

## STEREOTYPES SPRINGING FROM NEMBE EARLY 20TH CENTURY ACTIVITIES IN EPIE-ATISSA, IN THE CENTRAL NIGER DELTA

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### **Abstract**

Nembe, a sub-group and dialect of the Ijo ethnic group and language, occupies the coastal area, while the Epie-Atissa, a sub-group of Edoid, inhabits the hinterland of the Niger Delta. As coastal dwellers, Nembe had first met with the early European explorers, traders and missionaries, then acted as intermediate to the interior areas. From such relations, Epie-Atissa accused Nembe of applying intrigue, and in contrast, Nembe used derogatory words as primitive, strange humans or extremely ugly persons against Epie-Atissa. Relations became more estranged when the Divisional headquarters was moved from Brass to Yenagoa, toward the close of colonial administration. When all the efforts Nembe deployed to stop the shifting of the headquarters failed, Nembe indigenes afterwards pioneered Epie-Atissa interest. The headquarters of Bayelsa State was sited at Yenagoa, when a Nembe man was a member of the Provisional Ruling Council during the state and local government creation of 1996. Instead Epie-Atissa indigenes feel bitter about Nembe presence in the state capital, vengeance of the hegemonic role played by Nembe during British colonial era. As a matter of fact, one group lording it over on another for a period of time, or dependence by one group on another for a period of time, because of prevailing circumstances, is a phenomenon that is to be entertained in early Nigerian history. It is also a commonplace history of the rest of the world.

***Keywords:** Stereotypes Springing, Nembe, 20th Century, Central Niger Delta*

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### **Background to the Study**

The Nembe people predominantly occupy Nembe and Brass Local Government Areas of Bayelsa State. They 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). Nembe and Brass Local Governments still comprised other minority languages. The Nembe Local Government, for instance, comprises some Abureni (Mini) communities- Okoroba and Agrisaba. These communities belonged to the Central Delta family known as Ogbia. Due to inter-marital relationship with Nembe, Agrisaba now speak the Nembe language but maintain the Ogbia custom. The Okoroba Community and its satellite villages maintain the Abureni dialect of the Ogbia language.

Still, in the same Nembe Local Government Area, the Okoroma people speak Nembe-Ijo as their first language and a minority speak Ogbia as a second language. Okoroma though speaks Nembe but maintain the Ogbia custom and “tell traditions of common origin with the Ogbia,” Alagoa (1999). The Nembe-Ijo dialect is spoken in Nembe metropolis (comprising Ogbolomabiri and Bassambiri), and their satellite towns of Oluasiri Ibe, Ikensi Ibe, Fantuo, Sabatoru, Igbeta Iwoama, etc.

In the Brass Local Government Area, the Nembe-Ijo dialect is spoken in the cities of Twon-Brass, Okpoama, Odioma and Iwoama. There is the group who now identify themselves as 'Cape Famosa - Egwema, Liama, Oruokolo (Fununu) and Beletiem and they speak a dialect falling between Nembe and Akassa, Efere, et al (1999:96). Presently, Liama and Beletiem are now being resettled, which were destroyed due to inter-communal warfare. And the Brass local government also has the Akassa communities of Kongo, Minibie, Oginibiri, Okunbiri, Okunbi-ribeleu, and Sangana, amongst others. They all speak the Akaha dialect of the Ijo language.

On the other hand, the Epie-Atissa language is spoken in Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State. Atissa is spoken in Agbura, Akaba, Bebelebiri, Famgbe, Ikolo, Ogbogoro, Ogu, Onupan, Opuama, Ovomu, Swali, Yenagoa and Yenaka. Epie towns are Amarata, Azikoro, Agudama- Epie, Biogbolo, Edepie, Ekenfa, Ekeki, Etegu, Igbogene, Kpansia, Okaka, Okutukutu, Opolo, Ovelemeli, Yenegue, Yenizue-Epie and Yenezue-gene.

Epie-Atissa is 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 (1999:96).

Yenagoa Local Government Area also comprises Ijoid groups. Ekpetiama clan for instance, comprises the communities of Agudama, Akaibiri, Bumoundi-gbene, Gbarantorubo, Ikibiri and Tombia. Gbaran clan also in Yenagoa Local Government Area, consist of Koroama, Nedugo-Agbia, Obunagha, Ogboloma, Okolobiri, Okotiam and Polaku communities.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Explanations**

Whenever there is contact and interaction between groups, there could be either dominance or subordination, peace or war, friendship or enmity. Man has a natural tendency toward war against every other man. Human society is characterized by chaos, due to aggressive behaviour between groups. There is a principle that holds that societies are hostile to each other, and are eager to fight over, the means of sustenance. Natural Anarchy is the political proposition by Thomas Hobbes who described the state of nature as essentially solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short., Okpeh (2006:7).

