



THE ESCAPE OF CHIEF ADA SPIFF TO TWON-BRASS AND THE FOUNDING OF GBOBOKIRI (ADA-AMA) IN 1871 AND EKPERIKIRI 1873

Oscar Inowei – Alabo

Department of History

Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education, Sagbama, Bayelsa State

Email.inobra4@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is about the conversion of chief Ada –Spiff with Christianity at Nembe and his subsequent escape into Twon-Brass as a result of him violating the traditional taboos of the Nembe traditional juju. Before the coming of Christianity into Nembe, there are certain belief which the people believed are taboos which is forbidden in the Nembe society. But Chief Ada Spiff believed in his Christian faith was alleged to have violated and was sentenced to death at the instinct of the Juju priest. Chief Ada Spiff escaped to Twon-Brass with the secret assistance of King Ockiya Amayanabo of Nembe – Brass

INTRODUCTION

Human migration is a universal phenomenon and dates back to the appearance of Homosapiens on earth. Migration and settlement in pre-modern times involved person moving from one place to another for causes connected with wars, political crisis, calamities and religious upheavals. Chief Ada Spiff migrated to Nembe after travelling in ships to several places in search of fortunes. In the course of his travelling journeys, Chief Spiff picked up a smattering of English Language which helped him greatly in his trade with the European on the Brass River. On arrival at Nembe, chief Spiff stayed at Bassambiri with King Duguriya for a While and moved to Ogbolomabiri where he had a distinguished career as a trader under the guidance of Chief Amange. During the Nembe/Kalabari war in 1862 at the time of King Kien, Chief Ada Spiff and Chief Igbeta being great friends initially manned the same war canoe – Ada at the bow and Igbeta at the stem. Later each launched his own separate canoe in the war, thereby proving their capabilities to earn the much coveted title of autonomous war canoe chieftaincy. Having achieved wealth and fame, Chief Ada Spiff was forced to migrate again due to religious persecution having converted to a Christian faith and was alleged to have committed a sacrilious.

Chief Ada Spiff was an intimate and bosom friend of King Ockiya, the Amayanabo of Nembe-Brass. Spiff was at the time living with his retinue at Agbutubu Polo, Nembe town, where he had a magnificent upstairs building. As the land could no longer accommodate his increasing house hold, Chief Spiff appealed to King Ockiya, the Amayanabo of Nembe-Brass for an alternative land and was offered Isoukiri bush. In that pre-christian era, Isoukiri was regarded as a sacred bush and no person would ever dare to enter and clear such a bush for fear of offending the traditional Juju. In that Pre-Christian era of Nembe society, like other communities was bedevilled by several superstitious belief and taboos, one of them was the total ban on the cultivations of yams by the traditional deity Ogidiga. The fear of violating the strange injunction of the Juju priest



was the Nembe actually abandoned agriculture pursuits on the little available arable lands and depended on expedition to Aboh and elsewhere for the supply of yams and other essentials foods for their existence.

With the advent of Christianity however, signs of great changes appear on the Nembe Society. However Chief Ada Spiff fortified by his faith in God, decided to embark on yam cultivation on the land offered him at Isoukiri bush before building on it, Chief Ada's agricultural activities aroused the anger of the Juju priest and consequently plans were laid for his elimination with the connivance of some influential chiefs of Nembe. Then an outbreak of small pox epidemics was ravaging the town and the Juju priests were consulted as to the cause of the terrible disaster. The chief Juju priest quickly divined that Chief Ada Spiff had offended the deity by entering the sacred bush and cultivate yams on Nembe soil and in the process had cut the emblematic plant representing the Nembe national deity. All these were serious accusations involving death penalty in the pre-Christian era where there were no health care facilities in most parts of Nigeria, small pox epidemic was very rampant everywhere, Nembe town was no exception. From time to time community came under the attack of small pox and other dreadful diseases. But on this particular occasion the people found a convenient accusation on Christianity and Chief Ada Spiff as the culprit.

