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By Idenze Ezeme

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UTE-OKPU

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Ute-Okpu is one of the major clans of Ika land in Delta State, and Ika is an Igbo subgroup of western Igboland. Its history matters because the clan holds a strong tradition of eastern Igbo migration across the Niger, and both local oral history and older ethnographic records preserve it. The same records also note later contact with Edo-speaking neighbours to the west.

Older colonial accounts often treated any link to Benin as proof of Benin origin. Ute-Okpu is better understood through what the community says about itself, the Igbo character of its language and institutions, and the evidence for migration from the Niger-Anambra region.

01

The Nri Tradition

The main Ute-Okpu tradition traces the clan to Nri, which Ika speakers call Nhi or Ihi (Delta Decides, 2023). In 1936, Marshall recorded that the founders claimed to have left Nri, near present-day Onitsha, after a quarrel with the ruler of Nri. The founder was Ute, who settled in the area of today's Ute-Okpu and had two sons, Okpu and Odogu. Okpu became linked with Ute-Okpu, while Odogu went on to found the Owa settlement at Oyibu.

A later account of Ute-Okpu history names the ancestor as Epum, possibly the father of Okpu I. It places the early Ute settlement in the wider Ute area, before the separate Ute-Ogbeje and Ute-Okpu

communities took shape. It also puts these movements well before the sixteenth century, but such dates belong to oral chronology and are not securely fixed.

The versions should not be forced into one neat genealogy. What they agree on is the Nri connection and the central place of Ute and Okpu in the making of the clan. This fits a wider pattern. Onwuejeogwu argued that during Nri's ascendancy, Nri lineages spread across the Ika-Igbo area, with Ute-Okpu among the western upland points from which people moved deeper into Ika land (Ika Weekly, 2023).

02

From Ute to Ute-Okpu

According to tradition, the early settlers first lived in the wider Ute area before settling more permanently in their present territory. One version says that descendants of the founder went hunting and set up temporary camps. When they came back, the yams they had left behind had sprouted vigorously. The richness of the soil convinced them to stay.

Stories like this carry real weight in Igbo thought, where yam, farmland, settlement and ancestral ownership are closely bound together. Finding fertile land could be the beginning of a new lineage community. Over time, others joined them, some from nearby communities and some from farther west. Ute-Okpu therefore grew into a settlement of several ancestral lineages rather than the offspring of one recent migration.

03

The Eight Villages

Older ethnographic records list eight villages in Ute-Okpu: Ibi-Agware, Owele, Ogbe, Idumu-Eze-Aje, Odah, Alihe, Alumu and Enugu. Together with their idumu (quarters), they form the lineage structure through which the clan developed. Marshall described Ute-Okpu as a clan whose parts traced themselves to a common origin. This follows the usual Ika arrangement, in which clans divide into villages (ogbe), villages into quarters (idumu), and quarters into extended families. It is a familiar Igbo way of organising a community around lineage.

04

Ute-Okpu and the Spread of Nri Influence

Ute-Okpu is important because later communities are linked to it. The best-known case is Owa. Owa tradition names Odogu, a son of the Ute-Okpu ruling lineage, as the founder of Owa-Oyibu, and an older ethnographic account says the same. A recent government environmental assessment records a tradition that Nri migrants first settled at Ute-Okpu and that Odogu later founded the Owa dynasty from there. Ute-Okpu was therefore a source of new settlements, and not just one settlement among many.

05

Ute-Okpu and Amahor

Esan sources also preserve a link between Ute-Okpu and Amahor in Esanland. According to Okojie, a large group of migrants from Ute-Okpu reached Amahor around 1508. They found an earlier settlement at Olokumi and eventually became the dominant population. Okojie names Ewero as a leader of the newcomers and says they brought the protective deity Oza from Ute-Okpu (Okojie, 1960, as cited in Delta Decides, 2023).

This matters because it comes from an Esan source, not only from Ute-Okpu's own tradition. It also shows that people moved both ways between Ika and Esan, leaving communities with intertwined histories across the Delta-Edo boundary. Dating in Okojie's narratives should be handled carefully, since scholars have raised chronological problems with his Esan traditions.

