

BETWEEN EGWU-OTA, TRADITIONAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS AND GOVERNANCE IN ASABA, DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

***Mariam Asabe IYEH**

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between Egwu-Ota and the Asaba traditional political institutions and governance and establishes the significance of Egwu-Ota to the political institutions and governance of the Asaba people of Delta State, Nigeria. In doing this it employs the ethnological field study methodology of interviews, historical analysis and observational techniques to assert that Egwu-Ota, as a dance form, is a microcosm of Asaba holistic culture. It reflects in compact forms the socio-political, economic, religious, cultural, traditional and linguistic values of the people. Egwu-ota aggregates the cultural pride and tenacity of the Asaba people who have strung bits and pieces of their culture together to form a unique dance. Therefore, Egwu-Ota is central to traditional title taking/governance in Asaba, and implicates certain levels of social status that one attains as a true born of 1Ahaba.

Keywords: Asaba, Egwu -Ota, Traditional political institutions, Governance, Ahaba

Introduction

Order has always been the wheel of progress, continuity and development in human societies. Every society, no matter how advanced has had some underlying laws whether tangible or intangible that upholds it in its developmental strides. Often these laws can be conventional or traditional. In this article, we are concerned with the traditional system. In such societies, the traditional council is the custodian of such laws. The traditional council is sometimes made up of the monarch or Eze, chiefs and chief priests. They administer these laws on behalf of the generality of the

people. This hierarchy goes down through the heads of extended families and nuclear families. This arrangement allows for cohesion and governance which in turn produces order, continuity and progress in society.

Egwu-Ota is the royal dance of the Asaba people of Oshimili South of Delta State, Nigeria (Iyeh, 2008). Egwu-Ota ranks very high in the hierarchical order of Asaba dances. Therefore all the Ebo/quarters in Asaba acknowledge Egwu-Ota as the supreme dance of the Asaba people. It is performed on occasions such as title taking or installation ceremonies, e.g., Eze or Obi titles and the coronation of an Asagba. Egwu-Ota is also performed for civic receptions at the instance of the Asagba. This is a very recent innovation introduced by the current Asagba, Obi (Prof) Chike Edozie. It is also performed during festivals such as Ikha- Inne, etc. During such festivals, Egwu-Ota is performed in the house of the most senior Obi in the quarter.

For the purpose of scholarship, Iyeh divides Egwu-Ota into three forms, namely, Egwu-Ota Isinabor, Egwu-Ota in music form and the most common, Egwu-Ota for Omenani (traditional) burials which can be referred to as classical form because of its sequences (2008). This division is based on their performance structure, which describes the order in which the actions are arranged or presented during performance.

Egwu-Ota in music form is performed during installation ceremonies as music to which people dance in felicitation with the Eze and his first wife Anasi. This form is only performed at the climax of the installation rites for the Eze title aspirant as part of the ritual called Ebi Nugboma, which is a ritual for the expression of fatherly love and universal brotherhood. Egwu-Ota in music form is also played for civic receptions. On such occasions, Egwu-Ota serves as the only major music. Regardless of whatever dance groups present, Egwu-Ota dominates because it is considered the Asaba national identity stamp.

Egwu-Ota, as a royal dance reveals the deep respect the Asaba people have for traditional titles. A typical Asaba man strives to leave the level of 2Mkpisi to at least that of a 3Mkpalor before he dies. A titled man in Asaba is highly respected and recognized, irrespective of age. For example, an Obi or Eze titleholder, will have the audience in a case where an Mkpalor and an Eze raise their Uya (horsetail) or Azuzu (hand fan) respectively requesting to be granted audience at a meeting. It does not matter if the Mkpalor is older in age than the Obi. The same applies to an Mkpalor and an Mkpisi. This dance therefore shows the class structure in Asaba society. Any Asaba man who aspires to improve his social rank and status takes the following titles respectively, Alor and Obi or Eze.

