

NEMBE HEGEMONY OVER EPIE-ATISSA IN THE CENTRAL NIGER DELTA: FROM PRE-COLONIAL THROUGH POST- INDEPENDENCE



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Abstract

Nembe and Epie-Atissa are two groups inhabiting the lower Niger Delta. Based on Nembe occupation of the coastline, it had advantage to first receive European trade, missionaries and hosted colonial administrative offices, located at Twon-Brass. Nembe became the middlemen to Epie-Atissa, one of the immediate hinterland groups. Toward the terminal of colonial rule, indigenous councillors, from the Northern Ijaw District Council and Southern Ijaw District Council, of the Brass Division voted their preference to relocate the divisional headquarters to the hinterland town of Yenagoa, due to its centrality and connectivity to the Eastern Regional headquarters. This action provoked torrent of petitions from the Nembe District Council members, who were more educated at the time, to retain Twon-Brass as headquarters. The dispute drew the attention of the Regional Resident and the Governor General of Nigeria to Yenagoa, for fact finding. Yenagoa was favoured and became the Divisional headquarters. Surviving few eye-witnesses corroborated both written texts and archival materials on this. After a decade of the unpleasant incident to the Nembe/Ogbia faction, a Nembe man became the military governor of newly created Rivers State, who surprisingly, appointed an Epie-Atissa man to supervise relief materials. Despite the quarrel, a Nembe man in Nigerian Military Provisional Ruling Council chose Yenagoa, as the Bayelsa State capital. Contrariwise, Epie-Atissa people feel bitter about Nembe people in Yenagoa, when it took on as the Bayelsa State capital. It could be explained that the fears of Epie-Atissa, from past experience, forced them to see threats – whether real or imagined -, and to suspect the motive of Nembe around them. There is need for more works to explain and correct the approach of the Epie-Atissa people towards Nembe, based on their past relationships.

Keywords: *Nembe Hegemony, Epie-Atissa, Niger Delta, Pre-Colonial, Post-Independence*

Background to the Study

This article will expound the ethnic advantage, dichotomy and rivalry between Nembe and Epie-Atissa groups in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Nembe speak Ijoid. Linguists said Ijoid is divided into Defaka and Ijo, which in turn is sub-divided into East and West Ijo. Nembe is part of East Ijo, Efere, and Williamson (1999). Epie-Atissa is rather classified as Delta Edoid, which is among four sub-groups of Edoid. Other Delta Edoid are Zarama, classified as a dialect of Engenni, which is in Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State; Degema and Engenni are also Delta Edoid in Rivers State. The Isoko and Urhobo speakers are classified as south western Edoid, a sub-group of Edoid in Delta State, Efere, et al (1999).

Incidentally, the two groups have been in one political unit, district or constituency since the inauguration of British colonial rule in Nigeria. By the fact that the Nembe people inhabits the coastal zone of the Niger Delta gave them the advantage to first received the European traders, explorers and missionaries. From that onset, Brass became a British administrative centre, as well as, a European trading post.

Nembe therefore had control, as middlemen, over groups in its immediate hinterland, to which Epie-Atissa was its hegemonic sphere of influence. Nembe trading mission to Epie-Atissa as middlemen, started in November, 1830, with a visited to Yenaka a confluence town, of the Nun River and Ecole creek. Again, the Nembe people accompanied missionaries and took Christianity to Epie-Atissa land, served as interpreters. The educational development took the same pattern of events, just as Christianity and trade. The Nembe language and culture formed a major subject on the school curriculum.

As pointed out in the paper, a colonial census officer gave the Nembe population figure that quadrupled that of Epie-Atissa. In the area of politics, as early as June, 1938, a Nembe man, was a founding member and an active leader of the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) and became the publisher and editor of the Lagos-based *Daily Service*. He was the President of the NYM when he contested and won the Nigeria Executive Council seat, in Lagos, from 1941, Nnoli (1980). All, played out in Nembe's dominance. On the other hand, Epie-Atissa location in the hinterland place it as a recipient of European items from Nembe, during the Atlantic trade.