A counter principle to the Natural Anarchy is the Mutual Aid Thesis. This paradigm holds the view that societies while struggling for the basic things of life, human beings cooperate out of necessity, Okpeh (2006:7). Okpeh quoted Kessler as saying "... in the evolution of the organic world... mutual support among individuals, play a much more important part than their mutual struggle," Okpeh (2006:8).

It could therefore mean that whenever there is contact and interaction between groups, there could be either dominance or subordination, peace or war, friendship or enmity. As either of these could happen, each interacting group has an identity and make inputs. The identities could range from natural endowments and comparative advantages. These advantages which give the unique identities, could originate from the abundance in a particular habitat or ecological zone, and how the aborigines fashion crafts to harness that environment to their advantage. Interacting groups ultimately end up in borrowing techniques and trading. Each group supply what they are more endowed or talented. It is a form of co-operation; a relation of mutual dependence.

It is imperative to explain ethnicity, which are the interacting groups, from which stereotypes are propagated. Ethnicity means the social practice related with interactions among members of different ethnic groups. The social practice of a people is embedded and expressed in the tradition, culture, and idiosyncrasy of the group. Nnoli (1980:5), said ethnic groups are social organisations identified by communal character, and that this could be language and or culture. To him, language and culture therefore are the main features that distinguish or identify an ethnic group. Now, a stereotype is a set of special qualities ascribed to all members or some members of a group. It involves belief that all or some members possess those special attributes. Agatha Inweregbu again said "Historians are of the opinion that stereotypes spring from past events, Inweregbu (2006:39). Obaro Ikime said "These stereotypes not only prevent us from knowing the real peoples, they make cordial inter-group relations difficult to promote and so retard national development", Ikime (2006).

### **Nembe Early Christian Missionary Activities in Epie-Atissa Land**

The Nembe people were among the first to take Christianity to Epie-Atissa land. In 1904, it is said that Reverend Henry Proctor, a white missionary, first landed Epie-Atissa in company of two Nembe-Brass men, namely, Spiff and Ockiya. The two Nembe-Brass men, served as interpreters.

The coastal people embraced Christianity before the hinterland groups. As early as 1861, Rev. J.G. Taylor, who was at Akassa, was said to have paid visits to a congregation of converts at Brass. These converts were ones Captain Pearman preached to, on weekly basis, on board his hulk on the Brass River. Also, it was King Ockiya of Ogbolomabiri Nembe who asked Archdeacon D.C. Crowther, to plant a church in Nembe Kingdom; first at Twon-Brass in 1868, and in Nembe metropolis, in 1869, Alagoa (1964:121).

Ayandele, (1980:385-389) devoted five pages, in his 23 pages book-chapter, of the Brass men who were of good manners and as devoted Christians, compared to their neighbours. In his words, "From all accounts the Brass-men were the most humane group from the Ijo and they possessed an innate goodness conspicuously absent in their neighbours." Ayandele, also quoted Sir. H.H. Johnson, who he said knew the delta well, and to have said "The Brass were a good natured people". The Brass people were said to have received unique commendations, at a time Europeans doubted the quality of the Christianity professed by other Nigerians. Ayandele also quoted Reverend J.B. Wood, who wrote in 1880 of the Brass Christians, "All the chiefs - the masters of nearly all people... come under Christian influences." Reverend J.B. Johnson was again quoted to have said the Brass men were missionaries in the interior markets. From these accounts, the Nembe people had embraced Christianity in 1868, about forty years, before Christianity was planted in Epie-Atissa in 1904, by the Nembe people.

At the time, the English missionary preached the sermon in English language, the Nembe assistants will then interpret it into Nembe dialect. An Epie-Atissa man who understood Nembe translated to the Epie-Atissa listeners and converts. The subsequent task of establishing Christianity in Epie-Atissa was undertaken by the Nembe people, notable among them was Rev. Daniel Ogiriki Ockiya. In 1913, Ockiya was said to have travelled up the Epie creek up to Igbogene, Yakie (2010:60).

