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Shared cultural heritage between the Oratta (Urata) and Etche people

By Chuka Odike

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"The goddess of the earth," as described by P. A. Talbot, c. 1932. Musée du quai Branly. This may be Ala, the Igbo earth divinity and the man pictured may be an Eze Ala, a head priest of Ala. Ala is represented by trees and shrubs.

Etche and Oratta tribes share several cultural, linguistic, and traditional similarities that is highly indistinguishable, mainly due to their close proximity and intertwined histories of origins.

Today they have evolved to two different tribes despite being of the same stock.

Oratta are made up of sub-tribes, i.e; Owerri, Uratta, Nekede, Umunoha, Ngor, Abala, Obudi, Umuakpo, Obike and Emerienwe.

While the Etche are made of sub-tribes, i.e; Echie (Etche), Omumma and Okpala (Okpuala).

Here are the key similarities between these two tribes based on shared language, architecture, masquerades, culture, town names, deities, trades and agriculture.

Etche and Oratta people speak dialects of the Igbo language that are mutually intelligible. The dialects may differ slightly, but with the same breathed “r” is found. They share almost same significant vocabulary, expressions, and phonetics.

• Both communities use similar Igbo words for everyday communication.

• There are slight variations in pronunciation or accent, but the overall grammar and sentence structures are similar.

Masquerades are an important part of traditional festivals and rituals in both Etche and Oratta. They are often used during celebrations like harvest festivals, rites of passage, and other communal events.

• Ekwu-Eke (Ekpe): A prominent masquerade seen in both communities. It is associated with leadership and initiation rites.

• Okonko: Another shared secret society and masquerade that emphasizes justice and discipline within the community. It is particularly notable in Etche but also present in Oratta areas.

Most towns in Etche and Oratta bear similar naming conventions suffix such as “Eri” and prefix such as “Umu” and “Igbo” and reflecting their shared historical and cultural ties.

•Eberi (Etche) and Mbaeri (Owerri): Both having the Eri suffix, which

attributes them to Eri or Umueri at some ancient time.

•Umuechem (Etche) and Umuoye (Ngor-Okpala): Both have “Umu-” prefixes, which means “children of” in Igbo, a common way to name towns and communities.

•Obibi: Obibi is a town in both Etche and Ngor-Okpala, showing a strong link between the two areas.

The Igbo Earth Mother, Ala in an Mbari house dedicated to her in Ebele, near Owere (Owerri). William Fagg, 28th February 1946. British Museum.

Both Etche and Oratta share common deities, especially those related to land, fertility, and protection. The worship of deities such as Ala (the earth goddess) is central in both cultures, though there may be some localized variations in how these deities are honored.

•Ala (Ani): The earth goddess, who is central to land ownership, fertility, and justice in both Etche and Oratta.

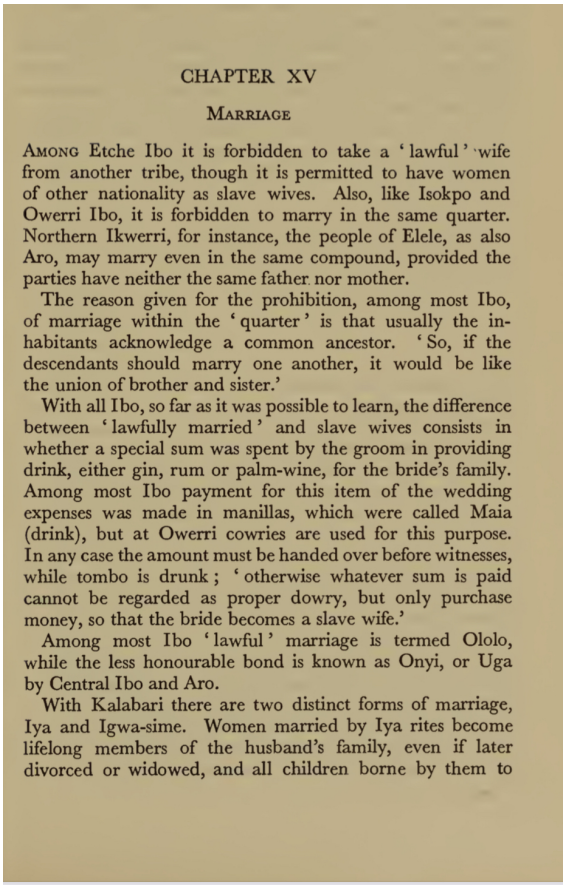
•Amadioha: The god of thunder and justice, revered in both communities, though his presence may be stronger in certain subgroups like Ozuzu, Etche where it’s traditional shrine is situated is also worshiped and revered by Oratta and Igbo people at large.

