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Nembe:
the City Idea in the Eastern Niger Delta

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The following discussion of the delta city is confined to the four main Ijo metropolitan centres of the Eastern Delta, namely Nembe (Brass), Elem Kalabari (New Calabar), Bonny, and Okrika; and excludes the cities of Odo Itsekiri (Warri) in the Western Delta, and Atakpa (Old Calabar) on the Cross River estuary to the east. The four cities seem to have started from a similar cultural and political base-line, and to have responded to similar historical factors such as the overseas trade in slaves, and later, palm oil, with only slight variations.

A number of attempts have already been made to define the cities in the Niger Delta. Dike (1956) first studied them in the nineteenth century. He considered them proper states and not tribal states, since citizenship in them was based on residence rather than on kinship. Specifically, he named them city-states comparable to the Greek city-states because of the manner in which their political authority radiated from one city to surrounding settlements, and especially to trading posts in the hinterland.

Jones (1963) called the cities "trading states". He saw them as creations of the European trade in slaves and palm oil, and as organised, in the main, for the purposes of carrying on overseas trade. The problems of interest in their internal history were, accordingly, the intergroup rivalries between the 'Houses' (trade corporations organised on a lineage model) to be expected in a society organised for commercial competition.

Horton (1969, p. 50) has paid greater attention to the cultural criteria for citizenship, and especially the fact that even bought slaves could become full citizens by becoming fully acculturated:

"In positive terms, the identity of New Calabar was seen in the possession of a distinct, isolated settlement area; of autonomy under a distinctive body of laws; and of the possession of a distinctive culture. As in the villages, this definition of identity was essentially open in its implications. Any one who could acquire the culture and pull his weight could become a citizen. As the drum-name of the earth of New Calabar puts it: 'If a dog walks on him, he does not spurn the leg; if a goat walks on him, he does not spurn the leg'."

All these views of the Delta city are largely valid, in the aspects of their organisation considered. It is only necessary to sketch in one view that has so far escaped adequate treatment, that is, the religious dimension. Religion, in fact, serves as the ligament holding together the various joints of the social and political structure of each of these Eastern Delta city-states.
The city idea in the Eastern Delta is tied up with three religious cults, namely, Amakiri, Ama-tême-suo, and Amanyanooru. Amakiri, or City Earth, is considered a primal force concerned mainly with fertility and the continuity of the city's population. Refugees to the city swear allegiance on the City Earth, and any act of treachery on their part while enjoying the city's hospitality is punished by Amakiri. Further, the infringement of certain sexual taboos can only be atoned by rituals to Amakiri. Bareness would follow the non-performance of the prescribed rituals.

Ama-tême-suo, or City-Creating Destiny, is conceived of as the soul or spirit of the historical city, and cannot be conceived of apart from the city itself—as Amakiri could, conceivably, remain after a city is destroyed or deserted. Ama-tême-suo determines or embodies the very character of the city: standing guard over its destiny and fate. Because Ama-tême-suo represents the spiritual essence of the city, Ama-tême-suo kule (the drum praise name of Ama-tême-suo) serves the function of a national anthem—a poetic distillation of the ideals, aspirations, and historical experience of the city. Since the oral traditions of these cities did not normally tell of common ancestry for all its members, the idea of Ama-tême-suo enabled the diverse elements to think of the city as a corporate body with a single character and destiny.

Amanyanooru, the city or national god, is the spirit that receives most overt worship and embodied in a shrine and set numbers of festivals and rituals, and taboos observed by all citizens. This is probably because Amanyanooru has an ascertainable or prescribed historical origin parallel to the creation of the state or dynasty. Some Amanyanooru are believed to be the deified spirits of departed ancestors (such as Fenibeso of Okrika); to have assisted the current dynasty in setting up the current State institutions (such as Awomekaso of Elem Kalabari); or to have been brought by an immigrant group (such as Ogidiga of Nembe). Where there are more than one royal line or where there have been changes of dynasty, variant histories of the national gods exist. But they usually agree in assigning a dominant role to the god in affairs of State, and especially in association with their own particular group.

