

IS OZORO AND UZERE CLANS' TRADITIONS OF ORIGIN EDROID OR IGBOID?

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Abstract

The bulk of the Isoko people subscribe largely to Benin/Edroid origin with claims that they came from Benin through primary and secondary migrations in their stories of migrations and traditions of origin. This work presents an analytical exposition and re-interpretation of the traditions of origin of some Isoko clans/kingdoms against the background of the hitherto perception and ingrained and extant belief of the Isoko-Benin connexion over the years. Intrinsic is the analysis made to ascertain the veracity or otherwise of the Benin ancestry/Edroid origin of the clans of Ozoro, Uzere, Enwhe/Okpolo and Igbide as case studies. Nevertheless, available evidence points to Igboid origin of the above Isoko clans.

Keywords: Ozoro, Uzere, Edroid, Igboid, Tradition

Introduction

History has it that, after the Ogiso, Urhobo land and other areas (Isoko land), it would imply, continued to gain mixed migrants who were traders, warriors and escapees from "Benin" justice and injustice especially during the latter fascist phase of Oba Ewuare as well as the second republican period (1480-1483).¹ In this light one can suggest that these later immigrants, who are now being considered as the progenitors of the Isoko people and indeed these waves of migration from Benin, may not be what resulted in the initial founding of the Isoko clans. In other words the Benin migrants came into a territory already occupied by earlier settlers and mingled with them. It is to this extent that Ikime opine that;

It would seem that the Benin migrants were the last to arrive in ancient times, that human memory remembers those migrations having forgotten the earlier ones. We would never know where the original founding fathers of those who are now Isoko actually came from, any more than we know that fact for sure the other Nigerian peoples.²

However, to avoid dwelling too much on the hypothetical, a critical and analytical exposition of the traditions of origin of the Ozoro clan / kingdom will prove more useful in the hitherto perceptions and ingrained belief of Isoko-Benin connexion over the years.

Traditions of Origins and Re-evaluation of Isoko-Benin Connexion

The only attempt at a comprehensive published history of Ozoro, it would seem is that by Kiyoy Oyolo.³ In his preface to the book he has this to say:

I shall be more pleased, if the booklet interests both sons and daughters of Ozoro... I shall also welcome helpful suggestions and criticisms backed with documents and facts which will help to embellish the knowledge of Ozoro History.⁴

It is in part to this challenge, that this work is in response, in order to put the origin and history of Ozoro – Benin connexion in its proper perspective and to salvage history. Ozoro is claimed by the people to have been founded by Opute (son of Oba Ezeoti of Benin) who fled Benin to found a new territory and named it after his wife Ozor now corrupted to Ozoro.⁵ It is one of the 19 clans that make up the Isoko nation. It is indeed the largest single clan in Isokoland both in landmass and in population. It is the Headquarters of Isoko North Local Government Area; one of the two administrative units in the Isoko region of Delta State, Southern Nigeria.⁶ On the traditions of origin of Ozoro, there are five versions, with two tracing their origin to Benin via Okpe-Isoko and subsequently Okpe-Urhobo while the other three betray direct Benin ancestry.⁷

One of the versions is that by Hubbard. In this account, Igboze was said to be a cousin of an Oba of Benin (whose name was not mentioned) and he is the founder of Olomu in central Urhobo who was the father of Okpe. Due to dynastic struggle, he fled Olomu. The said Olomu was divided into two quarters – Agbaro and Uruobe. In the course of the migration, a schism cropped in which eventually led to a bilateral migration. The first migration founded Okpe clan in Urhobo, while the second migration settled at a site called Okele near the banks of the *Ase* River. This site was not far from the Tirakiri slave trading station of Anyama. Here, the Tirakiri and other Ijaw slave traders found an available supply of slaves as they constantly raided the new comers.⁸

Aside this, it was said that many members of the Agbaro quarters became discontented with their conditions of life, and greatly wished that they had traveled westwards with their brethren who had gone into the Jekri country, from whom came glowing reports of the splendid land that they had found. Eventually many of the malcontents from the Agbaro quarter, disgusted with Okele and their companions of the Uruobe quarters, determined to cut themselves off from them altogether, and go and join the others in the Jekri country.⁹

Under the leadership of a man called *Ozoro* they set out. They had not traveled far however before they came upon excellent land free from flooding and occupied only by aborigines believing therefore that a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush, they promptly settled there, acquired the ownership of all the land nearby and formed the town of Ozoro or *Ozoro* as it is now called. They have since then refused to have anything to do with the people they left at Okele.¹⁰ Hubbard goes further to claim that Ozoro was probably formed early in the 18th century.

The argument here should be if at the time of the coming of *Ozoro*, people already inhabited Ozoro as claimed by Hubbard, who were they? Secondly, these aboriginals should be the founders and not just a late comer and thirdly, it could not just be as late as the 18th century as claimed. However, the Ozoro people have since rejected this account outright. In other words, as the Benin immigrants would appear to have met people who had lived in the area for some time before the arrival of the “Bini” the core of the Isoko (Ozoro) people would obviously be of a greater antiquity at best some elements of amnesia in trying to reconcile Ozoro traditions of origin.

