

Mein-Ibe: A Critical Reflection on Traditions of Origin¹

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Abstract: This paper attempts to reflect on the existing traditions of origin on the Ijaw ethnic nationality from the *Mein-ibe* perspective. Tradition of origin is synonymous with African history due to peculiar nature of her existence and the end to which it served the society. It had the idea of change, development and rich inter-group relations. Traditions of origin like the computer, was used to store information about the total way of life of the people. It also had passwords that were used to secure the files such as parables, proverbs, songs, *kile*, and other oral genres from external intrusion. Practitioners and other specialists helped to ensure the continuity of the practice of history in the society. The coming of Western and Arabic idea of history, formatted and changed the landscape of how Ijaw past was interpreted to the detriment of the mindset and worldview of the people. This piece advocates that, for the historian to fully understand or decipher the meanings to African past, a great deal of empathy, patience and zeal is needed to enable one get the true meanings of these events.

Keywords: MEIN, IBE, TRADITIONS, ORIGIN, IZON, NIGERIA.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The idea and practice of history as we have today, was crafted and developed in the West, Europe to be precise. Expectedly, the yardstick or measurement for interpreting past events is seen to be set from the originating environment of modern Historical scholarship. For History to make sense, it must have either been written down or follow the explanations of logic in the European clime. The idea of African History, especially south of the Sahara, which does not have close characteristic similarity with Europe, is solely on oral traditions in its purest form and this is a challenge to historians with Western intellectual influence.

Traditions of origin in the African sense, which had been downgraded as a source of oral literature by most European scholars, had being treated as worthy historical documents that deserves proper scrutiny and attention by African historians and researchers. Thus, when historical research attempts to go back into the most remote past to investigate the origins of people, oral tradition is called in to fill in the vacuum left unaccounted for by other sources.

The above does not imply that, western scholars do not rely on oral traditions for the engagement of their past. Rather, they have been able over time, to comprehend and utilize the required skills to decode information stored in their oral sources. While they have being able to understand and interpret their oral traditions, they cannot claim to be able to do so for that of sub-Saharan Africa especially the Ijaw ethnic nationality in the Niger Delta due to the obvious distinction between the idea and practice of history in both climes. Thus, historical explanations that are sensible in one clime, might not be in another. This has led to the imposition of interpretative values on Ijaw oral traditions which has being carried forward by even African Historians albeit, unintentionally.

The focus of this paper is to interrogate the existing accounts on the traditions of origin of the Ijaw ethnic nationality from the *Mein* sub-group perspective with an attempt to have broader understanding of the undisclosed meanings of such accounts. It is also to serve as an orientation about the Ijaw ethnic nationality the Niger Delta as even most members of the academia seem not to have a good comprehension between the Ijaw and other ethnic groups especially, the *Igbo*. The justification for choosing the *Mein* subgroup is due to the fact that, it is unarguably the largest *ibe* in the Ijaw ethnic nationality with its ancestral headquarters at *Ogobiri* in Bayelsa state and descendants widely dispersed to Delta and Rivers states respectively (Eweke, 2011:1)

¹ The original idea of this paper was presented at the Postgraduate Seminar, Department of History, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria on July 5, 2010. The current version was developed by both authors, who are involved in the teaching of the the course, 'Ijaw and her Neighbours' and 'Niger Delta History' at their institution since 2017.

II. ORAL TRADITIONS: A CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The importance of oral traditions in the writing of African history cannot be overemphasized. To be explicit, oral traditions and African history are obverse side of the same coin or better still, synonymous to each other. It was not only because Africa especially south of the Sahara had no Western oriented writing culture before the coming of Europeans that made oral traditions a reputable source of African history but also because majority of the literature about Africa before the 1950s was majorly about European activities in Africa written by Europeans and not by Africans about Africa.

Thus, there was a lopsided view of African activities as events in Africa were only seen from the European perspective. This generated a lot of prejudice, stereotypes and other non-factual thoughts about Africans that ultimately led to erroneous and biased interpretation of the African personality and his past. It was essentially as a result of the above that spurred the pioneering of oral sources in the reconstruction of African history by Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike in his research and successful defense of his Ph.D thesis titled "Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885" at the University of London in 1940 (Falola, 2000:378).

Dike's insistence on the use of oral testimonies and oral traditions to reflect the African side of their narrative, opened the floodgate of later historians such as J.F. Ade Ajayi, S.O. Biobaku, E.J. Alagoa, A.E. Afigbo, Obaro Ikime and a host of others who depended largely on them for the reconstruction of Nigerian History. There are basically two forms of oral sources which are oral tradition and oral history. While the former is seen as oral testimonies concerning the past that are reported accounts for which the informants and raconteurs were not themselves participants, eye-witnesses or contemporaries of the events recorded, the later is concerned with oral testimonies concerning the past told by the participants in the events, or by persons who were eye-witnesses to them or belonged to the generation or period in which the events took place. The informants in this case, do not report information passed to them but assume the posture of first-hand reporters or interpreters of the events (Alagoa, 2006).