All of a sudden Nembe was in a state of turmoil and both King Ockiya and his chiefs were perplexed as to what to do with Chief Ada Spiff in view of his wealth and influential position in the town. Series of meeting were held in the town over the issue between the chiefs and the Juju priest, the latter leading the attack against the new faith. The meetings were held mostly at Oruamabiri, the centre of heathenism. Chief Ada Spiff was never invited to the meetings having been declared a *persona non grata*, by the town. At last, under pressure from the Juju priest the chiefs took the painful decision that Chief Ada Spiff should be killed and offered as sacrifice to the deity. It was strongly believed that by sacrificing Chief Ada Spiff the anger of the deity would be appeased and the epidemic would cease. Following these steps, steps were taken to arrest Chief Ada Spiff in the night for execution at the appropriate time.

King Ockiya, the Amayanabo of Nembe out of Christian love for an intimate and trusted friend secretly informed Chief Ada Spiff of the plot and urged him to leave the town immediately, But King Ockiya was bound by an oath of secrecy like the chiefs, not to divulge any information on the matter to Chief Ada Spiff, King Ockiya could not therefore, communicate with Chief Ada Spiff directly but only through an emissary who adopted the ingenious device of scattering periwinkle shells on the zinc roof of Chief Ada Spiff house at night on August 1871, Chief Ada Spiff with few of his men, all disguised as fishermen, left Nembe in King Ockiya boat to seek asylum under the British traders at Twon-Brass, Chief Ada Spiff landed at Twon-Brass safely. At Nembe, the appointed time, the assailants went to Chief Ada Spiff's house and found out that he had escaped. At his sudden disappearance, the chief took swift actions in organising search parties in three different directions, one took the Kalabari rout, another went to Ogbia Creek, and



the third followed the Brass River to Twon-Brass. By the time the search team led by Chief Oruwari arrived Twon-Brass, Chief Ada Spiff has already taken refuge in one of the European trading hulks based at Twon-Brass, having failed to secure the release of Chief Ada Spiff went back and reported the result to King Ockiya, the Amayanabo of Nembe-Brass, who merely nodded with apparent satisfaction over the turn of events. Later it was widely rumoured that through King Ockya's, deliberately manures the movement of the boats, as it was delayed for several hours presumably, to forestall Chief Ada Spiff being apprehended on his way to Twon-Brass. The rumour seemed to have a strong foundation considering King Ockiya role in the whole affairs and especially his long standing intimacy with Chief Ada Spiff.

CHIEF ADA SPIFF AT TWON-BRASS

Chief Ada Spiff was at Twon-Brass and the most important result of that dramatic flight from the assassins was the establishment of the Ada Spiff town known as Gbobokiri. On arrival at Twon-Brass, Chief Ada Spiff stayed in a British trading company hulk for some times and later moved to the mission house under the protection of Reverend Thomas Johnson. His men were settled in Shidi compound. Chief Ada Spiff was quite safe at the mission for Reverend Thomas Johnson was a respected and loved as a faithful minister, a man on unbending integrity and true benevolence. Consequently the mission house became the asylum of the oppressed and fugitives from religious persecution. Thus the persecution and exile which Chief Ada Spiff suffered became the cornerstone of Christianity in Twon-Brass.

Through the intervention of Reverend Thomas Johnson, Chief Ada Spiff was able to retrieve few of his personal possessions, the rest of his property have been looted by the people of Nembe. While at the mission Chief Ada Spiff requested for a permanent abode and was granted a piece of land on the outskirts of the town by the chiefs of Twon-Brass. The land was initially cultivated as a cassava farm under the caretaker of a man named Adam Gbobo, hence the settlement became known as Gbobokiri from 1871 until in the late 1990's when it was reverted back to the original founder's name Ada-Ama. The same also applies to Ekperikiri founded by Chief Ada Spiff in 1873 which still bears the name of its caretaker Ekperi, to this day. Ekperikiri land was acquired by Chief Ada Spiff from one Mr. Ayiga of Ologoama to serve as a plantation for the supply of foodstuff to Gbobokiri (Ada-Ama) in Twon-Brass. After staying at the mission for two years Chief Ada Spiff moved to the land offered him by the Chiefs of Twon-Brass. He erected a number of houses for his men and an upstairs building as his personal residence. By that time Chief Ada Spiff had severed all connections with Nembe and had become completely absorbed in Twon-Brass, thereby enjoying all right and privileges normally accorded to indigenes of the town, from this humble beginning, guided by the hand of God, the settlement has expanded into a full fledged community and is now playing a significant role in the affairs of Twon-Brass. At Twon-Brass the activities of Chief Ada Spiff were directed to acquiring wealth as a basis for the development of virile and respected community, for ten years he was engage in trading with the European Super Cargoes. During that short period of time Chief Ada Spiff acquired immense wealth which he used in consolidating



