

**The Pedigree, Personality and Philosophy of a Nigerian Monarch: The Life of His  
Royal Highness Christian Atani Okpofaa Otobotekere**

By

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**Introduction**

Perhaps nothing reveals the nature of a person than his pedigree, personality and philosophy. Thus, it is against the backdrop of these features that we intend to peer into and analyse the life of a Nigerian monarch in the Niger Delta – the man whom we have come to know by the sobriquet, the Poet-King – His Royal Highness Christian Atani Okpofaa Otobotekere now age ninety-seven. Economist, Accountant, Philosopher, Poet, Environmentalist and Chieftain, he is king (Amananaowei) of the town of Tombia in the Ekpetiama Kingdom of the Yenagoa Local Government Area of the southern Nigerian state of Bayelsa.

**Pedigree of the Christian Otobotekere**

His Royal Highness Christian Otobotekere was born on the 21st of April, 1925, in the small but growing town of Tombia, located 5<sup>o</sup> North of the Equator by latitude 6<sup>o</sup> East of the Prime Meridian, at the bank of the River Nun in the Delta of the River Niger (Olali, et al 2008:3). His father, Okpofaa (originally spelled Okpofagha), was the son of Chief Otobotekere, the ruling chieftain of the Birifabiri quarter of Tombia, who in his day, was in co-operation with his brothers, responsible for introducing Christianity to Tombia on the 11th day of the 11th month of 1911, being 11th November of that year. He died in 1939. Okpofaa's mother, Gbeinkoromo, was the daughter of Ekpebu of Sabagreia town in the Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Council Area of Bayelsa State.

Christian's mother, *Were*, was the daughter of Chief Akoko, a chieftain of the Ingbelebiri quarter of Tombia. Her mother was Oweipele of the Burudani quarter of Sabagreia. *Were* died when Christian was just an infant. He was thus raised by his maternal and paternal grandmothers – Oweipele and Gbeinkoromo respectively, whom he cherished for nurturing him with utmost love and care.

The fact that Christian has his ancestral roots in both quarters of Tombia, being Birifabiri and Ingbelebiri, has undoubtedly served his goodwill right from his cradle to his coronation and after. He recalls that back in his childhood days, he had defied the orders of the Ingbelebiri people and crossed into their territory at forbidden times. In his words: *during certain religious festivals when the Birifabiri were not allowed to cross the instituted demarcating line into Ingbelebiri, I was found crossing the line but was spared being sanctioned, because of my dual family pedigree* (Otobotekere, C.A.O., Personal Interview, 2008).

At birth, his parents had called him Christian, reminiscent of the introduction of Christianity to Tombia in 1911, just fourteen years before his birth. As could be observed, Christian Okpofaa Otobotekere was by birth a natural descendant of two chieftains on his paternal and maternal sides – Chief Otobotekere and Chief Akoko of Birifabiri and Ingbelebiri respectively. He thus had the touch of royalty in his veins, which of course blossomed and became manifest when he was, on his own merit and right, elected and crowned ruler of Tombia in 1972 and 1975 respectively. Since ascending the throne, his dual pedigree has clearly been effective in his ability to rule Tombia as one united entity, as he has increasingly gained a wide acceptance of all his people regardless of their quarter or compound of origin.

### **Personality of the Poet-King Christian Otobotekere**

The word ‘personality’ herein implies “character, disposition, nature, persona, temperament,” etc. It is the totality of a person’s attitude, interests, behavioural patterns, emotional responses and individual traits that endure over long periods of time (Encarta, 2009). Many who have studied the personality of Christian Otobotekere would agree that his character could be defined by four traits, namely, integrity, determination, humility and hospitality. These evident virtues have indeed reflected his disposition from his earliest days to the ninety-seventh year, thus far, of his sojourn on earth. We shall examine each of these traits accordingly.

