OKPEKPE OF NORTH IBIE (NORTHERN EDO) RESISTANCE TO NUPE GHAZI (RAIDS) IN THE 19TH C

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the Nupe incursions into the Northern Edo territories, and their subordination of these territories was not readily and easily achieved. The Nupe-Fulani incursions were met with the prolonged and spirited resistance as demonstrated by the Okpekpe of North Ibie, who succumbed to negotiations of Amana only after a betrayal and a grueling siege. The paper examines Okpekpe’s resistance of the 1860s in some detail, and draws a conclusion as to why Okpekpe negotiated Amana despite the inability of the Nupe to defeat them on the battlefield.

INTRODUCTION

The Nupe incursions into Northern Edo territories and their impact have received scholarly attention from Michael Mason, Hakeem Haruna, and Edward Erhagbe.1 These incursions are viewed only in terms of “the Nupe’s victory over the entire Etsako” as posited by Haruna.2 There does not seem to be any study of resistance to Nupe incursions in the Afenmai area. Despite the existence of archival documentation and oral sources showing that not all


Afenmai people were defeated as recorded by Denton,\(^3\) this aspect of Afenmai history has remained neglected. Thus, this article focuses on the resistance of the Okpekpe community of North Ibie clan to the Nupe depredations. These incursions, particularly under Etsu Masaba, qualify as *ghazi* or raids rather than *jihads* or wars of defense or expansion of the faith, according to Mason’s study, which showed that the Nupe wars in distant lands, including Afenmai, usually degenerated into mere banditry.\(^4\) This article aims to show the nature and character of the resistance of Okpekpe, the factors that made their resistance possible and prolonged, and why they eventually agreed to negotiation despite being undefeated on the battlefield.

The paper is divided into four sections, with the first section describing the Okpekpe community of the North Ibie and relations with their neighbors. The second section looks at Nupe *ghazi* among the Afenmai people. The third section discusses the nature and course of Okpekpe-North-Ibie’s two years of resistance to the Nupe *ghazi* and siege under Etsu Masaba, while the fourth section accounts for Okpekpe-North Ibie’s submission and Nupe administration.

**OKPEKPE-NORTH IBBIE: ORGANIZATION AND RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBORS**

Geographically, Okpekpe community in North Ibie is located in the northern part of present-day Edo state of Nigeria. The North Ibie are bounded in the south by the Avianwu of Etsako Central and Uzairue of Etsako West. To the west are the three Ivie clans and the Okpella people respectively. North Ibie is bordered on the east by the Weppa/Wanno groups, the administrative headquarters of Etsako East, and to the north by Kogi State. Okpekpe itself occupies

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a very hilly granite terrain at latitude 7.2 (7°12’ 0N) and longitude 6.47(6°28’ 0E). There are two main rivers, Obu and Obe, and numerous streams in this area.

MAP OF NIGERIA SHOWING OKPEKPE, THE AFENMAI AND NUPE EMIRATE, 19TH C.  
Courtesy of Osaze Usuanlele, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada.

Okpekpe has good and fertile soil suitable for agricultural production, making the people disposed to small land-hold farming and dependent on rudimentary farm implements such as hoes and cutlasses. Because of the availability of land, the people practiced shifting cultivation. They grew such crops as yams, beans, maize, rice, and kolanut, and took advantage of the wild palm trees that grew in the area for food and other uses. Apart from farming, they also engaged in hunting for game to both enrich their diets and acquire such products as skin and bone for craft and other purposes. With time, hunting became a lucrative venture and conferred some kind of prestige on those who were successful. Anyone who killed a wild buffalo or any other big game animal was celebrated and conscripted immediately as an infantry soldier in the community.

The Okpekpe people speak the Ibie dialect of the Edo language and are part of the general Etsako/Afenmai people formerly known as Kukuruku. In their oral traditions, they trace their origin to migrations from Benin during the oppressive reign of a 14th or 15th century Oba. They first settled at Iyakpi in South Ibie and later left in search of a safer place to settle. In the process of migration from South Ibie, they were led by the son of Ibie, their founder, called Ogogo who together with his people settled at Odivie. As the population grew, there arose problem of land shortages and perhaps insecurity which compelled them to move to their present location.

