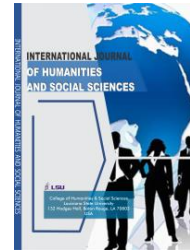


Simingi as a Source of Identity for the Iyankpo people of the Niger Delta

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Abstract

This paper will take a cursory look on how the deity Simingi have served as a source of identity and unity for the Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) people from the 15th century till the present times. Religion as a unifying factor is explicit in the case of Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) people as they are denied recognition in the descriptive recording of modern Nigerian history. In Africa deity's and masquerades served as the major source of identify for indigenous communities before the advent of colonialism. Most indigenous people were recognised by their deities and major masquerades. Like the Iyankpo's with Simingi, Aros with Chuku Obiama, Efiks with Ekpouwo, Ekpo Itaiaba, If the early Europeans did not document the deities prominent in the areas they traded with some communities would have lost their historical contributions to world civilization to others like the Iyankpo people whom the British tried to erase from historical records but were recognised by their deity Simingi by the early Portuguese explorer Pachecho Perreira. The research methodology from this study is qualitative sourcing data from primary and secondary sources. The theoretical framework utilized for this study is post-colonial theory which stipulates that colonial societies should write a history for themselves to correct the inconsistencies of their recorded history. From the findings of this study we have seen that history in a sense is recorded from the perspective of the victor. The British having secured the Niger delta as part of the Nigerian protectorate decided to write a history for their friends Kalabri, Bonny, Nembe, and Okrika excluding the Iyankpo people who were the first to arrive at the Rio Real. But the for the historical records of the Portuguese explorer Pachecho Perreira in his work the Elsmeraldo De Situ Orbis which chronicles the ruling deity of the area as Simingi in the Rio Real estuary history would have forgotten them the Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) people in the annals of Niger delta.

Keywords: Deity, Identity, Iyankpo, Tombia, Finnema, Bonny and Kalabari.

I. Introduction

Indigenous Africans were recognized by their deities. The Aro's were recognized by Chuku Obiama the long juju of Arochukwu, likewise the Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) people by their deity Simingi. The Kalabari's have Akaso, the Ibani's Bonny people by Ikuba, even Yok Obolo of the Andonis is an Iyankpo deity,. G. I. Jones (1963), also attested to the fact from his narrative that before trading starts in any trading vessel the Simingi Alabo (Simingi priest) not 'Ikuba priest, nor Akaso priest' but Iyankpo priest who will first board the ship to declare trading safe. The priest of Simingi was given Comey as the king and he was the chief priest of Nyankpo (Tombia and Finnema). This clearly shows that the Bonny people arrived when the Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) whose deity Simingi the Portuguese acknowledge as the deity they met in the Rio Real had already settled at the coast and were fully engaged in trans-Atlantic trade in salted fish, salt and tobacco with the Portuguese. The Abalama people were also settled there at a place in the creek called Abalamabie but were not mentioned as being engaged in the trade by the annals of Portuguese records. In African societies deities and masquerades serve as a source of identity like Igue festival of the Benin, Ekpe festival of the Efiks and Ibibio's Chuku Obiama of the Arochukwu, Ozuzu of Ihiala and Etche, Ogun, Obatala, and Shango festivals of the Yoruba etc. In Nigerian history the achievements of the Iyankpo people are erroneously ascribed to the Bonny and Kalabari people, but the earliest Portuguese records clearly showed that their first partners in trade on the rio real have a tutelar deity known as simingi. This was in the 15th century, the Igwana the tutelary deity of the Bonny people came to be in modern European records from the 17 th century. This shows that there is a deliberate attempt by the chroniclers of Niger delta Nigerian history to submerge some facts. It was recorded that the Portuguese were the first to trade with Benin in the 15th century same time they had contact with the Iyankpo people.. When you talk, about suku, or chuku you refer to the deity of Arochukwu people.