Oral tradition is by far the most widely used and scientifically developed by Nigerian Historians. It holds waters amongst them that, just as western historians have gone to great to record historical facts, in the immutable form of written word, so have many non-Western literate peoples carefully sought to preserve certain of their own historical traditions by other means (Philips, 1978:21).

According to Sorgwe, Oral traditions can be defined as oral testimonies concerning the past which a community transmits formally through the generations because of their historical significance (Sorgwe, 1998:27-8). In this regard, oral traditions helps to transmit messages from the past to the present to enable us understand the peculiarities of that time and this transmission is done by words of mouth.

For Alagoa, oral tradition can be referred to as recited history of events passed down by the word of mouth from one generation to another (Alagoa, 1986). These events are usually about their ancestors and have the comprehension of time and space. In other words, the events must have taken place at a particular time and place.

In Vansina's view, oral tradition is history in its own right and remains a source material for the use of the modern historian. He posits that the transmitters of the oral information themselves were historians in their respective communities with the requisite skills and know-how to interpret the accounts handed down to them (Vansina, 1985). To emphasize this, he stated thus;

It follows that oral traditions are not just a source about the past, but a historiology (one dare not write historiography) of the past, an account of how people have interpreted it. As such oral tradition is not only a raw source. It is a hypothesis, similar to the historian's own interpretation of the past (Vansina, 1985:196).

What is being noted here is the peculiar nature of oral traditions which should be interpreted within the context and worldview of the originating environment to accurately deduce the intended meanings and not those implied by external standards. This has not being the situation with the coming of Islamic and Western Historiography to Nigeria. Instead, these orientations about the idea and practice of History especially the latter, is aided by the prestige of the western dominance of the world in its efforts to establish itself as the universal standard. In other words, any interpretation that does not suit their yardstick of rationality is simply termed "barbaric" or modified to suit their view. The recently Islamic acclaimed "jihad" against the West manifesting as terrorism, could also be seen in the light of the resistance of imposition of standards including historical interpretation by the latter on all parts of the world. While violence is not being justified by this piece, it only exposes the misdirection of the anger by elements in a certain cultural area against the universalization of perspectives by another, a situation historical scholars of African descent had fought intellectually since the colonial period.

III. THE FORMS OF ORAL TRADITIONS AND AFRICAN HISTORY

There have been identified various forms which oral traditions could take. In other words, it has various files for storing oral historical documents. Oral traditions can be distinguished among four broad forms which include myth, legend, song and popular history (Philips, 1978:21). Although it is recognized the reality that oral traditions have its limitations, it can be useful for the western trained historian who has identified with them. Thus, a great deal of patience is and a significant degree of empathy are required as fundamental assets to enable the historian tap profitably from the great well of living data that still remains.

In another vein, folksongs, folktales, riddles, proverbs and pithy-sayings are various headings of preserving oral traditions. Sorgwe (1998), like other scholars have acknowledged the weaknesses in oral traditions which include memory problems, addition of fresh inaccurate information, omission of favourable events as well as exaggeration, telescoping and lack of exact dates in most cases. However, African Historians still believes more in this source of history. The reason for African scholars doing so, is evident in Sorgwe's comment below;

They (Oral traditions) are authentic sources because the contents are jealously guarded and preserved by the people through institutionalized methods (Sorgwe, 1998:27).

Alagoa (2007) sees oral tradition as a broad category of cultural phenomena which comes into being without benefit of writing through oral expressions in societies without writing, where all communications are carried out orally. These utterances are referred to as oral literature that includes genres such as legends, myth, poetry of various types (Alagoa, 2007:10). From the above description on the composition of oral traditions, it is explicit that, it is an inextricable part of the lives of African peoples. They wake and sleep oral traditions, they eat, breath, work, fall ill and treat themselves with oral traditions. It is the foundation of their lives and their corporate living is oral tradition making their existence synonymous with it.

Their worldview, culture and future are predicated on oral traditions. There was nothing done in an African setting without the proper use of proverbs, folktales, folksongs, poetry, legend, amongst others to either justify or disqualify human actions. These are the instruments of socialization in the society which aids the individual to fit into the idea person required to function in that environment. *Ogbo*² are important structures in this process that serves as archives to oral traditions which are used in their stages of initiation, training and regular deliberations towards decision making. Some *ogbo* include the associations according to gender reflected in *Ere-ogbo* and, *Asia-pesi*³, socio-cultural groups such as *Sekiapu* and *Ekine* in *Nembe* as well as those formed on occupational basis.

