

THE SALT LAKE, THE HEALTH AND ECONOMY OF OKPOSI, 1967-1970

Samuel Ogonna Paul

Department of History and International Studies, McPherson University, Seriki Sotayo

&

Malang Fanneh

History Unit, School of Arts and Sciences, University of The Gambia

Abstract

During the Nigerian Civil War, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, in a bid to prosecute the war, executed a military blockade against the eastern region of Nigeria. This led to untold hunger, malnutrition and deaths, especially of young children, which some have referred to as an orchestrated genocidal attack against the people of eastern Nigeria. Although Okposi, located in eastern Nigeria, is one of the major salt-producing communities in Ebonyi state was not a major theatre of war and so did not suffer considerable damage; however, the rich deposit of salt in the area was crucial to their survival. They were able to sustain their economy and health from the sale and consumption of the salt, respectively. This paper interrogates the place of the salt lake (Mmahi Okposi) in the survival of the Okposi people during the Nigerian Civil War. This work employs both primary and secondary sources to interrogate the central role of the salt resource to the survival and sustenance of the Okposi people and beyond during the Nigerian Civil War. The paper argues that the consumption of salt from the Mmahi salt lake was a major factor in the lack of kwashiorkor plague among children in the town.

Keywords: Okposi, Uburu, Mmahi, Kwashiokor, Nigerian Civil War.

Introduction

This work intends to interrogate the survival of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) by the Okposi people as a result of their being blessed with the Mmahi salt lake. The Nigerian civil war was one singular event that threatened the very foundation of the Nigerian state, as the Biafran state threatened to secede from the union. The Federal Military Government, in a bid to hold the nation as one, went all out against the secessionist state in a war which lasted for about 30 months. The blockade of Eastern Nigeria by the Nigerian government led to untold hunger, malnutrition and economic hardship among the Igbo in the east of the Niger, especially. However, the Okposi people had the salt lake, which was both a source of minerals and trade survived the horrors of the war without suffering much significant impact. That being said, this work shall be divided into the following parts: introduction, the Okposi people; origin and migration, the salt lake; discovery and expansion, the Nigerian Civil War, the salt lake and the Nigerian Civil War and then conclusion. The foregoing forms the introductory part of this work.

Geography and Peoples and Migration of Okposi

Okposi is a town located in Ohaozara Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. It is geographically located in the southwest of the state. Okposi is nestled in a valley surrounded by rolling hills and mountains, which is characteristic of the landscape of Ebonyi State. It is bounded on the north by Onicha Igboeze town, on the South by Amasiri people, on the East by Ugwulangwu town and on the West by Uburu town (Ngwuta, 2024). The region experiences a tropical savanna climate with two distinct seasons, the wet season from April to October and the dry season from November to March. The vegetation of Okposi is predominantly tropical savanna, with a mixture of grasslands, shrubs and trees. It has fertile soil that supports agriculture, with yams, cassava, and maize being the most widely cultivated crops in the town.

There seems to be very few variations of accounts about the origin of Okposi; however, as it concerns the arrival of the different villages, there is much diversity of opinions. There seems to be a consensus among various scholars and accounts that the founding father of Okposi is one Enechi Akuma. Enechi Akuma is believed to have been born at Agala (Agana in Okposi dialect) in the present Benue State.

Ekechi Akuma was believed by oral tradition to have committed murder in Agala. As a result of fear of being apprehended and killed for the murder, he fled Agala, leaving his family behind. He arrived at a town known as Okpuru Nwajagbo Okpuitumo village in Ikwo Nnoyo, Ebonyi State.

Waddington's account states the father of the Okposi clan, one Enechi Akuma, was born. In Agala, a place vaguely described as lying in the north of Abakaliki division, and there, he grew to manhood (Obaji, 2024). A brother of Enechi's father quarreled with a man, fought him, killed him and fled the town (Agala) to escape retribution. The story continues to describe how Enechi, who fled Agala with his family, separated from them and, after wandering through Abakaliki grassland, arrived in Okpuitumo Ikwo. There, feeling safe from pursuit, he decided to settle (Obaji, 2024).

This account is more reliable than an alternate account that suggests that Enechi's arrival in Ikwo was in connection with a push by the Jukun people. This is not factual because the Jukun push could not have affected only a single family or individual (Enechi Ekuma family) in Agala. Whether he left alone or with his family, the fact is that all the accounts are consistent with the fact that there was a flight from Agala to Ikwo by Enechi Akuma. To support the Agala thesis, words suggestive of Idoma language are still being found today in Okposi dialect. These include: *Uno-agana, Nweze-agana, Agada, Owu, Eke-Ekpa, Agba and Abakpa*. Also Okposi's proverbial attachment to yam farming can probably be accounted for by the following statement: "The importance of this crop in exchange transactions is reflected in the Idoma word for market, *Olihi*, which literally means 'that which has yams.'"