As they settled in their new location, an administrative system evolved as a natural consequence of the desire of a community to unite under a trusted and reliable person for protection, preservation of their traditional values and customs and the well-being of the community. Although it is difficult to say precisely when the traditional administrative system began in Okpekpe, what emerged was a segmentary system of gerontocracy based on the rule of the eldest surviving man in the community called Agidigbo. This system ensured that mobility to

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the top of the social structure was through the age-grade system. Unlike neighboring communities of Okpella, Weppa/Wanno, and South Uneme, that functioned under a title system, Okpekpe operated a system that conferred socio-political as well as spiritual authority and leadership on the oldest surviving male in the community. The general administration of the community was the responsibility of the council of elders called Enejor presided over by the Agidigbo. The unit of organization was the village under the Agidigbo, who together with other elders formed the village council comprised of five elders namely but not in order of seniority: Agidigbo, Otse, Ojoko, Udi and Alika. Apart from the Agidigbo, other members of the Enejor have different functions. The Otse is deputy to the Agidigbo, the Alika and Ojoko are priests, and the Udi acts as the council’s messenger. In addition to this council of elders, there were age grades and other “social clubs” assisting him in administering the community.

However, it is noteworthy that from the 16th century, most Etsako communities started to sever their vassal relationship with the Benin kingdom and assert their independence. These Etsako communities withdrew their loyalty from Benin by discontinuing the payment of tribute, thereby weakening Benin hegemony in these areas. This was made possible by the succession disputes in the Benin kingdom and its increased engagement with the Yoruba-speaking areas in the 19th century. The disinterest of the Benin kingdom in reasserting hegemony in the area made it vulnerable to the Nupe-Fulani invasions and the subsequent conquest of Etsako, not only North Ivie-Okpekpe but also other polities to the south. Meanwhile, the strategic location of the Nupe during this period placed them at the crossroads of an interconnecting network of trade routes linking the north savanna and the southern rainforest.

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Okpekpe, North Ibie (Northern Edo) Resistance to Nupe Ghazi (Raids) in the 19th C.

**Nupe Ghazis in Afenmai Land**

Towards the middle of the 19th century, the Afenmai territory that included North Ibie and Okpekpe experienced Nupe invasions that led indirectly to the establishment of Nupe influence and domination in parts of the area. The reasons for these incursions are embedded in the social, political, economic, and religious developments among the Nupe during the period that saw them incorporated into the Sokoto Caliphate to which they were obliged to send tribute in slaves.11 Etsu Masaba’s expansionist moves southwards were primarily for the capturing of slaves. The south was regarded as a potential source of slaves since there were few internal or external enemies to contend with.

The Nupe incursion into Etsako can be dated to the 1830s when Masaba was still a fugitive warlord based at Lade south of the Niger. He is known to have raided along the Niger River, even clashing with some of the forces from Aboh, in West Igbo territory.12 These ghazi or raids along the Niger affected the Weppa/Wano of Agenebode on the Niger and brought the Etsako into direct contact with the Nupe. When the Nupe arrived in Kukuruku/Etsako, some villages submitted, some were abandoned by their inhabitants who fled to the top of the neighboring rocky hills, while others were sacked and their populations scattered.13 Having become used to making raids along the Niger valley as a warlord, Masaba was to turn the Edo North area into a source of supply for slaves and tribute paying vassals during his reign as the Etsu Nupe of Bida (1859-1873). He established a war camp, Bida, as his capital and base for his conquests.14 The invasions into Edo North under Masaba were preceded by his movement on

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land through neighboring Okun in Yoruba territory and by water from Bida along the river Niger to Agenebode (Weppa/Wanno) and inland to North Ivie. During Masaba’s reign, nearly 700 new hamlets were said to have been created. In these numbers, Yoruba accounted for 56, Kukuruku/Afenmai 11 (including North Ivie) and Ebira 6.\textsuperscript{15}

