

## **RELIGION AND SOCIO-POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN ETCHE, RIVERS STATE, IN TIME PERSPECTIVE**

**Godwin Aturuchi Eche PhD**

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies

Ignatius Ajuru University of Education

Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt

Rivers State, South-South, Nigeria

[godwineche1@gmail.com](mailto:godwineche1@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

*Any society without rules guiding the conduct of its members stands the risk of becoming a hobbessian society, with everyone acting and behaving as it pleases him or her. For rules to be obeyed in any given society there are often mercenaries put in place to check and balance the conduct and day to day activities of that society. Five administrative structures were identified and highlighted in this work, using the qualitative and descriptive methods of data collection and analysis. In arriving at our conclusion, the sociological approach was adopted and our finding reveals that religion played an important role in the selection and endorsement of those vested with socio-political authority in Etche and this has existed for a very long time and has remained highly revered among the people until this present time. This has helped in the maintenance of law and order in the society with the established structures playing the roles assigned each of them for the good of society. In all these, the role of religion cannot be wished away. In the final analysis, this work recommended that since these structures have brought about social integration and orderliness in Etche ethnic nationality, it should be borrowed by other ethnic groups in Rivers State especially in these days of restiveness in our society.*

### **Introduction**

This work sets out to discuss the religio-political and social institutions in Etche in time perspective. Within the scope of this work, the geographical entity on the political map of Rivers State of Nigeria known as Etche which comprises of two Local Government areas of Etche and Omuma will be discussed.

Etche is made up of six traditional clans which to some extent are autonomous with their political structures. These include: Okehi, Igbo Agwuru Asa, Ulakwo/Umuselem, Mba, Ozuzu, and Omuma. Upon creation of Omuma Local Government area out of Etche in 1996, Omuma clan was subsequently divided into three for administrative convenience. These are Eberi/Obiohia, Umuogba/Umuajiloke, and Ofeh/Ohim/Oyoro clans.

"Etcheland is bounded in the East by Abia and Imo States, in the West and South by Ikwerre and Obio/Akpor local government areas, and in the North-East by Oyigbo local government area" (Achebe: 2011). As part of Rivers State, Etche is regarded as a component part of the oil rich Niger Delta region of South-South of Nigeria, with oil locations littered in many communities in Etche.

As in many parts of the Niger Delta, before the advent or coming of Christianity, the people of Etche were religious, practicing their religion and worshipping their deities who they believe worked for their good at all times and made manifest in every aspect of their life. This religiosity dictated their political and social life and has continued to do so in time perspective.

This could be why Amaele (2000) posits that:

Religion qua religion needs no apologetics to establish the fact of its existence and that it has been a concomitant of almost every sphere of human activity from time immemorial is not debatable. It did not come as a result of Western interference but could be said to be the way of life for the people. God is believed to be everywhere at every time, yet His abode is up in the sky. This is why when one is accused falsely of an offence or act, he or she raises up his or her hands to the sky saying, 'you who dwell in the sky, see my hands, they are clean, prove my innocence'. God (*Chineke*) among the Etche people is conceived as being too majestic to be approached directly hence He is worshipped through a medium. The Supreme Being, *Chineke* (the god that creates) is recognized as the source of everything that exists here on earth. This recognition makes the people to give their children names that portray His almighty and goodness such as *Chibuzor*, *Chinwendu*, *Chiamaka*, *Chidinma*, *Chinaemezu*, *Chukwudi*, *Chikanka*, *Iheanyichukwu* etc (p. 21-23)

In Etche the administrative (political) and social setup could be likened to the ladder with five (5) rungs with each performing specific roles in ensuring that there is order throughout the ethnic group. The crux of this paper is the social and political institutions in Etche, and how it has metamorphosed to its present state.

### **Pre-Colonial Period**

The people of Etche had always lived together in peace and harmony ever, before the period preceding the pre-colonial and Nigerian civil war era. They

carried out social and political activities, settling disputes amicably among themselves. As Nwodim (2011) noted, “every society is organized to accommodate the activities and efforts of such activities of the people living in it” (p. 25).