Why Enechi Ekuma chose Ikwo for a place of refuge is worth considering? Legend has it that he; Enechi Ekuma and the founder of Ikwo were children of the same mother but different fathers. Although this is not mentioned in an updated work by O.O. Nweke's "A Short History of Ikwo People," the fact that Ikwo came from the same Agala is a welcome coincidence.

Enechi got married to an Ikwo woman and raised a family that eventually grew into a hamlet. His people were known for constantly being in disagreement with their host village. This made the Ikwo to contemptuously call them "Ndi Okposia" literally meaning, nullifiers (of decisions). Two accounts conflict here. One says that the situation merely degenerated into a rift. The other account mentions another murder, this time involving a child. What is important is that these "Okposi" people were constrained to start another exodus; this time, they headed westwards.

On arrival at their present site, they settled at a place later known as "Egu Okpuhu Ukpo." From there, the group moved on to Avu where Enechi Akuma lived until he died. Here, another account states that a separate group of settlers were the first to arrive at Amechii village, led by "Ukpo" (mentioned above). The arrival of Enechi Akuma's group sparked a seniority contest between Avu and Amechii villages, which was later decided by a heroic deed in favor of Avu. It was from Avu that the eight clans (ezi na asato) in Okposi were founded by the sons of Enechi Akuma (Obaji, 2009).

Mr. Nwani Ngwuta believes that the Okposi people, ezi na asato migrated from different locations; some came from Uturu, others arrived from Afikpo. He stated that of the clans that make up Okposi Okwu, Amaogudu, Uvueze and Agu na abani people migrated from Ikwo, Amoja and Mba na chukwu migrated from Oshiri, Isiakpu migrated from Umuka, while Oha mmahi people is unknown. Of all the communities in Okposi, Okposi Okwu were last to arrive its present location. When the Okposi Okwu people arrived, they first settled at Eze Uneke Ocha's compound at Avu n'umuiwa. As a warlike people, Uneke Ocha told them that if they could fight the occupants of their present location, they were free to settle. As a result, Okposi Okwu people started a war with Ugwulangwu, Onicha, Mgbom Okposi and Uburu. They conquered and pushed the people inwards before occupying their lands. The war with Uburu people is about the last inter-communal war that Okposi people engaged in around 1955 (Obaji, 2024).

It is sometimes believed that Okposi Okwu was the last to arrive and was shown the present site where they currently live by Enechi Akuma. The people started to settle by clearing a "bad bush" (bush believed to be inhabited by bad spirits) between Avu's earlier inhabitants of Ohaozara and the Nadu people. Nadu people were a warring village and were said to have been a terror to all the surrounding communities and towns. A day came when the combined forces of the surrounding villages accused Nadu of the murder of a child and annihilated its people. The story says that some of the inhabitants surrendered and were integrated into some villages, but their

greatest hero (Ikekeke), rather than surrender, hopped into the swampy ground and was seen no more (Obaji, 2024).

The date of the settlement of Enechi Akuma in Okposi is believed to be between 4000 and 3000 B.C. because an archaeological finding establishes the date of Ukpa village in Afikpo as 3000 B.C. And it is on record that Ukpa was peopled by inhabitants of Okposi. Two accounts that substantiate this claim were given by Waddington and Ottenberg (Obaji, 2024).

Enechi Akuma and his people settled and built a prosperous and commercial town. A market built a few yards from the founder's compound became so popular that it was named Odenigbo (one that resounds in the whole of Igbo land), which name it still retains today. Salt trade attracted various traders from different parts of Igbo land and Ekpoto horse dealers from the north to "Odenigbo Enechi Akuma." As the name implies, Odenigbo (a market that resounds in the whole of Igbo society) shows how famous and widely attended the market was in its glory days. The market was in the same class of fame with Eke Afikpo and Eke Ishiagu. The market was widely attended and was the most popular market in the whole of Okposi. The reputation of the market made people from Benue state bring horses for sale there. From the whole of Igbo society, people came for salt, yam and different articles of trade, including the Abriba people from Cross River, who brought articles for sale at the market. The decline of the market started when a trader quarreled with a customer, leading to conflict and disturbances in the market. People looted the goods and merchandise of traders from other parts of Igbo land. These visitors took their goods and rushed towards the west across the Uburu River (Esu). On reaching Uburu, they were met by some Uburu natives who negotiated and bought those articles from the traders. That place of transaction became a market, and because they hastily sold their items to the Uburu traders while standing, the market was named *Avia Nkwuroto* (a market where they stood and sold). This was how the Uburu market was established. The market soon grew and attracted traders from different parts of the Igbo society. Very specifically, the Arochukwu people began to attend the markets and sell slaves at the market. The collapse of Odenigbo market in Okposi led to the rise of Uburu market.