The first incursion of the Nupe into North Ibie-Okpekpe cannot be dated from oral traditions. Since Okpekpe-North Ibie is somewhat distant from the Niger, the raids of the 1830s would not have affected Okpekpe. It was during Masaba’s reign at Bida in the 1850s that the Nupe-Fulani ghazis started to penetrate further into the interior. The first raids on Okpekpe took the people by surprise though they had heard of the prior invasions of Weppa/Wano territory. The Nupe-Fualani soon stationed their agents on Weppa/Wanno land, making it an operational base for their movement into the interior of Etsako. North Ivie, being neighbors of Weppa/Wanno, was easily reached and in the first raid, many individuals were captured and taken to Bida as enslaved men and women. The Nupe invading cavalry did not stay in North Ibie, but withdrew, enabling the North Ibie to prepare as news of the raids on other communities spread. The men learned to arm themselves against future surprise attacks, develop warning signals to notify the community of raids, and exploit the refuge that their peculiar environment offered them.

The raids, submission, and subordination of southern neighbors of the Nupe such as the Afenmai-Edo, Bunu, Yagba, Kakanda, Akoko, Owe, and Ebira\textsuperscript{16} were made possible by the area’s political fragmentation. As a result, they were unable to present a united front against their common enemy, the Nupe-Fulani slave raiders. Lack of unity apart, the Nupe-Fulani had a well-organized and


Okpekpe, North Ibie (Northern Edo) Resistance to Nupe Ghazi (Raids) in the 19th C.

equipped army made up of the Etsu’s Nupe bodyguards along with volunteers, slaves, and mercenaries from Yoruba, Hausa and Bornu states who were well trained and experienced soldiers.\textsuperscript{17} The Nupe-Fulani army used weapons such as swords (\textit{utakobi}), spears (\textit{ube}), bows and arrows (\textit{ote}), and guns (\textit{ava}) which they had in large quantity.\textsuperscript{18} In fact, Nupe raiders and invasions were not restricted to North-Ivie. They also reached Auchi, Uzairue, Aviele, Agenebode, Akoko-Edo, and even border communities of the Esan-Edo.\textsuperscript{19} Apart from the use of firearms, Nupe-Fulani soldiers travelled very quickly and mostly on horses (\textit{ikashi}) which the Afenmai people lacked.

One of the strategies and tactics of the Nupe was moving up as close as possible to the communities to be attacked, hide, camp in the bush overnight, and attack in the early hours of the morning. It was usually a surprise attack. Another of their tactics in warfare, according to Nadel, was that “in an open battle, first came the foot soldiers… behind them, a troop of horsemen. Behind this group again another larger detachment of cavalry. The infantry would follow and at the rear are the reserved troops.”\textsuperscript{20} They could also call for reinforcements from home\textsuperscript{21} and subjugated neighbors who became allies and shared in the booty. So menacing were the Nupe-Fulani raids that weaker communities lacking the means to resist, surrendered and became tribute paying vassals. With a large formidable force that was well trained, equipped, experienced, and organized, they were difficult, if not impossible, to defeat. Consequently, they were able to conquer and subjugate most of the communities that they attacked.

In spite of the superior advantage of the Nupe forces, Okpekpe put up a formidable resistance that became legendary in Afenmai history. For one to fully appreciate the nature of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Nadel, \textit{A Black Byzantium}, 109.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Nadel, \textit{A Black Byzantium}, 109
\item \textsuperscript{19} Anthony I. Okoduwa, \textit{Studies in Esan History and Culture}, Vol. 2 (Ekpoma, Ever Best Press, 2005); 162.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Nadel, \textit{A Black Byzantium}, 111.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Nadel, \textit{A Black Byzantium}, 112.
\end{itemize}
Okpekpe resistance, even though they were forced to surrender eventually, it is pertinent to note the strength, force, and policy of Okpekpe. Comparing the description given by Nadel of the Nupe army (formation and arrangement coupled with their policy of no retreat until achievement of their goal), with Okpekpe forces, it is clear that they were unevenly matched. Yet Okpekpe held its ground for longer than expected by the Nupe-Fulani. The little community of Okpekpe-North Ibie with no regular army was able to hold out, resisting for a good number of years without surrendering. Okpekpe was a small community, with fewer than 8245 people in 1952, suggesting it would have been even less populous in 1854. The population of Bida, the capital of the Nupe Emirate, stood at 26,000 in 1952. Bida would have mobilized its troops from outside its populous capital as well. Clearly, the two were not evenly matched.

