

GLEAMS OF HISTORY IN EPIE-ATISSA LEISURE GAMES**Chabuovie M. Sorgwe****ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the historical contents of the traditional leisure games in Epie-Atissa in the Niger Delta. While not neglecting the anthropological and sociological dimensions of the games, it pays significant attention to the historical information embedded in the games. The games contain inferences of economic and social activities of the people. They similarly provide clues to migratory historical traditions of the Epie-Atissa people. On the whole, the paper has enhanced the knowledge of the history of Epie-Atissa through its analysis of the contents of the traditional games.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional leisure games of Epie-Atissa constitute an important aspect of the people's social system as applicable to rural societies as noted by Chitamber (1997: 248) According to Sutherland (1961: 99), Social interaction is the "dynamic interplay of forces in which contact between persons and groups takes place". Such contact he further asserts results in a "modification of the attitudes and behaviour of the participants. On the other hand D.F. Mccall (1969: 131) has defined history as "an account of human activities through time in a social environment". In a similar vein, Harold Perkin (1970: 2) says history is the summarized experience of a society". It is against this background that this paper examines the gleams of history in Epie-Atissa traditional leisure games. In discussing this topic it is pertinent to quote C.H.K. Marten as noted by R.C.K. Ensor and others (1990:9).

all knowledge could be contained under the two heads of history and geography. For history is no longer considered to consist only of "past politics", it can be interpreted to include everything that undergoes change.

In other words, the changing traditional leisure games are objects of historical studies.

The study is also undertaking as further exploit in the use of oral sources in the study of history. Indeed, it is a response to the call by Erim O. Erim (2004:35) for “a more imaginative history that” will view the past in a “holistic manner”. As he further noted the present is “illuminated by insights to the past” by drawing from the accumulated experience of the past in a creative innovative manner”. The paper also re-emphasises the place of the inter-cultural diffusion and evolution in time past.

Epie-Atissa, the people under focus according to Sorgwe (2000:2) is located between longitudes 6° 6' north of the Equator. The entire area under study comprises twenty-nine village communities. Generally, the communities are located along two inland Creeks, namely, Epie and Atissa or Ekole. The Epie creek links the area with the Engenni and Kalabariland through the Orashi River. The Atissa (Ekole) Creek takes off from the River Nun and flows south-wards into the Brass estuaries. The area is linked by road to the south-east mainland and the Isoko and Urhobo communities to the west. Both creeks are subject to annual flooding which normally overflows the banks between June and October every year. They are linguistically classified as Delta Edoid. Farming and fishing are the traditional occupation of the people.

THE TRADITIONAL LEISURE GAMES

Available evidence indicates that the people of Epie-Atissa traditional society engaged in both in-door and out-door leisure time games (Sorgwe, 1990). The youths engaged themselves in moonlight games while adults passed the evening leisure time in story-telling or *egberigbam*. Some of these are subsequently studied & analysed to glean from them the historical contents. Among those selected for study and analysis are folk-tale leisure time or *ifie egberigbm*, known as *ogboro me*, a broken home game known as *inobodigi* and rain-wish game.

FOLK-TALE LEISURE TIME GAME

This was a story-telling game in which an adult person narrated folk-tales to youths in a group. At other times the youths themselves tell the stories among themselves one after another. The stories reflected on the world around them touching several subject-matters. Many of the folk-tales were punctuated with melodious songs. As a prologue, the events in Epie-Atissa folk-tales are said to have taken place in a land named *akenmoba*. The folk-tales usually ended with an

epilogue which says “*mi to gba gba tomkiri ya agba ado*”.

FORTUNE-TEST-GAME

This game known to the people as *otitigonigo* had one adult and several children as participants. The adult would repeat certain words while touching the children’s stretched legs. At the end of the repeated words, the child whose legs were touched last was liberated. The whole exercise is repeated till the last person was liberated. The last person who was declared the least fortunate among the children was encouraged to expect a better deal some other time. The repeated words went thus:

*Otiti o Otitigonigo (twice)
Otiti mini abadi segbese
Segbese nii otiti gbe ya aka
Otiti o abanigini deneke niginigi ya ya ya.*

A GAME OF EXPECTATION

This game simply referred to as *Ogboro me* feature an adult and several children. After chanting a song, the adult would ask a child where the father was. The reply was that the father had gone to Ebo from where he was expected to return with yams (*ogboro*), garden eggs and pepper. The song chanted says this:

*Se ogboro me
Se ogboro me
Siyambu wos
Siyambu wos*

A BROKEN HOME GAME

This game simply known as *inobodigi* was an exclusive girl’s game played at sunset after the day’s work or during the moonlight night. In this play, the girls shared themselves up into groups representing village communities. The village communities (that is the groups) remained at different points in a circle to listen to the story of a wounded divorced lady returning to her parents. At each stop she told the story of how she was wounded and sent away by the husband. The village communities would respond by telling her *ugbee* which means “it serves you right”. The story of the broken home was usually preceded by a song sung by the aggrieved lady herself which went thus:

Ino o ino o ino bo digi o ino o (twice)
Yuwa yuwa bo ino o ino o
Talima talima bo ino o ino o
Aziba kalamani bo digi o
Obororobo sawa ba odu o

THE RAIN-WISH PLAY

This play took the form of a song by which children request rain to fall elsewhere. It was usually their wish that the rain should not fall on Epie-Atissa land. The rain they wished should rather fall at *Igbara* and *Kolo*

The song goes thus:

Owii ta mi gbara o
Owii ta mi kolo o

OLOLO GAME

The *ololo* game was done in separate groups of boys and girls. In each case the participants would line up in pairs and pass through the midst of the people. The last in the queue would be trapped to name his or her spouse. They continued that way until everyone had mentioned the spouse. Before trapping the last person, they continue to sing the song which says

Ololo o ololo gbain gbain gbain
Ololo mute mute bo
Ololo gbain gbain gbain

EPIE-ATISSA TIME ORIGIN

One of the historical inferences from the leisure time games is the question of the time of origin of the people. One feature of all the songs in the games is the use of archaic language. The songs contain extinct words that are no longer remembered by the present generation. The words of the song in the first game discussed above are completely unintelligible to the present generation of Epie-Atissa. In the second game only the phrase *ogboro me* which means my *ogboro* (yam) is understood by the present generation. The third game has only *ino* which means wound as the only word intelligible to the present generation of Epie-Atissa.

One derived reason for this high level of unintelligibility for the language of the songs in the leisure games is that the language had existed for a long time. The unintelligibility is therefore due to changes through the years. This derivation is corroborated by the lexicostatistical data from the works of Kay Williamson (1968: 124-130) and B.O. Elugbe (1979: 82-84). The data from these works indicate that Epie-Atissa and other linguistic groups within the Delta-Edoid sub-family

separated from a proto Edoid some two thousand years ago. This means that Epie language spoken by the Epie-Atissa people has existed for over two thousand years.

The linguistic evidence taken together with genealogical information, archaeological and settlement history in Sorgwe (1990: 80-82) dates the Epie-Atissa settlement in the present territory to the 15th century. Thus the linguistic indications in the leisure game songs are useful data for the establishment of the time of origin of the Epie-Atissa people. Although the exact date is yet to be unraveled the linguistic evidence shows that the people are of ancient origin.

TRADITIONS OF ORIGIN AND MIGRATION INFERENCES

Another gleam of history from the traditional leisure games are the inferences bothering on the people's traditions of origin and migration. These are found in the folk-tale told by the people, the broken home and the rain-wish games. Each of the three games listed serves to corroborate or confirm the traditions origin and migration of the people. There are useful clues to the people's migratory routes.

The folk-tales, as earlier noted, usually began with the prologue that the events in the story took place in *akenmoba*. The term *akenmoba* means either "A real Oba's town" or "A Young Oba's town". The term *oba* is a well-known traditional title among the Edo and Yoruba people. The expression therefore suggests that the people of Epie-Atissa had knowledge of the title *oba* as used among the Edo and Yoruba people. This view is supported by Alagoa (1964: 48) when he says that the Nembe people refer to Benin as *Oba-ama* which means Oba's town. The expression *akenmoba* therefore links the folk-tale to the Epie-Atissa traditions of origin from Benin as recorded by Sorgwe (1985:) Sorgwe (2000) also records that Yenizuepie, Amarata and Akenpai traditions of origin point to Benin as their ancestral home. The epilogue, *mi to gba gba tomkiri agba ado* provides a similar clue in that *Ado* as observed by Alagoa (1972:30), is a term widely used to denote Benin among the Niger Delta people.

