The Heroic Age of the Ohafia Igbo: Its Evolution and Socio-Cultural Consequences

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XXVIII
1
June
1990
7-35
0016-6774
1570600
[TN:105390][ODYSSEY:206.107.42.225/ILL]
ISSN crossmatch found using OCLC number

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THE HEROIC AGE OF THE OHAFIA IGBO:
ITS EVOLUTION AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES *

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* This paper is a revised and updated version of chapter 1 of my University of London doctoral thesis (Azuonye, 1979).
The Heroic Age of the Ohafia Igbo

Introduction

Ohafia is one of the numerous small confederations of autonomous village-groups in Igbo country (Map 1); with an estimated population of 100,000 inhabitants, it is located immediately west of the Cross River, on what has been described as a "hoe-shaped" ridge, part of the southern terminus of the great plateau and escarpment which traverses south-eastern Nigeria from north to south. This territory which covers an area of approximately 110 square miles has a vegetation cover of "orchard-bush" forest, i.e. a mixture of savanna grassland and tropical rainforest; but looking out into the open landscape, one can see some large groves of big trees. According to Nsuge (1974: 5), this suggests that 'before the effects of shifting cultivation and erosion from slope-farming combined with the pressure of population, high forest may have been extensive over the ridge'. Be that as it may, the forests still harbour enough wild life to make hunting an occupation of no less significance, in the community today, than peasant farming and subsistent trading.

In relation to most other Igbo communities (including immediate neighbours with which it is generally grouped together, in recent ethnographic sources, as the 'Cross River Igbo'), Ohafia is a highly isolated community. Its most reliable link with the Igbo heartland is a tarred but dilapidated road which runs along the ridge from Umunwala-Ibeaku, on the Enugu-Port Harcourt Railway, to the town of Aro-Chukwu in the Igbo-Ibibio borderland. Not long ago, before the construction of this road, Ohafia's isolation was complete. In the north and west, it was cut off from other Igbo areas by high forests and narrow, steep-sided valleys, and, in the south and east, it fronted the territories of the non-Igbo Ibibio and Ogoja peoples of the Cross River State.

What is significant about this geographical isolation is not just the fact that Ohafia was difficult of access from most directions in the Igbo heartland; far more significant was that, for several generations after the first Igbo immigrants settled there, it remained much more easily accessible from the territories of its alien and hostile neighbours.

The difficulty posed by the thickly-forested Cross River valley to the east and low-lying swampy country to the south was easy to surmount once the Cross River has been reached; from there, it was relatively easy to row across to Ohafia. In the north and west, on the other hand, the only access route was the crest of the ridge along which the tarred road runs, but the difficulty with this ancient route, used extensively in the past by Igbo and non-Igbo peoples alike was that it ran roughly from north to south, like the Cross River, away from the heart of Iboland, thus further isolating the Ohafia people and creating a front of contact, and consequently of conflict, between them and their hostile neighbours.

This geographical situation is perhaps the most important factor behind the evolution of the historical conditions which, in this paper, will be seen to constitute one of the most remarkable manifestations of the 'heroic age' in Igbo land. The paper will trace the main phases of this evolution and the various ways in which the special conceptions of manhood and honour fostered in this heroic age...
became ramified in the social organization and culture of the people. Special attention will be paid to heroic poetry (especially its oral epic species) which seems to be the most significant cultural product of the age.

Evolution of the heroic age

By far the most important historical consequence of Ohafia's isolation among the non-Igbo groups of the Cross River area was its emergence, in the course of time, as one of the most warlike groups in Igbo land, a power feared far and wide in the region throughout the 18th and 19th centuries and even into the present century, on account of the aggressive and ruthless road-hunting raids of its members. This section deals with the most important stages of this development, especially those reflected in the content of the heroic poems.

Origins, migrations and settlement patterns

The Ohafia have a tradition that their founding fathers migrated to their present homeland in the Cross River region from Iheke, a central Igbo community which includes the railway town of Umuahia. According to the tradition, they settled first at Elu (lit. Hill-top), a village-group on the crest of the ridge (Map 2) which is still regarded by the members of all other village-groups in Ohafia as the main centre of their religious and social life.

The original settlement at Elu is a typical example of the kind of strategic hilltop location generally preferred by migrant groups in the early period of Igbo history: defended in all directions by high forests and steep valleys, the location also offered a clear view of the surrounding plains just as it still does today. But the security thus vouchsafed was soon cut short when the pressure of population forced a new wave of migrations, this time short-distance emigrations.

As a result of these emigrations, eight, new settlements were formed in the plains and ridges around the original settlement at Elu. These were: the Amadi-Ekpo village-group, to the north, on the main ridge; Echem, to the south, also on the main ridge; and to the west, in the outlying plains and lower ridges, the village-groups of Nkwo-Ebi, Nde-a-Nku, Okagwe, Nde-Uduma-Ukwu, and Oboro (see Map 2).

Today, these eight secondary settlements are regarded by all Ohafia people as constituting an inner core of senior village-groups known as Oha-Eke (see Nsagba, 1974: 54-58, 59, 65), and as is customary among the Igbo generally, the seniority of these groups entitles their members to wield special ritual and political powers and to enjoy privileges denied the members of seventeen other village-groups whose ancestors are said to have come much later.

Early contacts and conflict with aboriginal non-Igbo groups

The arrival of new Igbo immigrants in the wake of the expansion of the early settlers from Elu helped to set the stage for increased contact and hence conflict with the aboriginal non-Igbo elements, some of whom had been displaced from
their land. But these conflicts were not limited to the Igbo and non-Igbo groups. As Ohaia traditions suggest, the Oha-Eke and the later immigrants also fought against one another, usually over rights to farmland and access to the palm-trees growing wild in the forests. But it would appear that, in the course of time, they came to the realization that their petty quarrels only served to weaken them against their common enemy, the non-Igbo Ibibio and Ogoja peoples. In traditions passed down from generation to generation, among these alien neighbours, the Igbo groups were portrayed as land-grabbers, and the young were reminded of their duty to retake all the stolen lands or at least render them unsafe for human habitation. This resulted in the kind of resistance which early European settlers in North America and Australasia met from the aboriginal elements there.

The analogy here with North America and Australasia is by no means far-fetched, for like the American Indians and the Australasian aborigines, in the wake of European incursions into their territories, the original non-Igbo inhabitants of the Cross River region seem to have been provoked, by successive Igbo incursions into their lands, to ‘take to war as a normal routine’, in an albeit fruitless effort to keep the enemy at bay. With the prolongation of this pattern of confrontation over several generations, an ‘heroic age’ (see Bowra, 1957) inevitably dawned in the area.