06

Ute-Okpu and Ute-Ogbeje

The two Ute communities remember their relationship differently. Ute-Ogbeje traditions recorded in the colonial period claimed descent from an ancestor called Ogbeje, while Ute-Okpu maintained its separate Nri origin. Marshall saw that the two were evidently connected and suggested that two branches of the Ute population separated during an earlier migration and reached the region at different times.

That reading is safer than the old claim that Ute-Ogbeje was founded by a brother of the Oba of Benin. That story was simply recorded as oral tradition at the time and does not establish the community's real

ethnic origin. Even the colonial ethnographers noticed the contradictions. The evidence points to an ancient relationship between the two Ute communities, and the exact dates and genealogy remain open.

07

Contact with Edo Neighbours

Ute-Okpu sits where Igbo-speaking communities east of the Niger meet Edo-speaking communities to the west. That produced alliances, wars, trade, intermarriage, migration and borrowing. So finding Edo-related names, institutions or traditions in Ute-Okpu does not prove the clan came from Benin.

Older colonial writing often read local traditions through the political weight of the Benin kingdom, and communities with long ties to Benin were sometimes called “Benin colonies.” In Ute-Okpu’s case, the community’s own origin tradition is Nri, and its later dealings with Benin are also remembered. Both can be true without making Benin the source of the clan. One Ika-focused account even suggests that some Ute-Okpu people who did not return home settled in Benin or Yorubaland, carrying the “Benin migration” story with them (Delta Decides, 2023).

08

Claims About Benin Military Service

Some later local writing says Ute-Okpu was allied with Benin and sent warriors on Benin’s campaigns toward the western Yoruba kingdoms in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This should be treated with caution. The specific claim that Ute-Okpu troops fought under Oba

Ewuare or Ozolua needs stronger primary evidence before it can be stated as fact. What can be said is that Ika communities lay within the political and commercial sphere between Benin and the western Niger, and that stories of cooperation with Benin found their way into Ika oral history.

09

Language

Language is one of the strongest arguments for Ute-Okpu's place in the Igbo world. Ika is a dialect of Igbo, spoken in Ika South and Ika North-East Local Government Areas of Delta State and in the Igbanke area of Edo State (Uguru, 2015). The Ute-Okpu variety is quite distinctive and differs noticeably from its neighbours, and one observer notes many filler words and borrowings from Ukwuani, another western Igbo dialect (Delta Decides, 2023). Even so, variation within Ika does not make it any less Igbo.

The clan's personal names, lineage names, institutions and vocabulary also contain a great deal of Igbo material. A name like Eze-Aje is interesting because Eze and Aja are widespread Igbo forms, though a single name should never be treated as final proof of migration. Isichei (1976) had already suggested that the Ika area may once have been inhabited by people of Igbo origin, before Benin's later expansion and influence (Ika Weekly, 2023).

10

Religion and Sacred Institutions

Ute-Okpu preserves indigenous religious traditions that fit the wider Igbo system. Local accounts mention Aja, Olokun, Mkpitime and Ohaunte, though their histories and functions differ between tellers.

Ohaunte is shared with Ute-Ogbeje, and Mkpitime travelled to Amahor, where it took another name (Delta Decides, 2023). This shows that migration carried deities, priesthoods, rituals and sacred objects along with people.

Ute-Okpu and Ute-Ogbeje also share a tradition of protecting the monkey. Oral history says monkeys helped or shielded the ancestors in wartime, so they are not hunted or eaten. Whether taken literally or symbolically, it reflects the community's own religious and environmental outlook.

11

Ute-Okpu in Igbo History

Ute-Okpu's significance reaches well beyond its present boundaries. Its traditions preserve a Nri migration, early settlement in western Igboland, the growth of an Ika-speaking community, contact with Edo neighbours, and later migrations that helped form Owa and parts of Amahor.

The evidence does not support calling Ute-Okpu a Benin foundation, though Benin's influence on the western Niger region should not be denied. The most defensible picture is an Igbo people whose earliest traditions lead back to Nri, and who developed within a connected Ika-Edo frontier. In that light, Ute-Okpu stands among the main communities through which eastern Igbo migration became established west of the Niger, and from which further settlements grew.

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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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