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# A HISTORY OF ORON PEOPLE

IN THE LOWER CROSS RIVER BASIN

**Okon Edet Uya**

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**A History of  
Oron People**

*of the Lower Cross River Basin*

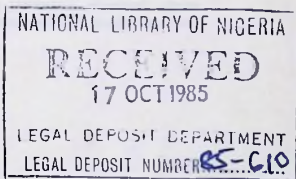


NSR

# A History of Oron People

*of the Lower Cross River Basin*

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*Professor of History, University of Calabar*



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Oron \* 1984

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### **Dedication**

To S.B. Onobo, Jack Edet Udo and  
A.M.E. Mba for their unwaivering faith  
and confidence that the history of Oron  
people would ultimately be written.

cont 6/11/85

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IN THE COURT OF THE COMMONS OF GREAT BRITAIN  
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PROSECUTIONS  
AGAINST THE  
DEFENDANTS



THE PROSECUTIONS  
AGAINST THE  
DEFENDANTS

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## Preface

The Oron people, comprising the Idua, Okobo, Effiat-Mbo, Ebughu, Enwang and Oron Ukpabang groups, inhabit the western bank of the estuary of the Cross River. Oron people share boundaries with the Etebi and Ubium in the Eket region and the Uruan groups of Ibibio in the Uyo region. In 1983, the population of Oron was estimated at over 600,000.

The attempt under the sponsorship of the Oron Union to write the history of Oron people goes back to 1964. In that year, the Union set up an Oron History Committee under the chairmanship of Rev. S.K. Okpo. The Committee held several meetings at such places as Oyubia, Okuko, Nsie and Uda and drew up a comprehensive questionnaire for oral interviews. Unfortunately, these efforts came to an abrupt end during the Civil War.

Interest in reviving the history project was expressed when the Union was revived as the Oron Development Union in 1973. However, it was a proposal made in a Key Note Address to the Annual Conference of the Union in 1981 by Professor Okon E. Uya that led to concrete steps being taken again on this matter. In response to the address, the Union set up an Oron History and Cultural Committee. It is that committee made up of Chief A.M.E. Mba, Rev. S.K. Okpo, Chief I.U. Iyanam, Mr. Okon Abia Basse, with Professor Okon E. Uya as Chairman, that has co-ordinated the activities that have resulted in this book. As Chairman, Professor Uya conducted the entire research and wrote all but one of the chapters in this book.

Needless to say, this task would not have been possible without the enthusiastic support of Oron informants who willingly shared their traditions with us. Though too numerous to mention, we should like to specifically thank the following: Chief A.M.E. Mba, the acclaimed and accepted traditional historian of Oron; Chief O.E. Isong, the Ahta of Oron; Chief O.U. Akan, Clan Head of Ibighi; Chief I.E. Nyong, Clan Head of Idua; Chief O.N. Okung, Clan Head of Uquong; Chief Okwong Udo, Clan Head of Ubodung, as well as all the other clan and village heads cited in different parts of the book. The oral traditions were collected at different times since 1974 by a variety of people, more importantly students of the History Department of the Universities of Calabar

and Nsukka who used them for the B.A. Long Essay Projects. Chiefs I.U. Iyanam, A.M.E. Mba, O.E. Isong, I.E. Nyong and Rev. S.K. Okpo were extremely generous with their private collections of Oron materials.

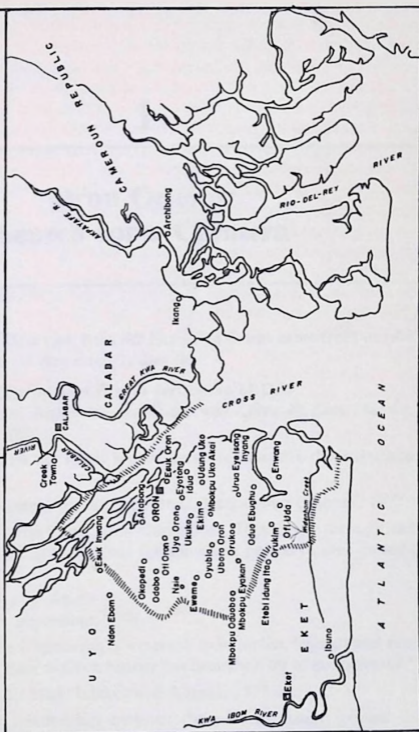
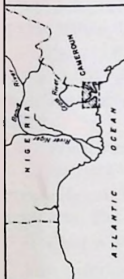
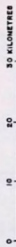
Initial funding for the researches of Professor Uya on Oron history which were destroyed during students' demonstration in March, 1982, came from the University of Calabar Research Grant. The Fund on Oron History and Culture established by the Oron Development Union in 1981 supported the later stages of the research for the book. We thank the Executive Members of the Union, especially the President-General and General Secretary, Okon Bassey Etienam and Dr. Etim Uye respectively for their co-operation and understanding. Though funded largely by the Oron Development Union, the views expressed are those of the author who has brought his professional competence as an oral historian to bear on the assessment of the often conflicting traditions.

Finally, we wish to say that this modest effort is only a beginning although it marks the fruition of efforts made since the 1920's by such prominent Oron patriots as Chief S.B. Onobo, Teacher Jack Edet Udo, and Chief A.M.E. Mba to write the history of Oron people. The book is dedicated to them in recognition of their vision and persistence despite the odds that they were not professionally trained historians! It is our hope that this book will provoke more intensive researches into the various Oron groups whose fascinating story can only be summarized here. As for me, writing the history of Oron people has been a labour of love!

**Okon E. Uya**  
*Calabar.*  
September, 1984.

# THE LOWER CROSS RIVER BASIN (ORON DEMARCATED)

Oron Local Government Area Boundary  
 Oron Local Government Area Headquarters





# 1

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## Oron Origins: Search for a Chimera

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“LONG, long ago, both the Ekets and Orons came from us (the Ibibio): if they deny it, they lie.”

Old Chief of Ikot Eyo to Jeffreys in M.D.W.

Jeffreys, *Report on the Tribes and Clans of Eket District*,  
May, 1925.

“We are neither Efik nor Ibibio but we are more related to the Efiks than to the Ibibios.”

Chief O.E. Isong, the Ahta of Oron, Interviewed October, 1977.

“The people of Oron came from Cameroon. They came through the river and after settling in Calabar for sometime passed to their present site.”

Prince Amba A. Amba

Interviewed, September, 1977.

“The origin of the Ukpabangs is wrapped up in myths, legends and oral traditions. This phase of Oron history has brought a lot of controversy.”

Chief A.M.E. Mba, Interviewed August, 1977.

The historical relationship between the various ethnic groups inhabiting the lower Cross River region of the Cross River State, with particular reference to their origins, has become a subject of great controversy. In general, the controversy has revolved around the attempt by the majority ethnic group in the region, the Ibibio, to impose a common or pan-Ibibio identity on the smaller groups such as the Annang, the

Eket, the Ibuno, the Efik and the Oron. According to Monday E. Noah, "The major Ibibio sub-groupings include the Oron, Eket, Ibuno, Anrang ... [and] the Efik of Calabar are descendants of the Ibibio people."<sup>1</sup> On their part, the minority groups, especially the Oron and the Efik, have been consistent in insisting on their separate identity. Although Noah would have us believe that this insistence is the result of recent micronationalism flowering into historical revisionism and the desire of political aspirants to use ethnic particularism as a launching pad for their political careers since Nigerian independence, evidence at our disposal confirms that the public insistence of the Oron, in particular, on their separate identity goes back to the early colonial period.

The earliest of these efforts occurred on September 26, 1918, when three Oron sons, including Daniel Ekpo from Ekim village, then a teacher at the Oron Training Institute, gathered at Udung Uko Eyo Atai in their determination "to check any bad thing that began to come into 'our land' as a result of foreign influence that seemed to destroy Ukpabang good customs." As Chief A.M.E. Mba, who was excluded from the meeting because of "my limitations in English Language" aptly observed:

If the awraw [Ukpabang] educated pioneers observed as far back as 1918 that they had a heritage that should be guarded against destruction by foreign influence, that certainly was the result of the knowledge of the past of their people.<sup>2</sup>

It was indeed this consciousness of their separate identity that led to the birth of the Oron Union on May 23rd, 1925.

Significantly, among the main objectives of the Union was: "to seek to rediscover what is noble in our customs and tradition for the purpose of maintaining the same for the creation of prestige and thereby to foster the spirit of law 'abidingness' and respect for constitutional institutions". Perhaps more relevant in our present context was the Union's determination "to protect our heritage being battered for mess of potato or selfish aggrandizement." It was indeed appropriate that one of the papers presented on the occasion jointly by Chief S.B. Onobo and Jack Edet Udo was titled "Introduction to the History of Oron," and focussed on the distinct origin of the Ukpabang people. It is perhaps important to point out that Chief Onobo and Jack Edet Udo were not "politicians" but the pioneers of western education in Oron and had no need to use a separate Oron identity as a launching pad for their careers.

Equally important was the fact that in 1926, in order to answer questions submitted by R.N.O. Marshall who was then compiling intelligence information on the Oron Clan, the then seven Oron clans met to compile authentic information on their origins. Unfortunately, as will be shown

later, Marshall, in the interest of administrative convenience, ignored their claims of separate identity.<sup>3</sup>

In this connection, the events surrounding the formation of the Ibibio Union and the exclusion of Oron therefrom are worth noting. When the inaugural meeting of what would metamorphorize into the Ibibio Union was held at the Qua Iboe Church, Uyo, on April 28, 1928, Chief John Esin attended on behalf of Oron. However, when Chief Esin returned to Oron and briefed the Ukpabang people on the intended name of the organization, Ibibio Union, the Chiefs and elders of Oron protested. They gave, as a condition for their association with the new Union, a change of name to Ibibio-Oron Union, insisting that "we are not Ibibio people." Needless to say, this suggestion was turned down by the Ibibio and not even the promise of an Oron son benefitting from the proposed scholarship scheme would persuade the Ukpabang people to join an "Ibibio Union".<sup>4</sup> This stance of a separate identity has been maintained with unwaivering consistency by the Oron people down to the present. It is, thus, within the context of these two contrasting and diametrically opposed traditions that one can meaningfully analyse the various traditions of origin of the Oron people.

### **Ibibio Origin of the Oron**

The Ibibio origin of the Oron people which has recently been refined into a creed by Monday Noah, Edet Akpan Udo, among others, was a creation of European visitors, missionaries, traders, anthropologists, and administrators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Oron land, because of her geographical location, was included in Ibibio country by the early travellers and traders. According to John Adams, "the country inhabited by a nation called Ibbiby or Quaw bound it [Ibo land] in the east. To this nation the Heebes [Ibo] express a strong aversion, and call them cannibals."<sup>5</sup> Hugh Goldie's definition of the Ibibio or "Egbo Sherry" as "a tribe and country lying to the west of the Cross River, and stretching between it and the Ibo countries on the Niger," would certainly include Oron land which is contiguous with Ibibio land on the west side of the Cross River. Robert M'Keown wrote in 1912 that the Ibibio were "probably the stock native from whom most of the tribes in the Qua Iboe and Calabar have sprung."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Rev. W.J. Ward, a Primitive Methodist Missionary who arrived Oron in 1894, observed that:

What they [Oron people] know of their past is that country in and about the Cross River has not always been their home. Once they were much *further inland* [emphasis mine], but being defeated in tribal warfare they were driven forth and pushed down almost to the water edge.<sup>7</sup>

Given the location of Oron, Ward's "much further inland" could justifiably be interpreted to refer to Ibibio Country. These early speculations formed the basis of the subsequent classification of Oron as a "sub-tribe" of the Ibibio by colonial administrators and colonial anthropologists between 1925 and 1956.

In his 1925, "Report on the tribes and Clans in the Eket District," District Officer M.D.W. Jeffreys, defining a tribe as "a collection of peoples speaking the same language," classified Oron with the Ibibio based on a view expressed by Ubiums who opined that "both the Eket and Orons are offshoots of Ibibio." In fairness to Jeffreys, it should be pointed out that he was aware of the limitations of his classification. "I aimed that generalizations", he wrote, "at producing a framework, a first approximation as it were, in preference to working out in detail any one clan, or carrying through any intensified work." Among the problems he encountered, according to him, were the reluctance of the Oron men to divulge traditional history and the inadequacy of the one month available to him for the survey. Indeed, no actual survey was done and the boundaries of the clans and "sub-tribes" were based on observation and previous knowledge of distribution of towns, and native court boundaries. Needless to say, these limitations which Jeffreys freely admitted have tended to be ignored by later users of his "Report".<sup>8</sup>

Even more significant in this regard were the four voluminous ethnographic work on *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* by P. Amaury Talbot published in 1926. Throughout these studies, Talbot describes the Oron as a sub-group of the Ibibio, "probably the most ancient" of the semi-Bantu peoples of South-eastern Nigeria.<sup>9</sup> This classification of Oron as an Ibibio "subtribe" followed from Talbot's definition of a "tribe". According to Talbot, "a tribe may be described as a group speaking the same language, with approximately the same customs, religion and state of civilization, and often claiming a common descent." Talbot, however, was aware of the fact that some of the groups he designated sub-tribes of the Ibibio did not speak the same language nor claim common descent with the Ibibio. This was certainly true of the Oron. Indeed, like Jeffreys, Talbot was aware of the limitations of his classification. He wrote:

Unfortunately, owing to circumstances ... it has been impossible at present to classify the tribes according to their physical characters, a method which is incomparably the best instrument in our hands, and it has been necessary in this volume to use language as the sole means of classification, aided to a small extent by evidence of similar customs etc. The grouping in the present volumes is therefore purely provisional, for it is realized that language is a broken reed to rely upon ...<sup>10</sup>

Even more relevant in our present context was Talbot's observation on the specific case of the Ibibio and her so called sub-groups. "It will be extremely interesting," he wrote, "to find out, for example, whether some of the sub-tribes at present included in the Yoruba, Ibo and Ibibio tribes are not really quite different peoples ... and whether tribes in the semi-Bantu and Bantu areas have any common physical relationship."<sup>11</sup>

Another source liberally used by current protagonists of the Ibibio origin of the Oron people is G.I. Jones' and Daryll Forde's *Ibo and Ibibio-Speaking Peoples of South-Eastern Nigeria*. Observing that Ibibio is both an ethnic and linguistic term, Jones and Forde proceeded to classify Oron as a dialect of Ibibio, thus implying that the Oron language originated from Ibibio language. However, they were quick to point out that "although Oron language is in the broadest sense regarded as a dialect of the Ibibio, it has its own peculiarities which make it unintelligible to the Ibibio and Efik."<sup>12</sup> Noah and others have described these widely acknowledged differences between Oron and Efik languages, on the one hand, and Ibibio language, on the other, as "dialectal differences among the various Ibibio groups [which] can be attributed largely to the long period of isolation between these groups."<sup>13</sup> It is our contention, however, that the linguistic situation subsisting between Oron and her Ibibio neighbours, whereby Oron people understand the language of the later but are not understood by them suggests that the Oron arrived in the area much later than the Ibibio and that Oron is, indeed, a distinct language rather than a dialect of the Ibibio. As Chief A.M.E. Mba has aptly observed, "although the Ukpabang have lived with their neighbours, the Efiks on the east and the Ibibio on the west for thousands of years, neither the Efik nor the Ibibio can speak the difficult Oron language."<sup>14</sup> The dominance of the letter "L" in the Oron language and its near absence in the Ibibio language has also been used to argue for the distinctness of the Oron language.

As if to underscore their reluctance in classifying Oron as a sub-tribe of the Ibibio, Jeffreys also speculated that the Oron, Ibibio and Annang might indeed have derived from "an Ibo speaking race." "What probably happened," he wrote, "was that the territory east of the Niger was inhabited by an Ibo speaking race centuries ago and that a large section of it perished by plague, pestilence or famine leaving the fishing folk to survive along the coast and along the banks of the Niger. These fisher folk have spread inland founding Orones, the Ibibios and the Anangs". In support of this observation, Jeffreys cited the similarities between certain Oron and Ibo words thusly.

<i>English</i>	<i>Igbo</i>	<i>Oron</i>
Two	Iboa	Iba
Three	Eto	Ite
Water	Mili	Mmong
Foot	Ukwu	Uku
Husband	Di	Ibi/Ebi
Fish	Aja	Ayak
Main	Nwoke	Engwe <sup>15</sup>

This further underscores the very tentative nature of the work of the colonial administrators and amateur ethnographers. It should be pointed out that this Igbo origin is very unpopular with the various groups that comprise Oron.

The above examination of the sources of colonial administrators and anthropologists has sought to show that Jeffreys, Talbot, Jones and Forde were not as enthusiastic in their classification of Oron as an Ibibio sub-group as the later protagonists of this basically politically motivated notion have become. It should also be pointed out that these agents of British administration were more interested in administrative conveniences, tidiness and efficiency in their groupings than in historical accuracy or the cultural identity of the groups. Administratively, it makes sense that the Oron group, small as it was, should be included among the Ibibio larger group which formed her immediate neighbour to the west.

It is, perhaps, instructive to observe that most Africanist scholars now caution against the wholesale acceptance of the views of these colonial anthropologists. The apt observation of the anthropologist, Maxwell Owusu, is instructive in this regard:

Unfortunately, few ethnographers, if any, working in African societies in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, the senior anthropologists whose work laid the foundation for African Studies, had any appreciable control of the native languages ... the vaunted aim of the ethnography of Africa is to provide, on the basis of systematic fieldwork done through native languages or native interpreter — informants, careful descriptions and explanations that can be substantiated, interpretations that have insight, generalizations that can be factually supported, and findings that can provide a clear basis for governmental policy in Africa, the record of the results of conscientious European ethnographic explanations and discoveries has been, by and large, truly disappointing.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, Professor G.N. Uzoigwe's observation that "old fashioned anthropology has done more harm than good to African studies ... and that the so-called 'experts' on the anthropology of Africa had no proper understanding and appreciation of African values, and yet they speak with oracular authority," needs to be kept in mind by those who use

these European records for reconstructing the history of the peoples of the Cross River region of Nigeria.

Apart from the limitations of the sources, other known historical facts on the origins and migrations of the Ibibio to their present abode completely deflate the notion that the Oron are Ibibio by origin. It is known, for example, that Ibibio presence in Nigeria enjoys great antiquity. Talbot rightly pointed out that the earliest inhabitants of south eastern Nigeria were the Ibibio and concluded that the area "may have been inhabited from very early times." He pointed out that the Ibibio were the major descendants of the semi-Bantu peoples in Nigeria. He further insisted that the Ibibio area, "with its forests abounding in wild fruits, its waters teeming with fish and the salt to be obtained from the mangrove and salt water" could sustain human population from the beginning and suggested 7000 B.C. as the possible date for the development of human populations in the area. Noah himself estimates that the Ibibio might have entered the Nigerian region in about 8000 B.C. He writes:

Available evidence suggests that the Ibibio are the Afaha people whose original homeland was at Usak Edet in the Cameroons .... Upon leaving the Cameroons, the Ibibio seem to have migrated to the present location in two major directions. One group reached Nigeria perhaps by an overland route and settled at Ibom probably about 8000 B.C. ... What seems quite clear is that Ibom was major dispersal centre of the Ibibio and this dispersion must have begun soon after the Ibibio had reached the area now known as Nigeria in about 8000 B.C.<sup>17</sup>

Other estimates are those of Ajato Amos (2500 B.C.), and Harry Johnston and Talbot (about 430 A.D.). Indeed, so ancient has the Ibibio presence in their present abode been that, according to Forde and Jones, the Ibibio have "no tradition of migration from elsewhere or of having displaced any previous inhabitants." Even in the rather rudimentary state of our knowledge, there is unanimity that the Ibibio have lived in their present abode for a very long time.

On the other hand, as will be shown in Chapter II of this study, the migration of the Oron peoples to their present abode from the generally accepted Cameroon/Nigerian corridor, was rather recent. Noah admits this much when he writes: "There were other Ibibio who reached Ibibio mainland by sea. Among these sea-borne Ibibio would be included the Oron, Eket, and Ibuno people who, upon arrival, moved northwards and eastwards until they came up against the eastern Ibibio expanding southwards". Assuming, for the purpose of argument that the Ibibio originally migrated from Usak Edet in the Cameroons much earlier, a view now popular among the Ibibio, it should be pointed out that the name Ibibio was not applied to the group that now bears that name when they were in the Cameroons. Noah correctly speculates that the name

must have been applied to the group after their entry into Nigeria and insists further that "the word [Ibibio] may have originated from Ibibio counters with the pigmies who originally occupied the Ibibio area" if this is so, it is not logical to apply the "word" to completely different groups who left presumably the same area several hundred years ago and arrived their Nigerian homes on different migratory routes. The Ibibio migrants described themselves as Oron Ukpabang, Eket, Ibuno, and "other Ibibio". Indeed among the Oron people, to be called "Ibibio" tantamounted to being called "a slave." This explains why "until comparatively recently, the Oron did not intermarry with the Ibibi for fear of contamination first with the uncircumcised and second with descendants of slaves," according to one informant. Fortunately, this is changing.

It is indeed remarkable, as Chief A.M.E. Mba rightly points out, that "in spite of the fact that some of the Oron villages in the west and north-west are quite near to some of the Ibibio villages, Oron people remain ignorant of the Ibibio heartland until comparatively recently". On the contrary, long before the advent of the European slave traders in the seventeenth century, Oron people knew about Biakpan, more than 128km from the Cross River from Oron and Usakedit at Rio Del Rey, some 480km south of Oron in the Cameroons. It was not until the advent of colonial rule in the twentieth century that this near complete isolation between the Oron and the Ibibio would be broken. Indeed, as will be shown in Chapter III of this study, Oron institutions and culture, though sharing some general characteristics with those of the Ibibio, were remarkably different as to be distinct.<sup>19</sup>

This of course, is not to deny that there was interaction between Oron and her neighbours to the west especially the Eket people. Indeed those who have insisted that Oron traditions of origin point to Eket often quote the controversy surrounding the Okpo Clan, one of the eight clans in Oron. Okpo, the founder of the clan, was referred to as "Okpo Ekit" implying some connection between his origins and Eket. According to Chief Umium Esebere, village head of Okuko, "Afaha Okpo goes hand in hand with Ekit. That is Okpo came from Ekit. But other clans of Oron did not come from Ekit. Okpo was called Okpo Ekit because in the old times people were normally named after their mothers." Other informants, on the other hand, maintain that although Okpo's mother was clearly an Eket woman, this does not make Okpo an Eket man in a patrilineal society like Oron. Chief William Oboho of Uboro Oro, for example, explained that though Okpo was born at Uboro Oro, as a youth, he went to live with his maternal grandmother at Eket where he stayed and grew into an adult. When he eventually returned to Uboro

Oro, he was called Okpo Ekit, signifying his long stay there. Okpo subsequently begat Bieto, who in turn begat several sons, including Sekung, Bassey, Okpu, Osung and Sunlip, the founders of the present villages in Afaha Okpo. Similar traditions of Eket relationship are found among the Ebughu, Okobo and some Idua groups in present day Oron. It should be pointed out, however, that the Oron people never regarded the Eket and Ibuno groups as Ibibio. Indeed, even Jeffreys tended to treat the Oron, Eket, Ibuno, and the Oboduns as more related to each other and originating from a common area of the Cameroons independently of the Ibibio. He wrote: "if now it is accepted that the 'Oboduns' sprang from the Andonis ... it follows that the rest of the Orones had the same beginning."<sup>20</sup> It is also significant that until very recently both Eket and Ibuno people never accepted that they were Ibibio and even now some of them still insist on their separate ethnic identity!

From the above, it should be clear that the Ibibio origin of the Oron, which is currently being popularized in recent studies on the Ibibio, was largely a creation of British administrators and amateur anthropologists and has no foundation in historical facts. Indeed, as is shown below, most Oron people strenuously deny this Ibibio connection and are unanimous in their traditions that they came from the Cameroons independently of the Ibibio.

### **The Non-Ibibio Origins of The Oron**

Unlike the Ibibio, whose memories of their origins and migrations are rather vague and obscure, the various Oron groups have rather vivid traditions of their origins and migrations to their present abode. These traditions are unanimous in rejecting the Ibibio origin of the Oron people, though there is substantial evidence to show that some Ibibio elements were introduced into Oron long after the area had been occupied and Oron identity established. Indeed, even in the early years of colonial rule, the Ibibio never disputed the claims of Oron as a distinct ethnic group in Nigeria. On December 4, 1939, in answer to a question put to him by Chief Nyong Essien, an Ibibio, the Chief Secretary to the Government said: "They (the Ukpabang) are not of Ibibio origin and are not accepted as such by the Ibibios." Similarly, in his "Local Government Reform in the Calabar Province" (1949), Mr. R.A. Stevens pointed out that "the Orons were extremely unwilling to be dragged into a predominantly Ibibio unit in which, they feared, they would be swamped."<sup>21</sup>

We have already pointed out that though generally classified within the Ibibio cluster of languages, the Oron language is, in many ways

must have been applied to the group after their entry into Nigeria and insists further that "the word [Ibibio] may have originated from Ibibio encounters with the pigmies who originally occupied the Ibibio area". If this is so, it is not logical to apply the "word" to completely different groups who left presumably the same area several hundred years ago and arrived their Nigerian homes on different migratory routes. The late migrants described themselves as Oron Ukpabang, Eket, Ibuno, and not "other Ibibio". Indeed among the Oron people, to be called "Ibibio" tantamounted to being called "a slave." This explains why "until comparatively recently, the Oron did not intermarry with the Ibibi for fear of contamination first with the uncircumcised and second with descendants of slaves," according to one informant. Fortunately, this is changing.

It is indeed remarkable, as Chief A.M.E. Mba rightly points out, that "in spite of the fact that some of the Oron villages in the west and north west are quite near to some of the Ibibio villages, Oron people remain ignorant of the Ibibio heartland until comparatively recently". On the contrary, long before the advent of the European slave traders in eighteenth century, Oron people knew about Biakpan, more than 128km from the Cross River from Oron and Usakedit at Rio Del Rey, some 48km south of Oron in the Cameroons. It was not until the advent of colonial rule in the twentieth century that this near complete isolation between the Oron and the Ibibio would be broken. Indeed, as will be shown in Chapter III of this study, Oron institutions and culture, though sharing some general characteristics with those of the Ibibio, were remarkably different as to be distinct.<sup>19</sup>

This of course, is not to deny that there was interaction between Oron and her neighbours to the west especially the Eket people. Indeed those who have insisted that Oron traditions of origin point to Eket often quote the controversy surrounding the Okpo Clan, one of the eight clans in Oron. Okpo, the founder of the clan, was referred to as "Okpo Ekit" implying some connection between his origins and Eket. According to Chief Umium Esebere, village head of Okuko, "Afaha Okpo goes hand in hand with Ekit. That is Okpo came from Ekit. But other clans of Oron did not come from Ekit. Okpo was called Okpo Ekit because in the old times people were normally named after their mothers." Other informants, on the other hand, maintain that although Okpo's mother was a Eket woman, this does not make Okpo an Eket man in a patrilineal society like Oron. Chief William Oboho of Uboro Oro, for example, explained that though Okpo was born at Uboro Oro, as a youth, he went to live with his maternal grandmother at Eket where he stayed and grew into an adult. When he eventually returned to Uboro

Oro, he was called Okpo Ekit, signifying his long stay there. Okpo subsequently begat Bioto, who in turn begat several sons, including Sekung, Bassey, Okpu, Osung and Sunlip, the founders of the present villages in Afaha Okpo. Similar traditions of Eket relationship are found among the Ebughu, Okobo and some Idua groups in present day Oron. It should be pointed out, however, that the Oron people never regarded the Eket and Ibuno groups as Ibibio. Indeed, even Jeffreys tended to treat the Oron, Eket, Ibuno, and the Oboduns as more related to each other and originating from a common area of the Cameroons independently of the Ibibio. He wrote: "if now it is accepted that the 'Oboduns' sprang from the Andonis ... it follows that the rest of the Orones had the same beginning."<sup>20</sup> It is also significant that until very recently both Eket and Ibuno people never accepted that they were Ibibio and even now some of them still insist on their separate ethnic identity!

From the above, it should be clear that the Ibibio origin of the Oron, which is currently being popularized in recent studies on the Ibibio, was largely a creation of British administrators and amateur anthropologists and has no foundation in historical facts. Indeed, as is shown below, most Oron people strenuously deny this Ibibio connection and are unanimous in their traditions that they came from the Cameroons independently of the Ibibio.

### **The Non-Ibibio Origins of The Oron**

Unlike the Ibibio, whose memories of their origins and migrations are rather vague and obscure, the various Oron groups have rather vivid traditions of their origins and migrations to their present abode. These traditions are unanimous in rejecting the Ibibio origin of the Oron people, though there is substantial evidence to show that some Ibibio elements were introduced into Oron long after the area had been occupied and Oron identity established. Indeed, even in the early years of colonial rule, the Ibibio never disputed the claims of Oron as a distinct ethnic group in Nigeria. On December 4, 1939, in answer to a question put to him by Chief Nyong Essien, an Ibibio, the Chief Secretary to the Government said: "They (the Ukpabang) are not of Ibibio origin and are not accepted as such by the Ibibios." Similarly, in his "Local Government Reform in the Calabar Province" (1949), Mr. R.A. Stevens pointed out that "the Orons were extremely unwilling to be dragged into a predominantly Ibibio unit in which, they feared, they would be swamped."<sup>21</sup>

We have already pointed out that though generally classified within the Ibibio cluster of languages, the Oron language is, in many ways

distinct and generally unintelligible to the Ibibio. Admittedly, Oron language is poorer in vocabulary than the Ibibio language. But by the same token, the language is richer in accent and intonation than the neighbouring Ibibio language. Thus, words of the same spelling, when properly accented give different meanings in Oron language. Thus depending on the accent, *uku* can mean leg, an in-law, or calabash for drinking palm wine; *etu* can mean a stick, a tree, frame, they have thrown, they have cut (for example palm fruits) they have fired at (for example, an animal) and so on.

Further evidence of the distinctness of the Oron vis-a-vis the Ibibio can be seen in different dressing styles, attitude towards slavery and slave trade, refusal by the Oron people to use and accept the manilla which was described as "okpoho Ibibi" and the insistence on the use of *siti* (copper wire), different food preferences, and different political and social institutions.<sup>22</sup> These will be analysed in relevant sections of this study.

Be that as it may, the Oron groups are unanimous on the view that their putative fathers came from the Camerons. However, there are few traditions among the Ukpabang seeking to trace their ancestry to the "Mediterranean world". According to Chief O.E. Isong, the Ahta of Oron, the Ukpabang people migrated away from conversion to Islam in the general area of Egypt, and under their leader, Abang arrived in the Camerons. There, "Abang begat Do, Do begat Doni, Doni begat Oron and Obolo." Owing to dispute over farmlands, the group later moved in to present day Nigeria. Similar traditions were recorded by District Officer R.N.O. Marshall who observed that, the ancestors of the Oron people migrated somewhere from the Mediterranean world with one Orru as their leader.<sup>23</sup> In support of this "Mediterranean" or "Eastern" origins, references are made to the existence of certain traditions and customs among the Oron people which bear close resemblances to their "Mediterranean" counterparts. These include: the existence of such semitic names as Samu, Sama, Abia, Bioto, Zedeke and Nehema; the widespread and fundamental practice of circumcision; as well as the funeral rites of deceased old people in traditional Oron society.

In the present state of our knowledge, however, it is probably safe to limit our discussion of Oron origins to the Usahadi region in the Camerons. Indeed, most Oron groups, namely, Ebughu, Okobo, Idu and the Ukpabang proper, agree that the Camerons was the point of their dispersal into Nigeria, either together or separately. The various and sometimes conflicting traditions of migrations and the migratory routes are analysed in Chapter II of this study.

Evidences in support of this Usahadit origin are several. First, there is the prevalence of such Cameroon names as Akan, Ekang, Abang, Etong, Osung, Etang in Oron. Second, there is the familiar saying among the Oron people indicating that the farthest point in the world was Usahadit. Thus, when a child sent on an errand takes an usually long time, he is always rebuked with the words "aka-ka Usahadit" (did you go to Usahadit?). Thirdly, some older Oron people, such as Chief Okung Ntofon, Chief A.M.E. Mba, Chief Umium Esebre, have vivid memories of the people of Usahadit coming to Oron annually to attend festivities in commemoration of their oneness. Fourthly, the Oron word for white man, Mbatang (stealer of men), is of Cameroons origin. According to Jeffreys, the Oron word for white man "is an importation of a Younde word coming from Duala via Usahadit and is the word the Cameroons natives probably used to describe the Portuguese at Fernando Po."<sup>24</sup> It was the general acceptance of this Cameroon origin that underlay the address presented to the Federal Inspector of Education of West Cameroon, G. Nseke during his visit to Oron in 1972. Addressing the visitor, the Chiefs said:

You must have heard of the legend among Oron people that Cameroon direction is our original home when Abang, the great ancestor of Oron migrated into this land now occupied by his descendants. As tradition lasts longer than city walls, it is then reasonable and correct for the Oron man to regard anything Cameroon as native.

It is our firmly held position that most of the groups that now inhabit Oron land originated from the Cameroons and migrated therefrom quite distinctly and separately from the Ibibio group. Indeed, as it is shown in the next chapter, there is little doubt that the Ibibio group had settled in their present abode long before the Oron groups arrived.

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## Notes

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- 1 Monday E. Noah, ed., *Ibibio Pioneers in Modern Nigerian History* (Scholars Press, Uyo, 1980), p. 1.
- 2 Chief A.M.E. Mba, Private Papers, Oron Town.
- 3 See, R.N.O. Marshall, "Intelligence Report on the Oron Clan" File No. IK EKEDIST 1/2/146 (1935).
- 4 Chief A.M.E. Mba, Private Papers. Also interviews with Chief O.E. Isong, Chief S.B. Onobo, Chief Umium Esebre, etc.
- 5 John Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo* (London, 1823), p. 132.
- 6 Hugh Goldie, *Dictionary of the Efik Language* (Edinburg, 1874), p. 358; R.L. Keown, *Twenty-Five Years in Qua Iboe* (Lodon, 1912), p. 23.
- 7 W.J. Ward, *In and Around Oron Country or The Story of Primitive Methodism in Southern Nigeria* (London, 1911), p. 31.
- 8 For details see Jeffreys, *Report on the Tribes and Clans of Eket District*, May, 1911, National Archives, Enugu.
- 9 Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, Vols. 1-4 (London, 1969), Vol. 1, pp. 12-95-96.
- 10 Talbot, *Peoples*, vol. 4, p. 16.
- 11 *Ibid.* p. 17.
- 12 (London, 1950), p. 86.
- 13 Noah, *Ibibio Pioneers*, p. 7. For an examination of the differences between Efik and Ibibio languages, see Eyo Okon Akak, *Efiks of Old Calabar*, Four Volumes (Calabar, 1981), Vol. 11. *Language Origin and Usage*.
- 14 Chief Mba, Private Papers.
- 15 Jeffreys, *Report*, pp. 8, 27.
- 16 See Maxwell Owusu, "Ethnography in Africa. The Usefulness of the Useless" *American Anthropologist*, 80 (June, 1978).
- 17 Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, Vol. 1, pp. 12-15 also vol. IV, pp. 95-96. Also Noah, *Ibibio Pioneers*, pp. 6-7.
- 18 Noah, *Ibibio Pioneers*, p. 4.
- 19 Mba, Private Papers, *op. cit.*
- 20 See Jeffreys, *Report*, pp. 27-28.

- 21 Cited in *Memorandum of the Oron People on Administrative Divisions in the South Eastern State*, 1969.
- 22 Chief Mba, *Private Papers*, *op. cit.*
- 23 Chief Isong, *Private Papers*, and Interviews; also R.N.O. Marshall, *Intelligence Report*.
- 24 Jeffreys, *Report*, p. 29.
- 25 Address of Welcome presented by the Chiefs and People of Oron to H.E. Mr. G. Nseke on his visit to Oron Division, April 27, 1972.

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## Traditions of Migrations and Settlement

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**A**S pointed out in the previous chapter, there is near unanimity among the various groups inhabiting the Oron area that they originated from the Cameroons. This claim is of course consistent with similar claims made by other semi-Bantu groups in South-Eastern Nigeria and fits into the generally accepted theory that the Cameroon/Nigerian corridor was a major centre for major migrations. However, although there is near consensus on the centre of migrations of the Oron groups into present day Nigeria, there are conflicting traditions about the routes of these migrations. For ease of analysis, we shall take the major groups separately before attempting a synthesis of the phenomenon.

### The Idua

As pointed out earlier, Idua is one of the four distinct groups that make up Oron. A coastal settlement comprising the four main villages of Idua-Esit Edik, Idua Asang, Idua Afaha Eduok and Idua Ukpata, Idua is bounded on the north by Okobo, to the south by Udung Uko, on the west by Eyo Abasi and Iquita and on the north east by the estuary of the Cross River. There is reason to believe that Idua has lost some of its land over the years to other Oron groups, for according to one informant, in the past, "Idua shared same boundaries with Ebughu and Uya-Oron. My uncle often referred to this." Another informant recalls that "Idua is one of the earliest established communities in this part of Oron. Uya-Oron in time past shared boundary with Idua who were in fact, a distinct people." Of the estimated population of 319,940 for Oron in 1963, Idua accounted for about, 17,000<sup>1</sup>

There are two major traditions of the origins and migrations of the Idua people to their present location. One places Idua migrations within the general context of Efik migrations from Ibom in Arochuku to Uruan. According to this view, four groups of Eburutu, namely Abayan, Usuk-Akpa, Enwang and Iboku reached Uruan from Ibom. Some informants claim that Idua was part of the group identified as Usuk-Akpa, who along with the Enwang and Abayan, left Uruan before the Iboku group.<sup>2</sup> It is further claimed that the Idua people migrated from Uruan to Obutong in Calabar from where they crossed the river to their present location in Oron.

This claim of Eburutu ancestry for the Idua people, popular among the Efik, is not accepted by Idua people. Indeed, there is no mention of "Uruan" in the more widely accepted traditions of Idua, as will be shown below. One extremely knowledgeable informant, Chief Ita Uso of Ukpata is very explicit on the point. "According to our oral tradition," he insists, "Idua people are not Efiks, but have had close links with the Efiks from a very early time." Another informant, Chief Okon Ekpong of Idua Assang confirms that "during our stay at Anyangala, Efiks were not one of the groups we mixed with and if they were there at all we did not know them as Efiks."<sup>3</sup> This, of course, is not to deny that there has been great mingling between the Idua and the Efik over the years. As fishermen located near the estuary of the Cross River, the Idua fished in the Calabar River over a long time and mixed with the Efik fishermen. This common environment and interaction over the years have led to some common customs among the two groups.

According to Idua traditions also, there was considerable Idua settlement in the area now inhabited by the Efik before and after the Efik arrived there. Chief Inyang Effiong Nyong, clan head of Idua, claims that before the Efik emigrated or were expelled by other Ibibios, "the Iduas were already established along the coast of the Cross River". Apparently, as will be shown below, when the major Idua group left Eket, a portion of them, in their fishing expeditions, settled along the Calabar coast at a place called Akwa Esuk. Prominently mentioned among this group of early settlers were the followers of Chief Ayo Iyo, Oboyo Ntekim, Osukpong Ntekim and Atu Iyoka. According to tradition, Aya Iyo was a prominent fisherman who hailed from Idua. He established a settlement along the Great Qua River in Calabar in the 1680's. Around his settlement Aya Iyo had accidentally thrown some yam peels which surprisingly grew into huge tubers which at harvest time required three days labour to dig up. As part of his social obligations, Aya Iyo went to present some

River. In 1921, the population of Okobo was estimated at 10,615, made up of 5,109 males and 5,500 females. By 1931, however, D.M. Sh. estimated the population at about 7,833. By 1963, that population had risen to 46,870, thus making Okobo the second largest group in the Oron area. The Okobo are divided into two clans, *Odu* and *Eta*, the former consisting of the villages of Ebighi Okobo, Ebighi Odu, (Ekeya), Ubo Nda, Akaba, Obo Esuk Inwang, Obot Inwang and Atabong, and the latter Ebighi Eta, Okopedi, Nnung Atai, Ammamong, Obufi and Odobo.<sup>11</sup>

There are three competing traditions of origins and migrations of the Okobo, the first pointing to migrations from Igboland, the second associating Okobo with the dispersal of the Eburutu groups from Urua and the last linking Okobo with the general movements from Usahadi which the Oron Ukpabang group was part. According to the first version, the Okobo, Oron and Ibibio were once neighbours living in Igboland and their movement away from there was part of the general dispersal from the Akwa-Orlu centre.<sup>12</sup> As the story goes, the Ibibio, Oron and Okobo moved from there southwards towards the coast. The Ibibio settled first while the Okobo and the Oron continued their movements towards the Atlantic Ocean, passing through Andoni, Eke and Ebughu in the process. At Ebughu where the Okobo probably settled briefly, a land dispute broke out and in the ensuing conflict, some of the Okobo sailed northwards in a raft into the Uya Oron Creek and established a settlement at the present site where the bridge on the Uya Oron/Uyo road stands. Their stay was shortlived, however, for they were raided by a band of Oron people from Eyo Otong. The Okobo moved further north of the creek and established a new settlement at Ebighi where they were considerably removed from the reach of the Oron raiders. Ebighi became the centre of secondary dispersal principally because of land shortage to meet the demands of an increasing population. Thus, families hived off in search of farmlands and in the process new villages were established. The strongest proponent of this view of Okobo migrations is Chief E.O. Uyo, who claims that the version was handed down in his family.<sup>13</sup>

It should be pointed out that this tradition does not enjoy much popularity among the Okobo people. Besides, there are no credible traditions of Igbo settlement among the Oron Ukpabang group, the supposed neighbours of the Okobo in Igboland and companions in their wanderings. Indeed, one informant, Chief Esu Obiesio was quite indignant when he maintained: "We have no connection at all with the Igbo. We did not know them".<sup>14</sup>

A more popular tradition is that which associates Okobo with the generally well known migrations of the Eburutu from Ibom and subsequent dispersal from Uruan. Apparently, a small part of the group that scattered from Uruan entered the Okobo area. As already pointed out, Okobo shares a boundary with Uruan to the north. It is significant that this tradition is more popular among the population in the border area between Okobo and Uruan. At all event, this population is too insignificant and obviously does not represent the views of the majority of Okobo people.