While the exploits of Rev. Ockiya paid off in most towns of Epie-Atissa, it was not so in Akaba community. Chief Egelesuku Emesiri and the Akaba town reacted against the Christian missionaries because of the presence of the two Nembe (Brass) men. Yakie (2010) narrated 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 from Akaba town 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.

Though, there is no direct correlation between the Dorgu reported here, who had dealings with Egelesuku and the Dorgu, who was one of those who provided war canoes during the Akassa Raid in 1895. Dorgu use of language of belligerency, threat with war and violence against Egelesuku, tends to relate him to that veteran of the British and Nembe war, otherwise called Akassa Raid.

In Alagoa (1964:99), Dorgu was on the list as number twelve of the Chiefs who provided war canoes from the Ogbolomabiri fleet, during the Akassa Raid of 1895. Okorobia

(1999:216), said Dorgu was one of those Nembe merchants who established trading post at Okoroma. Specifically, Dorgu-Ewoama was the Okoroma town where Dorgu had a trading post. In correlation, Chief Joseph Alagoa's name also appeared as one of those who provided a war canoe, as well, a merchant, who established a trading post at Okoroma, called Alagoa-Tereke. Therefore, Dorgu's use of threat, brings out the intrigue and duplicity of the coastal chiefs involved in the Atlantic Trade, at the time.

These coastal chiefs were the middlemen between the super-cargoes and the hinterland groups. The European traders, also called the super-cargoes, trusted manufactured goods to a local trading chief or persons recommended by him. These persons became the middlemen, goes into the hinterland, using the same trust system, exchanged these European goods, with local produce, such as palm oil, and later palm kernel also, slaves, etc. These delta merchants were heavily armed and raided communities who breached the trust system.

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).

### **Nembe, the Pioneers of Western Education in Epie-Atissa**

The educational development took the same pattern of events, just as Christianity and trade. That is, the coastal communities received western education long before their immediate hinterland neighbours. The towns at the seaboard produced the teachers of the inland communities. Thus, Yakie (2010:61) remarks are apt in saying that Christianity was the forerunner of Western literary education in Epie-Atissa. Each of the churches had a teacher. The pioneer teachers were Brass and Kalabari men. At the time, the Nembe language and culture was given approval and formed a major subject on the school curriculum.

Yakie went further to say that by 1935, the relationship that went sour between the Brass men staying in Yenagoa town and the people of Akaba community, had been resolved with time. Brass (Nembe) men resided at Akaba town in large numbers. The same Nembe people were the traders, as well, preach the gospel and taught in the infant school at Akaba. Notable are Awotongha, Mark and Nathan Daka were Nembe men, who stayed at Akaba and Ogu towns, preached the gospel and taught in the infant schools, Yakie, (2010:61).



The Nembe people residing in Epie-Atissa also served as petition writers to the Epie-Atissa people, Yakie, (2010:46). In one instance, the Epie-Atissa kingdom wrote two petitions against their inclusion in the Sabagriea 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 28<sup>th</sup> May, 1927.

The disparity in the growth of literary education in Nembe and Epie-Atissa, could be traced to when primary education started in both places. Alagoa (1964:121) said as far back as August, 1868, a school-chapel was established at Twon Brass. By October, 1869, another school-chapel was established at Nembe. Barely 20 years with the establishment of primary education, Robert Abarakasa Igbeta became Nembe first university graduate in 1888. Otite (2011:21) wrote on *The Ijaw Factor in Urhobo Migrating History*, quoted Darah (2009), who said the first Ijo graduate was Herbert Jumbo from Bonny, present-day Rivers State in 1856, followed by John Jumbo, still from Bonny in 1878, and third, in 1888, Robert Abarakasa-Igbeta from Nembe, now in Bayelsa State and Josiah Adokiye Batubo from Buguma, Rivers State, 1909. In comparison, Otite said Ejaiefe became the first Urhobo graduate in 1948.

Concerning Abarakasa-Igbeta, Alagoa (1964:97) said Robert Abarakasa Igbeta was educated at a college in the Isle of Man. That, a visiting Roman Catholic priest, Father Bubendorfer (or Diedenhofer) was left in the care of King Koko's clerk, Thomas John (Eppe) and Robert Abarakasa Igbeta. The father brought the son of King Koko, who had attended the Society of the Holy Ghost Mission, at Onitsha, coinciding on the eve of the raid on the Royal Niger Company.