The Amanyanooru of the metropolitan city is conceived as sitting at the head of the pantheon of the entire kingdom. The gods of villages or towns within the kingdom are thought to be related to it in kinship terms as sons, daughters, or wives. Similarly, political alliances with neighbouring cities or states are stated to be the result of friendship in the spirit world between their Amanyanooru.

To Horton's list of the things that determine the identity of a Delta city, then, must be added, the possession of a distinctive group of gods, Amaoru (city gods).

The following reconstruction of the growth of the Delta city of Nembe, therefore, is based on the following three hypothesis:

1. That the city transformed the basic Ijo village political structure to a strength beyond all its neighbours, and, accordingly, became a refugee centre, population centre, and the protector of these neighbours against external attack.

2. That external long distance trade (within the delta and to the hinterland, as well as the trans-Atlantic trade) served as the stimulus for these changes and
also gave the necessary military and economic muscle to the king and the city to achieve these objects.

3. That these gains were consolidated in the religious ideology of superior spiritual guidance; that is, that the Amakiri, Ama-teme-su and Amanyanaoru of the city were more powerful than those of the neighbours.

Before about 1400, there were up to seven independent little settlements scattered around the site of Nembe. The inhabitants of these settlements may have been proto-Ijo since all the oral traditions agree they were Ijo, but cannot say from where they had come. We have most information about three of these early settlements, namely, Olodiama, Oboolu, and Onyoma. The leaders of these communities seem to have been priests, since they are referred to in the songs, riddles, and folklore concerning the period as Olodiama ọrọ, Oboolu ọrọ, and Onyoma ọrọ. And ọrọ is the title of the high priest of the national god of an ethnic group (ike) among the Ijo of the Central and Western Delta. The totem of the Olodiama national god was the tortoise, and of the Oboolu, the royal python (or some other snake).

All these earlier settlements were scattered by wars among them, plagues, and by external attack. Olodiama fought a war against Oboolu in which magic involving their national gods was used. Later a civil war arose at Oboolu, occasioned by the unfair distribution of the soup of meat killed in communal hunting. Olodiama was struck by a small-pox epidemic. The survivors fled eastwards to Ekuleama in the Kalaba area.

Onyoma was apparently undisturbed by the upheavals at Olodiama and Oboolu, but got into scrapes with the neighbouring Kalaba towns of Kula and Bile. A Kula prince engaged to an Onyoma princess was killed. Kula supported by Bile attacked and sacked Onyoma.

These disasters served as the opportunity for regrouping. One of the leaders who had fled Oboolu, Kala-Ekule, returned to the old site and gathered in the survivors from all the surrounding settlements. This was the beginning of the city-state or kingdom of Nembe and Kala-Ekule appears as first on all king lists. Estimates based on these lists give about 1400 for the time of Kala-Ekule.

It would seem that during this early period, the integration involved only the settlements of identical culture over a radius of little more than ten miles. The Nembe settlements of Okpoma, Odioma, Twon, and others to the south were still outside the orbit of the city. The economic activities of the people too were still rudimentary: fishing, hunting, and trading with the neighbouring Kala-ba towns to the east.

New developments followed the arrival of fresh immigrants from the Itsekiri kingdom of Warri during or soon after the reign of Kala-Ekule. Some of the traditions speak of these immigrants as coming from Benin, but even these turn out to be references to Itsekiri traditions of the arrival of their Olu from Benin. The implication is that the migration from Warri to Nembe occurred soon after that from Benin to Warri.

