yam and plantain, although more women are now engaging in these farmland in modern times.

Fishing was another traditional occupation the people of Yenagoa were engaged in. Situated along the River Ekole and the Epie creek, the Yenagoa people fish extensively in the waterways for their domestic and aquatic needs. Fishing activity among the Yenagoa people involved the use of Igbor or fish net, Igbe or fish trap and hookline (Ighoro-goro) more recently commercial fishing practice involved the construction of ponds, taupuline ponds and fiber tanks to rear mud fishes such as the African cat-fish species (*Clarias garipenus* and *Heterobranchus* species). In pre-colonial times, fish preservation is done by smoking, salting and sunning in Yenagoa. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century however, modern methods of fish preservation such as freezing, drying by the use of oven, etc became prevalent in the area.

Trading was an important age-long activities of the Yenagoa people. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the people were producing foodstuff, fish and palm produce for domestic and/or subsistence living but also for commercial purposes. The people of Yenagoa traded with other Atissa neighbours, Epies, Ogbia, Nembe and people of various ijaw clans. The trade which was prevalent in the Oyoyo Market of Yenagoa established in the 1930s helped in the development of Atissa and Epie communities. Yenagoa traders brought commodities from as far as Orashi, Krigni and Enuoto and brought them to Oyoyo market in Yenagoa. Similarly, the people of Yenagoa were also actively involved in the slave trade, however, this was done indirectly as they (the people of Yenagoa) unlike the Akassa and Nembes, did not go to the hinterland to capture their slaves. Rather, they purchase their slaves at the Oyoyo market.

An important economic activity worthy of some elaboration during this period was the trade in palm produce. The relevance of palm produce came to the limelight due largely to the Industrial Revolution in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Palm oil processing became one of the main occupations of the people of Yenagoa. The people of Yenagoa mostly sold their palm produce to middlemen known as Agbila who were mainly Nembe and Ogbia traders at the Oyoyo market. The Nembe middle men in turn sold the palm oil to the Europeans stationed at the coast of Twon Brass, Akassa, Bonny, etc.

From the 1880, however, the Europeans began to penetrate various parts of the Niger Delta. In 1885 the National African Company established a trading post opposite Yenaka in Atissa to exploit the abundant palm oil produced in the area. A treaty was signed between the National African Company and the people of Yenaka. A hulk was later stationed at mid-stream with the European traders on board while Nembe traders acted as interpreters. Although the Odiabara war between the Europeans and the Atissa people disrupted commercial activities for a while, the resumption of trade later continued.

In furtherance of the palm oil business, two British merchants, Messrs Robert Yorke Sewell of Mansfield and Gerald Parke of Manchester signed an agreement with the people of Yenagoa in 1911 for the establishment of a palm nut cracking company in the area. The company was known as UTOSEWEL, meaning Sewell's plot. The company took charge of buying and cracking of the Palm oil and nuts. In 1918, Sewell sold his share to Mr. Yakie Ozaka of the UAC (Barugu Patterson in Kenegbolo, 2017).

By the 1930s the trade in palm oil in this region had become competitive, therefore, the people of Yenagoa started selling their products to faraway places like Uguta, Abomema and Warri. This they did by paddling to and from their station. The process was laborious and only few industrious people could engage in it. This trade in palm produce helped in the exposure

and development of Yenagoa. Yenagoa thus became a notable spot in the history of the Niger Delta.

### **Yenagoa in Transition**

The palm oil trade and the subsequent Odiabara war in 1894 ushered Yenagoa into a transition period leading to their contact with the outside world, especially with the Europeans.

Due largely because of the frequent crises between the Royal Niger Company and the Local peoples of the Niger Delta, the charter of the RNC was abrogated in December 31, 1899 and the British government declared a protectorate over Southern Nigeria and the Yenagoa people under Epie-Attissa fell under the British colonial administration. Yenagoa was grouped alongside others to form the Brass District.

The inception of Colonial rule led to the abrogation of the gerontocracy. The introduction of Christian in 1913 and education changed the social scenario of Yenagoa. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) of the Anglican Communion pioneered the established of the St. Peter's Primary School alongside the Church.

Between 1891 and 1929 the warrant chief system pervaded the political and judicial system in Yenagoa, which led to the established of native courts first at Sabageria in 1904 and later at Onopa in 1936.

Three major incidents occurred in Epie-Attissa land between 1958 and 1966. The Epie women riot locally called Igekwe took place in February, 1958. The riot was prompted due to the plan by the Eastern region government of the National Council of Nigerian Citizen to reintroduce school fees in schools. The women chanted "Anyigekwe" meaning "we disagree". At Yenagoa town buildings and property were destroyed before the riot was brought under control by the anti-riot police squad. This demonstration has metamorphosed to the annual festival of Obunem Epie. In April, 1959, a General Hospital was established at Yenagoa.

A far reaching event that shook the foundation of Nigeria in February, 1966 was the Boro revolution. Issac Boro, a former police officer stunned the Yenagoa Police station, disarmed the policemen on duty and formed the Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS). Isaac Boro led 12 other young men to issue two decrees (1) The Niger Delta People Republic declaration of independence and (2) The Niger Delta Peoples Republic-State of Emergence.

By this proclamation, he had declared the independence of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. The revolution lasted for twelve days before it was quelled by a Platoon of Soldiers of the Nigerian army led by second lieutenant Jugga and a team of about 200 mobile police force sent from Enugu and Port Harcourt. Isaac Boro and his Cohort were arrested in March 7<sup>th</sup>, 1966, were tried on charges of treason against the state of Nigeria by Justice J.A. Phil-Ebosie and were sentenced to death. However, the government of General Yakubu Gowon released him and Boro died fighting on the side of Nigeria during the civil war. Isaac Boro's revolution thus became the first rebellion against the Nigerian State.

### **Yenagoa in Recent Times**

At independence, Yenagoa went through much civilian and military administration until 1996 when the government of General Sani Abacha created Bayelsa State. Yenagoa was preferred ahead of Amassoma and Kiama for the Bayelsa state capital.

At creation as the state capital the name Yenagoa came to include all the communities in Epie-Atissa clans and also the headquarter of Yenagoa Local Government Area which also include such neighbouring clans as Gbaran Ekpetiama, Okordia, Zarama and Biseni.

According to Ama-Ogbari (2014) that “Yenagoa since becoming the state capital has become a vast and egregious cosmopolitan centre. It has made great strides in all fronts: economic, social and politics.

### Conclusion

The paper examines in historic details the gradual built up of Yenagoa from ancient times to the modern dispensation. In doing so, cognisance is taken to chronically place historical events and developments in succeeding orders. High points of the paper has been the geography of Yenagoa, migration and settlement, development and growth of political and social institutons as well as the economy in the aspects of harnessing the resources in their neighbourhood, in farming, gathering and fishing. Commercial activities which “stone balled” into great and profitable inter-group relations between Yenagoa and her neighbours is brought to fore in this discourse. The paper concludes with aspects of modernity when Yenagoa came in contact with the outside world, especially Europe. The colonization of Yenagoa, the decolonization process and Yenagoa in an independent Nigeria as well as becoming a state capital are topical issues that were considered.

Yenagoa has been an ancient settlement that had strived to attain modern status as a state capital. This nucleus Attisa community now ‘housed’ nationalities of divergent origin. Social-economic development have been fast tracked and it is now in the main stream of Nigeria politics. The current trend of globalization has eaten deep into the fabric of Yenagoa society especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

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