The ‘heroic age’ is usually thought of as belonging more to legend than to recorded history, but as Bowra (1957) has shown, it is in fact a universal feature of recorded human history. Characterized by the fostering of a generation of men for whom the winning of honour in war or single-combat is the chief aim of life, the heroic age is essentially the result of prolonged exposure to what Kunene (1971) describes as ‘conditions of life which constitute an ever-present challenge to the valour of men’, namely:

(a) frequent wars, battles, and skirmishes;
(b) frequent encounters with wild beasts, as in hunting;
(c) frequent hunting expeditions;
(d) frequent cattle raids; and
(e) generally, the presence of any source of danger to life and property; as, for instance, the prevalence of cannibalism (Kunene, 1971: 3-4).

Conditions of this kind prevailed in the Cross River area before and about the time of the arrival of the Ohaia people; the only difference was that in the absence of pastoral life in this thickly forested area, the place of cattle-raids was taken by raids into the farms and palm-tree groves of one group by its neighbours. Such raids were usually occasioned by drought, seasonal hunger, or the failure of crops; but they were also among the conventional ways in which men asserted their manhood, in the heroic age. But by far the most important way of asserting one’s manhood was by risking death in order to ward off the attacks of hostile neighbours and wild animals on the community to which one belonged.

Among the wild animals encountered by the honour-seeking men of the heroic age, leopards and bush-hogs were the most formidable. While bush-hogs
Head-hunting and the development of an heroic ethos in Ohafia

With the development of head-hunting, an heroic ethos evolved in Ohafia. The society came to make a distinction between two classes of men. The first of these, *ufiem*, consisted of men who had proved their manhood by procuring heads in encounters with the enemy; it also included those who served the society in times of trouble by destroying dangerous animals or raiding neighboring areas for food. The second class of men was known as *ufo*: this consisted of cowardly and dishonourable men who shirked their responsibility to the society by failing to risk their lives in its service. The inaction of such men created huge gaps in the defence of the land, giving the enemy the respite he needed to increase his attacks.

The institutionalization of the distinction between these two classes of men was essential because it enabled the society to operate a system of rewards and punishments by means of which it succeeded in a remarkable way in holding members of its younger generations from deviating from the established heroic norm. For the *ufiem* (the honourable warriors), the door was open for the enjoyment of all the material benefits and privileges the society could offer: they alone could wear the *ohara* cloth and other traditional status symbols such as eagle plumes and the red tail-feathers of the parrot; they alone were free to marry whoever they chose to marry and to go about their daily business without molestation; finally, they alone could qualify for admission into the prestigious secret societies in the community.

By contrast to the life of the *ufiem*, the life of the *ufo* (the dishonourable cowards) consisted of a series of humiliations. From time to time, the members of their age-grade would raid their homes and barns and seize their property and yams to share with impurity among themselves. Wherever they went, they were greeted with insolent mock-heroic titles, even by children and slaves. In many cases, they were not even allowed to get married; but if they got married by any chance, their wives bore the brunt of their degradation. Such unfortunate women were generally obliged always to dress themselves as mourners and to wear their hair short. If they put on any beautiful dresses or ornaments, they were quickly arrested by the wives of the honourable warriors and stripped naked in public. Naturally, many women could not put up with this daily routine of shameful living and simple abscended. But, as tradition has it, some women of the heroic age were so brave and so deeply in love with their husbands that they took up their cause and actually went to the wars to procure heads on their behalf. But such Amazonian women were rare indeed; the onus in the heroic age was always that of the man to act, unless he totally lacked the sense of shame.

Stringent social pressures of this kind gave rise to a highly competitive and individualistic society. Young men vied with one another for the numerous positions of honour with which their generation rewarded every display of many prowess. In the circumstances, they came to see every war — any war — no matter who the combatants were or what the quarrel was, as their own war. In the generations to come, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, they went in search of war to almost every part of Igboland, including the border areas of Nsukka and Anambra in the north-east. They went as individuals, in small bands of a handful of men, and as huge armies levied by war-chiefs of the twenty-five village groups.

18th and 19th century developments

The spread of the warlike and head-hunting activities of the Ohafia people to other parts of Igbo country, in the 18th and 19th centuries, was accelerated by their contacts with the Aro, an ambitious and powerful group, whose founding fathers apparently arrived much later in the Cross River area than other Cross River Igbo, settling in a small strip of territory, now the town of Aro-Chukwu, to the south-east of Ohafia.

The early history of the Aro was probably much the same as that of Ohafia. That they got embroiled in constant warfare with their neighbours is well-attested to by their traditions. But while developing a head-hunting culture in response to this situation, their chief cultural attainments tended to be more...
Social organization

In more than two centuries of constant involvement in heroic warfare, structures emerged in the Ohafia social organization which served to promote the people's warlike preoccupations and to sustain the heroic mode of life. This section is confined to three such structures which seem most relevant to the discussion of the oral epic songs. The first of these is a double-descent system of kinship relationships in which women controlled agriculture and the transmission of agrarian land while men defended the homestead and controlled the transmission of residential estates. The second involves the compact arrangement of wards of residential estates within villages in the form of military garrisons, for defensive purposes, and the linking together of wards within various villages and of the villages themselves within village-groups, by paths radiating from common centers for the purposes of rapid mobilization in times of war. The third is the organization of members of the society into age-grades for various military and social functions, and the use of age-promotion ceremonies to emphasize the need for individuals to make notable contributions to the glory and welfare of the community at various stages of their lives.

The double-descent system of social organization

A double-descent system of social organization is one in which an individual can claim descent both from his father's people (his patrilineage) and his mother's people (his matrilineage); from each of these lineages, he expects to inherit certain specified types of property or rights. Nsugbe implies that one can trace the origins of this system of social organization in Ohafia to the conditions of the heroic age. He writes:

It is very likely that the need for men to consolidate a new territory would involve them in constant warfare and therefore in the reallocation of responsibilities by transferring farm work to the women. The longer this need persisted, the likelier this experience for survival would become a routine way of living (1974:21).

It did become a routine way of living. After so many generations of controlling farm land, women became the sole transmitters of the right of its ownership. But residence remained patrilocal, and as the men continued to act as defenders of the homestead and winners of titles, residential property and titles passed from them to their sons. The resultant lineage structures are described by the Ohafia people as likwu (matrilineage) and umudi (patrilineage).

In the Ohafia system, matrilineal groups are not local units. Their members cohere through matrilineage associations which meet periodically for the discussion of affairs of mutual interest and for celebrations. These associations operate under the leadership of two heads—a ritual head, who must be a woman, and a secular head, who must be a man. The responsibility of the ritual head, who is described as a queen-mother, is to make sacrifices to a group of sacred pots, which are traditionally accumulated to represent the ancestresses of the lineage. The secular head, on the other hand, is the sole legal officer of his matrilineage. He not only settles disputes among members, he also has the more important responsibility of protecting the rights and interests of members in the lands or estates and the resources of these; he appoints those who apportion matrilineal land to members and others who need to use them over a period; it is he who permits the exploitation of plant and soil resources from their common estates, and protects these against abuse and selfish use (Nsugbe, 1974:93).