his position at Twon-Brass and training as many sons and daughters of his chieftaincy House. Prominent among those he trained were Chief James Allen Spiff (who later succeeded Chief Ada Spiff as Head of the Chieftaincy House) and Mr. Dandeson Coates Spiff (father of late Venerable Alfred Dandeson Spiff) both of them educated at the famous grammar school in Freetown, Sierra-Leone. On their return, chief Ada Spiff assigned Dandeson Spiff to the mission for ecclesiastical work while he retained James Spiff as his personal clerk. Before chief Ada Spiff escaped to Twon-Brass he had married several wives. chief Ada's eldest son, Thomas Ebiegberi who was born after chief Ada's conversion to Christianity was named "Ebiegberi" meaning goodnews- Eleanor Amami-isele a daughter, was born at Nembe in the heat of the tension between the converts and heathens, chief Ada had become an object of attacks and curses by the aged women of the community. He named her "Teriyai", meaning the abuses and curses on him were like a hat on his head.

Chief Ada Spiff was not ruffled in his encounter with the unbelieving masses at the introduction of Christianity into Nembe. Rather his faith in God waxed stronger over the years. At Twon-Brass Chief Ada Spiff received bountiful rewards, his personal possessions were more than what he lost at Nembe. And what is more important is a respectable community was founded, and his name is today immortalized, it is essential to emphasize that Chief Ada Spiff did not come to Twon-Brass to seek the soft option of life, from the time Chief Ada Spiff landed at Twon-Brass he became fully involved in the affairs of the town. This was clearly evident from the role he played in the Calmday crisis in 1875. The crisis aroused as a result of the alleged looting of a British cargo vessel that got wrecked at the sand bar at the mouth of the Brass River. Major Calmday, a military intelligence officer, was sent out from England to investigate the incident. His conclusion after enquiry was that the natives of Twon-Brass and other coastal communities looted the cargoes and equipment onboard the ship. He therefore took draconian measures to exact compensations by imposing fines amounting to double the value of any articles removed from the ship and this created a crisis situation in the communities concerned. Many affected Chieftaincies Houses and family heads had no money to pay the fines and were forced to dispose off their members to raise the required amounts. Those offered for sale mostly women, were kept under lock in sun and some who could not bear the ordeal expressed their agony in songs.

Despite appeals made to him by some influential chiefs to temper justice with mercy, Calmday decided to handle the situation with such ruthlessness that he was widely named, Tekefa: meaning no begging. This crisis was responsible for the movement and absorption of a large number of persons into other Chieftaincies Houses and Towns in Nembe Kingdom. This caused the dislocation of families in several cases through the acquisition of sisters and brothers by different heads, notably Chief Sambo and Chief Ada Spiff. Although Ada Chieftaincy was not directly involved in the matter, yet Chief Ada Spiff teamed up with Chief Samuel Sambo to pay the compensation on behalf of families affected in Twon-Brass. Consequently, the movement of person was largely within the towns and only few indigenes found themselves in Chieftaincies Houses