By far the most popular and credible of the three traditions is that which traces Okobo dispersal to Usahadit in the Cameroons. Apparently, also, this dispersal post-dated that of the Oron Ukpabang from the same area. According to this tradition, the Okobo crossed from Usahadit in a raft to Ebughu where they first settled. Here, they stayed for a short while but were forced to flee the area because of a land dispute between them and the inhabitants of the area. According to Shute "if the Okobo and Ebughu ever dwelt together, the later was the original settlement. ... The principal shrine of the Okobo lie one at Inua Abasi on the sea coast and the other at Ewang on the southern bank of Mbo Creek on whose north bank the Ebughu Colony lies." This observation is significant in view of Jeffreys' remarks that it was the Ebughu who moved out from present Okobo area to found a colony where they could depend wholly on fishing.<sup>15</sup> Be that as it may, the Okobo people are near unanimous that it was they who moved from Ebughu to their present site, not the reverse.

Tradition has it that when they were compelled to move out of the Ebughu area because of dispute over land, the Okobo sailed up the Uya Oron creek and landed "where the bridge has been built to connect Uyo with Oron" near present day Odutin. This claim over Odutin was narrated to Jeffreys by Okobo chiefs. They insisted that they did not know who the Odutins were and that the land they were occupying was Okobo land. Okobo stay in the region was, however, brief as they were forced to move further up the Uya-Oron creek by bands of raiders from Oron. It was this later movement that brought them to Ebighi where they established a more permanent settlement. The settlement was named after Ebighi, the first son of Okobo, a great warrior, who led them from Ebughu.

From Ebighi, the Okobo began to spread over the present area they occupy. Odu, another son of Okobo founded Ube, Ekeya, Nda, Akaba, Obo. Similarly, Eta and his sons founded Ebighi-Eta, Okopedi, Odobo, Nnung Atai and Amammong.

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Tradition has it that when they were compelled to move out of the Ebughu area because of dispute over land, the Okobo sailed up the Uya Oron creek and landed "where the bridge has been built to connect Uyo with Oron" near present day Odutin. This claim over Odutin was narrated to Jeffreys by Okobo chiefs. They insisted that they did not know who the Odutins were and that the land they were occupying was Okobo land. Okobo stay in the region was, however, brief as they were forced to move further up the Uya-Oron creek by bands of raiders from Oron. It was this later movement that brought them to Ebighi where they established a more permanent settlement. The settlement was named after Ebighi, the first son of Okobo, a great warrior, who led them from Ebughu.

From Ebighi, the Okobo began to spread over the present area they occupy. Odu, another son of Okobo founded Ube, Ekeya, Nda, Akaba, Obo. Similarly, Eta and his sons founded Ebighi-Eta, Okopedi, Odobo, Nnung Atai and Amammong.

Some other settlements in Okobo were founded independently of the group. These include Obufi, apparently established by a group of refugees from the neighbouring Osu Ofi area of Oron. Another was Atabong, apparently founded by one Antai Ema, a fugitive from Adiabo. As the story goes, Antai Ema and his family who specialized in shell fishing were constantly attacked by crocodiles in the vicinity of Adiabo. Frightened by this menace, Antai Ema led this people down the Cross River and arrived a place the Okobo called *Ataw Obong* (place where cane grow plentifully). Here, Antai Ema and his family settled and were later joined by new migrants. This settlement is grouped in the Okobo Clan.

Yet another settlement established by non-Okobo group in the area on the border between Ndonebom and Ekeya, was Esuk-Iwang Ekeya. This was an Efik trading post which was frequented by Efik, Ibibio and Okobo traders which expanded over time into a major settlement. It, like Atabong, is now grouped under the Odu clan.

### Ebughu Otong

Another significant group in what is today Oron is the Ebughu Otong group. The distinctness of this group was recognized in the early colonial period, and Ebughu was designated one of the original four groups in the Oron District before the advent of colonial rule. The others were E Oro (Uquong, Ibhigi and Okiuso), Ubuoho Ekung (Ubodung and Okp and Asang (Idua).<sup>16</sup> Mainly coastal, north of the Mbo river, and bounded in the north and northwest by Udung Uko and Udesi respectively. Ebughu was described by Talbot as one of the largest towns in the E District. The population of the area was estimated at 14,000 in 1953. Today, the Ebughu Clan includes the village groups of Nsie and Oduting in the hinterland parts of Oron.

There are four competing traditions of the origins and migrations of the Ebughu group. The first insists that the Ebughu are a part of the Obodom group and that the putative ancestor of the Ebughu, Otong, migrated from Andoni in response to the pressure exerted on that area by the southward moving Igbo. The Ebughu reportedly moved southeastwards, crossed the creeks with a raft, and landed near the present site of Ibuno. Finding the Ibuno area unsuitable for farming, Otong and his followers left that vicinity and this later movement brought them to the west banks of the Mbo river where they established permanent settlements. The continuing friendship existing between the Ebughu and Andoni expressed in intermarriages and the freedom allowed the later fish in Ebughu waters is cited as evidence of these early relationships.

The second version of Ebughu origin and migrations links their movements to the dispersal of the children of Otong Iboku from Ibom. According to this version, Ebughu Otong Iboku was one of the offsprings of Iboku, who had left Ibom before the departure of the Eburutu from that region. Later movements reportedly brought the group to Nkat Inim and later to Idua in the Eket region. Here, war broke out which forced the followers of Otong to migrate further. It was this later movement that supposedly brought the Ebughu to their present abode near the Mbo river.

There is yet a third version, apparently influenced by the popular story narrated by E.N. Amaku. According to this now discredited version, Ukpabang, Iboto, Eburutu and Ebughu were children of intermarriage between an Igbo man, Okorafor, and an Ibibio woman, Otongama. All four initially lived in Uruan. But soon, war broke out between the children forcing them to move in different directions. The Ebughu migrated to Akani Obio (Oron) where they settled with the Idua. They were forced to make yet another movement which finally brought them to their present site.<sup>19</sup>

The final version of Ebughu origins and migrations is that Otong, the putative ancestor of the Ebughu, migrated from the Cameroons and first settled at Obutong, near Calabar. "Later, they left Obutong and migrated to Akani Obio, where they settled with the Idua people. But due to some quarrel they left and migrated and finally settled at the present site."<sup>20</sup>

It should be pointed out that all four versions enjoy considerable popularity among different segments of Ebughu people. This seems to suggest that, though Ebughu people all acknowledge Otong as their putative father, migrations into the area took different routes and occurred at different times. As one informant rightly pointed out, "all of us [Ebughu people] would not have been Ebughu Otong, meaning children of Otong." Apparently, some migrants came through the Andoni — Idua Eket area, and others came from the Cross River region. What seems certain is that the Ebughu are part of the Obodom group that entered their present abode in Oron from various directions.

### **The Enwang**

The Enwang, one of the groups that inhabit the Mbo littoral called Effiat Mbo, today live principally in the villages of Eyukut, Eyefai, Ubotuong, Ukoakpan, Ekiebong, Eyudombo, Uba, Ibete, Ibot Ikot and Udingi. Except for Ibot Ikot and Udingi, the other villages are contiguous, and generally referred to as "Atai Enwang" (real Enwang). In 1963, the

population of Enwang was estimated at about 25,000, making En the largest group in the Effiat-Mbo area. Initially grouped in the Okpo Clan, Enwang is now grouped with the villages of Afaha Okpo, there have been intermitent moves to have Enwang carved out as a separate clan.

There are basically two competing traditions on the origins and migrations of the Enwang to their present location. The first, not too popular, associates Enwang with the alleged movements of the Oron Ukpabang people from "Usiak Utin" (the East) to the Cameroons area. From there, along with the Ukpabang, the emigrants supposedly came to Nigeria in the Andoni region where they stayed for a while. Subsequent migration from Andoni brought the Enwang and the Oron to the respective areas they now occupy. This tradition thus associates Enwang with the Oron group, especially the Okpo clan in Oron and this explains the recent inclusion of Enwang in the Okpo clan. One informant in Oron claims that Enwang was the grandson of Okpo, founder of the Okpo clan in Oron.<sup>21</sup> It must be stressed that this version is not popular among the Enwang people and can be safely discarded as not authentic.

Enwang traditions are unanimous in linking the Enwang people with the Efik of Old Calabar. Indeed, there has been the tendency to see Enwang as one of the original Eburutu clans that dispersed from Ibom to Uruan. According to this tradition, the four Eburutu clans that arrived in Uruan from Ibom were Abayen, Usuk-Akpa, Enwang and Iboku. The latter further claimed that the Enwang, along with Abayen and Usuk-Akpa, actually left Uruan before the final exit of the Iboku to Creek Town area. In other accounts, however, Enwang is regarded as one of the children of Iboku. Be that as it may, the Enwang are unanimous in linking their ancestry to that of the Efik. One informant declared "Enwang was one of the Efik clans before the Europeans came to this area and we have always been known as Enwang. We all settled at Igboland from Uruan before we left and settled at Calabar because of trouble". Another informant declared, "the father of the Efiks and Enwangs was Eburutu. They lived in Uburu and were troublesome people. Because of their troubles they left and settled in Igboland. There at Igboland they lived at Iboku. Because of trouble again they left Ibom and settled at Uruan." Chief Isemin Abia, the chief of Enwang (Ovong Enwang) was even more insistent when he declared: "we Enwang people are Efiks. ... You must not forget that despite the fact that they bore the name Enwang, we are Efik." And finally, Mr. A.O. Abia, a school teacher argues:

*I have heard the history of Enwang from many of our elders. I was told that Enwang people came to settle at Calabar after they had lived at Ibom near Arochukwu and*

Uruan. The father of Enwang was Ating Anua and we left all these places because of war. At Calabar, the Enwang people who landed first before the other Efik who said they were troublesome lived at Nsidung.<sup>23</sup>

The details of Enwang migrations from Uruan are rather full. Like the Efik, the Enwang apparently refused to be absorbed into the Uruan society. Apparently, also, the Enwang left Uruan before the Efik and followed the Cross River until they reached present day Henshaw Town in Calabar. This claim of prior settlement of the Enwang in Calabar before the arrival of the Efik was the basis of a 1916 court judgement by Justice A.F. Webber. "It is more probable", he wrote, "that as far as Calabar land is concerned, the Efik when they came from Creek Town met the Kwas and the Enwangs. The Enwangs, an Efik tribe, must have come before the other Efiks. This is traditional history as given by the Henshaws, the Enwangs and the Kwas". Eyo Okon Akak has also concluded in a recent study that "the Akpas, Abayens and Enwangs were the first settlers mainly on the coast as fishermen and traders and they were all of Efik stock and family."<sup>24</sup> Further evidence of Enwang early presence in the area is that the most powerful diety among the Enwang, *Anantigha*, is still located at present day Efut beach. Indeed, Chief Isemin Abia insists that in the past an Enwang Chief had to be present during the installation or burial of any Obong of Efikland.<sup>24</sup>

Be that as it may, Enwang residence in present day Calabar was not without incidence. The Enwang people were generally believed to have magical powers capable of turning them into crocodiles to kill their neighbours in the adjacent rivers. It was reasoned that this was why they would not let their young girls go to fetch water from the streams. Finally, matters came to a head when the Enwang popular masquerade, Etok Udo Ekang, drove a non initiate into the house of an Nsidung woman, knocked down a door which fell on a sleeping baby who was killed instantly. War broke out between the Nsidung and the Enwang and after an initial victory, the Enwang were defeated and forced to migrate once again.

This movement led them to cross the river to Oron where they landed at present day Esuk Oron. Feeling still threatened by possible Efik pursuers from Calabar, the Enwang left Esuk Oron towards the estuary of the Cross River where they settled at Mkpang Utong, so called because from there they could listen to news and observe movements of the Efik who were still pursuing them. Mkpang Utong proved inhospitable and further movement brought the Enwang along the Mbo river to Ebughu. Apparently, the ruler of Ebughu refused to give them land to settle. Rather, he directed them to the other side of the Mbo river where Uba

Mbe, swamp land suitable for settlement, existed. According to tradition, a mud skipper helped the Enwang to cross the river to Uba where a new settlement was established. Once settled, the advance party word to others who had been left behind to join them. As the population grew, the children of Ating Anua fanned out and established new settlements which soon grew into the present day villages in Enwang.

As pointed out earlier, this tradition of origin and migration from Ibom to Uruan to Calabar to their present Oron locality is widely accepted by all Enwang families and conforms to most known historical facts about the Enwang people. There is little doubt that the Enwang was more related in origin to the Efik than their other Oron neighbours. It was not until 1926, for example, that the Enwang people, for administrative convenience, soft pedalled on their relationship with Efik and accepted brotherly association with their Oron neighbours.<sup>24</sup>

### The Effiat/Mbo Group

Apart from the Enwang, the other major groups in the Effiat Mbo area are the Effiat, the Mbo and the James Town people. Because of the geographical location, this area was a major meeting point for different peoples coming from Calabar, the Cameroons, Eket and Oron. Among those from Calabar were some Effiat groups and those who founded the Efik colony at Obio Okon Ekpo (James Town). Most of the Effiat groups came from the Cameroons while the Uda group of villages represent the intrusion of Oron settlers into the area. The traditions of each of these groups are analysed below.

The Effiat is clearly a multi-ethnic stock, related principally to Ibomo, Eket, Oron and Efik. The Effiat villages in Oron comprise mainly Akwa Obio Effiat, Usuk Effiat, Inua Abasi, Esuk Enwang, and Abana grew from the areas listed above. According to Efik tradition, in the sixteenth century, a group of fishermen followed Ikpotu Otong Iboku to establish the fishing settlements and subsequently miscegenated with settler fishermen from the neighbouring areas. Effiat is thus cited as one of the offsprings of the great legendary father of the Efik, Otong Iboku, who had left Ibomo and sailed down the Cross River before the departure of the main Efik stock from Ibomo to Uruan. It was the same movement of migrant fishermen from Calabar and Uruan that led to the founding of the many Effiat fishing settlements now in the Rio Rey area of the Cameroons now known as Isangele sub-division in the South-western Cameroons.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, there is little doubt that James Town (Obio Okon Ekpo) was founded as an Efik colony by James E. Bassey from Cobham town in Calabar in the late nineteenth century.

One version has it that Okon Ekpo left Calabar because he cohabited with a twin mother with whom he had two children. He apparently diverted two ships and started a lucrative trade in the Ibaka area. He obtained land from the Ibaka people on the beach and established a flourishing market for palm oil trade. This settlement grew into James Town (Obio Okon Ekpo).

Once established, the Effiat settlements attracted other fishermen from the neighbouring Ibuno, Eket, and Oron areas. As one informant put it, "Effiat is a multi-tribal stock, notably related to Ibuno, Eket, and Oron whose main purpose of settlements was fishing". Out of this amalgam of people, a polyglot community held together by their common occupation of fishing emerged. By the 1920's Effiat was appropriately described as mixed "Efik, Ibuno, Oron and Kroo boys."

The Mbo villages of Ibaka, Uda, Ofi, Orukim, Unyenge and so on, on the other hand, are clearly villages belonging to the Uquong clan in Oron. Tradition has it that they separated from the main stock at Usahadit in the Cameroons and crossed to the present site of Uda, which was the original settlement. It is further narrated that fratricidal conflicts led to the scattering of the family at Uda with the Ibaka moving out first to establish in their present location. Other villages were established in the same fashion but they were held together by common ancestry, frequent inter-marriages and not infrequent threats from their neighbours.<sup>26</sup>

### **Oron Ukpabang Group**

The Oron/Ukpabang are by far the largest group in Oron and it is in recognition of this that the area is named after them. In the 1920's the population of Oron was estimated at about 52,225. By 1936, R.N. Marshall estimated the population at about 273, 171. The population projection for the Oron Ukpabang group in 1983 was well over 400,000. This population is concentrated in the hinterland with Udung Uko, Eyo Abasi, Nsie, Oruko, Mbokpu Eyo Akan and Oyubia having the largest concentration. The Oro Ukpabang derive their name from the putative father of the group, Abang. Ukpabang literally means followers of Abang.

Oron traditions of origins and migrations are unanimous on four important points. First, contrary to the speculations of the European anthropologists and administrators, the people of Oron categorically reject the notion that they are a sub-tribe of the Ibibio. As indicated earlier, this denial is not a recent phenomenon to be explained away by post-Nigerian independence political agitation. This, of course, is not to deny

that the two groups have interacted over the years and in the process influenced each other. Secondly, all Oron traditions acknowledge Abang as the putative father of the group and Oro as the person who led them to their present abode, although some traditions see Oro as the brother of Abang while others regard him as the son of the former. Thirdly, the traditions all agree that although there might have been different points of entry into present day Nigeria, the actual point of dispersal into Nigeria was Usahadit in the Rio del Rey area of Cameroons. Lastly, the informants agree that one of the most important problems confronting the Oron people down the years has been how to maintain their separate group identity from their more populous Ibibio neighbours about whom they knew very little until the advent of colonial rule.

One tradition maintains that Abang, the putative father of the Oron people, came from the Mediterranean world, more specifically from Egypt, before the advent of the Moslems in that region. Abang supposedly wandered with his children and followers through the Sudan belt, possibly into present day Uganda and Zaire before he made a major stop in the Cameroons. Here, Abang begat Do, who begat Donni, who in turn begat Oro and Obolo. This tradition thus emphasizes the not generally accepted relationship between the Obolo and the Oron people which was celebrated by exchange of visits between the Obolo and the Oron people down to the 1940's. According to Obolo tradition, Obolo the founder of Andoni, and Oro, the founder of Oron Ukpabang were of the same stock. They proudly point to similarities between Obolo culture and that of the Oron, including the fact that the two groups never sold their sons into slavery, and that the Ekpu carvings of Oron had the *Ekpu Ebikan* ancestor faces of the Obolo as their direct equivalent.<sup>27</sup>

The stay of the Oron and the Obolo in the Cameroons was not without incidents. According to Chief O.E. Isong, there were frequent squabbles between the children of Obolo and those of Oron, sometimes over farmland and fishing grounds. Increased food production in the area especially plantain, banana and cocoyam, apparently led to increased population, thus putting pressure on the existing resources. In response to these difficulties, Obolo and Oron are supposed to have moved out of the Cameroons jointly according to some traditions, but separately according to others.

There is considerable controversy about the routes through which Oron entered present day Nigeria. One tradition states that the Oron Usahadit, crossed the river on rafts and landed at the present site of Eforon where they established their first settlement from where they expanded into the hinterland. Another, given by Chief William Obolo

Uboro Oro, maintains that the Oron migrated through Ejagham territory down the Cross River until they reached present day Calabar. From here they crossed the river in rafts to Esuk Oron. Yet another insists that the Oron and the Obolo entered through the Niger Delta, settled first at Andoni and from there, following a series of fratricidal quarrels, wandered through Eket until they entered present day Oron.

Two things appear clear from these conflicting traditions. First, there is no doubt that the Oron Ukpabang entered Nigeria through a sea route and that the last point of their sojourn outside present day Nigeria was Usahadi in the Cameroons. Secondly, it is probable that there were two waves of migrations, each taking a different route into their present location. This is probably what led Jeffreys to observe that the "Oronese are an amalgamation of two tribes." It is also interesting to note that originally, the Ukpabang comprised two main groups — Esu Oro (Uquong, Ibighi and Okiuso Clans) and Ubuoho Ekung (Ubodung and Okpo Clans). Chief A.M.E. Mba has also correctly observed that "the Ukpabang group arrived Oron in a series of waves at different spots from probably two directions."<sup>28</sup>

The evidence from oral traditions point to the fact that the Esu Oro group crossed the Cross River and settled at Esuk Oro near the present site of the Methodist Boys' High School. The original settlement was later disrupted by Portuguese raids on what was the biggest market in that vicinity. The Esu Oro were compelled to scatter, but not before each group had taken juju vowing to come to the aid of each other in case of trouble. They then moved further inland, some re-grouping at Uya Oron, others at Oti Oron and still others at Eweme. The group that settled at Eweme built the first shed in Oron called "Obio Ufre". Subsequent migrations from there led to the establishment of the villages in Uquong, Ibighi and Okiuso Clans, namely the Atakati or Mbukpo, Okere Oti, Etieke, Uda and Ubiafia groups of villages in Uquong; the Okpokuk and Utighe groups in Ibighi; and the Abang Alak and Ubesedi groups of villages in Okiuso. It should be stressed that each village in the clan was established by the children of the clan founder. It is said, for example, that the villages in Ibighi, namely Uya Oron, Okuko, Oyoku Ibighi, Atiabang, Oyubia, Urue Ita, Oyoku Asang and Afaha Akai were founded by the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth children of Ibighi, respectively.

Apparently, also, the Ubuoho group arrived in Oron in the general vicinity of Esuk Oron after crossing the Cross River in company of the Obolo with their war god Ubuoho. They found the area already occupied. While the Obolo group moved on after cutting off and taking

away one of the hands of Ubuoho, the others were left behind and live with the Esu Oro group. The attacks by the Portuguese slave raider already referred to subsequently scattered them. Families and relations moved off in search of farmlands and security. The fleeing Ubodung assembled together at Eyotong where they established their principal shrine, Olughu Ubuoho. Land dispute apparently broke out between them and their Esu Oron neighbours which forced them to move still further inland. The next major gathering point was Urue Okwong, then Oro (present day Obot Eyo) where a more permanent settlement was established. It was from this point that the children of Ubodung spread out to found new villages. Eyulor, for example, was founded by sons of Eket Okpo and enjoys primacy of place as Okpe Oruko. Ania Okpo was founded by Okpo; Udung Ukor by Ukor; Udung Uwe by Uwe and so on. Other important villages founded at the same time include Okossi, Ekim and Ukuda.<sup>29</sup>

Traditions agree that the Okpo group, comprising the villages of Eyo Bassey, Uboro Oro, Uboro Isong Inyang, Udung Uko and Edikor arrived at the same time as the Ubodung. The relationship between Okpo, the founder of the Clan, and Eket has already been mentioned. It is generally believed that Okpo first established a settlement at Uboro Oron, which was developed into village status by his grandson, Sekung. According to tradition, Okpo begat Bieto who begat several sons, principally Sekun, Bassey, Okpu, Osung and Sunlip. Bassey, Okpu, Osung and Sunlip later moved away from Uboro Oro as the family grew bigger and established the villages Eyo Bassey, Edikor, Udung Uko and Uboro Isong Inyang respectively.<sup>30</sup>

It was in this fashion that the Oron Ukpabang came to occupy their present location and establish permanent settlements. There is little doubt from the traditions that they arrived their present location in two basic groups. As E.B. Udo observed in 1975:

They (Oron) did not all arrive at the same time. The earlier arrivals were Ibhigi Clan, Lkwong Clan, Okuiso Clan, generally known as 'Esu Oro'. Idua and Effiat Clans arrived at the same time. The Ebughu, Ubodung and Okpo came later.<sup>31</sup>

This doubtless reflects the pattern of migrations into, and settlement in, the Oron area. The time of the arrivals of the groups in Oron, however, remains controversial.

### **Chronological Framework and Synthesis**

In discussing the chronological framework for the migrations and settlement of the Oron groups in their present location, we have to rely on

three kinds of materials, namely, evidence provided by the oral traditions, evidence from archaeological finds and art work, and tie-ins with established chronology for the various groups with whom the Oron claim to have come into contact. Like the traditions of most pre-literate peoples, Oron traditions of origins and migrations do not provide explicit chronologies for the events they describe. However, they contain clues which, when examined against other known historical events, are useful in establishing approximate chronologies for the events.

Oron traditions insist that they left the Cameroons and crossed over to their present locale in rafts or canoes. This suggests that the Oron people had acquired knowledge of iron technology before their departure from the Bantu-line. Roland Oliver has attributed the Bantu expansion from the Cameroons - Nigerian corridor to "the coming of Iron Age, with its attendant improvements in woodwork, boats, tools and weapons — above all weapons for hunting and fishing." There are also traditions which associate the migration of the Oron from this Bantu-line with population explosion resulting from improved food supply and production. One legend popular among the Oron people is that Berede was the first man who brought yams from God. This would refer to the introduction of yams into the Bantu-line area. Greenberg has associated the Bantu migrations with the introduction of new food crops from south-east Asia. It is not reasonable to associate the migrations of the Oron people with the population movement and migrations into the southeastern region of Nigeria which involved "small groups of people trickling through the forest belt over a longer period of time ever before the rapid expansion of the Bantu." The above statement would certainly apply to the Ibibio group who, as we pointed out earlier, had left the Usahadit area long before the Oron groups. Besides, the Oron people capture the confusion resulting from the movements set in motion by the Bantu migrations in their saying that this was the event that scattered the whole world (Ekung amaisim asuan Oduobit). It is clear from these pieces of fragmentary evidence that the Oron migration into Nigeria was associated with the Bantu migrations from the Nigerian/Cameroon corridor. It is significant that the migrations of the Obolo, with which some of the Oron groups associate themselves, have been linked with the activities of the Bantu in the Cameroon region. Jeffreys points out that the Bantu initially tried to assimilate the Obolo but failed. They then tried to marry off the women and kill off the men and that this was the main cause of obolo migrations out of the Ramby region of the Cameroons. It should be recalled that the initial movement of the Bantu has been dated to 200 A.D. and that the movement continued to about 1600 A.D.<sup>32</sup>

It is also clear from the traditions that the Oron had left Usahadit before the arrival of the Portuguese in the Rio del Rey area. Raids by the Portuguese slave traders are mentioned in Oron traditions only as a factor in their retreat from the coastal areas around Esuk Oron into the interior. It has been speculated by Chief Mba that the Oron might have left Usahadit about 300 years before the Portuguese arrived Fernando Port in the late fifteenth century. Be that as it may, we can safely assume that the Oron migrations from the Cameroons and settlement in their present location occurred between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries. It is significant that in the 1900's, there were several Oron families and clans who could trace their geneological trees about fifteen to sixteen generations back, based on their ancestral Ekpu carvings.<sup>33</sup> Based on the generally accepted generational age of about 30 years for Africa, this would take us back to at least the early fifteenth century A.D.

The above estimates are corroborated by evidence from other sources. By far one of the most enduring legacies of Oron to Nigerian cultural heritage are the Ekpu carvings. The Ekpu were carved from *Oko* to immortalize dead ancestors. The elders of the group were expected to be knowledgeable enough to identify the ancestor immortalized by each ekpu. The Ekpu representation was so important and central to Oron cosmology that it was incumbent on all children to ensure that their dead ancestors were immortalized in these carvings. Ekpu carvings were the "ancestor memorials" of great significance to the Oron people, as will be shown later.

Given its centrality in Oron cosmology, it is reasonable to assume that Ekpu carvings are almost as old as the settlement of the Oron people in their present location. In the 1960's Kenneth Murray, the Director of Antiquities, estimated that some of the Ekpu carvings were more than 500 years old, thus tracing them back to about the middle of fifteenth century. Most Oron chiefs insist, however, that the samples available to Murray were the "latest carvings" available and that the earlier carvings, including Ekpu Odu Oro, were more than 900 years old. This would take us back to about the beginning of the eleventh century A.D. These dates stand to be confirmed or refuted by carbon dating of recent archaeological finds in Oron which are now being processed.

We can also get some sense of the timing of the migrations and settlement of the Oron people by comparing Oron traditions with the traditions of those they came into contact during their migrations and from whom rather firm dates have been established. Two groups are important in this regard — the Obolo whose traditions are associated with the migrations of the Ubodung group in Oron and the Efik with whom the

Enwang associate their origins and migrations. It should be recalled that both groups maintain that present day Oron area was already inhabited by the Esu Oro groups before they arrived. A recent study of Obolo origins and migrations has estimated that Obolo migrations must have occurred between 200 and 1200 A.D. and that they must have arrived the Niger Delta area, after passing through Oron, before 715 A.D.<sup>34</sup> This, of course, indicates an earlier date of settlement for the Oron. Similarly, though considerable controversy still surrounds the dating of Efik arrival in Calabar, which was already inhabited by the Enwang, according to traditions analysed earlier, it is now more reasonable to accept that the Efik arrived Duke Town sometime in the 15th century, probably between 1400 and 1420.<sup>35</sup> Since it is generally accepted that the Enwang departed Calabar after some conflict with the newly arrived Efik, the arrival of the Enwang in Oron can be assumed to have occurred also in the early years of the fifteenth century.

From the fore-going accounts of the traditions of the peoples who now occupy Oron, we can postulate, however tentatively, as follows. The Oron groups derived mainly from the Obodom area usually located on the Bantu line on the Nigerian-Cameroon border in the Rio del Rey region. As a result of the conflicts generated in that region by the intrusion of the Bantu, the groups dispersed through several routes into present day Nigeria. The Enwang, and some smaller groups appeared to have taken a route that brought them to the Ibom area where they co-habited with the Efik Eburutu for sometime. Apparently, also, they left Ibom down the Cross River to Calabar much earlier than the Eburutu. The other groups after leaving the Cameroons, reached present day Oron in two directions. The Esu Oro crossed the Cross River estuary in rafts and settled first in the area around present day Boys' High School from where they dispersed into the hinterland. The Ebughu, Idua, and Ubuoho (Ubodung and Okpo clans) appeared to have taken a more circuitous route, some through Calabar and others through Eket to present day Oron. Chief O.E. Isong is thus correct when he argues that

On reading through the information (from oral traditions) relating to the Okobos, the Odutins, the Okpo Ekets, the Ebughu, and the eastern part of Oron, it will be noticed that they all refer back their origin to the Ekets.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, in a recent comment on ethnic ties in the former Eket Division, the chiefs of Eket declared:

We know as a fact that the people of the former Eket Division have very strong ethnic ties. The Ekets, the Orons, Ibunos, Efiats and Okobo are blood relatives. As far as Oron and Eket are concerned, it is not just coincidence that you have groups of people, involving, in some cases those of many villages bearing the same name.

We have the Iduas in Oron Division, we also have them in Eket ... Before the introduction of political government, elders of these clans or groups from both Iduas and Oron usually met to discuss matters affecting their clans.<sup>38</sup>

The vividness and conflicting nature of the traditions suggest that habitation of present day Oron by these groups could not have occurred in "hoar antiquity". Indeed, we are certain that their migrations out of the Cameroons into present day Nigeria were associated with the later stages of Bantu movements in the Nigerian/Cameroon corridor and occurred between the second and fourteenth century A.D. At any rate, the indications are that present day Oron was firmly settled by the Oron groups before the beginning of the sixteenth century when Portuguese slaving activities in the area were on the increase.

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## Notes

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- 1 Interviews with Chiefs A.M. Mba and O.U. Akan conducted by Ita Effiong Nyong, October, 1983.
- 2 See A.K. Hart, *Report of the Enquiry into the Dispute over the Obongship of Calabar*, Enugu, 1964, p. 29; also Eyo Okon Akak, *Efiks of Old Calabar*, Vol. 1, pp. 22, 39.
- 3 Cited in Ita E. Nyong, *A History Of Idua Peoples of Oron to about 1900*. B.A. Project, University of Calabar, June, 1984, p. 7.
- 4 Cited in Okon John Offiong, *Calabar and Akpabuyo Relationship: Foundation -1891*. B.A. Thesis, University of Calabar, June, 1980.
- 5 Marshall, Intelligence Report on the Oron Clan, *op. cit.*,
- 6 Jeffreys, *Report on the Tribes and Clans of Eket District*, *op. cit.*
- 7 Interview with Chief Inyang Effiong Nyong, October, 1983.
- 8 Jeffreys, *Report on the Clans and Tribes in Eket District*, p. 33.
- 9 See Ita E. Nyong, *History of Idua Peoples*, p.17.
- 10 Jeffreys, *Report on the Clans and Tribes of Eket District*, p. 33.
- 11 See Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, Vol. iv, p. 56; M. Shute, Intelligence Report Okobo Clan Eket Division, Eket Dist. 4/2/2, 1925, p. 5, National Archives Enugu, and Ata Okon Ewa, *A Pre-Colonial History of Okobo*. B.A. Project, University of Calabar, June, 1980.
- 12 See G.I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers* (London, 1970), p. 30.
- 13 For details of this tradition as narrated by Chief Uyo, see the full transcript in Ata Okon Ewa's *Pre-colonial History of Okobo*, pp. 69-72.
- 14 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 9.
- 15 Shute, Intelligence Report, p. 7; Jeffreys, *Report on the Tribes and Clans in Eket District*, p.13.
- 16 See Chief A.M.E. Mba, Memorandum submitted to the Commission of Inquiry (South-Eastern State) on Oron Customs and Usages, 1974 (draft) in Private Papers.
- 17 Interview with Chief Peter Esang Ebianga, Clan Head of Ebughu, conducted by Victor Effiong Eneyo, September, 1979, as reproduced in *A Social History of Ebughu Clan*, B.A. Project University of Calabar, May, 1980, pp. 55-60.
- 18 See Akak, *Efiks of Old Calabar*, vol. 1, pp. 11, 23, 26, 82. Also interview with Chief Simon Akkatang of Osu Ebughu by Victor Eneyo, April, 1970, reproduced in *A Social History*, pp. 61-63.

- 19 Interviews with Chief Matthew Antai, Village Head of Akai Udo and Chief E. E. Eyo, Village head of Eyoior, Ebughu, reproduced in Eyoio, *A Social History*, pp. 64-65.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 67.
- 21 These are the views of Chief. O.E. Isong, the Akta of Oron as recorded in Bassey, *A Social and Economic History of Enwang in Oron Local Government Area, 1850-1950*. B.A. project University of Calabar, June, 1981.
- 22 These traditions were recorded by Bassey O.E. Bassey and reproduced in his *Social and Economic History of Enwang*, pp. 125-155. See also Edeh S. Etifit, *Aspects of Pre-Colonial History of Enwang in Oron Local Government Area*. B.A. Project, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, June, 1979.
- 24 Cited in Etifit, *Aspects of Pre-Colonial History of Enwang*, p. 34; Akak, *Efiks of Old Calabar*, vol. IV, p. 378.
- 25 Chief O.E. Isong, Private Papers.
- 26 See Akak, *Efiks of Old Calabar*, 1, pp. 23, 99. See also Edwin Ardener, "Documentary and Linguistic Evidence for the Rise of the Trading Politics between Rio del Oro and Cameroon, 1500-1650", in M. Lewis, ed., *History and Social Anthropology* (London, 1968), p. 110.
- 27 Interviews with Chief Eyo Antai of Ibaka, Chief Okon Abasi of Abana, Chiefs E. Ekpo and Okon Effiong Etifit of Inua Abasi, April, 1954.
- 28 See M.C. Ejituwu, "The Lower Cross River Region: Andoni Migration and Settlement", forthcoming; also Ejituwu, "The Obolo (Andoni) of the Eastern Niger Delta", Ph.D. Thesis, University of Lagos, 1977.
- 29 See Jeffreys, *Report*; Chief Mba, Private Papers.
- 30 For details, See Emmanuel Okon Ndiok, *A History of Afaha Ubodung in Oron L.G.A.* B.A. Project, University of Calabar, June, 1984 and Bassey Roy Li, *Oruko, Pre-Colonial to 1960*, B.A. Project University of Calabar, June, 1983. The traditions are reproduced as appendixes in both projects.
- 31 For details, see Etim Eyo Unanaowo, *A History of Afaha Okpo in Oron, 1850-1950*. B.A. Project, University of Calabar, June, 1981.
- 32 "The History of Opobo" in *Nigerian Chronicle*, July 4, 1975.
- 33 For details see the following Roland Oliver: "The Problem of Bantu Expansion", *Journal of African History*, VII, (1966); Merrick Posnansky, "Bantu Genesis: Archaeological Reflections", *Journal of African History*, IX (1968), and Ejituwu, "Andoni Migrations", *op. cit.*
- 34 Chief Mba, Private Papers, *op. cit.*
- 35 See Ejituwu, "Andoni Migration and Settlement", *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.
- 36 For an excellent summary of the conflicting positions on this question, See Akak, *Efiks of Old Calabar*, Vol. IV, especially Chapter V.
- 37 Chief Isong, Private Papers, *op. cit.*

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## Evolution of Oron Society

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**A**S indicated in the previous chapter, the various groups who now inhabit Oron arrived their present abode separately and at different times. The Esu Oro were probably the first to arrive directly from Usahadit. They were later followed by the Enwang, the Idua, the Okobo and the Ubuoho Ekung groups. It is also clear that by the end of the 17th century, the actual processes of settlement had been completed. The processes by which these motley of people were transformed into an Oron group are examined in this and subsequent chapters of this work. This chapter concentrates on the institutions that cut across families, villages and clans and cemented the different groups together, however tenuously. These centripetal institutions evolved over time in response to concrete historical circumstances, but were firmly in place by the end of the nineteenth century.

It would seem that before their departures to their present abode, the various Oron groups had developed some internal cohesion separately. Certainly, each group saw itself as a distinct entity, often expressed in their recognition and identification of a common ancestor. This process of seeking identification through a common charter and the recognition of a "jural community" was elaborated upon on their arrival in Oron. It is significant that most informants agree that from earliest times, the clans in Oron identified themselves with the ancestral father of Oron. According to one informant, Abang begat Do, who begat Donni who begat Oron and Obolo. Oron in turn begat the fathers of the clans, namely, Okpo, Uquong, Ibighi, Idua, Okiuso, Effiat and Ebughu. Indeed, some traditions insist that the clan founders were sons of Oron.<sup>1</sup>

This, as we have seen, is, of course, not historically accurate. However, this common charter served to emphasize unity among the various groups from the earliest times.

It is also evident that before they arrived their present locations, the various groups had developed some important aspects of their culture, especially language, vegetation, religion and some rudimentary social and political organizations. Undoubtedly, there are slight differences in vocabulary and pronunciation in the dialects spoken by the major groups in Oron, namely Okobo, Enwang, Ebughu, Idua and Oron proper. It is significant, however, that these dialects are mutually intelligible to their different speakers. Indeed, some people speak more than one of them. This mutual intelligibility indicates rather early interaction between the groups as well as mutual acceptance of each other. It is significant, also, that, as pointed out earlier, these Oron language and dialects are not understood by their immediate neighbours, the Efik and the Ibibio, although Oron people understand the later groups. A mutually intelligible language thus became one of the earliest cementing influences among the various Oron groups.

It is also clear that before they departed their original homes, the Oron groups had developed aspects of their religion and cosmology. Religion in this case should be understood as the mechanism used by man to explain and understand his physical environment. Defined this way, religion is as old as any human population. Scholars of religion have pointed out that religious institutions evolved in stages in response to the social and environmental realities the population seeks to explain and understand. There is the stage of magic when the people try to control the supernatural around them; that of animism which represents an attempt by man to explain his dual nature; then there is ancestor veneration emanating from the desire to deify dead fathers and ancestor heroes. In the next stage totems are adopted and family, village and clan cults evolved.<sup>2</sup>

It is clear that the various Oron populations had gone through much of the above stages in their religious developments before they arrived present day Oron. The central deities of Atabong, Anantigha, and Ubuoh were already recognised by the Ebughu, Enwang, and Ubuoho groups in Oron during their migrations into Oron. Village and family cults would develop later when villages were firmly established. By far the most important of these was the shrine. "Eke Eme Oro" (Great mother of Oron) located at Uya Oron in Ibighi Clan.

As pointed out earlier, the occupation of their present territory by the various Oron groups, though generally peaceful, was not without major

incidents. Groups fought against each other to establish primacy over territories, farmlands and fishing grounds. One result of the situation was the increasing importance of deities associated with war. The Ibighi group is said to have been particularly ferocious. Indeed, one tradition is that they derived their name from their recognized ability to chop off peoples' head (Obighi). It is not surprising that the Ibighi came to be the custodians of such martial deities as *Ukana*, *Mkpete*, and *Nsibidi*.<sup>3</sup>

The evidences from oral traditions are unanimous that the Oron people were originally a fishing people. Jeffreys rightly observed that "the religious culture of the clans classed as Oronese shows they are all in some way connected with water, bound up with water, bound up with the sea, owe their origin to the sea, were once fisher folk."<sup>4</sup> Fishing was thus a major occupation of the Oron groups in the Usahadit area as well as in the early years of their occupation of their present land. Understandably, therefore, deities associated with water were some of the earliest in Oron. Thus, there were Abasi Esuk (God of the Shores), Atabiri Inang (God of the sea), Ndem, and even a society whose members were said to be able to meet under water, *Ekongeze*. These aspects of Oron traditional belief system remain very strong among the riverine peoples of Oron, particularly the Enwang, Ebughu, Effiat, Uda, Udung Uko, Abasi, Idua, Udesi and some Okobo groups — mainly because the principal occupation of these groups remains fishing.

There is no doubt that the Oron groups had developed a vegeticulture technology before their departure from the Cameroons. Increased food production, especially yams, plantains and banana, resulting in increased population and attendant pressure on available land, has been cited as one of the factors leading to their migrations. Land had thus assumed some importance in the belief system of the Oron people before they migrated from Usahadit. Land became a more important resource when the migrants arrived their present site and retreated into the interior, some groups adopting subsistence agriculture as their major occupation. The importance of land led to the creation of deities and other societies associated with land. Indeed, the protection of *isong* (land) became one of the most important concerns of the group. Thus, one of the most important deities became *Abasi Isong* (God of the Land); the free-born population became known as *Eyo Isong* (sons of the soil); fertility cults came extremely important.<sup>5</sup>

Conflict over farm land and fishing grounds and the increase in population in the settled villages meant that relationships and associations had to be better regulated. This meant the adoption of rudimentary forms of government at the village levels under the leadership of the

migration heroes of each village. Such leaders usually became chiefs. Situations had to be created for all free-born male members of societies to come together. Each village thus built village sheds — *Obio Udu*. As societies became more competitive and complex, they also became more stratified. Secret societies came to provide ready instruments of legitimation for the power elite. Membership in such societies like *Ekpe*, *Enyia* (male) and *Abang* (females) became extremely important and graded. Each community produced a surplus and engaged in trade exchanges with others, the powers of those inter-village and inter-clan societies expanded.

The demands created by the expansion of European trade, especially the slave trade, made it imperative that institutions for regulating various aspects of life religion, politics, economics and social interactions become more clearly defined. The institutions already existing in the villages and clans adjusted to meet these demands. Pressures exerted by neighbouring groups such as the Efik and the Ibibio also had to be accommodated. To some Oron groups borrowed some institutions of their immediate neighbours such as Ekpo from the Ibibio and some grades of the *Ekpe* from the Efik. From the traditions collected, it is clear that the social, political, and religious institutions of the Oron people had developed by the end of the nineteenth century.