Consequently, the relationship between Nembe and Epie-Atissa, from all human indices, was lopsided in favour of Nembe. So, when the headquarters of the Brass Division was moved from Twon-Brass coast to Yenagoa hinterland, an Epie-Atissa town, Nembe deployed all its human manpower and attempted to reversed it. This was one major source and essence of Epie-Atissa indignation against Nembe, even after Bayelsa State was created in 1996 and Yenagoa was chosen as the headquarters, at instance of a Nembe man.

Conceptual and Theoretical Clarification

The duty at this point is to bring some propositions and analyse them in a way to explain inter-group relations. The propositions or principles will explain what happens when groups associate, connect, relate with each other. One of the theories will be the Frustration – Aggression theory, which is the outcome of frustration. It holds that in a situation where the legitimate desires of an individual are deprived either directly or by the indirect consequence of the way the society is structured, the feeling of disappointment, may lead such a person to express his anger through violence. This aggression will be directed at those he holds responsible or people who are directly or indirectly related to them (Faleti, 2006).

Discrimination could be a potent factor. This manner of relationship is what the Psycho-cultural conflict theory emphasizes as culturally induced conflicts. In explaining this theory, Faleti, (2006:50) said that there exist different forms of identities. Among such identities, the one that is based on people's ethnic origin and the culture that is learned on the basis of that ethnic origin, is one of the most important ways of explaining violent conflict. Identity is seen as a reason of those conflicts that takes time to resolve. This could come from when people are discriminated against or deprived from their basic (material) and psychological (non-material) needs. The non-material needs are the recognition and protection of identities which are derision, derogation and deprivation.

Faleti explained that this theory takes its root also from Maslow's Theory of Motivation and Burton's Human Needs theory. Both theories explained how the individual or group start with basic need such as food, sex, security and moves to aesthetic taste needs, which are self-actualization. Conflicts that are caused by a crisis of identity are usually the most dangerous and most violent. Identity is an unshakable sense of self-worth, which makes life meaningful (Faleti, 2006).

One view holds that fear is the circumstance and state of affairs, which make groups restless and anxious, and which create doubt and danger sensitivities in them. Individuals and groups become protective against the things that endanger their values, identity, security and any privileges and advantages they may enjoy (Best, 2006:69). Another explanation says that conflict becomes inevitable on the ground that while states pursue their selfish national interest, in terms of divergent ideas, struggle for power, for instance, such interests, will come into friction with those of others. Under such incompatible or opposing needs or demands, conflict, which is inherent in human nature, becomes inevitable (Morgenthau, 1973).

Nembe as Middlemen to Epie-Atissa

Nembe trading mission started way back November, 1830, when King Boy Amain of Nembe-Brass, in company of the Lander Brothers visited Yenaka, a confluence town, of the Nun River and Ecole creek. Their mission to that Epie-Atissa community was solely trade, Yakie (2010:30-31). King Boy Amain was the fifth King of Ogbolomabiri-Nembe, who rescued the Lander Brothers from Aboh in 1830, Alagoa (1964). An obvious example

of dominance, was a story of a Nembe trader, named Dorgu, who resided at Yenagoa and bought palm oil and kernel. That, Dorgu had hired Egelesuku's big canoe and lost it. Instead of negotiating to pay the canoe, Dorgu had threatened Egelesuku with war, which the whole Akaba town could not respond to the harm done to Egelesuku (Yakie, 2010).

Dorgu who fought the British-Nembe war, 1895, Alagoa (1964), could be the one, who stationed in Yenagoa and traded at Akaba community, before the missionaries reached Epie-Atissa in 1904. It should be noted that it was the coastal chiefs who were the merchants that complained against the Royal Niger Company's interference with their trading, their spheres of influence in the hinterland markets, that led to the sacking of that company at Akassa in 1895 (Alagoa, 1964). There were demarcation and areas of influence between Company and the coastal middlemen. On this, Hopkins also confirmed that some European firms, such as the Royal Niger Company, tried to move inland in the hope of buying export crops more cheaply from the producers than from the coastal wholesalers. These moves were said to often provoked retaliation, as when traders from Brass destroyed the Niger Company's base at Akassa (Hopkins, 1973).

