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UROMI TRADITIONS OF ORIGIN: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

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Abstract

The problem of the historical origin of Uromi people has generated debates among historians and even other interested non-professional writers. A diversity of wide range speculation as a result has endeared on Uromi and even Esan history. Popular literatures on Esan history tends undisputable in their claims that Uromi people originated from Benin during the reign of Oba Ewuare in the 15th century. Quite a few scholars were bold enough to suggest the possibility of aborigine origins let alone a multiple sources of origins. This paper is a departure from both the Benin migration myth of origin and the aborigine myth of origin. Through a multidisciplinary approach, this study questions the existing accounts of the traditions of Origin of Uromi people from Benin. This is on the ground that the task of interrogating the origins of a people is not the exclusive privilege of the historian, as the geographer, archaeologist, and the linguist are also eminently involved. Therefore, the claim of this paper is that we must deviate from the widely accepted belief of Benin myth of origin and the aborigine myth of origin as the only traditions of origin of Uromi people of Edo State, Nigeria.

Keywords: Uromi, History, Tradition, Origin, Multi-disciplinary Approach.

Introduction

The area known as Uromi was a district in the defunct Ishan Division of the Mid-Western region now Edo State Nigeria. Uromi district as a whole measures 60sq miles and is also the headquarters of Esan North East Local Govenrment Area of Edo State. Its territory is bounded on the North by Afemai-Etsako, on the North West by Irrua, on the North East by Uzea, on the East by Anegbete and River Niger, and on the South East by Ugboha and Ubiaja, and on the South by Ugbegun and Igueben. Uromi is situated mainly on a high ridge on the Esan Plateau and the whole district is forested. It lies between latitude 6½ and 7° East of the Equator, and also within longitude 6° and 6½N of the Meridian. The absence of Mountains and Prominent Valleys accounted for lack of rivers in the area. This made the local people

before year 2000 A.D, to dig large pits to catch water during the rainy season (National Population Commission, Esan North East Local Government Area Office, Uromi 18th June, 2020).

This work is a contribution to identity studies in Nigeria that has not been fully explored. Ehiabhi Simon(2015:2) in his research about the origins of Uromi people titled ***Re-interrogating Uromi Tradition of Origin and the Hegemany of a Benin Establisment,*** collaborated what Leo Otoide (2011:13) has identified about identity study in his public lecture that was delivered on the 12th of November, 2011 to mark the 20th Coronation Ceremony of the King of Uromi. Both Scholars of Uromi history argue that identity study has not attracted much scholarship among Nigerian historians because of its potentials of provoking, most often, unscholarly reactions. According to Otoide (2011:13) in a public lecture on Uromi Society and Culture touches on "very provocative areas, where angels fear to tread and perhaps too, an affront to the protectors of the establishment". This research can be considered provocative because it questions the existing accounts of the traditions of Origin of Uromi people. As such, this paper could also be understood as an affront to those historical and intellectual institutions that have sustained a stereotyped tradition of Uromi origin.

It is imperative to acknowledge that much of this work owns a great deal of appreciation to the non-professional historians for their interest and ability of putting together events in Uromi in the form of history. According to Ehiabhi Simon (2015:3), though most of their works are deficient in historical methodology and craft, professional historians more often depend on the accounts of African past and traditions of origin. For him, the fact that non-professional historians have the tendency to over blow events and most times project such events to mysticism and fanatics, their accounts should not be disqualified as inauthentic but rather they should be accepted as "history by amateurs" or as source material. In other words, this paper to some extent relies on the accounts of non- professional historians to interpret Uromi traditions of origin basically from a multidisciplinary perspective. For a better understanding of the origin of Uromi, it is imperative to peruse through some of the established accounts on Uromi traditions of origin.

Benin Myth of Origin

The existing Pro Benin Versions about the traditions of origin of Uromi people points that sometimes in the 15th century when Benin was at its peak, a group of people left the city to form new settlements and these migrant groups eventually moved towards Esan region among whom was Uromi. These migrants were either criminals or disadvantaged with the laws of the Oba. They were also said to have settled in the jungle of Uromi land, struggled against all environmental hazards, survived and then evolved a soothing state system which remained stable under British imperial force conquered Benin Kingdom in 1897 and by extension Uromi in 1901(H.L.M. Butcher,1982:231).

Another account from Benin migration myth of origin assents that the first settlers of Uromi migrated into the chiefdom about 1025AD during the reign of Ogiso Orire, grandson of Ogiso Ere.There was said to be an outbreak of smallpox epidemic. By some process of magical ordeals, the oracle was capable of determining the perpetrators of the pestilence, who were beheaded. The fear of being subjected to the ordeal, whose method of dispensation of justice was unascertainable and unreliable, compelled the migration of people. Some issues in this

story tie up with another story in the reign of Oba Ewedo. This story recalls Oakha as one of those who migrated in protest against the magic pot ordeal, with his three sons namely, Uzea, Uromi and Ekurele. They were to find trace of human habitation in the course of their migration,Uromi, the second son of Oakha discontinued his movement due to health challenges and settled in a spot known today as Egbele, which is regarded as the first village in Uromi (L.E. Otoide,2011:18).

