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By Kosisochukwu Nzeribe

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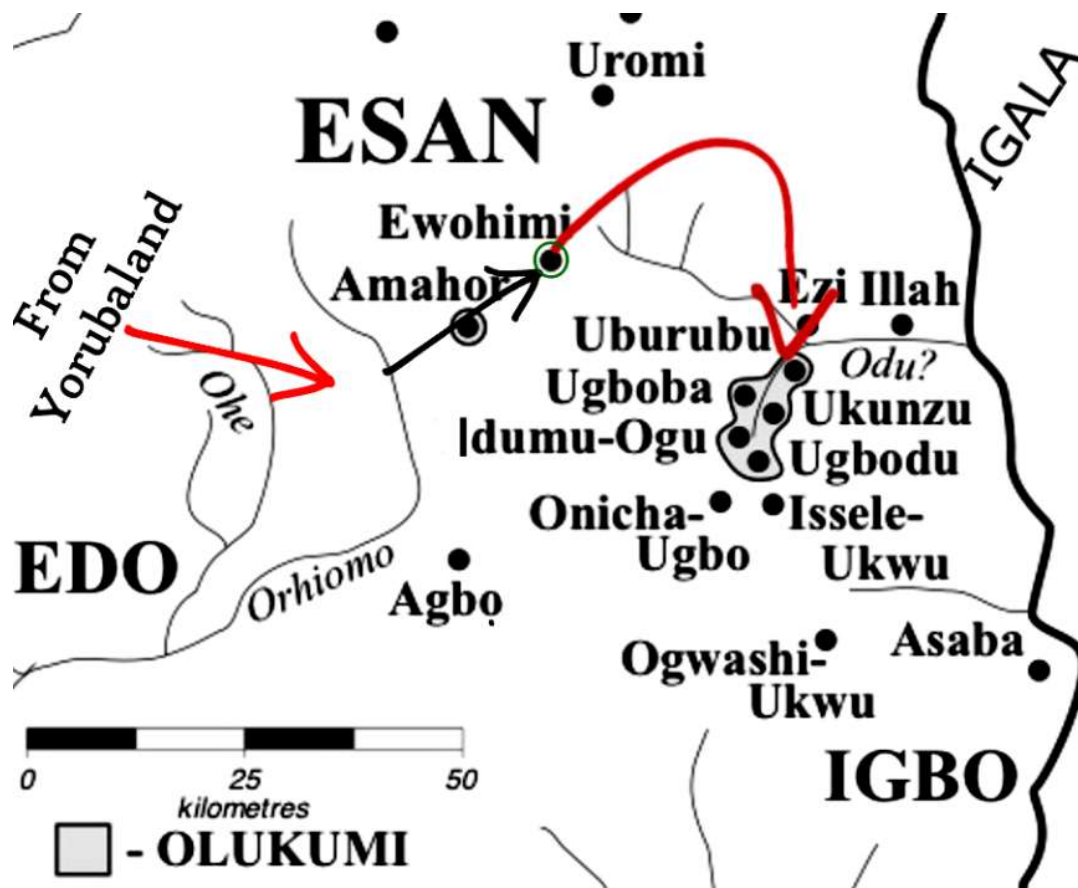
A historical comparison of traditional regalia in the Delta region, showing the strong Yoruba and Itsekiri visual influence. Photo Credit: G. I. Jones Archives / Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

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THE OLUKUNMI CONNECTION

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The Olukunmi migration pattern to their present location in Igboland.

The ethnolinguistic map of Nigeria is a complex mosaic, often defying the rigid boundaries drawn by colonial administrators. Among the most fascinating of these “cultural islands” is the Olukunmi people, a Yoruba-speaking group located primarily within the Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta State. Surrounded by Igbo-speaking neighbors, the Olukunmi represent a “linguistic enclave” that has preserved its heritage for centuries. However, the significance of the Olukunmi extends beyond their immediate geography; they serve as a vital “missing link” in understanding the migratory history and ancestral foundations of the Itsekiri people of the Atlantic coast. This article explores the historical, linguistic, and cultural ties that bind the Olukunmi to the Itsekiri, revealing a shared “commercial and ancestral empire” that predates the modern Nigerian state.

01

The Origins of the Olukunmi: “My Friends” from the East

The term “Olukunmi” is derived from the Yoruba phrase “Olu-re-mi” or “Olukun-mi”, which translates to “my friend” or “my confidant.” This name itself suggests a history of “diplomacy and peaceful coexistence;

- **Migration from the Yoruba Heartland:** Oral traditions suggest that the Olukunmi migrated from the Owo, Akure, or Ile-Ife regions several centuries ago. Unlike many Yoruba groups who moved westward, the Olukunmi moved eastward, eventually settling in the fertile lands of the Anioma region.
- **The Principal Settlements:** The Olukunmi heartland consists of several towns, most notably Ugboodu and Ukpuduma. Despite being surrounded by the Enuani (Igbo) people, they have maintained a dialect of Yoruba that is surprisingly archaic and linguistically related to the Igala and Itsekiri languages.