In 1904, it is stated that Reverend Henry Proctor, a white missionary, first landed Epie-Atissa in company of two Nembe-Brass men, namely, D.C. Spiff and D.O. Ockiya. The two Nembe-Brass men later took the gospel up, from Yenagoa through the creek, to Igbogene in Epie-Atissa (Yakie, 2010).

In the area of western education, Robert Abarakasa Igbeta became Nembe first graduate in 1888, at a college in the Isle of Man (Otite, 2011:21). The Nembe people were far ahead in Western education, served as petition writers to the Epie-Atissa people. In one instance, the Epie-Atissa kingdom wrote two petitions against their inclusion in the Sabagria Native Court, which was dominantly Izon speaking. The petitions were written to the Resident at Warri and the District officer at Brass. Yakie (2010:46) described these petitions as "well worded." The petitions were written by Mr. S.N. Bonnie of Ogbolomabiri Nembe, on the 28th May, 1927.

The same Nembe people who were the traders, preach the gospel and taught in the infant schools at Akaba and Ogu towns. Notable among them were Awotongha, Mark and Nathan Daka. Through the Nembe men exploits, came the first 14 pupils of Epie-Atissa origin, to obtain the first school leaving certificate. Frederick Abiye Agama's name came first. He obtained the first school leaving certificate in 1933, who also became the first university graduate in Epie-Atissa in 1956, at the University of Southampton in England (Yakie, 2010).

Commencement of Colonial Rule and the Creation of Brass Vice-Consulate

There is need to give sequential order of events from Brass District to Yenagoa Province at the cradle of British colonial rule. Epie-Atissa and Nembe have always been grouped together at the onset of colonial administration in Nigeria. The first policies were not

direct and effective. Thus, John Beecroft as consul, headed the consulate established at Fernando Po in 1849, to intervene in the affairs of the Niger Delta. In 1891, Sir Claude Macdonald was appointed as Consul-General of Oil Rivers Protectorate. The Headquarters was at Old Calabar (present day Calabar). Administrative districts were created, called Vice Consulates: Calabar, Bonny, Opobo and Brass. Nembe and Epie-Atissa amongst others, were under the Brass Vice-Consulate.

In 1900, a major administrative reorganization of the protectorate took place when divisions were created; the Eastern Division, the Cross River Division and the Central Division with headquarters at Onitsha. Then, in 1906 the Southern Nigeria Protectorate was amalgamated with the Colony and Protectorate of Lagos. This new unit was grouped into three provinces; the Western Province, the Eastern Province and the Central Province. Nembe and Epie-Atissa, were grouped with others in the Central Province, with headquarters at Warri.

The amalgamation of 1914, of Northern and Southern Nigeria, brought other changes. The three large provinces of the South; namely, the Western, Eastern and Central Provinces were broken into nine smaller provinces. The provinces were in turn divided into divisions, and the divisions split into districts. Epie-Atissa was a district, in the Brass Division, which was under Owerri province. A Resident Commissioner headed the province, while a Division Officer (D.O.) was in-charge of the divisions and District Officers controlled the districts (Afigbo, 1980).

Subsequently, in 1921, P. A. Talbot was a census officer and gave an estimate of the population of Brass-Nembe and Epie-Atissa, amongst others, as follows:

Table 1.

<u>Clan</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Total</u>
Brass-Nembe	6,550	7,066	13,616
Atissa	1,755	2,041	3,796

Source: Alagoa (1964:9).

In the table above, Atissa represented the figures for both Epie and Atissa. To this extent, annual reports of British colonial administrative officers only mentioned Atissa clan in reference Epie-Atissa. In May 1927, paramount rulers of Epie communities jointly signed a petition with Atissa rulers under the nomenclature of Atissa tribe and Atissa sub-district (Yakie, 2010).

Between 1929 and 1947, Brass Division was reduced to a district, under Degema Division. This evidence is contained in No. BRASS DIST 4/1/103 at the Enugu National Archives, which is an Annual Report of 1947, stating that Brass District ceased “to form a part of Degema Division and was restored after 18 years to Division status, from April”. It was also stated in the report that the Resident, His Honour Sir Bernard Carr, visited the

Division from 30th October to 5th November, 1947, and went round the four main councils of the Brass division as follows:

31st October, Epie-Atissa at Onopa

1st November, Eastern Ijo at Oporoma

4th November, Ogbia at Oloibiri

5th November, Nembe at Nembe

It will be of interest to know that a street in Port Harcourt town-ship, is named after the Resident, Sir Bernard Carr. In the same report, it was said that Honourable Bowari Brown represented the Brass Division in the Eastern Regional House of Assembly and that he accompanied the Resident on the visit.

