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Amiara, Solomon Amiara
Department of History and
International Relations,
Ebonyi State University,
Abakaliki, Nigeria.

Correspondence:
Amiara, Solomon Amiara
Department of History and
International Relations,
Ebonyi State University,
Abakaliki, Nigeria.

Ikwo-Okum War: A Historical Review of Autochthony

Amiara, Solomon Amiara

Abstract

The Ikwo-Okum war was a historic war fought on the account of indigene/settler's dichotomy. The war broke out when migration war was still part of Africa's identity. Each of these clans claims the original owner of the area. This study is not to prove the ownership of the land but an exposition of cultural intermingling without aculturalization. Brief histories of these people were discussed while issues that challenged them as well as areas of success were also highlighted. The study concluded that except the Okum masquerades that are dominated in Ikwo today, the war ended to the victory of Ikwo who captured four Okum people but assimilated two of them to Echara autonomous community who allowed them to form and develop a village called Nkalapho.

Keywords: Ikwo, Okum, War, Historical, Autochthony

Introduction

Brief History of Ikwo and Okum people

Ikwo history is traced to a legendary ancestor called Noyo-a son of Enyi Nwegu who migrated from Igala in Benue state around the mid 10th Century to first settle in Ekpeli, from where other waves of migration took place. During this period of migration, Ikwo first came in contact with the "Okum" who were said to be the original inhabitants that lived between "Onunwegu Nchonu" in Ekpeli axis in Ikwo North to link up with their kiths and kins in the present-day Cross River state. In this migration, Noyo first sojourned at Ngbo before proceeding easterly to his present abode. Aside the above account, there is an account to Ikwo history of what historians called autochthonous theory. Autochthony ascribes to inhabitants the rights of indigenship. Hence, its emphasis lies on the inhabitants of a place or indigenous rather than descended from migrants. It is synonymous to indigenous and native. Therefore, the theory holds that Noyo did not migrate from anywhere. He and his son 'Ikwo' have been living in this present area from time immemorial. They did not migrate from anywhere and every Ikwo person holds on to this assumption.¹ In their views, Noyo, the legendary ancestor of Ikwo did not migrate from anywhere. He lived in Ekpeli and fought war of expansion with the people of Cross River and Ezza.

On the contrary, the history of Okum is much obscured. It is a sub-clan of Mbembe in Obubra Local Government Area of Cross River. They are often considered as part of the mono cultural units of Obubra people. However, they have a monarch and share borders with the peoples of Apiapum and Aduni of the lower Cross River. G. Uguru maintains that Okum are from Nkum in the present-day Cross River.² They crossed big river to settle in the present land of Ikwo much earlier before Noyo arrived around mid-10th Century. They had to settle very quickly and develop cultural practices different from Ikwo when they came in contact with them. These cultural values together with the scarcity of land gave them opportunity to engage each other in military confrontation that resulted to the defeat of Okum by Ikwo warriors.

History of the War

Opinions have differed about the historical origin of the war that broke out between the warriors of Ikwo and Okum respectively. However, each tends to point to the period of