As we have already noted, patrilineal groups, in the Ohafia system, are the local units. Their members generally occupy a common territory, the village. Each village comprises a number of wards or residential districts which are linked together by a pattern of paths radiating from a common square. The wards themselves are made up of collections of the houses of members of various extended families. In each case, the houses are 'joined together to form a continuous wall enclosing a space usually filled by additional men's houses' (Forde and Jones, 1950: 52). These come under the headship of a ward-leader while the whole village comes under the headship of a non-hereditary chief.

Interestingly, the function of the village-head is limited to the management of relations between the village and other villages, both within and outside Ohafia. The actual government of the village is the responsibility of a democratically constituted assembly—a kind of house of commons—of which every adult member of the society is qualified to be a member. This operates under the guidance of an advisory council of elders—a village senate—whose members wield enormous influence in the management of affairs, for 'among the Ibo generally, wisdom and knowledge of local traditions are associated with age' (Nsugbe, 1974:66).

Apart from the political and administrative structures described above, another important feature of the village and its component wards is the presence in their common meeting grounds of a number of objects and sanctuaries which are connected with local religious beliefs and practices. We noted above that the chief role of the ritual head of the matrilineage is to make sacrifices to a group of sacred pots, which represent the ancestresses of the lineage. Similar pots are accumulated in memory of the ancestors of the patrilineage in a mound located close to the central square of the village. In addition to these sacred ancestral pots, patrilineal ancestors are also represented by a special class of wooden images, which are enshrined in special halls of ancestral images. These halls are of two types: a small one, which constitutes the central meeting place of the members of the ward, and a big one, which is located close to the central square of the village and constitutes the meeting-place of the village assembly.

There are two other types of ritual objects in the central square of the village: one is the war drum, ikoro, a slit-drum of great size used to summon the able-bodied members of the village in times of serious emergencies such as the outbreak of war; the other is the sanctuary of the tutelary deity of the village, and this is usually a god of war. The military importance and cultural significance of these and other ritual structures in the ward and the village will be dealt with below in more detail.

Beyond the village, there is no political arrangement of any significance in the Ohafia system. Villages which occupy a common territory constitute a village-group, but these are loose federations of people, whose ancestors, like those
of the whole Ohafia confederation itself, chose to settle in the same geographical area, when the Oha-Eke groups emigrated from the original settlement at Elu, to found satellite settlements in the plains and valleys around the ridge. The members of these villages are, however, united by two important kinds of cultural bonds: one is that they generally exhibit, and are widely recognised to possess, a distinctive communal character or spirit, often reflected in their names and patronymic titles; the other is that they generally worship a common deity, again usually a war god, whose shrine can be seen in a central communal square connected to the central squares of all the component villages in the group by large radiating paths. The absence of significant genealogical or political links between the members of the village-group is evidenced by the absence of any administrative council, or of sacred ancestral pots and images, at this level of social organization.

One might be led, from the foregoing account, to wonder where lies the basis of the unity of the twenty-five village-groups, as component members of the Ohafia confederation. By far the most important basis is the common historical experience of the people as described in the greater part of the foregoing pages. According to Nsugbe, the Ohafia people themselves say that the basis of their strong feeling of corporateness lies in their past history. They make the claim in their oral tradition that in the past their villages met, as they still do, when there was need to take decisions on matters that affected their general interest and which also called for urgent and concerted action. Drought, epidemic, or external threat, or even the presence of man-eating or crop-destroying beasts were causes to make them meet as a community (1974: 34).

Another important cause was, and still is, religious; as a community, the people 'own a common tutelary deity, Ikwan', a war spirit whose shrine with that of his wife, Orile, is at Elu where the first migrant group settled' (Nsugbe, 1974: 34).

Military features of the patrilineal settlement

Throughout the foregoing section, I drew attention to the fact that most of the structures found in the patrilineal settlements, at all levels of their four-tier organization, are of some military significance and importance. I will now proceed to deal with the ways in which these structures actually functioned in times of war during the heroic age, paying particular attention to those aspects of them which I regard as most essential for a proper visualization of actions and situations in those texts of the war songs which are set in the village. The first thing to note is the compact arrangement of houses within the wards of various villages for the purposes of 'protective arrangement and defence against surprise attack' (Nsugbe, 1974: 51). We find a detailed explanation of this arrangement in Nsugbe:

Now to take a closer look at the structure of the tertiary territorial unit (the ward). This, to start with, resembles the sector of a circle, and consists of unbroken rows of huts which run radially from the ogro (village-square) towards the bush behind. In between each paired rows of huts lies a path...that leads straight into the ogro, emptying directly behind the appropriate 'rest-hut'... (of the ward). The hind end of the path passes through the bush surrounding the primary unit. The bush separates one territorial unit from the next...

Access (to a ward) is possible from the ogro or from the bush end of the unit; it is hardly likely and sometimes impossible from any other direction. This means that once one finds oneself in the path one becomes effectively trapped, retreat being possible only by continuing in the direction of the ogro or by returning towards the bush. It can therefore be imagined that should the need to defend a village primary (of ward) arise, all that would need to be done would be to block the two ends of the path as one would a bridge.

Doors open into the paths between the paired rows of huts. A first visitor (to an Ogro ward) is bound to experience the disquieting feeling of being watched by scores of eyes from behind the interiors of huts on either side of him, unable to see them himself. For such a visitor, there might be the strong temptation to look over his shoulder now and again as if to assure himself that he is not being shadowed. The feeling is one of apprehension of some danger coming as it were from all sides. Most primaries in Ohafia are structured this way, with the result that each such unit presents the appearance of a'...military garrison with the surrounding bush serving as a 'moat'. The one essential purpose of this kind of residential structure is effective protection and defence against surprise attack. No foe would find it easy to extricate himself if trapped within such a maze of rows of huts. (1974: 50-51).

In addition to offering effective defence against surprise attack, the ward also served as the primary level of military mobilization in times of war. The signal for war usually came from the central village-square. Here various age-sets kept round of watch over the village from an observation post on the top of a tall tree. As soon as a group of enemy troops was sighted, the watchmen alerted those on the ground, who then alerted the whole village by beating the war drum. The signal would then be picked up by other watchmen in other villages. This process would continue until the whole of Ohafia was alerted. Because the war drum is generally a species of talking drum, it was generally possible to specify the exact nature of the danger for which the community was warned...to the state what kind of help was needed from other villages. In the event of a major war involving the whole of Ohafia, each ward-leader would normally assemble those members of his ward, who belonged to the particular age-grade responsible at the time for fighting on behalf of Ohafia, according to the established quota. These would then assemble at the village square, proceeding from there to join forces with companies from other villages, in the central square of the village-group. The force thus assembled would then move to Elu, the traditional rendezvous for all the bands of warriors from all the twenty-five village groups.