The most popular and widely accepted version though with little variations is that which claimed that Opute the founder of Ozoro was the son of Oba Eze Oti of Benin who had five sons, namely, Ozoro, Afor, Aboh, Ashaka, and Obodogwa. Because of trouble in Benin Opute and his five sons fled Benin and eventually settled at Ozoro. This account also maintained that Ozoro had five sons whose names were given to the five quarters of Ozoro.¹¹

Another variant of this version says that Opute was the son of Oba Ezeoti of Benin who came directly from Agbado market in Benin. According to this strand, there was a feud at Agbado market in Benin, which led to the death of the mother of Oduaran, (Aruaran) a giant in Benin mythology. The killing was purported to have been done by the eldest son of Opute called Okpe who later deflected to found a settlement of his own.¹²

In a bid to avoid the looming chaos of immense proportion that would have befallen them, Opute and his household fled Benin for safety. This was the beginning of the long tedious and hazardous journey from ancient Benin, which the people called Aka. They journey through thick jungles and forest and had to cross unknown routes to their destination in the Western Niger Delta. During this adventure, some of his close relations and their families amongst whom was Esume accompanied Opute or Odume who was sometimes called Ogwezi. According to tradition, Odume (Ogwezi) was a half brother to Opute.¹³

While they were on the run some became tired and weary. Those who became tired settled and founded their own settlements. For example, Etim-Uku stopped over at Afor (Obe-Etim) with his group; Oshimili-Uku also stopped over and founded Ossissa and Ozoma-Uku took his own people to Ashaka where they settled. Obodogwa also came into existence through this way.¹⁴ In other words those towns were founded by Opute's relations who dropped by the wayside.

While at Ashaka, Opute who was with a charmed sword or staff known as *Usu* or *Uzuiu*, struck the ground as to test whether it was convenient for them to settle there. Unfortunately the sword could not pierce through the soil, meaning they should continue their journey to a safer place. Here disagreement arose between Odume (Ogwezi) and Opute over which direction they should follow. Opute suggested that they should go to the upland area but Odume (Ogwezi) objected and argued vehemently that they should rather move down the riverside and possibly cross it and settled where Oduaran (Aruaran) and his cohorts would not meet them. With these arguments, they parted ways.¹⁵

Tradition has it that Odume (Ogwezi) and his group was able to cross the proposed river with the help or aid of a big fish called *Eme* (Manatee) with a school of crayfish on its back and finally founded the settlement or kingdom of Aboh. This explains why the Aboh regards the Manatee and crayfish as totems. The manatee is said to be the Angel of the "river god."¹⁶

Meanwhile Opute and his group continued their journey and eventually arrived Isokoland. At this spot, Opute once again pierced his magic sword/staff-the *Usu* or *Uzuiu* into the soil and it penetrated deeply into the soil with ease thus symbolizing that the place was fertile and suitable for settlement. Opute then called it Otor-Alaka or Allah square as it is called today. The magic sword, with which Ozoro was cleared, is still available today at the Eriokpe shrine, which is usually brought out in display during the Eriokpe festival.¹⁷

The tradition further adds that a man called Abanagwa was equally in Opute's fleeing team and had already deflected to settle at a place called Ogbe. On arrival, Opute then prevailed on him to come out of his solitary confinement and stay by him. Abanagwa eventually came to settle at a place called Alua. Today, in Ozoro, Alua is the oldest spot in Urude and the descendants of Alua often regard themselves as the first inhabitants of Urude quarter. They claimed that they have more rights to

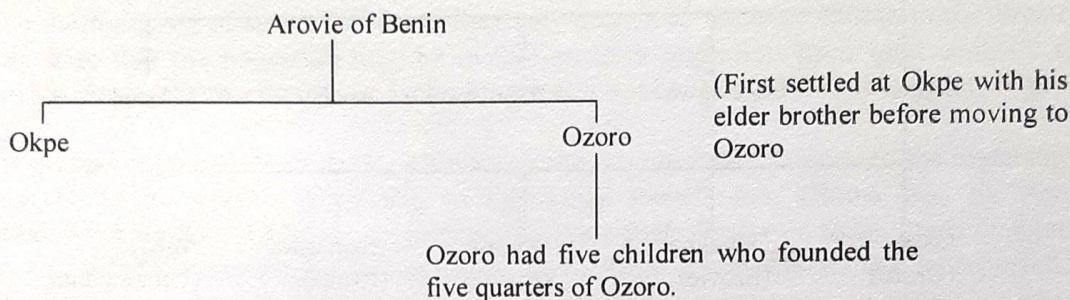
land in the bush of Urude and that Alua people have the sole prerogative to cleanse the bush traditionally if it were to be desecrated.¹⁸

It is against the backdrop of the above claims of Ozoro to Benin ancestry, that a critical analysis and some observations will be made to ascertain the veracity or otherwise of the Benin ancestry of the Ozoro Kingdom. The diagram below is the graphical representation of the different versions of the traditions of origin of Ozoro.

Diagrams

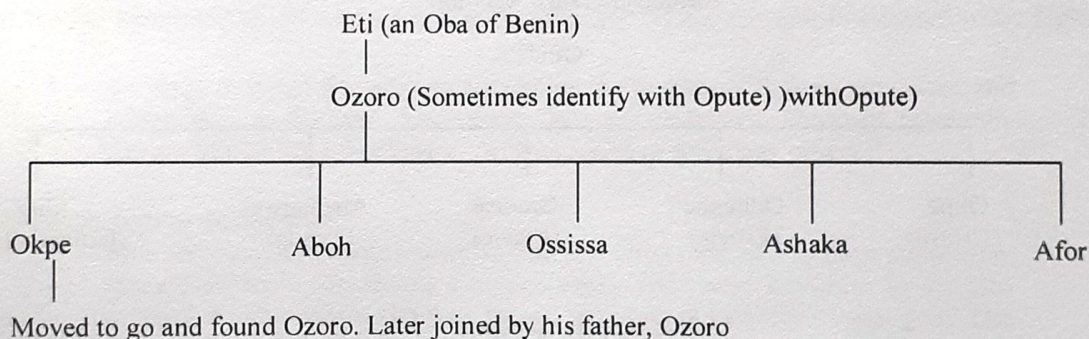
(A)