Giving credence to the above views for example, Jones (1963) encapsulated the reliability of oral sources, a strict canon of historical methodology applied in its collection, processing, and interpretation of data. The surest is by obtaining the variants (files) that is, combining it with other sources or forms. With these complexes of arrangements guided, its authenticity can rarely be contested. Thus, he observed that, its fixed text goes with sanction against flaws; it is more absolute than written texts (Jones, 1963:2). Therefore, in oral civilizations of sub-saharan Africa, it is the medium of preserving the past as there were no revised versions or editions. As a result, free texts widely collected through the narration of informants, had various perspectives that helped in checking the disjointed narratives, distortions, and exaggerations that result from memory lapses. In doing so, oral historians are obliged to render details of the event through the inductive approach, which is, most useful for the direct establishment of oral historical facts (Topolski, 1976:460).

Vansina views oral tradition as esoterism (or esoteric) which manifested as clan, family or group history. Oral data are stored by the special group and transmitted by few individuals trained by the institution or group. The group controls access to such information for accurate transmission of these files from one generation to another through laid down principle or procedure including drumming, singing, chanting, etc transmitted by words of mouth by specialists in the group. These are fixed texts of a privileged few controlled by sanctions such as penalty and public opinion.

Interestingly, when esoteric tradition is grounded in the people's culture, it becomes cultural evidence. This science of ethnology studies the cultural evidence of the people's past, which is the cultural history or sometimes called ethno-history (Vansina, 1965:8). For example, the *sekiapu* or *ekine* masquerade dance association of the Ijaw societies of *Nembe*, *Okrika*, *Kalabari* and *Bonny* etc is tied to esotericism as individual drummers or singers receives specialized training on the traditions of the Ijaw on its transmission by drum-lore and lyrics. This specialized characteristics of *Sekiapu* and *ekine* initiates, is its ability to preserve the uncommon traditions of the Ijaw people in its ethnological form. This makes the oral historical source (data) a rigid kernel to crack (Eferebo, 2013:101).

² *ogbo* refers to a group or association in an Ijaw society.

³ *ere* means woman, *asia-pesi*- youth group. For detailed information on *ogbo* such as *Sekiapu* and *Ekine*, see Jones, G. I. (1963), *Trading States of the Oil Rivers*, London.

African history has to do with the study, understanding and explanation of activities about Africans in Africa. It is hereby noted that, there is a divide on whether African history differs essentially from the history of other parts of the world say for example, Asian history. For Smith (1978), history is history, be it African, European, Asian, American, etc. He believes that it shares the same characteristics as well as purpose. Hence, Smith sees the appellation, African History as only a way of trying to explain historical events in African environment from African perspective. He stated thus;

the qualification of the noun 'History' by the adjective 'African', means no more than that the problem of historical explanation is to be discussed in an African setting (Smith, 1978:1).

The thought on the other side of the divide is essentially Afrocentric. It holds that African history is not same with European history. Ikime (1979) believes that such classification is an attempt to universalize different history and culture which would ultimately lead to the imposition of external standards on the thought process and interpretation of African perspective of history. The basic approach of studying African history is the emphasis on oral sources which historians elsewhere also recognize.

Since it is an established fact that African societies especially south of the Sahara had no writing culture in either European or Islamic form, most of their activities, from origins, migrations, settlements, intergroup relations and other events are stored in their oral database. The Ijaw people in general in the Niger Delta and the *Mein-ibe* in particular are not exempted from this fact. Parables, riddles, songs, greetings, praise-singing to traditional monarchs are some forms through which we can interrogate their history. Thus, in the analysis of the traditions of origin of the *Mein-ibe*, this piece would also consider parables, proverbs, praise-singing and greetings to monarchs as sources that provide interpretations to popular history. Such carry meanings other than what they literarily seem to mean.

IV. THE IJAW ETHNIC NATIONALITY: THE MEIN-IBE PERSPECTIVE

The origin of *Mein-ibe* could be traced to the ancestor or progenitor of this sub-group referred to as *Mein* (HRM Fineman Amgare, oral interview). He was said to be one of the numerous sons of *Izon*, the father and originator of the Ijaw ethnic nationality. The *Mein* subgroup or *ibe* together with her *Izon* siblings, occupy the lower reaches of the Niger Delta for all its length, from east to west. A few of them occupy the territory stretching as far north as the Niger-Benue confluence. There are as many as forty sub-groups or *ibe* in the Niger Delta as stated by Imoagene (1990) but Alagoa (1972) identified forty-three sub-groups and this is the most acceptable since he has done more thorough and rigorous research about the *Izon* than any other scholar.