In 1953, the Brass Division comprised the aforementioned clans and native administrative areas, i.e., Nembe, Ogbia, Epie-Atissa and Eastern Ijaw (Alagoa, 1964). Mr. H. B. Cox was said to have been the census officer, who compiled the 1953 census who had complained that the people had misunderstood it to be a taxation measure and many people did not show up for a count. A breakdown of the 1953 census figure for Brass Division was as follows:

Table 2.

Clan and native administrative areas	Number of people
Nembe	24,297
Ogbia	20,720
Epie-Atissa	9,335
Eastern Ijaw	72,002
	126,354

Source: Alagoa (1964:6).

In 1954, the Eastern Regional government had five Provinces, namely: Calabar, Enugu, Onitsha, Owerri and Rivers. The Rivers Province comprised five divisions: Port Harcourt, Ahoada, Brass, Ogoni and Degema. The Brass Division consisted of four districts, which included: (1) Northern Ijaw District Council with headquarters at Okolobiri, (2) Southern Ijaw District Council, with headquarters at Oporoma, (3) Ogbia District Council, with headquarters at Oloibiri, and Nembe District Council, with headquarters at Nembe.

The Central Ijaw County Council was a new nomenclature that replaced Brass Division. Under this arrangement, majority of the elected councillors of the four District Councils choose Yenagoa town as the preferred headquarters to Brass. The elected councillors of the four District Councils formed the decision-making body of the Central Ijaw County Council. A serious dispute arose over the change of headquarters from Brass to Yenagoa. The dispute was between the Nembe District Council/Ogbia District Council, as one faction, who favoured Brass and the Northern Ijaw District Council/Southern Ijaw

District Council, the other faction, that had voted for a change of the headquarters. It led to the Eastern Regional government to set up a commission of enquiry. This led to the Thomas Harding report of 1955, which also recommended the transfer of the headquarters from Brass to Yenagoa. The reasons presented, were that Yenagoa geographical advantage of being in a central position, her easy accessibility to every part of the Brass Division and her road link with Enugu, the Eastern Regional headquarters.

The quarrel over the change of headquarters did not end with the Thomas Harding report. Through petitions from the Nembe District Council/Ogbia District Council faction, in October, 1955, the British Colonial Governor General of Nigeria, Sir James Robertson, visited Yenagoa. The Governor General calmed down the Nembe/Ogbia faction but approved Yenagoa as the County Council headquarters (Yakie, 2010).

It should be added that the petitions got quick response from the colonial authorities both at the Eastern Region and by the office of the Governor General of Nigeria, for the reason that a Nembe man, Ernest Ikoli, from Twon-Brass was a member of the National Executive Council from 1941. In June, 1938, Ernest Ikoli, as a founding member and an active leader of the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM), became the publisher and editor of the Lagos-based *Daily Service*. Ernest Ikoli was the President of the NYM when he contested and won the Executive Council seat, against Samuel Akinsanya, a Yoruba, then the Vice-President of NYM (Nnoli, 1980). Ernest Ikoli was said to have influenced the easy movement of the petition of the Nembe/Ogbia faction, to the table of the Governor General. It was the Ernest Ikoli's factor that made the Governor General of Nigeria, to first pacify the Nembe/Ogbia faction, even though, he upheld Yenagoa as the County Council headquarters, in view of the reasons in the Thomas Harding report.

Petition writing was not new to the Nembe people at the time. When the Epie-Atissa people wanted the establishment of a separate Native Court, from the Ijaw dominated Sabagria Native Court, it was a Nembe man who wrote the petition for Epie-Atissa. Nelson Yakie, a historian, wrote that "Two well worded petitions were written... The first one was addressed to the Resident at Warri; while the second was sent to Mr. John Ashley, the District Officer at Brass. Both petitions were written on 28th May, 1927, by Mr. S. N. Bonnie of Abiotonland-Ogbolomabiri, Nembe" (Yakie, 2010).