Worship or religion, in the history of a people was continuous why did Iyankpo documentation die and Jones is now contracted to write a history for the Bonny and Kalabari people. As a true historian he recorded Pachecho Pereira description of what he saw in the Rio Real. Large Wooden dug out boats that can carry up to 80 paddlers carrying yams, goats, cows and other lives stoke from the interior to the coast. They traded with the Portuguese on the most needed items in Europe as at that time spices salt and salted fish. Most recorded African history are of this type. In the words of Erekosima et-al (1984) 'trying to ascribe Iyankpo his to the emergent Kalabari'" In the earliest hope an record, on The contact with Africans of the Bight of Biafra (the eastern Nigerian and Cameroon coast), the Portuguese adventurer, Pachecho Pereira, recorded how the Kalabari transported goods down the Rio-Real estuary from 'up the river' to the town of Bonny on the coast. Writing in the Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis on what he saw at the end of the fifteenth century, he specifically noted the size of the canoes in use, which were ' the largest in the Ethiopians of Guinea', this being the west African coast. He said they 'could hold eighty men and carried yams in large quantities as well as slaves, cows, goats and sheep'. He also noted that there was trade in cloths, beads, animal skins and palm oil. But there was no mention of Akaso the deity of the Kalabari then in the Portuguese records.

Deity/identity

Deities are supernatural, immortal, or divine being such as a god or goddess, who are in a sense worshipped for holding power over aspects of life or the universe. They are normally human beings who have been deified by their people having achieved great feats in their lifetime. Thus they are regarded as deities because they possess powers exceeding the ordinary humans and are thus venerated and considered sacred and in a sense accorded worship in the society in which they are born or adopt. This is the kind of character Simingi is to the Iyankpo people of Tombia and Finnema.

Iyankpo people

Iyankpo people comprised of Tombia and finnema before their sepeartion to two distict communities with the same deity. The Iyankpo people ethnically are an Ijo speaking people who migrated from the Central Delta town of Ekpetiama between the 10th and 11th century and settled first at Nyankpo, then at Okpoma Dappa Tombia in Andoni territory and later at Iloma Tombia when Finnema and Tombia where one in the present Bonny area. Here they were later surrounded by the Andoni, and Ibani people who later migrated there to meet Nyankpo and Abalama already settled at Abalamabie in the interior. Then the Nyankpo people were fully engaged in the Atlantic trade with the Portuguese before the arrival of the Aro's through Ndoki Asa to the Rio Real area. The Nyankpo people settled the Aro's who came through the Ndoki Asa who constituted the emergent Bonny people at Orupiri (Juju bush). The emergent Bonny people learnt the house system of social organization masquerade culture and trade with Europeans from the Nyankpo people for they the Bonny people were not salt makers. But they do not want to acknowledge but only attested to having met the Nyankpo people on their arrival. Which according to E.J. Alagoa and Fombo A. (2001) in "A Chronicle of Grand Bonny they stated that the Bonny people;

First settled at Orupiri (about a mile from Bonny town). They finally moved to Bonny 'Town', which they named Okoloama that is Curlew town. At this time the Ijo peoples of Tombia were living on the coast" near the site of "modern" Fininma, and the Abalama were at a place now called Abalamabie "inside the creek."(p.3)

Orupiri (juju) bush is an area that is reserved for deities and the evil things. In traditional societies an evil forest is reserved for strangers and not indigenes. Indigenous people do not settle in Orupiri (juju bush) but strangers who have come to settle are settled in such places by the indigenes. The Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) people settled the Bonny people at Orupiri. This necessitated their claim to have met the Nyankpo and Abalama people when they first came to settle there. This was not in the 15th century but in the 17th century for Portuguese records did not mention Ikuba the tutelary deity of the Bonny people in their chronicles of the 15th century but mentioned Simingi of the Iyankpo people as the tutelary deity of the Rio-Real estuary. That is why when the Iyankpo formed an alliance with the Kalabari they the Kalabari were settled in the interior. But the Iyankpo people because of their earlier contact with the Europeans had the gun powder coupled with their strength in

warfare settled on the coast opposite Finnema were the trade with Europeans in the Rio Real occurred. According to Jones (1963);

Among the Ijaw the coastal villages of the Nembe tribe salt by boiling sea water; 'Nembe was not in the Rio Real' some of the villagers of Ke were ritual specialists and peace makers; those of Illelema were potters; the early inhabitants of Bonny (Nyankpo) were salt makers, the later ones and those of Kalabari were engaged in carrying trade 'because they did not know the codes of the trade' taking the produce of the Delta "salt and salted fish " up the Rio Real (New Calabar) and Imo Rivers to sell in the upriver markets and returning to the delta with goods and food from the hinterland. (p. 15).