migration and settlement as the starting time and also, to the time when the entire Abakaliki people came to occupy the present place they are now occupy. Okum were historically regarded as migrants from Cross River that occupied the present Ikwo land before 16000 AD. Linguistically, they are non-Igbo speaking people whose languages are similar with that of Mbembe in Obubra Local Government Area of Cross River. They speak distinct language, observe distinct traditions and carry out distinct cultural practices and values in their co-habitation with the Ikwo. This practice was totally at variance with Ikwo cultural values, practices and belief system and by this, they were committed to ensuring that non-Igbo speaking people did not co-habit with them. Therefore, in what could be indigene/settlers' war and like other prevailing crisis among the clans in early African history, the Ikwo-Okum war is said to have broken out of the scarcity of land for habitation and for growing agricultural products with each of the clans' laying claims of the ownership over the land. In this case, it would be understood that Oferekepe were part of these Okum who had lived in this area and claimed to have come to live much earlier than the Ikwo in their present abode. To that extent, Okwe, maintains that from the very beginning our ancestors were living in a place called Ekoyo where the Ikwo people are living at present. And to prove this, Mbiam or juju named Nchonu that is find there was placed by our ancestors.³ He went further to say that this juju was jointly sacrificed together yearly by the people of Oferekepe and Ikwo in those olden days before the war broke out between them. Though, Okwe did not tell us the original owner of the juju nor did he tell us the first inhabitant of the area but he opined that both clans were paying tributes to the deity. In fact, the truth is that Nchonu is an Ikwo word-meaning general square (Ogbaku) and since this is an Igbo word, the area today occupied by the people could be the land of Ikwo by birth. Furthermore, Okwe maintained that Ochonnu was a juju built by their ancestors but later left it for another place. According to him, the juju was made in form of earthen pot and placed in a shed built with sticks and a roof on top. After building it, they lived there for so many years before living to settle in another place which they named "Itam-tet". He further stressed that after some periods of years at Itam-tet, the ancestors again left for more comfortable place until they came down to another place they named "Okononnu". As the Ikwo people found that our ancestors had left the place "Itam-tet", for "Okononnu", they came in again and occupied the former place "Itam-tet" and they named it Efgbabo.⁴ This could be practically the reason for the war that broke out between them as opinions have differed on the causes of the war.

The Ikwo-Okum War

There are diverse views on Ikwo-Okum war. Some are of the opinion that the war was a demonstration of anger to the people of Okum while others saw it as an outcome of land scarcity. For B. N. Amiara, Ikwo and Okum were apparently living close to each other but however, war broke out between them when pigs belonging to the Okum went into ploughing Ikwo cassava in order to eat them.⁵ According to him, the Ikwo considered this very provocative as every Ikwo man is highly attached to his food. The Ikwo who was supposedly looking for an opportunity to drive the Okum away capitalized on that and

invaded the Okum. To that extent, when Ikwo saw that Okum could be victorious because of their magical powers, Ikwo became apprehensive and depended on their numerical strength to win the war. More so, another account to the outbreak of the war has it that Okum was originally the occupant of the area now known as the Ikwo. Noyo, the ancestral father of Ikwo was the late comer. He migrated from Igala and had sojourned at Ngbo before proceeding easterly to settle in Umueka from where, he expanded as a result of population till he came in contact with the Okum before war broke out between them. This account is so controversial that it lacks historical supports but what appears more consensus among the Ikwo is that, Ikwo migrated from nowhere. He is the original owner of the area they now occupy. According to O. Nweke, Noyo as the ancestral father of Ikwo originated from Ekpeli. He did not migrate from anywhere. He had lived in the area from the beginning of his existence. He fought war with the Okum who crossed the big river of Cross River settling within the riverine areas.⁶ According to him, when the war broke out, the Ikwo were aided by a medicine man called Mkpishi Mgbenwe Egvu.

The Role of the Medicine man (Mkpishi Mgbenwe Egvu)

The history of Mkpishi Mgbenwe Egvu is unknown to every Ikwo man today. However, historical account suggests that during the war, a man known as Mkpishi Mgbenwe Egvu appeared from nowhere and demanded for the elders of the Ikwo. As they assembled at the village squared, he introduced himself as Mkpishi Mgbenwe Egvu. He told the Ikwo that he would assist them to defeat the Okum if only they could get him what he would demand from them. B. N. Amiara, opines that Mkpishi Mgbenwe Egvu was a medicine man whose origin is unknown till now. He appeared in Ikwo during the war and asked ndi Ikwo to allow him make a charm that would be used to drive Okum away for them. He demanded twelve (12) goats, twelve (12) baskets of flies, twelve (12) baskets of yam, twelve (12) cows, twelve (12) cocks and twelve human heads and told them that he would make the charm inside a drum that whenever the drum is beaten, the Okum on hearing the sound would run away till a place where they would settle and if they settle in that area, they would no longer be driving away anymore.⁷ According to him, he warned that nobody should take because he (Mkpishi Mgbenwe Egvu) was making a charm for them and keep his stomach.