Southern Report 1929



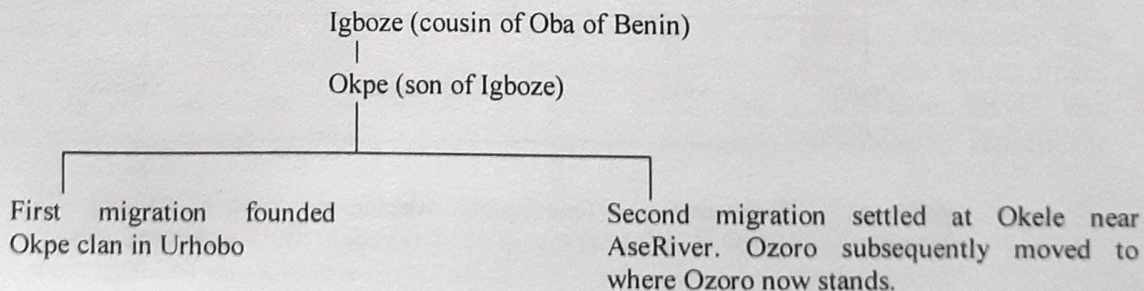
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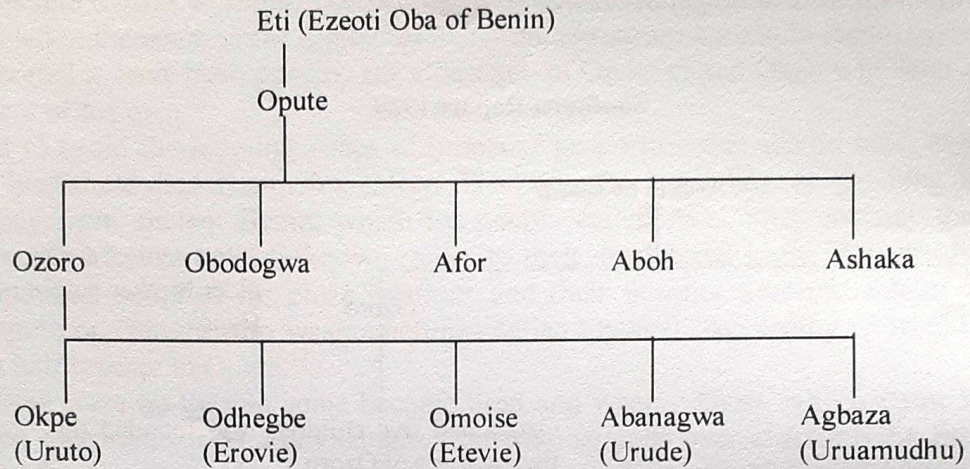
(C)

Hubbard Report 1948



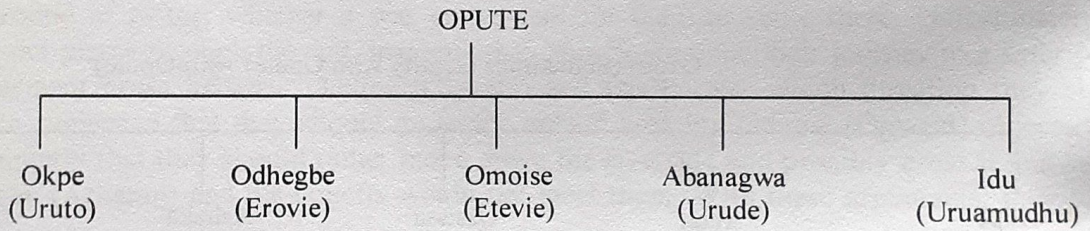
(D)

Egware Family Report



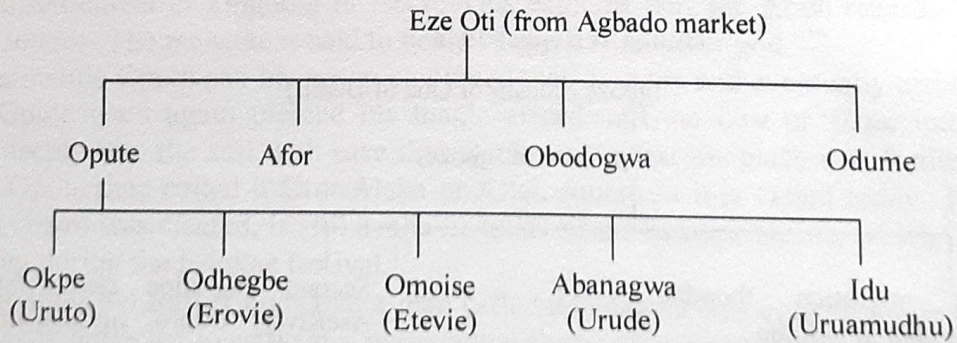
(E)

Edions of Ozoro Account



(F)

Uyo Family Account



Source: Oyolo, K. (1982)

Perceptions and Evaluation: Analysis, Criticisms and Observations

As observed by Ikime the heterogeneity of the ethnic composition of the Western Niger Delta or Delta province, together with the fragmented nature of each ethnic group makes it difficult to go into details of traditions of origin in a work of this nature.¹⁹ Yet even so a few words must be said about the origins of these peoples. Here the Ozoro Kingdom tradition of origin in relation to Benin is evaluated.

There is no gain saying the fact that the Ozoro clan has been largely believed to have belong to the same migratory group with Aboh under the Ezechima episode. An evaluation of the origins stories of Ozoro (and some other Isoko clans) agreed with Nzimiro and Isichei's thesis.²⁰ The thesis goes to show that, the Chima (Eze-Chima) led migration from Benin in the 16th or 17th centuries resulted in the founding of several towns collectively known as Umueze Chima in the Western Igbo area. They aver that the migration may be in fact an Igbo migration from Igbo centre.²¹ Of these towns or settlements, Ozoro though an Isoko kingdom is said to be in the same migratory group with Aboh.