Nigerian historians like Dike, Tamuno, Alagoa Wariboko, Ejitiwu were all interested in documenting themselves in history instead of establishing national historical facts. The Nembe's, Bonny's did not engage with the Portuguese in salt trade, neither did the Andoni's, Ibo's, nor the Okrikans. The people recorded by the Portuguese were the Iyankpo people by virtue of their deity "Simingi", in the 15th century, which is still in existence as their tutelary deity today. So why ascribe their history to Bonny and Kalabari. Even inland communities like Benin were recognised because they were mentioned by the Portuguese but Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) which were mentioned are not recognised by Nigerian historians because the British did not want them to be recognised. Rather they contracted G. I. Jones to write a history for Kalabari and Bonny mentioning Okrika and subjecting and ascribing Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) history to Bonny and Kalabari. Why deny a people their history? Even their split to Tombia and Finnema did not limit their economic prowess in the trans-Atlantic trade in salt, salted fish and other commodities before the arrival of the Aros' with their human trade, as the Nyankpo still controlled the trade in the Rio Real as they have always settled on the coast wherever they found themselves controlling the trade with the interior and the international trade with the Europeans. Jones (1963), furthermore describes the initial settlers before the Kalabari thus;

The expansion of the Nembe tribe was east and south into uninhabited territory, beyond it lay a region between the Santa Barbara and the Andoni Rivers containing a number of small widely dispersed communities of 'obscure' 'the word obscure is used here to deny them their ancestry and originality' origin - Kula, Ke, Bille, Okpo, Tema, Ifoko, and Iyankpo on the coast; Bukuma, Illelema, Minama, Angulama, Soku, and Idama further inland. "All these communities were before the arrival of the kalabari who claim to own them." (p. 29).

Kalabari was not mentioned here by Jones because they were non-existent in the 15th century in the Rio Real estuary. Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) have always been on the coast wherever they are on the Rio Real Estuary. Many of these, communities including Bille, Okpo, Tema, Ifoko, Bukuma, Illelema, Minama, Angulama, Soku, and Idama, , Okpo, Illelema, Bukuma Soku, Sama and Tema, were settled on the interior northern margin of the delta and where they preserve their indigenous traditions relating to a gradual movement southwards towards the coast before the arrival of the Kalabari. If the Kalabari had arrived first and knew the trade with the Europeans they wouldn't have allowed the name Iyankpo to be associated with the Portuguese. The question then arises why is Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) always on the coast? Historical facts reveal that their primary occupation was salt making and salted fish trade which is why they are always on the coast before the coming of Bonny and Kalabari to the Rio Real estuary. Young town's centrality in knowing the dictates of the trade in the latter part of the 18th century and 19th century in the Rio Real made the trade to be conducted in front of Young Town. Young Town knew the rules of the trade and is always on the coast as their deity still remained Simingi. When historical legends are taken from Kalabari, Okrika and Bonny who were not there when the trade with Europeans started, history will be distorted but information should be taken from the Nyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) who traded with the Portuguese and are documented by them in the 15th century through the recognition of Simingi as the deity that ruled the area, and their salt cooking and salted fish tradition.