**North Ibie-Okpekpe Resistance**

Nupe attacks on Okpekpe, North Ibie failed because of a number of strategies and factors that frustrated their efforts, despite their formidable army. The topography of the land made the use of cavalry impossible, as the town was built on top of the hill and the approaching roads were fortified with a line of trenches locally called ‘obe,’ built by one Itamesho. Therefore, they could not effectively put their horses to proper use. Thus, the horses, a major source of Nupe strength in other places, became a serious weakness in Okpekpe, North-Ibie. Tsetse flies in large number in the area further weakened the horses and shortened their lives. Once dismounted, the Nupe soldier(s) had little or no hope of success. Thus, both natural and artificial defenses enabled Okpekpe, North- Ibie to resist the Nupe forces that swept through Afenmai.

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Also, sentries were permanently stationed at strategic locations on hill tops and tree tops—baobab tree tops (obobo) to be specific, especially one famous one called ‘obobo Oyarelemi’ that was later toppled by a rain storm perhaps due to ‘old age.’ From their various hideouts, sentries sent out alarm signals whenever they noticed or saw any danger or impending attack. The signals used by the sentries were ‘Ivie, Vha Gbeooo! Okholi Obha lee ooo!’24 (Ivie, let’s kill, for fight or war has come ooo!), while the village force answered ‘Agbeloooo?’ (What do we kill ooo?). Other signals used included whistle blowing and the throaty, shrill cry of the birds ‘Ukukuku’.25

One of the natural factors aiding Okpekpe, North-Ibie’s defence was its location. Numerous caves abound on the hill tops where people could take refuge. Access to the caves by the enemies was rendered difficult if not impossible by the palm oil and other slippery substances poured over the granite surfaces leading to the caves, leaving only a narrow passage for access by the people of or Okpekpe, North-Ibie to use. The hills also had deep rocky crevices between them; anyone who fell into them hardly survived.26 Through the use of the caves and rendering the granite routes impassable, the Okpekpe North-Ibie were able to forestall Nupe access and made them an easy target that could be repulsed. Actual clashes between the Nupe and the Okpekpe North-Ibie were few as the people were always in their hideouts. This was a sensible strategy since the Okpekpe had neither a standing army nor mercenaries to prosecute the war, but citizen soldiers made up of mostly farmers and hunters who normally retired to their homes and farms as soon as the attack on their settlement was over. However, when the opportunity arose, the Okpekpe North-Ibie lured the Nupe into battle and dealt

24 Interview with Jossy Egwakhide, Musician and Artist in Okpekpe North Ivie, aged 79 years, 23rd March, 2012.
26 Nadel, A Black Byzantium, 110.
them a severe blow. There is a place today within the community of Okpekpe which houses the remains of items recovered from the Nupe as shown in the photograph of this statue below. Rather
Statue (above) marking the site where remains of the Nupe weapons are buried in Okpekpe.

Rather than keeping these items of war as artifacts which would have helped more in the study and understanding of traditional African war weaponry, the Okpekpe people buried them in the ground.
and erected a statue at the site, thereby depriving later generations of such understanding. Today that particular place and location has become an annual pilgrimage site/shrine where the community makes a mock farm as a sign the new farming season should commence, that the land is safe for people to farm in the coming year.

The weapons of North Ibie in the war were mainly poisonous spears and arrows, clubs, knives, including charms and perhaps the few guns they had. They also made use of such unconventional weapons as stinging bees that they could unleash on unsuspecting enemies. It was with these weapons and strategies that the small community of Okpekpe put up a spirited resistance that was to last for two years in the late 1850s before giving in to the demands of the Nupe raiders who had laid a siege. However, Okpekpe’s decision to negotiate would not have happened if not for the treachery of neighboring communities. For instance, Omogbai of Uzairue allied with the Nupe to fight North Ibie-Okpekpe. Omogbai kept the Nupe supplied with men, weapons and food throughout the duration of the siege laid on Okpekpe. In spite of this treachery, Okpekpe continued to hold its ground. Seeing the tenacity of Okpekpe resistance, Okpella came to a late realization that the Nupe-Fulani would next turn their attention to them, possibly to raid for supplies. It was perhaps this realization induced fear that forced the Okpella community to come to the aid of North Ibie-Okpekpe. Okpella and North Ibie-Okpekpe are in the same strategic geographical position, both sharing boundaries with the Ebira. They are like brothers; when one is hurt the other feels the pain too. However, Okpella’s coming to the aid of North Ibie-Okpekpe cannot be said to have been born out of love. Rather, it was an attempt to forestall calamity. If and when North Ibie-Okpekpe