### Social and Political Institutions

As among other traditional societies in Africa and elsewhere, there was no great differentiation between social, political, economic and religious institutions in Oron. There was an almost total uniform reconstruction and integration of the various institutions which had reciprocal influences on each other. The kinship idiom permeated all institutions whether they were administrative, judicial or executive. The kinship idiom of association was dominant because people with kinship ties were more trustworthy and sincere to each other. Indeed, so fundamental was kinship that any person who could not trace his or her ancestry was regarded as an outsider and denied some important benefits of society.

Although there were traces of matrilineality<sup>10</sup> in some areas of Oron like Idua and Enwang, succession to offices and property was essentially patrilineal. In Idua, for example, a dead chief or ruler was only succeeded by his kinsman; the highest *Ekpe* title, the *Iyamba*, was by and large hereditary within the Abiak Elibe family.<sup>6</sup> In all Oron villages and towns, governing was in the hands of the elders thus conforming to the gerontocratic emphasis found among other Nigerian and African groups.

In practice, there were five recognized hierarchically arranged social and political units in Oron. These were the *Udip* (immediate family), *Ufok* (extended family), *Efak* (lineage group), *Udung* (the village). The *ufok* was extremely important. It consisted of several immediate families held together by a common consanguinity. A typical *ufok* comprised members of the immediate extended family, immediate relations, departed ancestors who, "helped to solidify and mystically bound the family together." E.G. Parrinder's comments on the role of the ancestors in the affairs of the *ufok* need recalling here. He wrote

Everything that concerns the family, its health and fertility, are of interest to the ancestor since they are elders and will also seek rebirth into the same family. The family land is their property and they must be consulted when land is let out to other people.<sup>7</sup>

The physical cohesion of the *ufok* was expressed in the common habitation of a compound by all the members. Each member of the family depended on the family for land and other important resources and the unit functioned essentially to sustain the well being of the members. The *ufok* was characteristically headed by the *Ubuhu Ufok*, the oldest male member of the unit who still had his faculties intact. He presided over family meetings, ensured equitable distribution of land and other benefits, led the sacrifices to the ancestral deities and regulated the behaviour of family members to ensure that the good name of the family was maintained. He was regarded as the father of all.

In many regards, the *ufok* were autonomous in their affairs. However, as families grew larger and interacted with others competing for the same resources, it was necessary to have a higher level of organization. This was the *Efak* or *Ekpuk*. These were essentially a group of patrilineal relatives tracing descent from a single ancestral father, the founders of the *udip*. It was usually headed by the most elderly male in the *Efak* who was designated *Ofong Efak* (group head) who was assisted by a council of elders from the dominant nucleus of the *Efak*. This group had collective responsibility over *Efak* land. The *Ofong Efak* represented his lineage in all village meetings and council. He was responsible for effective administration of the *Efak*, and presided over lineage group meetings especially for settling inter-family squables. Similarly, he presided at the marriage ceremonies of family members, especially the female ones. Most informants agree that, "he was regarded as the father of all in his lineage group and was the custodian of the interests of the group. It was difficult to define the limits of his authority as long as he acted in the overall interest of the *Efak* and his behaviour did not alienate the ancestors." Each *Efak* had a common meeting place, *Obio Efak*,

which served to emphasize the cohesion of the unit. The *Efak* was thus a collection of "several compounds (*ufok*) acknowledging agnatic descent from a common founding ancestor," which scrupulously looked after the interest of its members.<sup>8</sup>

The *Udung* (village), the next important level of political socialization, comprised a number of autonomous *Efak* sharing a common leadership. As defined by one Oron elder, a village was "a communal unit capable of an independent existence through its possessing of the instrument of administration and law, and not lacking such elements of religion as necessary for the comfort and prosperity of its members." It is clear that the villages developed in the early stages of settlement as each *Ufok* and *Efak* staked claims to definite land and it became necessary to have recognized boundaries. It is instructive to note that from the very beginning, the most important source of inter-village feuds was dispute over land boundaries. The most important functions of the village council were thus to effectively police village land, ensure law and order among the component *Efaks*, and to create the appropriate atmosphere for the orderly progress and development of her citizens.<sup>9</sup> The *Udung* was, to all intents and purposes, the highest level of the political system that functioned on a day to day basis.

The village was headed by the *Ofong Udung* (village chief) who was assisted by a governing council consisting of all *Ifong Efak* and *Ubugha Ufok* in the village and other important persons selected solely on their recognized ability to contribute meaningfully to the affairs of the group; Marshall's description of the village council merits attention here. He wrote:

As elsewhere in the Ibibio Country, the highest administrative and judicial authority was (and still is) vested in the village council presided over by the village Head who was the eldest man possessing all his faculties in the village".<sup>10</sup>

The choice of a village chief was not a haphazard affair. Indeed, the Oron people conceived of an *Ofong* (chief) in terms of the characteristics of the incumbent was expected to exude. Several sayings of the people illustrate this point. According to the Oron people, *Ofong osi Abasi* (the *Ofong* is a representative of God); *Ofong osi Ufok* (chieftaincy is hereditary); *Oyofong Ofong onu Ofong* (the son of a chief is a chief); *Udung eketip eti udung* (no real village lacks a chief or father of all), and so on. From these sayings, it is clear that the Oron people conceived of an *ofong* as a man favoured by God who had spared him to live long enough to assume the leadership of his people. The *ofong* was thus expected to be a man of transparent honesty and integrity, incorruptible, and above board in a

respects. Because the *ofong* possessed all these qualities, he enjoyed the confidence and attention of the people. As the Oron people say "*Abasi ene onwi utekelei oduoho ono* (when a man is favoured by God, vultures will gather or congregate on his roof). The *ofong* was also regarded as *eti udung* (the father of the village).<sup>11</sup> One of the most respected chiefs in Oron, Chief Inyang Efiong Nyong, Clan Head of Idua, has this to say on the subject.

A king or chief was usually a respectable person. So much was he regarded that if he could not attend a meeting or an occasion he made his presence felt by sending his *esang* (staff) or any of his dressing paraphenelia like his hat. In any discussion or decision reached, the opinion of the person through whom he sent his staff or his hat was highly respected.<sup>12</sup>

Parrinder's observation on the institution in the general African context is equally instructive. He wrote:

The mystical element in social life is often crystalized in the person of the king or chief. The African chief was not merely a secular ruler who can be replaced by a foreign district officer, but he is hedged by a divinity of his own.<sup>13</sup>

Thus regarded, the chief was the custodian of the village. If things went wrong, like a bad harvest or poor fish catch, he was blamed for it. The chief thus "combined magico-religious with civil duties," acted as the "representative and priest of the village on all dealings with gods and ancestors", and regulated all religious ceremonies.<sup>14</sup>

The chief was assisted in the discharge of his duties by an *Isong* council. According to Chief Mba, the council, before the advent of colonial rule, was made up of the *Ofong Udung*, the *Ofong Efak*, the *Ubuhu Ufok*, and other persons famed for their ability to contribute positively to the deliberations. Among these were *Osukhu Usi Onwi* (a man recognised in the village for his uncompromising passion for truth), and *alaba ofong*, (a would-be-chief). As described by Marshall:

The Council called *Isong* consisted of a meeting of all the men in the village and while the words of the village and *Efak* heads bore the greatest weight, all were free to express their opinion.<sup>15</sup>

The *Isong* dealt with all matters affecting the village — security, land disputes, inter-*efak* misunderstandings and so on. A.E. Afigbo's description of this system of government as "village democracy", applies perfectly in the Oron context.

The clan or *Afaha* was the highest unit in the indigenous political organization of the Oron people. Before the advent of colonial rule, there were seven clans in Oron, namely, Idua, Ebughu, Ibighi, Uquong, Ubodung, Okpo and Efiat. Okiuso was created in the 1920's. As indicated earlier, too, all the villages in the clans were founded by the

children of the clan leaders and were thus united to protect each other. As Marshall observed of the clans in Oron.

The villages combined in ancient days for such purposes as war, land disputes, and for sacrifice, each Afaha having an mbiam or juju to which sacrifice was made by all the villages of which it was composed.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the significance of the clan as an everyday political institution was not as pervading as that of the village. Each clan had a recognized leader or chief who presided over the periodic meetings of the clan. Succession to clan headship was not hereditary. A potential clan head must have all the attributes of the *Ofong Udung*: honesty, integrity, moral uprightness etc. In addition, the clan head was expected to be a person of average wealth, must possess a commanding personality, must be a free born and not known to have "a double tongue". He must be acceptable to all the villages in the clan. Once selected and appropriately installed, the clan head, *Ofong Afaha*, was charged with the responsibility of presiding over all clan meetings, advising group and village heads, and promoting cordial relationship within villages in his clan and between his and other clans.

Although the rulership of the whole of Oron (*Ofong Oro*) was not institutionalized as the *Ofong Udung* and *Ofong Afaha*, certain individuals exercised such pervasive influences and won such general respect in the whole of Ukpabang land that they were recognised and regarded as *Ifong Oro* in the traditional society. These were people with great reputation for honesty, integrity, impartiality, and above all tremendous wealth. Such an individual, after performing the *Inam* ceremony, was described as *anyana anyana ofong*. The *Inam* ceremony is a celebration of achievement expressed in the form of enormous wealth. It was meant to indicate God's favours and blessings on the celebrant. The favoured chief would normally live apart from people for about two to three months during which time he communed with his maker (*Inam*) and offered sacrifices of thanks and entered into a covenant with his God (*Ekukinam*). When he emerged, he would plant or build an *inam* symbol (a shrine or tree) in commemoration of his having successfully undertaken such an expensive ceremony. This symbol, known as *Okoro Inam*, was a highly respected treasure of the family and the spot on which it was built or planted was regarded by all Oron people as *Onyi Abasi* (the abode of God). Indeed, according to Chief Mba, "There is an *Okoro Inam* symbol in the family of every *Ofong* in Oro and even if it is carried down in any family, the spot where it stood is still kept sacred in every village where such *ofong* ruled or reigned."<sup>17</sup>

These favoured chiefs were expected to hold *inam* ceremonies preferably annually to which all clans in Oron were invited. Such ceremonies usually lasted seven days during which there was tremendous feasting involving the slaughter of at least one cow. The ceremonies naturally focused the attention of all Oron people on the celebrant and established his prestige and reputation far beyond his village and clan. By sheer force of character and by virtue of his enormous wealth, such an individual came to exercise power and influence over Oron land. His children were the favoured wives of other chiefs, and through such family connections, he came to be regarded as *Ofong Oro* (Chief of Oron). In this position, he adjudicated in inter clan disputes and was consulted on all important matters affecting the welfare of the entire Oron people. According to one informant, no Oron person was "ignorant about ofong Oro. If such a person had not had a chance to meet the *Ofong* in person, he must have heard about him".

### Ekpe and Other "Secret" Societies

At what ever level governing was carried on in Oron, secret societies were involved. By far the most important of these was *Ekpe*. It is significant to note that despite the proximity of Oron to Ibibio land, *Ekpo*, the most important organ of traditional government in Ibibioland, was not known in Oron until the establishment of colonial rule. Also, when it was introduced, *Ekpo* never enjoyed the status of being an instrument for the enforcement of traditional authority and has remained important only for her entertainment values among young men and women.

There is considerable controversy about how the various Oron groups acquired *Ekpe*. The Ukpabang groups claim that they got their *Ekpe* direct from Usahadit in the Cameroons and brought it with them when they dispersed from there. The Idua, on their part, claim to have been the first group in Oron to come in contact with *Ekpe* which was originally owned by the Efut and the Usahadit people. According to one informant:

The Efut and Usahadit people were the custodian of *Ekpe*. Idua came to know *Ekpe* from them and never bought *Ekpe* from the Efik as is often alleged. Rather a group of Idua fishermen including Nta Nya while on a fishing expedition one day met some Efut men at Ube Osukpong in Akpa Edok playing *Ekpe*. They went into negotiations with the Efut men on how to acquire *Ekpe*.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, the Okobo acknowledge that they acquired their *Ekpe* from the Efik of Old Calabar. Chief Okon Andem, the *Eyamba Ekpe* of Ebighi Odu, insisted that "Ekpe was not our original way of ruling the village. Our fathers used *Isong*. *Ekpe* became known to our people

through Efik traders, who settled at Ebighi-Odu and Esuk Iwang. My father told me that these Efik that came to Ebighi were fugitives. Apparently, these Efik fugitives were those who fled as a result of the wars between Nsidung and Atakpa in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is known, for example, that large Efik settlements were established at Ebighi-Odu, Atabong and Esuk Iwang at this time, and that Ekpe was used to maintain law and order in these settlements. Although initially restricted to the settlements, Ekpe became attractive to the local Oron chiefs who saw in it an additional source of power outside the restrictive influences of the *Isong* Council. Clearly, by the end of the nineteenth century, a substantial number of Okobo chiefs had been initiated into the Ekpe Society.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, there is little doubt that the Enwang got into Ekpe as a result of their earlier contact with the Efut of Old Calabar. Ebughu traditions also confirm that the Ebughu got most of their grades from the Efik of Old Calabar.

Whatever its source, there is little doubt that by the nineteenth century, Ekpe had become the most important and effective instrument for the enforcement of traditional authority in Oron, as it was among the Efik of Old Calabar. The Ekpe in all Oron communities had several grades, namely: Nyamkpe, Nkanda, Usongo, Ekpeyong, Esa, Iban, and Eyamba. Apart from the *Nyankpe*, there were two other types of Ekpe in Oron with rather limited membership, namely - *Obon* and *Ekpe*. Admission into the various grades was by initiation and the initiates were bound to keep the exotic secrets of the Ekpe. In Oron, the supreme authority of the Ekpe was known as the *ofong ekpei* (Chief of Ekpe) and his authority could not be challenged by any member. Unlike in Calabar, Ekpe in Oron was an exclusively male society and remains so to this day. So pervasive was the influence of Ekpe that every free born aspired to be initiated into the society. To be known as *okpu ekpei* (non initiate) in Oron was not only an indication of extreme poverty but more importantly tantamounted to being traditionally ostracised. A non initiate could not become a family, lineage, village or clan head; he could not enter a village shed, *Obio Ekpei*; he was thus excluded from participation in the governance of his community. Thus, though initiation into the various grades was expensive, every free born aspired to membership. Because membership of the society conferred great immunity on the initiate, it facilitated his association with people from villages and clans other than his own.

All the traditional laws that governed the villages and clans in Oron were formulated and executed by the Ekpe society. According to an informant: "In those days nobody could oppose Ekpe. I still remem-

some Idua people who because of violating Ekpe's law and inability to pay the penalty left for Calabar to hide. Their children and grandchildren are still there up till today". Another adds that "dispute and hostility no matter the extent would end immediately Ekpe stepped in". The Ahta of Oron, Chief Isong, summed it up best when he emphasized that the Ekpe formed "the legislative, the executive as well as the police establishment of Oron". The Ekpe chiefs in the village councils formulated the laws; the Ekpe members adjudicated in disputes brought to them; Ekpe decisions were enforced by the *Nka Ikwo Ekpe* that usually accompanied the Ekpe masquerade. Most frightening in this regard was the wrath of Ekpe directed against a member who divulged Ekpe secrets. When this happened, the entire clan of the culprit would descend on his village, seize stray goats, sheep, and fowl, uproot farm crops indiscriminately and the culprit was made to pay for all these. This ceremony was known as *Ototo-ntok*.

The functions of Ekpe were several. Ekpe was used for the maintenance of peace and order, enforcement of laws and administration of justice, protection of individual property, entertainment, and above all, recovery of debt. With regard to the last function, Shute's comments on the Okobo are a fair representation of what happened in other Oron communities.

Creditors would seek the aid of Ekpe to get their debt. They would take 4 brass rods to the Obong Ekpe of their village, and if the debtor did not pay his debt after receiving a message from Ekpe, it would go to his compound and play there (and) collect sufficient property to liquidate the debt.<sup>20</sup>

As among the Efik of Old Calabar, there were seven principal ways by which Ekpe sanctions could be enforced. Firstly, Ekpe could boycott a person and his enterprises by having Ekpe "blown" against him thus restraining or prohibiting anyone from transacting any business with the culprit. Secondly, Ekpe could prevent the movement or use of a culprit's property by placing an Ekpe mark on the said property. Additionally, Ekpe could impose and collect fines. Moreover, Ekpe could arrest an offender and detain or hand him over to the person whom the offender had wronged. Fifthly, offenders could be executed either by decapitation or by tying them to a tree in the forest with their lower jaw removed. Sixthly, offenders could be confined to their homes by having the Ekpe yellow flag hoisted on their houses. Lastly, Ekpe could destroy a man's property until the offender made amends. The debt recovery power of Ekpe was thus extremely attractive to prominent traders.<sup>21</sup> Be that as it

may, there is little doubt that Ekpe was by far the most important instrument for the formulation and enforcement of traditional authority in Oron in the pre-colonial period. Ekpe was not alone, however.

Two other exclusively male societies that played prominent roles in traditional government in Oron were *Ekung* and *Anwan-idit* (also known as *Ekpri-Akata*). The former was primarily a social group that was interested in the proper burial of its members. Members of the society were distinguished from other Ekpe members by the wearing of the *Iyara* (red woolen cap) which was a mark of great honour and distinction in Oron. The society grew up originally to celebrate the martial prowess of the members in their old age. All village chiefs and elders were usually members of Ekung society and the authority of the society was thus used to enforce law and order in the village through the imposition of fines, *iki*, on those who broke community laws.

Similarly, *Anwan-idit* was a male society intimately concerned with the moral fibre of society. Members of *Akata* were regarded as "spirits" and therefore, ubiquitous and thus capable of knowing all scandals committed in the society. The main function of *Akata* was therefore the detection of anti-social behaviour, the popularization of the crimes, and the ridiculing of the culprits into correction. Typically, *Akata* members made their outings at night when they used their special instrument, *Okokpok*, to warn non-initiates off the streets. *Akata* members were particularly famed for their ability to concoct songs spotlighting such offences as immoral associations of the sexes, pregnancy without husband, stealing, witchcraft and other crimes supposedly committed in the dark. *Akata* thus provided considerable amount of entertainment while at the same time acting as a social cleanser. According to one informant, *Akata* was "a mouth piece of the society in informing the public of secret happenings in the village. It exposed criminals and by so doing encouraged moral rectitude."

Although Oron Society was primarily male dominated, women played an important role in the maintenance of law and order. By far the most important exclusively women organization in this regard was *Abang*, also known as *Iban-Isong*. Led by their chief, *Osong Abang*, the society exercised unquestionable authority over the affairs of women in each village with the primary intention of protecting the decency of womanhood through peaceful co-existence both at home and in the market places. *Abang* laws were particularly harsh on women who stole in the market places or from other people's farms. When such occurred the culprit was often invited before the *Iban Isong*, her hands and feet tied and her mouth stuffed with dirt. In extreme cases, her body was

be painted with charcoal. She would be paraded before the public, and banned from future participation in the affairs of women in the village. These served as a deterrent and distanced the rest of the community from the shame associated with the misdeeds of the woman.

The entertainment value of the society was no less important, however. Abang dances were frequently held in the villages and attracted women of all ages. Sometimes, the dances would last from early evening into the early hours of the morning, thus provoking the anger of some husbands. There is, for example, the popular story of the encounter between one of the famed *Ofong Abang* in Oron, Madam Odiokine Abakhadang of Uboro Oro and a husband who came to take away his wife from an Iban Isong gathering claiming she had been away from home for too long. As the story goes, Madam Abakhadang regarded this as an intrusion into an exclusive women affair, and although the man was a full member of the Ekpe society, she ordered the man to be held until he paid a fine of four bottles of locally made gin (*ufofu*) to appease the women. Similar stories abound in many Oron villages and they serve to underscore the fact that though Oron was a male dominated society, the women exercised considerable influence and authority over those areas they regarded as exclusive to women. The *Iban Isong* association thus served to protect the integrity of women, to train women in morals and domestic responsibilities and to uphold the laws of society.

Equally important in maintaining the ethos of society as well as executing development projects in the villages were the age-sets which existed in every Oron village. Every person in society, male and female, except the very young children, was expected to belong to an *Nka*. The *Nka*, in turn, served to enforce the norms established by the village on all its members who were usually all about the same age. The *Nka* was thus a major socialising institution which taught members the norms of society, their roles therein, and their expected contributions to the development of the community. Members fondly referred to themselves as *Nda* (Oron) or *Adami* (Okobo), a term which emphasized their corporate identity and mutual responsibilities to one another. Any act, such as stealing or adultery, by a member of *Nka* was regarded as a disgrace for his particular group and attracted instant punishment, first by his group, before he was handed over to the village authorities. Shute described the function of the *Nka* among the Okobo in this regard as follows:

A thief was very severely bound and then tied to a tree in a market place or the village square by his *Nka* where he remains till mid day ... the messenger of his *Nka* would enter the compound of the thief's relative and take any property they wished, its value being considered a debt against the thief.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from this important role, the Nka were valuable in developmental roles they were expected to perform. In all villages, Nka members were charged with the responsibility of maintaining public sources of water supply, streets, the markets as well as guarding the village. Among the Okobo, for example, the Nka served the various needs of society on a rotatory basis of six years before advancing to the next higher duties in the village. The Nka Ukparaosung was charged with the cleaning of the market squares, streets and streams; the Nka Uf looked after the village shrines and administered oaths to those accused of witchcraft; the Nka Ndito was charged with the general administration of the village and ensuring that all orders of the *Isong* council were enforced; finally, the Nka Eso acted as the village guards.<sup>23</sup> Among the Idua, the Nka -Mkparawa was the warrior grade charged with the responsibility of fighting off threats to the village. The Nka Ndito Ise whose membership was open to males and females, was a pan-tribe association whose main purpose was to ensure unity of purpose and cohesion among all Idua indigenes. Apart from executing self-help projects designed to improve the physical environment, the Nka undertook such activities as transporting the body of a dead member from the fishing settlement to the village for burial, advising the village council on important matters, and enforcing rules and regulations designed to uphold probity among the members. One informant credits the Nka with helping to expand the Idua territory in the early years of settlement.<sup>24</sup>

Though there was no definite pattern common to all the villages, the most important Nka among the Ukpabang villages were *Nka Ikpono* (for elders), *Nka nnlap* (for the youth), *Nka asian*, *Nka Ime*, *Nka A*, *Nka Ukwak* and *Nka Uteghe*. Taken together, these age sets maintained roads, constructed bridges, cleaned the market squares, and defended the villages. They also pulled their labour communally to execute such projects as clearing each other's farmlands and planting the crops, construction of dwelling places for members, and assisting in the burial of members. In Oron society, therefore, age sets were important socializing institutions that played economic and political roles. They acted as guardians of public morality, as disciplinary institutions, and enforcers of the decisions meant for the public good. John Beattie's summary of the role in the general African context is perhaps relevant here. According to Beattie, age sets

provide a means of establishing corporate groups whose members may form a powerful standing army; they provide for the formal transition of individuals from one clearly marked social status to another. They provide for the organized exercise of at least some political authority; an age set system provides a means

establishing social contact, even some sense of tribal unity and cohesion over a wider range than would otherwise be possible.<sup>25</sup>

As the various Oron groups settled and consolidated in their present abode, they evolved other social institutions, which apart from their entertainment and recreational values, tended to pull neighbouring villages regardless of clans together. By far the most important of these were *mbok* (wrestling), and *mbaya* (otune). *Mbok*, an exclusively male recreational activity, always featured intense drumming, songs, as well as the physical exercise of one contestant trying to pull the other down. In olden days, wrestling matches were arranged in each village two months before the farming season. Characteristically, such matches attracted young men from neighbouring villages who battled it out to establish the supremacy of their respective villages. A good wrestler attracted instant attention and reputation to his village. Days fixed for wrestling matches were days of festivity in the villages and outside visitors were sumptuously entertained by the hosts. *Mbok* thus served as a unifying influence in Oron villages.

*Otune*, later known as *Mbaya*, was another important recreational activity which had a rather unifying influence. As recalled by Chief Umium Esebre, village head of Ukuko and a prominent *Otune* exponent in his younger years at the turn of the century, the entertainment provided by *otune* was so effective that the early missionaries had a hard time persuading young men to leave the *otune* circuit to go to school. *Otune* attracted both male and female dancers and singers, the songs being composed from local incidents of significance. An accomplished *otune* musician would travel the length and breadth of Oron with his team, entertaining over a number of weeks, and depending on the host villages for sustenance. The *akwa-ikwo* is still an important person in any Oron society. His reputation in the olden days was Oron wide and he brought not inconsiderable attention to his village. The *Otune*, like the *mbok*, was thus a major unifying influence among the various groups in the Oron district.

Other recreational activities with Oron-wide influences were *esatat owo* and *ekpo* (introduced into Oron by the turn of the century). There were also certain recreational institutions limited to specific groups but which attracted people from far and wide in Oron. Thus, among the Enwang, there was *Ufok eteni* which was used to commemorate the migrations to and settlements of the Enwang in their present locations. This traditional play was banned by the colonial authorities in 1938. Among the Idua, clearly reflecting Efik influences, there were such plays as *Ibom*, *Okukim*, *Nnabo*, *Enyong*, *Ekomo Iba*, *Ufafat*, *Ayo*, and *Mma*

*Mfat*. These recreational activities, apart from giving society some occasion, served to relieve the tedium of work associated with the agricultural and fishing pursuits of the people. They also served as reference points to emphasize the distinctness of the Oron people vis-a-vis their Ibibio and Efik neighbours. This process was further facilitated by the marriage arrangements that were developed.

As among other traditional African societies, marriage was an important institution which developed as early as communities began to be established. Marriage was regarded as "a duty, a requirement from a corporate society. Anybody who refused to partake in it was regarded as a deviant or as an under human being." Indeed, the character of a family was often judged by its success in marrying off its marriageable females. For a marriageable girl to remain unmarried was regarded as a major curse on the family.<sup>26</sup> Marriage was essential to ensure the continuity of the family, especially through the male line.

Although there were slight differences in customs, as between the Ibibio, Asang and Okobo groups on the one hand, and the Ukpabang groups on the other, the essential approaches to marriage and the formalization of the union were similar among all Oron groups. As the system developed, two main approaches became distinguishable, namely infant marriage and adult marriage. Infant marriages could be initiated in one of three ways: *elo ke eku* (marriage contracted while the navel string of the would-be- bride was still on), *ebei ku udion* (a wife picked while the would-be-wife was playing with other children on the sand in the village square), and *mbit nte nwa* (marriage contracted by notification of the parents of the bride indicating intention to marry their daughter informally). The rationale behind the first approach was the belief among the Oron people that a child naturally inherited the characteristics of the parents, a female child being most likely to imbibe the virtues of her mother. Thus, once a good woman was identified, her issues were usually prized as would-be-wives. As the Oron people say "Oyoni onwi, *elo ke eku*" (a child from a good family is married with the navel string on). The family of the would-be-groom would normally visit the mother of the baby when the navel cord fell off, plant a plantain on the spot where the string and the baby's first hair would be buried and make a bamboo bed for the mother and the baby to sleep on to signify his intention to marry the baby when she grew up. The plantain and the bed were assessed at 100 wires (about 20 kobo) and 50 wires (10 kobo) respectively, and would be refunded if the marriage did not materialize eventually. The *ebei ku udion* marriage was usually contracted by strangers who, on passing through the village square, spotted a pretty girl at

subsequently inquired about her and her parents. Formal contact would subsequently be made with the parents and arrangements concluded while the girl was still a child. Similarly, *mbit nte nlo* could be paid for installmentally until the girl came of age. However initiated, marriage arrangements could not be concluded and formalised until the would-be- bride had undergone the Nkugho coming of age ceremony. Most marriages in Oron in the pre-colonial period were initiated on one of the above three ways.

Adult marriages were usually second marriages for the brides whose first marriages had failed either because the husband could not support the wife and pay the expected dowry (*ebi enyi ubok*) or he maltreated the wife, and so on. In such cases, the dowry or part thereof paid by the first husband had to be repaid before formal marriage could be contracted.

However contracted, marriages in Oron involved payment of a dowry (*nkpo nlo*) which before the 1920's, included about 60 to 70 different items of drinks, articles, and wire currency. More importantly in our present context, marriages were unions, not of the contracting individuals, but of their respective families, villages and clans. Since, according to the Oron people, *uku ewu uku* (inlaws cannot kill themselves), marriages became major cementing symbols between the families and villages in Oron. They united villages and clans that would otherwise be isolated. The husband was expected to help in cropping the farmlands of his parents-in-law. The death of the husband did not automatically terminate the marriage, and the widow could be assigned to a near relation of the deceased husband. Through marriages, therefore, villages and clans in Oron built enduring relationships with one another over the years especially as marriage outside the Oron groups was frowned upon. Thus, inter clan or village marriages, usually sanctified by powerful taboos prohibiting warfare and other hostile acts between the contracting communities and societies served as an instrument of social, political and economic cohesion among the various Oron groups.<sup>27</sup>

### Oron Religion and Cosmology

Equally important in cementing relations between the various Oron groups before the advent of Christianity were the similarities in the traditional religious practices and world view of the Oron people. As among other Africans, religion played a crucial and pervasive role in Oron society. All activities in society, be it farming, hunting, fishing, marketing, social relations, and even recreation were governed by religious laws and taboos. Through religion, the traditional Oron man, like his other African brothers, tried to locate himself in the universe around him, to

come to terms with his environment, to evolve codes of behaviour between himself and the spiritual and natural environment. Through rituals and taboos, he tried to regulate and control man's exploitation of the resources around.

Like their Ibibio and Efik neighbours, the Oron people recognized a hierarchy of spiritual power culminating in the Great, Omnipotent, Omniscient and all-powerful *Abasi Odung Oyong*. The special attributes of this God were that he lived in the sky from where he saw and judged all human actions; he was the creator of everything; he rewarded all good deeds and punished bad ones; he was the source of life and death and manifested himself daily among his people.

However, this Omnipotent God was rather far removed physically from the people and manifested himself through equally powerful representatives who were also designated Abasi. Given the importance of land to the people, it is not surprising that the immediate counterpart of *Abasi Odung Oyong* was *Abasi Odung Isong* (God of the Earth). As A.S.A. Esen has aptly remarked in the Ibibio context, Abasi Isong was "the personification of the totality of earth-based resources which provided life's sustenance. ... It is Abasi Enyon that creates, but it is Abasi Ison that sustains. He is the source of all the food, water, shelter, medicinal herbs and all other things that sustain life. He is the sustenance of the living, the final resting place of the dead."<sup>28</sup> Given the importance of land in the agricultural pursuits of the Oron people, this Abasi was held in very high esteem next to *Abasi Odung Oyong*. She was physically represented in each village by *Abasi Utei* (God of Farming) to which everybody sacrificed at the beginning of the farming season to ensure safe bush clearing, planting, and above all, a bountiful harvest.

Even closer to each family was the God of the compound (*Abasi Okoro*). This god which was regarded as the immediate protector of the household and all therein — people, property, animals etc. — was usually sacrificed to on *Obribong*, a loal market day. Similarly, there was the god of prosperity (*Abasi Inam*) which was credited with being responsible for any wealth accruing to an individual. Finally, especially for the fishing folk in the riverine areas, there was *Abasi esuk* (god of the river) which was sacrificed to by throwing the head of a beheaded cow into the river to secure her blessings for an abundant catch.<sup>29</sup>

Serving as a major intermediary between these gods and man were the ancestral cults. Each Oron family had its shrine where the carved wooden images made from *Oko* tree representing each ancestral father was kept. In some villages, these were gathered together in the village shed, *obio udung*. Because of the importance of these ekpu carvings, the *Oko* tree

from which they were made was regarded as sacred wood and it was not used for firewood. After the funeral ceremony of any man who had a male child was completed, appropriate sacrifices would be made and the carving of Ekpu commenced. The work was usually done in secret by an accomplished carver who would charge appropriate fees. Once completed, and appropriate sacrifices made, it was believed that the spirit of the dead father dwelt in the Ekpu carving. According to Chief Mba and other informants:

In Oron it was mandatory for each son or daughter in the family to know and identify his or her ancestor (ekpu) or else such a child was considered irresponsible.<sup>30</sup>

Appropriate sacrifices were made to the ekpu to secure the continued goodwill and protection of the departed ancestor. The ancestors were consulted and appropriately placated through libations on occasions of births, marriages, good harvest and the like. It was firmly believed that to fail to consult the ancestral spirits represented by the ekpu carvings could bring untold disaster to the family.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from these family deities, each village in Oron had its central deity (Olughu) and a shrine dedicated to her. Among the best known of these whose influences went beyond their villages were *Abanga Nlak* Umume; *Atiabang* Okuko; *Awai* Uboro-Oro; *Ukit-eti* Eyo-Bassey; *Atakpa* Udung-Uko; *Okpokim* Edikor; *Enweme* of Ubotuong people and, *Etifit* of Eyukut all in Enwang; *Olughu Ubuoho* of Eyotong, *Olughu Mkpok Okwong* of Okossi; and *Otokpor* of Udesi, and so on. These village *olughus* were used to detect crimes, settle disputes between individuals and families, and enforce village norms through rituals and punishment of offenders.

Also, each of the clans had their deities whose influences went beyond the villages in the particular clan. Thus, the Ibighi had their *Eke-Eme Oro* whose shrine was at Uya Oron and to whom the villages in the clan made periodic sacrifices. The influence of this Olughu was Oron wide as indicated by its name (The Great Mother of Oron people). The Idua had *Uruting*, *Asang*, *Anamfa*, *Etung Okin* etc. The Ebughu had *Atiabang Ebughu* located between present day Ebughu and Udung Uko villages. The Enwang had *Anantigha* whose approval was sought before undertaking any major task. Among the Okobo, the best known *Olughu* were *Esuk Itak* in Odu and *Udutin* in Eta. Appropriate sacrifices were made to these clan deities and all the villages in the clan contributed to such sacrifices. These clan deities thus served as rallying points for the villages in the clan, and the most powerful ones were often consulted by people outside the clan. As the reputation and impartiality of a clan *olughu* expanded, it came to exercise influence over all of Oron. In this way, some

of the important clan deities served to unify the various Oron people as they were widely consulted by most people, regardless of their clan of origin.

Taken together, the entire religious system of the Supreme God, the lesser gods, the ancestor spirits, the various Olughu or Mbiam, the Ndem, etc. served as essential ingredients in the maintenance of order, law and social control as well as common unifying influences among the villages and clans that made up Oron.

From the above, we can conclude that as the various Oron groups tried to come to terms with their new environment, they created institutions which served as unifying factors among them. Particularly significant in this regard were the Ekpe, the many inter-village, inter clan recreational institutions, and finally the many dieties which, though located in particular villages or clans, were widely consulted by all Oron people. Thus, as the different groups in Oron came to share and respect the same traditions, usages and expressions, spoke mutually intelligible languages, and inter-married into each other, a sense of oneness as an Oron group emerged and was consolidated before the advent of the colonial period. This, of course, is not to argue that feelings of distinctness between the clans and the villages did not often explode into open conflict. But this was often moderated by the generally accepted notion, except among the Okobo, that all the clans came from one paternal stock, were born at a common spot, and were brothers of the same ancestral father, Oro, the son of our putative father, Abang. These ties were further strengthened by the economic institutions which developed in the pre-colonial period described in the next chapter.

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## Notes

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- 1 Interviews with Chiefs Mba, Isong, Okung, Umium Esebre, and others.
- 2 For details, See M. Posnansky, "Archaeology, Ritual and Religion", in T.O. Ranger and I. Kimambo, eds., *The Historical Study of African Religion* (London, 1972); E.B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (1973); John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York, 1970) and *Concepts of God in Africa*. (New York 1970); E.L. Schusky and T.P. Culbert, *Introducing Culture* (1973) and F. J. Sulloway, *Freud: Biologist of the Mind* (London, 1979).
- 3 Interviews with Chief Umium Esebre. See also *Ibighi Clan in Oron Division*, Memorandum submitted to the Commission on Customs and Usages, 1974.
- 4 Jeffreys, *Report on the Tribes*, op. cit.
- 5 For analysis of this process in another context, See P. Amaury Talbot, *Women's Mysteries of a Primitive People; The Ibibios of Southern Nigeria* (London, 1978).
- 6 Interviews with Chief I.E. Nyong, Chief Ita Uso, etc. conducted by Ita E. Nyong and reproduced in *A History of Idua Peoples*, op. cit, especially pp. 24-40.
- 7 E.G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London, 1974), p. 59.
- 8 For details, See A.J.H. Latham, *Old Calabar, 1600-1891* (London, 1973), p. 31.
- 9 See the *Voice of Oron*, edited by Mr. E.A. Awana, p. 3.
- 10 Marshall, *Intelligence Report*, op. cit.
- 11 This distinction is elaborated upon by Chief A.M.E. Mba in his "Chieftaincy Among The Ukpabang" Unpublished memorandum in his Private Papers.
- 12 Interview with Chief Nyong in Ita Nyong, *A History of Idua*, op. cit., p. 32.
- 13 Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, op. cit, p. 28.
- 14 See Talbot, *Life in Southern Nigeria*, p. 563.
- 15 Intelligence Report, op. cit.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 See Chief Mba, "A Glance into the Ukpabang Past", in Private Papers of Chief Mba.
- 18 Interview with Chief Ita Uso, op. cit.
- 19 For details of the interview, see, Ata Okon Ewa, *Pre-Colonial History of Okobo*, op. cit., pp. 79-80.
- 20 D.M. Shute, "Intelligence Report Okobo Clan, Eket Division, 1925", p. 17.
- 21 Indeed, A.J.H. Latham explains the importance of Ekpe and its prominence in the politics of the city states of Old Calabar by reference to this debt recovery power. See Latham, *Old Calabar, 1600-1891* (London, 1973).

- 22 Shute, "Intelligence Report", *op. cit.*, p. 15.
- 23 Interview with Chief Andem, *op. cit.*,
- 24 For details, See Ita Nyong, *A History of Idua*, p. 65.
- 25 John Beattie, *Other Cultures* (London, 1964), p. 142. See also Monday Noah, *Old Calabar: The City States and the Europeans* (Uyo, 1980), p. 66.
- 26 For an examination of marriage in the general African Context, See J.S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London, 1976).
- 27 For details, see for example, *Memorandum on the Customs and Usages of Ibibio Clan*, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-13. Also, Chief Mba, Private "Memorandum to the Customs and Usages Commission of South-Eastern State, 1974" in *Private Papers*, *op. cit.*
- 28 A.J.A. Esen, *Ibibio Profile* (Calabar, 1982), p. 48.
- 29 For details, see Ward, *In and Around the Oron Country*, p. 57.
- 30 In *Private Papers*, *op. cit.*
- 31 A recent recreation of the central role of the ancestor carvings in Oron affairs can be found in Etim Uya Akaduh. *The Ancestors* (Oron, 1983).

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## Oron Pre-Colonial Economy\*\*

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**O**RON pre-colonial economy was one of real under-development. A rudimentary technology ensured lack of appreciable mastery of the environment. And as is often evident in such situations, geography assumed a deterministic role. An imbalance in productive-resource endowment in the constituent sections of the community conditioned the economic endeavours of the people. But, more importantly, it established symbiosis as the most meaningful mode of internal relations. By this token, the economy complemented political and social factors as potent instruments of ethnic integration and cohesion. It also offered a channel for enhanced inter-group relationship with the Ibibio and Efik neighbours.

Oron pre-colonial economy may have been under-developed, but it was not lacking in dynamism. The people displayed an avid desire and determination for self-improvement which was readily manifested in the development and growth of the mainsprings of the economy. This discussion will, therefore, analyse the salient sectors of the economy to highlight the foundation on which the major strides of the colonial period rested. To this end, agricultural and other land-use practices will be examined while the development of local industries will be carefully explored. Similarly, the development of both internal and external trade will be considered. Moreover, the impact of external impulses will also be evaluated since Oron may not have been insulated from developments in the estuary and beyond.

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\*\*This Chapter has been contributed by Efiog E.B. Edunam of the History Department, University of Calabar.

## Land Tenure and Agriculture

The mainstay of the pre-colonial economy was land. It is reasonable to assume that when Oron's ancestral fathers occupied the west bank of the Cross River estuary, the area was an expanse of seemingly impenetrable and forbidding forest. Thus, it behove them to devise a system of land tenure which would make the exploitation of the area most rewarding. And considering the elementary state of their technology which made a critical reliance on land unavoidable, it is no wonder that the land use custom fostered by the ancestors manifested a religious attachment to land.

However, land was a communal property. This fact may have resulted from close kinship and friendship ties which bound the founding fathers together and the collective effort which was required to tame the vegetation. To safeguard everybody's right to it, communal land was held in trust by the leader of a given group, usually male. For example, since villages were veritable lineage units, the village head, *ofong udung*, was the custodian of village land. This land, as and when due, was shared among the sub-lineage units which comprised the village, *efak*, each taking its share in the order of seniority. In turn, applying the same criteria as at the village level, the *ofong efak*, allocated to each family head, his family's share of the communal land.<sup>1</sup> Since the stake on an allotted piece of land was not held in perpetuity, much room was not left for private ownership.

Land in Oron fell into three broad categories — residential, agricultural, and reserve. The residential land, *nduong*, comprised the current area of residence of the people concerned and one which they may have earlier vacated. Agricultural land, as the name implies, was used for agricultural purposes. It embraced all the farmlands in the village's fallow cycle which may include considerable portions of *nduong*. But its main components were *utei* and *ukuke*. The third category, reserve land, called *akai*, was made up of sacred groves, forest strips along water courses, and unexplored, untamed forests. Sacred lands were so declared because of their specific significance in the worship of the deity, *akai olughu*; their relevance for the activities of some secret cults, for example, *akai ekpe*; or their use for the disposal, dead or alive, of the unwanted elements of the community, *akai ekpu*. Access to all sacred lands was restricted.

Although communal ownership of land held sway, some avenues of transfer and acquisition evolved over time. The commonest avenues were reclamation, inheritance, long occupation, mortgage and purchase.<sup>2</sup> As noted above, some forest lands remained outside the ambit of communal

ownership. Some individuals or households unilaterally staked out and reclaimed land from the forests. Such land could be inherited and transferred without community sanctions. Long occupation on the other hand did not necessarily confer an unchallengeable right of ownership on the occupier. He could be called upon to vacate or, in the alternative, to offer a substitute to the owners of the occupied land.

Mortgage and purchase of land were latter day developments, probably, inspired by external influences. They reflect the era of widespread individual land ownership. However, pledged or mortgaged land was considered under a temporary transfer and the owner was free to redeem it, though not before the expiration of one farming season. Purchase conferred a permanent right of ownership on the purchaser but it was a very rare transaction in the pre-colonial society. It spelt a permanent loss to the selling party. Since land, relative to the population, imposed little constraints on acquisition, sale was an aberration. Such transactions, in the absence of standard currencies, were carried out with cattle and goats.