For proper identification of the Ijaw people in the Niger Delta, Alagoa outlined the six sub-regions within the area and the *ibe* found in the various zones:

s/no.	Name of Zone	Name of Zone	Name of Zone
	WESTERN DELTA FRINGE <i>Apoi, Arogbo, Furupagha, Olodiana, Egbema, Gbaramatu, Ogbe.</i> (7)	WESTERN DELTA <i>Obotebe, Mein, Seimbiri, Tuomo, Tarakiri, Kabowei, Kumbowei, Operemo, Oyakiri, Ogulagha, Iduwini.</i> (11)	CENTRAL DELTA <i>Apoi, Basan, Olodiana, Oporoma, Ogboin, Tungbo, Kolokuma, Opokuma, Gbaran, Zarama, Okodia, Buseni, Ekpetiama, Tarakiri, Boma (Bumo), Akasa (Akaha).</i> (16)
	EASTERN DELTA <i>Nembe, Kalabari, Okrika, Ibani (Bonny).</i> (4)	EASTERN DELTA FRINGE <i>Nkoro (Kala Kirika), Opobo (Ibani).</i> (2)	NORTHERN DELTA FRINGE <i>Epie-Atissa, Ogbia, Oruma (Tugbene).</i> (3)

The above are the various *ibe* or sub-groups in *Izon* land said to be founded by the sons and grandsons of *Izon*. They cut across six states namely Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Rivers. In most literature, the terms Ijaw, *Izon* and Ijo are interchangeably used to refer to the people of the ethnic group under study. The name Ijaw is said to be a “Europeanized” or anglicized version of the original word, *Izon*- the ancestral father of the Ijaws. *Izon* is translated to mean Truth which forms the fulcrum of the worldview of the people (Agedah, 2006:48).

The *Izon* concept of truth which encapsulated the virtues of equity, fairness and justice, was and is still fundamental to the idea of history and relationships in the society. According to Larry (2017), the Ijaw concept of truth was essential to the resolution of conflicts in their pre-colonial society. This is because when a *sor* (dispute in *Izon*) arises, the disputants who were coming for settlement are expected to be truthful. Moreso, the settlement of some disputes transcends human reasoning. This is manifested in involving of god swearing or oath taking where they were used to enforced the truth (Oral interview, 27/08/17).

In another sense, the concept of *Izon* is a universal term. Since it is taken to mean the truth, any one that is truthful and straightforward could be referred to as an *Izon* person. Thus, one might be from another ethnic group but has the *Izon* virtues of equity, fairness and justice, such a person readily fits into the Ijaw description. There were some of the virtues that personalities such as Jaja of *Opobo*, rose to prominence. This has no doubt influenced the struggle for resource control and self-determination over the years by the people against the Nigerian state and her foreign allies in the petroleum enterprise.

The Ijaw people speak the *Izon* language which is within the Kwa Branch of the Niger-Congo family of African Languages (Greenburg, 1963). Most of the various sub-groups (*ibe*) are also dialects of this language (Williamson, 1968). However, there are some *ibe* which consider themselves Ijaw but currently speak non-Ijaw languages. They include those on the western, northern and eastern fringes.

In comparison with others, the antiquity of the Ijaw language from linguistic studies shows that, the language has been calculated to be at least, 5,000 years distant from Ibo, Yoruba and Edo, a calculation which accords with the geological age of the Niger Delta itself (Alagoa, 1972:17). From this view, it can be deduced that, the Ijaw people cannot be said to come from any of these or other ethnic groups in the area. What is evident is the several inter-group relations centred on trade, marriage, religion, etc which has ensured the mixture of the various groups in the Niger Delta. The presence of Igbo elements in Ijaw territories such as Bonny and Opobo were mainly as a result of economic interactions between latter and the former.

The *ibe* is wrongly referred to as “clan” in British colonial records (Alagoa, 1972). An *Ibe* comprises a group of villages and people who speak a common *Izon* dialect. The sub-group generally believe in a common ancestor. They also have a religious base of common identity provided by the worship of a single national god. All members of the *ibe* observe prescribed taboos and attend the annual festivals under the supervision of the *Oru-kari-owe* (High Priest). There was no personified central authority in each village as it was essentially an entity where powers and functions were duly separated. The above features of the *ibe* are not compactable with the idea of the European originated clan as the characteristics are quite distinct.