This agrees with Adebayo (1981) who said that:

Every society consists of different groups of people woven together in a complicated process to achieve the goals and objectives of such society and when two or more people are involved in activities, there is the need to organize their actions and activities towards achieving the common goal (p. 1)

It is imperative to point out that prior to the colonization of Etcheland the people organized themselves in a simple and harmonious manner. They had laws that regulated their lives and day to day activities.

According to Nzimiro (1996)

in pre-colonial period, leaders emerged within the system prevalent in those societies. Most outstanding were the kings and nobles of these African Kingdoms. They possessed charismatic influence based on meta-physical axioms anchored on around the myth of their divinity. These rulers found in many of these pre-colonial empires exercised judicial, legislative and executive powers. They controlled the wealth of their feudalities through taxes, levies and forced labour that to sustain these empires (p. 1).

Traditional Etche administration can be best described and referred to as gerontocracy or republicanism. It was based on ruler ship by the Council of Elders from drawn from village locally referred to as '*Ofor*' holders or '*Ndiche*'. The *Ofor* or *Ndiche* title is bestowed on the eldest member of each family in the village. This group of elders from various recognized families in the village or community forms the Council of Elders. It is the Council of Elders that form the jury in the village. When any matter arises in the community, it is brought before the Council of Elders who would adjudicate over the issue. The Council of Elders meeting is presided over by the most senior and oldest member of the council. The meetings were usually held at the residence of the eldest person in the council or in the village square, or community hall built for that purpose.

In communities with very strong presence of deities, worshipped and revered by the people, the Council of Elders is presided over by the *Eze Agbara* (Chief Priest) of the community deity. It is imperative to note that system of

administration in the Kingdom was not uniform as there existed different forms of maintenance of law and order in the various communities. When the need arises to enforce laws, the able bodied youths in the community were used to achieve the purpose. However there exists the account of ancient traditional rulers in Etche Kingdom before the coming of the white men in the 1800's.

According to the *Constitution of Etche Supreme Council of Traditional Rulers and Chiefs* cited in Nwodim (2010),

'*Odo*' and '*IgboKulube*' were some great grand sons of the founders of Etche land, who were the first settlers about the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the areas now inhabited by the Igbodo people, while the rest of the founding fathers dispersed to other clans now inhabited by Igbo Agwuru Asa people, Mba, Ndashi, Ozuzu, Okehi, Omuma, Abara, Akpoku, Obite, Ulakwo/Umuselem. Akwa, Obibi, Odagwa among others (p. 3)

Nwodim (2011) further went on to say that during this period, there existed His Highness Nwogu Ogodo, the Ochie of Etche land. He was said to be one of the paramount rulers who brought the first '*Nwadishi*' (Whiteman) into Etche in the late 1880's.

There is also the account about Chief Nwarishi Anele of Ozuzu who was one of the reigned longer than any past and present traditional ruler, as he lived over a century. He was said to have his life lost his life during the British invasion of Etche land in about 1898 (p. 31)

The same is also said to be true of Chief Ashiri, whose ancestors were said to have founded Ndashi town. He later became the first Mbichiri of Mba Clan and first *Onye Ishi Ala* of Ndashi. His uncle Chief Odo grew in prominence to become the first *Ochie* of Etche. Report has it that Chief Odo was captured alive during the British invasion of the Niger Delta hinterland in 1895 and exiled to the French Equatorial Island (Panya). Same fate was also suffered by Chief Aka-Ogu of Umuoye. He controlled part of Mba clan where his supremacy was unchallenged.

He attempted to halt the British invasion party into his territory but was overwhelmed by the same in the 1890's (Nwodim: 2011).

Chief Nwagwu Onyeche 1, was the first *Mbichiri* of Igbo Agwuru Asa Clan. He was said to be the earliest Etche traditional ruler that established and controlled commerce with the British Colonial authorities. Chief Nwachi 1 of Obibi also reigned supreme in Obibi of Okehi Clan. He was one of the prominent Chiefs of the Odo dynasty, and he reigned up to the 1940's.