Nembe had deployed all these talents in the pursuit of their petition. The desperation of the Nembe people to reclaim the Brass Division headquarters, supported the statement that when states are engaged in pursuit of scarce and competitive claims, conflict is the natural out-come. Decision makers will always stand to defend their basic interest (Deutsch, 1973).

From Central Ijaw County Council to Yenagoa Province

From 1959, due to local government reform embarked upon by the Eastern region, the Central Ijaw County Council nomenclature was changed and called Yenagoa Province. The Nigerian civil war, 1967-1970, was the primary cause of the end of the existence of the

Yenagoa provincial administration that lasted up to 1968 (Yakie, 2010). At the start of hostilities, Yenagoa fell into the hands of the Biafrans and being a provincial headquarters, it played a pivotal role in the Biafran secessionist government. This role was increased when Enugu, Calabar and Bonny fell into the hands of the Federal troops. Ejituwu et al (1999) wrote that Yenagoa was made a provincial headquarters, while the Biafran secessionist government made Twon-Brass and Oporoma as district headquarters, at the time. Many ministries and parastatals, or parts of them were transferred to Yenagoa. In August, 1968, the federal troops liberated Yenagoa from the Biafran soldiers. The federal troops were led by Second Lieutenant E.B. Amade, a Nembe man from Okpoama town. The Nigerian troops which liberated Yenagoa consisted of Epie-Atissa indigenes. The natives of this region, led and formed the bulk of the liberating army in the Third Marine Commando, due to their knowledge of the terrain.

Enemugwem (1999) said the Third Marine Commando under Col. Adekunle was formed to capture the Niger Delta which the secessionists are using the oil installations, as collateral for foreign support. As the battle to take over the area met with greater resistance, many more Rivers and Bayelsa origins, were recruited into the Third Marine Commando. Notable Bayelsans that need to be mention, were Major Jasper Adaka Isaac Boro, Samuel Owonaro and Nottingham Dick. Major Esinkuma Nyananyo and Captain Amangala were graduates, who also joined the contingent. The first three persons, were initially arrested and sentenced to death for treason, before the start of the Nigerian civil war, during the "twelve-day revolution", led by Major Jasper Adaka Isaac Boro.

Isaac Boro, then a young police officer and an undergraduate of the University of Nigeria Nsukka, raised a military force, the Niger Delta Volunteer Force, and declared the then Yenagoa Province, a republic. Yenagoa town was the headquarters of his Niger Delta Democratic Republic, which lasted for twelve days before they were arrested, tried and sentenced to death for treasonable felony. Lt Col. Gowon released them from prison, then awaiting execution. The five persons mentioned above were recruited into the Third Marine Commando (Ejituwu et al, 1999). All died in action, and are immortalised in Rivers and Bayelsa States. There is Isaac Boro Park in Port Harcourt and another in Yenagoa. Some of the veterans, Owonaro, Nottingham Dick and Captain Amangala have streets named after them in Port Harcourt. While there is a Major Nyananyo Memorial Library in Nembe, his home town.

The creation of Rivers State at this time, saw the appointment of Lieutenant Commander Alfred Diète-Spiff, a Nembe man, as its military governor. Lt Commander Alfred Diète-Spiff appointed an Epie-Atissa man - Mr Sunday Yakiah, to superintend the distribution of food and relief materials to the people of Bonny, when that town was liberated from the Biafrans (Yakie, 2010:11). Despite what had happened in the past, a Nembe man preferred an Epie-Atissa man, though, there were competent Bonny natives that would have done the job with nostalgic feelings.

From Yenagoa Province to Two Local Governments: Brass and Yenagoa

In 1975, a military coup d'etat ousted General Yakubu Gowon, under which Commander Alfred Diете Spiff got the appointment as the Rivers State governor. The coup ushered in General Murtala Mohammed administration, and in 1976, there was local government reform, which created the present three-tier structure of administration in Nigeria. The old Brass Division which later became Yenagoa Province, was carved into two: Brass and Yenagoa Local Government Areas (L. G. A). There was also boundary adjustment, which brought Sagbama L. G. A., from Bendel State, into the old Rivers State. Sagbama was moved into then Rivers State following the Justice Irikefe Commission to define state boundaries and the criteria for the creation of new states in 1975 (Alagoa, 1999).