A critical examination of the Ezechima episode is a necessary prelude to the understanding of the source of Ozoro origin. According to Okerekwu Peter²² Eze Chima was an Aro native doctor/Herbalist who left Arochukwu in present day Abia State for Benin to set up as an agent of the Aro long Juju, for the usual purpose of collecting slaves from Benin. On arrival, he reported himself to the Oba of Benin, as was the custom, who then accepted him as his guest. In course of time, Chima settled down and set up practice as a native doctor/Herbalist and agent of the Aro oracle. The Oba became very impressive about Chima's magical art, as a result, the Oba installed Chima a chief in the palace of Benin, hence the title Chief Chima or Eze Chima.²³ This account is attested to by Egharevba that,

the reign of (Oba) Ewuare was notable for the number of famous magicians and heroes then in the land. They were: Okhuahe of Ikhuen, Ovato of Igieduma, Emuen of Uhi, Ezuku of Ogan... Ireghezi of Ekae and many others.²⁴

He goes further to say that,

Two ferocious cannibals known as Osa and Osuan are said to have come from Iboland to Benin City during Ewuare's reign. They were forbidden by the Oba to practice cannibalism and were placed in charge of two of the royal gods, Osa of Ora and Osuan of Uwen.²⁵

From the above excerpt Chima may just be one of those Igbo immigrants referred to by Egharevba in his account. Moreover, there is a history of Igbo rulers in Ado (Benin). Obviously, Eze (King) Chima was an Igbo, one of the leaders of the resistance against Oba Ozolua, who led returnees towards the rise of the sun in the east.²⁶ Indeed the Diary of the Dutch Merchant, David Van Nyendael, who lived and traded in Benin around the late 15th and early 16th Century reports the following:

The ruin of the town and the surrounding land was occasioned by the King causing two kings of the street (Rios de Aro) to be killed... After this barbarity, the king found also a third man that stood in his way, who being much beloved,

was timely warned of that prince's intention, and accordingly took flight, accompanied by three-fourth of the inhabitants of the town...²⁷

The important things to note here are the descriptions of the three "Kings of the Street" (popular leaders of the mass movement in other words) as "Rios de Aro" (Kings or leaders of the Aro). In addition, Portuguese maritime records and reports of their contacts with Benin ("Ado") talk about a huge Igbo influence in the Benin courts, especially in their encounter with the very old King (Oba) Esigie (also called Osawe) who had fought the "Idah wars". It is possible that the Igbo had a significant claim to Benin leadership in the period, and that Eze Chima, as Aro, was headed home - just as the Igbo do even today, when attacked wherever they live.²⁸

Egharevba gives a semblance of this episode when he says (Oba) "Ozolua waged war on Origbo, then a powerful chief at Ejide in Siluko district. He subdued him and seized his treasures..."²⁹ there is no doubt that the said Origbo may just be one of the rulers/leaders of the Igbo elements in the Siluko district of Benin referred to by Egharevba above. To further buttress the above claim, Afigbo quoted one Mr. Wellington Igunbor, a Benin historian, who on the maternal side belongs to one of Benin's traditional chieftaincy families - chief Gaius Obaseki's family who was the Iyase or prime minister of Benin in 1947, saying that,

The settlement of Eze Chima in Old Benin was established in the area through which Siluko Street runs in present-day Benin City. As Eze Chima's influence increased so did the population of his settlements expanded. So influential was Eze Chima and so completely absorbed in the society was he and his clan that there was hardly a thing he and his people could not do on the basis of equality with Benin indigenes.³⁰

Probably this unchecked privilege made the Igbo elements in Benin to usurp the throne by installing an Igbo man as Oba in the person of Eze-Oti in 1473. This to the Bini could not be tolerated further. They stopped at nothing to unseat him, little wonder Oba Eze Oti reigned for only fourteen days. Egharevba described him as a great agriculturalist that possessed much courage;³¹ this description perfectly fits an Igbo man. Besides, the Eze title is not known to the Benin but instead is peculiar to Igbo language and political culture. Chima, if the story is to be considered, has to be the personality in question.

Much has not been said on the brevity of Oba Eze-Oti's reign, rather Egharevba care freely depose that "during his investiture he was shot in the forehead by a boy with a poisoned arrow. This action was predicated upon Eze-Oti's stinginess. There could be more to this than the flat excuse given by Egharevba. Otherwise how can one explain the murder of Oba Ezeoti's only son and heir Owere³² - this certainly is an Igbo name? The only explanation is probably, the Binis wanted to put an end to a foreigner becoming the next Oba in their land, at least not another Igbo man.

This incident(s) is enough causal reason for the Igbo element in Benin to either fled or returned home in protest. In other words, Eze Chima was a diasporan Igbo returnee from Benin after a failed bid to capture the Bini throne. Thus, Eze Chima and his band of supporters have to move from Benin for their dear lives after a support of failed faction of a true Bini heir to the throne.³³ So be it for now, yet let us continue the Eze Chima's story.

The account states that, having settled Eze-Chima sent for his brother Ekensu and other relatives from Aro Chukwu as it is usually the Custom of the Igbo even till date. The hunch is that amongst these invited relatives from Aro-chukwu were either the fore bears of or Odume (Esume-Uku) also known as Ogwezi, the founder of the Aboh kingdom; Oputa-Uku (Opute) the founder of Ozoro; the founders of such settlements as Isele-Uku, Onitsha-Olona, Onitsha-Ugbo, Onitsha-Mili i.e. present day Onitsha, Ossissa, (Uzere, Igbide) and others collectively referred to as Umu Eze-Chima. They were invited to Benin to set up an Aro settlement there, similar to those Aros had set up within the description of Crowder in other areas throughout former Eastern Nigeria.³⁴

The account goes further to say that while in Benin, Eze-Chima's relatives allegedly killed the queen mother. In retaliation, Chima's settlement was invaded which resulted to loss of lives. Eventually Eze-chima to avoid further blood bath decided to quit Benin with his men and relations to the East whence, he came to rejoin his Ibo kith and Kin – or in the alternative to find new settlements for himself and his people in places far and safe beyond the reach of the Oba of Benin. According to Chief Okerekwu Peter this story is documented and told in an Ibo primer popularly known as “*AzuNdu*” approved by Government Education Department for infant classes of primary schools in the Ibo province of then Eastern Nigeria.³⁵