Oron people were predominantly farmers. Expediency, favourable climatic conditions, and the rich, humus-laden, loamy soil which characterized the area made it possible. However, their production was not backed by any commercial motive but the satisfaction of their subsistence needs and a little surplus for exchange. Moreover, their productivity was conditioned by the agricultural system they practised.

They may have started out with the shifting cultivation system where settlements shifted in sympathy with the area of cultivation. This may have provided impetus for the wide dispersal of Oron villages as each unit searched for enough room to ensure a comfortable shifting and fallow cycle. However, this system may not have been widely practised for long. The newly deforested areas were found feasible for prolonged cultivation, necessitating fixed settlements. But since fixed settlements did not guarantee perpetual fertility of the soil, the rotation of farmlands remained pertinent. Thus, a new dimension was introduced into farming in Oron — rotational bush-fallow. The new system gained grounds so gradually that farmsteads in distant farmlands remained a conspicuous feature of agriculture in Oron well into the twentieth century.

In the rotational bush-fallow system, as noted above, settlements became fixed geographical features while cultivation rotated over defined farmlands which were assigned specific historic names. The length of a village's cycle was determined by the size of land available to, and the population of the village in question. For example, Eyoabiasang had five farmlands in her cycle comprising *uko itak*, *uko uboro*, *uko nduong*, *uko*

*odighi efie-'nwi* and *uko ikpo-'nwi*. Although these suggest a five year fallow cycle for Eyoabiasang, it was not necessarily so. Sometimes, the adult population of a village entitled to shares of the farmland was small that it required between one and five years to exhaust the cultivated area in one cycle unit. This had the consequence of lengthening the cycle from anywhere between five and twenty five years. The unused units remained for the period in fallow, *ukuke*. The Ekpe Society, as the supreme authority in the village, ensured that the rotational order was not violated at one's peril.

Farmlands were not named arbitrarily. Often, they were given names which on closer investigation embodied significant fragments of the community's past. The Eyoabiasang case mentioned above offers a good illustration. *Uko Uboro* implies that the village of Uboro which is now situated about six kilometers to the north east of Eyoabiasang may have been previously settled there in the course of their migration. Similarly, *uk odighi efie-'nwi* tells another aspect of the history of the settlement. The farmland is traversed by a road which a European made use of. This may suggest that Eyoabiasang acquired the land either in the last decade of the nineteenth century when the missionaries explored the area or in the first decade of the twentieth century when the colonialists "pacified" Oron. Finally, *uko ikpo-'nwi* tells the story of Eyoabiasang-Oduonic war which led to the death of one Eyoabiasang man. *Uko ikpo-'nwi* was offered by Oduonim as a compensation to Eyoabiasang in the settlement of the dispute.

Farming consisted of a series of taxing, manual operations. At the commencement of the farming season — usually between late October and early November when the second maxima of rainfall had subsided — the deity of the farmlands, *Abasi Utei*, was appeased to ensure a productive season. Subsequently, each family cleared its plots, pruned the bushes and small trees and left the foliage to dry in the sun. A few days later, it was set on fire and the remains were raked or brushed up later for the planting of the appropriate crop. Big trees which could not be felled were burnt severely to clear their canopies and lighten up the farm. None of these tasks was made easier by the crude matchet and locally made hoes which were the main implements employed.

The above agricultural system came under intense criticism. Such criticism came mainly from those whose cultural and educational background removed them from effective participation in the system rendering them incapable of appreciating its merits. E.E. Enyenih, an indigene of Oron, once wrote: "In Oron some villages use a shifting cultivation system in which the land remains fallow for about five or a

least four years. This system is of no advantage whatever and does not improve adequately the fertility of the soil".<sup>3</sup> This seemed to have echoed P.A. Talbot's contention that it was a wasteful method of farming, by which, except for sacred groves and comparatively rare stretches of forest, every few years growth is destroyed causing deforestation.<sup>4</sup> The system was also alleged to limit the percentage of land under cultivation while frequent burning militated against the spread of permanent tree crops.

When the cultural and economic contexts in which the rotational bush-fallow system was operated in Oron are considered, such criticisms seem unmerited. Intensive farming could have been plausible against a background of commercialization. But pre-colonial Oron society had an under-developed economy in which a commercial motive caused very few people sleepless nights. The charge of soil exhaustion was adequately tackled by the lengthy fallow cycle of the era and bush burning which restored essential minerals like potash and phosphorous to the soil.

Furthermore, the operators of the system did not have much constraints with regard to land. It is evident that Oron in the pre-colonial era had a very low population density. This fact tended to place more land at the disposal of individual families which, sometimes, resulted in the distortion of the worked out fallow order. The nostalgia which a reflection on harvests in the pre-colonial era evoked in the elders of Oron community is persuasive that the total return per plot was often remarkably bounteous. To them, this was proof of the efficacy of their technique and comparison with alien cultures and practices seemed superfluous.

Yam was the main subsistence crop of Oron people. Many species of it were cultivated but their importance varied. The most important species were locally known as *ebok*, *nnyineni*, *oko*, *mkpuk*, *efiang*, and *otuk okpo*. These species were important because in social circles, their extensive cultivation earned the cultivator a high status. The first two, particularly, acquired distinction as indices of wealth.

Rather amazingly, the cultivation of the cherished species petered out as colonial rule progressed. It is not clear why this fate befell the leading species of the community's prime subsistence crop. Certain factors are, however, discernible. Firstly, with the opening up of the community to external influences by the end of the nineteenth century, such perishable items gradually lost their appeal as indices of wealth and status. Secondly, the advent of missionary education denied this crop the attention of many youths who could have succeeded their fathers as cultivators. Thirdly, as prominent Oron men got drawn into the vortex of world trade, they paid less attention to yam cultivation while the rapidly expan-

ding population menaced the existing stock. Finally, these yams seemed to have thrived best in the rich long-forested farmlands which characterized the pre-colonial era. The colonial era hosted a fast expanding population which shortened fallow cycles, reduced soil fertility, further fragmented available plots, and diminished yields.

The other species to which men did not extend undue regard were *ayabre*, *akpan udo ikpo*, and *owenni*. These ones were cultivated mainly for family consumption. Consequently, apart from male responsibilities in tending them before harvest, they were generally considered the responsibility of the women who knew which one to harvest prematurely and which to reserve for the final harvest. Such decisions were the reserve of men in the important species.

Be that as it may, yam cultivation seemed quite ideal in an economy where storage techniques were rudimentary. Yam could be stored for a long time in the house or in the open without fear of spoilage. Thus, it helped to avert hunger till the next harvest. Besides, it could be transported over long distances without much difficulty and fear of damage.

Cocoyam was also very widely accepted in Oron. Its cultivation was enhanced by the rich soil of the newly deforested areas. Three main varieties were often inter-cropped with yam — *onimbo*, *ikpong mbatang*, and *ebre nkang*. There was a fourth variety which was not favoured for consumption and cultivation by Oron people — *akpana nkpong*. However, the fact that it commonly thrived in the compost of many households seems to suggest that some people consumed it discreetly. Cocoyam shared some of the qualities of yam and its broad leaves often came in handy as umbrellas.

Casava was also cultivated in Oron in pre-colonial times. But unlike the above two crops, many sections of the community treated it with contempt. Established yam cultivators believed that it would only impoverish the soil for their yams. Such notions were reinforced by the discovery that some species of it were intoxicating while some others were bitter and even poisonous. Little wonder why Afaha Okpo persistently discouraged its cultivation in pre-colonial times. Consequently, the spread of the edible varieties were impeded.

Cassava seems to have been introduced quite late into Oron. Many of the varieties seem to have reached the area during the colonial period. However, the resistance to its consumption and cultivation was gradually swayed by the crop's inherent beneficial qualities. Its propagation by stem cuttings was relatively easy. Moreover, it could either be a sole crop

or intercropped with yam, cocoyam, maize and vegetables. Its planting required little tillage and it could thrive extremely well even in poor soils.

Furthermore, cassava matured quite early and could remain in the soil for up to three years, thus, alleviating the problem of storage. It minimized the danger of famine since it could remain in the soil all through the year to ensure a steady supply of food. Besides, like yam, its transportation over long distances posed no immediate problem of spoilage.<sup>5</sup>

More importantly, as food crop, cassava was open to various modes of preparation. This became possible after the people had learnt to overcome its prussic acid content which often rendered it inedible. How this feat was achieved in Oron is not clear. But popular historical accounts attributed the know-how to West African slave repatriates from Latin America, its original source. However, Oron people grated cassava, dried the paste and fried it to make *garri*. It was also fermented, mashed, boiled and pounded to make *udep utim*. It could also be grated into a paste enveloped in measured strips of plantain leaves and boiled to produce a meal of unmatched popularity in Oron — *ekpang iwe*. The least time-consuming modes of consumption were eating it raw, roasted or boiled. Cassava's utility readily became evident for while the roots made human food, the stem was used for its propagation and the foliage was fodder for animals.

Although Oron people were pre-occupied with subsistence farming, two cash crops deserve mention in the pre-colonial era — oil palm and cocoa. The oil palm (*eleasis guineensis*) seems to be indigenous to south-eastern Nigeria to which Oron belongs. Palm trees grew wild throughout the area and required little or no attention. And it was not recognized as a commercial asset until the exigences of world trade made it so.

Oil palms were not exploited indiscriminately. Individual rights to trees in private residential lands were respected. So also were rights to trees situated in a farm where a man's crops were growing in the duration of a farming season. But rights to trees in all other areas remained communal. To control their exploitation during the colonial period, it was common for a village, for example, to declare palm trees on her land closed to individual exploitation. The ban remained in force until a fixed date agreed upon for a mass harvest called *ekpa osi*.

Qualification for the harvest was not automatic. One needed to discharge one's obligations to the village regularly as an adult male or to be a recognized widow who retained residual rights of her husband. An individual was entitled to a maximum of two harvesters. Other rules which applied forbade such unfair tactics as beginning before day-light

and starting out anywhere else than the authorized village square. The standard tools were a plaited piassava climbing rope, *ukara*; and a sharp machet with which one hacked his way to the fruit. Harvested fruits were transported home by women for processing.<sup>6</sup>

Processing the fruits to obtain oil was essentially a manual process which women undertook almost exclusively. After steaming the fruits, men helped out in pounding the fruits in large, sometimes buried, mortars to separate the pulpy pericarp from the nuts. The pulp was later squeezed to produce oil and the remaining shaft left for fire-making. However, Oron people often stored their palm fruits for many days before processing, resulting in a high accumulation of fatty acid. This made the oil congeal and reduced its quality.

Chief A.M.E. Mba disclosed that before the beginning of legitimate trade, the oil palm was mainly important for its oil. Palm kernel was widely used in making fire and in producing oil, *mmanyanga*, which was thought to be of immense medicinal value.<sup>7</sup> Late in the nineteenth century, these produce experienced a gradual change in their commercial significance. On why this happened, K.O. Dike explained that

With the increasing population at the time of the industrial revolution in Britain came changes in social customs and industrial requirements. As British people began to take washing seriously, the demand for soap rose considerably and palm oil was the chief constituent in its manufacture. The substitution of metal for wooden machinery and the development of railways caused a steep rise in the use of oil as lubricant. The existing source of animal fats were not only inadequate but sometimes unsuitable.<sup>8</sup>

The involvement of Oron people in gathering supplies for export began to open the economy of the area to the vagaries of the international market.

Unlike palm oil, cocoa was not indigenous to Oron. It got to Oron as by-product of the Henshaw Town/Duke Town War of 1874. Its introduction is credited to Joseph Henshaw, an Efik trader. According to A.J.H. Latham, Joseph had gone to Fernando Po (Equatorial Guinea) to relate to the British Consul his town's displeasure with the terms of settlement of the conflict. And while there in Fernando Po, he had the opportunity to be conducted round a cocoa plantation. Subsequently, he purchased some cocoa beans with the hope of initiating a lucrative trade in it at Calabar. As it turned out, not all the beans reached Calabar, for on his way back in 1879, he bought a piece of land in Oron from Chief Ating Edem Umo of Iquita. On this land, he cultivated cocoa, initiating the first cash crop to be grown in the Cross River area. Joseph later settled in Oron to trade in palm produce.<sup>9</sup>

K.K. Nair asserted that Joseph Henshaw's cocoa venture in Oron was quite successful.<sup>10</sup> This is doubtful. Primarily, the soil in the Oron area is not known to be suitable for the cultivation of the crop. It is also unlikely that such a successful novel venture could have escaped the notice of Oron people considering the lack of information about it in the community. Besides, the success of the venture would have induced the wealthy members of the community to emulate Joseph's effort. Therefore, one is more inclined to think that the venture may have collapsed for his inexperience in cocoa cultivation.

In addition to crop cultivation, Oron people practised stock-breeding on a limited scale. Cattle (the dwarf, humpless variety), goats, dogs, sheep and poultry were raised. These animals were bred as much for their economic and proteinous value as for their social significance. The social status of one who owned some cows was higher than that of those who possessed other livestock. Thus, cows became the highest measure of value. They were used along with goats in major transactions such as dowry, debt settlement, land purchase and in exchange for slaves.

The rich rain forest vegetation of the area tempts one to believe that these animals were well fed and healthy. This was especially so in times when extensive gardening or the fallow rotation did not turn areas around homesteads to farms. But when this happened, livestock were confined in penthouses and fed by their owners. Poultry were tied to stakes and fed or were allowed to roam tied to moveable objects which impeded their normal movements. This denied the animals access to natural pastures and sometimes rendered them prone to diseases. Nonetheless, their lack of freedom was made up with increased human attention. Men were responsible for providing fodder regularly at home or taking them out to a bush in fallow in the morning to feed, retrieving them late in the afternoon.

As the foregoing indicates, the success of crop cultivation and animal husbandry depended on not only how labour was organized but also how effectively the organization was applied to necessary situations. Labour was often organized along sexual and age-group lines while the family was almost an autonomous labour unit. In agriculture, men in the family undertook tasks which demanded much physical exertion. This explains why they cleared the bush, tilled the soil for crop sowing and provided stakes for yam vines. They also tended livestock as noted above. But women on their part were largely concerned with sowing seeds, and weeding at the appropriate season. Similarly, during harvests, men unearthed yam tubers and women provided portrage. This pattern was maintained in palm oil processing. However, it must be pointed out that

this division of labour was not mutually exclusive. Both parties could share their tasks.

Cooperative labour was the acknowledged means of performing tasks which seemed too formidable for an individual. Although families could render mutual assistance to each other in less remarkable tasks, building family homes which entailed much work was often carried out cooperatively with all adults in the village chipping in materials, labour, or food and entertainment. Equally effective was a variation of cooperative labour which was often organized among friends, relatives, clubs, or age-groups. This approach called *ububu* offered collective labour to each member of a group in rotation in the execution of similar tasks like bush clearing and crop planting. Women could also organize in the same manner to perform their own chores. Adult males or youths of the village were also regularly organized to perform communal tasks such as cleaning village streets, clearing silts in streams and other desirable tasks. An aspect of this where villagers set aside specific days to render voluntary service to their village head was known as *okpokok*.<sup>11</sup>

Slave labour was present in the pre-colonial Oron society on a small scale. It was restricted to the families of the wealthy who could afford to purchase slaves. Such slaves were employed as domestics, porters, canoe-paddlers for long distance trade as well as farm-hands. As farm hands, slaves were most effective in the cultivation of distant farmlands. Housed in farmsteads, they raised and protected crops from destructive game.<sup>12</sup> Obedient and hard-working slaves were given female slaves in marriage, multiplying by their offsprings the number of labourers at the disposal of their owners. Disobedient ones often went down alive in the graves of titled members of the society as escorts to their departing souls. However, few were rich enough to afford such luxuries and with its limited impact, Oron people, far from despising labour, esteemed the hard-worker.

The above mentioned economic activities by no means absorbed the full potential energies of the population, especially of the young males. This was the more so because agricultural activities were seasonal. But the underemployment did not necessarily translate into laziness or leisure preference on their part. Rather they engaged in other activities, such as fishing, craft production and, in the nineteenth century, part-time trading.

### Local Industries

Several local industries existed in Oron. However, none was as important in geographical spread as well as the proportion of the total population

involved as fishing. While agriculture was common primarily to all the sections of Oron, some communities, by virtue of their geographical location, gave greater prominence to fishing. These included villages like Effiat, Ibaka, Ebughu and Enwang. Others were Uda, Udung Uko, Eyo Abasi, Atabong and Idua. Understandably, interest in open sea fishing progressively yielded grounds to fresh water fishing as one moved inland. The pre-colonial Oron community may have been one of less than 40,000 when one considers that Oron including Okobo (11,000) had a population of about 52,000 by the 1921 census. Therefore, the involvement of so many areas in fishing ensured the availability of enough fish for consumption and exchange.

Various tools and methods were employed in fishing. In open sea fishing dominated by professionals, canoe was indispensable. So were nets (*iyire*) of different meshes, hooks (*uwam*) of various sizes, and spears (*usam*). Prior to legitimate trade, these implements were unrefined and locally made. Nets were woven with fibres and vines of forest epiphytic plants while local blacksmiths forged metal tools. When factory made twines arrived with expanding European trade, they were acquired and woven into nets with age-old techniques.<sup>13</sup>

Open sea fishing was a specialist venture which required more than a passing knowledge of swimming and the presentiments of the tides, clouds, and winds. The vagaries of these natural elements, among other factors, influenced the development of several methods of fishing which Oron people adopted in pre-colonial times. In *ntu-mfuk*, a big conical, fine-meshed cast net was hurled from a canoe with a technique that ensured the unfurling of the circumference of the net before dropping into the sea. The net was pulled out some minutes later to dislodge the catch. This method yielded fish for immediate needs and did not necessarily have to take the fisherman far from his base. *Mfioro* was a method whereby the net, about one and a half meters wide and often more than a hundred meters long, was set across the sea to drift with the tide. The net remain open width-wise in the sea because the downward pull of lead weights was resisted at the top by cork or calabash floaters. After drifting for a satisfactory distance, the fishermen who drifted with it in their canoes pulled it out to harvest their catch and to free the net from unwanted materials for a repeat performance.

Sometimes, the net having been set, the sea was plonked with big sticks to scare fish into it. This method was named *ummai mmong*. A third method designed to ensnare big fish was called *ikpabad ukim*. The net whose mesh was not as fine as those mentioned above was staked across the middle of the sea. It was identifiable with its big calabash floaters and

the tip of the stakes. If done in the evening, the fishermen could go back to base and call back at dawn to harvest the catch. Hooks strung at regular intervals and baited with mollusc, small fishes, and insects could be staked and left overnight too in a method called *usin unim*.

Creek and fresh water fishing was much less professional. Traps were extensively used in this regard. *Ikpikpa*, a conical trap with funnel-shaped one-way entrance were strategically located in creeks and streams to ensnare unwary fishes lured by its baits of palm fruits or food remnants. Where the width of a creek was narrow enough to be fenced across with sticks and fronds, gaps were left which were trapped with the device. Other traps in use were known as *ekong* and *ikpaya*. Furthermore, a poisonous herb called *otu* was also discovered and utilized to devastating effects. When introduced in a stream, the poison killed all classes of fish but also contaminated sources of fresh water. It was quite detrimental to fish growth.

Fishing was practised all-year-round. For this reason some fishermen made their homes in fishing settlements called *inne*, which in Oron were generally located between Afaha Eduok and Ibaka on the Atlantic coast. They took their wives and children who also became totally involved in the industry. However, the fisherman went home intermitently to gather foodstuff or to cultivate his farm in the dry season. It is said that an indefinite stay in *inne* was checked by the paucity of food supplies to such remote areas. And what was more, *garri* which later revolutionized life in fishing settlements did not exist and one's stay relied on the durability of yam tubers and cassava.<sup>14</sup> Understandably, agriculture could not be rewarding in the swampy locations of these *inne*. Besides, mosquitoes which found fertile breeding grounds in the swamps constantly reminded the settlers with malaria of the comfort of home.

The Cross River estuary and the Atlantic coast in Oron were richly endowed with various species of fish. Some of the commonest ones caught were *ebat* (sardinella eba) and *oliok* (pseudotolithus typus). The former, whose peak season was the dry season, came in different sizes and possessed numerous tiny pin-size bones which rendered eating it a dicey affair. The latter, nicknamed *obok otoho* often disintegrated into fine bits in the cooking, leaving one with no big bit to satisfy his cravings. The list included *okwe* (Pseudolithus elongatus), *edeng* (Galeosides decadactylus), and *unanga* (Chrysichthys nigrogitatus). Others were *akpanata* (Sphyræna piscatorum), *ukpek* (Cynoglossus) *ukpam* (Dasyatis margarita), *onim* (shark) and *abakakak* (whale). These were supplemented by the different kinds of fish in the tilapia family which could be found in fresh water creeks.<sup>15</sup>

Fish yields were either disposed of fresh or dried. Fresh fish was meant for immediate consumption while dried fish was more convenient for storage and transportation. The drying was usually the work of such auxiliary workers as fisherman's slaves, apprentices, wives and children. The drying process involved trimming the fins of the fish, scaling and sitting its ventral section to eliminate unwanted intestinal organs. The big ones were laid out singly while the small ones were staked. They were then arranged and covered on a drying platform under which fire was set. The blaze was regulated to ensure a gradual and thorough drying.

A fisherman returned home occasionally to dispose of his stock of dried or smoked fish. Such stock was often large enough for his domestic consumption, sharing among his extended family relatives and for exchange. The exchange process highlighted the complementary relationship between the coastal and the hinterland villages. Women from the hinterland, using the numerous bush paths which wove the villages together, transported agricultural products to the coastal communities in exchange for fish. The reverse was also common. This issue is revisited below. But suffice it here to note that there were not enough vents outside Oron for the exchange of surplus fish. Thus, invariably, much of it went into local consumption without improving remarkably the quality of life of the fisherman.

Although it lacked the wide appeal of fishing, carving received considerable patronage. The distinction of the precolonial Oron people in this craft is eloquently portrayed in the *ekpu* figures. These were sculptured memorials to Oron's male ancestors whose preservation would later motivate the establishment of a museum in Oron. The Federal Department of Antiquities testified that

A museum was founded in Oron primarily as a means of preserving the Oron carvings, which are some of the oldest and finest wood sculptures in the whole of Africa. They portray the male ancestors, EKPU, and are carved from special hardwoods (*Coula edulis* and *Pterocarpus soyauxii*) which are relatively resistant to the destructive effects of termite attack and weathering. Some EKPU figures are believed to be between two and three centuries old. They are the unique artistic achievements of the Oron people, and diverge markedly from the mainstream of Calabar mainland sculptural traditions.<sup>16</sup>

Daryll Forde and G.I. Jones described the figures in similarly glowing terms as "unique, in no way like other Ibibio works".<sup>17</sup>

The symbolism of the *Ekpu* figures could be likened to the mummification of ancient Egypt. When required, a carver was consulted and commissioned to produce one. Regardless of who produced it, the general features remained the same. The figure seemed to be in three segments — the head, the midsection and the stump on which the legs rested. Beards

and male genitals were often emphasized, and many "wore" hats which seemed to suggest more recent production.

However, this magnificent art and artifacts suffered a setback with the advent of Christianity in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Suddenly, antiques which the entire community cherished were branded "fetish", pagan idols which overzealous new converts were only too willing to destroy. But for the keen interest and discerning eyes of Kenneth C. Murray, an expatriate art teacher at the Uyo Teacher Training College who began collecting them in 1938, they may not have received a deserved early attention.

Out of the expertise of Oron people in carving came such domestic utensils as mortar and pestle (*udung* and *oyo udung*), ladles (*ukuko* and *ubube*), and wooden basins (*akwa*). It was also their lot to produce stools and doors at a time when carpentry was virtually unheard of. Masks used in such plays as *akpan ekpu* and *anwang idid* were produced by Oron carvers too.

It is worthy of note that the carvers did not have commercialization as their motive. Thus, their products were not regularly found in the market for exchange. Those who needed their products struck bargains and reported on mutually accepted dates to claim their orders. Moreover, the absence of a standard medium of exchange and the limited demands for carved products inhibited the expansion of the industry and discouraged full time specialization. Besides, a carver, like other craftsmen, dreaded being stigmatized as lazy for abandoning the soil. All these explain why such craftsmen regarded their work as a constructive utilization of their leisure hours.

As interests diversified to other pursuits during the colonial era, the art of wood carving seemed to have localized in Mbokpu Uko Akai. Chief O.N. Okung attributed this development to the fact that Mbokpu people found themselves in a thickly forested area and were challenged to make use of the wood they found in abundance.<sup>18</sup> Talented Ibibio slaves were also catalytic factors in the industry.

The prominence of fishing in Oron implied that canoe, the most important open sea fishing implement, may have been produced in Oron. Many canoes in use, it is said, were made by the Ekoi in the upper Cross River and transported to Oron for refinement. Canoes were made from logs cut and hollowed out with axes made by local blacksmiths. It demanded great skill to make them with sides and bottom of approximately uniform thickness. The rough hollow was finally smoothed out by burning. The production of the Ekoi could not have met the de-

mand in Oron. This fact lends credence to the probability of local manufacture.

An Enwang man, Ukut Ene, distinguished himself as a canoe maker. His main tool was a locally forged chisel called *okpukpai*. There may have been others like him in the area to meet the demands. The Idua on their part claim that they were highly skilled canoe makers. According to Chief Okon Ekpong Inyang, "the Ibeno who now live near Eket settled briefly with the Idua and later left behind their canoe carving technology".<sup>19</sup> If they made canoes on a large scale, the Idua may have been able to supply the neighbouring communities too. However, it is plausible to assume that all the major fishing villages had people who could make canoes without necessarily being experts in the art.

Coastal communities in Oron also met the salt needs of the hinterland. They obtained salt from sea water by boiling it to evaporation. It was often carried out in the dry season when the sea was most salty. To many of the communities, it was a small diversion from their major occupations but for Tom Shott Island dwellers and Ibaka people, it was a leading economic activity.

Tom Shott Island, situated close to the mouth of the Mbo Creek, is believed to have the oldest tradition of salt making in Oron. The inhabitants were a mixture of Oron and Efik elements collectively known as Effiat. Explaining how the island came by its name, Efiang U. Aye, an Efik historian, proffered that the name was acquired in the eighteenth century. The ruler of the island is said to have been nicknamed "Tom Salt" by some British seamen. "Salt" was later corrupted in the local dialect as "Shot" which the inhabitants felt could do with an extra "t" — Shott.<sup>20</sup>

A.J.H. Latham noted that the importation of European salt into the Cross River started in the early part of the nineteenth century. Hitherto, Tom Shott Island produced enough salt to strengthen Oron's underdeclared policy of self-reliance. The European import came at a time brass basins had taken the local industry to its peak. Thus, without exercising patience to let the European import sway its buyers, Duke Ephraim, an Efik salt dealer, waged war against the island producers in 1820. Thereafter, the industry declined irredeemably.<sup>21</sup>

The development of blacksmithing (*utim*), another important craft in Oron, was conditioned by the level of technological progress of the society in general. The local blacksmiths produced metal tools with which Oron people maintained their precarious balance with the environment. Among them were matchets, knives, hoes and spearheads. Their products had poor finishing which accounted for their easy displacement by

imported alternatives. Subsequently, they stayed in business by producing cheaper versions of European goods and retained a considerable patronage of those who found the imports expensive.

The source of raw materials for *utim* is not quite clear. Although European origin is persuasive, evidence of local derivation seems more probable. Hope Masterton Waddell, commenting on the industry in Calabar, deposed that "Native iron got from the Qua Mountains, and reckoned better than the English was formerly employed but has yielded ground to its rival". In view of the intimate commercial and conjugal relations which bound both peoples together, the source of raw materials for the industry in Calabar may also have served Oron.

Oron's weaving industry probably did not know the loom. Consequently, the manual operations to which it seemed doomed placed the area behind several parts of Nigeria. The most skilled weavers in Oron were found in the coastal villages. Their products, understandably, relied heavily on fibres derived from the swamp forest. In tune with their fishing needs, Uda, Effiat, and Atabong people excelled in weaving *esek*, small conical nets used in crayfish and shrimp fishing. Other products of the area were *mbit* and *ikan*, very popular sleeping mats.

Raffia weaving, on the other hand, was less localized. By this means the people made *ikpaya*, a band of raffia clothing, a prized possession of the elders. Raffia bags were produced which became a companion of most men in their daily toils. Some skilled hands made raffia bamboo beds and baby cots — *mkpana*, an art which seemed to find a lot of sympathy in Odiko. Unyenge, Effiat and Atabong practised basketry and their surplus found ready markets in the hinterland. *Okwe*, a more resilient, wooden-framed sturdy basket was the main facility for transporting fairly heavy loads in all parts of the community. And its production was widely diffused.

It is pertinent to mention too that Oron people were courageous hunters. Like fishing, hunting was widely practised throughout Oron. Hunters enhanced the community's protein intake and, more importantly, rendered residential and agricultural areas safe for human activity. In the pre-colonial days when forest frontiers were in close proximity to residential areas, lions, *okpi*, roared terrifyingly in the pith of the night and menaced domesticates while elephants, *oni*, sometimes, lumbered into farmland destroying crops. Thanks to the ingenuity of Oron hunters, who braved the hazard and the odds of inadequate weapons to ensnare them, future generations could go to sleep and rear their crops in peace.

Although hunting was a high-risk exercise it was embarked upon either individually or cooperatively. Individuals lay and erected traps for

animals and birds in their well trodden trails and their feeding grounds. The traps were then visited at appropriate intervals to check for game caught or were readjusted if tampered with. Individuals could also excavate suspected game burrows after taking time to block their escape exits or in the alternative place a net at the exit and set fire at the main entrance. Thus, smoked out of its burrow, the game ran into the awaiting net. This was more effective with porcupines, *obiong*. If an individual could single-handedly kill a lion or a leopard, he was honoured as a man of considerable valour. Such was rare.

However, hunting was more effective as a cooperative exercise. Using matchets, spears and later, dane guns, hunters from one or more villages assembled and undertook expeditions. Sometimes these were necessary when a dangerous game was known to be making life difficult in a given locality. Dogs drugged to enhance their perception and bearing rattlers on their collars led the way. The hunters encircled a desired area and set the dogs in to ferret out any game lurking in the encircled area. As the game came into view, it was shot or hacked to death. If the first expedition failed, it was repeated with intelligence received from farmers and victims. In this way, even the most dangerous animal could be hunted down.

Industries in the precolonial economy developed in consonance with the available technology, the purchasing power of the sparse population, and the limited vents which existed for external exchange of their surplus. However, unlike agriculture which produced similar yields in almost all the sections of the community, industrial goods and crafts demonstrated discernible geographical loyalties. Consequently, fishing seemed to have developed faster than agriculture and consistently won more converts to its side in order to meet the expanding needs of the hinterland. Basketry and *esek* weaving expanded rapidly as the requirements of fishermen in the hinterland increased. Thus, gradually, elements of specialization began to develop in such riverine villages as Atabong, Effiat and Uda. This development engendered more intimate contact within the community and made for ethnic unity and understanding. But, admittedly, the most profound strides were taken in all facets of the economy when trade contacts with the Europeans, albeit indirectly, improved the quality of the available technology and induced commercialization of local products.

## Trade

Allusions have been made above to the operation of a form of exchange in the precolonial Oron society. There were two main types — domestic

and external. Both shared a common means of exchange known as barter. This entailed handing over one commodity directly for another either on the spot or by other means customs or the convenience of both parties dictated. Both parties thus accomplished by that token the roles of buyers and sellers.

In respect of domestic trade, inter-village transfer of exchange commodities was slow. This resulted from lack of open market places which later facilitated exchange by the end of the nineteenth century. In the absence of market places, circulation was aided by such non-economic factors as kinship ties, marriage alliances and bonds of friendship between individuals and between villages.<sup>22</sup> This was a manifestation of the diffused state of the under-developed economy. However, it ensured that salt, fish and other sea foods produced on the coast, as well as crafts, found their way to the hinterland in exchange for food crops. This was further facilitated by a concession of deferred payment, and the offer of credits.

As a means of transaction, barter was time-wasting. Every transaction not only required a double coincidence of want but there was also no satisfactory way of giving change. For example, for a man who had a goat to exchange for five chickens, if a prospective buyer came forward with only three chickens, the seller had no way of offering him three fifth of his goat. This created a problem of coincidence. Moreover, barter did not conduce to specialization and division of labour in the direction of natural talents and abilities, and increased productivity. Participants, therefore, had to emphasize self-sufficiency.

These operational snags plagued exchange in Oron until the second half of the nineteenth century when external stimulus generated greater economic activity. With palm produce trade came new and exotic products into the domestic exchange system. Gradually, open market places for the display of these commodities became feasible as the introduction of metal currencies helped to slash down the time consumed by barter.

Oron's market place adopted the characteristics of such institutions in other parts of Nigeria. It offered a forum for goods and information exchange between friends, relatives and strangers. It also served as a venue for traditional recreational activities. Furthermore, it operated periodically in deference to the local calendar. Thus, the important market days in Oron were *ududa*, *nwikpi*, *urueassang*, *odieto* and *ububo* in the local eight-day-week. Market places situated at different villages observed a temporal spacing which eliminated clashes and provided each market place enough attendance to justify its existence.

Major markets were inadvertently located at regionally accessible areas — Okobo, Okuko, Oruko, Ebughu, Udung Uko and Afaha Edwok. Markets in coastal locations were noted for the availability of a wide range of sea foods while those in the hinterland featured, in the main, local foodstuff and crafts. However, common to all the markets were such items as palm produce, pepper, salt, soap, mirror, tobacco, and cloth. With regard to attendance, A.G. Hopkins aptly observed that traders in these kind of markets, tended to be "women, part-time, mobile and numerous". They were mainly women because local trade was a convenient additional duty to family chores; part-time, because it was seen as secondary to primary activities like agriculture and crafts; small scale, because resources were lacking for large scale engagement. They were unavoidably mobile since connecting potential buyers entailed shuttling from one market to another though on different days. Finally, they were numerous because such small scale trade required less specialized skills.<sup>23</sup>

The above stated probability of shuttling from one market to another to be able to dispose of one's goods justified the temporal spacing of markets in Oron. The distance between Odobo market and Urue Equai at Okuko or Odobo market and Ebughu market was so great that it seemed forbidding for one who attended one on a given day to attend the other the following day. The answer to this difficulty was a practice which came to be known as *urue ndang*. This meant that those who attended a distant market set out a day before the market day and spent the night in a village, close to the market. They performed their activities on the market day and set home early or passed one more night before heading home.

Market periodicity in West Africa is an issue that has earned several scholarly studies. Some of those who have attempted to explain the phenomenon are A.G. Hopkins, B.W. Hodder, Paul Bohannan and George Dalton. Their views fall into two broad groups represented by Hopkins and Hodder. Hopkins holds that where demand was weak and spread over dispersed settlements, periodicity became a peculiar feature. On the other hand, viewing the issue from a supply perspective, Hodder contends that periodicity was prevalent in food surplus areas while daily markets characterized food deficit areas.<sup>24</sup>

A careful examination suggests that both perspectives were operative in Oron's precolonial situation. Demand was weak and spread over widely scattered settlements and food was surplus. However, to the extent that these views look at the phenomenon from purely economic points of view, they seem inadequate. In reality, the economic activities and social

obligations of the people intertwined. For example, on days that a traditional play like *ekpe-uko* was staged, no one was supposed to be found outside his home except members of the Ekpe society. Such sanctions occasionally lasted several days and women, the backbone of domestic trade not being members, remained confined to the detriment of their commercial activities. They also put up with such sanctions during the activities of an exclusive class of Ekpe Society members called *obon*. These demonstrate that market periodicity may have been dictated by other considerations than economic as room had to be made for other equally important activities in the local calendar.

Be that as it may, there was remarkable progress in market development as the nineteenth century progressed. Gradually, commercial consciousness developed and greater quantities and varieties of both local and imported goods were traded. Existing market centres gained in fame and new ones were added to reduce shuttling distance, or to serve growing needs.

At the close of the nineteenth century, a new market was opened at Idua Assang by an Efik immigrant, Nyong Efanga. His market remained largely ignored as people continued to patronize the old ones. He was compelled to hand out gifts of salt as inducement to traders. However, when the locality was made a colonial seat of administration for the Oron area, Nyong's market gained in stature. It may, subsequently, have been instrumental to snuffing out Afaha Edwok market. During the colonial period, it became the preferred place to go because of the concentration of Efik middlemen and retail traders.

The long distance between the major markets highlight the importance of transportation in the development of domestic trade. Like the non-geographical market, market places could also be influenced by the nature of existing transport facilities. The market place could be expanded as more people take advantage of good and cheap transportation to bring more goods into the market, and attracted more buyers. The enlarged volume of trade could stimulate greater production and quicken the pace of the economy towards modernity.

What constituted Oron's road network was a system of tiny, winding footpaths which criss-crossed the entire area. The major footpaths generally had a coast-hinterland orientation. This clearly portrayed the complementary interests of the two sections of the community. They also linked the major market centres while secondary paths radiated from these main arteries to villages situated in the interior. These major arteries like those from Ebughu to Udung Uko; Ebughu to Udesi; Eyo Abasi to Oruko; Esuk Inwang Ekeya to Nsie; later provided the sketch of

road development during colonial rule. Slight variations were made where necessary but they all tended to retain their initial directions weaving many villages together. A projection of a few of them provided links with Oron's neighbours.

Furthermore, these tracks, hardly more than one and half feet wide, meandered through dark, luxuriant forests which were often unsafe. Paradoxically, the forests from which they derived much of their requirements for the good life turned out to virtually imprison Oron people, depriving them of widescale contacts which, perhaps, could have facilitated their economic upliftment. What was more, Oron, being a rainy area, the footpaths remained flooded or were turned into veritable drainage channels in torrential down-pours, thus impeding movement. Besides, they inescapably crossed many streams, lengthening distances by attempting to cross the streams at the narrowest points. *Otogho*, indigenous bridges constructed with tree trunks propped up precariously with stakes, were no permanent solutions. They often got washed away when the streams swelled up and surged more violently with the rains.

Oron lacked pack-animals. Apparently, the humpless cattle which existed in the area through their natural immunity against tse-tse fly attacks were never trained to fill that void. In consequence, therefore, head portage remained the most effective means of land transportation. Head portage had the advantage of flexibility, but this could not offset its handicaps. Naturally, there is a limit to the capacity of a human being to carry load over long distances. Moreover, the engrossing and debilitating nature of the rain forest climate is anything but comfortable for transporting heavy loads. In effect, a trader, for instance, needed to hire several people to carry his goods to a distant market. Although the caravan offered some security during the journey, its cost militated against the trader's expansion of the scale of his business. These shortcomings dictated that bulk transporters had to rely more on water transport if their destination enabled them to take advantage of it.

Oron is drained by three main river systems — Mbo, Uya Oron and Okobo — all of which made the interior quite accessible, especially in the rainy season. Both local and foreign traders took advantage of them in transporting their commodities cheaply. Availability of canoes did not constitute a problem as fishing boats were readily converted for transportation. But such traders had to contend with the silting up of some of the creeks during the rains, or occasional closure by uprooted trees, and the recession of the length of navigable areas in the dry season. More importantly, rivers suffer from geographic inflexibility. Unlike roads, they cannot be extended easily to serve areas outside their reach.

The above factors make it quite tempting to dismiss the pre-colonial transport system as primitive. This type of conclusion would be as hasty as it is misleading. Though head portage appears inadequate for modern economies, for Oron's under-developed economy, it may have been fairly effective. If viewed with empathy, it is discernible that the volume of traffic at the time was comparatively small. Moreover, the river systems constituted ready-made trade routes. The limits of their navigability served as bulking centres where goods could be moved to larger entrepôts on the permanently navigable Atlantic coast and the estuary. The more familiar conditions which dictated a radical change in the existing system arose because the colonialists needed swifter means of transport to accomplish their objectives. Otherwise, the old system sufficed even when the Efik began to evacuate produce from Ibibioland through Oron from 1882. After all, transportation facilities could never have been more advanced than the prevailing physical, economic and social environment which it served.

The above discussion may have unfolded the role of transportation in facilitating the complementary relationship which existed between domestic and external trade. It is rare for a society to be completely self-sufficient in all its needs and to completely insulate itself from external developments. Thus, economic and historic factors drew Oron into commercial relations with her neighbours. This commercial relationship existed on two fronts — one with the Ibibio in the hinterland, and the other with the Efik commercial sphere of influence in the Cross River.

Oron-Ibibio trade, like the local one, was hinged on the system of barter. It was small-scale and almost entirely restricted to the immediate border villages. Oron offered fish, crayfish and salt for slaves and pottery wares. Agricultural products did not feature prominently in the external trade because of the limited complementarity in the produce of the two areas. An Intelligence Report on Nsit disclosed that they were almost entirely agriculturalist as their Nsie and Okobo neighbours.<sup>25</sup> This is probably why their pottery products were more alluring to Oron. Okobo also traded in salt obtained from Inua Abasi in Ibaka with Esuk Inwang people of Ndon Ebom. The Etebi of Eket brought *esek* to sell at Oruko and to the Effiat of Tom Shott Island.

The proximity of both ethnic groups to each other had the potentials to stimulate healthy trade links which could provide momentum for the economic growth of both areas. These potentials were unfortunately circumscribed by certain mutually divisive factors. As already noted above, Oron's internal resource imbalance between the coast and the hinterland made the community inward-looking. What was lacking in the interior of

Oron were mainly sea foods which could not be found more readily elsewhere than on the Oron coast. Pottery wares which the Ibibio had to offer had competitive alternatives in gourds, calabashes, and supplies from Umon and Afikpo of the upper Cross River. Moreover, Oron was not a rewarding market for slaves.

The lack of standardization in currencies introduced in the Cross River basin in the nineteenth century compounded an already tenuous economic contact. While Oron people used *sitim*, thin horse-shoe-shaped copper wires about twenty centimeters long, *okpoho* (manilla) was more popular with the Ibibio.<sup>26</sup> The problem of conversion between the two obviously discouraged Oron people who were already not too eager to adopt the novelty.

Although these factors were important, the most crucial ones were rather of cultural nature. Trade by barter was facilitated by a mutually intelligible medium of communication. In this regard, Efik language was more intelligible to Oron people than Ibibio. The Ibibio too did not understand Oron language commendably. Furthermore, Oron alleged that the Ibibio practised cannibalism which Oron found most detestable. This custom never reared its head in Oron and the revulsion it generated had repercussions on economic activities.