Age-grades in the military and political life of the society

We have already referred above to the fact that certain age-based groups within the Ohafia social system were responsible for the conduct of wars in the heroic age. Because there are numerous references to these grades and to the sets that make them up in our examination of the texts of the oral epic songs, it is necessary here to give some idea of exactly how they were constituted and the manner in which they actually functioned, especially in times of war.
Altogether, there are five age-grades in the Ohafia system. The two most junior grades in this system are respectively known as Uke and Uke-ji-ogho. The age-range of the members of the former is 16-25 while that of the latter is 26-35. In both, selection is by age alone. It was from within these two grades that the fighting forces of the community were drawn. Here, a man must prove himself an honourable warrior or forever wallow in the degradation of a coward's life. In view of the military responsibilities of the members of these two grades, it was customary, in the heroic age, to prepare every age-set adequately before being initiated into the first grade. This preparation began from early childhood, and included harsh, Spartan exercises in warfare culminating in a series of ordeals which formed part of the rituals of initiation.

From the Uke-ji-ogho, various age-sets passed into the third age-grade, Akpan, where they performed police duties. It was from this grade, the age of whose members ranged from 26-45, that the hard core of seasoned warriors who served as generals in the wars of the heroic age were drawn. The next age-grade, Umua-Aka (age-range: 46-55), was the only one with a female counterpart known as Ikperikpe. This was the source of the wise elders who served the community as political leaders, and as judges and public orators. Because of the power and privileges of its members, recruitment into it was only by selection from those members of the Akpan grade whose services to society were considered most meritorious. This selection was also restricted to members of the Oha-Eke village-groups.

Those who were not selected to serve in the Umua-Aka grade stayed on in the Akpan grade until they attained the age of 55, when, if they survived, they passed into the most advanced grade, Nde-Ichin, now playing the role of senators and advisors to the younger generation.

The most important thing about the age-grade system of social organization, for a heroic society like Ohafia, is that it constituted a means of ensuring that the age-grade system focused on its members to evaluate their progress and achievement, in accordance with the established heroic ethos, at every stage of their lives. In this way, men were made more acutely conscious of the necessity for personal success and of the pains of failure. Thus, as we have already seen, every child was groomed right from the cradle for his future role as warrior and in the course of his advancement in the junior age-grades was expected to join the ranks of notable warriors by performing deeds of valour. Thereafter the way lay open for him to enjoy the respect of his fellow men and to wield power and influence in the upper echelons of the age-grade system. Survival into the venerable grade of Ichin was the supreme goal of life, for in this grade, the individual could now be looked upon as a 'living ancestor', addressed by the same title, Nna (father) or Nne (mother)34 which is also applied to the deified ancestors in the spirit world; here, one could look forward with pleasure and satisfaction to death and to the prospect of reincarnating to continue the life of glorious achievements in the human world.

Cultural traditions37

In the light of the foregoing, it is perhaps not surprising that the principal preoccupation of Ohafia cultural traditions is with the ideal of personal success, a heroic ideal which over the generations has become the basis of a religious and philosophical tradition dominated by the veneration of dead ancestors and brave warriors as a source of inspiration to successive generations. As we shall see presently, the principal channel of tradition for communicating and maintaining the continuity of this heroic ideology is a body of historical traditions dominated by heroic legend and transmitted from generation to generation through a wide range of traditional art forms.

Religion, philosophy and historical tradition

It has been pointed out above that the respect accorded by the Ohafia people to brave warriors in their lifetime was continued in their death. This practice stems from a belief, common to all Igbo peoples, that death is only a stage in an endless cycle of movement from the world of spirits to the human world, and from the human world back again to the world of spirits (see Azuonye, 1989). Men who attain the venerable rank of Ichin in their earthly existence continue to be honoured after death. Such men constitute the highest rank in the hierarchy of spirits of the dead, and are known as arunabi (i.e. 'ancestral' as opposed to ordinary spirits).38

While all spirits influence the living in many different ways, the influence of the ancestral spirits is the most positive, being directed at ensuring that men do not fall short of the high ethical and moral standards, which is the basis of peaceful progress and stability in the society. On those who upset the social order, they inflict severe penalties. Consequently the favour of the ancestors is piously courted by the living through regular sacrifices and a communion involving the pouring of libations, in which the dead are invited to share with the living and guide their ways. This is a general Igbo practice; but in Ohafia, it is given so much prominence that there is now little or no place at all, in the people's religion, for the concept of chi, or the universal power of life, which is the central tenet of the religious beliefs of most other Igbo societies (see Azuonye, 1977 and 1989).

This is not to imply that the concept of chi is alien to Ohafia culture: the greater prominence of ancestor-veneration is deeply rooted in the ethos and mores of the heroic age which have given rise to the conception of history (akuko-aka, akuko-ali or akuko-nde-ichin)39 as a record of the heroic deeds of the ancestors in the heroic age in their efforts to secure the land now occupied by their descendants against the claims of hostile forces, both human and brutish. Thus conceived, traditional history served as a dynamic instrument for survival, its primary purpose being to inspire the younger generations to emulate the example of their heroic forbears in dealing with the survivalist challenges of their own times. Among the ritual and artistic means developed by the peoples over
the generations for maintaining the continuity of this traditional function of history, by far the most effective is the body of heroic poetry known in Ohafia and neighbouring Cross River Igbos communities as *abu-aba* (war songs).

**Conditions of the heroic age in Ohafia heroic poetry and art**

Originally, the Ohafia war songs formed part of paraphernalia of traditional heroic warfare. They consisted of simple battle songs which were chanted by warriors on their way to battle, in the course of combat and on their victorious return from successful expeditions. These early forms of purely functional battle songs have survived in the repertoires of the contemporary singers of the war songs; and they feature in situations which bear close resemblances to the heroic battle situations in which they originally featured, e.g. communal work, matches and other kinds of competitions, inter-village rivalry of various kinds and electioneering campaigns. But by far the most spectacular modern context in which the traditional battle songs are performed is as an integral part of the well-known dramatic war dance of the Ohafia people in which typical battle situations are re-enacted on festive, ritual and other celebratory occasions. A pageant and a dance-drama, the war dance (*ari-aba*) not only re-enacts typical battle situations but also those physical qualities of manhood which the heroic age sought to cultivate. Part of its beauty lies in the rhythmic vibration of many sinewy in response to the beats of the accompanying martial music. The following is an example of the type of battle song heard in the performance of the dance, in this case in the re-enactment of a victorious return from battle with the captured or slain enemy compared to a leopard trapped in a hunt:

*Onya amala agu o!*

*Je, anyi jee-e-e, je, tyaa!*

*Onya amala agu o!*

*Je, anyi jee-e-e, je, tyaa!*

(The leopard has been trapped!)

Forward, let us go, yes, forward!

The leopard has been trapped!

Forward, let us go, yes, forward!

For a fuller description of the dance and the accompanying songs and music, see Azuonye, 1979: 58-67.

In the interludes between the re-enactment of battle situations in the war dance, invocative chants of the order of panegyric or praise poetry are intoned. These consist of catalogues of the apical heroes in the Ohafia heroic pantheon with their praises names and brief references to their exploits in war and public life. References to the pouring of libation and to the need to exorcise cowardice in chants such as the following excerpt suggest that the original contexts of these chants, which may be described as invocative war songs, were probably 'the religious and magical ceremonies which, according to the literature, were normally held before and after all major wars to prepare warriors spiritually for battle or to purify them after their deed of bloody slaughter' (Azuonye, 1979:67):

He that would shudder before a corpse, I say, let him retreat!