The account continues; on their way out of Benin, some of the Eze Chima's people settled at Agbor about 44 miles away from Benin, (approximately 71 kilometers) which they considered far enough, and out of the reach, molestation and influence of the Oba of Benin and his brother Gbunwala, the war-lord.³⁶ Others went beyond this distance and settled at Isele-Uku. Recall that in the tradition of origin of the Isoko clan of Uzere, they were said to have settled temporarily among the Isele-Uku. In any case, others were said to have settled at Onicha-Olona, Onicha-Ugbo and Obio, but the most important of all being Onicha Mmili or Onicha Eze Chima present day Onitsha situated on the East bank of the River Niger.³⁷

The account goes further to state that another section of the Onicha, instead of crossing the Niger with Eze Chima, struck southwards following more or less the course of the Ase River and its tributaries under the leadership of a man called Ogwezi or Odume sometimes referred to as Esume-Uku. He eventually founded the kingdom of Aboh. This latter group had remarkable adventures on their journey southwards. Their numbers were said to begin to dwindle as they traveled because some families decided to settle at various points on their journey. For example, Oputa-Uku (Opute) stopped at Ozoro with his own people; Etim – Uku stopped over at Obe-Etim (Afor) with his group; Osumili-Uku also stopped over and founded Ossissa and lastly Ozoma-Uku took his own people to Ashaka where they settled.³⁸ Of all these settlements only Ozoro, appears to be an Isoko clan in the same migrating group with the Aboh.

From the above narrative of the Eze-Chima migrating episode and with the common knowledge that Ozoro originated from Benin and belong to the Umu Eze Chima migratory line, the following observations and criticisms are here raised. Why is it that not one person has stopped to wonder how a people who trace their origin from Benin came to be descendants as well of an ancestor with an Ibo name? For Chima, is undoubtedly an Ibo name – an Aro Ibo name for that matter, not a Benin name? Nor has any one also stopped to wonder how the Isoko kingdom of Ozoro has an Oputa-Uku (Opute) – a purely Igbo name as its founder?

Even within the kingdom there is a section known as Abanagwa-a purely Ibo name, not to talk of the preponderant of Ibo names in the kingdom, with a few insignificant Bini names. One would have thought that the Ozoro having originated from Benin and being a strain of the Edoid group of languages, either names of Benin origin or Benin names should have been obviously dominant. Rather the preponderant of Ibo names in the kingdom betrays Ibo ancestry as the Eze Chima migratory episode has made us to believe. Some of the Ibo names are here shown below:

Table 1: Ibo Names Borne by Isoko (Ozoro and Uzere) People

Agbaragu	Akalo	Udogwu/Odogwu	Udo
Akudo	Ugute	Ezumezu	Nzimiro
Anibeze	Agbamu	Akum	Oberiko
Azubuike	Ogene	Ele	Idhegwe
Dibia	Efi	Okorigwe	Okedi
Ebiri	Okeke	Ekoko	Ogbodo
Edike	Egwuonu	Ala	Ezere
Ibuka	Okorafor	Emebuo	Oguh
Obi	Abanagwa	Umu-Okoro	Agwo
Okobi	Agbanugo	Ogueri	Anaro
Okoro	Ochonogor	Ugborie	Olize
Opute	Eke	Azane	Azaka
Uba	Enebeli	Aniebor	Olika
Onyeke	Ifaka	Nnorom	Ojugo
Ogeme	Igeme	Otutu	Nmufo
Ugboma/Ugbomeh	Udhoma/Udoma	Ejeh	

Source: Author's Field Investigation (2011)

Still on the origin of Ozoro, one is confronted with another thought provoking question that should nag the severity of any well-trained historian or scholar's mind. Why is Opute, an Ibo name the son of an Ibo man who apparently usurped the throne of Benin in the name of "Oba Eze-Oti" king Oti, yet Opute is being ascribed to Benin ancestry?

On the etymology of the name Otor-Alaka (Allah Square) no one has been able to do justice to this, even in the face of overwhelming evidence, queried Okpevra³⁹. To unravel this mystery, recall that in the course of the migration of Opute and his group, we were told of how he used his magic sword/staff to test the soil for its suitability. This exercise is Igboid!, this writer is not aware of anywhere else this is done except in Igboland. The accounts says when Opute arrived eventually in Isoko land, he struck his charmed sword/staff against the soil after several failed attempts, on his way, it immediately penetrated without any hindrance meaning the location or spot was convenient and suitable for settlement. It is against the backdrop of this success that Opute - "the Igbo man" may have exclaimed, *AlaAmaka!!!* Meaning this land is good. Ala Amaka, over the years has now been

corrupted to Alaka; hence, today, the centre or spot where Opute performed this act is known as Otor-Alaka or Allah square, the centre of Ozoro kingdom.

One other important evidence that betrays Igbo ancestry of Ozoro is the *Mmonwu/Mmanwu* masquerade. The dexterity and skills in the dancing of the Mmawu Masquerade is an eloquent testimony of the Igbo trait of Ozoro. Initiates of the Mmawu cult or masquerade speak the Ibo language with fluency. A first time visitor to the scene of the Mmawu display will definitely think he is in Ibo land.⁴⁰ Most of the deities in the kingdom bear Ibo names, for example, Ele, Ukwame, Ogene, Ezumezu, Oganenu, Onomegedi e.t.c.

