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A Brief History of Chukwu Abiama

By Idenze Ezeme

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHUKWU ABIAMA

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Chukwu Abiama is a vital part of Igbo culture and spirituality. Its history goes back to before Christianity came to Nigeria. The Igbo people regarded it as an oracle, meaning it had a huge influence on the lives and beliefs of the Igbo. This article will analyse the history of Chukwu Abiama, what the name Chukwu Abiama means, its impact on the Igbo people and others around them, and its long-lasting legacy.

01

What Does Chukwu Abiama Mean?

The name Chukwu Abiama comes from two Igbo words. Chukwu itself means “Great God,” while Abiama comes from “lives there”, which refers to a priest, a diviner, or one who speaks for the gods.



stands the noted city of A'ro or A'no, where is the celebrated shrine of *Tshúku*, or the deity to which pilgrimages are made, not only from all parts of I'gbo proper, but from Old Kalabár, from the tribes along the coast, and from Orú, and Nímbe or Brass. The city is described as being nearly three times the size of Abó, and as extremely populous. The inhabitants are skilful artisans, and manufacture swords, spears, and metallic ornaments, specimens of all of which I have seen, and can therefore testify to their being very

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311

neatly finished. The town is always mentioned with great respect, almost, at times, with a degree of veneration, and the people say "*Tshúku ab'gawa*," or "God lives there." The dialect of A'ro is peculiar, but Isuáma and E'lugu are also much spoken, as well as E'fik or Old Kalabár, and numerous other languages are to be heard among the crowds of pilgrim-votaries who throng the shrine. The mark used in A'ro consists of a series of (from ten to twelve) short horizontal lines, just before the ear. Of other places of which I heard, without being able to obtain any remarkable particulars about them, I may mention Abám to the north of Ogobéndo, Isiápo a small district between Ndéki and Bonny and which may be reached by canoe, Orátá to the eastward of O'zuzu, and finally Oniúnsi, a town in E'lugu, the inhabitants of which are said to be very short, but very stout.

The religion of I'gbo is entirely Pagan, mixed up with numerous rites and ceremonies, neither in general so frightful nor so bloody as those practised in Bini, in Dahómi, and other more western countries, but still all of a pre-eminently superstitious character. The I'gbos all believe in an Almighty-being, omnipresent and omnipotent, whom they call *Tshúku*, whom they constantly worship, and whom they believe to communicate directly with them through his sacred shrine at A'ro. But they speak also of another and a dis-

Baikie, W. B. (1856). Narrative of an exploring voyage up the rivers Kwora and Binue (commonly known as the Niger and Tsadda) in 1854. John Murray.

The area of Arochukwu is located in a marshy territory known as the Enyong Creek. The Eburutu are the various Ekoid clans who lived there, such as the Lorsí, Nchalagha, Ukwa, Idere, Umon and most importantly, the Iboku clan, which went on to become Efik after they left for Akwa Akpa.

The Eburutu live side by side with the Ezeagwu Nnobia clan (Oti Eze, a descendant of Okeigbo); the Ezeagwu's people lived in a section known as Unene, while the Eburutu lived at Iwere. The Aro were also known as Inokon (and are still referred to as Inokon by the Annang and Efik today)

The importance of the location was marked by the presence of the shrine to their supreme deity, Ekpeyong Abasi (Ekpe-enyong) or Ibritam. Ibritam is still a household deity amongst the Annang.

It was located at a place called Ibom Ikot Abasi(translated by the Aro

as Ovia Chukwu)

The Anrụ were originally known as Inokon. Anrụ means quarters or niche; it comes from Anrụ- chukwu, which means Chukwu's abode or domain (now known as Arochukwu)

The Aro-ibibio war is a fallacy, as there was no known ibibio settlement there. Ibibio in old accounts was erroneously used as a blanket term for the Akwa Cross people, especially as regards to enyong people. To buttress that fact, Aro has no cultural or ancestral relationship with Ibibio as they do with Efik.

The conflict mainly centred between the inokon (Ezeagwu's clan, the Ebiri, Edda and the Eburutu people)

Efik Eburutu traditions agree that they came from Arohukwu after a dispute with the Inokon, but the Ibibio have no tradition of coming from Aro.

The Annang were the keepers of the Ibritam shrine and the prestigious Idiong society that guarded its secret. (through Ekpo), They welcomed the first Aro initiates into the society, who later took over the shrine and laid the foundations of Ekpo Arochukwu, who is Annang speaking to date.