He that would shudder before a corpse, I say, let him retreat!

Ajalu Uma Ajalu, pray drink wine for me.

Mispace, some of Imaga Odo, pray drink wine for me.

Aduku Mmanwur, son of Udumoke, wherever you may be, we are at wine!

Kamalu, son of Ngwo, man of the patrician of Agala-Nde-Ogo-Ukwiwe,

Drink wine for me and soothe my voice, for the night that falls on afo must dawn

*Ngwo*

My great father, Awa Afaka, he that-goes-to-battle-with-a-farming-knife,

Man of the patrician of Udege-Ezhi-Anunu,

Pray, drink wine for me, for the lip dipped in wine is wine itself.

Ogba Ebi, wherever you may be, we are at wine.

My great father, Akwu, man of the patrician of Abia Eete,

Draw-water-only-and-leave-the-fish-behind.

He that would shudder before a corpse, let him retreat!

While retaining their reference to their original ritual contexts, texts of the invocative war songs in the repertoires of Ohafia bards today are becoming more and more contemporary in reference, including the names of prominent Ohafia indigenes in education, business and public life as well as those of national and local political leaders. The achievements of such contemporaries are thus by implication celebrated on the appropriate occasions as the modern equivalents of the glory of winning human heads in the combats of the heroic age. On this, one of the leading bards in Ohafia today, Ogba Kaalu of Abia, says:

Today, head-hunting is out of fashion. But if you grow rich or become highly educated, especially if you go to the White man's land and return with your car and immense knowledge, we will naturally perform the (songs) for you. The point is that by doing these things, you have won your own battle honours. Passing examination — your examinations — well and bringing home the White man's money: these are the prevailing kinds of war we have today. If you achieve these, they are for you as your own battle honours. The same is true of building a big house, one that is truly imposing. People will say (on seeing it): your money is your battle-trophy. On the day such a house will be opened, we will normally perform for you, for by building the house, you have won your own head in battle, for things of this kind are the only form of head-hunting that exists in our present-day culture (Interview, March 1976).

It is this kind of reasoning that has made the heroic songs of the Ohafia Igbo as relevant to its contemporary audiences as it certainly was in the immediate post-heroic era when it was still intimately bound up with communal instinct for survival. Today, the desire for historical knowledge coupled with cultural pride and even vain glory are among the factors which have ensured the continuing vitality of the heroic tradition of poetry and music in the Ohafia society. The invocative poems supply the latter most bountifully, stirring local patrons whose names and the names of whose fathers are mentioned to thoughtless displays of generosity towards the bards. Thus we are told by a local connoisseur (Ukidwe Maduweke of Asigba) about the art of the bard in the invocations and its effects on the audience:

He will put you into deep thought about what your great grandfather was, about your own father, about the life of your own mother. He will go on and on talking about these things, and you will not know when you give him whatever you have in hand. If you have a goat in hand, anything you have in hand, you will give it to him. He awakens your spirit (Interview, March 1976).

Needless to say, there are some mercenary bards who, in their performances, focus on this more profitable aspect of the invocations, paying scant attention
to their more important socio-cultural functions. The leading bards are more circumpect and their heroic repertoires include, in addition to battle songs and invocations, the most highly developed category of Ohafia war songs — the category of narrative war songs — through which the substantial historical and cultural knowledge fostered in the heroic age as ideals for survival is most effectively transmitted in the form of myth and legend.

The 'narrative war songs' (Azuoñye 1979) are properly-speaking a species of oral epic songs (see Bodker 1965 and Lord 1968), being heroic narrative poems of small dimension. They possess all the primary characteristics of the oral epic distinguished by Johnson (1980:312), namely: the poetic, the narrative, the heroic and the legendary; but lacking in length, they nevertheless possess all the three other secondary characteristics, namely: multifunctionality, cultural and traditional transmission and multicentric qualities. These have been firmly established in my earlier studies of the epics (Azuoñye 1979, 1983 and 1986). A detailed examination of these characteristic features falls outside the purview of the present paper. Suffice it to say that, evolving in the post-heroic era as a dynamic vehicle for the celebration of the doings of the leading heroes and ancestors of the heroic age, the oral epic songs inevitably drew some of the elements of the two pre-existent heroic materials (the battle songs and the invocative war songs), combining these with features of the traditional fictional tale (itụ) as well as oratory. Thus, in spite of their compact brevity, the songs are complex structures with narrative, invocative, lyrical and oratorical elements and in performance gravitate between different modes or styles of vocalization: recitation, singing, chanting and speaking. These elements, together with the musical accompaniment (percussive wooden clappers, horn and drums) mark out the themes of the songs in a clear and attractive manner. But perhaps, the key to the beauty and effectiveness of the epics is their formulaic language comprising, in addition to conventional narrative formulas, a large repertoire of epithets (praise names, titles, mock-heroic or satiric names) which help to present the heroes and the villains in terms of their historical significance, their personal attributes and associations, as can be gleaned in part from the following passage from Elibe Aja (see notes 16 and 26) in which Aro war chiefs go from house to house in Ohafia pleading for help over the leopardess that harries their country:

They went mbele megbele, came and reached Ekidi-Nde-Ofoali. They entered the house of Nkoma Obiriaga, son of Ola. Wizard-of-guns-for-whom-the-gun-is-a-playing, son of great mother Agbooke Ezeji. Offspring of them-that-are-lizards-like-goats. If you kill their men, they will not avenge, but if you kill their lizard, they rise up in vengeance:

That is the birthplace of Olugu Ebin, Terror-of-them-that-trade-in-precious-metals. They said they would not go, and they went past theirogo. They came to Binosi, people of Igbenji-Uka. They arrived at the house of Ole Kamalu, terror of Nde-Aba-Ahaba. Ole Kamalu, they drank a case of wine.

'People of Aro, what is the purpose of your visit?' They told them why they came. But they said they would not go, not even one of them.

They came to Ugwu-Nnaka-igne, people-that-live-themselves-alone-in-the-isolation-of-their-valle. People-that-are-well-versed-in-medicine-even-their-women, Birthplace of great father Nke, He-who-if-he-is-not-in-the-lead-no-one-goes-to-battle. They drank a case of wine but said they would not go, not even one of them. They went past and arrived at Nde-Awa-Ezehia-Elechi, Ogboegbume, Good-chief-whose-nose-drips-like-that-of-a-child. People, who on their outward journey crush the python under their heels. And on their homeward journey wash their hands in contempt for the breed of adders, Roasting. What did the python do to us that we should be afraid of adders! That is the birthplace of Mbilu Obu! That is the birthplace of Ajadu Uma Ajadu! That is the birthplace of Kamalu son of Ngwo! That is the birthplace of great father Ngwo, Great-one-that-is-the-terror-of-them-that-trade-in-salt-petre! Elibe Aja said he would go (lines 25-53).