In addition to historical contacts, there are ongoing associations between Ozoro and Aboh and other Western Igbo (Ukwuani) and Ndosimili land-bound and waterside Igbo groups or towns for trade, farming, and fishing. Correspondences of terminology, cultural features, and artistic traditions seem to link the Ozoro more to the Riverain Igbo than any other peoples (Benin).⁴¹ The culture of the Ozoro in totality is Igbo in terms of ancestral worship, dance, custom and festivals. There is nothing Benin about Ozoro except the crown-(the political organization) and belonging to the same Edoid group of languages. Even at present, the reigning monarch has an Ibo dynastic or ruling house name – His Royal Majesty, Barrister Anthony Ogbogbo, Ibuka I – Ovie of Ozoro.⁴²

Apart from the suggested Igbo origin of some of the prominent names in Ozoro such as Okoro, Umukoro, Ukoko and Umukoko, it would seem actually, these four names form a complex of names that are as old as Isoko cultures. Though these names feature predominantly among the Igbo of Southern Nigeria, on both sides of the lower Niger, they are common and traditional names among the Isoko of the Western Niger Delta. They are however, almost never borne by Benin with whom the Isoko is claimed to share a great deal of common culture, especially politically.⁴³

The origin of these names at present poses a problem. Nevertheless, considering their age-long usage, it could be deposed that they may relate to the times when fragments of Isoko migrated from the lands of the Ogisos, which predates the second Benin dynasty. Note the Isokos must have left the lands that are now called Benin when they were quite elementary in their social organizations. These lands according to Ekeh acquired their new appellations after the demise of the Ogiso dynasty. That in itself explain why “Benin” and “Edo” do not exist in Isoko language, which continues to refer to modern Benin with the terms they took away from the days of the “Benin” and “Edo after the Ogisos i.e. *Aka* and *Udo*, which, the Isoko are used to in their folktales. In other words these names: Okoro, Umukoro, Ukoko, and Umukoko have survived among the Isoko from ancient times dating back to the Ogisos. While it is now a piece of cultural atavism in Benin culture.⁴⁴ Or how else, queried Ekeh, does one account for the fact that Okoro, with its derivative Umukoro, Okorotete remained dominant in ancient Isoko while disappearing from Benin and the newer Edoid fragments of Ishan, Owan, and Etsako?⁴⁵

Uzere Clan

The tradition of origin of the Uzere people is more comprehensive and is popular and widely accepted, though with little variation. The tradition holds that the founder of Uzere is one Uzei (Nze) who fled Benin with his family on account of having been accused of committing adultery with one of the Oba's wives.⁴⁶ Another version says that Uzei left ancient Benin kingdom as a result of the

havoc then being wrought by a very powerful warrior named Oguaran or Aruaran. As he fled, he moved in an easterly direction.⁴⁷

This account holds that when they left Benin, they first settled at Isele-Uku, hence Hubbard suggests that Uzei must have known of an earlier movement towards Onitsha and decided to follow the same route. Accordingly, Uzei settled among the Igbo of Isele-Uku now in Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta State. Traveling with Uzei was a very important figure known as Eni- a water spirit. For Uzei, Eni served as a kind of guiding spirit. The tradition maintains that because there was no sufficient water in which Eni could live, the spirit urged Uzei to move on.⁴⁸

Moving east from Isele-Uku, the group soon reached the Ase creek or the Niger. Then Uzei turned south and not long after passed the town of Aboh (Igbo) founded by Ogwezi. Continuing south, they came to a junction with another creek. Here Uzei encountered the Erowha and requested that he and his followers be allowed to travel up a nearby stream.⁴⁹ The tradition goes on to say that due to other recent settlements a little further, south, the Erowha initially refused. Later Uzei and the Erowha leader became friends and the travelers were allowed to settle at a place called Oruhe (Eruke) along the bank of the Niger.⁵⁰

Having settled Uzei (Nze)??, decided to legitimize his claim to the land by taking title to it in the traditional manner. With age not on his side he decided to send his son Okugbo (Okigbo)??, to perform the necessary rites and ceremonies before the Oba and his court in Benin. Okugbo (Okigbo)?? subsequently fulfilled this obligation. Okugbo (Okigbo)?? now became the Oba's official representative in his home area as the ritual guardian of the land and medium for ancestral communication, hence Okugbo (Okigbo)?? became the first Ovie of Uzere.⁵¹

Another variant of this accounts says that when Okugbo (Okigbo)?? got to Benin, the Oba sent him back to the Obi of Aboh, so he could buy his "kingship" rights from him. The Aboh (Eboh) king crowned him the very first king of his people in the year 1453.⁵² On returning from Benin, Okugbo (Okigbo)?? stopped over at Aboh where he was royally and lavishly hosted by the Obi of Aboh. A while after he had returned, Okugbo was invited back by the Obi of Aboh or Eboh as the people called it. He accepted this invitation but was accused of committing an atrocious act in Eboh (Aboh) land during the visit. The invitation was predicated on the pretext of forgetting to present to Okugbo the sacred sword called *Ebere* meant for a king.⁵³ An exchange of attacks ensued which eventually led to Okugbo's death and the subsequent defeat of the Uzere "forces".

After the massacre, most of the surviving Uze people under the leadership of Okugbo (Okigbo)?? three sons – Uhei, Ezede (Ezedi)?? and Uweye moved into the interior for fear of Aboh (Eboh). A fraction also crossed over to found Odi in present day Bayelsa State, hence the kinship ties between Uzere and Odi.⁵⁴ The people under the leadership of Okugbo's three sons subsequently moved into a new site and named it Uzei (Nze) in honour of Okugbo's (Okigbo) father. The names of the three sons now refer to the quarters or communities in Uzere (the anligicized form of the name Uzei (Nze) i.e. Uhei, Ezede (Ezedi) and Uweye. They also used this fear to justify why no king (Ovie) from that time onward ever went to Benin to be properly installed.⁵⁵

From the above seemingly comprehensive account of the tradition of origin and migration of the Uzere clan, the following observations and probing questions need to be raised. The answers there from will prove to a large extent whether the Uzere clan is of Benin or Igbo ancestry: Firstly,

the name Uzei, Uzee or Uze could just pass for the Igbo title of “Nze”, the second highest traditional title in Igboland to *Eze*, *Obi* or *Igwe* as the case may be. The leader of this group Uzere (Nze) whose real name may have been forgotten, but only his title is remembered. This man Uze or Nze could definitely be a relation of the Aro Herbalist and leader, Ezechima from Aro-chukwu who sojourned in Benin. Aro Chukwu is in present day Abia State formerly in the defunct Imo State. Recall also that Mgbidi where the Igbide clan claimed its origin is also in Imo State. The Aros no doubt, are an itinerant group within and outside Igboland.