The complex relationship, or rather covenant, between Aro and Annang, which is not much talked about, the settlements in each other's territory and why there are many Aro and Ohafia surnames amongst the Annang.

After the Aro-Eburutu conflict the oracle was established over Ibritam as Ebini-Ukpabi (where God lives, Ukpabi being God)

it is worth noting that the remaining Eburutu people were assimilated by Ezeagwu's clan into Obinkita and few other villages.

The popularity of the oracle spread over time around Ala Igbo where it

is known as Chukwuabiama, as far as Kalabari they knew it as Suku-Abiama, the Aro equated their deity Obasi Inokon or Ukpabi with Chukwu.

(The Ogu deity was brought to Ubani[Bonny] after a consultation with Chukwuabiama)

The name Ibom mbot Abasi was gradually replaced by Anrụ- chukwu (Arochukwu) which means the same thing, “the abode or domain of Chukwu”

The Efik Eburutu say they left Arochukwu because of religious reasons(they refused to worship Ibritam Inokon) however this can be understood as a mere chauvinist explanation, because Ekpeyong Abasi Ibritam is still the same Obasi Inokon, what is obvious is that perhaps they refused to submit to the new priesthood under the inokon, hence the Iboku clan left for Uruan from where they crossed over to Akwa Akpa (Calabar).

Aro continues to maintain a fraternal relationship with Efik Eburutu through the Ekpe society which was fundamental in the foundation of both city-states.

The Aro were the only known agents who ran an oracle of Chukwu, in Igbo belief Chukwu was viewed as unknown and very distant from the people, and as such were feared and respected all over Igbo land, they were known as umuchukwu.

Anrụ and Chukwuabiama oracle shaped Southern Igbo culture and traditions forever. It helped Anrụ to establish a foothold over almost every village in the South, where ever they settled, they often demanded control over the native titular deities... in so doing they fused Kamalu with Amadioha, Igwekaala and so on, they also established Ọkọnkọ(Ekpe) lodges, Oboni and Ekpo masquerade all over the South Personal Ebini-Ukpabi altars were also erected just as one pictured below which was found around Afikpo also reaching as far as Ahoada.

02

Where Was Chukwu Abiama Located?

The oracle of Chukwu Abiama was situated in a location generally known as Arochukwu, presently in Abia State, Nigeria. The place was named Arochukwu, meaning “God’s domain” or “the place of God.” It was swampy, lying close to a creek called the Enyong Creek, wherein different groups of people were stationed.

Major groups in the area included the Eburutu clans, which include those known as the Lorsi, Ukwa, Idere, and Umon people. Others include the Ezeagwu Nnobia clan said to be descendants of Okeigbo. One of the most important groups to arise from the Eburutu was the Iboku clan, which moved down to Calabar at a later date and became the Efik people.

03

Why Was Chukwu Abiama Important?

Chukwu Abiama was not an oracle himself but was viewed to connect people to the supreme God, Chukwu. According to Igbo beliefs, Chukwu was a distant yet powerful god. He helped connect to this god through spiritual advice, settling disputes, and guiding communities.

This made them one of the most respected individuals in the region, for they possessed control of the oracle. They expanded the worship of Chukwu Abiama throughout Igbo land and beyond. Many communities embraced Aro cultural practices, like the Ekpe society and the Ekpo masquerade, which became part of Igbo traditions.



04

Influence beyond Igbo Land

Chukwu Abiama was not exclusive to the Igbo Neighboring communities like the Efik, Kalabari, and Ejagham also known as the oracle. As a matter of fact, the Efik referred to it as Suku Abiama and believed in his powers.

The Aro people enjoyed close relations with the Efik through a cultural association known as the Ekpe society, which existed between the two communities. However, their religious differences sparked the withdrawal of the Efik people from Arochukwu. They declined worshipping the oracle of Chukwu Abiama under the Aro priests and migrated to Calabar where they continued with their religious practices.

05

Chukwu Abiama and the Slave Trade

There are many reasons Chukwu Abiama is remembered, some good and some bad. While it spiritually helped the communities, it also took part in the transatlantic slave trade. Many people came to see the oracle for guidance or justice, but its decisions usually led to one being enslaved.

The Aro used the oracle's reputation to justify capturing people and selling them into slavery. This made the Aro people powerful but also contributed to the suffering of lots of people.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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