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## Aya-Adesuwa: *The Ubulu-Uku/Bini War*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE  
IMAGE

**A group of Igbo warriors in ancient battle dress at a warrior's funeral.  
Photo: M. D. W. Jeffreys, 1956.**

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**AYA-ADESUWA**

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**T**he war between the Bini Empire and the Ubulu-Uku or Ubulu-Ukwu was one of these great ancient wars that were fought between the Western Igbo people and the Bini Empire due to proximity and the Bini Empire's constant invasion of Western Igbo land. There are different versions of the story, and they all believe that the war was fought around 1750. In the period the Oba of Bini was Oba Akengbuda, while the Obi of Ubulu kingdom was Obi Olisẹ. The descendants of Obi Olisẹ are today known as Ụmụ-Olisẹ.

One of the version of the story said that Obi Olise had initially visited the Oba's palace to complete his installation, as required by Ubulu-Uku tradition. However, this time, he came to Bini at the invitation of his long-time friend, the Ezomo of Bini Empire. The Ezomo had fallen out with the Oba over some domestic matters, so he devised a plan to have his daughter, Adesuwa, seduce the visiting Obi knowing fully well that she was betrothed to the Oba. Adesuwa agreed to her father's dirty scheme and willingly presented kola nuts to the handsome Obi Olise. However, the situation took an unexpected turn. The Obi was captivated by Adesuwa's beauty and invited her to bring beads to Ubulu-Uku for him to purchase. Adesuwa accepted the invitation, but she never returned to Bini. A message was later sent to the Ezomo, assuring him that his daughter was in good hands. Upon hearing this, the Oba became furious, as Adesuwa had been betrothed to him. This is not the first time in history that wars have happened due to a woman.

*According to Ubulu's oral history, all the kings of Benin from the Ogiso era often undertook a three-day journey to Ubulu-Uku for a fortification ritual since Ubulu people were known for their strong herbs and spiritual power that protected them during wars.*

According to Jacob Egharevba, he narrates that “ a prince from the house of Oboro-Uku came to Benin City to be installed as Ogie or Obi of Oboro-Uku. As was customary, he danced around the city after his investiture and visited the Ezomo at Uzebu. The Ezomo welcomed him with kola nuts, presented by his beautiful daughter, Adesuwa, who had been betrothed to the Oba. Captivated by her beauty, the Obi expressed a desire to marry her, but Adesuwa insulted him, mockingly calling him a ‘bush ruler.’ Outraged, the Obi returned home and used charms to bring Adesuwa to Oboro-Uku. Adesuwa, disregarding the advice of her servant, sought permission from her parents to travel to Oboro-Uku market, claiming she needed to collect a debt owed to her for the sale of goats. Upon hearing of her presence in the market, the Obi sent for her. When Adesuwa again rejected his advances and insulted him, he ordered her execution. When the news reached Benin City, the Ezomo went to the Oba's palace to report Adesuwa's death and expressed his intention to wage war against Oboro-Uku. The Oba, however, declared that he would avenge his beloved's death himself.”

However, understanding a people's way of life is crucial when documenting events about them, especially when they are a people rooted in consistent traditions. Therefore, while Egharevba's account mentions the Ezomo presenting kola nuts to the Obi of Ubulu-Uku through his daughter Adesuwa, the use of charm to bring her to Ubulu-Ukwu, her visit to the market to collect a debt for goat sales, and the insult and refusal that led to her murder, might not be entirely accurate. After all, in Ubulu to this day, no female, no matter how well regarded, serves the king kolanut or reaches into the bowl of kolanut meant for the king.

Another longer and well explained version of the story narrated that in the year 1750, the Bini Empire coronated a new Oba (Oba Akengbuda), but he failed to undergo his fortification ritual in Ubulu like the former Oba, which led to a severe illness. As the sickness

worsened, a discreet call was sent out across the Benin Empire, seeking any healer capable of curing the Oba. The general public of the empire did not know of Oba's illness.