Hamitic hypothesis

The Hamitic hypothesis has it that the Uromi people came from Egypt or the Middle East. On getting to the western ridge, they sent 'down' some hunters to look for a fertile land to settle. Based on the information these hunters brought back, the Egyptians partly decided to come 'down' south into the rainforest, thus departing from the savanna region and followed the western ridge which geographically depicts the 'Kukuruku Hill'. The account further states that, Efa and other members of the Egyptian party on getting to the Esan Plateau with its feature of fertile land and plants were attracted to the place and decided to settle there (Esan Plateau) (A.P. Ojiefoh, 2002:7).

A variant of the account appears to validate the above argument. The account argues that the Egyptians finding the domain of the Pharaoh to be too harsh,"decided to migrate southwards and in the course of their journey employed some Sudanese to carry their wares through the Savannah into the rainforest. On getting to 'Uhe,' the Egyptian migrants who were the shepherds and hunters were sent with the Sudanese to scout for fertile land. The scouts on getting to Bini sent back their Sudanese Colleague to 'Uhe' with cherry fruits. However, on their arrival at Ugboka, Efa the leader of the group was diseased on the feet from an injury that he sustained in the jungle. The Sudanese subjects later deserted among these were the Uromi earliest settlers. The account further stated that, this is the reason why the Hebrew word 'Abba" is the Uromi word for 'Abba" meaning father (A.P. Ojiefoh, 2002:8).

Colonial Intelligence Report on Uromi Origins

Butcher (1982:241) who compiled the intelligence report of the various Esan Communities in 1932 recorded in the case of Uromi that Oakha and her three boys are early founders of Uromi as they migrated from Benin and moved eastward to avoid being murdered by the King of Benin. On their way, the second born son of Oakha named Uromi decided to settle down in the region later known as Uromi. However, Butcher noted that the Calla tradition of origin was not supported by both Uromi and Benin traditional authorities. S.O. Ehiabhi (2015:3) has argued that the then Onojie (King) of Uromi, Okojie II, refused the Oakha tradition and told Butcher that there was no evidence to suggest that Uromi people migrated from Benin. Ehiabhi further avers that the Oba of Benin, Akenzua II also rejected the Oakha story because it lacked merit on the side of Benin royal records (S.O. Ehiabhi, 2015:3). Inspite of these rejections, Butcher (1982:237) went ahead to document that Uromi people were "in the main Benin origin either directly or indirectly….and Uromi language is a dialect of Bini….Uromi Culture is based on that found in Benin.

Apart from Butcher, another British Colonial officer who worked on Uromi history was Edward Morris Falk, the District Officer in the Ishan Division between 1915 and 1916. Edward was instructed by the Commissioner in Benin Province to undertake a study and compile an intelligence report on the various Communities in the Esan region. In his report, he submitted

that the people of Uromi acknowledged that their Onojie (King) was confirmed by the Oba of Benin before such succession was valid.(National Archives Ibadan (NAI), BP 437/1916 "Ishan Town Relations of, to Benin". Compiled by Edward Morris Falk, the District Officer in Ishan Division, 1915 – 1916). What is important here is the need to reveal that the British Colonial Officers deliberately falsified Uromi history. S.O. Ehiabhi (2015:8) in his well-researched paper on ***Re-interrogating Uromi Traditions of Origin and the Hegemony of a Benin Establishment,*** lampooned Edward Falk for not taking time to cover most Communities before drawing his conclusion about their history. He argues that "Falk only visited 18 out of the 32 Esan towns, arrived at his dubious conclusion based on assumptions and scattered statements and observation, and therefore ignorantly rested his report on presumed hypothesis. Without doubt therefore, British Colonial reports on Uromi traditions of origin is baseless and preposterous. What we have succeed in doing so far is to establish the fact that Uromi does not have a monocausal traditions of origin but varieties of origins.

The multidisciplinary approach on Uromi traditions of origin

This is the kernel of this paper, and it argues that there is a multidisciplinary approach to our understanding of Uromi traditions of origin. As has been argued earlier in this paper the task of interrogating the origins and past of a people is not the exclusive privilege of the historian as the geographer, archaeologist, linguist, sociologist, anthropologist are all eminently qualified to do same. In this case, three of the disciplines mentioned above will be used to establish the historical authenticity of Uromi traditions of origin. In other words, what does geographical, linguistic and archaeological sources tell us about the Origins of Uromi People?