This is the typical texture of the epics: densely allusive and fraught with unvoiced background, qualities which arise from the frequent recourse to formulas. The final picture we get at the end of each epic is neither biographical nor factual but that of imaginative fiction of the order of legend which nevertheless is informed by the ideals of survival from the heroic age. The hero is an embodiment of these ideals and his life is of interest so far as it is sufficiently exemplary to stir emulation.

The bulk of the epics recorded so far are about such heroes: hunter heroes like Elibe Aja (notes 16 and 26), war heroes like Amoogu, Egbelie and Igburu (note 27), great female warriors like Iyan Olugu and Nne Mgbafo (note 22) and such great artists as Ogbara Okorie, the Ekpe dancer and Kamalu Ezehia Mgbgo, the wrestler, who typifies the pinnacle of excellence in their arts as well as the misfortunes which are attendant on such extraordinary artistic excellence. (The former is killed when he goes to perform at Idima on a special invitation while the latter is cursed with infertility when he defeats the King of Spirits in his domain.) Closely related to the heroic legends are the ancestral legends (see notes 9 and 30) which purport to account for the origins of Ohafia or its component groups but which are actually imaginative constructs in support of the heroic society's idealistic view of itself.

In addition to heroic and ancestral legends, there are a number of other tale-types which do not strictly-speaking belong to the heroic tradition but which feature in the repertoires of the bards. First, there is a fairly large corpus of creation myths which, under the guise of accounting for the origins of things, actually defend the status quo in the post-heroic society. Typical examples are: Ife Meenu Chineke Kwere ana-agbu Anu (Why God Ordained the Killing of Wild Animals) and Ife Meenu Iwa na-egbu Ewu (Why Cassava Kills Goats). The former, in which wild animals lose their case against being hunted by men before the judgement seat of God, is actually a series of observations on animal life in the wild and the condition and challenges of hunting in the heroic age. In the latter, an argument between Cassava and Yam over who first came into this
world (really the Igbo world) highlights known facts about the primacy of Yam both in the agricultural history of the Igbo people and in their customs and rituals. The second category of tale-types comprises actiological and didactic tales of the order of ilu (fables) which seem to have become part of the heroic tradition because the values they expound are of relevance to the ethical concerns of the heroic and post-heroic society. There is no limit to the choice of such tales by individual bards; what is important is the relevance of the moral drawn at the end. The tale of Nne Acho Ugo is particularly relevant: the story of five birds who evade the responsibility for giving their mother a fitting burial is decided by a parable which impinges on one of the most important ethical concerns of the society: reciprocity.

A heroic epic tradition is not a static phenomenon. It is subject to change in a high and moving tension. The tales not only change in content and structure in the performances of singers in different contexts and periods of time (see Azuonye 1983), so too do the repertoires of the individual singer. The repertoires of the leading singing in Ohafia today include accounts of contemporary events refracted through the myths and idiom of the heroic tradition. Kaalu Igirigiri’s account of “The War of Nigerian Unity” (Ogu Mmeka a Naijiria) is in this respect noteworthy for its moving albeit tendentious and tribalist representation of Nigerian history, from 1966 to 1970, as an absurd drama in which Igbo leaders show good sense and are not killed while Hausa leaders cling senselessly to power and so are killed under the new dispensation requiring an universal hand-over of power to the military. The pogrom and war unleashed on the Igbo people on account of these myopic follies were instigated by the white man, but though the war took a huge toll of life and property, it did not destroy the Igbo; and (note the local chauvinism), it did not affect Ohafia because of the people’s supernatural powers and experience in war, until after a deceptive peace was won and the occupying force of Nigerian troops burnt homes in the Ohafia patricians of Okon and Amaekpu believed to have been responsible for the frustration of Nigerian efforts to enter Ohafia across the Cross River (Azuonye, 1983: section 23).

Apart from the war songs, another important artistic means of expressing the heroic tenets of Ohafia historical traditions includes the group of sacred sculptures, in which the power and divinity of the heroic ancestors are depicted in impressionistic images. Closely related to the sacred ancestral pots in that they shroud the images of the ancestors with a certain mystique which compels veneration, these sacred sculptures are enshrined in special halls of ancestral images known as obu nkwu. The best preserved of these halls is the Asaga temple in the Asaga village-group. This has now been declared a national monument by the Federal Antiquities Commission. According to Nzekwu:

The omo-ukwu is a building of great size, with a beautifully constructed roof supported by pillars and beams about twelve inches in diameter (1964: 126).

It is richly decorated with murals depicting scenes of war as well as scenes from everyday life in the heroic age. But the glory of the building is its gallery of ancestors, both male and female. The figures are impressionistic rather than realistic and, in them, the greatness of the hero is suggested by the bulk of his image just as, in heroic poetry, that greatness is sometimes suggested by number of lines devoted to describing him by means of the traditional formulas.

The representation of the heroes of the heroic age in carved or stone images enshrined in special temples is not unique to the Ohafia tradition. Ancestor monuments of the same kind have been noted in the study of the heroic ages of other cultures and societies, and everywhere, there seems to be a close functional-aesthetic relationship between them and heroic poetry.

Conclusion

It seems rather clear from the foregoing that the impetus behind the warlike and head-hunting activities of the Ohafia people in pre-colonial times lies neither in savagery nor mercenarism, as generations of Western and Western-oriented scholars would have us believe. These activities stem rather from that heroic love of adventure and military glory which is characteristic of all heroic societies. The evidence before us suggests that at the time of the coming of the British, the Ohafia and indeed all Cross River Igbo and non-Igbo groups alike were in the heydays of their heroic age, an age called into being by challenging geographical-historical conditions against which men strove to survive and in the course of which struggle complex socio-cultural structures which were forged in support of the existing order. In Igbo land, the heroic age appears not to have been localized in the Cross River basin. It appears that all borderland Igbo people — north, west, east and south — passed through similar phases in the march of their social systems. The heroic epic and saga of the Anambra Igbo now being documented (see Azuonye, 1984: 1) bears witness to this possibility in the Anambra River basin. Indeed, there are also possibilities that the predatory impact of the borderland cultures on the hinterland and the turmoil of internal migrations may have stimulated heroic ages throughout Igbo land. Be that as it may, the documentation and study of the material and cultural offshoots of these heroic ages throughout Igbo land is a wide open field of fruitful investigation for scholars in the humanities and the social sciences.
Notes

1 Apart from on-the-spot observations in the field, the data contained in this section derive mainly from Forde and Jones (1950), Floyd (1969), and Nsugbe (1974).

2 The term 'confederation of autonomous village-groups' is used here after Ottenberg (1971: 67). There are altogether 25 village-groups in the Ohafe confederation. See Map 2 and note 11 below.

3 This is based on the disputed census figures of 1973. Nsugbe takes a 'conservative estimate of 65,000 to be the population of Ohafe in the 1960s' (1974: 11).