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27 Interviews with Pa Maliki Enegbuma, the Agidigbo of Okpekpe (eldest man in Okpekpe) aged over 100 years, 20th March 2012, and Pa. Emmanuel Saliu Jekpe, retired teacher, Okpekpe, aged 80 years, 15th January 2012.

fell, Okpella would not be safe. Thus, they decided to meet the Nupe at the battle ground in Okpekpe, North-Ibie instead of allowing the assailant’s entry into Okpella.

Be that as it may, this singular act by the Okpella in Okpekpe led to Okpella’s coming face-to-face with the Nupe army. The Nupe in response launched a reprisal attack against Okpella for rendering assistance to Okpekpe. It was perhaps the fear of Nupe reprisals that prevented most Afenmai communities from daring to assist or help their neighbors, or form an alliance against the Nupe. Although some meager help came from other North Ibie groups, it was not enough and it came only after the Nupe had laid siege to Okpekpe, North-Ibie, especially on their farm land.

According to interviews with Okpeka elders\(^\text{29}\) and archival sources, the people of Okpeka North-Ibie were not defeated in battle by the Nupe. Rather it was the Nupe siege on the villages and their farmland combined with their betrayal that starved them into considering negotiations. At the end of the negotiations, Okpeka like their Ebira neighbors agreed to pay tribute in slaves in return for being left in peace.\(^\text{30}\) Moreover, because of the effectiveness of Okpeka’s resistance, some communities--especially ones from Uzairue--fled to North Ibie for refuge when they heard that the Nupe were advancing on their lands.\(^\text{31}\)

It could be asserted that Nupe invasion of Okpeka only achieved its goal after paying a significant price themselves, since they were neither able to enter Okpeka community nor defeat them on the battlefield. It was the combination of incessant raids and the siege that compelled them to surrender. Each attack worsened the suffering of the people while the siege that prevented

\(^{29}\) Interviews with HRH Peter Abalumhe. Osigbemeh, the Owenweko of Okpeka, Traditional ruler and Clan Head of Okpeka-North Ivie, aged 70 years, 26\(^{\text{th}}\) April 2012; Pa Maliki Enegbuma, ; and Emmanuel Saliu Jekpe a retired teacher, aged 80 years on 15\(^{\text{th}}\) Jan. 2012.

\(^{30}\) According to oral information, the peace agreement was reached between 1856/1857. Interviews with HRH Peter Abalumhe. Osigbemeh, 26\(^{\text{th}}\) April 2012; Pa Maliki Enegbuma, 20\(^{\text{th}}\) March 2012; and Emmanuel Saliu Jekpe, 15\(^{\text{th}}\) Jan., 2012.

Okpekpe’s farming cut off supplies to the community. Life in the caves or other places of hiding became unbearable since it was not possible to farm the granite rock terrain of the hilltops to produce food. Their stored food ran out within two years, and without access to farmland, famine ensued, disrupting the economic and social life of the community. Most affected were the aged who could no longer be cared for properly. Given this terrible situation, the Okpekpe elders agreed to work with neighboring communities to find a common solution.

General fear and insecurity with regard to lives and property resulting from the Nupe-Fulani raids led many Etsako communities to start seeking solutions that would restore peace to the area. As J.W. Jewell noted, “had the various communities combined, there is little doubt that the Nupe would ever have overrun them.” However, lack of cohesion and unity of purpose led to their conquest. During their meetings, intra- and inter-clan disunity manifested itself, as communities disagreed on how an agreement should be reached. Some communities like Okpekpe opted for continued resistance, while others supported the option of paying tribute. However, once neighboring communities such as Auchi and Uzairue had agreed to tribute payment, it became impossible for Okpekpe to resist the imperialist the Nupe and their loyal Etsako vassals. The capitulation of their neighbors added to the siege-induced famine that forced Okpekpe to agree to pay tribute in slaves in return for peace.