outside Twon-Brass. Chief Ada Spiff activities at Twon-Brass were many sided. Apart from trading, Chief Ada Spiff engaged himself in planting fruits trees and rearing cattle. Two of the trees bread fruits and kolanuts survived to a great age, and served the community in diverse ways. The area surrounding the kolanut trees became, like a centre for relaxation and public disputation. In the evenings the elders of the community usually retired there to play games (drought) and discuss current affairs and trade generally. It also served as a town hall where the meetings of the Chieftaincy House were held. The Kolanut trees eminently fulfilled its role as a meeting place for several years, before it fell a victim to erosion in the late 1930's. Regarding the cattles, Chief Ada Spiff initially kept just a few heads specifically for slaughtering to entertain the community during annual general meetings and on special occasions such as the burial and installation of chiefs in the town. In time the cattle increased, and as their movement was not restricted the cows soon became a menace to the community during the regime of Chief James Allen Spiff. It happened that in 1922 one of the cows strayed into Cameroon's compound in Twon-Brass and destroyed some food crops. Chief Uriah Opuene Cameroon, took his rifle, aimed at the errant cows and shot one of them down. This incident would normally have passed without any serious repercussion, but it set in motion a chain of events that almost led to Gbobokiri (Ada-Ama) packing out of Twon-Brass. When Chief Cameroon saw the determination of the Gbobokiri (Ada-Am) elements in carrying out their intentions, he was disturbed and he immediately took steps to arrest the situation. He pleaded with Chief James Spiff not to carry the issue to an extent that might jeopardise the relationship of Twon-Brass and Gbobokiri (Ada-Ama). He argued that the three component unit of Twon-Brass, Gbobokiri (Ada-Ama) and Oruwarikiri (Kemmer Town) that made up the town were like a tripod and if one leg was removed the tripod could no longer stand. Chief James Spiff eventually yielded to his pleading and that resulted into the signing of a memorandum of unity which served as the basis for the formal integration of Gbobokiri (Ad-Ama) into Twon-Brass.

Following this incident Chief James Spiff arranged for the cows to be confined in an enclosure where they remained and multiplies over the years. During the Nigerian Civil War, a number of Biafra soldiers were posted to Twon-Brass. Immediately the soldiers arrived they started to feast on the cows at the rate of two to three cows a week unmindful of the ill-will their reckless actions generated in the community. This indiscriminate slaughtering of cows continued until the 20th may, 1968 when the last cow was killed. On the sudden appearance of the Federal troops on the fateful morning the Biafra soldiers abandoned their posts and fled in disarray, leaving the carcass intact to the joy and delight of the liberating forces. And so ended the dramatically, the century old story of the cows that Chief Ada Spiff attempted to rear at Twon-Brass.

THE DEATH OF THE CHIEF ADA SPIFF

Chief Ada Spiff was very liberal minded, progressive in outlook and had no trait of disposition in his administration of the community. Largely due to his paternalistic attitude a number of persons flocked into Ada House, for protection from and those he acquired personally. It is reported that a prominent Chief in Twon-Brass went to see



Chief Ada Spiff and found him dining with some senior members of his household. The visitor was amazed and could not help questioning Chief Ada Spiff, why he had condescended to dine with his men, none being a chief like himself. Chief Ada Spiff replied that he did not see anything wrong in sitting at the same table with his own men. He pointed out that he came to Twon-Brass alone without any brother or sister, but through the grace of God he had expanded in terms of material and human resources. The man the visitor saw with him was more or less his brothers. Chief Ada Spiff added that he had no room for discrimination in his heart and the senior members were assisting him in the overall development of the chieftaincy House. They were therefore entitled to dine with him and discuss matters patterning to the well being of the community at close range. The visitor was not quite impressed and left, with Chief Ada Spiff and his men sitting round the festive table.

By adopting the principle of collective responsibility in managing the affairs of the chieftaincy House, Chief Ada Spiff was able to lay a solid foundation for the rapid growth of Gbobokiri (Ada-Ama) which is successor, Chief James Allen Spiff, inherited and built up with dedication and vigour during his long reign spanning nearly half a century.