Jones conclusion did not give an accurate date to the migration of Bonny and Kalabari to the Rio-Real. He avers that it is quite impossible to attribute any historical dates to these stages. All that can be said is that Bonny or Kalabari, moved down into the delta during the Portuguese period (1450-1550), but if it were so they Bonny and Kalabari would have been documented in the 15th century by

the Portuguese through their deity rather than Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema's Simingi). Thus it is distinctly clear that the cooking of salt, and salted fish moved by the large canoes the large canoes, and the trade with the interior predated the Portuguese period, because salt was an essential commodity which was dominated by the Iyankpo people as their major article of trade between them and the interior communities before the arrival of the Portuguese. This regular internal trade in salt and provisions with the interior and later Europeans provided the reason for a movement into the delta by the inland communities of the Aros through the Ndoki Asa route into the delta. For the first king of Bonny Kamalu was an Ibo not an Ijaw. It is therefore not possible to correlate these early Ijaw movements with corresponding movements among the Edo-speaking peoples of the Benin region since no study has yet been published of Edo or Bini Ethnology ... at this time. (Jones, 1963, p. 30)

Semeraldo de Situ Orbis Dapper and Barbot

The Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis is based on Portuguese writing records of the 15th century "it gives a very accurate description of the Rio Real estuary as it describes;

The two passages across the bar and how to use the east one to make a safe anchorage. It describes 'a very large village 'of some 2000 inhabitants engaged in making salt near the anchorage and says that the people of this river are called Jos Ijo) and are warlike cannibals 'rarely at peace'. They are naked, wearing only copper necklaces, an inch thick; they carry daggers like those of the white Berbery '. like every succeeding description the Esmeraldo is very impressed by the size of the canoes , 'the largest in the Ethiopia's of Guinea '.; some of them are large enough to hold eighty men , and they come from a hundred leagues or more up the river bringing yams in large quantities; they also bring many slaves , cows, goats, and sheep. 'they sell all this to the natives of the village for salt and our ships buy these things for copper bracelets , which are prized more than brass ones, a slave being sold for eight to ten of such bracelets.' (Jones, 1963, p. 33-34).

Distinctively this description does not fit the Andoni's as the people occupying the large community as they were not salt manufacturers or traders in salted fish neither were the Bonny but the Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) were salt manufacturers and traders in salted fish who lived on the coast because of their traditional occupation thus recognised by their deity Simingi. The Iyankpo people, as a people who lived on the coast were practically traders who knew the essence of salt and salted fish which formed their major commodities of international and internal trade with the interior communities and later with the Europeans, thus they are the ones the description fits as their settlements till date are still on the coast as it was then. Jones (1963), confirms that;

The Esmeraldo's description of the coastline on the eastern delta shows that it was substantially the same as today; it gives no name to the 'very large village'. It could well be the town of Bonny; but it could also be the village of Iyankpo, the traditional home of Tombia which became the Finnema of history. It is not so likely to have been the village occupied by Abalama whom the Bonny emigrants drove away, as the cite which Bonny still refers to as Aabalamabie is further inland and away from the anchorage. (p. 34).

The Perreira's Esmeraldo description shows that the slave trade and inland trade was fully established' in the Rio Real estuary before the arrival of the Portuguese. The Esmeraldo did not mention Bonny or Kalabari but Iyankpo (tombia and finnema), who valued their monopoly over the salt and salted fish trade with the interior while it was the interior communities specifically the Aro's who brought the human cargo (slaves) merchandise' as commodities of exchange with the coastal communities, for European merchandise other than the coastal village of Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) which were engaged in legitimate trade in salt and salted fish trade with the Portuguese as early as the 15th century. According to Jones (1963);

It is clear that the Portuguese did not trade with the Cross River estuary and the Rio del Rey area, 'during the 15th century' and the name of the former did not appear in the sixteenth century maps. By the Seventeenth century however the name Calabar have become firmly attached to the cross river area and to the Efik tribe which controlled the estuary, who were thence forward called the Old Calabar to distinguish them from the Kalabari of the Rio Real , who claim to be"the new Calabar of history. (p. .34).