Asiegbu (1984:110) wrote on *Nigeria and the British invaders, 1851-1920*, and published verbatim of an eye-witness account given by Rev. Father Bubendorfe on the Akassa Conflict. The Reverend Father was quoted to have said “... I saw Robert Apracassa (Abarakasa) jumping about quite naked, painted white, with pieces of human flesh hanging to him, shouting and singing. He was the most brutal and ferocious of them all. At 5pm I was told by the King's Clerk that the boy would never come with me...” The reason why the Reverend Father, specifically mentioned Robert Apracassa (Abarakasa), could be that he was surprised to see a graduate from that society at that time and to participate in cannibalism and rituals.

These examples and explanations are just to show how elements of Nembe and Nembe society generally, were enlightened and interacted with the White man, in the nineteenth century. No wonder therefore, the Nembe people became the traders, missionaries and teachers in Epie-Atissa and to some other hinterland groups. On the contrary, primary schools were only established in Epie-Atissa, in about 1935. Yakie (2010:64) said, three schools were established at Yenagoa, Agudama-Epie and Amarata, and did not have more than standard four until 1949. Yakie (2010:62) also gave names of the first 14 pupils of Epie-Atissa origin, to obtain the first school leaving certificate. Frederick Abiye

Agama's name came first. That he obtained the first school leaving certificate in 1933, and also became the first university graduate, in 1956, at the University of Southampton in England.

The Epie-Atissa Kingdom however, surpassed Nembe in the area of the establishment of secondary school. The Yenagoa Grammar School (later called Bishop Dimieari Grammar School, Yenagoa) was officially opened in May 15, 1956. This school is now the oldest secondary school in Bayelsa State. On the other hand, the Nembe National Grammar School, Nembe, was established in 1964. These dates are boldly inscribed on the entrance gates of the schools.

### **Stereotypes, Arising from Nembe and Epie-Atissa Relations**

From the account above, the people of Akaba town, led by Chief Egelesuku rejected the Christian Missionaries, because of the presence of the two Brass men. The people were resentful of every Nembe person, based on the lost canoe belonging to Chief Egelesuku's and instead, Dorgu had threatened to declare war on Akaba town if Egelesuku continued to disturb him. In Yakie words, "...therefore they frowned at any business in which any Brass man was involved, Yakie (2010:59). This and similar events are the roots of labels, the stereotypes.

A stereotype, as said, is a set of special qualities ascribed to all members or some members of a group. A person could be regarded as embodying or conforming to a set image. It involves belief that all members of the group possess those special attributes. An author on inter-group relation, Agatha Inweregbu, stated that "Historians are of the opinion that stereotypes spring from past events", Inweregbu (2006:39). The past event here, was Dorgu's loss of the canoe belonging to Egelesuku and threat of war on Akaba town. The Akaba town categorized every Brass man as wicked and not trusted.

There could be the possibility that the people of Akaba town must have weighed Dorgu's threat heavily, so could not press for the payment of the canoe, on behalf of their kinsman. His personality must have dissuaded the Akaba town from taken action. From records, Dorgu was a member of the Court of Equity, Brass River, from 30<sup>th</sup> September 1885, to 6<sup>th</sup> April 1889. He was the father of King Koko, Mingi VIII, who led the Nembe fleet to destroy the British Royal Niger Company's headquarters, at Akassa, in 1895. Dorgu's name is variously spelt Chief Doggu, Dogo by the British, Alagoa (1964:139-141).

He was a trader and a war veteran. Dorgu led a war canoe to the British - Nembe war of 1895, Alagoa (1964:99). Dorgu and his fellow coastal traders, had been denied their middlemen position and their markets, by the British Royal Niger Company. This led to the sacking of that company's headquarters at Akassa. The British upon it, had visited Nembe with punitive expedition. On the other hand, Spiff and Ockiya were Christian missionaries, which faith rest on peace. Nevertheless, the Akaba people saw the missionaries, not in their faith but as Brass men. Just as said above, stereotypes are very harmful because it takes away our ability to treat each member of a group as an

individual. Stereotypes are based on determined mind-sets of ethnic behaviour, which makes them proud, as being superior and this also made them self-centred. Stereotypes attributes are restrained to beliefs, group identity, narrow-minded inclination, and group pride, Nnoli (1980).

Such past interactions between Nembe and Epie-Atissa degenerated to using derogatory words to address each other. Due to the different roles played by the Nembe people in Epie-Atissa land: as traders (middlemen), missionaries and teachers, the Nembe people derided the Epie-Atissa as uncivilized and crude mannered. In contrast, the Epie-Atissa disdained Nembe people as proud, cheat, skilful deceit, cunning.