Geographical Explanation of Uromi traditions of Origin

The puzzle of the Hamitic accounts of origin of the people of Uromi can be explained with collaborative geographical evidence. Contrary to the Pro Benin Origin Versions, studies conducted by academic historians with the effective application of historical re-enactment based on geographic evidence (D.U. Momodu,2006:6), as well as other multidisciplinary methods like ethnographic and linguistic studies(J.H. Greenberg,1955:16) not only debunked the Pro Benin Versions of origin but also indicated the possibility of the Benin Kingdom springing out from Esan that Uromi belong to. The argument here is that long before the Benin migration story, people were already settled in Uromi due to the geographical fertility of the land. The receding of waters into the ocean may have opened up more fertile land which by implication triggered the movement of people into Uromi, these migrants were well received by the aborigines in Uromi.

Obviously, emergent dry lands are usually fertile low land features, as such it will require a lot of physical and psychological effort for the people that have already settled in Uromi land herein referred to as the "aborigines" to exploit the resources that they found in the land. The aborigine origin of Uromi though is not part of this research is reserved for future work. D.U. Momodu (2016:6) in his work titled: **A history of the Evolution of Uromi township institution** has argued for the authenticity of the fluvial era in Uromi history. By fluvial era he meant the continuous receding of water from the Sahara into theAtlantic and the changes in natural arrangement that followed opened up new lands that became attractive to "unsedentary" people. Uromi people are probably example of these "unsedentary" migrants (D.U. Momodu, 2016:6). It could therefore be argued that the geographic which is the abundance of fertile land in Uromi greatly attracted migrants to Uromi terrain.

Linguistic Explanation of Uromi traditions of Origin

The tenability of the claim to an aboriginal population in Uromi has been heightened by linguistic findings in recent times. Linguistic findings show that, inspite of the corroboration of the etymology in the words "Onojie and Khara" in Benin vocabulary, the fact remains that about twenty percent (20%) of Uromi vocabulary with no Benin origin suggest the presence of a long neglected underlying culture in the area.(J.B. Webster & E.O. Emesiri, 1985:5). The Edo language like its Igbo and Yoruba counterparts belong to the Kwa family language groups, which in turn belong to the larger Niger-Congo group of languages. The Niger-group of languages according to language experts, commenced its process of separation about four thousand years (4,000 years) ago about the same period in Uromi origin centuries before the birth of Christ.(B.E. Oseghale,1987:2). A logical assertion from this is that the Benin people actually passed through Uromi territory in their journey to their present site. (B.E. Oseghale, 1987:8). In an interview with Agbokhan Timothy,(2020), the few people that could not continue the journey to Benin settled in Uromi where they necessarily have to learn Uromi language. It follows those geographic and Linguistic explanations of Uromi traditions of Origin suggest that people were already living in Uromi territory long before the Benin myth of origin.

Archaeological Explanation of Uromi tradition of Origin

On the archaeological explanation of Uromi traditions of origin, an archaeologist Graham Connah (1968) has argued that by the late Stone Age, man was already living in the rainforest lands of Southern Nigeria which the Uromi people belong to. Graham Connah who has done an extensive and successful work in the area has also suggested that man was already living in Benin City 3000 B.C and that there were settled agricultural communities in Uromi area. For him also there is evidence of human occupation as far back as A.D. 770. The point here is that archaeological evidence suggests the possibility of an aboriginal people in Uromi before the Benin migration myth of origin. In other words, Uromi before the various waves of migration theory was never a "terra incognita", devoid of human activities.

A.E. Afigbo (1981:17) agrees with the findings of Graham Connah when he said that

> "Without depending unduly on the Benin migration to
> Esanlands, the South Central Nigeria region in around
> 1300 could not have been one in which the population
> was meager or just concentrated on one spot (Benin City).
> Owing to population pressure and environmental factors,
> people from Benin began migrating to Esan land."

Afigbo is simply saying that there are varieties of stories regarding Uromi origins.

Conclusion

The kernel of this research is to establish that apart from the Benin migration myth of origins concerning the Uromi people, there are multidisciplinary sources which have shown that Uromi land was already occupied by Agricultural Communities. We should acknowledge the fact that although people migrated from Benin to Uromi, it should not be seen as the "only" source of their tradition of origin. Put differently, we can also interrogate the origins of Uromi

people from a multidisciplinary approach as the historian is not the only qualified individual to interrogate the origins of a people. In the case of Uromi, it is clear that any tradition of origin that arrogates the creation of Uromi to a single factor of Benin migration is not tenable but preposterous.

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Research shows that the kukuruku hills are geographically located in the North Eastern fringes of Akoko Edo Etsako people. Its elevation according to Lambat Azimuthal's area projection is about 2000km above sea level, while the low lands in which Benin is inhabited is about 200km above sea level which to a large extent, buttress our argument.

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This claim by D.U. Momodu appears to have been based on part of the Analysis derived from ***National Geographic Channel***. The Amazing Earth. DSTV breakfast of February 2002.Retrieved from www.natgeo.com.