But Pereira's description shows us that at this period there was no Bonny, but the village 'Iyankpo', now known as "Tombia and Finnema" which preceded Bonny was already a local and international trading centre of some importance, having not only developed trade in salt, salted fish and provisions with the interior but an external trade with Europeans. From these descriptions it is undisputable that the Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) when they were one village constituted the large village mentioned by the Portuguese in the *Esmeraldo de situ Orbis*. There was also no deity like Kalabarina Akaso or Bonnyna Ikuba at this period in the Rio Real, only Iyankpona Simingi of (Tombia and Finnema) that was there during this period as culled in historical records of the Portuguese during these periods.. Thus European records have always described the Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) people as always living on the coast not Bonny, Abalama or Kalabari. The trade with Europeans was a coastal trade not an inland trade, with major article of trade being salt and salted fish with Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) have always dominated on the coast determining the terms of the trade with Europeans. Thus we see the Ibani with their growth in population constituting a threat to the Iyankpo . Thus there was a deliberate British attempt to extinct Iyankpo from the annals of the Niger delta history in which J. I. Jones was contracted because of the deliberate lack of historical accuracies to ascribe Iyankpo historical records to Bonny and Kalabari.

From Kalabari records the first settlement of the core Kalabari which later grew to be Bakana, Abonnema and Buguma was at Ahiakwo referred to as Obu- Amafo. Their alliance with Tombia made them to come into the Rio Real area where they learnt the trade to grow in wealth and population. This occurred when the alliance was formed with the Iyankpo people as their ancestors migrated to a creek around the Rio Real Estuary through Nyankpo protection. From here they settled at a place called Elem Kalabari which was in the creeks while Nyankpo was at the coast (Young Town) and had always been on the coast where the trade with the Portuguese, Dutch and later the British occurred. Which they the Kalabari tried to include themselves into history by referring to themselves as New Calabar which the Efik have dissociated themselves from the name where also it was claimed they participated in the later part of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and later the palm oil trade before the advent of colonialism. According to Talbot (1926);

Informer times new Kalabar and Bony River's had a common Embouchrone, but of late the streams flowing down has formed a large bank of sand between their mouths. pilots obtained from Fouche town this latter place where trading vessels are stationed opposite Young Town , you pass no village , save that of a pilots residence , and about eight miles higher up is the capital of new Kalabar in which king Amakree resides (p. 165)

King Amakiri resided eight (8) miles from where the trade with the Europeans was conducted in palm oil, this was the latter part of the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century. Thus we see that the Kalabari families that settled in Tombia (Young Town) prospered and those that did not disintegrated. This shows all the emergent Kalabari war canoe houses benefiting from the magnanimity of the Tombia people. Of the Kalabari houses that benefited from the trading experience of Tombia are the Barboys, the Harry's as Edi Abali (Harry Braide) had already settled in Tombia (Young town) where he made his fortune and founded his canoe house. Of all the Kalabari houses derived from Amakiri house, George Amakiri who became the richest and largest settled in Tombia with his inlaw Igbiri Davies where he made his wealth, by declining information to his in-law and paying a fine on his behalf thus inheriting his wealth. But for Igbanibo his in-law informed him of the plan to eliminate him. Form which we have the popular obo tune "Iyogo Igbanibo akwa kiri poko fiete" my in-law Igbanibo the drum beat have changed.

The alliance between Tombia and Kalabari contributed immensely to the growth and development of Kalabari participating in the latter part of the slave trade to the emergent trade in palm produce, and the formation of all the emergent houses of new Kalabari Bakana, Abonnema and Buguma. For Abonnema Oruwari became the head of the duenala house after Asukien the great Tombia warrior left the leadership of the house when Iyalla left Tombia to found Bakana with Igbanibo Braide, which brought about Oruwari coming to head the house. Thus we see that prominent men from Tombia and Elem Kalabri founded modern Bakana, like Iyalla (India Yellowe), Abonemma (Owiye, Fyneface) and Buguma where some members of Tombia from Idonibo's house

settled because of the marriage of Ekineye-Data, Oduye Ekine (Young Town's) daughter to Kariboye Abbey.