### **Integrity**

According to the New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, “Integrity” is synonymous with uprightness of character, probity and honesty. It also denotes soundness and completeness. Clearly, in the light of the above definitions, sufficient evidence abounds that Christian Otobotekere is an epitome of integrity. This is buttressed by certain antecedents that have, without being biased, proved his sincere stance and nature. For instance, in the past forty-six years since he was installed king of Tombia town, nobody has accused him of any act of impropriety within or outside the town. He told this writer in 2008, of how many years ago, some youths in his domain

accused him and his chiefs of mismanaging the town's funds and requested to manage it themselves. Not having any secret about how the funds were being managed, he, in agreement with his chiefs, obliged and handed over the funds in the communal coffers to the youths. After a few months, he recalled, the youths came apologising, after they had run out of ideas on how to manage the funds that the chiefs had handed over to them and could not generate more funds to meet the town's expenses. They requested that the King and his chiefs should continue managing the financial affairs of the town. Apparently, he observes, they noticed that the funds were usually in short supply and that the King was more often than not, supporting the town with his personal funds and other fund-raising strategies. That was integrity and patriotism in action, on the part of His Highness Christian Otobotekere and his Chiefs at that time and after.

Also, in 1978, when he was named Chairman of the Rivers State Schools Management Committee for Yenagoa Division, he was determined to see that everyone in a position of responsibility maintained a high level of integrity. Thus, he declared his "no money will pass" stance, implying that he and the officers associated with his office should have nothing to do with the "filthy envelopes" of bribe money that were usually doled out by certain persons seeking to curry undue and unmerited favour. According to an account expressed in his eightieth-birthday citation, *"witnesses are living today when as Chairman of the Education Committee, he made a public pronouncement that "no money will pass" in his ... Committee. He effected the rule down the ladder. Some errant School Masters had to refund monies wrongly collected from job seekers, while bribe envelopes were returned to senders. These events occurred live."*

Consequently, as a result of Christian's emphases on honesty and hard work, being the fulcrum of his integrity, he was never accused of indulging in any unwholesome act throughout the nineteen years of his active service in the Shell British Petroleum Company or Shell BP as it was called at that time. His integrity was no doubt instrumental to his meteoric rise through the lower rungs of the senior staff cadre to the rank of Assistant Finance Controller of the company's Eastern Division. Also, after his retirement from Shell BP, he was strongly sought after to take up appointment in the public service sector in the Yenagoa Division of that era (Olali, 2009).

The following statement represents the view of one citizen, Freeborn Owei, of Ikibiri, a town near Christian Otobotekere's home of Tombia: *"HRH Otobotekere's rise to the top is seen as a product of hardwork and service to his people. He did very well during his days as an accountant with the Shell BP. He became the Amananaowei of Tombia in Ekpetiama and is presently the Acting Ibenanaowei of Ekpetiama Clan... HRH C.A.O. Otobotekere is a very composed leader*

*and is equal to face the challenges of any endeavour. His hardwork, patience, dedication and consistency have made him a complete leader and an icon. He is today, busy with the maintenance of peace and progress in his domain and is cherished by all."*

### **Determination**

It is evident even by a cursory glance at the life and times of HRH Christian Otobotekere thus far, that he has been a very determined person. Although a scion of chieftains, he had humble beginnings, and was not necessarily a silver-spoon child. Growing up in the often inclement deltaic environment, determination and perseverance were some of the natural traits that blossomed in him, but of course because he predisposed himself to those traits. Although several evidences that buttress the position that the persona of HRH Otobotekere has been definitively a determined one abound, three major precedents glaringly prove his persevering stance to life. One such situation was a school-related incident in his childhood. Christian had just passed out of Infant School at Tombia and was supposed to go on to the nearest primary school at Kaiama, being the Proctor Memorial Primary School, but his father, grandmothers and relatives thought that he was too small to travel to distant Kaiama and to live there out of their caring sights. So they decided that he should wait till the following year by which time he would be older and bigger to travel to live in a distant place like Kaiama. That decision seemed right to his father and relatives but not to him. Thus, from the moment the canoe conveying his classmates who were considered mature enough to go to school at Kaiama let the shores of Tombia, Christian remained at the waterside and began to cry and continued to wail for several hours. Fearing that he could be imperiled by his determined sobbing, his parents resolved to organise a canoe to take him to Kaiama to join his peers. The year was 1936, and he studied at Proctor Memorial School till 1940 when he passed his Standard Six examination. That incident no doubt remains a proof of his persevering and determined spirit even in childhood.