It is also said that the Ibibio sold their people into slavery, a practice which was taboo in Oron. This is explained by the fact that Oron community considered itself one gigantic family. And customarily, a child belonged to both the father's and the mother's families. One held the other responsible if the child was declared missing while in its custody. And what was more, a person of the *oyo isong* ("son of the soil") was considered sacred and whoever violated his person faced the wrath of the village deity. Therefore, unlike the Ibibio, a person who constituted a nuisance to the community was not sold into slavery but was buried alive with common consent.<sup>27</sup>

Chief M.A. Eyo disclosed that the Ibibio were in the main uncircumcised.<sup>28</sup> Such people were known in Oron as *edod*, stigmatized and subjected to unnerving ridicule. In addition, the Ibibio were noted for violent, bloody settlement of differences. For this reason, Oron people, J.U. Eka pointed out, usually thought that whoever ventured into Ibibioland was not likely to return alive.<sup>29</sup> The fear aroused in Oron people rendered their trade relations with the Ibibio unstable as manifested in their trade on slaves. The Ibibio who desired to sell their slaves undertook to come to Oron to do so since Oron buyers loathed to go there.

Finally, land disputes in the border areas with some Ibibio communities made several villages in Oron suspicious of their Ibibio

neighbours. For example, Okobo frequently engaged in wars over land with Ndon Ebom in pre-colonial times. It is said that unlike the practice in such wars with other Oron communities, the dispute with Ndon Ebom was often very bitter and bloody. Prisoners of war were promptly killed while such were exchanged with Oron villages. This double standard is explained by their perceived ethnic divergence from the Ibibio which made them consider any concession to the Ibibio a complete loss to Okobo people.<sup>30</sup> This hardly constituted a conducive milieu for the growth of commerce.

It could be assumed that Oron people considered themselves culturally superior to have sat in judgement of Ibibio customs. The superiority complex would have seemed misplaced against the Efik. In realization of this, relations with the Efik was characterized by mutual respect and a willingness to deal. Certain factors seem to have made this possible.

Firstly, Oron elements had a significant presence in the Efik community. Perhaps, this in itself would not have meant much but for the fact that that element kept its ties with the parent community alive. One of the best examples of this is the case of two Idua sons — Oboyo and Aya Iwu. Settlements founded by them and inhabited by their descendants in Akpanyo are said to be Akwa Esuk, Esighi, Ibot Ewongo, Idiaz Inwang and Euk Ana. The marriage of elements of these settlements into Efik royal families engendered a measure of goodwill towards Oron.<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, the Efik gave Oron distinction as source for their choice wives. This feature more evident after the Henshaw Town/Duke Town War. It is said that Henshaw Town men rushed to Oron to marry more Oron women who had acquired a reputation of high fertility among them. This was to enable them make up their human losses in the war or even surpass their Duke Town adversaries.<sup>32</sup>

Secondly, apart from the Enwang, an Efik clan which migrated to Oron, there continued a steady flow of Efik people to Oron up to the colonial period. Many of these immigrants settled in Tom Shon Island, Ibaka, Idua, Uya Oron and Okobo. Not only did their presence expand the existing fraternal ties with the Efik; they also brought with them well developed knowledge of the demands of international and domestic trade. Their impact on the development of trade would, probably, be better appreciated in a more detailed consideration of the subject.

One of the most notable Efik traders who established their influence in Oron was James Egbo Bassey. He is said to have been a Duke Town slave who bought his freedom after the effective abolition of the slave trade in Calabar in 1841. James Bassey first settled at Ibaka and subsequently founded James Town. From there his sphere of commercial influence ex-

tended to Udesi, Uda, Enwang and Afaha Eduok. His activities in the Mbo Creek created avenues for Oron people in that area to dispose of their surplus agricultural commodities and fish yields.

The Henshaw Town/Duke Town War of 1874-1875 also benefitted Oron economically. It was earlier mentioned that it caused Joseph Henshaw to open a trading base in Oron. Joseph also brought his European trading partner, George Watt, and together they established a lucrative palm produce trade in Idua and the Qua Iboe area of Ibeno. However, Oron people reacted to this encroachment by demanding tributes on goods passing through their territory from Ibibioland. The dispute is said to have been resolved militarily when a formidable Efik force organized by James Henshaw subdued the Idua people who were responsible. Their success in Idua was matched by a set-back in the Qua Iboe base when King Jaja of Opobo attacked and destroyed their factory in 1881. Jaja felt that they had trespassed on his commercial empire.<sup>33</sup>

Significant number of Efik traders also settled in Okobo, especially in the area of Esuk Inwang Ekeya. Through trade and marriage, they exerted so much cultural influence in the area that Okobo culture was put in jeopardy. And as the nineteenth century progressed, there appeared to be a tacit partitioning of Oron among some Efik traders. Thus, Bassey Orok held sway in Ebughu area while Edem Orok dominated trade in Eyo Bassey and Udung Uko. A number of others are remembered for the bulking centres which they named after themselves such as Esuk Ene Okon, Esuk Iman and Esuk Inyang Uyi in Uya Oron.

At the close of the nineteenth century, European firms began to show interest in Oron. The potentials of the area were first appreciated by the German West African Trading Company which was based in Ikang, near the Cameroon border. The Miller Brothers and African Trading Association were close on the heels of the German company. However, the full impact of these companies and those which came later became clearly felt only during colonial rule. The German company folded up its operations on the outbreak of World War I.

The export trade involved two main products — palm oil and kernels. The latter took a longer time to catch on as an export commodity. Unlike the export of palm oil which was carried out before the effective abolition of slave trade in the estuary, the export of palm kernels, reportedly, began in 1869. Hitherto, palm kernels were used in Oron to make fire and to produce oil called *mmanyanga*. It took the increasing dividend which accrued to those who exploited the opportunity early to convince people to start cracking for sale. The bulking of the produce to manageable quantities was carried out in market places before transpor-

tation to the coastal trading posts. Such posts were located at Udesi, James Town and Idua.

In return for their produce, Oron traders received gin, brandy, cloth, mirrors, ceremonial umbrellas, fishing hooks and twine among others. The unjust exchange of valuable produce for non-durable consumer goods set K.O. Dike lamenting:

It is a matter for reflection that little of permanent value came to West Africa from the 400 years of trade with Europe. In return for the superior labour force, the palm oil, timber, gold and the commodities which fed and buttressed the rising industrialism, they received the worst type of trade gin and meretricious articles.<sup>34</sup>

The increasing involvement of the Efik and Europeans in Oron led to some changes in the economy. Barter held its grounds but conscious attempts were made to introduce metal currencies. This was logical since trade was expanding beyond the capacity of the barter system, and specialization in certain roles was becoming manifest. A hoe-shaped currency known locally as *udok* was introduced. Its use was short-lived and was readily replaced with such copper currencies as *etung*, *sitim* and *okpoho*.

The introduction of these currencies was not easy. Oron people certainly preferred trade which yielded consumable goods to that which left them with pieces of metal. This attitude has been attributed to the African's deep conservatism and his love of extended bargaining coupled with his disappointment with anything so boring as a standard price. It seems natural and reasonable, nevertheless, that Oron people were cautious in adopting unfamiliar novelties. They, understandably, placed their material needs above the unclear advantages of a monetary system. The love of justice and fairplay apparently dictated the practice of extended bargaining. Extended bargaining also protected the unsophisticated Oron trader against undue exploitation by the experienced foreigners. But the march to modernity with the adoption of trade currencies would not be halted. Colonial rule ensured that.

In spite of the animated commercial activity which Oron later experienced, the negligence the place suffered hitherto in the European trade is intriguing. Ordinarily, Oron's strategic location at the mouth of the estuary should have invited the attention of Europeans who sailed to Calabar. Efik traders who established an extensive commercial empire in the Cross River basin, apparently, failed to incorporate Oron. The European trade accelerated the economic development of Calabar and improved the quality of life of its people. Thus, for as long as Oron's participation remained marginal, she was denied those benefits. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to explore the reasons for this anomaly.

Trade on the Cross River focussed on its upper reaches and not the mouth where Oron is situated. Perhaps, Europeans moved up the river because approaches to Oron was often sealed up by sand bars. Consequently, they may have decided to be cautious since the river was still unmapped. Besides, it is pointed out that Oron people lived away from the water front and the dense coastal forest gave out no clue of habitation. Living away from the coast was a security measure brought about by earlier Portuguese slave raids. These raids had caused the coast to be dreaded along with the Europeans whom the Oron nicknamed *mbatang* (raiders).<sup>35</sup> When the slave trade subsided, the coast was reoccupied but, not surprisingly, the Europhobia persisted into the colonial era.

It is widely known that what engaged the attention of Europeans in the estuary before produce trade was slaves. Oron people asserted emphatically that they did not participate in the trade for which reason the area could not sustain slave ports. Oron, they maintained, was too thinly populated to have indulged in selling people, apart from the customary implication of such acts. Moreover, the number of slaves bought from the Ibibio was too small for re-export.

Oron was also united against slave raids in her territory. For instance, A.M.E. Mba narrated the case of one Mbokpu Uko Akai man, Nduebak, who was captured by raiders. On receiving the news, the village organised and sent out two search parties. One headed for Idua and the other for Udung Uko. The Udung Uko party caught up with the raiders at Usung beach as they were about to put to sail with their victim. Startled by the trackers, they escaped into the swamps leaving Nduebak in chains. But luck ran out on one of them. He was captured and executed. This incident served notice that Oron was not a profitable place for the obnoxious trade.

It is also suggested that during the palm produce trade, Oron did not yield as much produce as Ibibioland. This, it is believed, resulted from sparse population and the preoccupation of the people with fishing and farming. Marketing had not yet been adopted as a means of livelihood and the Aro and Efik trade which could have passed through the area was diverted to the Qua Iboe river port of Eket.

Finally, S.K. Okpo suggested that Europeans probably thought that Oron was an extension of Ibibio country, and also under Efik tutelage. This sort of error appears probable because the Efik, to strengthen their middlemen role, had long maintained a policy of preventing Europeans from breaking new grounds. Such policies were sustainable because the Efik were better organised politically and were commercially more experienced. The House system which they operated placed a formidable

military muscle behind their economic interest. And the effectiveness of their methods could be gauged from the fact that Europeans respected some of those policies until the establishment of colonial rule. When Oron eventually got sucked into the sphere of Efik trade, it did not happen as a design of any of the big Houses of Calabar.

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that although Oron's precolonial economy was underdeveloped, it was firmly on a course of modernization. Agricultural practices and other land-use customs forged in the milieu of backwardness demonstrated their contextual relevance through their resilience. The organization of labour adopted in those days received little tinkering subsequently. What may be regarded as the industrial sector of the economy remained depressed and subsistent mainly as a concomitance of inadequate commercial vents for surplus. However, resulting from the complementary needs of the different sections of the society, local industries became effective tools of ethnic cohesion and solidarity. This was taken further by the development of commerce which became a forum for intra-ethnic intercourse and the expansion of the existing network of footpaths.

Nevertheless, the efficacy of the old order did not render Oron impervious to new ideas. The adjustments which the economy made in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in sympathy with some external forces is a measure of the peoples' desire to achieve their end of development, albeit with external help. Thus, during colonial rule, many palm oil producers readily embraced the modern plantation system and reaped its benefits of improved yield per tree, high quality oil through easier control of harvesting, and a stable source of income. Carpentry, book-binding, and printing were gradually added to the list of crafts. Road development under colonial rule sympathised with the existing network and tended to link contiguous Ibibio communities as the paths dictated. And when commerce blossomed, market periodicity in the villages was complemented by the daily market of the budding urban centre of Idua Assang. In general, Oron's pre-colonial economy contradicted the tendentious, pseudo-scientific notions of the so-called theory of tropical abundance which saw Africans as too complacent to strife.

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## Notes

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- 1 Information on land use practices obtained in interviews with Chief O.N. Okung, Uquong Clan Head (Mbokpu Uko Akai) 8/8/78; Chief O.E. Isong, Paramount Ruler of Oron, 19/8/78; See also "Memorandum Submitted on the Customs and Usages of Ibighi Clan, Oron Division, South Eastern State, 1972", Edet Eyo Bassey, *An Agricultural History of Oron People: A Study of Continuity and Change in Historical Perspective* (Unpublished B.A. Thesis, History Dept., University of Calabar, 1980).
- 2 Chief Isong, *op. cit.*
- 3 E.E. Enyenihi, "Cooperative Development Schemes", *Voice of Oron*, 1, 2 (1962), p. 21.
- 4 P.A. Talbot, *Life in Southern Nigeria* (London, 1923), p.4.
- 5 W.B. Morgan and J.C. Pugh, *West Africa* (London, 1969), p. 87.
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## The Colonial Interlude

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**T**HE colonial period in Oron history, important, among other things, for the consolidation of the sense of oneness of all the groups that inhabit the Oron district, has remained one of the least studied aspects of Oron history. Two reasons appear responsible for this. First, because of the historical relationship between the people of Oron and the Efik of Old Calabar, there has been the tendency to regard the Oron experience under colonial rule as a minor appendix to the major events which happened around Calabar. In a recent study of the role of Efik political agents in the establishment of colonial rule in Old Calabar, Ann Eyo has in fact concluded that, by and large, colonial officials tended to treat the Oron district as "an extension of Efik territory." Secondly, for much of the period, Oron was in the Eket District, and given the remoteness of a substantial number of the Oron villages from Eket, Oron never got sustained attention from the colonial officials. This partly explains the paucity of colonial documents on the Oron area.

By and large, Oron was drawn into the colonial web as a result of activities designed to consolidate consular influence and authority over Old Calabar in the second half of the nineteenth century. By the 1880s it was clear that British influence in Old Calabar was being threatened by German activities to the east of the region and the consular authorities recommended the urgent necessity "for the sake of Britain to secure the whole of Old Calabar River." On June 5, 1885, the "Niger Districts," including Old Calabar, were placed under the "gracious protection" of Her Britannic Majesty, thus signalling the formal establishment of colonial rule over the Eastern Provinces. But, as Adiele Afigbo has rightly

pointed out, "in terms of actual rule, which is to be understood as the successful establishment of a regular machinery of government, which seeks and is able, to administer the public life of the people,"<sup>2</sup> colonial rule was still about three decades away. With particular reference to the Old Calabar region, the "overthrow of indigenous authority" to borrow J.C. Anene's apt phrase, would involve the declaration of a Protectorate over the Oil Rivers and the appointment of Sir Claude Macdonald as the Commissioner and Consul-General in 1891; the decidedly "blood and iron" approach of his successor, Sir Ralph Moor under whose tenure the hinterland communities were subdued by a combination of almost unbroken wars and fox-like cunning; the Native Court Proclamations of 1901 and 1903 which established courts for the orderly governance of the area and the inauguration of the Warrant Chiefs system. All these developments affected Oron.

### **Establishment of Colonial Rule in Oron**

The expansion of colonial authority into Oron, as indeed among the hinterland peoples of South-Eastern Nigeria, involved the application of considerable force as well as the participation of a noted Efik Political Agent, Chief Daniel Henshaw, who is usually credited with the subjugation of the Oron district. Although according to plan, British rule was to be established by diplomacy and negotiation, in practice, force or threat of force became the most effective instrument for the establishment of British rule. Indeed, the many villages in Oron had to be cowed into accepting British rule. Two episodes in this regard stand out clearly in Oron history.

The first was the expedition sent against the people of Udung Uko in 1897. In September of that year, the second son of the village chief, Chief Osung Atanang, killed one of the women of his father's household who was accused of being the witch responsible for the death of one of the chief's sons. The pregnant woman was murdered, the unborn baby was removed from her womb and beheaded. This, of course, was a threat to law and order, as far as the new government was concerned. Accordingly, the chief's son was arrested, tried at the Calabar assizes and sentenced to death by hanging in his village square. To prevent the anticipated re-action of the chief, the District Commissioner of Calabar, A.A. Whitehouse, arranged for the execution to be carried out while the chief was to be decoyed and kept at Idua Asang by Chief Daniel Henshaw, the native Political Agent for the Oron District. Chief Atanang finally returned to his village to be stunned by the news of the execution of his son. As the story goes, he swore to avenge the death of his son even at the risk of being killed himself.<sup>1</sup>

While the chief, whose authority had obviously been challenged in his domain, and his people were still smarting over the humiliation, Etetim Okon Ene, the court messenger stationed at Ukpata, went to the village to announce an impending court session at Udung Uko and to invite people with complaints to prepare to appear before the court session. Apparently, Etetim Ene had been warned about the possibility that his ill-timed visit might spark off trouble, but he persisted and went. As if to add insult to injury, when Etetim Ene saw Chief Atanang, he disdainfully sneered at the fact that the chief who had sworn to avenge the death of his son or take his own life was still around. Angered by this insult from "Oyo Ofon Efof," (the son of an Efik slave), as Chief Atanang described the messenger, he ordered Etetim Ene to be murdered and skinned. He was accordingly murdered and his mutilated body distributed to the neighbouring villages. The Udung Uko villagers marched on the court house at Ukpata, the symbol of the new authority and burnt it.

The action of the Udung Uko people was interpreted as a show of resistance and a threat to the new authority. Without prior approval from the Foreign Office, as required by regulations, Whitehouse ordered a punitive expedition to be mounted against Udung Uko, contrary to the advice of his more senior officer, Wall, who preferred to use "all pacifying and persuasive measures" to deal with an explosive situation. This reluctance later led to Wall's withdrawal from Calabar.

Meanwhile, as news of the impending action against Chief Atanang and his people spread, Chief Amba Esu Amba of the neighbouring village of Mbokpu Uko Akai assembled men from Ikpe, Mbokpu Obiokonun and his own village to assist Chief Atanang to fight off the invading army. According to oral sources, Chief Amba thought it inconceivable that an Ukpabang chief, sovereign in his village, could be arrested for killing an intruder in his Kingdom!

Finally, Whitehouse and Captain Hill arrived accompanied by about 60 armed men. Whitehouse first tried to persuade the "guilty villages" to surrender, but they refused. As recorded by an eye-witness, three days later, the invading army

went up the Eyo Abasi road instead of the more usual route from Ukpata by which they expected us, and where they had made ready to fight us; when we neared the town, the people came out in their hundreds against us, but being unprepared and divided after the first volley, they broke and ran and within fifteen minutes, the place was taken.<sup>4</sup>

The chiefs were rounded up and tried. Eight of them were found guilty. To further ensure peace and order, Chief Daniel Henshaw was stationed at Oron as Native Political Agent charged with the responsibility of appealing to the villages in Oron to accept the new dispensation. It was in

this role that Chief Henshaw went from village to village in Oron and got involved in the second important episode in the establishment of colonial rule in Oron in 1902. This was the march of a military detachment from Oron town to Eket.

Before the departure of the troops from Oron town, Chief Daniel Henshaw, better known in Oron as Nyong Efanga, had sent a warning to all the villages through which the troops were to pass not to resist or risk being sacked. He was particularly interested in the fate of his friend, Chief Enyenihi of Oyubia, known for his prowess. Chief Henshaw sent word to warn Chief Enyenihi not to resist but remain calm as the troops approached his village. Similarly, Chief Nkpanam Otu of Uya Oron sent a message to Chief Enyenihi that he must not do anything "to annoy the hen with its young ones" which was heading towards his village.

The expedition wound its way through Oyoku and Okuko towards Oyubia. When the troops arrived, they threatened Chief Enyenihi who had taken a position at the entrance to his village. Some reportedly struck him on the chest with the butt of their guns, but he remained calm and did not obstruct their passage. Finally, Chief Henshaw arrived with the British Officer, and saw that Chief Enyenihi had remained unruffled. Chief Enyenihi won the admiration of the expedition which camped temporarily in his compound before proceeding on the march towards Eket. Subsequently, Chief Enyenihi's compound served the colonial government as a court hall and lock up prison and a clerk was stationed there. Chief Enyenihi's role as a pioneer in Mission education in Oron will be discussed later.<sup>5</sup>

Chief Daniel Henshaw, Efik Political Agent, clearly played an important role in the establishment and consolidation of British rule in Oron. He held periodic meetings with the village chiefs in such places as Oyubia, Enwang, Udung Uko, Effiat, Okuko, etc. He spied on the Oron district for government officials and made periodic reports of threats to law and order to the officers in Calabar. He adjudicated in disputes involving the villagers.<sup>6</sup> His term of service in Oron was not without controversy, however.

The appointment of Chief Daniel Henshaw as permanent President of the Oron Native Court provoked a petition from a well known Oron Chief, Ekpu Edubio Odoro of Udesi Isong Inyang. Chief Odoro refused to buy the argument that Chief Henshaw was entitled to the position by virtue of his being "the Native Political Agent" in Oron. Chief Odoro felt that Henshaw was not sufficiently conversant with Oron norms and traditions to serve as President and that he was usurping a position that naturally belonged to an Oron chief. The colonial authorities regarded

Chief Odoro's action as subversive. The District Commissioner for Eket recommended that Odoro, then only sixteen years old, should be exiled. The Resident in Calabar had to intervene in the matter. After interviewing Odoro, the Resident concluded that Odoro did not act out of "contempt for authority" but rather "as a result of patriotism and self realization." He advised Odoro to go home and co-operate with the new authorities. Odoro, however, remained an uncompromising foe of British rule in Oron, especially where government actions tended to subvert Oron traditions. In 1922, Jeffreys described Odoro as "belonging to the line of insurbodination." Apparently, as described by Chief A.M.E. Mba who knew him well, Chief Odoro saw colonial rule as humiliating and degrading and capable of subverting the best traditions of the Oron people. It is not surprising that Chief Odoro was one of the founding fathers of the Oron Union in 1925.

Be that as it may, by the 1920s, British rule over Oron was fully established. The process involved subduing every community in turn. Sometimes, as happened in the case of Udung Uko, some villages had to be subdued more than once. Sometimes, hostile demonstrations were organized against government officials, including a plot by some villages "to capture the Commissioner of the Eket Sub-district while on his rounds in the District."<sup>8</sup>

### **Administration**

Throughout the colonial period, the Oron area was administered as a sub-district in the Eket District of what was variously described as the Calabar Division or Calabar Province. In the pre-1929 period, the basic unit of administration was the Native Courts which exercised judicial, administrative and legislative powers. Between 1929 and 1951, the system of Native Administration, comprising a Native Authority and a Native Court for each administrative unit was in vogue. Between 1929 and 1947 the Okobo Native Court area was responsible to the N.A. Treasury at Eket, not to Oron. About 1947, however, following the observation of C.J. Kayne, the Senior Resident for Calabar that the financial position of the Eket Native Authority would not give Okobo an opportunity to develop and maintain the N.A. School at Okobedi, Okobo was subsequently transferred to the Oron Native Authority. Apparently, according to participants in the negotiations that brought Okobo into the Oron Native Authority, there was a clear understanding that in the new arrangement, amenities were to be shared on a ratio of 4:1 between Oron and Okobo respectively. When the three tier County Council system was introduced in Eastern Nigeria in 1951, the Oron Native Authority was re-designated

Okobo-Oron County Council. Within the Council, however, there was a permanent Oron Town Committee which oversaw the affairs of the Oron urban area. By 1959, the urban area was constituted into the Oron Urban County Council with jurisdiction over all Idua villages, Eyo Abasi, Uya Oron, Iquita and Esin Ufot. The seven appointed members of the Oron Urban County Council were Chief O.E. Isong, Rev. S.K. Okpo, Chiefs I.E. Nyong, O.E. Ekpenyong, U.A. Ebin and E.H. Emenyi. In 1960, elections were held into the new Council. When the two tier system of Local Government was later introduced in the early years of Independence, the Okobo/Oron District Council was broken up into 16 Local Councils, 12 in Oron and 4 in Okobo. The above was the basic administrative arrangement under which Oron was governed throughout the colonial period.

From the very beginning, the British rulers of South-Eastern Nigeria were confronted with two important problems. The first was the acute shortage of European administrative staff to effectively oversee the affairs of the large territory she had acquired. Such shortages were particularly acute during the First and Second World wars when the few available had to be diverted to other duties. Secondly, effective administration was hampered by inadequate communication and means of transportation. In tackling these problems, the British found it convenient to rely on the existing traditional structure of government of the local population. This approach had three advantages. First, it was cheap; second, the involvement of the local chiefs made for continuity of administration; and lastly, it was reasoned that the involvement of local persons would soften the anticipated shock the introduction of western ideals and ideas of government was bound to provoke. Thus, from the beginning, the preferred system of government was to rule the people indirectly through their local chiefs.<sup>9</sup>

As explained earlier, the traditional system of government in Oron before the advent of colonial rule revolved around the Ifong Udung (village chiefs), the Ifon Afaha (clan heads) and the Ifong Oro (Paramount chiefs in Oron). It appears that when the British arrived in 1896, they quickly identified prominent *Ifong Oro* who had performed the *In-am* ceremony and had established unparalleled reputation in the area. These included Inwang Uwe of Ubodung clan, Enyenihi Okwong of Oyubia and Uya Inyang of Okuko in Ibihi clan, and Amba Esu Amba and Edeke Usip in Uquong clan. They were the major props of the Native Court system through which Oron was administered until about 1929. As elsewhere in South-Eastern Nigeria, they were designated Warrant Chiefs, thus supporting Adiele Afigbo's contention that some of the

warrant chiefs were recognized and highly respected traditional rulers in their villages before they acquired the British warrant. Under these were minor chiefs in each of the villages in Oron. These were constituted into an all-purpose body with judicial, executive, and legislative powers, initially called Native Courts, and later more appropriately, Native Authority.

By the turn of the century, a Native Court had been established near Oron town at Ukpata. By 1903, court sessions were held in Chief Enyenihi's house at Oyubia and a court house subsequently built at Oyubia. In the course of the first two decades of the twentieth century, a court was built at Okobedi (Okobo) which was also attended by the neighbouring Oron villages. In 1925, there was a proposal to change the names of the courts in Oyubia and Oron to Oron Court and Okpo Eket court respectively, the later to serve the villages in Idua and the Afaha Okpo villages of Eyo Bassey, Udung Uko and Edikor principally. These proposed changes were not effected. However, a travelling court was established at Esuk Ebughu which met once a month to serve the Ebughu, Enwang and Effiat groups.<sup>10</sup>

When the District Commissioner, who had legal and ministerial powers was present, these courts functioned as District Commissioners Courts and exercised three kinds of jurisdiction. Firstly, it had jurisdiction over criminal matters such as theft, larcery, affray, loitering with intent, behaving in a manner likely to cause the breach of the peace, attempt to commit a crime and wounding offences under the Arms Prohibition Proclamation. The court was competent to impose prison sentence not exceeding six months and a fine not exceeding £50. The court also had jurisdiction over civil cases involving debt, damage or demand on which the value of property in question did not exceed £100. The court could also hear cases involving non-Africans. When the District Commissioner or his Assistant was not present and the leading Warrant Chief presided, the courts had jurisdiction on all criminal and civil cases on which customary and local laws applied and in which all the parties were local people or in which any party, not an African, consented in writing to his case being tried. However, such a court could not try suits on which the amounts involved exceeded £200. Appeals from the Native courts could be heard by an Assizes Court which was established in Oron in 1910 and sat at Oron, Eket, and Calabar on the first Monday in October and March of every year. From the Assizes, appeals lay to the supreme court in Calabar.

Under the Native Courts were Minor courts which could be held in the villages, presided over by village chiefs and preserved exclusively for

native participants. Such a court had jurisdiction over civil and criminal matters to which local law and custom applied in which the amounts involved did not exceed £25.

Each Native Court had a clerk, a messenger and a court bailiff. The clerk, usually educated, recorded court proceedings, conveyed to the chiefs the list of members approved by the District Commissioner to sit for the month and issued summons to the accused. Initially, it was the duty of the plaintiff to deliver the summons to the accused. This system, which was potentially provocative was soon abandoned and the position of the court messenger established. The messenger, dressed in his black uniform, a cap with an official emblem, puttees on his legs, and a baton hung loosely around his waist on the right hand side, was charged with the responsibility of delivering the summons, serving the warrants in criminal cases, maintaining order while the court was in session and keeping custody of criminals sentenced to imprisonment until they were transferred to the District Prison at Eket. This was an extremely important post and most court messengers in Oron, as elsewhere, exploited their position and soon became notorious for bribery and corruption.

With rather minor and generally insignificant modifications from the point of view of the Oron people, the Native Court system remained the basic structure of administration until the late 1930s. Protests were usually made against specific personnel appointed, the most noted being that directed against the appointment of Chief Daniel Henshaw as the permanent President of the Oron Native Court by Chief Ekpu Edubio Odoro in 1912. Occasional dissatisfaction with the system was also directed against some of the warranted chiefs and the court messengers whose reputation for bribery and corruption continued to be openly talked about in the villages. Also, by the late 1920s, it was becoming obvious that in the absence of any system based on chiefly autocracy in the area, many villages and clans, especially those not adequately represented in the Native Court systems, were alienated from the new government. It was also reasoned that the Native Court system which vested executive, legislative, and judicial powers in the same body was largely responsible for the abuse of power by some of the chiefs and needed to be reformed to be more in consonance with the traditional system of government in the pre-colonial period. As elsewhere in South-Eastern Nigeria, colonial anthropologists were assigned to investigate the local populations, their customs and traditions as a means of developing a more acceptable system. The new system, as correctly pointed out by Afigbo, aimed at achieving four basic objectives, namely, broadening the scope of participation by the creation of clan and village assemblies, maintaining

ethnic integrity among the component units of the Districts, separating judicial from legislative and executive functions and ensuring that the court staff (clerks, messengers and bailiffs) were drawn from the local population.<sup>11</sup>

The reforms resulted in the introduction of the new system of Native Administration comprising a separate Native Authority as well as a Native Court for each unit heretofore under one Native Court system. In addition, clan and village councils were established in which every lineage head was expected to be represented. These functioned as surbordinate Native authorities. Furthermore, there was established an advisory council on which all the clans were represented.

When the system came into operation in Oron in about 1930, the clan Advisory Council had seven members representing the then seven recognized clans in Oron (Okiuso was then still part of Uquong Clan). Among these were Chief Enenyi Iniekung (Ubodung), Chief Ntak Ikam Mba (Uquong), Chief Oquong Ebito (Ibighi), Chief William Umo (Ebughu), Chief Umana (Effiat), Chief John Anwana Esin, representing Chief Ekpenyong Abasi (Okpo). Chief Bassey Edentegbe was later appointed to represent Okiuso. The clan Executive Council had four members, namely John Anwana Esin, Esu Adiaha Ibok (Esu Esio of Oyubia), Esuk Esang and Inana of Unyene Udung Eyo.<sup>12</sup> Each village nominated two members to represent it at sessions which met regularly at Oyubia, Oron, and Okobedi. A major responsibility of the village representatives was tax collection. Indeed, some of them became known as *Ifong tax* (Chiefs for collecting taxes), and this won them not inconsiderable disrespect. The above administrative arrangement remained in force until the introduction of the new Local Council government structure in 1951.

One of the major responsibilities of the Native Court and Native Administration system of government was the maintenance of peace and order in the villages and clans that made up Oron. The major instrument for ensuring this were the courts charged with the responsibility of adjudicating virtually in all matters of interest to the local population which were governed by their traditional norms and customs. The court system, needless to say, represented an intrusion of an alien English norm into the traditional Oron setting. It is not surprising that some of the classic confrontations between the traditional system of government and the new occurred in the courts. A few examples should serve to illustrate the point.

As indicated earlier, Chief John Anwana Esin represented Chief Ekpenyong Abasi of Okpo clan in the Clan Advisory Council established in

about 1926. According to tradition, Chief Ekpenyong Abasi was the recognized clan head. However, the chief who was also the chief juju priest of the clan, and, according to Jeffreys, "a man of the old school, deeply steeped in the superstitions and pagan practices of his clan," was denied representation. The colonial authorities denied him a seat in the courts because "he was constantly accused of murder charges and witchcraft."<sup>13</sup> This collision between tradition and the new order was repeated in several other cases. Indeed, problems surrounding witchcraft accusations and the swearing of *mbiam* in court as proof of innocence were some of the most difficult for the new court system in Oron.

One of the earliest recorded cases involving the administration of *Mbiam* was that brought against Bassey Owonoko of Ebughu in the Oron Native Court in August, 1931. He was charged with "administering juju with intent to harm." When the corporal in charge of the Oron detachment of the Police went to arrest Owonoko, he was allegedly offered a bribe of 22s:0d by one Edet Ene of Edikor. Edet Ene was accordingly charged along with Owonoko. The case was called before A.R. Whiteman, the District Officer on August 26, 1931. Although Owonoko and Ene pleaded innocence and insisted that they acted according to the traditions of their peoples, Whiteman sentenced Owonoko to three months imprisonment with hard labour and Edet Ene to a year term of imprisonment, also with hard labour.<sup>14</sup>

The issue of swearing *mbiam* in Native Courts which was regarded by the local population as the only acceptable grounds of innocence by the accused provoked a lot of controversy between the Resident and the district officers. C.P. Thompson, the District Officer for Eket, felt that the swearing of *Mbiam* was "an unsatisfactory method of settling a case." Other officers, however, argued that, as long as "there is still a very real belief in the sanctions involved on juju swearing," the practice should be upheld. The District Officer countered that swearing juju was "a temptation to the judges to shirk the issue" and that it offered "opportunities for profitable perjury on the part of the growing class of persons who no longer regard juju with fear and veneration." Furthermore, he pointed out that the system conflicted considerably with the expanding christian practices in the area, since the Christian would not swear by *mbiam*, and his Bible was not accepted as a substitute. Finally, he condemned the system as being capable of perpetuating "superstitious practices better abandoned." The inconclusiveness of the debate clearly illustrates the considerable conflict between traditional practices and the new system.<sup>15</sup>

Equally troublesome for the courts were cases involving matrimonial causes, divorces and what to do with children born under traditionally acceptable but western condemned circumstances. One of the sensational cases of 1931 was the one involving Antigha Okpobia of Ebughu who was brought to A.R. Whiteman's court on two charges of (1) slave dealing by selling a girl named Uwa Umo (his wife) and (2) child-stealing contrary to section 379 of the criminal code. Apparently, Okpobia had sold his wife Uwa Umo to another person, and informed her relatives that she had died. The accused confessed that he had acted "out of vexation" but was sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labour. In a rare show of candour about the efficacy of the traditional judicial system, Whiteman observed that "in pre-government days Native law punished an offence of this nature by living burial."<sup>16</sup>

Cases involving matrimonial causes became more frequent after the return of ex-servicemen from the Second World War. Informants recall that at the end of the war, many of the young ex-servicemen who returned had sufficient money to pay dowries for wives. Apparently, some preferred young girls who were already married. As Chief Mba recalls, "some irresponsible and greedy parents took advantage of this situation and gave their daughters already married to those ex-servicemen who were able and prepared to refund not only the dowry paid by former husbands but an addition of what they called Utang-Olukhu and unyime nlo - oath and marriage agreement fee." In a very short while, those two items rose from £1:5s:0d to £12. The result was a series of divorces and the courts were flooded with cases involving divorce, child dispute, and receiving double dowry.<sup>17</sup>

As would be expected, the situation was rather confused as there were no precedents in either western law or the traditional Oron law to guide the officers who adjudicated in these cases. Tensions over marriage problems mounted and villages were often on the brink of war over such matters. Decisions were usually haphazard and inconsistent. Matters came to a head in a child dispute between Osin Eneyo of Odu Ebughu and Onwinokuyure of Ediko. Fortunately, Chief A.M.E. Mba, though not a court member, had followed with considerable consternation the confusion unleashed by the situation and written a paper titled "Child Dispute in our Native Court" which had earlier won the admiration and approval of both J.P. Cobb, the Divisional Officer at Eket and C.J. Mayne, the Resident in Calabar. It was this paper that formed the basis of the judgement handed down by the Oron Native Court in 1949 which was upheld by both the Divisional Officer at Eket and the Resident in Calabar. According to Chief Mba, in his paper, he "did not introduce any new mar-

riage customary law into Ukpabang custom but revealed that which existed in its tradition." Apparently, colonial officials were not opposed to accepting African solutions in matters which they felt incompetent to handle and regardless of what the official instructions said!

The major responsibilities of the clan and village councils were tax collection, sanitation, maintenance of law and order, assessment and levying of special rates. The Native Authority Councils functioned basically as advisers to the government Administrative Officers who retained the effective power.

By the late 1940s the Native Administration system came under attack from a variety of quarters. With its numerous village and clan councils, the system was described as too unwieldy for the effective conduct of government business. The system did not provide a wide enough scope for participation by the new educated elite in Oron who, as elsewhere in the Eastern Provinces, began to denounce it as undemocratic. Most of the clan and village representatives were constantly charged with corruption. Efforts to streamline the system by reduction of membership and allowing each community to send "its best man" to represent it proved unsatisfactory. By 1950, the colonial government was persuaded to introduce a new system whose main objective was "the encouragement of local political interest and the building up of a new system of efficient and democratic local government." The new system which was to be modelled after the Local Government structure in Britain was based on the recognition that the "political progress of the territories was dependent on the development of responsibility in local government, and that without sound local government a democratic political system at the centre was not possible." Efficient organs of local government directly representative of the people, it was concluded, were imperative for the expansion of social services to the people.<sup>18</sup> To ensure an effective take-off of the new system, twenty-one individuals were selected and sent to London to be trained on the intricacies of the British system of Local administration. Two indigenes of Oron who benefited from the training programme were Chief O.E. Isong and Chief A.M.E. Mba.

Under the new system, Oron was constituted into a County Council and designated Okobo/Oron County Council with headquarters at Oyubia. Initially, the new County was a Tax authority and not recognized as an Educational Rating authority. Education rates continued to be paid to Ikot Ubo. By 1954, however, this arrangement was stopped and the County collected its education rates which enabled it to start her scholarship programme. As indicated earlier, there was a Statutory Standing Committee in the County responsible for the affairs of Oron Town.

This Committee would later mature into the Oron Urban County Council by 1959. Thus, at the end of the colonial period, there were two County Councils in Oron namely, Okobo/Oron and Oron Urban.<sup>19</sup>

For purposes of election into the County Council, Oron was divided into 33 wards. Elections were hotly contested as each ward tried to present its best available educated candidate. Most of those elected were in fact the cream of Oron society, educated and articulate, mostly teachers in the voluntary agency schools. Others were local politicians and prominent traders. Some of the most outstanding were O.J. Eminue, Inyang Effiong Nyong, E.O. Unanaowo, J.U. Essang, O.N. Okung, R.E. Odokhofre, A.I. Akadu, E.B. Offiong, E.O. Onofiok, S.K. Okpo and so on. Members elected their own chairmen who served for one year, and among those who served in the early years were Onofiok, Edet Abia, O.N. Okung, E.O. Unanaowo, H.E. Enyenihi and E.B. Offiong. When the Oron Urban County Council was established, S.K. Okpo served as its first chairman. Subsequent chairmen of the Urban County Council were Chief I.E. Nyong and U.A. Ebin.

The Okobo/Oron County Council was served by a secretariat headed, for the first seven years by A.M.E. Mba, recently returned from his training course in England. Phillip Ante, who had been nominated to enter the service as a messenger but was converted to Treasurer because the D.C. was most favourably impressed by how smart he looked in his uniform, served as Treasurer. There was an office staff of clerk (J.B. Okon), Messenger (Nyong Odokwo), dispensary attendants and sanitary inspectors. Technically, the Native Courts continued to function independently of the County Council. In practice, however, as Chief A.M.E. Mba admits, the Secretary was regularly consulted in the appointment, promotion and punishment of the court staff and membership.

Like the Native Authority before it, the County Council exercised wide functions. The Council initially collected taxes, assessed and collected special rates and levies, constructed and maintained existing roads connecting major population centres and markets, maintained the existing dispensaries at Oyubia, Oron Town, Okobo and Effiat Mbo, as well as the maternities, and finally, it maintained peace and order. Among the roads maintained by the Council, some of which had been built by the N.A., were the Eyo Abasi-Ekim-Oruko-Etebi; Urue Ita-Okossi-Urue Okwong (Udung Ukpong)-Nsie-Okobedi; and Umume-Uboro-Oruko-Uda roads. The Council initially ran a canoe service at Ofi Uda but this was abandoned because, according to Chief Mba, canoes were often stolen or damaged by the local population. An important source of

revenue for the Council was the market at Oron Town opened by D.O. Smith in the 1930s. The Council charged stallage fees for the use of the market. Other main markets regularly visited by the Council sanitary inspectors were Urue Ekwai (Okuko), Urue Eyo (Oruko), Urue Ebughu which was an important meeting point for the riverine communities, and Urue Okobo which was heavily patronized by Oron communities far and wide. Other sources of the Council revenue were fines and fees from customary courts, licence fees, education grants from the government, capitation rates of up to a maximum of 5s (50k) per capita, and block grants from government initially assessed at 3s (30k) but later raised to 45s per head payable on condition that the Council discharged its assigned services efficiently.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most important programmes carried out by the Council from about 1955 was the scholarship scheme which awarded scholarships to bright but financially handicapped students in secondary schools and later, universities. Unfortunately, the full records on the scheme are not available. However, it is well known that the scheme was essential in the educational endeavours of many now prominent Oron indigenes at the secondary and university levels. From available records, each of the sixteen Local Councils within the Oron District Council was assigned 3 secondary school scholarships a year. Among the beneficiaries of the university awards from 1957 to 1966 were E.E. Bassey (Fourah Bay) A.B. Offiong (UNN), O.E. Uyo (Ibadan), A.B. Etim (Lincoln University, USA), Gregory N. Eyo (Germany), Thomas E. Ekpenyong (Italy), Boniface Ekpenyong (UNN), J.A. Eyo (London), A.B. Anyin, L.E.O. Anwanakak (Ibadan), A.U. Enenyi (Ibadan), E.D. Okon (Ibadan), Effiong J. Ndehedehe (Ibadan), O.T. Nkereuwem (London), E.O. Isong (London), and so on. More importantly, the administration of the scheme provoked hot political exchanges in Oron. The Councillors were charged with corruption and mismanagement and these became important topics for hot debates and discussion in all Oron Union Conferences between 1958 and 1966. Besides, there were charges that Okobo was being favoured in the awards at the expense of the more populous Oron. Chief Mba admits that Okobo had better than its agreed share of 1:4 in the distribution of amenities which formed the basis of association of Okobo in the Okobo/Oron County Council.<sup>21</sup> This assertion is supported by available fragmentary documents on the awards.