Sketch of Oba Akengbuda

The Obi of Ubulu-Uku, a highly respected figure among traditional doctors in Ubulu Uku at that time and top sworn members of all traditional cults in Ubulu Uku, decided to pay a visit to the Oba with a team of traditional healers due to the close relationship between Ubulu people and Bini Empire. Obi Olisé set out on this journey, stopping along the way to see his friend, the Ezomo of Bini Empire at that time. During this visit, he met a beautiful woman, Adesuwa. The story claimed Adesuwa was the daughter of Ezomo betrothed to the Oba.

When Obi Olisé indicated his interest in marrying the young maiden, the Ezomo dismissed his request and stated that she had already been betrothed to the Oba. After leaving the Ezomo's palace, Obi Olisé and

his team of powerful herbal doctors proceeded with their journey to the Oba's palace. Upon reaching the Oba's palace, they treated the Oba and nursed him back to health. Among the numerous charms that were prepared for Oba Akengbuda during the treatment, the most important charm was the longevity charm known as "Idayi." Idayi was prepared to ensure that Oba has a long and prosperous reign.

*Note: The people of Ubulu-Uku later continued to prepare the Idayi for the Oba of the Bini Empire even during the reign of Oba Akenzua, which fostered a relationship between Ubulu-Uku kingdom and Bini Empire as allies. Ubulu-Uku was never a subject of the Bini Empire as people assume.*

After restoring the Oba's health, the grateful king obliged Obi Olisé the opportunity to demand anything as a token of appreciation. Obi Olisé expressed his wish to marry Adesuwa, whom he had seen at the Ezomo's palace. Despite that Oba had interest in the maiden, the Oba could not rescind his promise, so honored his promise and instructed the Ezomo to give his daughter to the Obi, which the Ezomo reluctantly agreed to do.

After Olisé Obi departed, the Bini chiefs, led by the Ezomo, gathered around the Oba and argued that conceding Adesuwa to the Obi was a grave diplomatic mistake, regardless of what the Obi had done for the Empire since they believed that Bini Empire was more powerful than Ubulu-Uku, and can easily be subdued. They argued that even if Adesuwa were to be taken back to Bini, the Obi could not fight the Bini Empire, as any such attempt would lead to the annihilation of Ubulu-Uku. After many arguments, the Oba agreed with his chiefs and instructed the Ezomo to retrieve Adesuwa. Without hesitation, the Ezomo of the Bini Empire assembled a group of soldiers and set out eastward chasing the Obi. The Obi and his entourage had barely traveled far beyond the borders of the Bini Empire, which made it easy for the Ezomo to catch up with them and demand the return of his daughter, Adesuwa. Initially, the Edo people were indifferent to this act; they believed Adesuwa rightfully belonged in Ubulu-Uku since she was the price paid to save their king's life. But this did not go down well with the Ezomo, who felt he had lost the opportunity of

becoming the Oba's in-law. Also, the sudden, unceremonious removal of his daughter was seen as a personal insult.

The Obi agreed to the demand since he was still in their land do not have soldiers with him for battle, so Adesuwa was sent back to her father. However, once the Obi returned to Ubulu-Uku, he used the mystical powers of “mpupụ” to spiritually transport Adesuwa to Ubulu-Uku.

As Adesuwa was in Ubulu-Uku, she proved to be an arrogant and disrespectful wife, frequently insulting the Obi of Ubulu-Uku. Over time, Adesuwa became increasingly unbearable in the palace. She misinterpreted the Obi's affection for her as a sign of weakness. The other wives were upset by her behavior and insisted that she adhere to the Ubulu-Uku tradition, which prioritized seniority based on the date of marriage rather than their ages. Despite repeated warnings, Adesuwa continued to ignore the palace rules, which led to the matter being brought before the council. The situation reached a breaking point when she publicly disrespected the Obi in front of the traditional council, which was the final straw that broke the camel's back. The Obi had no choice but to yield to the silent pressure caused by Adesuwa's actions. Regrettably, he allowed the law of the land, which condemned her behaviour as “iyin-aja” (a grave offence), to take its course. The Idoloma took her away and executed her for insubordination, as her offence was punishable by death. It was said in Ubulu-Ukwu then, that the knowledge of Idoloma was the beginning of obedience.