- The “Buffer” Role: Historically, the Olukunmi acted as a “commercial and cultural buffer” between the Benin Empire to the west and the Igbo-speaking communities to the east, facilitating trade in textiles and agricultural products.

02

The Ancestral Link to the Itsekiri

The relationship between the Olukunmi and Itsekiri is one of the most significant “historical threads” in the Western Niger Delta. While the Itsekiri are often associated with the Benin Royalty (the Olu), their “linguistic and biological foundation” is deeply Yoruba;

- The Migratory Path: Historical accounts suggest that a segment of the proto-Itsekiri population shared the same ancestral origins as the Olukunmi. As the Olukunmi settled in the hinterland, other related groups pushed further south into the “Benin River” and “Warri” regions.
- Linguistic Affinity: Linguists have noted that the Itsekiri language and the Olukunmi dialect share a “cognate relationship.” Both languages are classified under the Yoruboid branch of the Defoid languages. Many words used in Itsekiri traditional rituals and core vocabulary find their “closest relatives” in Olukunmi speech, rather than the standard Oyo Yoruba.
- The Ologbotsere Connection: Some oral traditions among the Itsekiri link certain high-ranking “House” lineages, such as the Ologbotsere (the traditional Prime Minister), to ancestral groups that passed through or originated from the Olukunmi-Owo axis.



Ceremonial regalia in the Western Niger Delta showing the overlap in aesthetic between Itsekiri and Olukunmi traditional elites. Photo Credit: G. I. Jones Archives / Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

03

Cultural Syncretism: Bridging Yoruba and Igbo Identities

Living as an enclave, the Olukunmi have developed a “dual cultural identity” that mirrors the “Itsekiri-Urhobo symbiosis” seen on the coast;

- **Bilingualism and Naming:** Most Olukunmi people are “trilingual,” speaking Olukunmi (Yoruba), Enuani (Igbo), and English/Pidgin. It is common to find an Olukunmi individual with a Yoruba first name and an Igbo surname, or vice versa, symbolizing the “blurred lines” of their ethnic identity.
- **Traditional Rulers:** The Olukunmi maintain a “Yoruba-style

kingship” (the Oloza system) while adopting certain Igbo administrative titles. This “hybrid governance” allowed them to maintain their internal autonomy while integrating into the broader socio-political structure of the Aniocha region.

- **The Textile Legacy:** Like the Itsekiri, who are famous for their “George” clothes and elaborate dressing, the Olukunmi (especially Ugboodu) were historically renowned for their “weaving industry,” producing indigenous fabrics that were traded as far as the Benin palace.

04

The “Commercial Empire” of the Interior

The Olukunmi were not isolated; they were active participants in the “pre-colonial commercial empire” that linked the interior of Nigeria to the Atlantic coast.

- **Trade in Crafts:** The Olukunmi were master artisans. Their pottery and woven goods were sought after in the “waterside markets” of the Itsekiri.
- **The Gateway to Benin:** Because of their linguistic ties to the Yoruba and their proximity to Benin, the Olukunmi served as “intermediaries” for traders moving from the Niger River toward the Benin Empire.
- **Agricultural Contribution:** Similar to the Urhobo’s role in the “Itsekiri-Urhobo symbiosis,” the Olukunmi provided “food security” for the region, trading yams and forest produce for salt and fish brought up from the Itsekiri coast.
- **A historical comparison of traditional regalia in the Delta region, showing the strong Yoruba and Itsekiri visual influence.** Photo Credit: G. I. Jones Archives / Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

Challenges to the “Enclave”: Modernity and Language Loss

In the 21st century, the Olukunmi connection faces significant threats from “globalization and cultural assimilation;

Linguistic Erosion: Because the Olukunmi language is not taught in schools and is spoken by a small population, many of the younger generation are becoming “monolingual in Igbo or English.” This threatens to sever the “linguistic bridge” to their Itsekiri cousins.

The “Minority” Struggle: As a small Yoruba enclave within an Igbo-majority state, the Olukunmi often struggle for “political visibility.” This has led to a renewed effort by Olukunmi cultural associations to “reconnect” with the Ooni of Ife and the Olu of Warri to reaffirm their ancestral heritage.

Research and Preservation: Historians and linguists are increasingly visiting Ugboodu to record the “archaic Yoruba” spoken there, as it contains “clues” to the ancient history of the Yoruba people that have been lost in the more modernized Oyo and Lagos dialects.

The Olukunmi connection is a powerful reminder that “ethnicity is a journey, not a destination.” The existence of this Yoruba-speaking enclave in the heart of the Anioma region provides a vital “historical anchor” for the Itsekiri, proving that their roots are deeply embedded in a broad “Yoruboid expansion” that occurred long before colonial borders were drawn. The Olukunmi are the “silent guardians” of a shared history, a history of “migration, commerce, and friendship” that links the hinterland to the sea. To preserve the Olukunmi heritage is to preserve a crucial chapter of the “commercial and ancestral empire” of the Western Niger Delta, ensuring that the ties of “friendship” (Olukun-mi) remain unbroken.

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