This agreement brought an end to the direct Nupe raids on Okpekpe as it became a community paying tribute to Bida. Each community was assessed and told how many slaves were to be paid annually, based on its size. Both male and female slaves were accepted by the Nupe. The terms of peace or amana favored the Nupe more than the Afenmai people. And

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34 Mason, “Population density and slave raiding,” 54.
according to Michael Mason, once the amana had been accepted and the amount of tribute payment agreed upon, the question of administration was simply answered.35

**Okpekpe Submission to Nupe Administration**

The practice of the Nupe in the areas they conquered was to station their own agents there. Some communities such as Uzairue, Auchi, Aviele, Anegbette, Weppa/Wanno – Agenebode, and Ekperi had agents whom the natives called azeni, or as they were called in Yorubaland ajele.36 Perhaps because of the nature of Okpekpe resistance coupled with their refusal to have any Nupe agents in their midst, agents were not stationed in Okpekpe. Rather, the Azeni stationed at Agenebode was delegated to collect the slave tribute from Okpekpe.

It is said that at the initial stage, the community taxed itself of slaves by using their members of their own kindred (Ede),37 since each kindred was asked to provide a fixed number of slaves. They were then sent to the azeni in Agenebode for onward dispatch to Bida.38 However, as the community did not want to deplete its own population, they tried completing the required number by capturing people from neighboring communities. Okpekpe thus developed and established a slave raiding group known an agiebi, its leader called ika.39 The captives from this group’s raids formed the bulk of those who were sent to Agenebode for onward delivery to the Nupe at Bida.40

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38 Interview with Emmanuel Salihu Jekpe, 15th Jan. 2012
40 Interview with Godwin Irosowe, Retired Headmaster, aged 68 years, 22nd March 2012.
It is important to note that these agents (azenı) took advantage of the opportunity of the high price commanded by slaves\textsuperscript{41} at that period to increase the number of slaves paid as tribute by various communities, with the extra slaves kept perhaps by the azenı for their private profit.\textsuperscript{42} This was the situation until the British (with the forces of the Royal Niger Company) conquered Bida in 1897. This brought to an end the Nupe hegemony in the south, especially in Afenmai-North Ivie and set free many enslaved individuals such as Imagbejor and Imalla Yida who returned home from Bida.\textsuperscript{43}

**Conclusion**

The Nupe incursions into the Northern Edo areas were ghazi or raids which turned the area into hunting grounds for slaves and tribute collection outposts. The Nupe ghazi activities were largely successful because they had a well-armed, organized, and motivated army compared with their southern neighbors who were not unified and poorly organized militarily. In spite of the advantages that enabled the Nupe to subdue and subjugate most communities in Afenmai, the Okpekpe of North Ibie stood out for its long resistance, ultimately forcing the Nupe to lay a two year siege with the support of Uzairue. Okpekpe of North-Ibie only negotiated and accepted amana when it was realized that all other polities in Afenmai had surrendered and accepted Nupe terms and conditions, precluding any further assistance to Okpekpe. Their continued resistance seemed futile in the prevailing circumstance and as a result, Okpekpe North-Ibie accepted amana and payment of tribute to an azenı, a collecting agent in Agenebode.

\textsuperscript{42} Interview with Godwin Irosowe, 22\textsuperscript{nd} March 2012.
\textsuperscript{43} Interview with Emmanuel Saliu Jekpe, 15\textsuperscript{th} Jan. 2012.
It is therefore concluded that the Nupe incursions into the area did not result in the conquest of all Etsako people, even though it resulted in their paying tribute in slaves to the Nupe-Fulani rulers of Bida. There was fierce resistance among some of the Etsako, best represented by the Okpekpe, North Ibie who were never defeated in battle but forced by hunger into negotiation of Amana.

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