*According to Mr. Benard Isichei, a descendant of Ije—a Prince of Idu who came to Ubulu for war but settled there after his troops were defeated: “Adesuwa once told the king that his palace was smaller than her mother's kitchen. After that, he instructed the ‘idolomas’ to take her away. In Ubulu, ‘take her away’ means paying the ultimate price.”*

When news of this tragic event reached the Bini Empire, the chiefs, led by the Ezomo, urged the Oba to declare war on the Ubulu Kingdom. They also believed it would be an easy victory for them since Ubulu was a kingdom, while Bini was an empire. However, the Oba

understood that it wasn't going to be an easy war. The chiefs argued that the Obi had deceitfully taken the Oba's lover and had her killed out of spite because her heart was for him, the Oba, and claimed this was a grave insult to both the Oba and the Edo people. They also contended that even if the Obi had issues with his Adesuwa, her noble birth should have made her execution unjust. For this reason, the Oba instructed the Ezomo to lead the Bini (Edo) army into battle.

Messengers were dispatched to Ubulu-Uku to formally convey the declaration of war to the Obi. Upon hearing of the impending attack, the Obi assembled a meeting with the entire kingdom to discuss the situation. A delegation was sent to the ancestral home of the Ubulu people, which is Ubulu-Uno to update them on the developments.

The Obi and the entire people of Ubulu determined that the Obi had acted by the laws and customs of their land, declaring him innocent. They vowed to defend their territory against the Edo army. The Ubulu people were confident in their ability to use their deep knowledge of African sciences, inherited from Ezemu (their progenitor), their understanding of their region, and their strong connections with neighboring Western Igbo kingdoms. Also, to the Western Igbo states, the Oba's actions and his army were seen as bullying. Some even took a blood oath (Igba ndu) to pledge their support for Ubulu-Uku.

According to both the Bini and Ubulu accounts, the messengers sent from Bini lost their way to Ubulu-Uku. This incident was attributed to a special magic used by Ubulu magic men, which neutralized the charms used by the Bini messengers and caused them to wander in the jungle. After waiting for weeks with no response from the messengers, the Edo people realized they had wandered to their deaths and immediately sought support from the Esan region of the Bini Empire. The plan was for the Edo army to attack from the south via Urhonigbe, while their allies from Esan would strike from Ewohimi in the north. With the Edo army now fortified with more powerful charms, it was aimless for Ubulu to repeat such acts, so they had to figure out a counter strategy. It was decided that every Ubulu native, except those in Ọkwa-Iyase, including soldiers and warlords led by the Iyase himself, should relocate to another area so they can be prepared

for the impending attack

This situation triggered a wave of migration of Ubulu people relocating to other regions such as Delta, Imo, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Anambra. In around 1752, soldiers from the Bini Empire launched an attack on Ubulu but were soundly defeated and nearly annihilated. The Ezomo narrowly escaped death, and to make matters worse, the wells in Ubulu-Uku and its surroundings were poisoned. As the Edo soldiers drank from these tainted wells, many succumbed to the poison. The western Igbo chiefdoms surrounding Ubulu were highly supportive by assisting in logistics, intelligence, charms, and weapons. While the Edo soldiers had European-sourced weapons, they lacked the knowledge of the region which was needed to overcome the resistance from Ubulu and its allies in Enuani and Ika.