From time immemorial, custom and traditional rites were and still are the axiom for governance in Asaba; and these traditional sequences and observances were and still are the prerequisites of any Asaba person's claim to nativity and citizenship (Akus 1994). In the words of Ogbueshi Ennemoh, "Age grade system has stabilized traditional

governance in Asaba. An indigene must of a necessity pass through a category of age grades from childhood to old age. This age grade system also determines how one would be buried. The cultural resilience of the Asaba people is sustained and promoted by the somewhat rigid observance of some aspects of tradition. Indeed, the significance of these titles is as follows:

- (1) They are a badge of citizenship of Asaba or the stamp of recognition as a bona fide son of Asaba;
- (2) They confer on one the authority to participate in family meetings/discussions and decisions involving the affairs of the kindred, the quarters and subsequently qualify one to take greater and higher titles to partake in the government of Asaba.

The Age Grade Structure in Asaba

An Asaba man climbs through the age grade from birth to death in the following progression:

- (1) Nziza Ezi - Ages 0 to 18 - This age grade is made up of males that have not joined any functional group.
- (2) Okwulagwe - This group is made up of young men of ages 19 to 45 (youths).
- (3) Ochokoloma This group is also made up of men between ages 46 55.
- (4) Oturaza This is the ruling age grade in Asaba which comprises men and women in the age brackets of 56 72. However, the women do not actively participate in the politics.
- (5) Ichiokwa Men and women from 73 years and above. They are advisors on matters of administration.

Mkpisi The Badge of Citizenship

This is the first step to higher titles. It is the foundation of other attainments in life for an Asaba man. The Mkpisi initiates males into the first class of government cadre in Asaba and qualifies them to carry for the first time officially the 4Ofo. Maduemezia (1999) explains that Mkpisi is a traditional ceremony of initiation and admission into the mainstream of society of male indigenous citizens of Ahaba. According to him, %be ceremony entails the enumeration of all male persons born of Ahaba parentage during a particular period, and signals the confirmation of their position as full-blooded citizens of Ahaba.+ Mgbamkpisi refers to an Ahaba man who has gone through the initiation rites as stated earlier and has not taken the Alor title which is next.

Mgbamkpisi ceremony is performed in Asaba once every twenty years interval or according to Maduemazia (1999) 'in recent times whenever

those in authority consider that a sufficient number of youths have attained a reasonable age to get counted'. The ceremony, from oral sources does not take place simultaneously in all the quarters in Asaba, the different quarters in collaboration with the custodians of matters that concerns Mkpisi carry out the ceremony at their own convenience. This ceremony can also be done on behalf of a candidate who for one reason or the other cannot make it to Asaba during the ceremony but so long as the requirements are met by the family of the child involved, such as the money stipulated, he is counted. If an Mgbamkpisi does not go above this level, he is referred to as 5Aka Ola. Okanga drums are used during this ceremony and if by fate an Mgbamkpisi dies before he could enhance his status by taking the Alor title, the Okanga drums will be played at his burial. He does not qualify for Egwu-Ota, no matter his age because it is the Ozi drum that qualifies an Mkpilor for Egwu-Ota at his burial.

The significance of this title is that it gives recognition to an Asaba man who has attained the productive age. It also integrates him into the scheme of affairs as true born of Asaba. No stranger is allowed to participate in the Mgbamkpisi ceremony no matter how long he had been in Asaba. It is the exclusive preserve of the Asaba people. The paraphernalia for the Mkpisi ceremony are the Akwu-Ocha (hand-woven white cloth), Ugo (feather), Otulak, (Elephant tusk), White ribbon and Ofo Alor sticks.