Whilst still on the crest of fame, Chief Ada Spiff fell ill and died suddenly on 16th February 1882 – eleven years after leaving Nembe in search of religious freedom on the 18th February his remains were buried amidst the wailing and lamentations of his people and friends. When Chief Ada Spiff died the members of the Chieftaincy House attributed his death to an overdose of sleeping drugs administered by the British medical doctor who attended to him. Blinded by rage, they held the doctor and beat him up. This incident was reported to the British Consul Station at Benin River who, after consulting with the Foreign Office in London, imposed a fine of 100 casks of oil on the Chieftaincy House for assaulting the British Medical doctor. The fine was heavy in terms of monetary values prevailing in those days. It was therefore, feared that the Chieftaincy House would not be able to pay the fine and might consequently go into liquidation. In fact some wealthy chiefs at Nembe hinted at the possibility of acquiring the virile members in the event of Ada Chieftaincy House liquidating. To the utter amazement of all Chief James Allen Spiff issued a cheque to pay the fine before the deadline and thus saved the Chieftaincy House from the danger of imminent extinction.

With the death of Chief Ada Spiff, it is relevant to examine the circumstances of his early conversion to Christianity in a predominantly heathenish society. One thing that might have helped Ada greatly in breaking away from the rigid adherence to Nembe customs and traditions was the fact that Chief Ada Spiff arrived Nembe at an age when he was no longer susceptible to beliefs and customs prevalent in the society which were probably at variance to religious techniques and practices he had earlier imbibed in his native land before migrating to Nembe. It was, therefore relatively easy for him to accept the tenets of the new faith and thus became a very strong pillar of Christianity at the early stage of the establishment of church in Twon-Brass



Following the invasion of Akassa, Britain launched full scale military operations against Nembe which resulted in destruction of the metropolis, Twon-Brass and Okpoama. Four British warships under the command of Vice Admiral Sir Fredrick Bedford led the attack and for two days a pitched battle was fought between the British naval forces and the Nembe Armada under the command of King Koko. In the fighting on Nembe soul, Chief Ada's store yard building at Nembe was burnt down along with that of Chief young George Yemanain, King Ockiya's building was reportedly spared by the British forces on account of the role he played in establishing Christianity at Nembe.

THE CONVERSION OF CHIEF ORUWARI

Before the building of a church at Nembe, the king and chiefs who had been converted to the Christian faith made it a regular business of travelling to Twon-Brass for class meetings and church services every weekend. This was the experience of many converts before the chapel was built at Nembe. Early in 1876 Chief Oruwari, who had never embraced the Christian faith, came to Twon-Brass to visit Chief Ada Spiff. They had been friends and had both fought in the Kalabari wars but each now stood on a different religious platform. In the course of their discussions chief Oruwari noted that the Chieftaincy Houses and communities that accepted Christianity appeared to have made phenomenal progress as compare with those which did not accept the new faith, he wondered why this was so. Chief Ada Spiff explained that there was more in Christianity than what was preached from the pulpit and that with the onset of the living faith, the traditional Juju was seemed to be propitious were no longer in control of human affairs.

Chief Oruwari accepted this view and agreed to accompany Chief Ada Spiff to attend a church service for the first time on the following Sunday. The Vicar at Twon-Brass, the Reverend Thomas Johnson, knew Chief Oruwari very well and least expected to see him in the church in view of the staunch opposition to Christianity. When the Vicar mounted the pulpit to preach and saw chief Oruwari sitting by the side of Chief Ada Spiff, he was astonished and changed the text of the sermon to 1st Samuel chapter 10 vs 11; is Saul also among the prophets?" it is reported that Chief Oruwari was so touched by the sermon that he immediately decided to follow the footsteps of King Ockiya, the Amayanabo of Nembe, by discarding with his idols and charms and embraced Christianity. Chief Oruwari founded the settlement called Oruwari-kiri as a trading deport at Twon-Brass. He trained the late Chief William Kemmer in England and on his return settled him at Oruwari-kiri, hence the place became also known as Kemmer town. William kemmer later became the Head of the Oruwari Chieftaincy House in Nembe before his death on the 10th October 1892. Chief William Kemmer also established Christianity in that sector of Twon-Brass as was according nick-named "Seibokorogha" land of prosperity.

CONCLUSION

Chief Ada Spiff escaped to Twon-brass was an act of God, through the intervention of King Ockiya, Amayanabo of Neme-Brass. It was a miraculous intervention by God in response to the cries of a man whose life was in danger. It is a clear testimony that at