During the era of the fame of Odenigbo market, people believed in legitimate trade; however, it was when the Arochukwu people settled in some parts of Ohaozara that trade in humans began. Okposi people, who bought slaves, got them from Uburu market; Okposi people never traded in slaves in any Okposi market. Every attempt to resuscitate the Odenigbo market was thwarted by the Aro people, who rather enjoyed the rivalry that developed between Okposi and Uburu because it indeed prospered their trade in humans (Obaji, 2024).

What is unknown about Enechi Akuma, an Agila migrant, is how and why he adopted an Igbo name, or whether it was a mere coincidence or accident. Or it could just be a case of inter-communal cooperation, which of course existed during the period. For instance, there are many people in the Mbebe area of present-day Cross River State who bear Obaji up till today. Perhaps

the cooperation made people honour their friends on the other side by naming their children the local names of those friends. It is also unlikely that he adopted an Igbo name to avoid retribution for the people of Agala. He argued that the friendly economic relations between the Agala people and the Igbo may have influenced the direction of his movement when the crime was committed (Obaji, 2024).

Okposi, as has been stated early on in this work, is made up of *Ezi na asato* (Eight clans). *Ezi na asato* are the various *ezis* (clans) that make up Okposi. After their settlement at Agu Okpuhu, and there was no further movement for settlement immediately, the lands were virgin, and people continued to spread slowly to their present settlements. It should be noted that the exodus or migration from Ikwo was not simultaneous; rather, the people came in different batches and occupied any available space in the location where they have continued to live to date. Historically, the Amechii people would have been the oldest *ezi* in Okposi, but for a strategic twist which made them lose it to Avu n'umu Iwa. The reason they lost their position was that during a war with Ugwulangwu, there was a notorious Ugwulangwu warrior named *Ununu Ube* that terrorized Okposi people. It was unanimously agreed that any of the *ezi* (clan) from where the killer of Ununu Ube emerges would assume the first *ezi* in Okposi. Eventually, the killer came from Avu n'umu Iwa; thenceforth, Avu n'umu Iwa assumed the leadership position in Okposi. This implies that in the event of any sharing in order of seniority in Okposi, Avu n'umu Iwa took precedence over Amechii. The *ezis* are *Avu n'umu Iwa, Amechii, Umunuka, Mgbom n'achara, Umu Akuma, Okposi Okwu, Mmebi Owa na Mmebi Okpa and Amenu n'Amenequ*.

Okposi Okwu was sojourning with Avu n'umu Iwa until the growth and explosion of their populations could not take them together any longer. They had to cross the Ata River. Across the Ata River was occupied by the Nadu people. The Nadu people were strong warriors that proved difficult to be conquered, and so the joint forces of various communities led to their expulsion. Some of them fled to Uburu as Uburu Nadu, others fled to Onicha Igboeze area as Ishiama people in Onicha and Okposi people retained their land where the Okposi Okwu people live till today across the Ata River (Obaji, 2024).

The Okposi Salt Lake: Discovery and Expansion

The Okposi salt lake is located at Ivu-Ezizo village in Okposi Okwu clan. It was believed that the lake was discovered by two hunters. There is a little disagreement about the names of these hunter discoverers, while some believe that their names were known as Ekuma Chita and Uta Anoo (Ngwuta, 2024), others like Chief Okike Obaji believe that their names not known (Obaji, 2024). There is however, a general agreement that one of the hunters was from Okposi Okwu while the other was from Okposi Achara. The latter is fondly called Okorie Okpo Enwa (The praying Okorie because he could make lengthy traditional prayers). These hunters in the course of hunting expedition became thirsty wanted to quench their thirst from a small pond which they saw in the forest, they discovered that the small pond had a salty taste. After consulting with the

oracle, they were told that to preserve and expand the lake, they would have to sacrifice one their children to Enivie whom they believed blessed them with the resource. Okorie Okpo Enwa from Okposi Achara therefore sacrificed his son to ensure that the lake was preserved (Obaji, 2024); Mr. Nwani Ngwuta Eze however, believes that it was his daughter that was sacrificed (Ngwuta, 2024). Be that as it may, a sacrifice was made in order to preserve and expand the lake. After making the sacrifice, the small pond was believed by oral traditions to have expanded to the size it is today. From then on, only women were allowed to fetch and process salt from the salt lake. It is also believed among the people that it was the deity that taught the women how to produce local salt from the salt brine. The Okposi and Uburu salt lakes are the reasons behind Ebonyi State being referred to as the salt of the nation. They built a shrine to the Mmahi deity near the salt lake which is still been venerated by the Okposi Okwu people till date.