From this brief history we can decipher that all the major houses of Kalabari made their fortune in Tombia, because they knew the terms of the international trade with the Europeans and not Kula, Abalama, Minama, Bille, or Fouche where the Iyankpo pilots were stationed but in Tombia (Young Town) which is clearly recorded in the historical development of the Niger delta or Nigeria. . This clearly portrays that the alliance with Tombia opened the eyes of Kalabari and Bonny to the Atlantic trade. Bonny and Kalabari have a history written for them by the British but the Iyankpo people because of their hold on tradition and resistance to the British penetration of the interior they tried to subject their achievements to Kalabari and Bonny save for Simingi which remains their deity and link to Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) people as recorded in the annals of Portuguese trade in the Rio Real area.

II. Conclusion

Nigerian historians have refused to write about these events for reasons best known to them but the earliest recordings of the Portuguese clearly shows that the Iyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) people with Simingi as their deity were the earliest settlers who traded in salt and salted fish with the interior and the Portuguese as recorded by the Portuguese before Bonny and Kalabari people came to the Rio Real area. Hence Bonny's Ikuba and Kalabarina Akaso would have been evidenced in Portuguese chronicles earlier than the Iyankpo people's Simingi. Furthermore Pereira's description shows us that at this period not Bonny, but the "Iyankpo" (Tombia and Finnema) with their tutelary deity Simingi was already an international trading centre of importance, having not only developed trade in salt and salted fish with the Europeans but in provisions with the interior communities along the tributaries of the two rivers. The Esmeraldo's description of the coastline on the Eastern delta we can decipher that the very large village it mentioned was Iyankpo , the traditional home of Tombia and Finnema. Because the village Abalama whom the Bonny emigrants drove away, were not on the coast but were inland at a place which Bonny still refers to as Abalamabie which is very far from the anchorage. For the description of the Esmeraldo shows that trade in salted, fish , salt and the slave trade was already well established' in the Rio Real before the arrival of the Portuguese'. This description clearly shows that the interior communities, brought the human cargo (slaves) merchandise' to the coast rather than the coastal village which were engaged in internal trade in salt salted fish and tobacco with the interior and the Portuguese. It is clear that the Portuguese did not trade with the Cross River estuary and the Rio del Rey area, 'during the 15th, & 16th centuries' and the name Bonny and Kalabari did not appear in the sixteenth century maps. By the Seventeenth century however the name Calabar appeared in Portuguese records almost the same time with Bonny. The Portuguese had to distinguish the Cross River area and the Efik tribe which controlled the estuary as Old Calabar distinguishing them from the new emergent Bonny and Kalabari of the Rio Real. The name Kalabari and their deity Akaso became prominent name in the latter part of the 18th century who now claims to be the new Calabar of history of the 17th and 18th and 19th century.

From this discourse we have seen that the Rio Real by the end of the fifteenth century already had by international standards a well-developed system of external trade with Europeans and an internal distributive trade with the inland communities with the Iyankpo people producing the major article of trade salt a very essential commodity in these parts of the world, salted fish and other interior goods to the Europeans and selling salt as a major article of trade also to the interior communities finally serving as middle men between the Europeans and the interior communities before the coming of the Ndoki Asa which brought about the emergence of Bonny and Kalabari in the annals of the history of the Rio Real. If the deity Simingi belongs to the Iyankpo people (Tombia and Finnema) and the Bonny people in history claim to know and have met the Nyankpo (Tombia and Finnema) people and Bonny was before Kalabari, it means the Bonny and Kalabari people knew nothing about the trade in salt and salted fish with the Portuguese. But the Bonny and Kalabari having heeded to the British advice to divide the Iyankpo people are trying to use Abalamabie which, they compelled in an alliance to move with them to present Kalabari, whom the Bonny people chased away because of their weakness were placed deeply in the interior by the Kalabari. But for the Iyankpo

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people their deity still remains Simingi and has survived to maintain their coastal position in Finnema and Young Town as at today. The history of the Niger delta cannot be complete if the Iyankpo people are not given their proper place in the historical annals as their hold on tradition of being your brother's keeper should not be taken as an advantage to deny them their proper place in Niger delta history.

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