Other Chiefs that were prominent in Etche land during the pre-colonial period were Chief Isiguzo Ubia Oduehie, *Mbichiri* of Mbai (1860 – 1940), who had a standing army under the command of Prince Agu Eligwe; Chief Obinna Nworgu, *Mbichiri* of Ulakwo/Umuoselem clan who ruled over the large territory stretching from Okehi, Akwukabi, Obibi to Igboh.

He was one of the Chiefs of Etche who had contact with the British at the Oguochie River in Afara in the late 1880's; Chief Okere Nwaogba 1 of Okehi (1970 – 1973) was one of the wealthiest traditional rulers in Etche Kingdom during this time. Chief Sampson Amadi JP, *Mbichiri* of Ozuzu clan was a prominent Etche Chief who regularly attended the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly on observer status. He died in 1996 at a very old age. Chief Nwagwushi of Ndashi was a Judge at the Umuaturu Native Authority Court. He contributed immensely to the development of Etche customary laws and ensured orderly government presence in the land. He reigned from 1928 – 1950.

However the most prominent Etche Chief of the pre-colonial / pre-war era was Chief Jonas Elemuwa Nwuke, a native of Okomoko. He was a successful politician highly respected in Etche land and beyond. He became clan head of Igboh Agwuru Asa clan and from there contested the traditional headship of Etche with Chief Achonwa, which he won. The Eastern Region thereafter accorded him recognition as Second Class ruler and clan Chief of Etche, representing Ikwerre/Etche County Council as Minister and member of the Eastern Region House of Chiefs in the first Republic. By this, he became and remained the rallying point of Etche people until his death in 1970 (Nwodim: 2011)

### **Post-Civil War Period**

The end of the Nigerian civil war in 1970 saw the emergence of the modern system of traditional administration seen in Etche in contemporary times. This underscores the importance of traditional administration in any African traditional society.

On 16<sup>th</sup> September 1970, the Rivers State Chieftaincy Inquiry Committee was inaugurated, with Professor E. J. Alagoa as Chairman and an Etche son Dr. Eze O. A. Nwala as Secretary. Memoranda were called for by this committee from Rivers State people. The Etche people were not left out in submitting memoranda. The Etche people under the leadership of Eze the clan head of Etche submitted a memorandum to the committee giving the history and overview of the chieftaincy institution in Etche, as well as the structure. The structure showed that the traditional head of the people of Etche is the *Onye Ishi Ala, Ochie of Etcheland*. Ever since then, the Ochie of Etcheland stool has been recognized as a 1<sup>st</sup> Class traditional stool and the administrative structure totally reviewed.

The Etche administrative structure could be likened to a ladder with five rungs. In this paper, we shall discuss each beginning from the lowest which is the family level of administration.

A family is defined in the New Webster Dictionary (1993) as “a group of persons closely related, a group consisting of individuals descending from a common ancestry; a household” (p. 145). Among each of these groups of people closely related who share a common ancestry, the eldest male referred to and addressed as *Okwara nna* (extended family head) is usually at the helm of affairs in all things concerning the family. He is charged with the responsibility of maintaining law and order, directing affairs and representing the family in the village or community level.

No decision affecting the family can be taken without his knowledge and eventual approval. He is seen and regarded as the human representative of the ancestors and as such highly respected and revered by all members of the extended family. It is his responsibility to summon members of his family at the beginning of the year (which marks the commencement of the farming season) to ensure that the farmland is evenly allotted to qualified members of the family. He sits to adjudicate over matters of misunderstanding among members of his extended family. Whenever any member of the family wants to undertake any venture such as getting married, building a house, travelling to a distant place etc, the approval and blessing of the family head is sort. He represents his family at the village and community level and is referred to as the *Oji-Ofor* of his family who makes sacrifices to the ancestors at the *Ndichie* (the family shrine) on behalf of his family.

The second rung of the administrative setup in Etcheland is the village level. The village council is made up of the *Okwara nna* who are also the *Oji-Ofor* of their respective families. The head of this council is the *Onye Ishi Nkpo* who in most cases is the eldest person from the ruling family or his representative (when indisposed).

As head of the Council of Elders, he directs the spiritual affairs of the village, and in conjunction with the youth leader, also directs the socio-political affairs of the village. He leads other members of the Council of Elders and holds the *Mpi-Okpo* (a great animal horn), and the *Ofor-na-Ogu* as a symbol of authority to dispense justice, peace and other in the village or community.