At the time of the settlement, in almost all the surrounding communities around Okposi Okwu, there were communal wars. For instance, between Okposi Okwu and Ugwulangwu, Okposi Okwu and Uburu and Okposi Okwu and Onicha. There also internal squabbles among the various Ezis in Okposi, for instance like the Mgbom and Achara people fighting with Okposi Okwu. A good example of this was that in 1948, Chief Okike Obaji recounted that he was already in infant 2 when Okposi Okwu fought with Okposi Achara and Mgbom Okposi. It was during that period that they conquered and occupied Ohabuenyi village in Okposi Okwu. Part of Ohabuneyi village had belonged to Okposi Achara and Mgbom Okposi; however, after the war; the latter were pushed almost beyond Ugwu Ezima. This was the final wars between Okposi and her neighbours till date, the rest of were internal conflicts between the Ezis and also boundary disputes with her neighbours that were litigated in the Court area built in 1911 (Obaji, 2024).

According to Chief Okike Obaji, only women were allowed to fetch from the Mmahi salt lake as they were traditionally not allowed to go to war with the men; rather they engaged in domestic activities and trade. Okposi men were not allowed to waste their time in domestic activities as they were expected to always be battle ready and battle prepared to defend their territorial integrity especially given the fact that they were late arrivers among other peoples of Ohaozara local government area. If men engaged in domestic activities, they would be distracted from being able to hear the Ukoro (the war drum) sound, and any man who was found to delay his response to the war drum, endangered his life. This was why men never engaged in domestic affairs. Also, it should be noted that a man was not meant even to help any woman bring up or bring down the salt cooking pot at the lake. It signified readiness for emergency situations and division of labour between men and women in Okosi Okwu town (Obaji, 2024). This is in agreement with what Adiele Afigbo said with reference to economic activities in the traditional Igbo society when he stated that in the traditional Igbo society, engaging in trade and domestic activities were chiefly feminine affairs, while farming was masculine. Respected men in the traditional Igbo cosmology were big yam farmers (Afigbo, 1981). Again, in some wars, women stayed at the back of the men and gathered and supplied them with stones with which they fought the war (Obaji, 2024). On the reason why only women were allowed to fetch and process the

mmahi salt lake, Nwani Ngwuta stated that traditionally, only women who performed traditional female circumcision were allowed to fetch, and not every female. It signified traditional maturity of the women to fetch and process it (Ngwuta, 2024).

Okposi, the Salt Lake and the Nigerian Civil War

Human history is replete with wars which often have often involved starvation and perhaps the elimination of whole populations. One example of such wars is the Nigerian Civil War, which took place between 1967 and 1970, with Eastern Nigeria, especially the east of the Niger, as the war theatre. It was the declaration of the State of Biafra and refusal to renounce the declared secessionist state that were the immediate factors that led to the hostilities of the war. The war stalled economic, academic, social and religious activities in almost the whole of Igbo land, which was overrun by the federal troops. The Biafran side, having no standing army, resorted chiefly to volunteer soldiers and forceful conscription of young men into the army to execute the war. Young Igbo men either joined the war for the joy of defending their fatherland (Uchendu, 2007) or were forcefully conscripted into the military.

There was very little conscription among the Okposi people during the Nigerian Civil War; most persons in Okposi who joined the Biafran army did so voluntarily. It should be noted that most Okposi people provided war supplies in many ways; they contributed food, money and supplies to the Biafran side. Others were sent to pass to through bushes to Ohafia area where the Biafran troops were to provide intelligence. Most young men joined certain groups like Puff, other militias that could move secretly to where Biafrans were staying. We joined the home army called the army gbayuoku or home brigade. This brigade was charged with ensuring that people did not cook outside their houses at nights because of the enemy fighter planes that constantly flew across and could bombard the areas they saw fire lights. It was also this home brigade that protected the Federal Government College, Okposi from bombardment during the war. This they did through cutting Indian bamboos without pruning them and palm fronds to disguise the place as a forest region. There was almost nil conscription in Okposi, some Okposi people were conscripted in other areas where they lived during the war. The eventual occupation of Federal Government College, Okposi by the federal troops was after war hostilities had ceased (Obaji, 2024).