•Ikenga: A symbol of strength, personal achievement, and masculinity, is important in both Etche and Oratta.

Etche and Oratta share numerous cultural practices, especially in terms of social organization, festivals, and marriage rites.

•Iri ji (New Yam Festival): Both communities celebrate the New Yam Festival, which is a central agricultural and cultural event in Igbo land, signifying thanksgiving for a bountiful harvest.

•Traditional Marriage Rites: Marriage ceremonies in both Etche and Oratta follow the Igbo traditional framework, which involves bride price, family negotiations, and community involvement like the Umunna and Umuada.



CHAPTER XV

MARRIAGE

AMONG Etche Ibo it is forbidden to take a 'lawful' wife from another tribe, though it is permitted to have women of other nationality as slave wives. Also, like Isokpo and Owerri Ibo, it is forbidden to marry in the same quarter. Northern Ikwerri, for instance, the people of Elele, as also Aro, may marry even in the same compound, provided the parties have neither the same father nor mother.

The reason given for the prohibition, among most Ibo, of marriage within the 'quarter' is that usually the inhabitants acknowledge a common ancestor. 'So, if the descendants should marry one another, it would be like the union of brother and sister.'

With all Ibo, so far as it was possible to learn, the difference between 'lawfully married' and slave wives consists in whether a special sum was spent by the groom in providing drink, either gin, rum or palm-wine, for the bride's family. Among most Ibo payment for this item of the wedding expenses was made in manillas, which were called Maia (drink), but at Owerri cowries are used for this purpose. In any case the amount must be handed over before witnesses, while tombo is drunk; 'otherwise whatever sum is paid cannot be regarded as proper dowry, but only purchase money, so that the bride becomes a slave wife.'

Among most Ibo 'lawful' marriage is termed Ololo, while the less honourable bond is known as Onyi, or Uga by Central Ibo and Aro.

With Kalabari there are two distinct forms of marriage, Iya and Igwa-sime. Women married by Iya rites become lifelong members of the husband's family, even if later divorced or widowed, and all children borne by them to

Marriage rights between the Oratta and Etche, Tribes of the Niger Delta. – P.A. Talbot.

Land Ownership Customs: Both groups have similar customs regarding the ownership and inheritance of land, with strong communal ties to the land through their worship of Ala.

"Mbari house, Umowa town, Oratta Ibo [Urata Igbo], just completed, 1933." G. I. Jones. Mbari houses are the outstanding cultural features of the Oratta and Etche proper. These structures, which have the appearance of temples, contain painted mud figures and are set up in honour of the tutelary spirits of the various villages. The building of them is initiated by a priest, after consultation with the elders, and is carried out with communal labour and supplies, the builders remaining apart and being subjected to various taboos until the work is completed. The buildings are not, however, used for worship. Their purpose is said to be the propitiation of a deity or the averting of misfortune, but they are allowed to decay soon after they are finished.

The people of Etche and Oratta derive most of their wealth from the

sale of palm kernels and oil, by selling harvested crops like yam, cocoyam and other crops to the more densely populated neighbouring areas.

Etche and Oratta groups are better yam farmers, Farms are worked by both men and women, growing of yams, cassava and cocoyams are prevalent between the two tribes.

Etche and Oratta share many cultural, linguistic, and traditional similarities, particularly around language, masquerades, deities, and cultural festivals. Their close historical ties and geographical proximity have allowed them to maintain these shared aspects of Igbo culture, even as they may also have unique local differences.

The Ibo and Ibibio Speaking People of South-eastern Nigeria. Darryl Forde and G.I. Jones

Traditions of lgbo Origin · A Study of Pre-Colonial Population Movements in Africa. – J.N. Oriji

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explores ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.

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