In *Mein-ibe* for example, the dialect spoken is called *Mein*, a variant of the *Izon* language. Also, the national god of the *ibe* is *Dirimoagbeya* represented by an elephant tusk. There are several taboos that people of the *ibe* were expected to obey. For instance, no one was expected to kill the black snake (*okini*) which is also a representation of the national god, *Dirimoagbeya*. The annual festival of the *ibe* is called *Mein-Owei-Uge* which is the coming together of all *Mein* descendants to celebrate their origin and strengthen the bond of brotherhood amongst them. This is reflected in a popular Ijaw saying;

*ene ama me ekiye*⁴

The political structure in *Mein* communities was organized in a non-centralized form. There were leaders such as the *Ama-Okosi-Owei* (eldest man), *Ogulasowei* (Spokesman), *Ekpekpe-gbele-owe* (information official), *Oru-kari-Owei* (High Priest) who attended to official issues in the community. However, it was the *Ama-se-bene* (Town Assembly) where any *Ogula* (matters of utmost importance) affecting the wellbeing of all was discussed, that had the highest authority in the *Ama* (Eweke, 2011:31). It is important to state here that, it is not whether a political system was classified central or non-centralized that makes one better than the other. The only difference between them is seen in the distribution of power, resources and privileges that suited the political associations of the various systems. In other words, whether it was either centralized or non-centralized, it served the end of governance of that society as well as an internal product of their political alignment and re-alignment. Since our focus is on the interrogation of traditions of origin, to this we now turn to see how interpretations have been made on only the literary meanings that the narratives seem to offer.

V. THE TRADITIONS OF ORIGIN OF MEIN-IBE

The study of the origin of man has seen the emergence of three schools of thought on this never ending debate. These schools of thought except for the scientifically oriented one, has peoples from various ethnic, religious and political divide subscribing to either one or another while some to both. The views are;

1. The creation school of thought;
2. The evolution or scientific school of thought;
3. The migration school of thought.

VI. THE CREATION SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

The creation school of thought tells of a supreme or spiritual being that initiated the creation of man and the world. Evidences of this can be seen in the *Yoruba*, *Jewish* or *Chinese* origin episodes. It is mostly used to isolate one race or ethnic group from another. The Ijaws also believe that it was *Temearau* or

⁴ *ene-your, ama-town, me-now, ekiye-remember or love*. Thus, this implies “ Always remember your hometown”. It is used to arouse the spirit of nationalism and service to the sub-group especially for those in the Diaspora.

*Tamarau*⁵ that created the world. Thus, in interacting with the *Izon* man on this view, the following would be the outcome;

Question: *Tu baka ke eteme weri ma?*

Answer: *Tamarau ke eteme weri mi*⁶

However, since a person cannot account for his birth, so also humanity cannot account for her creation. This is because there is no valid memory to tap from to prove the very second, hour, day and so on that a person was born except by information from those that were knowledgeable and present at the time. What people that subscribe to this school of thought hold is the oral information transmitted to them or the claim of revealed knowledge about the creation by the supreme being.

The school of thought tells of the creation of *Izon*, the father and progenitor of the Ijaw ethnic nationality by *Tamarau* at *Isomobou*, the first settlement of the people (Clarkson, oral interview). It states that it was from *Isomobou*, which is said to be located somewhere in Wilberforc Island, Bayelsa state that all Ijaws migrated from to outlying areas of the Niger Delta and beyond. The other early Ijaw settlements include *Agadagbabou*, *Obiama*, *Ogobiri* and *Ikibiri* all in the central Niger Delta. In other words, the Ijaws did not originate from any Nigerian or foreign ethnic group but is an autonomous nation or not an appendage of other ethnic groups. This version appeals more to Ijaw sons and daughters in more recent times as they believe that their cultural identity is peculiar and unique to them only.

VII. THE EVOLUTION SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

The evolution or scientific school of thought is mainly a Eurocentric view of the origin of man. It posits that man's existence is as a result of an evolutionary process that led to the emergence of anatomically modern humans, beginning with the evolutionary history of primates- in particular genus *Homo*. The ultimate end of this process is the emergence of *Homo sapiens sapiens* as distinct specie of the *Hominid* family, the great apes. This process also includes the gradual development of traits such as human bipedalism and language. A major proponent of this idea is Charles Darwin, whose publication titled, *On the Orgin of Species* in 1859 opened up the space for the contemplation of a relationship between man and apes. Other adherents to this school of thought are Thomas H. Huxley, Richard Owen, Alfred R. Wallace, and David R. Begun, to mention but a few.

What this view did not explain is, how did the ape that man evolved from came to be?. Put differently, who created the apes?. This follows from the idea of causation in history which posits that, *causa non causa*⁷. Thus, this thought does not completely account for the origin of man which the historian is commissioned to investigate. Furthermore, this view is seen as the bid of Europe-inspired science to justify imperialism driven by mercantilism in the 19th and 20th centuries.