Upon the return of the Edo soldiers to Bini, it was decided that they needed a new strategy to defeat the Ubulu people. Their main challenge was to unravel the secrets behind the magical practices and war strategies of the Ubulu army. During their evaluation of the conflict, they realized that they could use the knowledge of the OGIUGO or Agbogidi of Ugo. Ugo is a state within the Bini Empire, which had its duke, the Ogiugo, and was notably independent from the central authority of the Bini Empire until the reign of Oba Ewuare. Agbogidi, who was the Ogiugo at that time was brought up at Ubulu-Uku. Where he was inducted into the traditional Onicha-Okpe medicine guild and learned much of the magic of Ubulu people. Agbogidi was born deaf and dumb and efforts to cure him failed. So, his father who was then the Ogiugo sent him to Ubulu-Uku to be treated. After many years of treatment which means he practically lived most of his life in Ubulu-Uku, he was cured but Obi Olisé had already developed a fondness for the boy.

While Agbogidi lived in Ubulu-Uku, he underwent the ‘ìcha-aka mkpùlùgwù’ ritual and was initiated into the guild of traditional doctors in Ubulu-Uku. He also married an Ubulu woman. As part of the initiation rites, initiates were bound by an oath of trust and loyalty, which Agbogidi had sworn never to break. In the culture of

Ubulu-Uku, only a descendant of Okpe can be initiated into the sacred cult of Ezemu's magical powers, because it was Okpe who inherited the pot of charm of the man described in their eyes as the third most powerful occult grandmaster. This cult has the vital secrets of Ubulu people's power.

His connection to Ubulu-Uku, which includes his deep understanding of the Western Igbo land, magical practices, language (Igbo), and customs of Ubulu, Ika, Ukwuani, and the Enuani people, was precisely what the Edo army needed. Motivated by the promises of fame, power, and greed, Agbogidi agreed to lead the Edo army into Ubulu land, and by doing so, he betrayed the sacred oath he had taken. With a bigger, better-prepared force, the Edo army launched another attack on Ubulu-Uku around 1754 two years after the Edo army's first invasion, this time led by Agbogidi and his Ubulu wife. The battle was fierce this time, as the Edo army, now armed with better experience from their previous defeat, and Ogiugo's knowledge of the land and his Ubulu wife, fought with renewed determination and strategic advantage.

The Edo army claimed victory in some of the battles, but the strong resistance from Ubulu-Uku lasted much longer than they expected. The Ubulu people were able to secure weapons from their allies, which provided them with an essential psychological boost. A key part of the "Okwa-Iyase" class of war chiefs in Ubulu-Uku was a group of migrants from Nri kingdom, and they are known as Ụmụ-Ikem, whose primary role was to craft various weapons. We suspect these Nri craftsmen came from present-day Awka of Anambra, as they were known to be famous "oka uzu," which means blacksmith. Awka (Oka) blacksmiths also founded Idumuoka in Esan land because of their expertise in blacksmithing. Their contribution to the success of the Ubulu-Uku army was priceless. Ubulu-Uku also received reliable support from its neighbors, with no reports of betrayal, even from Issele-Uku, who remain strong allies of Edo to this day. Though the Edo army believed they would ultimately win, Ogiugo overlooked a critical factor: despite his vast knowledge of Ubulu people's magical practices, warfare tactics, language, and customs, this familiarity was not prepared enough to fully counter the powers of the Okpe

magicians. He was never introduced to their deepest secrets, as he was not of Okpe's bloodline. Even till date, only bloodlines from paternal lineage are entitled to such secrets of Ụmụ Okpe.