During the Nigerian civil war, Okposi women were richer than their husbands because they heavily engaged in salt production and sale. Salt became so scarce and expensive that people from different areas of Igbo land visited Odogo to purchase salt. Women took care of their husbands, their children, helped their husbands and children acquire traditional titles, helped their children marry wives, built elaborate huts and houses, sustained their homes, and acquired properties as well. The salt trade also boosted the trade of people who sold wood as fuel for salt production. According to Chief Okike Obaji, he was, in fact, one of the people who started trading in firewood with which the salt water was prepared. Firewood traders went as far as Erei in Cross River state, to Onicha Igboeze, Ugwulangwu and supplied to the people (Obaji, 2024).

Women returning from the market had enough domestic supplies; there was nothing like kwashiorkor among the Okposi because they fed well. As time went on, the Biafran government discovered that the Okposi salt lake had the highest salinity and so came and built a small industry near the lake, and taught the people better ways of production of pure salt by making use of alum at a certain stage of boiling. Salt could be transported to various places. He remembered selling a spoon of salt at 3 shillings at Ohaofia, and the buyers were even asking for more. Refugees who came to Okposi suffered Kwashiorkor, but there were no records of Kwashiorkor among the natives. Both old and young women joined the salt production in Okposi during the Nigerian Civil War. People and traders from other parts of the Igbo society came to Okposi and smuggled out salt so they could sell and also add to their foods (Obaji, 2024).

It should be noted that there were obvious disruptions and alterations of the daily life activities of people during the Nigerian civil war. Hunger, starvation, diseases and malnutrition were widespread from 1968 until the end of hostilities (Uchendu, 2007). Margery Perham noted that there were evidences of not just dead men, women and children, but of children with swollen stomachs and stick-like legs and hands (Perham, 1970). Several organisations engaged in humanitarian services, especially in Eastern Nigeria. For instance, in 1968, some medical teams were assembled by the 'Save the Children Fund' for work in Nigeria to treat severe starvation, which ravaged Eastern Nigeria, especially among old people and the children who suffered from the effects of protein-calorie malnutrition. Many people died as a result of poor sanitation, diseases and malnutrition (Hughes, 1969). The term Kwashiorkor was used in children and adult protein-calorie malnutrition in adults. Grade one patients had hair changes (loss of colour, increase in length and thin texture), anemia, muscle wasting, oedema, skin breakdown; grade two patients had anorexia, diarrhoea and secondary infection, while grade three patients had lethargia, dehydration, peripheral circulatory and collapse (Hughes, 1969).

It should be stated here that before the Nigerian Civil War, only the Okposi Okwu people fetched and processed salt from the Mmahi salt lake; however, during the war, because of its expediency, the lake was opened for people from all parts of Okposi so that they could get the means of survival. Since the war ended in 1970, it has returned to how it used to be before the war, when only the Okposi Okwu people could fetch from the brine (Ngwuta, 2024).

The Nigerian Civil War did not have a considerable impact on the Okposi people, even though the Nigerian troops had their patrol route from Aba Omege through Okposi to the Uburu area. They also made some people carry their loads from Okposi to Aba Omege, while in a boat ferrying them across the Ebonyi River, one of the load bearers jumped into the river, which led to the Nigerian troops opening fire on the rest of the captives. At the time of the Nigerian Civil War, whenever the Nigerian troops visited, there were some organisations known as the Council of Elders, headed by Oyiba Johnson Omoke. This group of men who could speak Hausa acted as intermediaries so as to avert dangers to the people during the war.

Conclusion

This work, *The Salt Lake, the Health and Economy of Okposi, 1967-1970* has examined how the Nigerian Civil War had a great economic and health impact on the whole of the Igbo society especially between 1968 and 1970 when hostilities came to a halt; however, it states that assuming that the whole of the Igbo society was equally impacted was an over-generalisation. The Okposi town did not suffer the same economic and health fate as other parts of Igbo land. These, according to this work, were a result of the revenue that came to the town from the production and the consumption of salt from the Mmahi salt lake. Evidences show that people from all over Igbo society visited Okposi to buy *nnu Okposi*. Again, available evidences show that there were no Okposi children or old persons who suffered kwashiorkor as a result of hunger and starvation caused by the war. The activities continued because Okposi was not a war theatre during the period; people from various parts of Igbo society visited Okposi to participate in the salt trade, which they smuggled into their respective towns for sale and consumption. Okposi, during the war, therefore enjoyed a flourishing economy and health because of the rich natural deposit of salt in the town.

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