The geographical area that had had different nomenclatures: Brass District, Brass Division, Central Ijaw County Council, and Yenagoa Province, parted ways in the 1976 Local government Reform. The Northern and Southern Ijaw Native Councils became Yenagoa L. G. A. While Ogbia and Nembe District became Brass L.G.A. Once more, from the Yenagoa L. G. A., Southern Ijaw Local Government Area was carved out in 1991. And from Brass L. G. A., in 1991 the Ogbia L. G. A. emerged. Ekeremor was carved out from Sagbama Local Government Area. They were then, still in the old Rivers State.

From Brass and Yenagoa Local Government Areas, to the Creation of Bayelsa State

This geo-political area, i.e., Brass District, Brass Division, Central Ijaw County Council, and Yenagoa Province, that now formed Bayelsa State, has six out of the eight local government areas of the present Bayelsa State, created in 1996. The unit identified as 'Brass Division' or 'Yenagoa Province' represented the bulk of the present Bayelsa State less Sagbama, which was then part of Bendel State (Alagoa, 1999).

In the 1996 creation of states, embarked upon by late General Sani Abacha, who was then the military Head of State, Admiral Victor Ombu, a Nembe-Bassambiri man, was an influential member of the Provisional Ruling Council. He affected the creation of Bayelsa State, even though it had only eight local governments, which ordinarily would not have been qualified for a state. Yenagoa was given the headquarters' status of the new state, which Admiral Victor Ombu would have cited it at Nembe metropolis or Twon-Brass. Just as an addendum, Admiral Victor Ombu went to the peak of his career, as the Chief of Naval Staff, during General (retired) Olusegun Obasanjo's first tenure, 1999-2003, as the civilian president.

Admiral Victor Ombu never put past altercation over the citing of Divisional colonial headquarters between his Nembe group and the Epie-Atissa, to becloud his judgment. He made sure that the present Kolokuma/Opokuma L. G. A., was, at the time, carved out from the remaining Yenagoa Local Government Area; equally, the present Nembe Local Government Area was cut out from the remaining Brass Local Government Area, all happening together with the creation of Bayelsa State, in October 1, 1996.

Quite contrary, the Epie-Atissa people resented against Nembe people in the newly created Bayelsa State, over what the present generation said Nembe did to them. Epie-Atissa would rather align with other groups in the State and pitch camp against Nembe political or economic interest.

Conclusion

Epie-Atissa reaction seem absurd, going by the chronicle of benevolent acts done to them at post-independent Nigeria, by Nembe people, such as Commander Alfred Diète-Spiff, who incidentally, later became the king of Twon-Brass, Second Lieutenant E.B. Amade and Admiral Victor Ombu. The statement taken from 'conceptual and theoretical clarification' above, explains the Epie-Atissa reaction to the people of Nembe. "Fear, is the circumstance and state of affairs, which make groups restless and anxious, and which create doubt and danger sensitivities in them. Individuals and groups become protective against the things that endanger their values, identity, security and any privileges and advantages they may enjoy" (Faleti, 2006).

The Epie-Atissa people were engulfed with anxiety of threatened attack or the actual denial of basic needs by the Nembe people, owing to the past Nembe pioneering or dominant role in trade, Christian religion, and education, from pre-colonial times to the present. This mind-set causes fear, which elicited the defensive mechanism. Faleti (2006) analyses of past theories and observance that actors form beliefs in a subjective way that draws mainly on the experiences of past interactions with others, is germane in this scenario. That the fears individuals and groups experience force them to see threats – whether real or imagined –, and to suspect the motive of others around them. This tendency to see things in a selective way, he continued, is mostly due to a past history of competition for scarce resources in which the opposition always comes out as winners.

As said, Epie-Atissa need to be reminded by the numerous acts of benevolence, done to them at post-independent Nigeria, by Nembe people. There should be conscious efforts to organise a meeting of the political elites and the traditional rulers of both groups. The work should be on orientation, to disabuse the minds of the Epie-Atissa people, in particular, against their Nembe neighbours.

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