The war went on for nearly a year of siege and, the Edo army became demoralized, struggling with their dwindling supplies and a lack of new strategies. As a result of this, the Edo army sued for peace. As part of the peace agreement, Prince Ije, one of the Edo army leaders, married Amisha. Amisha was the younger sister of Obi Olisẹ. Ije's descendants are known as Ụmụ-Idu, like Mr. Benard Isichei who was mentioned above, and they still live in Ubulu to this day. One of the main factors which contributed to the casualties suffered by Edo army was the expertise of Ubulu warriors (and their allies) in archery and sniper attacks. They skillfully retrieved guns from fallen Edo soldiers, which greatly enhanced their arsenal. It is believed that the term "Ekwumekwu," which originally means "ekwuna okwu" in Igbo (don't talk), also known as "Ekumeku" originated from this conflict. Ekwumekwu served as a password for the Ubulu and Western Igbo soldiers, allowing them to identify each other as they effectively targeted their enemies.

Upon his return, Obi Olise expressed his disappointment in Ogiugo's actions because he was taken as their own, so he demanded compensation for the unjust hostility of the Edo people and their Oba. Ready to negotiate peace, Ogiugo demanded to know about the nature of the compensation. Then Obi Olise requested a substantial amount of livestock, particularly cattle, as well as European luxuries that the Bini Empire had access to, such as guns, gun powders, and clothes. The clothes, which were the Portuguese catholic priest's dress influenced the dressing style of Ubulu-Uku present-day kings. Many of these demands, especially those for livestock, and clothings were met.

The Ubulu also demanded a pact with the Bini Empire, barring them from ever waging war against the Ubulu the Ika, and Enuani people, a proposal that Ogiugo promised to discuss with the Oba of Benin. Afterward, the Edo soldiers were asked to leave Ubulu-Uku, but many, uncertain of their fate cos of their loss if they returned to Bini Empire,

pleaded with Obi Olisé for permission to settle in Ubulu-Uku and acculturate into the community. The bravest of these soldiers were selected, and their descendants are still in Ubulu-Uku today, residing in distinct settlements known as Idumu-Idu and Onije villages. Also, some of these Edo soldiers settled in other Western Igbo communities, where they acculturated. The war officially ended in 1755, and by around 1760, Obi Olisé peacefully passed away at a ripe old age and was later succeeded by his son, Obi Dieze.

Following the defeat and the terms imposed by the Ubulu people on Ogiugo, he faced the daunting task of conveying such news to the Oba, and such meant death. On the advice of his wife, an old slave bearing some sort of resemblance to the Obi of Ubulu-Uku was killed, and his head was presented to the Oba as that of the Obi of Ubulu-Uku. Initially, the Edo people believed Ogiugo's claim that it was the head of "Ogie-Ubulu," as they referred to the Obi of Ubulu-Uku because they have always refused to acknowledge the title of Western Igbo kings. This can also be seen in present-day Ika community of Igbanke, where the Edo people refer to the Eze Igbanke as "Enogie."

However, upon closer inspection, they realized they had been deceived. Some soldiers confessed that apart from Ogiugo being defeated, he had a pact imposed on him by Obi Ubulu.

The Oba summoned Agbogidi, Ogiugo of Ugo to appear before him and his chiefs to explain his deception. When Oba's messengers were sent to Ugo, Ogiugo had them brutally killed and refused to obey his Oba's order to come to Edo, the capital of the Bini Empire. Angered by this defiance, the Oba declared war on Ugo. The conflict was fierce due to Ogiugo's mastery of magic learned from his time in Ubulu-Uku, but the relentless attacks continued since the Oba was determined to have Ogiugo's head for daring to present the head of a slave as that of the Obi of Ubulu. Ogiugo's forces did put up a formidable resistance, which forced the Oba to seek help from magicians in other regions. The magicians advised the Bini army to wear special red garments that would neutralize Ogiugo's war charms. When Ogiugo learned of

this strategy, he desperately sought help from the Ubulu people, but they refused, mentioning his betrayal of their oath. In eyes of Bulu, he was the cause of his downfall because they see it as the consequence of his broken vows. After several weeks of battle, Ogiugo was ultimately defeated, and his head was sent to the Oba.

You can continue reading the aftermath [here](#).

## SOURCES

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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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