With the idea of natural selection, Africans, including the Ijaws, were termed 'sub-humans' and therefore, needed to be controlled by the more intelligent Europeans. Since the evolution view concertedly 'hierarchified' the human existence, it was expressly used to justify racism and discrimination which has been institutionalized in the world. This assertion is analyzed as the Hamitic hypothesis which claims all ingredients of innovation and creativity in Africa was enabled by the Hamites of the Caucasoid racial stock who migrated into central Africa as pastoralists, bringing new language, customs and technologies with them, prompting the achievements seen in Ijawland and elsewhere (Seligman, 1930).

The implication of this school of thought's position on Ijaw history in particular and African history in general is that, Africa is not capable of anything worthy of civilization. Africa was seen as a dark continent and had no history. For the Ijaws to have a history, they must identify with an ethnic group that is seen as more 'civilized' than her in terms of European parameters of what civilization means. This was what gave rise to the explanation of Ijaw (*Mein*) origin as a consequent of migration from other ethnic group(s) such as *Yoruba* and *Benin*. One of the European parameter for judging the Ijaws (especially *Mein*) as an 'uncivilized' people was the non-centralized nature of her political system (except for the eastern delta kingdoms of *Ibani*, *Nembe*, *Okrika*

⁵ *teme*- spirit or to create and *arau*- Woman. Thus, *Temearau* or *Tamarau* means the woman that creates. In the Ijaw worldview, it is believed that only the woman has the ability to procreate or give life. In other words, the Ijaw idea of the almighty being is matrilineal. However, there is revisionist view to this as the idea of *Temeowei*- the man that create is now in vogue especially in the western religious thought.

⁶ The question means 'who created you?' and the answer is, 'it was the almighty God that created me'. The picture of *Temearau* cannot be represented in a symbolic form. In other words, the Ijaws believe in the omnipotence and omniscience of *Temearau* or *Tamarau* and God cannot be represented in an artistic form. Put differently, God almighty to the *Izon* man cannot be comprehended in totality.

⁷ It is a *latin* maxim which means, nothing causes nothing. Thus, history is of the view that, something must have initiated an action before it became manifest in its active form. For example, the ape must have being created by something and that something was also created by something, *ad infinitum*.

and *Kalabari*⁸). Since the evolution school of thought does not subscribe to the idea of spirituality and divine providence, the *Mein ibe* in particular and Ijaw people in general are not in support of this. It robs them of their worldview of *Tamarau*, the various *asain*⁹, life after death and other metaphysical as well as existential issues.

VIII. THE MIGRATION SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

Migration is the only record of origin that man can account for to a large extent. This is so as man is the principal actor in this episode. It is essentially about how man had moved from one point to another due to economic, religious, political and other factors. The migration episode usually starts halfway in to the account of the existence of man. Put differently, it does not tell about the creation of man but only to his movements from one place to another. The migration school of thought emerged due probably to the desperation among various sections to claim a vintage position over the other in the struggle for scarce resources, including the superiority of culture. A typical example of this is the *Benin-Ife* counter positions on the status of the prince that originated the kingship institutions in both areas¹⁰.

In same vein, the *Bayajida* of the *Hausa* states, *Oduduwa* of *Yoruba*, and *Mein* migration accounts have similar narrative. The only variation by the *Mein* from the others is that, while the other two claim relationship with the Arabian peninsula, the former hold to an origin within her area of abode. Furthermore, the *Mein* migratory oral records did not result to the formation of centralized system of governance as it did in the other cases. This makes it obviously distinct from the others.

Mein-ibe is unarguably the largest in terms of territorial stretch, springing from *Ogobiri*, the ancestral home of this sub-group in Bayelsa state to *Gbekebo* in Delta state as well as the *Egbedani* in *Kolokuma*, some *Urhobo* elements and *Kalabari* in Rivers state emerging from this *ibe* (Alagoa, 1972). The *Kile*¹¹ of the *Ebenana-owe*¹² of *Ogobiri-Mein* kingdom tells of this fact when he is greeted thus;

Mein-ibe nana mu Gbekebo dou (3x)¹³

Mein history is as complicated as the history of the Ijaw ethnic nationality. This is so because the sub-group had broken up to various parts and is now widely dispersed during the era before Arabic and western writing came to sub-Saharan Africa. The only record about their dispersal is recorded and stored in their oral database. For starters, let us look at the oral tradition about *Mein* origin.