Again, when he was to leave for secondary school, it was in faraway Okrika, and it took a dint of determination and hardwork on the part of both Christian and his father – Okpofaa, to travel that considerably long trans-delta distance to attend the Okrika Grammar School. Indeed, twice in each term of the school year, Christian's father – Okpofaa and his friend – Adibalakumo, father of Chief Nathaniel Abo Frank-Opigo, took turns in conveying the boys to school by paddling the hundreds of miles from Tombia and Angiama respectively, in the Central Niger Delta to Okrika in the Eastern Delta. That was no mean feat and was the result of two determined fathers striving to ensure that their determined sons – Christian and Frank-Opigo respectively – got the then much sought after, but difficult to attain secondary school education. And happily, both Christian and Nathaniel passed out

of OGS with brilliant results. On his part, Christian Otobotekere finished with a Grade 1 in the Cambridge School Certificate examination.

Yet another experience that define His Highness Christian Otobotekere as a personality that epitomises the spirit of determination was his dogged effort in leaving the shores of Nigeria in a trans-Atlantic journey to the Fourah Bay University College, Sierra Leone in 1954. Sponsored by two kind-hearted cousins – King Lawrence Wanke Mabinton (Ebenibe Atissa) and Mr. Richmond I. Okara of Boumondi in Ekpetiama Clan, he went off to Sierra Leone in a Cargo boat from Buea in the Cameroons, where he had been a civil servant in the colonial office, to Fourah Bay. Arriving there rather late, towards the end of the first semester, his fellow students teased him that he wouldn't be able to cope with the workload from the lectures he had missed before the semester examination was due. They told him that they had been there from the beginning but were not finding their studies easy, and wondered what hope there was for a late arriver. Unperturbed, Christian assured them that he was determined to succeed. And in his words, he said to them, *"if it is so I'll study and die here."* And indeed, there is ample evidence that he did study to breaking point at Fourah Bay College. He graduated in 1957, bagging a Bachelor of Arts in Economics, with a recommendation to proceed to the University of Durham, in the United Kingdom, to which the Fourah Bay University College was affiliated. Although he couldn't go to Durham, his determination had paid off and he had become a graduate.

Throughout his adult life and in his later years, his determination has always aided his actions as and when necessary. And many will agree that even when his patience was tested to its limits during the incident of his adoption, he survived because of his determination to live in that place and situation of uncertainty.

### **Humility**

A thorough examination of the personality of Christian Otobotekere reveals that his character is synonymous with self-effacement, modesty and meekness. Unassuming, his lifestyle has been antonymous to pride, arrogance, egotism and self-importance.

Indeed, this assertion is buttressed by the words of Oseleye Dennis Ojula, a visitor to the palace of HRH Christian Otobotekere in 2011, *"On this day being the 6th of July, 2002, we visited the Okun of Tombia to inspect buildings that are to be cleaned by our company – Virgin Clean. His Royal Highness has a fatherly disposition which is very unusual from what our experiences have been in other places. Hardly would any Royal Father permit you to use his private convenience as done by our Royal Father. The summation of this experience is that he has a humble disposition towards his subjects. He is a personification of what Jesus ... says that he who is greatest must be humble enough to be a servant."*

Clearly, the foregoing experience narrated by Oseleye Ojula is typical of the persona of Christian Otobotekere referred to as His Royal Highness in the narrative. Evidently, his humble disposition has as well been noticed by many including the writer of his eightieth birthday citation, who noted: *"In evaluating this figure, one is tempted to use the superlatives only. He is one of the most humble, most unassuming and most amiable leaders among us... He is indeed a special gift to this community."*

Unequivocally, Christian Otobotekere has been a gift, not only to the Tombia Community but to the Ekpetiama Kingdom as a whole. For nearly two decades, he has served as Chairman of the Ekpetiama Chiefs and Peoples Congress in profound humility and humanness. Both before and after the demise of the incumbent clan head, His Majesty King E.P. Okoya, he did not make any attempt to arrogate the throne to himself, but resigned to God who rules in the affairs of men.