He further stressed that after the Okum were driven up to the border with Cross River, Mkpishi Mgbenwe Egvu came back and asked the Ikwo people to make a fire at Azu Abalaeswe at Enyibichiri Alike. After the fire was made, he went to Aba and washed his hand before coming back to jump into the fire and disappeared. This Aba became a very power shrine in Enyibichiri that every traditionalist name his child after it today.

At the end of the war around 1900, the Ikwo had defeated the Okum. Towards the end of the war, four Okum people were captured and they had to denounce their identity, custom and tradition to accept Ikwo culture. Oral information gotten for this study showed that these four Okum captives were to be shared among the principal communities in Ikwo. Umueka and Mgbada rejected their own while four of them were shared between Alike and

Echara autonomous communities and at some points, Alike killed their own leaving only Echara with two Okum. These two were absorbed by Echara people who allowed them to grow and develop a village called Nkalapho. This is why of all the communities in Ikwo, only Echara has Nkalapho.

The Achievements of the War by the Ikwo People

As stated above, the end of the war was historic to Ikwo people. At first, it was a test of strength and of superiority to other clans that wish to engage Ikwo in arm battle. However, towards the end of the war, Ikwo had defeated Okum and captured their masquerades. These masquerades were shared among the communities in Ikwo. They included:

Enyibichiri-----Etangara
 Noyo-----Ukwankashi
 Okpotokum-----Inyagorgor
 Nzashi-----Agba Ekuma
 Imiyimagu-----Nwenu nkoko
 Igbudu-----Oyawa
 Umueka-----Ogbodo Enyi.⁸

Similarly, D. Oguji stresses that one of the significant achievements of Ikwo people in the war was the capturing of a popular Okum masquerade called Ogbodo enyi at Umueka. Ogbodo enyi is popularly found among the communities in Ikwo. It was the capturing of ogbodo enyi in Umueka that gave rise to other conventional masquerades operating in our various communities in Ikwo.⁹ Oguji accounts that the practice of Ogbodo enyi first began at Umueka before it extended to all other communities. In his word, all the communities in Ikwo began their expansion from Umueka up to the boundary river in Cross River State. For instance, Alike started at Ohankfu, Echara at Eleke and Ekpomaka at Eka-Awoke.⁸ In another swift account, S. Amiara holds that among the communities that practice Ogbodo enyi in Ikwo, its popularity is most commendable among the Nkalapho people.¹⁰ It is the Nkalapho that knows how to sing the song because of their status as captives, others are just imitating them.

Apart from the captured masquerades, there are other achievements such as the inheritance of Okum ponds. Many ponds belonging to Okum were inherited by the Ikwo when they defeated them. These ponds today became the sources of money making as fishes in those ponds are periodically sold in order to raise money. Others use the ponds as a source of drinking water especially during draught.

The Challenges to the Success of the War

Apart from the achievements of the war by the Ikwo people, there were several challenges to the success of the war. These challenges include:

1. The outbreak of the war marked the first time the people of Ikwo were being confronted by inter-tribal warfare.
2. There were no weapons to prosecute the war as the warriors used markets, stones and arrows for fighting.
3. It created unending dialogue between the people of Cross River and Ikwo up till now as those living at the boundary are constantly engaging in war with the Cross River people.

Conclusion

The Ikwo-Okum war was an unconventional military confrontation engaged in by the forces of Ikwo and Okum. While, opinions differed on the original inhabitants of the area, each has made claims to the fact that the land rightly belongs to them. While M. Okwe, asserts that the land belongs to them, Ikwo generally held that it was the land to which their ancestors left for them. Therefore, this study traced the sources of the war to the scarcity of land arising from population expansion, migration and settlement that characterised African state system. By this, the war that broke out between the forces of Ikwo and Okum was fought using several local weapons. The war ended with Ikwo being victorious and Okum losing their valuable possessions. Hence, N. Amiara noted that after the war, Ikwo captured several Okum masquerades such as Etangara, Ukwankashi, Inyagorgor, Ekpa Ekuma, Nwenu nkoko, Oyawa, Ogbodo Enyi and shared among the communities in Ikwo.¹¹

Again, apart from the acquisition of masquerades, there were several valuable properties such as palm trees, fish pond and economic trees belonging to Okum that were inherited by the Ikwo.

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