Nembe interpret the literary meaning of Yenagoa according to Nembe mythology. Nembe holds a belief that there were humans with tails who dwell in the bush, and were called *Nundo* or *Ye* and that they met such people at Yenagoa. *Nundo* could also mean an omen. *Ye* is generally, anything strange having a human figure or any person who is extremely ugly, often frightening or amusing. *Na* is a conjunction in Nembe language, which is "and". While *goa* means mix. So *ye, na, goa* (Yenagoa) is translated as mix with strange humans. Nembe legend has it that the people they met on that land were strange humans or looked extremely ugly, hence, they called the place, Yenagoa.

On the contrary, Yakie (2010:92) gave the origin of Yenagoa town and said, the word Yenagoa was devised from two words: Yen and Oguo. Yen in Epie language denotes home, and that Oguo was the founder of the home. Thus, yenuo in Epie language means oguo's home. The name was later distorted by the British colonial officials, to Yenagoa.

It could be asserted that the meaning given by Yakie (2010:92) is more reliable. Nembe rendering of the meaning of "Ye na goa", was purely a Nembe attitude. An attitude is an "...organized and consistent manner of thinking, feeling and reacting to people, groups, objects and ideas," Inweregbu, (2006:39). The Nembe attitude has to do with the precepts of ethnocentrism, which represents determined mind-sets of ethnic behaviour, that makes them proud, as being superior and this also made them self-centred. These beliefs, group identity, narrow-minded inclination, and group pride, coming from Nembe's presumed dominance, are what gave birth to the stereotypes.

The stereotypes were heightened by political events in Nigeria's colonial era. The two groups struggled over the headquarters of the then Brass Division. In 1954-55 the headquarters was eventually moved from Twon-Brass, at the coast to Yenagoa town, in the hinterland, Yakie (2010). Shortly afterwards, about a space of a decade, at Nigeria's post-independence, the country was engulfed in a brutal civil war. A Nembe man, Commander Alfred Diète-Spiff, was appointed and governed a wider territory of newly created Rivers State. Commander Alfred Diète-Spiff surprisingly appointed an Epie-Atissa man to an exalted position. Incidentally, Commander Alfred Diète-Spiff is the incumbent king of Twon-Brass. At the same time, it was a Nembe man, Second



Lieutenant Amade, who led the Nigerian soldiers to liberate Yenagoa, during the civil war. Once again, it was a Nembe man, Admiral Victor Ombu, influenced the creation of Bayelsa State and sited the state headquarters in Yenagoa. He was at the time, a member of the Provisional Ruling Council during the regime of General Sani Abacha, who in 1996, created new states and local governments in Nigeria.

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.

There is need for work on orientation to disabuse the minds of the Epie-Atissa people against their Nembe neighbours.

### **Conclusion**

We have attempted to set the records straight concerning the misinformed and misinterpreted facts about the past between Nembe and Epie-Atissa. It could be said that most people from the two groups had no clear facts about the real causes, bringing the labels and write off, as cunning or primitive. Nembe has overcome the dispute of relocation division headquarters from Brass coast to the hinterland of Yenagoa, judging from how Commander Alfred Diete-Spiff, a Nembe man, appointed an Epie-Atissa man in the midst of many qualified persons. Again, the bare fact that it was a Nembe man, Admiral Victor Ombu, as a member of the Provisional Ruling Council, sited the headquarters of Bayelsa State to be in Yenagoa, shows Admiral Victor Ombu never allowed the past relations concerning Nembe and Epie-Atissa to becloud his judgment. Notwithstanding, Nembe should stop the labels and write-off of Epie-Atissa as primitive, strange humans or extremely ugly person.

Contrariwise, the Epie-Atissa resented the presence of Nembe people in Yenagoa, as the headquarters of newly created Bayelsa State, not minding the benevolence of the Nembe people. There should be therefore much enlightenment to the Epie-Atissa people, so as to erase whatever bitterness harboured against the Nembe man, arising from past dealings. This is to disabuse the minds of the Epie-Atissa people against their Nembe neighbours.

Afterall, one group to lord it over on another for a period of time, or dependence by one group on another for a period of time, because of prevailing circumstances, is a phenomenon that is to be entertained in early Nigerian history. It is also a commonplace history of the rest of the world, Ikime (2006).

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