### **Hospitality**

Another peculiar strand that has defined the person of His Royal Highness Christian Otobotekere is his selfless and sincere hospitality. Indeed, a note left by the Bayelsa State Chapter of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) in 2007 lends credence to his remarkable hospitality. The ANA note states: *"The Association of Nigerian Authors, Bayelsa State Chapter, is proud to have HRH Otobotekere as a member. A role model, he is always blazing a trail for others in ANA to follow. The first to host the 'Taking Literature to the Communities' programme in December, 2005, His Highness has again graciously agreed to be host the Association today being the 5th of May, 2007. ANA is glad to be here. The Association is truly grateful."*

Besides ANA's submission, Chief Bob Nabena, Chairman of Host Communities of Nigeria Producing Oil and Gas (HOPSCOM), attested to the hospitality of HRH Christian Otobotekere. In his words: *"I, Chief Bob Nabena, Chairman... HOPSCOM, visited the palace to enlighten and sensitise His Royal Highness of the activities of HOPSCOM. We are happy for the reception and fatherly advice we received."*

Glaringly, the warm reception experience that Bob Nabena told of is an apt description of HRH Christian Otobotekere. All year round, his palace is home to persons from all walks of life, from within and outside Nigeria. On his dining table, his catch phrase "take your pick" is trade mark. He'd often say so to any close acquaintance dining with him. Such acquaintances could be rich or poor, educated or uneducated. In this regard, the present writer is a prime witness as he has seen the down-trodden in society, persons of low estate, being welcome to dine with HRH Christian Otobotekere who is a strong advocate of the

fact that all human beings should be treated with respect. Indeed, he believes that no human being should be deified or despised.

On a research trip to Nigeria from the University of Berkeley, California, in 2007, Freda Murray Bruce noted what is totally in tandem with the identified hospitality of King Otobotekere. In her words: *"I am grateful for the opportunity to have met His Royal Highness. He is a man of great strength and wealth of spirit. I will be honoured to do what I can to preserve his dream and desire for the education, greatness and future of his people."* In the same vein, one of his daughters, Mrs. Irene Uhunmwangho, describes him as hospitable, thus: *"Daddy is very caring, generous, humble, intelligent, accommodating, very poetic and friendly. He taught us not to lie and to avoid quarrelling. We had a peaceful home inspite of the fact that we were very many, especially during long vacations when we hosted holiday-makers."* Another daughter, Mrs. Didi Walson-Jack, captures the hospitable essence of her father – Christian Otobotekere, by the following lines:

Our Dad  
 A Colossus of integrity  
 A Paragon of nobility  
 Our Dad,  
 A Canon of Hospitality  
 A Maestro of capability.

### **Philosophy of Christian Otobotekere**

The philosophy of HRH Christian Otobotekere as implied herein, signifies his school of thought encapsulated in his ideologies which are profoundly expressed in his well over two hundred poems and maxims. A thorough search for the philosophical path of the poet-king would undoubtedly reveal a pathway of thought that transcends the celestial and terrestrial spheres of reasoning.

Essentially, the Christian Otobotekere philosophy expresses a culture of the reasoning heaven-conscious man and an earthly advocate for the sanctity of life and of the environment. So his philosophy could be summed up in three phenomena – God, Humankind and the Environment. He has continually advocated the reverential fear of God the creator enjoining human beings to revere God. He has also encouraged people to live two lives – for their neighbours as for themselves, and has sought to solve the problems of society in the best possible ways. And regarding the environment, he has constantly advocated that it be respected and preserved.