The colonial interlude, short as it was, marked a significant turning point in Oron history. For the first time, the different groups were brought under one recognized unit of administration first under the Native Administration and later the County Council system. This, no

doubt, promoted conflict between the Oron and Okobo groups for equitable share of the crumbs of the system. By and large, however, it encouraged the component units to look to the government at Oyubia as the main source of amenities. Secondly, the N.A. and County Councils were major training grounds for aspiring Oron politicians, and though charges of corruption marred the reputation of many, several went on to distinguish themselves in the public life of the country. Thirdly, the construction of roads, especially the Eket/Oron Road in 1905 and the Oron/Aba Road later, helped to break the isolation of Oron from their Ibibio neighbours to the west. Thus, Ikot Ubo was regularly visited by the Oron people and the trade in palm wine brought many Ubium and Nsit people almost daily to Oron. Of course Eket, as the administrative headquarters of the District was regularly visited by the Oron people. The introduction of bicycles in the 1920's and '30's facilitated these exchanges of visits and trade. Similarly, the N.A. schools established at Eket, Oruko and Okobedi Okobo attracted pupils from all sections of Oron and the Eket District generally. Even more important in this regard were the Mission schools, especially the Oron Institute and its successor, the Methodist Boys' High School, Oron which drew students far beyond the confines of Oron. And lastly, the colonial economy, with its emphasis on trade in palm oil and kernel, provided opportunities for enterprising Oron traders. As many made good in this trade, they invested their money in such enterprises as the education of their children, and the construction of more permanent and sometimes storey buildings. Oron (Akani Obio) matured into a major township under the impact of these developments and attracted permanent residents from all parts of Eastern Nigeria, especially from the Ibibio and Igbo hinterland. Indeed, Ibibio and Igbo traders dominated the markets at Oron town and by 1964, the Market Master, an extremely sensitive and lucrative post, was held by an Igbo. Although at the end of the colonial period Oyubia remained the focus of attention for the administration of all of Oron, Oron town was fast emerging as the pivot of political activities in the area.

The emergence of Oron town as an important crossroads between Calabar and the rest of the country was further strengthened by developments in water transportation during the colonial period. The Oron and Uya-Oron berths were used by the United African Company to transport produce, especially palm oil and kernel, to Calabar for export to Europe since the early colonial period. By the 1930's, the Elder Dempster operated ferry services between Oron and Calabar using a steam powered vessel. The service was considerably expanded with the introduction of the large, diesel fueled and faster M.V. Oron (1938) and

later M.V. Eket (1950). While the M.V. Oron provided first and third class passages, the M.V. Eket provided first, second, and third class passages. The fares between Oron and Calabar were ten shillings (first class), six shillings (2nd class) and nine pence (1938), increasing to one shilling and nine pence (1954) for third class. Both vessels had facilities for carrying motor vehicles and goods.<sup>22</sup>

The introduction of these services which provided the major link between the Igbo and Ibibio hinterland and Calabar, catapulted Oron into a major cross roads for the movement of peoples and goods. People from Aba, Eket, Uyo, Ikot Ekpene and so on travelled through Oron to Calabar. The ferry services were supplemented by canoe transportation which continued to transport people and goods between Calabar and Oron and was highly patronized by petty traders, small middlemen, and market women. It was thus during the colonial period that Oron emerged as the major gateway between the Ibibio hinterland and Calabar. The importance of this route would be felt after the creation of the South-Eastern state when Calabar became the state capital. Oron remained the major link between the mainland parts of the state and the state capital until the construction of the Calabar-Itu road.

Despite its integrative impact, colonial rule in Oron, as elsewhere, threatened the world of the traditional Oron man. The Ekpe society began to lose its hold as the major instrument of authority to the new local government institutions which came to regulate even such intimate areas of life as marriages, inheritance, and religious beliefs. As the Christian Missions won more converts, the traditional Oron jujus and their priests lost their hold over the people. As schools were opened in one village after another, and parents began to realize the importance of educating their female children, the traditional *Nkugho* educational system for girls became increasingly discarded. Inter-village football matches, spearheaded notably by Okuko, Udung Uko, Oruko, Okossi and Oyubia, would soon almost replace *Otune* and wrestling matches as entertainment in the villages. As the gramophones were introduced into the villages by the teachers, traders and smugglers, Sundays, rather than the traditional market days, became more important for the young who thronged the houses of such owners to listen to essentially non-traditional music from "His Majesty's Voice."

The Oron people responded in many ways, individually and collectively, to this spectacle of their world falling apart. Fortunately for them, they whole-heartedly embraced western education which soon became the determinant for leadership within the group. They also organized the Oron Union in 1925 with the declared aim of recovering, preserving and

transmitting to future generations the best in the traditions of their forebears. The expansion of western education in Oron and the role of the Oron Union in developing and consolidating the consciousness of the Oron people are analysed in the next two chapters of this book.

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## Notes

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- 1 See Ann Eyo, *Efik Political Agents of Old Calabar*, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Calabar, 1984, p. 124. See also C.O.S.I./137, Draft No. 142, 15/11/1897, Oron District, p. 321.
- 2 A.E. Afigbo, "The Eastern Provinces Under Colonial Rule" in Obaro Ikime, ed., *Groundwork of Nigeria History* (Ibadan, 1980), 410. For other accounts of the establishment of colonial rule over the area, see J.C. Anene, *Southern Nigeria in Transition, 1825-1906* (Cambridge, 1966); Obaro Ikime, *The Fall of Nigeria* (London, 1977).
- 3 For details, see C.S.O. 1/137, Draft No. 142, 15/11/1897, Oron District, p. 321, and P.A. Talbot, Personal Papers, National Archives, Ibadan. The story is more fully developed in a private paper by Chief A.M.E. Mba.
- 4 Cited in Chief Mba's Private Papers. *Op. cit.*
- 5 This incident is narrated in full in "Speech on Oyubia Education Day" by J.E. Udoh, December 23, 1966.
- 6 For details, see Ann Eyo, *Efik Political Agents of Old Calabar*, pp. 183-189.
- 7 See Chief Mba, Private Papers, *op. cit.*
- 8 See Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, Vol. 1, p. 215.
- 9 For details, see Adiele Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria* (London, 1972) and "The Eastern Provinces Under Colonial Rule" in Ikime, ed. *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, pp. 410-428.
- 10 Jeffreys, Regrouping of Native Courts, Eket District. M.D.W. Jeffreys, D.O. 20/5/25.
- 11 Afigbo, "The Eastern Provinces," *Op. cit.*, pp. 421-422.
- 12 Chief Mba, Private Papers.
- 13 See Jeffreys, *Report on the Tribes and Clans of Eket District*, *Op. cit.*
- 14 File No. C362/193 Calprof 2/12/270 "Eket Provincial Court Criminal Case No. 72: Rex Versus (1) Bassey Owonoko of Ebughu and (2) Edet Ene Eyo Bassey of Edikor." National Archives, Enugu.
- 15 File No. CP. 1993 Calprof 3/1/1879 "Swearing of juju or "mbiam" in Native Courts". National Archives, Enugu.
- 16 File No. C361/1931, Calprof 2/12/269, "Eket Provincial Court-Criminal Case No. 74/31; Rex versus Antigha Okpobia of Ebughu," National Archives, Enugu.
- 17 Chief Mba, interviews and Private Papers.

- 18 For details, see G.O.O. Orewa and J.B. Adewumi, *Local Government in Nigeria: The Changing Scene* (Benin, 1983), especially chap. 2. Also Sheridan Jones and Richard Riley "Local and District Councils — Should They be Forgotten?" *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 13, 2 (1975), pp. 309-332.
- 19 Interviews with Chief Mba, Chief Nyong, and Chief J.B. Okon.
- 20 See Orewa and Adewumi, *Local Government in Nigeria*, p. 51.
- 21 Interview with Chief Mba.
- 22 File No. 2277, Vol. II. Calprof, "Oron-Calabar River Transport, 1952-1954," p. 23; See also R.K. Udo, "The Growth and Decline of Calabar" *Nigerian Geographical Journal*, Vol. X (December, 1967); and G. Walker, *Traffic and Transport in Nigeria* (London, 1959).

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## The Mission and Education Factors in Oron History

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We cannot say that there is a great demand for spiritual things amongst these people; they have an eye for the things that are seen; their great desire is to "know book". The prevalent idea is that the Englishman's superiority is due to his knowledge, and the Native thinks that if he can get that which makes the white man great, he will become great in turn.<sup>1</sup>

**T**HE intervention of the Christian Missions and their introduction of western education were some of the most important developments in the unifying processes taking place among the Oron people in the twentieth century. Indeed, as the Rev Nathaniel Boocock, pioneer missionary in the Oron District observed in 1910. "Oron will always be inseparably connected with the training institute, and the generous undertaking of our Christian Endeavours." Boocock himself credited the Oron Institute with "helping to produce a fusion of tribes that is full of promise." Thomas W. Hancox, another missionary, similarly observed in 1905 that "the Institute is now full, and is representative of the localities where our work is carried on. The fusion of tribes is here taking place, and thus we hope to unite all under the universal sway of the Master."<sup>2</sup> These testimonies to the unifying influence of the mission and the schools can not be dismissed as missionary propaganda. Jack Edet Udo, one of the earliest beneficiaries of mission education in Oron recalled that the stampede for village schools and teachers had the effect of making Udung Uko and Urua Eye Isong Inyang a focal point of attention in Oron. He wrote:

Sometime before Rev W. Norcross came to stay at Oyubia, it seemed as the day was opened for all villages in Oron to have a school. Everyday, this village or that village would go out seeking for teachers to come to teach their children. Udung Uko in those days became a hunting ground for teachers. In the dry season, some people would visit Udung Uko farm to look for teachers. Some villages also went to Urua Eye Isong Inyang after Rev Hanney to ask for teachers.<sup>3</sup>

It is this unifying influence of the missions and their schools which will be main focus of this chapter.

### **The Coming of the Missions**

The introduction of Christianity into Oron was primarily the responsibility of the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society. In 1869, a British ship, the *Elgiva* landed in Santa Isabel, the main port in Fernando Po. As the story goes, during their brief stay there, the ship's captain, William Robinson, and carpenter, James Hands, both Methodists, came across a group of local Christians, apparently of the Baptist faith and preached to them. The local Christians were so impressed that they addressed a letter through the captain to the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society in London requesting for missionary to be sent to work among them. The letter, dated August 28, 1869, pointed to the desolate conditions of the Baptist congregation which had been left unattended since their missionaries had been expelled "after the arrival of the Romish Church on the Island in 1858." It solicited the assistance of the Primitive Methodist to send "a missionary to come and direct them in the way that leads to eternal life" as well as "some of your society's publications."<sup>4</sup> In response to this appeal, the General Missionary Committee of the Primitive Methodist Connexion sent out Rev. R.W. Burnett and Henry Roe to Fernando Po. The pair arrived Santa Isabel on February 21, 1870, and that same evening "held their first service in the house of Mma Job, a freed slave and one of the original band of Christians there."

From Santa Isabel, the work of the Primitive Methodists spread into the neighbouring mainland. In 1893, Rev Robert Fairley, the Minister-in-charge at Santa Isabel toured the land around the Rio Del Rey River and visited a place called "Oron". In response to German unfriendliness in the Santa Isabel area, Fairley pressed on in his search for a more suitable site to establish a base for the work of the Mission. The move brought Fairley and his band to Archibong Town where the Missionaries were warmly received by the local chief, Prince Archibong. In December, 1893, the original group was joined by Rev J. Marcus Brown and Mr and Mrs Knox. Together, the missionaries built a day school, a Mission House and a Church. By 1895, membership of the congregation had

risen to 10 in the Church. The school and Sunday school registered 60 and 90 pupils respectively.

As promising as Archibong Town was, several developments made the move to the mainland inevitable. As reported by Boocock, early in 1899 "Ralph Moore, High Commissioner of Southern Nigeria, informed Rev. C.F. Gill and me that he believed Archibong Town would pass into German Territory, as the present boundary was unsatisfactory." The prospects of the German rule were disconcerting. The people were apparently unwilling to come under German rule. Worse still, at about the same time Prince Archibong died "with the result that a large number of his wives, slaves, and people moved out of town." Deserted as it then was, Archibong town held little attraction for the missionaries who "began to think of removal and began to seek new homes".<sup>5</sup> This search took Rev W.J. Ward and Boocock to many places but they "finally fixed upon the Oron District as being the most suitable". Consultations were held with the congregation which endorsed the planned move to Oron. Consequently, "some leading members of the church went to Afaha Eduok and bought a large site of ground, and also made an agreement with the chiefs of the town respecting their removal there." Thus began what was initially called the Idua Mission.<sup>6</sup>

Apparently, the Mission was enthusiastically welcomed by the local population. "This station is full of promise", it was reported, "because it affords such a good centre for evangelizing the heathen towns in the district. Our services here have been well maintained. We have had two baptisms and several have been restored to church membership."

From Afaha Eduok, the neighbouring village of Esuk Oron was attended to by one Mr Ekpesuk. Even more encouraging for the missionaries was the fact that

The king of Esuk Oron continues to regularly attend our services and the king of Afaha Eduok also frequently comes and does not now audibly express a desire for ruin as he used to do. One of the wives of the leading chief here wishes to be baptized and is only awaiting the permission of her husband.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the initial enthusiasm, doubts began to be expressed about the suitability of Afaha Eduok as a Mission Centre. Because of her location on a narrow creek, Afaha Eduok was not accessible except when the tide was high. Secondly, available land was limited and more could not be acquired without depriving the local population of their farmlands. Indeed, this fear was one of the reasons the chief of Afaha Eduok had been reluctant to welcome the missionaries. By 1902, however, the advantages of the neighbouring Esuk Oron over Afaha Eduok were clearly established after extensive surveys of the region by Boocock, Banham, and Ward.

Unlike Afaha Eduok, Esuk Oron, which was on the Cross River could be reached at any time by boat "whether the tide was low or high." Land was abundant. Esuk Oron was central enough for Mission work in the neighbouring villages which were more thickly populated. Besides, Esuk Oron could be reached by boat from James Town and Urua Eye, two other centres of intense missionary activities in the early years. By 1902, therefore, "a site on a very elevated position near to Esuk Oron" was chosen as "by far the best place in the whole district." The site, reported Boocock:

is 120 feet above the river commanding a fine view of the steamers as they pass up and down. It is about 20 acres in extent and is the most fertile of any land in the neighbourhood.

In yet another report, Boocock insisted that "Our Oron Mission premises occupy a site of nearly thirty acres on high ground, which affords a magnificent view of the district. Our mission is a striking landmark for observing mail and passenger steamers." He further observed that the work of the mission there would be helped by infrastructures newly established by government, including a post office, telegraph office, a Customs House and most importantly "an important Native Court, at which a Government White District Commissioner often presides." Besides, Esuk Oron was only "thirteen miles from the Government hospitals and doctors at Calabar, and a convenient calling place between all our other missions, thus affording an excellent place for teachers' and missionaries' conferences."

Construction work began on the new site in earnest. The Mission House was transferred, with the assistance of Lt. Buckland, Acting Chief of the Marine Department, from Archibong Town to Esuk Oron. Thus began the Oron Mission which was to remain the centre of the activities of the Primitive Methodists in Southern Nigeria until the 1920s.

From this centre, Mission work spread to the hinterland communities of Akani Obio, Eyo Bassey, Esin Ufot, Uya Oron, Udung Uko and Iquita. At Akani Obio, it was reported that the church meetings were "cheering" and that the people, "under the direction of Mr Daniel Henshaw, have built a church and provided timber for doors, windows, and seats." By 1906, they were "putting finishing touches to the church, ready for the opening." On their first visit to Eyo Bassey in 1903, the Missionaries were "received with considerable suspicion," although their service which was held after they talked with the chiefs, was "well attended". However,

A suggestion that we should start a mission in the town was not cordially received. The people said 'sun sun', that is, let us go softly, softly.<sup>9</sup>

This advice was heeded by the missionaries and soon, after they had won the confidence of the people, "we had regular service held in different parts of the town and conducted sometimes by the missionary, and at other times by our members, as many as four services being held at the same time." The climax of the activities in Eyo Bassey came when the village Chief attended the services at Oron after which "he opened his compound for regular service." A subsequent service held in the town attracted about 250 persons. A site was offered and a church erected.<sup>10</sup>

From the Esuk Oron centre, the missionaries went up the Cross River and established another beach head at Atabong on the Okobo Creek. All the meetings in Atabong were reportedly "well attended"; the Sunday services were "large and encouraging", the lowest number present being 64, the highest 201.<sup>11</sup> At Ekeya, however, the response was less enthusiastic, although a church was built. From Atabong also, under the energetic activities of one Eyo Ekanem, "good meetings" were held in the neighbouring villages of Nda, Oti-Oron, Ndung Ata, Obufi, Odu, Ube, Irua, and Eyo Nku Oron.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time as the mission station was being established at Esuk Oron, two other important stations were opened at James Town and Urua Eye under the charge of Rev. G.H. Hanney and his wife, Mary. A school and church were opened at James Town and Urua Eye. The successes achieved by 1909 were such that Rev Hanney and his wife were "cheered". Three new outstations were established, twenty-nine baptisms were reported, and membership increased at the rate of 18 members per year. From James Town, the work expanded to Enwang. As recorded by Boocock, when the missionaries first visited Enwang in about 1902, "at first the people seemed afraid of us, but by and by they drew near and we told them of the love of Jesus Christ and how he had told us to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." Unconvinced, the Enwang people turned down a request from Ward and Boocock to open a mission in their town. Not too long afterwards, however, the Enwang people "sent an urgent request for a school." A similar reception awaited Boocock on his first visit to Uda which by reputation, was said to be inhabited by people noted "for their cruelty in offering human sacrifices." Boocock himself was not favourably impressed by what he saw in the town. The village chief was equally depressed by Boocock and he was not "over courteous." The chief remained unconcerned when Boocock tried to talk to him about Jesus, insisting rather that Boocock should first "dash" him some rum and gin. The chief finally pleaded with Boocock to leave him and his people alone!<sup>12</sup>

The welcome was warmer in the Urua Eye area, however. According to Rev. Hanney, who resided there:

hardly a week passes without him receiving most pressing appeals to open a school and mission in this town, the people themselves promising to assist in building a school.<sup>13</sup>

In many regards, Urua Eye became the spring board for the expansion of mission activities into the hinterland. By 1907, stations were opened at Oruko, Akai Ati, Edikor, Atebi and Eyoabiasang. Some of the better known converts at Urua Eye were Chief Peter Otoyo and Thomas Ante Ufuo. Chief Peter Otoyo would later accompany Rev William Christie to open Mission Stations at Adadia and Ikot Ekpene while Thomas Ante Ufuo distinguished himself as an evangelist in Oron.

A misunderstanding between some Urua Eye people and a church agent in 1907 was instrumental in the spread of the missions to Oyubia in the hinterland. Interpreting the issue as a serious affront and an unfriendly act, the missionaries decided to look for a more congenial atmosphere for their work. Attempts to establish stations at Oruko and Eyulor were resisted by the people who scorned the missionaries as "evil men". The search took Rev. William Christie to Unyenge where he met with no greater success. Subsequently, Rev. Christie arrived at Oyubia to an enthusiastic reception from Chief Enyenihi Okwong, who entertained him and his party with fresh coconuts juice. Impressed by this reception, Rev. Christie held church services in Chief Enyenihi's compound. Subsequently, he requested for a site to build a school and a church. The family heads including Esu Ulian, Metebene Ate, Bassey Abia, Nkereuwen Esio, Edueno Anan, Ate Edohonsi and Chief Enyenihi Okwong consulted. Rather reluctantly, they agreed to welcome the missionaries in their midst. Chief Enyenihi's "Inam Shed" was made available to house the missionaries while Chief Ewa Oboho's compound was offered as a school. Among the earliest converts at Oyubia were Jacob Enyenihi, Sampson Okpu, Daniel Ene, George Okpu, Iquo Enyenihi, Atim Enyenihi, and Chief Peter Oquong. They were baptized at Uya Oron by Rev. Hanney in 1908 and had the first communion there in 1910. In 1913, Edwin Enyenihi and Jack Edet Udo were among those baptized. A church was subsequently built at Old Urue Enyenihi. During the tenure of Rev. William Norcross at Oyubia which began in 1913, the present church Bell was purchased at £14.<sup>14</sup>

From Oyubia, mission work spread to the surrounding villages of Okossi, Okuko, Uboro, Ofi, Nsie, and others. By about 1920, most villages in Oron were reached by Primitive Methodist Missions either from Oron Town, Oyubia, Udesi, Ebughu or Enwang. The

predominance of the Methodists in Oron over other missions dates back to the evangelical zeal and untiring energies exhibited by the early missionaries in the area. Among the Africans who distinguished themselves in this early phase was John Enang Gill who, after being ordained Native Teaching Evangelist in 1902, reportedly, rendered "signal service as schoolmaster" and evangelist at James Town. On why he chose to devote his life to evangelical work, John Gill explained that

When Rev. T. Stone was the missionary, I remember him saying that the reason why he and others came as missionaries to Africa was the command of Jesus Christ to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. I then felt that if white men would come all the way from England to preach the gospel to us, I should like to preach the gospel to my fellow countrymen when I became old enough.<sup>15</sup>

At the Oyubia centre, Efiang Oyo Ekpo not only distinguished himself as "an ideal village teacher" but also "spent the evenings in prayer meetings. He was fond of open air meetings. We usually conducted these meetings at different villages in Oron." Jacob Enyenihi helped establish mission work at Ikpe and Eweme, while Edwin Enyenihi did the same at Mbokpu Uko Akai, Ukuda and Nsie. James Iyanam and Toyo Otoyoy worked at Okuko while Abraham Eto and Peter Oquong preached at Oruko and Ediko. It was from the Oron district that Methodist Missionary work later spread to Nsit and Ikot Ekpene.

The spread of the Methodist mission in Oron, however, was not without major problems. The mission represented an intrusion of foreign values into the Oron area and these were not to be accepted lightly. First and foremost was the fact that the missionaries were often identified by the Oron people with their more bellicose political and administrative cousins and thus suspect. In 1904, Boocock explained that "when we first enter a neighbourhood we have often to overcome prejudices on account of our colour. Many of the native chiefs view with apprehension and dislike the growing power of the government, because they think it means the waning of their own power." In the circumstance, many chiefs tried to dissuade their people from joining the missions pointing out that "if the white man comes he will take their country, their cattle, their goats, and perhaps even them as well, and that the best they can do is to oppose or evade all white men." It was not until the missionaries lived long enough among the local population and gained their confidence that this problem diminished.<sup>16</sup>

Equally troublesome was the issue of domestic slavery. Although slavery had been declared illegal, it continued. Slaves, mainly Ibibio, were used to work farms and the fishing canoes. It was the usual practice of the owners to send their slaves "on Sundays to the most distant farms and trading stations so as to be beyond the reach of any church or ser-

vices." Slaves were used as porters in the gin, rum, oil and kernel trade. Attempts by the missionaries to preach against domestic slavery usually brought them into collision with the slave owners, usually the village chiefs.

Thirdly, there was the even more troublesome practice of polygamy. Many missionaries shared Boocock's view that "polygamy is responsible for debarring many Africans from deciding to serve Christ." Boocock was in fact convinced that if the church advocated and sanctioned polygamy "we should doubtless have 20 professing christians, where we now have one." He correctly perceived that "plurality of wives in the mind of the African signifies wealth, position and power." A man with many wives, he continued, was regarded as belonging to the aristocracy. Besides, "he has people at his command to paddle the canoes, work the farms, and be ready at his beck and call." This being the case, when a chief was called upon to denounce polygamy, he felt he was being "called upon to make an incalculable sacrifice." Missionary preachments on and denunciations of the subject of polygamy thus alienated many Oron people from their missions.

Related to the above was the mission's attempt to protect women from what they perceived as the cruelties of their husbands. This was first noticed in Archibong Town where Prince Archibong, a convert "would come to church himself with all the pomp imaginable but he would not allow one of his forty wives to come for fear, as he said, some men may look my wives." Clearly missionary preachings about the equality of sexes made no impression whatsoever on the Oron converts. Wives were thus frequently prevented from going to church and whipped if they persisted in doing so. "In the early days of our mission," Boocock recalled in 1904, "women were flogged for the most trifling offences." He swore that he had seen "a poor woman whose back was covered with wounds, and who had received forty-four strokes." This, he observed, "was not an uncommon practice."<sup>17</sup>

An important area of conflict was what the missionaries described as the superstitions of the people. In 1894, the Oron people were described as "the hardest-hearted, most murderous lot of people to be found in that country." This description arose from the people's practice, based on thier traditional religious beliefs, of murdering all twin children and banishing twin mothers from society. There was also the practice of trial by ordeal which the missionaries described as "another horrible custom of the natives." There was the even more troublesome belief in "juju". "The word 'Juju' ", Boocock told his audience in England in 1904, "stands for very much in their imagination. It may be associated with wood, iron, wires, bones, feathers, poison, goods, medicine, curses,

blessings, and a host of other things both seen and unseen." The power of "Juju" which made it a worthy competition for the Christian God was demonstrated in the fact that:

if a person wants to preserve his yams he puts a juju at the entrance of his farm. If he wants to make sure no one will take the sticks for his yams, or poles from his house, he will attach a juju to them. Juju medicine applied in a certain way to particular persons is supposed to make them immune to poison and death. Juju medicine buried a few inches in the road is supposed to have the power to do terrible injury to those for whom it is intended, if they should pass that way. Juju poison placed in bush is supposed to have the power to poison the person for whom it is intended even if he never sees or tastes it.<sup>18</sup>

So ubiquitous and all pervading was the power of "juju" in the world of the Oron man that he needed real confirmation of the superiority of the power of the new religion before he could abandon his time honoured practices. The missionaries were equally vociferous in their denunciation of such traditional social institutions as Ekpe, which Ward described as "a glorification of the devil," *Nkugho* which they regarded as "heathen" and wasteful, and *otune*. Particularly irksome for the missionaries was the staging of *Ekpo* plays on Sundays. They were compelled to inform the Oron chiefs that "the Lord's Day (Sunday) shall be observed as a day of rest, and neither egbo nor any other heathen practice shall be allowed to flagrantly oppose the mission or its staff". This of course fell largely on deaf ears. The denunciation of these institutions led many would be converts to regard white Christianity as threatening the world they knew. It was against these odds that the missionaries had to battle.<sup>19</sup>

In her confrontation with the traditional Oron world, however, Christianity could be said to have had some advantages. Apart from the obvious zeal and unflagging devotion of the missionaries and their African wards, there was the effective propaganda directed against the Oron gods. Chief O.E. Isong, who grew up under this atmosphere, recalls that the Primitive Methodists told the Oron people that if they continued to worship their principal deities, God Almighty would send fire to consume the whole community. In time, the missionaries came to sound like "Sons of God" and were so believed. Since the Oron man believed in the same Great God, he was soon persuaded that the Christian message could just be true! Many joined out of fear of possible destruction.<sup>20</sup> This fear was compounded when the missionaries demonstrated, in time, their ability to enter sacred groves and destroy principal Oron deities and come out alive! Some communities deliberately gave the missionaries sacred farmland in the hope that they would be struck dead. None of these happened, however, thus confirming, in the mind of Oron people, the superiority of the white man's God. With their traditional open

mindedness towards borrowing the "gods of the stronger people", many Oron people flocked to the Methodist missions. However, by far the most effective instrument in winning most Oron people to the mission side was the schools the missions patronized and established in the various villages. This development is described below.

By the 1920s, Methodist Missions were established all over Oron land. As early as 1910, the white missionaries were already congratulating themselves in their ability to create in Oron "some of the finest Christians" they have ever seen. These Oron Christians, according to Boocock, though unmercifully persecuted and put through the fires and even "the lions' dens", were "most cheerfully and enthusiastically devoting their time and energy to the spread of the Gospel among their neighbours, cheerfully walking out to heathen towns in the district, and conducting themselves or assisting the missionary to conduct open air services." George Hanney was no less impressed. "The Gospel," he reported, was "winning its way to the hearts of the people. . . Our meetings are well attended." The Annual Report for 1910 observed that "the Oron station continues to grow. The staff find it impossible to meet the demand of the people for schools and teachers." Even the rather austere Thomas W. Hancox concluded that "it is impossible to gauge results by statistics, but the fact that there has been a large increase in membership, in spite of lapses, is a significant fact. We firmly believe that there has been a decided advance made towards a higher ethical standard of life and conduct."<sup>21</sup>

In our present context, however, the most significant effect of the work of the Methodist Mission was that it pulled villages together. In 1904 for example, the missions in Oron were grouped into three central missions, each with a specific number of outstations attached to it. There was the James Town Mission with Ibaka, Enwang, Ebughu and Ikot Ntika; the Urua Eye Mission had Uda, Oruko, Akai Ati, Edikor, Atebi and Eyoabiasang as outstations; and the Oron mission had Afaha Eduok, Eyo Bassey, Uboro, and Okobo Creek as outstations. When the circuit system was adopted, Oron was divided into three circuits, namely, Ebughu, Oron and Oyubia. Villages in these circuits often worshipped together; they pulled their resources to build each other's churches; they were usually baptized centrally together and attended communion services at a common location. The Methodist missions thus became major fora for interactions of Oron people in their Class Meetings, Leaders' Meetings, Church Committee Meetings, Circuit Quarterly Meetings, and District Synods etc. The mission schools, as we shall see below, played a

similar role. The Primitive Methodists, though clearly dominant, were, however, not the only mission that operated in Oron.

The Roman Catholics were the next missions to arrive in the Oron area. The presence of the Catholics in Ekeya Okobo had been reported by George Hanney as early as 1906. Indeed, Hanney blamed the poor performance of the Primitive Methodists in Ekeya on "the presence of the Roman Catholics whose methods, especially, with regard to the drink questions" were apparently more acceptable to the people of the town. From Ekeya, the Catholic missions spread their influence to Atabong where they won strong support of one Okon Edem Ekung who gave them land to build a church. The next stations was opened at Ate and Ebughu. By 1918, the Catholics arrived at Esin Ufot and set up a temporary mission near Chief John Anwana Esin's compound. By 1926, they set up their headquarters at Obot Father, about one and a half kilometres from Esin Ufot. From these bases Catholic activities spread to places like Udung Uko, Oruko and Nsie. In 1926, Father Eknabel arrived as the first priest in Oron and soon earned good reputation as "the father of all children." It was during his term that a mission house was constructed at Esin Ufot. Other Reverend Fathers who endeared themselves to Oron people after the departure of Father Eknabel in 1929 were F. Kirchner, J.J. Meehan, P. Biechy, J.S. Hanson and Thomas Mycttrick.

The Presbyterians were the next to arrive in about 1933. Rev. Okon Effiong from Henshaw Town, Calabar, is credited with the introduction of the mission. Unfortunately, however, the Presbyterians arrived when so much of Oron had been claimed by the Methodists, and to a lesser extent, the Catholics. Consequently, the Church never expanded beyond its base in Oron Town where it served the "stranger" elements, mainly Igbo, Efik, Ibibio traders with a sprinkling of Oron people. Other churches that claimed adherents in the Oron area from 1938 were Apostolic, Mount Zion, Christ Church and much later the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star. To all intents and purposes, however, Oron remained a preserve of the Primitive Methodists who still dominate the religious sphere in the area.

The dominance of the Methodists in Oron meant that the vicious forms of divisiveness associated with missionary scramble for spheres of influences in other parts of Nigeria were not very pronounced. Needless to say, each of the denominations, especially the Methodists and the Catholics, tried to instill into their congregations the idea that theirs was the only acceptable Christian way. Sometimes, also, non-Methodist children would not be admitted into Methodist schools. Similarly, Catholics preferred to patronize their Catholic hospital at Anua instead

of the nearer Methodist hospital at Iquita because they did not "feel very comfortable. . . and had no confidence in either the people or the medicine" in the Methodist hospital.<sup>22</sup> However, the number of villages where there was direct competition between the Catholics and the Methodists were so few that this potentially disintegrating phenomenon was kept to the very minimum. Unlike in most other places, therefore, Christian missionary activities in Oron, which involved principally the Primitive Methodist Mission, tended to be a cohesive and integrative force.

### **The Missions and Western Education**

Until 1949 when two Native Administration schools were established at Okobo and Oruko, Christian missions monopolized western education in the Oron region. Indeed, as pointed out by W.J. Ward, "every established mission had at least three clearly defined departments of service — the educational, the medical and the definitely religious." However, as E.A. Ayandele has aptly insisted, the schools built by the missionaries were established primarily with the sole purpose of producing catechists, deacons and priests. In the Oron region, one of the early advocates of mission education, Nathaniel Boocock, was insistent that "while a general education be given which may include instruction in carpentry and other useful trades, the pre-eminent aim of the masters shall be to train the youths with a view to their becoming Native Teaching Evangelists."<sup>23</sup> From the beginning, therefore, education was seen as a necessary adjunct to christianization. Thus, wherever the missionaries arrived in the early years, they opened a church and a school, one building almost always serving both purposes.

Even if the missionaries had not planned it that way, they would have been forced to do so by the attitude and demands of their Oron converts. As we have seen already, the Oron people, like their counterparts in Old Calabar before them, appeared to have been more interested in the concrete benefits of Christian missions than in their preachments about "their God". This was natural because, as pointed out earlier, the idea of a Supreme God was not new to the Oron people! Thus, whenever requests were made to missionaries, these were usually more for teachers than for preachers, although the two were, more often than not, one and the same person. Chief A.M.E. Mba has rightly observed that, "there was no distinction between a school and a church. When a person attended a school, he was a church-man."<sup>24</sup> Reporting from Oron in 1905, Rev Banham wrote that the people of Oron "are anxious to have a native agent so that the class meetings and other services can be more efficiently conducted, also to hold a school for the children." There is little doubt

that "the great desire" of the Oron converts, initially, was "to know book" rather than learn about "spiritual things" which many felt they already knew! Indeed, as the missionaries soon found out, establishment of a village school was indispensable for any effective work in that village. Besides, the benefits of education had already been demonstrated in Oron before the arrival of the missionaries. Chiefs William Umo and Johnson Aya of Ebughu reportedly had learnt to read and write English through their trade contacts. Similarly, John Anwana Esin, Edet Mansong, James Enyekung and Moses Une of Esuk Oron, Samson Enyung, Efa Bassey of Ibaka, and Etim Ebito of Idua Esit Edek were already able to read the Efik Bible. In the circumstance the demand for schools by the villages in Oron could not be suppressed.

Thus, between 1904 and 1905, village schools sprang up around the mission stations at Ibaka, Udesi Isong Inyang and Akai Ati. By 1910, most of the villages along the Oron-Eket road had village schools operating from their mission churches. Village schools were established in such places as Eyo Bassey, Ebughu, Enwang, Udung Uko, Nsie, Offi etc. By 1920, most of the prominent villages in Oron had village schools.

A most important milestone in the history of education in Oron occurred in September, 1905. From the beginning of their work in the Oron district, the Primitive Methodists had been confronted with some problems, the most acute of which were finance and adequate personnel to service their expanding enterprise. In dealing with the personnel problem, the Primitive Methodists seemed to have accepted the proposals set out by Mackay, veteran C.M.S. Missionary in Uganda in the 1870s. In answer to the question "How, then, is Africa to be christianized," Mackay had proposed that "the Agency by which alone, we can Christianize Africa, is the African himself, but he must first be trained to that work by the European in Africa." Mackay's proposal was particularly attractive to the Primitive Methodists because, as Boocock pointed out, "our funds are already severely taxed, and will not admit of supporting few, if any, white missionaries even if these could be obtained." Convinced about the soundness of Mackay's judgement, the Primitive Methodists set out to put it into practice in their enterprise in Southern Nigeria with Oron as the main base.

In his Report to the Executive Committee of the Home Mission in 1904, Rev Nathaniel Boocock proposed that:

A Training Institute be erected at Oron where we can receive boarders from Our Missions in Fernando Po and also the most promising youths from our Mission schools on the Mainland.<sup>25</sup>

For the above proposal to be implemented, he suggested that "a properly

certificated English School master be appointed — Ministerial or lay — who has a deep passion for the spiritual welfare of young people, and who will be prepared to assist in any way he can to extend our masters kingdom." Other items contained in the proposal were facilities to be provided such as dormitory, dry room and mess room, kitchen, latrine and a school block, all with specific dimensions. Lastly, he suggested a boarding fee of "£5, with a raise of £1 per year."

As he explained to an audience in Birmingham on June 15, 1904, Boocock's proposal for a Training Institute at Oron was motivated by several things. First was the competition offered by the Roman Catholics who had opened schools in Fernando Po. Although Boocock was not favourably impressed by the quality of the Catholic schools, whose "most admired pupil" could not even "pass the 3rd standard," he was worried by the fact that the "exceptionally cheap rates" charged by the Catholic schools was attracting "some of our young people" who have entered them and "have come out more or less influenced by the Roman Catholic dogmas which they have been taught, dogmas which . . . have not been conducive to make them loyal Primitive Methodists." The situation was clearly intolerable to Boocock, a fanatical Primitive Methodist.<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, Boocock was worried by the fact that, although the mission had established several elementary schools which were "doing good work," it was not possible to "do full justice to the most advanced pupils" since attendance at the village schools were irregular. What was required, he argued, was "an institution with a properly qualified master who had a deep interest in young people." Such an institution "would enable us to select the most promising pupils from our elementary schools, and give them personal and suitable tuition." He then alluded to the incessant requests from numerous villages for schools — and concluded that all these pointed to "the necessity of native agents, for without them we shall be long before we can respond to the pressing calls for help." He added, however, that to obtain such agents:

We shall have to train them, and train them carefully and long, and I know of no better means of doing so than by the wise use of such a training institution as I am advocating.<sup>27</sup>

In response to those who were advocating that the "Native Agents" could be trained in the Mission Institution already established in Wales, Boocock retorted that such a proposal would be very expensive. Worse still, "in many instances, the [African] lads who come to England have been more impressed with the wickedness which is everywhere apparent, than with righteousness which alas! is all too rare." Besides, such sur-

jour in England often alienated the trained youths from their people since they often tended to forget "their native languages." Training the agent in the environment where they were to work, he insisted, had the advantage of enabling the boys "use the language which the native speaks," and observe at first hand the habits of the local population, their characteristics and where their sympathies are most likely to be intensified. Also, training the child in the locality where the parents reside would diminish the anxiety of such parents about their children when they were away in England. On why he preferred Oron, Boocock pointed out that "Oron is more suitable than Jamestown and Urua Eye because the site there is much more elevated and therefore more healthy; much nearer to Old Calabar and therefore more easily within reach of medical assistance in case of severe sickness."<sup>28</sup> The primary object of the institute, Boocock assured the Conference:

will not only be to give a good general education including in many instances some technical instruction, but to aim at giving definite religious training with a view to making out of our most promising youths, pupil teachers, school masters, native teaching evangelists and missionaries."<sup>29</sup>

Boocock's appeals won the sympathetic attention of his audience. A resolution was adopted. Four hundred pounds was collected on the spot. The Young Christian Endeavour in England, convinced that this was to benefit the youth of Africa, raised one thousand one hundred and eleven pounds (£1,111) towards the project. Rev W.J. Ward was appointed to start the school and he arrived Oron in August, 1905. The school opened formally on September 18, 1905 with 16 pupils and Efa Ekpesuk from Archibong Town assisting W.J. Ward, as master. By the end of the first term, the number enrolled rose to 18. Thus began the Oron Native Training Institute, soon shortened to Oron Institute.

The impact the school was to make on Oron and the surrounding communities was clearly noticeable in the early years. As early as 1906, the buildings in the Institute, "a classroom, a dormitory and a third building which comprises a common room and a day room" were described as "all that can be desired." The pupils were reportedly doing well: "Four are capable of meeting most of the requirements of Standard IV (English Code), indeed, one of them is pretty well acquainted with the work of the next class." More importantly:

All the pupils take a more or less active part in the evangelization of the native towns in the neighbourhood on Sundays. One boy, William M. Bassey starts away about six a.m. accompanied by a smaller boy to hold service at a place nine miles distant and rejoicing in the name of Okukudung [Udung Uko]. It was my pleasure to be present one Sunday morning, and I noted with intense gratification, the splendid congregation he has gathered together.<sup>30</sup>

In that same year, the unifying character of the school was indicated in the origins of the pupils enrolled. The 24 boarders and 4 day pupils were drawn from Fernando Po, Urua Eye, Jamestown, Esuk Oron, Akani Obio and Calabar. By 1910, therefore, it was possible to conclude that the school was "full" and "helping to produce a fussion of tribes that is full of promise."

It is not intended here to retell the fascinating story of the development of the Oron Institute into the Methodist Boys' High School, Oron, of today. That story has been narrated in great detail elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> The pattern which had been established of drawing pupils from a wide spectrum of the Nigerian community was maintained throughout. In 1917, for example, the 60 students in the school came from Oron, Oyubia, Adadia, Ikot Ekpene, Bende, and Ovim. The picture had not changed appreciably by 1965. In that year, the school had 38 Annang, 58 Igbo, 6 Efik, 193 Oronians, 4 Ijaw, and 6 Ogonis among its population. A one-time principal of the school, Rev. S.K. Okpo, has aptly remarked that "this admixture of people made for healthy growth." In the 1930s the school matured into a secondary school and entered students for the first time for the school certificate examination in 1944. It finally came "of age", to borrow the apt phrase of the man who completely transformed the school as Principal, Rev S.K. Okpo, in the 1956-1966 period. The contribution of the school, both as Oron Institute and Boys' High School, to the manpower development in Oron is better appreciated when it is recalled that the list of its products reads more like "a who is who" in Oron.

Another significant step in the educational development of Oron was taken by the Primitive Methodists when they established the Girls' Institute at Jamestown in 1909 under Rev. Hanney's wife, Mary. It was initially set up to improve the character and domestic abilities of house wives and other girls. As described by G.S. Fisher, the matron in 1910, "valuable training" was given "in every branch of household duties". The school curriculum included hygiene, needlework, Bible lessons, Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, general knowledge talks, English and Efik grammar, and physical education.