He also is the Land Priest of the village, who makes sacrifices and pours libation to the divinities and ancestors on behalf of the village. He could summon the villagers at will, when issue affecting the entire village arises. The *Onye-Ishi-Nkpo* (head of all his colleagues) represents the village in the Town Council. In recent times, they have assumed the title of 'Village Chief'.

The third rung in the administrative ladder is the town level. At the helm of affairs at this level is the *Ochimba* (Town Council). In his council are the *Nde-Ishi-Nkpo* who are referred to in Etche as *Nde Mgbaragida* (assistant / cabinet members). The *Ochimba* derives his power from the villages and in most cases he is usually the Chief representing the first settlers of the town. However, in recent times the appointment of *Ochimba* seems to be politicized with either the *Onye Ishi Agwuru* appointing his loyalist, or the Chiefs electing from among themselves who they desire to lead them.

Amaele (2000) writing on the political organization in Etche, said:

In the ancient Etche, villages having common ancestral deity called 'Ala' are grouped as one town. Each town has *Onye-Ishi-Ala* (town head). In Etche custom, *Onye-Ishi-Ala* is the Chief Priest of the 'Ala' deity. And the mode of incumbency to the stool is hereditary (p. 45)

This is still the practice in Etcheland in the contemporary times. Christianity is yet to influence this aspect of Etche socio-political institution. The *Ochimba* stool in some communities in Etche is separated from the *Onye-Ishi-Ala* stool. A good example is in Akwukabi Etche, where the people of Umuode village are *nde nwe ishi ala* Akwukabi where part of their traditional right is to present the eldest

man in their *Umunna* as the *Onye-Ishi-Ala* who is the Chief Priest of the town. He is not the *Mbichiri*. The mbichiri is usually selected from among the Chiefs.

The *Onye-Ishi-Ala* presides during community traditional functions such as 'new yam festivals', 'wrestling festivals', 'marriage rite', 'birth rite', 'puberty rite' and 'initiation into adulthood'; and in the administration of oaths when the need arises. It is expected that the Ochimba consults with the *Onye-Ishi-Ala* on matters of utmost traditional importance which concerns the people. Failure to do so could attract severe consequences upon the land. The Ochimba however represents his town in the clan and governmental levels.

The fourth rung in the ladder of political organizational setup in Etche is that of the clan level. A clan as referred to in Etche is a group of towns and people who speak same dialect and share certain religious and social norms, institutions and traditions. Every clan in Etche land is made up of not less than five towns which could be regarded as autonomous communities with their respective 'Ochimba's' who are members of the 'Mbichiri' or '*Onye Ishi Agwuru*' in Council (clan head).

The *Mbichiri* is the clan head who is elected by the Chiefs and elders of the various communities that make up the clan from among the Ochimba's. The Mbichiri or Onye Ishi Agwuru stool is a Rivers State government recognized 2<sup>nd</sup> class or 3<sup>rd</sup> class traditional ruler as the case may be. He is therefore expected to be a man of integrity, well educated and highly exposed to be able to represent his clan, not only in the *Onye Ishi Ala Etche, Ochie of Etche* in Council, but also in the Rivers State Council of Traditional Rulers where he sits as a Council member.

He is the rallying point for every indigene of the clan, and with the assistance of the Ochimba's, he administers the clan, making sure that peace and order is maintained. Issues affecting the clan are always brought before him and his decision on any matter in the clan is always final. Our findings things are reveal that things are changing in recent times with the powers of the *Onye Ishi Agwuru* being threatened.

A stubborn power hungry Ochimba who may have what it takes in terms of money and connections may decide not to be loyal to the authority of his boss the *Onye Ishi Agwuru* and make the reign of the *Onye Ishi Agwuru* miserable or could even dethrone him at extreme instances. Political authority in Etche

derives from the villages and towns that make up the clan, and so the authority and respect that the *Onye Ishi Agwuru* enjoys is by the grace of the people.