Traditional Titles in Asaba

Alor

Mkpalor means an Alor titleholder while Ikpa Alor means taking Alor title. Alor is the next title after Mkpisi and it involves a long ceremony, which takes time and money. The rigors involved in taking this title differentiate the men from the boys. According to Chude Akus (1994), $\%k$ is a title for self esteem and recognition without which one is viewed with ominous reservations by the citizens.+ The Alor and Eze titles are titles that confer on their recipients a high social status. Maduemezia (1999) asserts that $\%a$ reality [these titles] are religious titles that indicate the spiritual attainment of the person vested with such titles.+ An Mkpalor is addressed as Ogbueshi, which means 'one who has killed the cow.q

From a metaphysical point of view, as expounded by Maduemezia (1999), the Ogbueshi is a process in the consciousness of a person who has killed or overcome the 'cow'. The 'cow' here symbolizes 'mother nature'. He reiterates that the Asaba people adopt a two-step approach to spiritual attainment as clearly set out in the traditions of Asaba (Omenani). The first step requires the aspirant to strive and overcome the problems of 'mother nature', i.e., nature. An Ogbueshi is said to be a person who has overcome the problem of natural life such as lack, poverty, barrenness, etc.

When a man has achieved a degree of success in the procurement of the necessities of life and there is some surplus that he can proceed to take the Alor title. It is after taking the Alor title that he then adopts a new

name as a form of greeting 6lli Afa. He becomes a new person recognized by tradition and thereafter conducts himself in a prestigious manner. He is no longer an ordinary man and must live by the rules of an Mkpolor. A typical Asaba man dreams to take the Alor title to enhance his prestige.

As we know, culture or tradition is not static; modernity has reduced the hurdles that one must cross to take this title. Presently, it is the social aspect that is emphasized while the ritual aspect is de-emphasized. It is this Alor title that qualifies an Mkpolor for Egwu-Ota when he dies. During the Alor title ceremony, towards the end of the rites an able bodied young man will carry the Ozi drum in a procession to Umuagu quarters. This ritual is called %Oli nni ge bulu Ozi+(the able bodied man has carried the Ozi drum). It is after this rite that the Alor title ceremony is complete. It is only the Ozi drum that is used in Alor title ceremony; the entire Egwu-Ota musical ensemble is not used. During the Alor title taking ceremony, days are set aside to feed and entertain the Umu-ada (daughters born in the quarter) and the Ikpoho-ogbe (women married to the quarter). The men are excluded from the feeding but share the meat of the cow, with the head exclusive. In this sharing, no matter the number of the Mgbamkpisi present, only seven ribs from amongst the ribs of the cow is given to them to share while the Ukwu-anu (the waist) is shared by the Nwa-Ada (Sons of Umu-Ada). The head of the cow will be cooked whole and be eaten only by the Alor title holders to end the ceremony. It is done a day after the %Oli nni ge bulu ozi+ ceremony. The costumes of an Mkpolor are a white ribbon, an eagle's feather, which he wears on his cap, an elephant tusk and a hand fan, Azuzu made of cowhide, which he uses to fan himself.

In sum, a very significant point that should be mentioned is captured in the words of Maduemezia (1999), %while Igba Mkpisi is necessary for all indigenous people of Asaba, Alor title is optional and is taken by people when they have attained a reasonable measure of prosperity and have given their dead father a traditional burial.+This therefore implies that no man can take the title while his father is still alive.

Eze or Obi Title

The Eze title is the highest title in Asaba traditional hierarchy. An Eze is addressed Obi and greeted %Obi Igwe.+An Eze or Obi is referred to as a %King without a Kingdom+. This means that he has no subjects, unlike the Asagba who is the head of all other Ndi Obi or the first among equals. To become an Eze is not a child's play, it is tedious, expensive and time consuming. Chude Akus (1994) describes it as a %long process with the attending financial expenses that are unavoidable yet a prestigious status that every Asaba man would aspire to reach if possible+.

Eze title is a social title. It has no function unless assigned by the Asagba. It is not paramount to the administration and governance of Asaba. That notwithstanding, the titleholders are recognized, respected at meetings, and in the society at large. They add prestige to any occasion they grace within and outside Asaba. The Eze title is more of a status enhancing

one. Egwu-Ota is the music that the Obi and his wife Anasi dance to during the period of the title taking ceremony.