In *'Seraphed Throne'*, the Christian Otobotekere reveres the Almighty God in line with his guiding philosophy. He writes: *"My son, my daughter/If you can but benchmark/The complexity of His works/And His bounteous love/You would be adoring and praising/Early in the morning/As*

*well at sundown...*" In his classical poem "Live Two Lives," he writes *Live your own/And live Your Neighbours/ That is what you need/to be your brother's keeper.*" About solving societal problems, Christian Otobotekere expresses his thought in the poem "Put on your Crown." In it, his philosophy speaks of the early-rising king described in the poem as 'the keeper of down town', who wakes up early to ponder the possible solutions to the problems of his domain. By the poem, the keeper of down town is enjoined to think, think and think, before he faces the new day at dawn.

Otobotekere (2010:62). In the face of the constant challenges of life, the Poet-King admonishes: *"For every problem/ there is a solution, lying in wait/ Have you found it? / Find it, positively."* Otobotekere (2008:134).

On the environment, he bewilderedly asks, and by doing so, exhorts his fellow Niger Delta folks on the need to preserve the environment. In his poem, 'Wai Universal', he asks: "What of the flowing river? /Your river, my river/Beauty of beauties now splashy/With concocted chemicals/Of dare-devil youth/Who break the laws of the land/Here, there, and upstream, in trial of/their puny strength/Also no more of the land of river and crocodile/Mystically floating/And quietly sinking/By day or by moonlight... O kids, O men of my race/ O men of this pretty little spinning earth/You are setting fire/To WAI-universal/your very nature/Your very future!/Should it be? Otobotekere (2009:51-54).





## Conclusion

This research has been an analytical narrative of the pedigree, personality and philosophy of His Royal Highness Christian Otobotekere, who has been designated – the Poet-King, because of his over two hundred profound, incisive and humane poems. Born at Tombia in the Yenagoa Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, Nigeria, on the 21st of April, 1925, he attended the Proctor Memorial Primary School at Kaiama in Bayelsa State; the Okirika Grammar School at Okirika in Rivers State; from 1936 to 1940 and from 1942 to 1945, respectively. After working with the British colonial Offices at Brass in the contemporary Bayelsa State of Nigeria and Buea in the Cameroons, he proceeded to the Fourah Bay University College, Sierra Leone, where he studied from 1954 to 1957.

On graduation in 1957, he worked briefly with the Baptist Boys High School before joining the Shell British Petroleum Company, where he worked for nineteen years from 1958 to the dawn of 1978, and rose to become Assistant Controller of Finance, Eastern Division of Shell BP, at a time of expatriate dominance at the higher rungs of the company's personnel cadre. Sequel to his retirement from service, which has been adjudged meritorious, he had brief stints with the Yenagoa Local Council, nurturing his business – Christian Tawi and Sons, as well as his Anyama Montessori Group of Schools, which has won several laurels as one of the leading schools in Bayelsa State.

A true family man, he has two wives –Timikoru and Adanibe, sixteen adult children and several grandchildren. As the ruler of his people since 1972, His Highness Otobotekere has done his best and is greatly loved. Albeit, he has never claimed to be perfect. This he admits in his poem *'To God and to Man'*. It reads: "Do what you can/You cannot do it all/Do what you can/And leave the rest to another/To do it better with less. Do what you can/You cannot do it well/Unless you leave the rest/To God and to man/To do it better with less/So why bother to do it all? You can only do it well/When you do what you can/And leave the rest to God/and to man. Otobotekere (2009:81).

In essence, the Poet-King Christian Otobotekere, has been defined as a humble man who has waded through the floods and storms of life with integrity, humility and hospitality as his watchwords. By these identified virtues, he has attained great heights, not by sudden flight, but by enduring enterprise. At age ninety-seven, by April, 2022, his advice for the up and coming generations of humanity, especially in his native Niger Delta, is in line with his philosophy of life. Indeed, two timeless American poets – Robert Frost and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow capture the Christian Otobotekere philosophy in a most profound manner. In Robert Frost's *'The Road not Taken'*: Two roads diverged in a yellow wood/And sorry I could not travel both/And be one traveler, long I stood/And looked down one as

far as I could/To where it bent in the undergrowth... I shall be telling this with a sigh/Somewhere ages and ages hence / Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by/And that has made all the difference. In the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: The Height by Great men reached and kept/Were not attained by sudden flight/But they, while their companions slept/Were toiling upwards in the night.

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