Satisfactory progress was made right from the start. The Annual Report for 1910 concluded that "the first year's working of the Native Girls' Institute, Jamestown, had been marked by cheering success. There is real improvement in the manners and morals of the girls. They show a keen interest in their studies and the ideal of Christian domesticity is being approached." The Matron of the institute, G.S. Fisher, reported in the same year that "this thriving Institution bids fair to a glorious future. As yet the elementary stages are still with us, but in view of successes

already achieved the outlook is rich with promise." Among the achievements she spotlighted were "freedom from temptation and impure atmosphere", "gentility and virtue" which were "crushing out heathenist tendencies", and improvement in personal and house hold hygiene. In a show of self congratulation in which the early missionaries occasionally indulged, Fisher concluded:

Considering the squalor of their former conditions, this education is important. The new environment will make a marked diversion from old filthy habits. Growing interest is manifested, the joy of their initiation into the domestic arts is a pleasing feature, peculiar gesticulations express their pleasure and surprise. Medical work is also claiming attention; we hope to extend to all opportunities for practical nursing.<sup>32</sup>

Be that as it may, the Institute was an important training ground for Oron girls. It's success was limited by the expected opposition of parents to the education of their female children. Most parents were convinced that sending their daughters through the fattening house which terminated with the *Nkuoho* outing was better preparation for ultimate marriage which they were convinced was the destined fate of their daughters. Gradually, however, some parents like Chief J.A. Esin, began to advocate female education and sent their daughters to be trained.

When Mary Hanney died, the Girls' Institute was in 1927, moved to Eyo Basse, which was nearer to the Mission station at Esuk Oron and renamed Mary Hanney Memorial School. Emphasis continued to be on training in the domestic arts. By 1945, there were 119 pupils on roll, 90 of whom were boarders. These, as in the case of Boys' High School, were drawn from all areas of Oron and the entire Eastern Nigerian area. By 1943, it was possible to observe that "the point about this school is that it seems to have broken the prejudice against girl's education in Oron." Besides, the standard of teaching under the white lady teacher was so high that the school attracted students from far and wide.<sup>33</sup> By 1961, Mary Hanney was converted into a secondary school for girls. The sustained support of the Okobo/Oron County Council and the inspiration of Chiefs O.E. Isong, A.M.E. Mba, O.N. Okung, and Rev. S.K. Okpo in this transformation have been widely acknowledged. At all events, Mary Hanney was a major milestone in the advancement of western education in Oron.

Other educational activities of the Primitive Methodists which had a unifying influence in Oron were the establishment of Central and group schools. The first, and for some time, the major Central school was that opened at Oyubia in 1921 with Rev Thomas J. Mckenzie as Manager and Teacher Jack Edet Udo as first Headmaster. Until the 1950s, Oyubia was

the main feeder school for pupils who were admitted into the Boys' High School, Oron. Like the later, the school drew its population from all of Oron and beyond, thus serving also to unify the group. By the 1930s another central school was opened at Ebughu. The Group schools established in such places as Okuko, Nsie, Udesi, Osu Offi, Unyenge, and Oruko played a similar role. Typically, a group school was jointly financed and provided for by a number of neighbouring villages regardless of clan affiliations. Okuko Group school, for example, was supported by the villages of Mbokpu Uko Akai and Mbokpu Eyima (Uquong); Oyoku Ibighi, Okuko, and Uya Oron (Ibighi); Uboro Oro (Okpo), Elei and Ibotong Nsie (Ebughu); and Umume (Okiuso). Indeed, Rev S.K. Okpo recalls that "one great advantage [of the Group Schools] was bringing many villages together for a common purpose. This led to common understanding e.g. some villages which were always at daggers drawn came to work together amicably." The Group schools thus served as major foci of associations for the different groups in Oron. This was particularly so because the Central schools and most of the Group schools had boarding facilities which enabled them to draw pupils from far and wide.<sup>34</sup>

One problem that confronted the Methodist schools was shortage of trained teachers. The first set of teachers came from Calabar and among these were Ayong Glover, Efa Ekpesuk, and B.N.E. Ukpe. In the 1920s some Oron sons, notable among whom were Edet Ekpo, J.E. Udo, and A.M.E. Mba were trained at Hope Waddell in Calabar. When Uzuakoli was opened in 1927, a number of teachers were also trained there. Teachers for the Girls' School were also trained at the Ederly Memorial Girls' School, Calabar. By the 1940s, however, there was a felt need to establish a Methodist Teacher Training Institution, especially for girls. A Methodist Women Elementary Training Centre was opened opposite Mary Hanney. In 1961, the Centre was moved to Uya Oron and built on land donated by Chief O.U. Akan. It soon matured into a Women Training Centre which prepared student teachers for the Grade Two Teachers' Certificate examination. Miss Edna Scott, "a capable and motherly missionary," is credited with establishing the school at its new site on solid foundations.

An important dimension to these educational activities of the Primitive Methodist Mission was the involvement of Oron sons in opening and staffing schools in the Ibibio and Annang hinterland. In 1929, for example, Edet Ekpo headed the Central School at Ikot Ekpene; Bassey Otto helped to found the Methodist Central School, Obot Atan. J.E. Udo, A.M.E. Mba, O.N. Okung, E.I. Nkereuwem, O.J. Eminue,

B.E. Usip and E.J. Ndekhehe continued with this tradition in the 1940s and 1950s. This involvement in Ibibio and Annang land, one informant recalls, helped to broaden the horizon of the Oron people quite early in the twentieth century and promoted interactions between Oron and her Ibibio neighbours to the west.<sup>35</sup>

The Methodists, however, were not the only Missions to open schools in Oron in the colonial period. The Roman Catholics opened such primary schools as St. Marks (1921) and Convent in Oron Town. The Catholic primary schools also included St. Michael's (Edikor); St. Jude's (Udung Uwe); St. Andrew's (Oti-Oron) and St. Joseph's (Ebighi Anwa Ikpi). In an effort to produce teachers for their schools, the Catholic Mission established a T.T.C. in Oron Town which served that purpose until it was merged with the T.T.C. at Ifuho in 1974. Finally, in 1963, the Catholic Mission opened the St. Vincent Secondary School at Oti Oron.

The last Mission to open a secondary school in Oron was the African Christian Schools Foundation. Apparently, immediately after the Civil War, the people of Oyubia had felt the need for an institution of higher learning there. After a number of inquiries, the Church of Christ with which a prominent Oyubia son in the United States, Eno Otoy, was intimately connected responded positively in 1970. The letter read:

Of course our interest is in the area of education — to be sure, a peculiar kind of education. This is where the Bible is taught every day, and where God is worshipped and honoured as a supreme Being of the Universe. We want all men to know His Word which tells us of His plan of salvation. In addition, we not only are anxious to see every man of the world be able to make a life but also a living. It is for this reason that we do not object to training people to work with their hands in those things which are honourable.<sup>36</sup>

The re-action of the Oyubia community was prompt. Land was donated. The neighbouring villages of Ibotong, Okossi and Okuko joined in clearing the bush and providing sand and water. The Ibighi Clan, under their Clan head, Chief O.U. Akan, made similar contributions. By March, 1971, amidst great pomp and pageantry, the Christian Technical Secondary School, Oyubia was formally opened with Eno Otoy as Principal and 68 boys and 3 girls as pupils.

The impression should not be given, however, that the Oron people welcomed missionary western education without resistance. Some parents saw in the schools a threat to their world and diversion of needed labour from farming, fishing and trading. They thus frequently withdrew their children from school to attend to "these more important tasks." The missionaries reacted, in face of stiff opposition, to board the pupils. Some Oron people, especially chiefs, resented the association of education with Christian evangelization. Prominent village chiefs,

especially those who wanted their first sons to succeed them as *Oku Olughu*, were unimpressed by the christian promise of "a new life in Heaven", through the agency of their schools. As one informant recalled:

he did not start schooling in time because as the first son of a chief, it was thought that the right place for him was home, to appease *Oluhoo* when the time came and to learn to take charge of other responsibilities which would be incumbent on him as a chief.<sup>37</sup>

As we have seen, the education of girls was specially resisted for fear that education would spoil their chances for marriage! On their part, many children did not fancy a system which took them away from the *Otune*, *Mbaya* and *Ekpo* circuit!

With time, however, as the benefits of schooling began to be seen in the form of local interpreters, court clerks and messengers, and above all, the village teacher, reluctance yielded place to enthusiasm. Chief Jack Edet Udo, one of the earliest beneficiaries of the new system, described a re-action which soon became typical. He wrote:

One morning in 1908, it was rumoured that the school (at Oyubia) was opened at Chief Ewa, that is Chief Enene Obobo's compound. All the village lads and some people who were curious went there. One could hear the din of the alphabet repeated after the teacher at a distance. All the school boys congregated at Ete Ewa's reception room where the lessons were taught. . . . At this time, some boys from different villages came to Oyubia school amongst whom was Ben Onobo of Eyulor.<sup>38</sup>

Clearly, by the late 1930s education had caught on in Oron. Villages scrambled for schools to be opened in their midst. Parents pledged their land and other belongings to pay the meagre fees then charged. Village Unions pulled their resources together to send their brightest children to secondary schools, especially, the Methodist Boys' High School which soon earned the name *Okpono Ufok Nwed*. The Oron Union soon began a loan scheme to help the bright but needy. And the Okobo/Oron County Council, despite charges of corruption levelled against several of its members, floated a scholarship scheme to help quench what had become the insatiable thirst of the Oron people for education by the 1950s. After the Civil War, this same enthusiasm for education led to the establishment of many community secondary schools in places like Okobodi, Ebughu, Odobo, Udung Uko, Okuko, Obufi, Nnung Atai, Oruko, Udesi and Okossi. On its part, the Oron Development Union sponsored the opening of the Ukpabang Community Secondary School, Enwang and the Union Secondary School, Nsie. The whole-hearted acceptance of education by the Oron people as the surest vehicle for their development and survival is, perhaps, one of the greatest commentaries on the success

of the missionaries who laboured with singular devotion and commitment in rather trying circumstances to convince them of the benefits of western education, albeit with a Christian face!

In our present context, however, the real significance of the work of the missions in both their church and the schools was that these activities helped to unify the Oron people more and more. It is a measure of their success in this regard that even up to now the church is invited to mediate in land and other disputes involving villages of different clans and groups. Church and school activities also served to promote interaction between the Oron people and their neighbours. In many respects, therefore, the church complemented the other activities which were promoted by the agents of the colonial administration which tended to unify the various groups in Oron. This is an aspect of mission work which has not always been stressed.

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## Notes

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- 1 "Extracts from Annual Report Year Ended March 1910 and Annual Meeting May 1910" in John Boocock's Notes, Oron Institute, Mss.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 "Speech on Oyubia Education Day," December 23, 1966, p. 8.
- 4 For Details see, "The Coming of the Primitive Methodist Missionaries" in S.K. Okpo, *A Brief History of Methodist Boys' High School Oron* (1980), pp. 4-5 and Rev A.A. Essiet, "Concise History of Methodist Church in Calabar," typescript, p. 1.
- 5 *Report of Primitive Methodist Missions, Southern Nigeria by Nathaniel Boocock, March, 1904 to The Executive Committee, Primitive Methodist Missionary Society*, p. 1.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Report of the Idua Mission, West Africa*, December 1, 1903.
- 8 *Report of Primitive Methodist Missions, op. cit.*
- 9 Rev Boocock, Conference Speech, Birmingham, June 15, 1904, "The Training Institute at Oron, Southern Nigerian, West Africa."
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 George H. Hanney, "Oron" in *Herald*, September, 1906.
- 12 Boocock, Conference Speech, *op. cit.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 For details see S.K. Okpo, "The Planting of Christianity at Oyubia", June 10, 1972.
- 15 Quoted in Boocock, "Conference Speech", p. 8.
- 16 Annual Meeting, May 10th, 1904, "Address by Rev. N. Boocock."
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Ward, *In and Around Oron Country*, pp. 42, 74.
- 20 Interview with Chief O.E. Isong.
- 21 These viewpoints are contained in *Boocock Notes*.
- 22 For details of this phenomenon, See E.A. Udo, "Missionary Sramble for Spheres of Influence in Eastern Nigeria, 1900-1952," *Ikenga: Journal of African Studies*, 1, No. 2 (July, 1972).
- 23 Boocock, "Report of the Primitive Methodist Mission", *op. cit.*, For a detailed examination of this problem, see E.A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria* (London, 1966), and J.F.A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in the Making of Nigeria, 1841-1891* (London, 1965).

- 24 A.M.E. Mba, "The Management as well as Curriculum Objectives and Implementation Including Enforcement of Discipline in Order to Achieve a High Standard of Education in Oyubia Central School between 1921 and 1950", in I.U. Iyanam, ed., *Oyubia Central School Diamond Jubilee (1981) Selected Essays on the History of Education in Oron* (1981), p. 15.
- 25 *Report of Primitive Methodist Missions, op. cit.*
- 26 "Conference Speech, Birmingham", *op. cit.*
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Ward, "Oron Training Institute" in the *Herald*, Feb., 1906.
- 31 See S.K. Okpo, *A Brief History of Methodist Boys' High School, Oron*, (1980).
- 32 See Annual Report for the Year Ended March, 1910 and Annual Meeting, May, 1910.
- 33 See DPE 38/16 Vol.1 MINED 6/1/131, p. 79.
- 34 On the Oyubia Institute see, Iyanam, *Selected Essays on the History of Education in Oron with Particular Reference to Oyubia Central School* cited earlier.
- 35 These comments are made in a correspondence from Rev S.K. Okpo to the author, dated September 3, 1984.
- 36 Cited in Iyanam, *Selected Essays*, p. 7.
- 37 Interview with Chief Umium Esebre, conducted by Ibia E. Ibia, December 24, 1983.
- 38 J.E. Udo, "Speech on Oyubia Education Day," December 23, 1966.

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## The Oron Union, 1925 — 1983\*

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**T**HE Oron Development Union (ODU) was founded on the 23rd day of May, 1925. Then known as the Oron Union, it came into existence for the unity, creative development, love and progress of the Oron people. Its place as an all-embracing, non-sectarian and supreme organization of the Oron people is not in doubt. Designed to foster mutual co-existence, provide an institutional framework for the cultural development of the Oron people and to serve as a meaningful institution for the co-ordination of structural (communal or non-governmental) development efforts embarked upon by the Oron people, its membership, from the beginning, was open to all people of Oron descent. The Union was also to represent the Oro Ukpabang Community in its relationship with the government and its functionaries.

Reports have it that "in the 1920s social cohesion and national consciousness were increasing in Efik and Ibibio lands. There was some fear of some form of aggression from our neighbours. It therefore became necessary for Oron people to organise a unifying force co-ordinating social cohesion in Oron against any form of outside aggression." This was the genesis of thinking in the direction of the formation of the Oron Union.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, on the 26th of April, 1925, Chief John Anwana Esin, Chief Ekpu Edubio Odoro and the then Mr O.E. Isong got together "to discuss

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\*A substantial portion of this chapter was drafted initially by Chief I.U. Iyanam, Permanent Secretary in the Cross River State Civil Service who served as the Secretary-General of the Oron Union in the 1960s.

matters of mutual interest and concerning Oron in general." The result of their mutual discussion was the meeting, well attended, and held in Chief Esin's house on 23rd May 1925. This date marks the effective inauguration of the Oron Union.

The aims of the Union at its inception which have remained with minor modifications to this day, were:

- (i) To maintain and protect the unity of Oron, to create better understanding among the Oron people and loyalty to the fatherland, and so to ensure for Oron a place in the affairs and institutions of Nigeria.
- (ii) To assist in the creative development of Oron whether religiously, culturally, educationally, economically, socially as a means of the self-determination of the Oron people in an ever-advancing civilisation.
- (iii) To seek to assert ourselves in every field of human endeavour and to discover and maintain what is noble in the customs and traditions of the Oron people.
- (iv) To foster in Oron children love for Oron and for the customs and institutions of the Oron people and also to pool our resources for the common good.
- (v) To cooperate and associate with other progressive bodies in the Federal Republic of Nigeria.<sup>2</sup>

The Union has since its inception strived diligently for the attainment of these aims and objectives, working hand in hand with the Native Administration Council for the welfare and progress of Oron and, indeed the Oron people between 1930 and 1955.

Originally, the Union was composed of 88 foundation members. Branches of the Union outside the territorial confines of Oron were virtually non-existent. It is reported that the question of membership was one of individual choice. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the organisation of the Union between the early 1930s to the early 1950s was to be found in the area of income and expenditure. As from the 1938/39 year, "one method by which the Union got its funds was the use of 10% tax rebates payable to the Oron people by the Native Authority."<sup>3</sup> The Oron Union overseas Education Scheme was financed predominantly from this source although money is reported to have come from such other sources as educational campaigns for funds in Oron as well as Afaha and village contributions. There was also the patriotic act of every Oron man earning wages foregoing one month's salary as his contribution to the Union from time to time.

However, times have changed dramatically and like time, the Oron Union has undergone changes of its own. The essential issue of membership, though still a reflection of individual choice, is now fraught with constitutional definitions and every individual of Oron descent is an automatic member of the Oron Development Union.

The question of finance has been significantly re-arranged and monies are now principally derived from the following sources:

- (a) Registration fees by members.
- (b) Subscriptions and levies (on members, branches and villages).
- (c) Sale of membership cards, Annual Presidential addresses, constitution, books, property, pamphlets, magazines and any other Union publication.
- (d) Donations and public collections.
- (e) Proceeds of entertainments, anniversaries, exhibitions and traditional or other displays.
- (f) Hiring of Union hall, property, etc.
- (g) Interest from savings, investments or deposits and any other sources as the executive committee may from time to time determine.

We can observe from the above that the initial picture as obtained in the period already reviewed i.e. between 1938/39 and about 1955 has changed significantly with the diversification of the sources of the Union's finance.

To administer the affairs of the Union at the Secretariat and to coordinate the activities of all the Union's branches all over the country, there was, from the beginning, an Executive Committee. This Committee was composed of all the elected members of the Union, namely, the President-General, 2 Vice-Presidents, the Secretary-General, 2 Assistant Secretaries, the Treasurer, 2 Legal advisers, the Financial Secretary, the publicity Secretary. It is to be observed that the Union's Auditor does not sit on the executive committee. But he used to in the 1960s. In addition, clan representatives are allowed as non-voting members of the Executive. These representatives act as liaison officers between their clans and the Union Secretariat. Also sitting on the Union's executive committee are eminent citizens of Oron distinguished for their contributions to the development of the Oron identity. In addition, the President of any of the Union's branches is eligible to attend any meeting of the Union's central executive committee and participate in the deliberations. Two women members and seven other members elected to represent the interests of the Union also sit on the central executive committee.

It should be observed that between 1925 and 1942, the Oron Union lacked a definite structure and operated on the basis of ad hoc committees. It was not until 1942 when Mr S.K. Okpo (now Rev) became the Secretary-General that the rudiments of structure and organisation began to emerge. It was only after this date that individuals within the Union became assigned to specific duties of secretary, treasurer, etc.

However, much is to be said for the revived Union of 1962 till date. The complex organisation which the Oron Development Union has become today is consequent upon the efforts of the persons who composed the Revival Committee. Their efforts at forging an articulate and working Union is appreciated against a background of the incoherence and disharmony that characterised the Union between 1925 and 1962. A lot of the policies and programmes of the Union were inaugurated in the 1960s.

### **Branches**

We have earlier observed that between 1925 and the early 1940s, the Oron Union was concentrated within Oron. In this period, branches of the Union in other parts of the country did not quite exist. It has been suggested that the Oron people over the ages, have always felt a traditional attachment to the land of their fathers and have consequently demonstrated their inhibition towards venturing afield to other parts of the country. This situation perhaps explains the marked absence of branches of the Union during this initial period.

From the late 1950s, however, branches of the Union were established wherever there was a sizeable population of Oron people. By 1965, 38 such branches had been established and the number has continued to increase. The operation of branches by the Oron Union at the initial period was not without some of its own problems especially in the areas of communication, finance and the freedom enjoyed by these branches to make bye-laws.

The problem of communication is a recurrent feature of any large organisation. For the Oron Development Union, communication between the various branches and the national headquarters at Oron is essential for the co-ordination of the Union's activities and streamlining of such activities to conform with the clearly specified aims and objectives of the Oron people wherever they may be. The constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the branch Unions to make bye-laws introduced the problem of confining such laws to a general uniform policy set down by the National Secretariat. Hence, such laws were subject to ratification by the central Executive Committee and the branches themselves were subject to the decision of this committee.

It is relevant to note that the branch Unions of the ODU constitute a meaningful source of the Union's finances. It is difficult to hazard a guess about the actual value (in monetary terms) of branch contribution to the coffers of the National Secretariat. But in terms of Conference levies and Annual subscriptions, their contributions can be said to be enormous.

Finally, the organisation of the O.D.U. mandated branches of the Union to submit memoranda to the National Secretariat highlighting problems, grievances, political, social and economic issues, conflicts and any other matter as they may arise. The most important of these memoranda were always included in the agenda for the Union's annual conferences and special general meetings. Although the conferences and general meetings made policy decisions for the National Executive Committee to implement during the year, the Executive in turn from time to time initiated policies and programmes which were almost always invariably approved by the conference in session. The above arrangement made for co-ordination of activities between the branches and the National Executive.

The Annual Conference was, from the beginning, the supreme authority of the Union which formulated policies and considered matters referred to it by the Executive Committee. Usually held in December of every year, it was the practice, especially between 1942 and 1955, to rotate the venue of this meeting from village to village in Oron in a bid to bring the Union nearer to the people. Between 1962 and 1977, this principle was also employed. Thus, the 1965 annual conference was held in Nsie in Ebughu clan while the 1966 conference was held in Eyo Atai, Udung Uko. Subsequent conferences were held at Uya Oro in 1974, Okuko in 1975, Oduonim Oruko in 1976, and T.T.C. Oron in 1977. The achievement of this attempt at identifying the Union with the Oron people cannot be over emphasised. Those eligible to attend the annual conferences of the Union included:

- (a) All members of the Executive Committee including Clan Heads.
- (b) 2 Accredited representatives from each village in Oron.
- (c) Branch Union representatives.
- (d) 5 representatives from the Women's Wing.

The above arrangement ensured maximum participation by all sectors of the Oron community in decision making on matters that affected them.

### **Constitutional changes**

At its inception in May of 1925, the Oron Union, the supreme cultural

organisation of the Oron people founded to provide a platform of unity and consolidation in the community, lacked a constitution of a written nature. At the initial stages the Union had an oral constitution.

Today, however, several changes have been institutionalised and the Union's constitution has matured into a concise document. Perhaps the first well known attempt at a modern constitution was made by the Revived Committee which sat in 1961 and mandated a sub-committee to produce a constitution. The sub-committee went to work in 1962 and in April of that year, the first draft of the new constitution was submitted to the Union's branches for analysis and recommendations for relevant amendments and insertions. The 1962 constitution was significant in one major respect — it provided the framework for the evolution of today's Oron Development Union Constitution. Its provisions represented a conscious attempt at affecting the basic norms of structural organisation and of overhauling an administrative system that had lapsed into decay consequent upon the financial and political crises that rocked the Oron Union as from the early 1950s and which threw the Union into a state of complete disarticulation and incoherence.<sup>4</sup>

July of 1966 saw the suspension of the 1962 revived Union constitution and the underground plunge of the Oron Union.<sup>5</sup> In the process of this plunge, it metamorphosed into the *Oron Community* and reappeared at the termination of hostilities in 1973 as the Oron Development Union (ODU). The Union's constitution became designed in terms of the new political configuration. The new draft constitution prepared and submitted by Lagos Branch in 1976 was adopted by the December 1977 Conference-in-Session.

### **The Oron Union and its relationship with existing organisations**

Within the boundaries of the erstwhile Oron Division and the now-existing Oron Local Government Area, the Oron Development Union was designed to embody the essential aims and objectives of all people of Oron descent. The directive principles of relationships between the Oron Development Union and any other similarly organised body were based on a genuine desire that such cooperation must be in the general direction of promoting the interest and progress of the Federation of Nigeria. It was thought necessary that Youth Clubs and Women's Organizations in Oron should be affiliated to the Union for effective co-ordination. However, constitutional restrictions have always been placed on the political involvement of the Union though individual members have always been guaranteed the freedom of independent participation in the

politics of the day. Within the framework of the basic constitutional guidelines, it became inadvisable for the Union to pry into the arena of partisan politics and to relate to or associate with any association having or harbouring partisan political sympathies.

From the late 1950s, however, attempts, however indirect, were made to associate Oron Union with politically motivated groups. The first such attempt was the application of the Ukpabang Youth Association (U.Y.A) to be affiliated with the Union in 1963. In a letter dated February 2, 1965, the Union's Secretary, I.U. Iyanam informed U.Y.A's Caretaker, N.O. Ita as follows:

The central executive of the Oron Union has considered the matter in all its ramifications and has come to the conclusion that in the interest of Oron solidarity, unity of purpose and strength in order to ensure fair play, constructive criticisms in all our affairs, all Oron citizens should work under the umbrella of the Oron Union.

The conditions of our time are such that we cannot afford further dissipation of energy and duplication of effort.<sup>6</sup>

In the light of the political tension that rocked the Federation of Nigeria at this time, the decision of the ODU on the question of affiliation of the quasi-political U.Y.A. with the Union can be seen to have been the wisest in view of the fact that the ODU was sworn against partisan politicking. Thereafter, all Union members were informed by the Secretary that the Union should play a fatherly role and desist from actual participation in the politics of the day. When, therefore, the Ukpabang Students' Union (U.S.U.) seemed to many to be dabbling into the politically inspired accusations and counter accusations made by members of the Okobo/Oron County Council against each other, the Secretary, who was also patron of U.S.U. warned:

No one will quarrel with your legitimate aspiration to correct or deplore certain irregularities in a council established with the primary aim of consulting the best interest of the locality in social and economic development but you must not forget the fact that you are dealing with an arm of the Government. . .<sup>7</sup>

The U.S.U. had alleged that Council was unable to award scholarships between 1962 and 1964 because of the embezzlement of £2,000 of the Council's money by Councils officials. However, the relationship between Oron Union and other development Unions in the area was more tantalising.

### **The Effiat/Mbo Situation**

The Oron Development Union - Effiat-Mbo debate dragged longest in the history of the Oron Development Union. The bone of contention was the proper kind of relationship that should exist between the relatively smaller Effiat/Mbo Union and the much larger Oron Development

Union. The issue of clan division in the 1960s brought the problem to the fore. Founded principally to foster solidarity of the entire Oron area, the ODU was necessarily drawn into the problem.<sup>8</sup>

At the heat the debate in the 1960s the Effiat/Mbo argued that:

- (1) They recognised their existence as an integral part of a larger ODU framework.
- (2) They religiously believed in themselves as constituting a unit in Oron.
- (3) They dissociated themselves from what they referred to as the arbitrary division of Mbo - the partitioning of Mbo and the subsequent addition of the parts to Afaha Okpo and Afaha Uquong.
- (4) That because of this arbitrary division, their unity had been jeopardised to the extent that they could no longer speak with one voice and this, according to them, accounted for their being neglected in the scheme of things in Oron.
- (5) They believed in their independence as a unit and not as parts and parcel of Afaha Okpo and Afaha Uquong. To this end, they suggested that Mbo's share of the Union's levies should be channelled through the Mbo Union and not through Afaha Okpo or Afaha Uquong.<sup>9</sup>

The Mbo position had thus been clearly stated. However, in its reply to the arguments above, the Oron Union stated that it had been following the pattern of clan division set by the councils and claimed that it was not the "competent body to look into the basic problem of clan division raised by the Effiat/Mbo Union."<sup>10</sup> It advised that the matter be referred to the appropriate quarters in the interest of peace and progress in Oron. To the extent of this advice, the issue remained unsolved and to this extent, a clear pattern of relationship could not emerge between the Effiat/Mbo Union in their aggrieved state and the Oron Union which was seemingly helpless on the issue.

Within the next two years, the issue remained much the same characterised by occasional meetings between both sides in attempts at lasting solutions. However, within the interval, the lukewarm attitude of the Effiat/Mbo people to the people of Oron within and outside Oron persisted. A meeting of both Unions fixed for 12th May, 1966 at Offi-Uda could not hold, although a further meeting slated for 25th February, 1967 did eventually take place. A delegation led by Chief S.B. Onobo and including M.A. Eyo, I.U. Iyanam, A.A. Mfon, O.U. Bassey, E. Bassey, R.E. Odohofre, O.E. Bassey, O.D. Mkpa and Rev E.B. Edunam arrived in Enwang to ascertain the reasons for the non-cooperation of

the Effiat/Mbo people with the Oron Union and to take a look at their problems. The meeting did not, however, resolve the outstanding issues. Meanwhile, the intransigence of the Effiat/Mbo people continued in the branch Unions of the ODU giving cause for grave concern. The Enugu branch of the Union reported on the 12th of December 1966 that:

In view of the apparent lack of interest shown by the Mbo people in Oron Union affairs; that in view of the fact that this has led to unfraternal relations between the Oron Union and the Mbo people and that continuance of this ugly situation may yet impoverish this so-much-desired fraternity. . . it is hereby recommended that this great conference sets up a committee to examine thoroughly, the Mbo people's grievances.<sup>11</sup>

This recommendation was approved by the 1966 conference and accordingly, a committee was set up in February of 1967. The close of 1967 did not however witness a conclusive end to the Effiat/Mbo issue. It is to be noted that the political turmoil that afflicted the Federation of Nigeria and the 30 month civil war did not provide a conducive atmosphere for any meaningful attempt at settling the Mbo issue. The misunderstanding notwithstanding, it must be stated that there have been several Effiat/Mbo individuals who are very well known as persistent active members of the Union to date. Mr E.O. Inyang, the present Inspector-General of Police comes readily to mind. Even more significantly, at the height of the confusion, the President-General of Mbo Union had maintained that "it is not our intention to break down Oron Union of which we are an integral part." In the same vein, the Secretary of Oron Union had replied that "what is paramount at present is the proper and right type of relationship between Effiat Mbo Union and the larger Organization of the Oron Union." At worst, therefore, the confusion between Mbo Union and the larger Oron Union had not threatened the commitment of all to the cause of Oron unity. Similar problems would occur between the Oron Union and the Ebughu Union with almost the same effect.

### **The Oron Union Account Case (1955-1962) and 7 years Lull**

The celebrated Oron Union account case perhaps singlehandedly rocked the very foundation of Oron unity and threatened the very existence of the Oron Union. Never in the history of the Union has a single issue agitated so many minds and introduced a diversion from the paramount issue of our corporate solidarity. Stretching from its genesis in 1955 to its mutual near-settlement in 1962, the account crises compounded by the political sentimentalism of the day, served in the long run, to throw the Oron Union into a seven-year period of inactivity.

In actual fact, the Union's account case began in 1951 following a sharp disagreement between two factions concerning the state of the Union's accounts. A specific issue in the account case was the refund of two thirds of Educational loan awarded by the Oron Union to O.O. Ita, Dr E.A. Esin, S.K. Okpo and E.I. Nkereuwem. At this stage, it will be necessary to review the exact nature of the loan award and the terms of repayment:

- (a) In 1943, O.O. Ita was sent to the United Kingdom to study law.
- (b) E.A. Esin was sent to Edinburgh, Scotland to study Medicine also in 1943.
- (c) S.K. Okpo was sent to the U.K. in 1951 to read History.
- (d) E.I. Nkereuwem was sent to the United Kingdom to study Law.

As they were on the Union's scholarship, the cost of their existence in the United Kingdom and the cost of their education was undertaken by the Union. It is understood that an agreement existed that dictated that on the completion of their respective courses and after a safe period of comfortable settlement back home, they were to begin partial refunds to total of two thirds of the actual loan amount. It is also understood that some of the recipients of this Union loan returned home only to deny ever taking receipt of some Union loan disbursements to them even though they claimed from personal letters and correspondence from the United Kingdom that the money was inadequate.

The confusion over the loan case is known to have started with the late Barrister O.O. Ita, the first recipient of the Union's loan. His reluctance to remit two thirds of the said loan to the Union's coffers was suggested as perhaps having spurred Messrs Esin, Okpo and Nkereuwem into similar courses of action.

The crisis in the Union became menacingly complicated and matters eventually came to a head on the 5th of March 1955. At the meeting of the Chiefs and people of Oron held at the Methodist Church hall, Oruko, confusion and divided interests characterised the deliberations. Feelings rose to fever heights; personal animosities were obvious and a faction in the crises led by O.E. Isong and consisting of Messrs A.M.E. Amba, O.N. Okung and W.O. Uko "became hostile and behaved in a most incoherent manner. They did everything to have the meeting dissolved in chaos and when this failed them, they staged a walk-out."<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the meeting got underway under Mr O. Abia-Onkon's direction. The conduct of O.E. Isong's party was deplored and their reluctance to render the accounts of the Union for scrutiny was considered as a challenge to to the Oron people. And it was observed that the time for positive action had come. The meeting resolved, inter-alia:

In as much as Messrs O.E. Isong, A.M.E. Mba, W.O. Uko and S.K. Okpo (then in London) have refused to file the Oron Union's account in accordance with the decisions of this house, on 29/1/55, this - house should take legal action against them in the supreme court for the filing of the Oron Union's account.<sup>13</sup>

This resolution, coupled with the fact that the meeting also agreed on the suspension of Messrs O.E. Isong, A.M.E. Mba, N.O. Uko and S.K. Okpo from the activities of the Union, had grave repercussions vis-a-vis the survival of the Union.

The account case finally went to the High Court in Calabar (Suit No. C/13/1955). And it has been argued that the genesis of the split in unity in the Oron Union can be attributed to the anti-solidarity effects of this crisis and the political undertone of the entire issue. Be that as it may be, 1955 marked the beginning of the effective disintegration of the "Union" and the beginning of the seven year period of inactivity and great uncertainty that only terminated in 1962.

The plaintiffs in the case were Messrs O.O. Ita, O.J. Eminue, P.U. Nkuda and I.E. Nyong, while the defendants were Messrs O.E. Isong, O.N. Okung, S.K. Okpo, W.O. Uko, and A.M.E. Mba.

The account case was regarded by many as betrayal of trust on the part of the beneficiaries of the loan scheme as well as lack of proper accountability by those in public positions of trust. The role of the Oron students of the University of Ibadan who adopted personal contact approach in settling the account case on 22nd July, 1962, and subsequent disposal of it in the Abak High Court on 25th July, 1962, must remain indelible in the annals of Oron history.

### **The Oron Union Revival**

As discussed earlier, the events of the mid-50s culminated in the disintegration of the Oron Union from 1955 till the well intentioned attempts at revival made in the later part of 1961. On December, 1961, the Enugu Branch of the Oron Union, acting on behalf of the other branches, convened a revival meeting at the County Council hall, Akani-Obio, Oron. The date marked the effective genesis of meaningful attempts at a revival of the Union after several years of slumber.

At the revival meeting attended by representatives of the branch Unions and Oron leaders of thought, sub-committees were set up to deal with specific matters among which were

- (a) Re-organisation
- (b) Finance
- (c) Constitution
- (d) Education

(e) Development

(f) Steering.

For the co-ordination of the reports of these committees with the exception of the constitution committee (which was to start work in 1962), a revival working committee chaired by Etim, J. Ndekhehe was set up. At the close of the day's business, a progressive machinery had been constructed for the revival of the Union; a skeletal framework for its organisation and structure was built and most importantly, the spirit of corporate solidarity, long lacking in the affairs of the Union, was revived and inculcated in the minds of all those who attended the meeting on that day.<sup>14</sup>

Subsequent meetings of the Revival Committee concentrated on working out the modalities for the operation of a Functional Union and in making preparations for a revived annual conference slated for December, 1962.

These efforts at genuine revival were indeed laudable. But there were some people who believed that the idea of genuine revival should be used to ensure a better future for the Union. This group of well meaning Oron citizens believed that without taking a look at the problems that beset the Union and culminated in its decay and without making efforts to neutralise these problems in most amicable terms, the Union would sooner or later become saddled with the same old problem. This group of individuals, composed mainly of young Oron undergraduates at the University of Ibadan referred particularly to the Oron Union account case that was still in court and had been since 1955.

In a memorandum signed by I.U. Iyanam on behalf of all Oron students in the University College, Ibadan, the young students manifested considerable wisdom and foresight. The 7th item of their memorandum suggested as follows:

There is no doubt that the settlement of this case will help to improve inter-personal relationship amongst our personalities. Yet from the few facts available, we are of the opinion that the people concerned in the case will want it to be somehow disposed of.<sup>15</sup>

They added that the revival committee should try by all means to ensure that the case was withdrawn from the court and suggested that the settlement of the case when withdrawn from the court, should not be made "an open market issue."

The call to withdraw the account case from court did not end there. The University students began a campaign on the 7th of July 1962 for support for their intention. At the meeting of Oron people held on that

day, and attended by Oron leaders of thought, the procedure to be adopted in settling the case out of court was discussed and adopted. I.U. Iyanam was to write later that:

The meeting was ominous in the history of our social, economic and political development since once more, it was possible for our leaders to come together for frank discussions on grave matters affecting Oron.<sup>16</sup>

On 16th of July 1962, after representations had been made generally to the judge of the Eastern Nigeria High Court sitting at Abak, the case was allowed out of court to be settled by independent arbitration and the report of the settlement made to the same court, on or before the 25th of July 1962.

Matters thereafter took on a degree of urgency due to time limitation. The students travelled out for personal discussions with both the plaintiffs and defendants in the case. They achieved agreement to go ahead and settle the case out of court. Things moved very fast and eventually a date for the arbitration panel to sit was fixed for Sunday, the 22nd of July 1962. It is pertinent at this stage to give an insight into the composition of this panel.

There is no doubt that it was organised under the auspices of the Oron Students of the University of Ibadan, notable among them being Messrs I.U. Iyanam, U.K. Enyenihi, A.E. Emenyi, S.M. Essang and E.O. Ebiefie. They brought Messrs E.U. Bassey, E.A. Anwana, A.J.E. Bassey, N.E. Umoh, E.E. Bassey and E.O. Oboho in to help them. Other dignitaries like A.E. Bassey, O.A. Ating, J.E. Udo, S.B. Onobo, were there.

On the appointed day, the peace committee held its trial and both the plaintiffs namely O.O. Ita, O.J. Eminue, P.U. Nkuda and I.E. Nyong and the defendants in the persons of O.E. Isong, O.N. Okung, S.K. Okpo, W.O. Uko and A.M.E. Mba gave their cooperation to the panel. The verdict of this panel was submitted to the judge at the High Court of Eastern Nigeria sitting at Abak on the 25th of July 1962 on which day, the Oron Union account case was also effectively disposed of. In any case, the question of part repayment of the educational loan remained to plague the Union's affairs for a good number of years thereafter. Up till now the repayments have not been made by the overseas scholarship beneficiaries. This, however, should not detract from the achievement of the Ibadan students. Wrote Etim J. Ndekhehe later;

One significant achievement of the year (1962) has been the settlement, out of court of the 7 year old court case instituted against certain members of the Union. I would place on record, our appreciation to our students of the University of Ibadan who were responsible for this settlement.<sup>17</sup>

With the resolution of the Union's account case, the way became smooth for the achievement of a unified new Oron Union. Progress in this vein under the direction of the Revival Working Committee set up on the 27th of December, 1961 led to the complete restructuring of the entire Union, a redefinition of the essential aims and objectives of the Oron people and the instillation of the spirit of solidarity and cohesive action in the minds of members. The year 1962 marked the effective death of the 7 year period of disarticulation and the dawn of the new era — the era that went underground with the outbreak of crisis in the Federation of Nigeria in 1966.

But even between 1966 and 1973, Oron people acting in groups and as corporate bodies, not necessarily under the name of Oron Union, carried on with several activities aimed at maintaining Oron social and cultural identity in the comity of the various ethnic groups of the then South Eastern State.

These activities are discussed below.

### **The War Years**

The military intervention of 1966 and the subsequent Civil War drove jitters into the Oron Union. A ban had been placed on all tribal Unions in the country by the 1966 "Public Order Decree." Although Oron Union was not listed as one of those banned, there was considerable apprehension about the advisability of continuing to function under that name. The activities of the Union went underground amidst protests by branches like Lagos which insisted that the Union was not one of those banned. However, the concerns of the Union continued to be articulated by other bodies that sprang up or were already in existence.

While the war lasted, village Unions and other Youth Organisations continued to play important roles in Oron development. Villages like Okuko, Oyubia, Eyulor, Okossi, Udung Uko, and Ebughu held periodic "development day" celebrations at which they raised money for specific projects, particularly education. The Ukpabang Students Union, founded in 1962 and with branches in higher institutions throughout the country, with their motto "That We May be One" continued to hold public enlightenment campaigns for more educational endeavours in Oron, emphasising in particular, the need for technical education. Even more impressive was the communal labour they provided in the reconstruction of Iquita Hospital in 1969 and the building of a bridge between Eyulor and Abiak Elibi in the same year.

Perhaps the one important project that engaged the attention of the Oron people in these years was the deplorable condition of the Iquita General Hospital, founded by the Methodist Mission in 1942.

## Iquita Hospital

In contrast with its counterpart in Ituk Mbang, the hospital at Iquita did not have the basic medical facilities and personnel to respond to the growing awareness of the benefits of good medical attention that was being awakened in the Oron people. More distressing was the fact that the Methodist Church was overtly shifting emphasis from the Iquita Hospital to that of Ituk Mbang. The situation was even more deplorable as there was no medical doctor to head the hospital at the time.

Indeed the state of disrepair had caused so much stir that in 1950, in a document titled *The Grievances of the Oron People Against the Methodist Church* presented to Rev Paul Kingston, Chairman of Eastern District of Methodist Church and signed by E.E. Odoro, President Oron Native Council, E.J. Ndekhedehe, steward, Oyubia circuit, J.E. Aya, steward, Ebughu circuit, B. Inwang, steward Oron circuit, the Oron people pointed out that "it is our considered opinion that the policy of the mission is calculated to neglect us." They insisted that though the intention had been to establish "a fully equipped and well staffed hospital at Iquita," Iquita did not qualify for a hospital "properly so called." While they brought pressure to bear on government for improvement, Oron people, through the Union, rendered great assistance to the hospital.<sup>18</sup>

In the first place, Oron Native Authority helped the Methodist Mission to get land at Iquita cheaply at £10 per annum and to put up the first temporary buildings. The Oron community did not stop there. The Oron Union gave an annual grant of £100 to the hospital. The Union also bailed the Hospital out of a debt by giving £450. This was in addition to a grant of £1000 towards the erection of the new permanent maternity ward. As at 1950, the Oron Union had given about £3000 towards the maintenance of the Hospital.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the aid given to the hospital by the community, emphasis by the Methodist Church was nevertheless shifting to Ituk Mbang Hospital. The need for a doctor to be stationed at Oron was stressed and as early as October, 1949, it had been suggested that the mission authorities should train an Oron boy as a medical doctor. It was later being rumoured that a candidate outside Oron had been selected for training. This was a sad development for Oron people.