There are five definite steps to be taken by an Eze aspirant according to the Omenani prescription:

- (1) 8lgbu-Madu literally means (kill a human being) which was practiced before the advent of the colonialism. It was later abolished and substituted with killing of ram or the payment of money to Ogwa Asaba as an option.
- (2) Iba nichii (A retirement into the bush in seclusion for prayers, fasting and meditation for 24 days). This period is seen as the period when the aspirant dies metaphorically to later resurrect when the process is completed.
- (3) Ebi Nugboma: This ritual involves feeding a host of people (the entire celebrant's quarter and well wishers).
- (4) Ije Udo (the baptism at Otu Umuaji a tributary of river Niger). The Eze aspirant and his wife go there to take their bath at Udo during the ceremony.
- (5) The ritual of resurrection after death into Nwa Eze Mmuo, literally translated as how a child of the spirit king+.

The Eze title carries with it certain rules, which must be strictly adhered to. The process of taking this title is what we can describe as mortifying the flesh and being alive in the spirit. These titles (Alor and Eze) are religious titles that show the spiritual attainment of the persons vested with them. An Eze is particularly distinguished by his dressing or attire, most especially the white twine rope tied on his ankles and bright red or purple caps that are sometimes decorated with eagle feathers (Ugo). He also carries an Nzah (a small donkey's tail) and Otulaka (elephant tusk).

Traditional Government of Asaba

Asagba is not a title in Asaba. It is the name given to the ruler of Asaba. He is the head of all the Ndi- Eze in Asaba. This position rotates from one quarter to another, according to seniority among the quarters respectively, Ezenei, Ugbomanta, Agu, Ajaji and Onaje. The current Asagba, Obi (Prof.) Chike Edozie, is from Umuezei of Ezenei quarter. The Asagba-in-council is the supreme traditional and functional government in Asaba. The Asagba presides over every meeting of the Asagba-in-council. The council consists of titled persons who, according to seniority in their positions, receive special treatment as long as they meet.

The Kinship between Egwu-Ota, Asaba Traditional Political Institutions and Governance

The interrelationship between Egwu- Ota and Asaba social system is manifested in the way the society and Egwu-Ota mutually affect each other. For example, modification in Egwu- Ota performance context, i.e., the civic reception context, is a reflection of the changes that have taken place in the social system. It indicates an alteration in the totality of which it is a part. This, therefore, presupposes that Egwu- Ota, as a micro unit of the macro Asaba social system, derives its totality from the social system. This means that a shift at the macro level reflects in the constituting units that in turn gives the macro a character.

Egwu- Ota is central to the Asaba social system and wields a great influence on it. Egwu- Ota is entrenched deeply into the Omenani Ahaba. Among the major elements that make up the Asaba social system, such as marriage, naming, title taking, burials, festivals and civic occasions. Egwu-Ota is significant in all these with the exception of marriage and naming.

The relationship between Egwu-Ota and Asaba political institutions and governance is at different levels. It starts first with Egwu-Ota as a royal dance performed only for royal purposes. Secondly, it is only the Asagba-in-council and the Obi title holders that can call for the performance of Egwu-Ota for special occasions. Thirdly, second burial is a prerequisite for title taking in Asaba. Egwu-Ota is a part of its early ceremony. Therefore, for any male person to aspire to take a higher title, the person must have buried his dead parent properly. If not, according to Ogbueshi Onwuewuna in an oral interview "that person cannot smell any title let alone taking it." Philips Onyebashi also in an oral interview adds that "the person ties up his generation forever except some one from his generation undertakes to do the right thing."

Egwu-Ota can also be said to be, in contextual terms, "a rite of succession" Ogbueshi Okolo Adigwe in an oral interview pointed out that:

If a person is not given a second burial in Asaba in which Egwu-Ota is part of the early ceremonies, it is presumed the dead person is still alive. The male children of the man cannot be allowed to take any title in Asaba (Oral interview, 2003).

Philips Onyebashi again re-iterates that:

Without Egwu-ota for a man who qualifies for it there can be no Egwugwu for the person and without Egwugwu, it means the man is still alive. Thus, none of his sons or grandsons to his last generation can take Alor or Obi titles because it is forbidden in Asaba for a man to take these titles while his father is still alive (Oral interview, 2004).