A pointer to the above claim and observation is seen from when Uzei (Nze) was leaving Benin. It is said that Uzei (Nze) was aware of an earlier movement towards Onitsha and decided to follow the same route. Uze (Nze) eventually settled temporarily among the Igbo of Isele-Uku where he was much at home; but for the inconveniences incurred by his guiding spirit – Eni who urged him to look for a water habitat. When Uzei (Nze) finally settled in a strange environment or land in Oruhe (Eruke) he decided to legitimize claim to the land. Being an old man he sent his son Okugbo possibly Okigbo to fulfill this obligation. Okugbo (Okigbo) latter became the Ovie of Uzere. The hunch is that the old “Igbo” man was used to calling his son(s) Nwam in the Igbo dialect. Little wonder the Uzere man calls his first son ‘Onwanran’ a corruption of the Igbo ‘Nwam’ even till date.

Recall, Erowha initially refused Uzei passage, presumably due to their strange identity not being of the Edoid fraction. In addition, the claim that the Oba of Benin sent Okugbo or Okigbo back to the Obi of Aboh (Eboh) only implies that the Oba of Benin has no jurisdiction over the area Uze (Nze) and his group eventually settled. This explains why no Uzere king ever went to Benin to be so installed. As already queried above, given that Uzei (Nze) was a refugee or fugitive as it were from Benin, at what point did he reconcile with Benin that he has to send his son back to Benin to obtain title to land and Oviship without reprisal from Benin? There seems to be no substantial evidence or reason why the Uzere do not go to Benin for the installation of their Ovie.⁵⁶

One is confronted here with a case of interpolation in oral tradition. Given that Uzei knew of an earlier movement towards the east and decided to follow suit, Peek gives us an insight on the origin of Eni vis-à-vis Uzere’s migration.⁵⁷ According to Peek Eni was discovered by a relative of Uzei who has left Benin after Uzei’s departure and had to follow a different route into the Delta (apparently further west of the Niger). This sounds like the former account of Uzei being aware of an earlier movement towards Onitsha or possibly later migrants. The man whose name was not mentioned was said to possessed several kinds of very strong medicine and of these, one called *Ama* was aiding him to find his relatives.⁵⁸ *Ama* is an Igbo elemental force/charm for detecting missing persons or objects or rather a pathfinder. No doubt this may just be one of the Ezechima’s group of medicine men who return or flee Benin to settle in the Western Niger Delta.

Another strong evidence of the Igbo ancestry of the Uzere could be seen in the allusion of the Eni oracle in Uzere to Aro-Chukwu in Igbo-land. It has been noted that, the Eni Oracle was very similar to the famous oracle at Arochukwu.⁵⁹ It serves as a very real cohesive social force in the Delta. The fame of Eni and its analogy to Aro-chukwu is reflected in Graville and Roth. According to them, “the following (the Eni oracle) may possibly be a case of a “long juju” (the Arochukwu oracle) i.e. a central juju, which has greater power than local surrounding jujus from whom there is appeal.”⁶⁰

Other such oracles are Igbo-based, for example the “Agbala at Awka and Igwe-ka-Ala at Umunneoha in eastern Nigeria”.⁶¹

The Ovie of Uzere is the high priest of Eni, indeed a kind of priest king whom the Igbo refer to as *Dibia*. One intriguing fact is that the founder of Uzere possibly introduced the Igbo cultural influence into that segment of the Isoko nation.⁶² If we accept the fact that Uzei was a Benin migrant, intoto, we may be shooting our own foot. How come, when one greets the Ovie, the priest of Eni- he says *Odhebe!* (*Eh debe*) three times: *Dibia* as maintained above in Igbo is a medicine man or powerful priest. Such is the Ovie’s role in Uzere. In other words over the years *Dibia* has been corrupted to *Odhebe*. Finally, the preponderance of Igbo names in use in Uzere today is another eloquent testimony of the Uzere’s Igbo ancestry. Thus, from the above, and the reality on ground, wholesale attribution of the origin and migration of Uzere to one source i.e. Benin would be ahistorical.

Enhwe-Okpolo Clan

The tradition claims that Okpolo (Enhwe) and his relatives left Elele in Ibo land in about A. D 1416. Among these relatives were Evwreni, Emede, Ewu and Ujevwe of these four only Emede is Isoko. The other three belongs to Urhobo sub-cultural units that are said to have Igbo Origins.⁶³ They were said to have left Elele as a result of the fight that broke out between the king of Elele and Okpolo and his relatives. This led to the brutal murder of the king and some of his relatives. Okpolo – Enhwe, it is claimed is one of the oldest clans in Isokoland.⁶⁴

In addition to the above Hubbard⁶⁵ also traces the origin of Okpolo-Enhwe to a migration from the Ibo country, in a similar manner to Igbide clan. According to him, the founder followed the steps of Eru by coming down the Niger River, late in the 17th or 18th centuries, ascending the Erowha creek and landing where Owodokpokpo now stands. From there they went straight inland and formed a village on the site of the easterly quarter of Enhwe, which is called Igbo after their country of origin.