The fifth and last socio-political administrative setup in Etche is the *Onye Ishi Ala, Ochie* of Etcheland. The chieftaincy institution in the entire Etche consists of the Etche Divisional Council of Traditional Ruler and Chiefs, as well as the Etche Supreme Council of Traditional Rulers, with the *Onye Ishi Etche, Ochie* of Etcheland as President/Chairman. All government *recognized traditional rulers such as Nde Ishi Agwuru (clan heads), all special titled chiefs such as Ogbuga, Egwurugwu, Onwa, Igolo, Umara* as well as other personal chieftaincy titles recognized by the *Ochie* of Etche land constitute membership of the *Onye Ishi Etche/Ochie* of Etche in Council. The traditional stool of *Ochie* of Etche is a government recognized 1<sup>st</sup> class stool in Rivers State the Etche Supreme Council of Traditional Rulers and Chiefs is the highest appellant authority for any grade of Etche people. Some of their function includes: appointment of members into the Traditional Courts of Arbitration, approval of all traditional ceremonies, utters or substitutes Etche customs while ensuring its uniformity where necessary among other.

The *Onye Ishi Etche, Ochie* of Etche Kingdom is the traditional head of all Etche people all over the world. He is crowned at Igbodo, under the '*Oba tree*' at '*Eketa Igbodo*'. He in turn is expected to crown other chiefs on the same ancestral place at Igbodo. The *Ochie* of Etche is addressed as His Royal Majesty, *Ochie* (Eze), the *Onye Ishi Etche, Ochie* of Etcheland. This stool is not hereditary. For anyone to ascend the *Ochie* throne, he would have been either an *Onye Ishi Agwuru*, or a senior titled Chief. He must be democratically elected by members of the Etche Divisional Council of Chiefs and Elders, and as well endorsed by the Etche Supreme Council of Traditional Rulers and Chiefs. At the demise of the *Ochie*, the most senior member of the Council automatically assumes the responsibility of the Regent who acts as the *Ochie*, until a new *Ochie* emerges.

## **Conclusion**

The religio-political and social life of any group of people form major aspects or part of the cultural life of such people. The Etche people as a culturally active ethnic nation have a well structured political system from the times of old which has remained sacrosanct to them till date. This has brought about control and orderliness experienced in most communities of Etche. The five structures which this work prefers to refer to as the 'five rungs of administrative structure' have been responsible for this orderliness. It would therefore be suggested that the

Nigerian nation should adopt this administrative pattern for the sustainability of its social and political stability.

The administrative structure through which the political and social institutions in Etche have been sustained has its foundation laid on the family which forms the nucleus of the society hence very effective since no ethnic group can exist without the family. This work therefore brings to the fore the fact that Etche ethnic nationality has such wonderful and well organized administrative and social structure that is worthy of emulation by other ethnic groups in Nigeria and beyond.

### **References**

- Achebe, C. (1958) *Things fall apart*. London: Heinemann Publishers
- Achebe, P. E. (2011) "History and origin of the people of Etche ethnic nationality" In O. Nwodim (Ed), *Studies in Etche: A journal of contemporary studies in Etche*. (p. 1-21) Port Harcourt: Girraffe Konsult.
- Adebayo, A. (1981), *Principles and practices of public administration in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum.
- Amaele, P. E. (2000), *The socio-political history of Etche*. Port Harcourt: Osai.
- Nwodim, O. (2011), "Pre-colonial traditional administration in Etche kingdom". In O. Nwodim (Ed) *Studies in Etche: A journal of contemporary studies in Etche*. (p. 24-36), Port Harcourt: Girraffe Kunsult.
- Nwodim, O. (2011), "Post-colonial administration in Etche kingdom". In O. Nwodim (Ed), *Studies in Etche: A journal of contemporary studies in Etche*. (p. 38-51), Port Harcourt: Girraffe Kunsult.
- Nwogu, I. (2004), *History of Etche*. Owerri: Springfield
- Nzimiro, I. (2005), *The rise and fall of African leaders*. Oguta: Zim Pan-African
- The Constitution of Etche Divisional Council of traditional rulers and chiefs*
- The New Lexicon Webster Dictionary of the English Language*. (Deluxe encyclopedia edition) (1989), USA: Lexicon Publications.