Oral accounts (probably from the Delta section of *Mein*) collected by P.V. Main (1930), "An Assessment Intelligence Report of the Mein Clan of the Western Ijaw Sub-tribe" attributed *Mein's* origin to *Benin*. It also mentioned *Aboh* as a place where he migrated to before leaving for *Ogobiri* after killing a woman found desecrating his shrine where *Dirimoagbiya* was worshipped. It must be noted that other *ibe* also have *Benin* as a point of migration. To ascertain whether the above information is anything to go by, let us check whether *Benin* or *Aboh* were stored in their oral database as well as determine whether the right questions were keyed in to the oral computer system when the above exercise which is now an archival documentary reference was conducted.

Benin, when typed into the search engine of the *Mein-Ijaw* oral database, is non-existent. What is available is *Beni* or *Ebeni*¹⁴. It has been established by linguistic studies that the *Izon* language separated from

⁸ These city-states as they are referred to, evolved centralized system of government based on their internal House system and not stimulated by European or other external forces. See Alagoa, E. J. (1971), "The development of institutions in the states of the Eastern Delta", *Journal of African History*, Vol. 12, No. 2.

⁹ *asain* means 'a spiritual force or power'.

¹⁰ What this episode obvious did not contend with is the origin of the Bini and Yoruba peoples. In other words, this episode only centered on the controversy around the establishment of centralized governance in both areas. Put differently, both peoples are different as their *Idodowa* (*Benin*) and *Oranmiyan* (*Ife*) versions respectively exposed.

¹¹ *Kile* means greetings. Every *Izon* man is entitled to a *kile*. It is a personal title that is used to address one during ceremonial festivities and general activities. The *kile* embodies the philosophy, mission and vision of life about that person.

¹² *Ebe-(ibe)nana-(own)-owe* (*man*) literarily refers to the head of the *ibe*. It is a position that was conceived during the pre-colonial era but consolidated during the colonial period. See Eweke, E. E. (2011), "Traditional Political Institution in *Ogobiri-Mein* Kingdom (1895-1960), M.A unpublished dissertation, Department of History, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

¹³ This means 'the one that owns *Mein-ibe* and also founded *Gbekebo*.

¹⁴ *Beni* or *bini* means 'water' in *Izon* language. Of course, there would definitely be a name for it due to the riverine and swampy terrain the Ijaws have found themselves in over the uncounted and counted years of

the broad language family before *Bini* or *Edo* so, how can Benin even be when it is external to them? In other words, how can Ijaw come from Benin, as we know today when it means something other than water?. Can it not be that the Ijaws were even the owners of *Beni(n)* which they left for the settlers that came? The point being emphasized there is that, the *Izon* man never forgets his roots especially the name of the place.

Let us consider the issue of enquiry into the origin of the people by the colonial ethnographers and anthropologists. The question probably asked when the Intelligence Assessment exercise was done was,

Te you ke ma do bo ma?

Instead of

*Tu baka ke eteme ma?*¹⁵

The above is a clear instance of the computer parlance, 'garbage in, garbage out'. The much acclaimed intelligence report was done using European standard on Africa activities. The end product would definitely be the emergence of a conflicted history due to the struggle between the indigenous perspective of history and the foreign one. Thus, this is seen in the *Beninization* of Ijaw history which is reflected in the not too distant account recorded by the British authorities.

The issue of internal migration is also prevalent in *Mein* history. It has four main parts which include; *Ogobiri-Mein* with headquarters in *Ogobiri*, *Akugbene-Mein* with capital at *Akugbene*, *Ngbilebiri-Mein* at *Kiagbodo* and *Ogbolubiri-Mein* at *Ogbodobiri* including the *Kalabari* and *Urhobo* section. These branches have their own political structures different from one another but are bound by the affinity of having a common ancestor.

IX. REFLECTIONS ON MEIN TRADITIONS OF ORIGIN

The African-born historian became incorporated into the historical discipline with the exposure to the rudiments of this scholarship from the early 20th century. Coming from a background that holds onto oral traditions, this historian had to evolve a dual personality to be able to function effectively in the western sense as well as the Ijaw view. For example, while the western idea of interpreting history is based on the scale of rationality and irrationality, the African perspective is not (Afigbo, 1980:2). To buttress this, the later developed western perspective of creation accepts the *Jewish* episode reflected in the Christian *Holy Bible* as correct while the ones by African accounts such as the *Oduduwa* and *Osanobua* of *Yoruba* and *Bini* respectively are not. Thus, it is the duty of the African Historian to enlighten and educate others to have an understanding on the workings of the African mind as regards history (Ikime, 1979). This is to avoid the eclipse of the African view of their past by what is seen as an 'alien standard'.

In earlier sections, this piece has attempted to stimulate further investigations on the available accounts on Ijaw *Mein* migration traditions. The first and only reason given for *Mein* descendants' dispersal from *Ogobiri* was the *wan fulou*¹⁶ episode (Owonaro, 1946:44). This view seems to have been influenced by the intelligence report of 1930. However, Alagoa (1999:77) puts the issues as disputes and overpopulation. It is important to note that, he did not specify what the disputes were about. It is probable that Alagoa simply gave a broad explanation of 'disputes' to the *wan fulou* account.