The Itsekiri migrants are generally associated in the oral traditions with the introduction of a new national god to the city. The god is known, generally, as Ogidiga, but also as Ada. It is asserted that Ogidiga was the name or title of the Itsekiri leader, and Ada the name of the magic sword of the war god of the Itsekiri kingdom at Warri brought by the migrants. Since Ogidiga became the priest of the cult at their new home, his name was adopted by its new adherents. It may be noted that Egharevba records Oba Ewuare of Benin as taking the title Ewuare Ogidigan, meaning "Ewuare the Great". The word Ogidigan thus meant a leader or the great one. Further, Egharevba states that the name Ada
was applied at Benin to one of two “swords of authority” introduced to Benin by the second Ogiso ruler, Ere.

Apart from imposing a religious dominance, the Itsekiri are not recorded to have set up their own dynasty. They were, apparently, satisfied with influencing public affairs through control of ritual. No name on the king list, for example, has been generally accepted to refer to an Itsekiri immigrant, and the city has continued to be known in the oral literature as Kala-Ekulema Nembe, i.e. Kala-Ekule’s city, Nembe.

Ogio, the fifth ruler after Kala-Ekule, is, however, believed to have been the founder of a new dynasty from a territory to the north of Nembe. Ogio had originally come as a refugee, but became influential as a medicine-man. He clashed with the Itsekiri priesthood. And either Ogio or his son, Peresuo, organised the rest of the population with assistance from his Mini home area to oust them.

The period of Ogio, of his son Peresuo, and of Peresuo’s sons Obia and Basuo, from about 1600-1700, seems, indeed, to have been one of change. The arrival of Ogio and his Mini followers itself shows that the city was already serving as a refugee centre for a wider area than the original territory of the six or seven nuclear settlements. Second, we hear of Basuo waging war against the Bassan ljó far to the west. This was the group that served as middlemen in trade between the Eastern and Western Delta, between Nembe and Warri. They made salt with Itsekiri pots, and sold a cassava product of the Itsekiri in the Eastern Delta. Basuo’s war may well indicate the full scale entry of the city into the long distance trade of the Niger Delta. This trade in its heydays spread westwards to the Benin river (where the Olodiana ljó sold big canoes), eastwards to Bonny, and northwards to beyond Aboh. Third, the peculiar city-state institution of the House may have had its beginnings in this period at Nembe, since the oldest known House now bears the name of Peresuo. This suggests that local long distance trade was probably as great a stimulus as the Atlantic trade in the formation of the city-state institutions.

This last point is significant because Nembe, being some distance from the sea coast, did not come into direct trade relations with the whitemen before c. 1700 (by current dynastic chronology). By the reign of Basuo’s grandson, Ikata, in the middle of the eighteenth century, Nembe merchants were still dealing with the whitemen at the ports either of Bonny or Elem Kalabarị (New Calabar). Ports in the Brass and Nun rivers became regular marts for the Atlantic trade only from the reign of Kulo (1800-1832).

The gradual increase in the city’s share of the overseas trade was reflected in political and military power. Ikata, although he traded through other ports than his own, was the first to mount cannon on his war canoes. And when he went to war against the Kalabarị town of Bile for acts of piracy against his trade canoes, other Nembe towns such as Òkpọma followed his leadership. But it was in the reign of Kulo at the beginning of the nineteenth century that Nembe became complete master over all the surrounding towns. The first consequence of the overseas trade was the intensification of the exploitation of the hinterland especially after the change to palm oil. Nembe, for example, began to explore markets on the Oguta lakes and other areas in competition with Elem Kalabarị. The demands of the trade and of the inter-state competition then led to institutional changes (like the expansion of the House system, its integrative role and its development into a fighting and commercial organisation).

The most recent example of the Delta city mobilised for action may be seen in the war waged by King Koko against the Niger Company in 1895. Within the city, each House equipped and launched its war canoe with the House head
acting as captain. All the surrounding towns were required to bring in their contingent of war canoes. King Koko himself acted as admiral of the fleet.

The high priest gave his blessing, and the fleet moved out under the protection of Ogidiga and the gods of the city. They fought to secure the sovereignty and economic interests of the city and of its rulers.

REFERENCES