In the course of this migration, it is claimed that Okpolo sojourned with his younger brother Evwreni now an Urhobo sub cultural unit. On their way they met the Erowha already established at their present site. Okpolo and his followers moved on to found what become known as Enhwe clan while Evwreni moved further inland to found Evwreni clan. The tradition went further to state that Okpolo met on arrival a certain Urhobo group who has apparently fled from their original home (presumably Jesse). A fusion took place between the Ibo speaking new comers and the Urhobo group. Over the years intercourse with the neighbouring Isoko and Urhobo clans led to the adoption of a dialect of Isoko with certain peculiarities of its own.⁶⁶ In other words the language of the Enhwe as it stands today is a mixture of Ibo, Urhobo and Isoko dialects. It is on record among the people that their founder, Okpolo spoke Ibo throughout his life time. But his children and grandchildren having mixed and intermarried forgot the language and could not afford to translate or interpret a single sentence in the Ibo language.⁶⁷

Evidence abound which suggest that indeed the Okpolo (Enhwe) is of Igbo origin and not Benin. Many aspects of Okpolo culture are of Igbo origin, festivals and ceremonies celebrated in public in Okpolo are in many ways closely related to those of Igbo people. For example, the *Ogwenhwe-Igbo* festival, which is popularly called in Isoko dialect Eha-Idhu, and *Ebe-Owurie*

festival named after the deities, which Okpolo the founder came with from Igboland.⁶⁸ The “*Iraboke*” cultural dance of the Emaka quarter in Okpolo (Enhwe) is another cultural affiliation, the way and manner they perform the dance give reference to Igbo tradition.⁶⁹ The foregoing and many other basic socio-organization and age grade systems which have Igbo background no doubt mirror the source of origin of the Okpolo-Enhwe people. However, over a period of five centuries, after Okpolo founded Enhwe, a peculiar Isoko-Urhobo dialect with a tinge of Ibo accent gradually evolved to replace the Ibo language that was said to have been spoken by Okpolo the founder. This emerged according to Chadwick the development of culture and political ambivalence in the clan from the olden days until now.⁷⁰

Igbide Clan

The Igbide claim Igbo ancestry. The tradition as held by the people states that Eru the acclaimed founder of Igbide originally came from Benin and for various reasons??? stays briefly in Awka.⁷¹ According to Enhwe tradition, Eru traveled together with the founder of Enhwe clan down the Niger. Both groups met the Erowha in the course of their migration and stayed with the latter for a while. Then the two groups moved on until they settled in some area about where Owodokpokpo now stand. Constant flooding of the area together with fear of Ijaw slave raids decided them to move on once more. It was at this stage that the founder of Enhwe and Eru parted company, each to find his own clan centre.⁷² In furtherance of this tradition, Hubbard from where Ikime largely draw his materials contended that Igbide was actually founded by one Eru, an Igbo man from Awka, a town about twenty kilometers to the East of Onitsha. Eru with his family is said to have come down through the river first into Ijoh country and then Erowha, Urie-Igbide and lastly Iwire, the Igbide clan centre.⁷³

Now, from the above should Igbide be regarded as a clan of Ibo or Benin Origin? That is the question! However, there are at least three versions of the traditions of origin of the Igbide people. The first trace their origin to Mgbidi in present Imo State, the second to Awka and the third to Benin. The first version says that Eru migrated from Mgbidi via Elele in Rivers State and through the Niger to Eastern Isoko. This version is generally accepted by the people claiming that indeed the name Igbide is a corruption of Mgbidi where they originated. Main and others have echoed the views of some Igbide elders. They are of the opinion that Igbide is the fifth oldest clan in Isoko.⁷⁴ The affiliation to the Igbo can be observed in the dress and costume code of the Igbides in festivals like Abame and the salutation sequence and chants as well as the mercantile nature of the typical Igbide man.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Okpevra⁷⁶ has once deposed that, it will be a historical for anyone to adjudge a work of this nature unfairly for stating with unusual candour the motivation for putting together this impressive assemblage of fragments of Isoko history the refractions of mythology of Benin hegemony that have held sway over the years. This extant belief of the Isoko-Benin connexion could be explained in three broad fold. Firstly, the powerful nature and conquering role of the old Benin Empire might have influenced many Isoko clans either favouring this connexion, in the process, knowingly or otherwise

suppressing some vital information. What cannot be disputed is political power that the Benin kingdom held in the past. Secondly, the unquestioned belief in Obaro Ikime's seminal work that most of the Isoko groups are of Benin origins as views held and expressed in the 1960s and 1970s. The views were "decidedly simplistic and were based on British intelligence Reports of the 1930s" and Professor Obaro Ikime's field work of 1961-1963.⁸ Thirdly, is the defeat of the Igbo in the Nigerian-Biafran (civil) war. No one wants to identify with a defeated "enemy".

However, the claim of origin from Benin by the Isoko clans has been taken and interpreted at its face value. It must be emphasized that the claims to origin from Benin in the period 1500-1750 for the Isoko clans studied above cannot be taken to refer to the migrations and dispersals, which led to the primary settlement of the people. At best the claims would refer to the flight of individuals and ethnic fragments to well established communities already existing beyond the frontiers of the Benin kingdom/empire. Some may have been or were adventurers who hoped that fortunes could be made more easily on the frontiers of the empire than at the metropolis where competition must have become so stiff that only the fittest could hope to survive.

The claim of Edoid ancestry suggests that the Isoko clans were founded by refugees and adventurers who left Benin only in the period after the 15th century. This could not be wholly true, because we do know on the strength of current and available evidence from linguistics and archaeology that the peopling of the Niger Delta Southern Nigeria took place in pre-historic time. Also the demographic map of the region may not have changed much since the last millennium before the Christian era. Thus, in the light of indisputable evidence that spewed frothingly forth like fresh palm wine and with the quantum of evidences available, one is left with no choice than to unload his frustration with monotony of the glorification of ancient Benin as the source of Origin of all Isoko clans. The question now is from the above analysies, is the Isoko clans of Ozoro, Uzere, Enwhe-Okpolo and Igbide traditions of origin, Edoid or Igboid?

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