It is therefore implied that Egwu-Ota for Omenani burials is a criterion for transition to the highest position of honour in Asaba-Ezeship, Asagbanship, and ancestorship.

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between Egwu-Ota and the Asaba traditional political institutions and governance among the Asaba people of Delta State, Nigeria. It observed that a lot of things, including title-taking activities in Asaba have experienced changes. For instance, the stringent rules such as the rituals discussed and the taboos surrounding the title taking have been relaxed. An informer (Ms Logede-Okwu Iyeh) jokingly said, %the rules were not relaxed many of the aspirants would have died in the process; men of this generation are not strong enough to withstand the rigours involved.+ These changes are attributed to modernity, Christianity and to this researcher, the %global meltdown+ which has compelled everyone to live moderately. These factors have reduced the craze for taking titles. However, as has been established, these titles separate the boys from the men, therefore only the %big jaws+ embark on this prestigious voyage though with lighter and fewer hurdles. According to oral sources, modernity has helped to reduce the hurdles and a payment of money to the Asagba-in-council has replaced some of the rites. In spite of all these modifications, these titles are still not easy to attain.

Notes

1Mkpisi is the first cadre of titles in Asaba and the most despised. Maduemezia and Ennemoh in oral interviews with this researcher commented that those members of the community whose attainment has been modest (i.e. Mgbamkpisi) are given the bare bones of seven ribs of a cow or goat. Implied in this is a subtle insult for men of modest attainments. Should a man in this category protest against this treatment he might attract a fine. The only remedy for a man unhappy with such treatment is to show himself worthy of honour by going through the rigours and expenses that transforms himself into an honourable member of the society. As was gathered in these interviews, the philosophy that informed this ideology was meant to serve as a challenge to the men folk to work hard in life to improve themselves. However, modernity is gradually eroding the importance attached to title taking.

2Mkpalor is the Alor title holder which is the next title after Mkpisi but it is very prestigious.

3Ofo --- staff of office or authority.

4Ahaba is the original name of the Asaba people, the colonial masters bastardized the word to Asaba but the indigenes prefer to be addressed as Ndi Ahaba

5Aka-Ola State hands or unwashed hands. At meetings he is the most despised, especially at meetings where meat is shared. On such occasions, the Mgbamkpisi group is given the scraps rib bones of the animal killed and if any amongst them protests or shows dissatisfaction about this demeaning treatment, he is challenged to improve his status by taking the next title Mkpalor which qualifies him to be treated as an Ogbueshi.

6Ili Afa is the adoption of a new name. It means that the person who has overcome the world of nature is a new person and so adopts a new name. He is a person who can now carry himself about with prestige. He is born anew, but not only a born anew but also an overcomer because there is a world of difference between a born anew and an overcomer. He has attained both. Certain rules and taboos are now imposed on him. (Maduemezie, 1999).

7Eze title is the height of worldly attainment in Asaba. It is a highly prestigious title.

8Maduemezie on the contrary in an oral interview explains that Igbu-nmadu means killing the personality, which in other words means mortifying the desires of the flesh in the process of becoming the son of God, which is Nwa Eze Nmuo. This is so because an Eze titleholder has achieved the status of the son of God.

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Sources of Information (Oral Sources)

Informers	Age Group	Date of Interview	Place of Interview
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2. Evang. Phillip Onyebashi	Ogbu/Otu-Ihaza	2004/5/8	Asaba/Ekpoma
3. Mr. Alex Ngozi Iyeh	Okwulagwe	2002/6/7	Asaba
4. Francis Mokogwu	Okwulagwe	2002/3/4/7	Asaba
5. Ogbueshi John Enenmoh (Historian)	Ichiokwa	2003/4	Asaba
6. Pastor A.N. Iyeh	Okwulagwe	2002/5/8/12	Ekpoma/Benin
7. Ogbueshi Onwuwuna-alias Onmentq	Otu-ihaza	2007	Asaba
8. Ogbueshi Okolo Adigwe - Egwu-Ota	Umudaike	2003/4/6/7	Asaba