Gba and *tomkiri* are Ijo terms. The former means to tell or say something in Izon language spoken in the Central Niger Delta. The latter means world in the Eastern Niger Delta languages of Kalabari, Okrika and Ibani (Bonny). The indication here is that there must have been Ijo elements among the Epie-Atissa settlers in the distant past. The epilogue of the folk-tale indeed confirms

the observation by Alagoa (1972: 179) that “various groups came to coalesce into the Epie-Atissa *ibe*.”

The song by the aggrieved lady in the broken home leisure game has similar clues to the foregoing paragraph. The term *ino* in the song means wound in Izon and Nembe. The phrase *bo digi* in the song is a Nembe expression meaning “come and see”. The word *Aziba* means God in Ogbia. The presence of these two words and a phrase in different languages is an indication that the original setters were of mixed ethnic nationalities. Again the fact that the rest of the song is not understood by the present Epie-Atissa generation suggests that the Epie language has evolved from an earlier form. In other words, it is an indication of a cultural disjunction resulting from generation gap. The fact of generation gap is strengthened by Akenfa and Agudama-Epie traditions in Sorgwe (1985:26) which tell the story of an epidemic that almost wiped the entire settlement of Ogborimiri. Akenpai has a similar tradition of a death toll which almost wiped off an entire generation.

The rain-wish game is also significant in that *Igbara*. (Gbarain) and *Kolo* (Ogbia) were next door-neighbours of the Epie-Atissa people. The children wish was always to send the rain to the two neighbouring communities. It is interesting to note that the rain was never sent to Engenniland, another close neighbour of the Epie-Atissa people. The plausible reason for the children’s action was the understanding that the Engenni people were of the same ethnic stock with the Epie-Atissa people. The fact of this close ethnic identity is strengthened by Alagoa (1972:178) when he names Engenni as the parent of the Epie-Atissa people. The common ethnic stock is also confirmed by B.O. Elugbe (1979:82)

ECONOMIC HISTORICAL INFERENCES

The Epie-Atissa like other Niger Delta people as noted by Ama-Ogbari (2009:11-30) were engaged in different economic activities for survival. As inland creek dwellers, they engaged in both farming and fishing activities. They also participated in the palm-oil trade in colonial times as can be seen in Sorgwe (1978:36)

The game of expectation or *Ogboro me* provides clues to economic activities of the people. The expected father was to return with yam (*Dioscora rotundata*) known in Epie language as *Ogboro*. Investigation reveals that this species of yam was usually brought from Omoku in Ogbia

land through the Orashi River. Others traveled farther to Ndoni and Aboh for better purchases.

The Epie-Atissa land was not very suitable for the production of the *Dioscorea rotundata* species. The people found it easier to cultivate the water yam (*Dioscorea alata*). The other yam species cultivated by the Epie-Atissa people was the three-leaved yam (*Dioscorea dumetorum*) In the circumstance, the Epie-Atissa people depended on the upper Orashi River markets.

The *Ogboro-me* traditional leisure time game names the place where the yam would be obtained an Ebo. Ebo has been identified as Aboh far up in the Niger. The Epie-Atissa by the same trade route had contact with Oguta, Ossomari, Asaba and Onitsha. The traditional leisure game corroborates Alagoa (1971:293) that the delta was not isolated. There is evidence of “long distance trade across the delta and into the hinterland”.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that ethnographic sources are useful to the study of traditional societies. They provide data for effective analysis of the social dynamics that helped to shape the society. They are similarly significant to a proper knowledge of the people’s cultural features vis-à-vis the historical development. This is what this paper has done for the Epie-Atissa society.

We note from the paper that the migratory tradition of the people are embedded in the cultural practices in the form of leisure games. The significance of this study also lies in the fact that the social milieu in which the cultural features thrived is in fact fading away. In another dimension the study is useful in helping to cement the social ties of the neighbouring communities. It therefore means that the leisure time games were instruments of social cohesion in Epie-Atissa society. The study is also a model for understanding inter-personal and inter-group relations in a traditional setting. On the other hand, it can be an asset to the prospective rural development strategies advocated by Martin O. Ijere (1992:11-12). In the same way, the knowledge is an asset to peaceful negotiation in rural setting in line with the concept of dialogue propounded by Miller (2003:25).

The paper is indeed an attempt to discover the fabrics of Epie-Atissa through its cultural practices. It is a worthwhile cultural exploration providing valuable insight into the nature of the Epie-Atissa traditional society. It is the author’s desire that the paper should inspire more research interest in this aspect of the society. The ethnographic data made available by such

studies could be combined with archaeological artifacts and oral sources to provide better comprehensive knowledge of the people than it is at present.

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