4 This includes the leopard, bush-hog, antelope, deer, bush-fowl, cane-rat, squirrel, bush-rat and bat. These figures prominently in the allegorical and parabolic fables as characters.

5 Alternatively 'Eastern Igbo', this major grouping of the Igbo, in Forde and Jones (1950: 51-56), includes fourteen communities which are not only located close to the non-Igbo Ibibio and Ogaja peoples of the Cross River State but also share many cultural features in common with them. According to Forde and Jones, their 'kinship system, men's associations and cults indicate that, apart from language, non-Igbo elements predominate in some groups, especially the Ada and Abam. Ages are more highly developed than among other Ibo and, among the Ada but not the Abam, associated with elaborate initiation rituals' (Ibid 52). Ada and Abam are two of three main cultural groupings into which the Cross River Igbo groups have been classified by Forde and Jones.

6 The third is Ora, the group which occupies the town of Aro-Chukwu in the extreme southeastern corner of the Cross River Igbo territory (Map 1). The Ada and the Abam, for their part, occupy the northern and central parts of the territory respectively. Ohafe is one of six large communities which constitute the Abam cultural grouping.

7 The Umuahia-Ohafe-Arochukwu Road was constructed between 1961 and 1962.

8 The quotation is from Nsugbe, 1974: 3.

9 The historical information contained in this section has been pieced together from a wide range of sources: Partridge (1905), Leonard (1906), Tremearne (1912), Basden (1921, 1938), Balfe (1926), Burns (1929), Lucas (1930), Cowan (1935), McFarlan (1946), Ojike (1946), Dike (1956), Afigbo (1965), Floyd (1969), Henderson (1972), Uka (1972), Latham (1973), Ichiere (1976), and Dike and Ekejiuba (1978).

10 The tradition is the subject of one version of the legend of the origin of Ohafe in the traditional epic corpus (as Azoonye, 1987). In this version, the origin of the founding fathers is traced further back to the ancient Kingdom of Benin; and in yet another version by another bard (yet to be fully transcribed), a more recent opinion that the Igbo are descended from the Hebrew is incorporated. Nevertheless, these extensions of the tradition are less credible than the core tradition of Ibeke origins. The credibility of the latter is strengthened by the fact that the Ibeke have a similar tradition about Ohafe origins and maintain fraternal relations with the Ohafe (see Nsugbe, 1974: 15-18). By contrast, the myth of Benin and Hebrew origins seems more like the universal tendency to use heroic poetry to claim noble ancestry or relationship with great civilizations of the past. In fact, the idea that the Ibeke are descendants of the Hebrew is probably based on the identity of sound between Ibo (the Anglicized form of the name Igbo) and Hebrew.

11 On strategic hill-top locations in the early period of Igbo history, the historical geographer, Floyd (1969: 46), writes as follows: 'Hill-top defensive locations for villages and the protective envisions of dissected Plateau country or high plains are to be found in most areas of Eastern Nigeria where medium to high densities of population exist today... By contrast, the open and flat countryside of the upper Cross River region (Ahabaliki and Western Ogaja provinces) offered no natural protection for its inhabitants, and their subsisting by the Ar-Abam fraternity was made easier because of it.'

12 Nsugbe explains, 'What appears at first sight to be the evidence of dual organization in the grouping of Ohafe local units involves certain units, eight in number, which call themselves the Ohafe. These villages each have the special right to run a powerful political and administrative body of their own, called Umuaaka. This right is denied to the remaining seventeen villages which, however, do not recognize themselves as a group, nor act as one in opposition to the Ohafe villages. On the contrary, they tend to accept as the outer status of the Ohafe villages... The free-born members of each of the eight Ohafe villages refer to themselves as the amadi ("tolerable" or "true sons") of Ohafe' (Nsugbe, 1974: 34-35). A similar recognition is accorded to these villages (actually village-groups) in the catalogues of heroes and lineages, in the Ohafe epic songs. See especially the Epics of Elibe Aja and Amaogo, in Azoonye, 1987 (sections 6.1. - 6.4. and 2.1. - 9.6).

13 In an article on the arrival of the Aro Igbo state, Dike and Ekejiuba have put forward the following corroborative argument, in which they identify the displaced aborigines as comprising the Ibibio and an autochthonous group of probably Ogoya stock. 'It would appear,' they write, 'that the Ibibio were relatively peacefully integrated with the autochthones, because of their experierence independence of their economies and the affinities of their cultures. Conflict therefore appeared less likely than the tension of the succeeding Ibo movements in the region... The arrival of Igbo groups intensified conflicts, and made intergroup relationships between the different swidden agriculturists more complex' (1978: 273).

14 On this conception of the 'heroic age', Bowra (1957: 1 and 1972: 79) writes: 'Many people cherish the legend of an age which, in the splendour and scope of its achievements and in the prodigious qualities of the men who took part in them, is thought to eclipse all that comes after it. For the Greeks, this was the age of heroes, and though the word heroes originally meant no more than 'Warrior', it soon assumed more august associations and implied a special superiority in human endowments and endeavours. Bowra further remarks that 'A number of such stories seem to be found in a number of other peoples and there is no reason to suppose that it appears in different forms it remains fundamentally the same'. This applies very well to the Ohafe people, among whom, the term ndi-ndibe (strong) has over the years assumed the same connotations as 'hero' in the idiom of heroic poetry.

15 Bowra (1957: 11) sees the need to make a distinction between 'a truly heroic society' and 'other societies which have, at times and at places, been characterized by an enthusiasm for prowess and violent deeds'. In his view, the Ohafe is a case in point: 'he writes, 'turns on the vastly increased attention paid to war, the energy and enterprise thrown into it, and the special outlook which it promotes'. He then cites three cases, the first two of which are exact parallels of the situation that developed in the Cross River area: 'In some cases this intensification of a military ideal is due simply to the need for manpower in lawless districts and in the case of other peoples and tribes, in other cases, as with the Achaeans and the Huns, the perfecting of a military system and the adoption of new weapons or tactics open up prospects of living more luxuriously and more easily by predatory methods at the expense of richer and more established societies; in still other cases, as in Wales, a people, which has been used to peaceful ways, is driven by foreign invaders to take to war as a normal routine.' Floyd (1969: 46) refers to aspects of these three typical situations in his comments on the need for "defensible sites for villages" in the early history of Eastern Nigeria: 'the cardinal considerations in the selection of areas for settlement were that they should contain defensible sites for villages, and that they offer land of sufficient size and quality to provide adequate sustenance for the group. The constant threat of attack from militant or revenge-seeking alien tribes-men, hungry neighbours whose crops failed or slave-raiding parties, was an insuppressible reality of life up to the beginning of this century.'
to say that any one has gone so far as to suppose a law of poetry which makes a common theme at a certain stage in the growth of poetry, and which results in reaving, but still that is implied by those who study the heroic element in early poetry as primarily a literary problem. Its proper study is even more anthropological and historical, and what Doughty tells us about cattle-lifting among the Bedouins is more enlightening, if we are reading Nester's tale of a cattle raid into Eliss, than is the mere knowledge that the theme occurs elsewhere in ancient poetry."