An interpretation to the *wan fulou* account is beyond the face value. African oral traditions in parables, riddles, pithy-sayings etc, are files in which the true meaning of such are kept. Due to the fact that this is same as other *ibe*, this stereotype or cliché in Ijaw traditions deserves the needed attention to truly understand this phenomenon.

For Alagoa (2007), the *wan fulou* is a parable used by the people to explain the circumstance being discussed. He elaborated that, this could refer to either a dispute over political power, land or a woman (Oral communications, 15/08/07 at GRA phase II, Port-Harcourt). From this springboard given, it is discovered that, there had been a disagreement between *Kabeama* and *Ogobiri* communities over the headship of the lineage. During oral interactions at *Ogobiri*, it was accepted that *Kabeama* was senior to *Ogobiri*. However, *Ogobiri*

their existence. *Ebeni* refers to the *Oiyakiri-ibe* towns of *Toru-Ebeni* and *Anyama-Ebeni*, neighbouring communities to *Ogobiri* on the other side of the *Sagbama-Igbedi-Ogobiri* creek.

¹⁵ *Te you ke ma do bo ma?* – means 'where do you come from?', while *Tu baka ke eteme ma?* – means 'who created you?'.

¹⁶ *Wan-duiker* or antelope, *fulou*-soup. Thus, it refers to 'the soup prepared with duiker meat'. This account tells of the disagreement over meat of an antelope that was caught at a stream by all the children of *Mein*. The emphasis on all shows that, it entails the issue of rights as children of *Mein*. This episode has also been recorded among other Ijaw *ibe* of *Nembe*, *Obotebe*, *Operemo*, *Oiyakiri*, *Bumo* which have similar explanations. See Alagoa, E.J. (1972), *A History of the Niger Delta*, Ibadan, University Press. Pp. 61, 77, 79, 127, 133-4.

version insisted that the former was a woman which deprived her of headship of the lineage¹⁷. In summary, *Kabeama* seemed to have lost out in the power dynamics inherent in the community, propelling migrations out of *Ogobiri*.

In Owonaro's¹⁸ account, *Kalabari* left *Ogobiri* due to issues he had with his brothers over his wife. The woman was said to have been accused of being involved in *pou*¹⁹ practices (witchcraft) by *Kalabari*'s brothers who had plotted to kill her. Her name was given as *Itimi* from the *Isoko* ethnic group (Owonaro, 1949:46). In a society which had strong belief system built on the idea of good and evil, witchcraft was a very serious issue. In fact, it was a 'sacred' term used to accredit one into the out-caste status of the society. The Europe interpretation of this would be 'superstition'. However, the westerners have accepted the Christian view in 1 *Samuel* 15:23 of witchcraft as valid. This is obviously double standard. Thus, it is the duty of the European Historian to also seek to know what constitute witchcraft and how it could be understood within the African context which is obviously not the same with their worldview.

X. CONCLUSION

The traditions of origin of *Mein-ibe* have been analyzed to show the ways Africans preserve their history. It can be said that, oral source which is the database or store of African past, can only be properly understood when the historian could decipher the meanings to the various accounts stored in proverbs, parables, praise-singing, folktales, and others. Like the computer, the codes to unlock the meanings to the sometimes "strange" explanations of these oral accounts can only be gotten when the historian exercises a great measure of patience and zeal to learn about the past.

The parables, praise-songs, proverbs, and other forms of oral genres, should be properly crosschecked with oral interviews, local gists, as well as un-deliberate discussions with elders and peers of the society the researcher is enquiring about to written sources. It is only through this way that issues such as the *wan fulou* and other accounts which are prevalent in African history can be analyzed, understood and placed in the proper context they ought to

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¹⁷ This period seems to suggest the shifting societal perception about the position of the woman in the Ijaw community. In other words, women's rights had been a dominant theme in traditional African societies and not of recent origins.

¹⁸ *Owonaro*, although not an Historian, was the first Ijaw to document the history of this ethnic group. He might have been able to get a better perspective of this issue due to his origin. The colonial reports might not have done so due to third party involvement in the process of data collection that mutates intentions, analysis and translations.

¹⁹ The contextual meaning refers to the art of 'witchcraft' implies a woman who was supposed to have magic powers, especially one who used these powers to do evil. See *Omoyajowo*, J. A. (1980), 'What is Witchcraft?' in Ade. Adegbola E. A. (ed), *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, Ibadan, Sefer. Pp. 317-336.

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