19 See Epic of Elibe Ajya (Azuonye 1979 and 1987). In this epic, an Ohaifa hunter, Elibe Ajya, like Beowulf in King Hrothgar's country in the Anglo-Saxon analogue, saves the people of Arochukwu from the menace of Depedepede which constantly raids their homes seizing and devouring men and livestock.

20 For a discussion of the practice of head-hunting in the Mycenean and Germanic heroic ages, see Chadwick (1932-40, vol. i: 92-94).

21 The deterrence value of possessing evidence of frequent successes in head-hunting, in the heroic age, is somewhat comparable to the nuclear deterrent in international relations today.

22 The head-hunting practice of the Ohaifa is not only similar to that of the Ibibio described in Talbot (1926: chapter XVII), its provenance also fits into the general pattern of historical evolution whereby head-hunting begets head-hunting. We are told in Tremeeran, for example, that the Kaji people of the non-Islamic belt of Central Nigeria, took up head-hunting only because their neighbours, the Kagero, practiced it on them (1912: 185).

23 This and the subsequent rendering of the term, ujo, are the nearest we can go in finding English equivalents of the Ohaifa terms.

24 The okara cloth, also known as 'George', is a status symbol all over Igbo land; it is usually striped and woven of an admixture of silk and cotton. Originally imported from India, it is now made and imported in large quantities from Manchester. A man wearing an okara cloth and a cape decorated with eagle feathers and the red-tailed feathers of a parrot is generally regarded as rich and respected.

25 See Epics of Nne Mgbafo (Azuonye 1979, 1983 and 1987) and Iyin Onwu (Azuonye 1979 and 1987). In Iyin Onwu, the heroine earns the title, Ogbe-etuwa-di-ya (Killer-that-gives-the-honour-to-her-husband) for contriving a situation in which she kills from enemy interception leaving a pregnant woman to be given her chopped-off head to her cowardly husband in order to relieve him of the shame and deprivations of an ujo life. In Nne Mgbafo, the heroine boldly confronts the enemy Ibibio captors of her husband and impresses them by her unusual valour to release him. In one version of the tale (CI), she intercepts a passerby, on their homeward journey, kills him and like Iyin Onwu gives him chopped-off head to her husband.

26 Cp Bowra (1957: 8): 'heroic ages, as we know them from history represent a crucial and dramatic stage in the emergence of the individual from the mass.'

27 Ohaifa traditions claim that it was the custom for each of the twenty-five village-groups to contribute a 'batallion' of abuo-adighya-na-nnu-abo, i.e. 'two short of four hundred (nna) times two' or 798 men. This would suggest a large army of 19,950 men. It is well known that Ohaifa was involved in a serious military confrontation with a rival power. The accuracy and significance of this figure are a matter for further research. For our present purposes, it would seem fair to assume that the figure refers to the largeness of the armies which the war-chiefs could levy at short notice and the factor of an established system of mobilizations within the society had developed. The nature of the mobilization process for major military expeditions may be gleaned from the six versions of the epic of Amogbo available at the moment (Azuonye 1979 and 1983).

28 This is based on traditions recorded in 1967 from Chiefs Kanu Okoroji and Okorofo Uwa Nwangoro, at Aro-Chukwu. These traditions formed the basis of a five-part radio talk which I broadcast over the Voice of Biafra early in 1968. The texts of the talk and the broadcast tape-recordings are available in the Archives of the Anambra and Imo States Broadcasting Services, at Enugu and Owerri, respectively.

29 See Elibe Ajya (Azuonye 1979 and 1987). In the wake of the attacks on their men and livestock, particularly which the hunter-hero ultimately kills, Aru war chiefs come to Ohaifa offering various expensive rewards for the services of any man who could help them out; but they are rebuffed in one Ohaifa community after the other because of their previous breaches of ukwusi in unknown territories.

30 The epics of Amogbo, Egbetle, and Iguru as well as the ancestral legend of Ebusul Iguma (Azuonye 1987), mention military expeditions by head-hunting Ohaifa warriors in such far away Igbo territories as Ibyghu (in the Enugu-Port Harcourt railway, near Okigwe), Okpata (on the road to Nsukka) and Elugu (lit. up country — a general name for the Northern Igbo of Anambra and parts of Imo State).

31 The information contained in this section derives mainly from Goody (1961), Ottenberg (1968), Forde and Jones (1950), Uka (1972) and Nsogbu (1974).

32 An important feature of the Ohaifa double-descent system, reflected in the title of Nsogbu's work, Ohaifa: A Matrilineal Ibo Peepole, is the dominance of the matrilineage over the patrilineage. 'Not only is the Ohaifa matrilineage the main property-owning and inheriting group, it is also the exogamous group; the patrilineage is non-exogamous and not the main property-owning or property-inheriting group' (1974: 121). Nsogbu also points out a number of psychological reasons why the matrilineage is the dominant group in the system. He refers to a number of common sayings among the people which express their belief that the only bond anyone can assert with certainty with any group is that of kpele (same womb). He then concludes by stating that if 'the Ohaifa descent system is to be classified as one of double descent, it must also be made clear that matrilineal elements are dominant in the system' (121). I draw attention to this strong matrilineal tendency, because, as can be seen in the texts of the war songs recorded (1987), warriors tend to be identified more as sons of their mothers than of their fathers and they generally tend to be more attached to their maternal than to their patrilincs.

33 A typical example is Asaga (i.e. A si aga? — 'Who says we should not pass?'). The name is informed by the reputation of the Asaga people as a community of fearless men who prefer to venture into places where others fear to approach. For a play on this image, see, for example, the title of Ajaya (Palmfruit raid) (1979 and 1987: lines 43-47).

34 This is referred to in the songs as Oke Ikwun.

35 Orte is also the name of the second day of the four day Igbo market week — Eke, Orte, Afo, and Nkwo. This goddess is presumably the patron deity of this holy day when no farming work is done anywhere in Ohaifa.

36 See note 24 above.


38 Elsewhere, in Igbo land, as in the Uhuru Agbaja community studied by Miss Green (1947: 25), the age groups were largely social and convivial in their activities, and concerned with the interests of their own members.

39 Ordinarily, nna and nne simply mean 'father' and 'mother' respectively, but applied to venerable old men and women, connote the idea of 'greatness'. It is in order to convey this difference that the initial letters of these terms are spelt here and elsewhere in the works with capital letters.

40 The information contained in this section is based largely on Nsogbu, Nzekwu and Uka (see note 25 above).

41 Thus in Amogbo B1 (Azuonye 1987: 9.1) and in other oral epic texts, ancestral heroes are invoked as arusibi.

42 These terms translate respectively into 'Stories of long ago', 'Stories of the land or the earth' and 'Stories of the ancestors'.
References