By 1965, the hospital had only one part-time doctor, about five grade two midwives, 24 Grade 2 midwifery students, 3 blocks of wards with a total of 75 beds, a modern operation theatre, but no out-patient department, which was an important sector of any good hospital. In a release by the Oron Union to the members of the Board of Governors of Iquita Hospital, Oron on 19th October, 1965 signed by I.U. Iyanam, the Union

called for handing over of the hospital to the Councils in Oron to run jointly with Eastern Nigeria Government with the Church remaining only as Manager. This, they felt, was the only means of developing the Hospital. The Iquita Hospital remained without a Resident Doctor up to 1967. In 1967 it was suggested by Dr T.F. Davey, Medical Secretary of Methodist Missionary Society, London in his paper "The Future of Ituk Mbang and Iquita Hospitals" that Iquita Hospital should merge with its Ituk Mbang counterpart to form a Group Hospital. The above premise was sufficient provocation for a violent confrontation with the Methodist Church and it is to the credit of the Oron Union that they allowed reason to prevail.

The Oron Union did not spare any effort to improve the situation at the Iquita Hospital. Even when they had no money, they opted to borrow. Their quest for a doctor to head the hospital knew no bounds. An appeal was made to Dr F.U. Isangedighi to come and head the hospital on 14th June, 1967, in a letter titled "Oron Union Appeal for your Services."<sup>20</sup>

The efforts of the Oron Union with respect to the building of the out patient block and a midwifery block was acknowledged in a letter from the Ag. Divisional Officer, Oron Division, Mr C. Ekwugha to the Rural Development Officer in charge, Provincial works in Uyo on 2nd May, 1967. He described the efforts as a "noble humanitarian project". The job was executed by direct labour under the supervision of Messrs S.B. Onobo, Treasurer, and I.U. Iyanam, Secretary General. It was the Netherlands Team that eventually completed those buildings which were started by the Oron Community. The dream of the Oron Union materialised in 1967 when the Government of "Biafra" posted Dr Ubani Ukomah to the Iquita Hospital.

There was another dimension to the Oron Union concern for the Iquita Hospital. Apart from the aid given to the hospital, it was apparent that if allowed, the Methodist Church would neglect the hospital to an irretrievable state. This factor accounted for the anxiety of the Oron Union and its active participation in the negotiations which eventually led to the handing over of the hospital to the Government. This in itself was not an easy task. On Friday 14th May, 1965 an Oron Union delegation discussed the future of the Iquita Hospital with Rev O. Nkposong, Chairman of the Calabar District of the Methodist Church of Nigeria at Adadia in the presence of Dr H. Haigh of the Methodist Hospital, Iquita. The subject was the decision of the Oron Community, represented by the Okobo/Oron and Oron Urban County Councils and the Oron Union, to take over the Iquita Hospital and run it on communi-

ty basis. The Oron Delegation included J.U. Essang, Chairman, Okobo/Oron County Council, U.A. Ebin, Chairman Oron Urban County Council, O.E. Isong, O.N. Okung, S.B. Onobo, M.A. Eyo and I.U. Iyanam.<sup>21</sup>

It should also be recalled that a delegation of the Oron Union met the Secretary of the medical committee of the Methodist Missionary Society, Dr T.F. Davey, in order to explain the ugly situation at Iquita Hospital. Dr Davey promised to find a doctor provided the Union would make available the sum of £1,600 for the doctors' expenses including salary, fare and expatriate allowance. This gave birth to Iquita Hospital Development Committee. Permission was obtained from the Ministry of Rural Development, Enugu, to collect the levy viz: minimum of 2s:0d per adult, 10s:0d per labourer and £1 per salaried worker. This was vigorously pursued to the villages through the clan heads. The Hospital Development Scheme was launched. Messrs M.A. Eyo and E.E. Antai launched the scheme with £100 and £25 respectively. The issue was also discussed with Dr Sonster, the President of the Medical Committee of the Methodist Missionary Society, England, when he visited the hospital on the 6th of December, 1966. He also promised to find a doctor. The Oron delegation was led by S.K. Okpo. Others were Chiefs O.N. Okung, S.B. Onobo and M.A. Eyo.<sup>22</sup>

The struggle for the development and management of the hospital continued during the civil war. On July 29th, 1968, the chiefs, elders and the people of Oron, in a memorandum addressed to His Excellency, the Military Governor of South Eastern State, revisited the issue of the poor state of the hospital and the need for the Government and the community to take over the hospital from the Methodist Mission for effective development. This memorandum was followed by a visit of the representatives of the Oron people to the Secretary to the Military Government, M.O. Ani, on 23rd of August 1968 and a letter dated 12th October, 1968 addressed to both the Chief Secretary to the Government and the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health, by the Oron Community. On both occasions, the people stressed the need for Government to take over the hospital for the good of the people and for effective management. Following these representations by the Oron Community, the Secretary to the Military Government wrote a letter No. GH/19/T/ dated 6th September, 1968 to the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Health to instigate the Ministry to take action concerning the take-over question. The Commissioner for Health visited the Iquita Hospital on the 11th of November 1968 and informed the people that if the church was willing to hand-over the hospital, the Government would have no alternative but to take it over immediately.

The Oron Community thereafter wrote a powerful letter appealing to the Chairman, Calabar District of the Methodist Church, Rev O. Nkposong requesting him and the church to write a formal letter of hand-over of Iquita Hospital to the Government. This received a quick reaction from the Methodist Church of Nigeria. In a letter dated 22nd January, 1969, the President of the Conference of the Methodist Church of Nigeria, Rev N.O. Salako wrote the South Eastern State Commissioner for Health, and handed the Iquita Hospital to the government.

Not long after the handing over of the hospital, the Government entered into an agreement with a Dutch Team of Medical experts under a scheme of Technical Assistance to run the hospital. In a welcome address read by I.U. Iyanam, on 8th November, 1969, the Oron Community pledged their continued co-operation and their readiness to participate fully to the best of their ability in the proposed government development of the hospital. The people wished that the Netherlands Team would renew their contract at the expiration time so as to stay as long as practicable, and assured their full co-operation in the running of the affairs of the hospital.

The plans for the development of the hospital were revealed when the Netherlands Ambassador to Nigeria, Mr A. De Vall visited the hospital in 1969. In a speech by the leader of the Dutch Medical Team, Major S. de Klerk, it was revealed that one more wing of the out-patient department was under construction. This block, he said, would house the X-ray, the Lab., the drug and instrument stores, offices for the Medical Superintendent, Matron and Team leader, and a meeting room. The modernisation of the theatre had begun while the labour-ward was to be next. Louveres, additional running water, and electricity were to be provided, and a new ward consisting of some isolation-rooms, intensive care unit and private rooms were to be constructed. All toilet facilities were to be rebuilt into running water toilets drained into septic tanks. He informed those present that some of their equipments were awaiting installation when the buildings were completed.

How far what Major Klerk enumerated above was achieved could be seen in a farewell address presented by the Oron Hospital Committee to him on Friday 2nd October, 1970, barely a year after his speech. The address in-part read—

Within this short time much water has passed under the bridge in this Hospital. We are all living witnesses to the enormous transformation that has taken place here. Now patients come from all other parts of the South Eastern State for treatment at the General Hospital, Iquita, Oron. All this outstanding progress can be attributed to the energy, vigour, and vision of Major de Klerk.

The Dutch medical team were to manage the hospital for the next four years before the South Eastern State Government took over with indigenous medical personnels. And Iquita General Hospital which started in 1942 came of age in the 70s, an eloquent commentary on the commitment of the Oron people, through Oron Union, to develop their fatherland.

Similar impressive efforts were exerted by the Oron people to ensure the proper management of the secondary schools in their midst. There was the involvement of the Oron Union in the controversy surrounding the Principalship of the Methodist Boys' High School, Oron, after the retirement of the expatriate Principal, Rev C.E. Wiles in 1955. The Union pursued the matter with the same zeal and dedication it showed in the Iquita Hospital case. It succeeded in getting the Methodist Church to appoint an Oron son, S.K. Okpo, to the principalship. Similarly, when another controversy over the same issue arose in 1966, the Union was able to get another Oron son, E.E. Bassey appointed to the post in the face of the obvious intention of the Methodist Church to appoint an Igbo man principal!

We have already noted the involvement of the Oron Union in the Overseas Universities Scholarship Scheme. This concern with giving assistance for the educational advancement of Oron was shown in other regards also. Before the inauguration of the Overseas awards in 1942, the Union had earlier sponsored M.E. Mkpandiok, on a partial scholarship, to pursue a course in technical education at the Hope Waddell Training Institution, Calabar, in the 1930s. In 1965, in continuation of the overseas scholarship scheme and in order to ensure that all the clans benefited as planned, Nkong Edem Umoh of Ebughu Clan was sponsored for a course in Mathematics and Physics at the Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone. Unfortunately, he failed to complete the course, even when he later transferred to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Despite its meagre and shaky finances, the Union also undertook to grant educational loans to enable promising but financially handicapped Oron children complete their University education. The loan scheme was started in 1965. Loans, not exceeding £60 could be extended to financially pressed Oron students, provided that the intended beneficiary came from a village which had paid her union levies regularly, and the student was himself a loyal member of the Union. The repayment was to be effected a year after the student had completed his studies. Among the beneficiaries of the scheme were E.E. Eneyo, Edet U. Umo, E.O. Akaiso, Edet O. Udo, and E.A. Umo. The Union, in addition, granted loans to parents who had difficulties paying their wards' fees. In these

ways, the Union supplemented the rather meagre efforts of the Eastern Nigerian Government that granted rather few scholarships to Oron indigenes to pursue university degree courses before the Civil War.

Finally, we should note three other concerns of the 1962-1966 revived Union. These were an Oron Town Hall Project, the establishment of Unity Secondary Schools, and the attempt to write the history of Oron. None of these projects matured until the Union went underground at the outbreak of the Civil War.

### **Another Revival, 1973-1983**

In many respects, the period, 1973-1983 will go down as a major watershed in the history of the Oron Union. The revival of the Union in December 1973 was largely due to exertions, commitment and sacrifice of the Lagos Branch under their energetic and patriotic leader, Mr E.O. Ita. It is in fact ironic that Mr Ita, who did so much to see the Union revived, was killed in a motor accident while the conference was still in session. His death, however, merely served to strengthen the faith of those who attended in a revived Union.

The excellent performance of the Union in the execution of projects in the years under review can be credited to a number of factors. Firstly, from 1974 onwards, the Union was fortunate to have a galaxy of committed, dedicated and patriotic Oron sons and daughters as officials. In this regard, mention must be made of the following — Chief Ambe Bassey, Rev E.J. Ndekhedehe, Major Ita Esang, E.R. Isang, N.I. Nkereuwem and above all, Okon Bassey Etienam who served the Union as National Presidents during this period. Between 1974 and 1979, Professor O.E. Eya served the Union as National 1st Vice-President in which capacity he chaired many Union Committees charged with executing specific projects. Nor can one fail to mention the meticulous care with which Engr. (Dr) Etim Uye has handled the secretarial affairs of the Union with singular dedication and rare thoroughness almost continuously throughout the period, except for the two years he was away for further studies. Under the able leadership of these officials, Union activities were handled in a more business-like manner; targets were set, and periodic reports of progress insisted upon. This went a long way in giving the Union a new image which redounded to her advantage financially.

The Union was also fortunate in these years to win the confidence and attention of prominent Oron businessmen and other professionals who annually contributed handsomely towards the execution of Union projects. Among these should be mentioned Victor Akan, Professor O.O. Bassey, Edet Bassey Etienam, Professor S.M. Essang, Etim Inyang,

Okon Bassey Etienam, and Dr E.J. Amana. Available records indicate dearly that the scholarship schemes sponsored by Victor Akan, E.B. Etienam, O.O. Bassey, I.U. Iyanam and E.J. Amana helped in giving the Union a positive image among the ever critical student population of Oron.

The projects carried out by the Union also aroused great enthusiasm from members individually and collectively. Branch contributions rose admirably from the paltry sums of the earlier periods, with Lagos and Calabar Branches annually competing to outshine the other. Enthusiasm within Oron itself, though inconsistent, was generally high and many villages contributed more regularly to the Union.<sup>23</sup> The regular participation of the Paramount Ruler and Clan Heads in Union Conferences also brought greater respectability to the Union. Lastly, the able moderation of Union Annual Conferences by O.E. Uya, LU. Iyanam and Okon Abia Bassey during the period under review made the proceedings more orderly and purposeful. Under these favourable circumstances major projects were executed by the Union.

By far the most important of these, and the one that has dominated all Union Conferences since 1975, was the Civic Centre Project. It should be recalled that the idea of building a Union Town Hall at Uya-Oron had been endorsed in 1966 and plans initiated to acquire land. A levy was in fact imposed on members towards the execution of the project. The plans, however, were aborted during the Civil War. When the Union was revived in 1973 as the Oron Development Union the project was identified as a priority. However, it was not until 1974 that land was finally acquired. At the Conference held at Okuko in December, 1975, A Project Implementation Committee, comprising O.E. Uya (Chairman), O.O. Bassey, E.A. Bassey, Ambe Bassey, Efiog J. Ndekhedehe, E.J. Amana and Chief A.M.E. Mba, was set up and mandated to ensure that:

1. Architectural drawings and site plans were produced and approved by the appropriate authorities.
2. That the building site was cleared and stumping carried out.
3. That the foundation of the main Hall was laid and the walls raised to window level at least before the next Conference.

After a rather slow start, the Committee went to work in earnest. In February of 1976, Engr. O.J. Okon was co-opted into the Committee and this helped speed up the work. In December, 1976, the foundation stone of the project was laid by the Paramount Ruler of Oron, Ahta O.E. Isong, amidst pomp and pageantry. After a series of halting starts, the project got under way and has been vigorously pursued by the executive that came into office in 1981 with Okon Bassey Etienam as Presi-

dent General. When completed, the Civic Centre will surely rank as easily one of the best in the Cross River State.<sup>24</sup>

Another programme implemented during the period was the proposal for the establishment of unity schools in Oron. Again, the idea was not new as it had been freely canvassed by Union members between 1964 and 1966. However, at its Annual Conference held at Oruko in December, 1976, the Union set up an Educational Planning Committee for Oron as a result of requests contained in the addresses by both the President-General, Rev E.J. Ndekhedehe and the General-Secretary, Engr. E.U. Uye. The Committee had seven members as follows: Professor O.E. Uya (Chairman), Engr. E.U. Uye, Efiang J. Ndekehdehe, Engr. O.J. Okon, E.O. Akaiso, Barrister E.E. Eneyo and Chief I.E. Nyong. The terms of reference were:

1. To hold discussions and obtain permission of the Cross River State Ministry of Education for establishing two new Post Primary Institutions in Oron.
2. To enter into negotiations with appropriate villages on land acquisition after determining suitable sites for such schools.<sup>25</sup>

In carrying out its assignments, the committee decided early in its deliberations that the two schools should be sited at Effiat/Mbo and Atak Oro, the two being the most educationally backward areas in Oron. The Committee visited many sites and finally decided on Enwang for Effiat/Mbo and Nsie for Atak Oro. It corresponded with the Ministry of Education and on 7th February, 1978, obtained Approval to Open a New School, the Ukpabang Community Secondary School at Enwang. Similarly, it obtained permission to open the Union Secondary School, Nsie, in 1979. The Union paid ₦9,000.00 of the required ₦10,000.00 deposit to have the school at Enwang opened while the Enwang community paid ₦1,000.00. The decision of the Union to build the school at Enwang was an extremely wise one as it apparently, once and for all, arrested the alienation of the Effiat/Mbo from the Union which we saw earlier. In a letter to the President-General of ODU through the Chairman of the Education Committee, the chiefs and people of Enwang said *inter alia*:

We are grateful for the interest shown by Oron Development Union in Enwang and her decision to site a Secondary School here. This attempt of the Union gives us a sense of belonging which in the past we never had.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, although the choice of Nsie provoked initial negative reaction from the Offi and Urue Ita villages in Atak Oro, when the dust settled, the decision was hailed as a wise one.

As pointed out in the Preface, it is also the revived Union which has now carried to fruition the desire to write the history of Oron which had been expressed intermittently since 1925. Other areas of interest to the Development Union have been improvement of transportation and other services at Oron, continuation of the scholarship scheme, as well as monitoring government programmes and projects in Oron.

From the above, we can conclude that from its inception in 1925, the Oron Union has provided a significant rallying point for Oron people. Despite occasional bickerrings, the Union has served as a major unifying force for all Oron people, regardless of clan or village of origin. It also helped to blunt the contamination of Oron traditions and values by foreign influences, be those from the Europeans or Oron Nigerian neighbours. The involvement of the Union in the educational and health delivery systems in Oron has been consistent and commendable. Although the activities of the Union did not cover Okobo wholly, the Union collaborated with the much younger Okobo Development Union on all issues that affected the two groups. Although by its constitution a cultural organization, the Oron Union did not shy away from making comments on political issues that touched on Oron identity and survival. When such issues became partisanly political, members of the Union, either individually or in groups of various designations such as Oron Community or Concerned Citizens Council, spoke up and acted to protect the best interests of Oron as a distinct ethnic unit within the Nigerian Federation. These concerns are examined in the next chapter.

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## Notes

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- 1 *The efforts of the Oron Union (1925-1966)*, I.U. Iyanam. (Unpublished work), p. 80.
- 2 See article II of the Oron Union Constitution (1966)
- 3 Cited from *The efforts of the Oron Union*, I.U. Iyanam. Unpublished work, p. 81.
- 4 See copy of the Dec. 1965 Secretary-General's report submitted at the Nsici Conference, p. 1.
- 5 See: Letter from Rev Ndekhedehe (Ministry of Education, Social Welfare Division) to N.I. Nkereuwem (Nigerian Palm Produce Board) 20/7/66.
- 6 Letter written by the Secretary-General, ODU to the Caretaker, Ukpabang Youth Association, Mr N.O. Ita, *Relationship of U.Y.A. with the Oron Union*, 19/2/66.
- 7 Letter from I.U. Iyanam, Patron Ukpabang Students' Union to the Secretary of U.S.U. — 9/5/64 (Ukpabang Students' Union file).
- 8 See Letter from I.U. Iyanam, Secretary-General, ODU to E.E. Bassey President-General, Effiat/Mbo Union, *Effiat/Mbo Union - Oron Union Relationship* 13/12/65.
- 9 See copy of letter from E.E. Bassey — President-General, Effiat/Mbo Union to Secretary-General, ODU, 10/12/65.
- 10 I.U. Iyanam to E.E. Bassey, cited above.
- 11 Letter from Mr O.E. Ntekim, Branch Secretary, Enugu to the Secretary-General, ODU on occasion of the 1966 conference, 12/12/66.
- 12 Minutes of the mass meeting of the Chiefs and people of Oron held at the Methodist Church Hall, Oruko, 5/3/55.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 See conveners address delivered by Mr E.J. Ndekhedehe, President ODU Enugu Branch, presented at the revival meeting, - 27/12/81 and also minutes of the meeting.
- 15 "Revival memorandum" from Oron Students in University College, Ibadan to the Secretary-General, Oron Union Revival Committee, April 1962. Signed by I.U. Iyanam.
- 16 See handwritten minutes of this meeting held on the 7th of July, 1972.
- 17 Rev Etim J. Ndekhedehe - Address delivered at the opening session of the resumed annual conference of the Oron Union - held at the Customary Court Hall Akani-Obio, Oron, 26/12/62.
- 18 Release titled "the grievances of the Oron people against the Methodist Church".
- 19 *Ibid.*

- 20 Dated 14th June, 1967 signed by I.U. Iyanam, Secretary-General Oron Union.
- 21 Welcome Address presented this day 2nd of Sept., 1967 by Oron Union to Dr Ubani Ukomah signed by I.U. Iyanam Secretary-General. M.O. Ani, Secretary to the Military Government in 1969 also acknowledged contributions to the Iquita Hospital etc.
- 22 Iquita Hospital; 1966 Conference etc. dated 17th November, 1966 and signed by I.U. Iyanam, Secretary-General, Oron Union. See also "collection of Iquita Hospital Levies" dated 17th November, 1966 also by Iyanam, I.U. Also, Oron Union Accounts and Secretary-General's Reports - 1966-1969.
- 23 For details, see the Annual Financial Reports of the Treasurer for the years 1973-1983.
- 24 See minutes of Executive Committee Meetings and Annual Conferences, 1973-1983 for details.
- 25 See Annual Conference held at Oduonum-Oruko, December 23 and 24, 1976, *Summary of Conference Proceedings*, pp. 2-3.
- 26 Enwang Community to President, Oron Development Union, March 26, 1977.

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## The Burden of Distinct Identity and the Politics of Self-Determination

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**N**O account of the development of Oron can be regarded as complete without retelling, however tentatively, the heroic struggle of the Oron people to preserve their distinct identity and to arrange the political and administrative environment in such a manner that that identity would be preserved and sustained. Partly thrust on them by the historic circumstance of being a distinct minority almost surrounded by the more populous Ibibio majority, this concern permeated all activities in Oron from the colonial period to the demise of the Second Republic in December, 1983. It influenced the political sympathies and alignments of the people, the choice of spokesmen in the legislative houses, the activities of the Oron Union from its inception in 1925, and so on. Finally, this concern has shaped and will continue to shape the attitude of the Oron people towards the question of state creation as a solution to the ever sensitive minority question in the present Cross River State, in particular and Nigeria as a whole.

Between 1951 and the outbreak of the Civil War, the most conspicuous, effective and popularly acclaimed spokesman for Oron causes in the political arena was Barrister Oyokunyi Otu Ita. Though he shared the political limelight with such bossom political friends as O.J. Eminue, and Inyang E. Nyong, and distinguished opponents as Dr E.A. Esin, S.K. Okpo and E.I. Nkereuwem, few will contest the fact that Ita was, especially between 1951 and 1960, the political "boss" in Oron. He dominated the political process by his sheer force of character, his penchant for truth, his uncompromising detestation of corruption in all its

facets, and above all, his championing of the rights and welfare of the minorities, his Oron people included.

Born on November 11, 1916 at Ekim, educated in mission schools in Oron, once a teacher, a civil servant in the printing Department, and finally sponsored to undertake legal studies in Britain by the Oron Union in the 1940s, Ita devoted his entire political life to championing the cause of the down trodden minorities in the Eastern Nigerian House of Assembly. All agree that he was imbued with a sense of service to his birth place and that he served them with "a high standard of morality and thoroughness," though some blame the backwardness of Oron in these years on his uncompromising opposition to the N.C.N.C. government of the day.<sup>1</sup> None, however, questions his sincerity, his commitment to hardwork, his passion for truth and his refusal, in his politically active years, to be lulled by spoils of office and promises of higher position into abandoning the cause of the minorities of Eastern Nigeria. Above all, Ita's willingness to put his legal training in court at the service of the masses, often without prior consultation and without charging a fee, endeared him to the masses of the Oron people. When, for example, in the 1950s, the Chairman of the Okobo/Oron County Council served improper retrenchment notices on 29 labourers of the Council, Ita took up their cause, without consultation and charges. He wrote to the Chairman:

I believe that your Secretary realizes to the full that those 29 labourers whose Christmas he has marred this year are all married or nearly married men. If your Council supports this type of administration, we should all get ready for hell when you have your independence. Let me add that neither the notices of retrenchment nor those of suspension are in legal form. If you want to free your Council from trouble, give the labourers their proper notices according to law or else, you will receive notice to be sued by them. For it is unthinkable that I should live and see 29 unfortunate people treated so shabbily by a man whose only claim to senior services and fat salary was his irresponsibility.<sup>2</sup>

Needless to say, the labourers were called back. Such was Ita's passion for justice and the plight of the peasants and farmers! Indeed, according to one Asuquo Ntekim, Ita's contemporary and friend, Ita firmly believed that "a lawyer must never be isolated from the masses, for their welfare must always be his supreme concern."<sup>3</sup> Ita was often quoted to have argued that he regarded serving the Oron masses as "one way of returning their kindness for training me."<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising that he called his Chambers at 55 Becroft Street, Calabar, 'Ukpabang Chambers'.

Ita further endeared himself to the masses of the Oron people by undertaking educational tours to Oron villages when he returned from England. As he fondly told his audiences, Ita believed that "the well-

being of a nation, does not depend on the abundance of its revenue, nor on the beauty of its public buildings, but consists on its men of education and character." This author was a beneficiary of Ita's lecture at the Okoko Methodist School in 1954 when Ita tried, however unsuccessfully, to encourage him to go to Government College, Umuahia which Ita regarded as the model school in Eastern Nigeria rather than the West African People's Institute, Calabar, to which he had been admitted. In these lectures, Ita urged parents to make sacrifices, whatever their costs, to educate their children. Also, in the numerous newspaper articles he published, Ita urged government to relieve poor parents by granting scholarships to children of poor parentage. For the children, Ita advocated hard work and self discipline as absolutely essential for educational excellence. For many an Oron parent who had come to regard education as the greatest gifts they could bestow on their children, Ita's lectures were received with great enthusiasm and appreciation. Indeed, Ita was held up by several Oron parents as a symbol of what a man of humble origins could achieve by dint of hard work and persistent striving.<sup>5</sup> They simply adored the man!

Ita's reputation as an anti-corruption crusader during the crisis in the Oron Union as well as his use of traditional dances of *etembe* and *afiaha oyid* also redounded to his political advantage. This political style provided his ardent followers with a source of entertainment and a deep sense of participation. Even on the soap box where he delivered his campaign speeches "in a neat and gentlemanly manner," Ita took care, according to one-time political opponent, Dr E.A. Esin, not to injure the reputation of his opponents. Indeed, Ita's campaigns were major sources of entertainment for Oron villages and this won him many admirers. The extent of the admiration of the Oron people for their "Oyokunyi" is indicated in a folk song which was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. It went thus:

Ning onwi okodoho ku oro m'edinyi lawyer (3times)  
 (who said Oron would not have a lawyer)  
 Lawyer Ita oke lawyer Udoma Uwa-aya  
 (Lawyer Ita defeated Lawyer Udoma)

When he returned from England in 1948, Ita was convinced that his legal training had properly equipped him "to face the battle for our freedom." When the first general election to the Eastern House of Assembly was held in 1951, Ita contested and won as an independent candidate. However, while in the House, he worked closely with the opposition parties of National Independence Party (N.I.P.), then the United National Independence Party (U.N.I.P.) which was a fusion of

the N.I.P. and the United National Party (U.N.P.) in 1953, and lastly, from 1954, as a member of the Action Group which became the main opposition party in the Eastern House of Assembly. This "opposition mentality," as many of Ita's political detractors described it, was conditioned by the singular conviction of Ita that the opposition Action Group, not the N.C.N.C. government party was the only party committed to ensuring self determination for the Eastern Minorities in state creation. As one informant recalls, "He refused to join the N.C.N.C. He said this party would not identify itself with the aspirations of Oron people. He rather found Action Group which was led by Awolowo. He used to tell people that Action Group was the best party in the country. He also used to say that to join N.C.N.C. was to court slavery."<sup>6</sup> The Oron people doubtless accepted this interpretation of the future of Oron vis-a-vis the existing political parties and rewarded Ita with victories even in the face of intimidation by the Government party! Thus assured of the massive support of his people, Ita became the "Voice of Oron" in the C.O.R. State Movement which was the dominant political issue for the Eastern Minorities in the dying days of colonial rule.

### **The Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers State Movement (C.O.R.)**

As conceived by the protagonists, the COR State Movement sought to resolve the problem of domination of the Minorities in Eastern Nigeria by the Igbo Majority by constituting the Minority Provinces of Calabar, Ogoja (excluding Abakaliki and Afikpo Divisions), and Rivers into a State. The proposed State covered an area of about 47,03.3 Sq. Kilometers and had an estimated population (1957) of about 2,649,291.<sup>7</sup> As explained by O.O. Ita, the immediate event that ignited the agitation of the minorities was the return of Azikiwe to Eastern Nigeria after he lost an election into the Western House of Assembly in 1952. Zik's return precipitated a major crisis in the Eyo Ita led government of Eastern Nigeria as the majority Igbo wanted their kinsman, Zik, to assume the leadership of government. Even more distressing for the minorities was the absolute cunning and blatantly dishonest tactics employed by the Igbo leadership to oust Eyo Ita as Leader of Government Business and Minister of National Resources.<sup>8</sup> In the minds of most minority legislators, O.O. Ita included, the show of naked majority power was in consonance with the declared objectives of the Igbo leadership to plan "for our perpetual rule of the Federation." They recalled, for example, that the same Zik, as President of the Igbo State Union, had declared in 1949 that:

The God of Africa has specially created the Ibo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of these ages. The martial prowess of the Ibo nation at all stages of human history has enabled them not only to conquer others but also to adapt themselves to the role of preservers. The Ibo nation cannot shirk its responsibility.<sup>9</sup>

For most people in the minority areas of Eastern Nigeria, Eyo Ita's ouster was the beginning of the systematic march of the Igbo towards achieving that goal of perpetual domination of not only the region, but eventually, Nigeria, which another Igbo leader, C.D. Onyiema, had predicted would be accomplished in 1964! It was this naked injection of Igbo tribalism into the politics of Eastern Nigeria that convinced the minorities of the need for a separate state of their own.

As narrated by O.O. Ita, in the thick of the crisis, Dr E.U. Udoma and Chief Davies Manuel invited Dr Okoi Arikpo and himself to a meeting at Ikot Oku, Uyo where they discussed extensively the need to separate from the Igbo dominated Eastern Nigeria. O.O. Ita recalled in 1958 that "it was here that I declared my stand for the COR Movement, and since then, it has formed a part of my existence in Nigeria."<sup>10</sup> Soon thereafter, as recalled by Chief Andrew Bassey, another major protagonist of the COR idea, another meeting was convened at the residence of Madam Lizzie Okpo Ene in Enugu. It was at this meeting which was attended by, among others, O.O. Ita, E.U. Udoma, Okoi Arikpo, S.J. Una, Alvan Ikoku, Sir Louis Mbanefo and Andrew Bassey, that the COR idea was transformed into the COR State Movement.<sup>11</sup> Other meetings were convened in quick succession to work out acceptable political alignments in support of the Movement. It was finally decided that the two opposition parties, U.N.P and N.I.P, should merge to form the United National Independence Party (U.N.I.P) for better co-ordination of the campaign. Dr Alvan Ikoku, Dr E.U. Udoma, Prof Eyo Ita and O.O. Ita, among others, emerged as the leaders of the new party which was irrevocably committed to the fight for the COR State. Ita was among the leaders of the party that toured parts of the proposed state and the Western Cameroun in 1954 to rally massive support for the Movement. Soon, two newspapers, the *Eastern State Express*, owned by Udo Udoma and edited by an Oron son and relation of O.O. Ita, E.A. Anwana, and the *COR Advocate*, emerged as the major mouthpieces for the Movement. Ita's ideas about the proposed state were frequently carried in these papers as well as in the *Nigerian Eastern Mail* and *Daily Service*.

By January, 1954, the advocates of COR State were convinced that they had sufficiently sold the idea to their people and felt strong enough to present their request for a COR State in the form of a petition in the resumed Constitutional Conference in Lagos. This petition was co-sponsored by O.O. Ita and "two others" and highlighted the fears and

aspirations of the Eastern Minorities as well as other minorities in the country. Referring specifically to the problems of the Eastern minorities, the petitioners wrote:

We are therefore pleading that we be placed in a position of being helped by the Federal Government .... We firmly believe that only a state of our own, protected by the Federal Government of Nigeria can save us from slavery in our country.<sup>12</sup>

Understandably, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, who chaired the Conference refused to entertain discussion of the petition, claiming that "these questions were not on the agenda for 1954 and must be raised at the next Conference." The delegates from the minority areas were however satisfied that they had served notice on the nation and alerted everybody to the importance of state creation in solving the problems of the minorities in the country.

On return from Lagos, Dr E.U. Udoma invited the minority delegates and leaders to a strategy meeting in Calabar to plan for the impending 1957 Constitutional Conference in London. Soon after, the leaders of COR State Movement undertook rather extensive tours of their area to strengthen the faith of their people in the idea. Ita, the "Voice of Oron" was conspicuous in these tours. As a member of the Central Executive Committee of the Movement, Ita worked with the other fourteen members to draft a Memorandum on the issue for the 1957 London Conference. When the Conference finally convened on May 23, 1957, the Memorandum was presented by the five delegates who represented the COR area, among them O.O. Ita.

The equivocation, vacillation, and hesitancy that characterized the British Government handling of the fears of the Minorities of Nigeria need not detain us here. As is well known, the Conference decided to set up the Henry Willink's Commission to look into the fears of the Minorities in Nigeria. More specifically, the Commission was

- (1) To ascertain the facts about the fears of minorities in any part of Nigeria and to propose means of allaying those fears whether well or ill-founded.
- (2) To advise what safeguards should be included for this purpose in the Constitution of Nigeria.
- (3) *If, but only if*, (emphasis mine) no other solution seems to the Commission to meet the case, then as a *last resort* (emphasis mine) to make detailed recommendations for the creation of one or more states.<sup>13</sup>

Understandably, the delegates from the Minority areas to the London Conference were apprehensive though hopeful about the outcome of the Commission's work. Writing in the *Eastern State Express* on June 29, 1957, O.O. Ita observed:

In May 1957 I was sent to Britain as a delegate of the COR State Movement to tell the British public what the minorities in Nigeria feel about the so-called freedom

without their security. I was not alone in my mission and I am glad to report that our task was well done .... Thank God I am spared once more to be on my desk, especially at the time great decisions are expected from the Colonial office.<sup>14</sup>

Ever the optimist, Ita charged all Nigerians to be honest and sincere in their thoughts and actions and to have faith in the righteousness of the demands of the minorities. The next few months were spent preparing a comprehensive memorandum which highlighted the grounds for the agitation for the COR State. The document charged the Igbo with complete domination and absolute control of the Executive Council, the Legislature, Public Service Commission, the Public Services, the Statutory Boards and Corporations, the Judiciary, the Legal Department and the Police Force of Eastern Nigeria. It charged that the Igbo monopolized the scholarship awards in the region and viewed this as "a subtle attempt by the Scholarship Board dominated by Ibos to perpetuate the dominance of Ibos in the Region's Public Service." The Igbo, it further stated, monopolized the contract awards, the loans and the entire economy of the Region. Worse still, it pointed out cases of massive corruption involving Igbo public officers and concluded that "the Ibos have no regard for public morality." In contrast:

In the C.O.R. area as in other civilized parts of the world, lapses in public morality are rigorously checked not only by exposing the evils of dishonest people but also by denying such people of any claim to leadership. That is why the C.O.R. area people cannot recognize the leadership of Ibos since it is based on corruption which is cherished only by Ibos in the Region.<sup>15</sup>

O.O. Ita participated in the drafting of this Memorandum.

Finally, the long awaited Willink Commission arrived to hold its public sitting at the High Court building in Calabar on January 8, 1958. People from all walks of life, including Oron Chiefs and traditional rulers attended. Oral evidences were taken from, among others, Dr E.U. Udoma, O.O. Ita, and the Action Group, who all supported the creation of states in Nigeria, in general, and the COR State in particular. Quite understandably, the Igbo leadership opposed the creation of the COR State which would have deprived them of the rich agricultural resources of the minority areas as well as leaving them landlocked. Ostensibly, however, they claimed to have opposed creation of the state because it was "inspired by a negative dislike for the Ibo tribe."

As is well known, the Commission did not recommend the creation of any state in the country, though it recognized the fears of the minorities as genuine. When the minorities pressed the issue further at the 1958 September-October London Constitutional Conference, the country was given the choice between state creation and the delay of Independence or

Independence in 1960. Most Nigerians preferred independence, thus sweeping the issue of state creation temporarily under the carpet.

The leaders of the minorities were very disappointed. Dennis Osadebay, leader of the Mid-West State Movement, confessed that their only consolation was the fact that "the new Nigerian Constitution would contain provisions for the creation of new regions."<sup>16</sup> The Oron people shared in this general disappointment. But their leader, O.O. Ita, assured them that "there is no going back on the subject. States must be created to stamp out tribalism in our politics."<sup>17</sup> Until his retirement from active politics in 1962, Ita continued to advocate the creation of states as the only way of ensuring greater loyalty to the nation rather than to ethnic groups in Nigeria. Throughout his politically active years, the Oron people stood firmly and unflinchingly behind O.O. Ita because he articulated their political aspirations and understanding of the Nigerian political complexion. Even when he became a magistrate in 1962 and could not therefore be involved in partisan politics, Ita's faith in the justness of the cause of the minorities remained unshaken; and according to Chief Andrew Bassey "his role was then more of advisory than that of an active participant." Ita's vision of a Nigerian nation made up of more states to protect the interests of the minorities could not materialize until the Civil War broke out. Exactly forty days after the historic creation of states by the military authorities on May 27, 1967, Ita passed away somehow vindicated in his conviction that "if Nigeria is to remain a united country, all ethnic groups should be given chances of political freedom."<sup>18</sup>

### **And the War came**

The army intervention in Nigerian politics in January 1966 and the accompanying events that led to the Nigerian Civil War left their marks on the political landscape of Oron, as elsewhere. Like in many Nigerian communities caught in the trauma of these events, there was an initial period of confusion about what to do. As the events unfolded, however, and the threat of Biafra secession was becoming a reality, the Oron people, like other minorities in the Eastern Region, concluded that the situation offered the best opportunity for the realization of their long cherished dream of having a State created for the minorities. As the storms gathered, Oron students and staff at the University of Ibadan joined others from the Calabar Province to warn against the threat to the country's survival from the activities of their Igbo colleagues who, without consulting them, were making "various representations, purporting to advance the views of the entire people of 'Eastern Nigerian Origin' in

the above named institutions, relating to the position of Eastern Nigeria as a whole in the present political situation in the country." In that Confidential and Private Letter to Lt. Col. C. Odumegwu-Ojukwu in September, 1966, they declared, among other things, as follows:

- (i) The country should remain as One Nation, and that there should be no question of disintegration or secession
- (ii) For unity and greater stability in Nigeria, more states should be created
- (iii) The Old Calabar Province should constitute one of the states comprising Nigeria. This is the express wish of the people of the Calabar Area whose right to self-determination must be respected.<sup>19</sup>

This stance continued to be maintained and popularized especially after the leaders of the Old Calabar Province, including E.O. Eyo, S.J. Umoren and Andrew Bassey managed to escape from Eastern Nigeria and took up residence in Lagos. Indeed Ibadan and Lagos soon emerged as the major theatre for waging the propaganda war of the minorities against the impending Biafra.

Oron residents in Ibadan and Lagos played a prominent role in these propaganda efforts which did a lot to spur the Federal Government into breaking Nigeria into twelve states.

In January 1967, for example, the articulate and extremely effective pressure group, the Old Calabar Students Movement, under the leadership of O.E. Uya, then a post-graduate student at Ibadan, made representations to the Head of State on the fate of the Eastern minorities trapped in Ojukwu's stronghold. After appraising the military authorities of the intolerable situation in the minority areas of the East, the students urged Gowon to "redeem his pledge to the nation and the world at large to the effect that 'there must be a definite commitment on the states question' in order to achieve 'normalcy and freedom from fear of domination by one region or the other' as a 'sine qua non' of a 'stable federation.'" Finally, they expressed

Our firm view that, having regard to the fact that our present national and bloody convulsion has its origin in the imbalance of political power as between Regions and tribal groups, the only "realistic and permanent solution" to the current problem is the reconstitution of the Nigerian Federation along Gowon's proposals i.e., creating at least eight federating states, all responsible to a Central Authority in Lagos.<sup>20</sup>

So touched and impressed was the Head of State and his colleagues that they invited the student leaders to a meeting at Doddan Barracks on February 18, 1967 at which Gowon, more or less confided in them his intention to announce the creation of new states, including their own soon!

An Oron son, then Barrister O.A. Esin, was in the Federal Government delegation to the Kampala Conference that tried to find a solution

to the crisis. It is not surprising, therefore, that when the twelve state structure was announced on May 27, 1967, Oron people, though under Igbo surveillance, went wild with joy. As recalled in a memorandum in 1970:

To the generality of Oron people who have been in the forefront of the struggling vanguard for the creation of a separate state for the minority people of the former Eastern Nigeria, it was a momentous occasion of great joy and relief. This was reflected in the spontaneous support and loyalty we gave to the cause of the Federal Military Government and the enthusiasm with which the Oron people welcomed the Federal troops of liberation into their area.<sup>21</sup>

The joy and sense of satisfaction at achieving the long struggle for state creation were, however, tempered by the reality of an impending war. Given its strategic location, the Oron area was expected to be a major theatre of any war. The agonies, devastation and tremendous losses sustained by Oron during the war were vividly captured in a memorandum they prepared for submission to the Commonwealth Documentary Film Delegation that visited their area in 1969 when the war was still on.

This impressive document first declared that "the over 320,000 Oron/Okobo people, forming an integral part of the South Eastern State of Nigeria, are *an entity* by themselves, quite distinct ethnically and culturally from the Ibos of the Central Eastern State." After tracing the history of their heroic struggle for self-determination from the time of the introduction of the Macpherson Constitution, they re-asserted that their right to self determination and ethnic survival was "inherent, natural, inalienable. . . and that we will never give up our autonomy within the context of One Nigeria." Besides, they continued, "when the Ibos conspired to declare secession on May 30, 1967, none of us was party to it." They opined that what the Igbos were rebelling against "is the existence of South Eastern and Rivers States, the mouths that fed them" and that "their rebellion had nothing to do with their claim that they were fighting for self-determination and survival."<sup>22</sup>

Even more important in this document was the long list of atrocities committed in the Oron area. According to the Oron people, these atrocities were committed by the Igbo during their occupation and when they were fleeing from the advancing Federal troops "because of our open support for the efforts of the Federal Government to keep Nigeria One." The first of these acts was the seizure in July, 1966, of all licensed guns and matchets from Oron people thus rendering them militarily powerless before the Igbo tribesmen in the area who were being "armed to the teeth." Secondly, there were cases of actual alienation of Oron land in places like Unyihe, Ebughu and Udung Uko where Igbo tribesmen were settled and where "the Igbo hierarchy proceeded to rename

places with Igbo ethnic terms." This was interpreted by the Oron people as "one of the most outstanding examples of Igbo plot to either completely assimilate or exterminate us." This same interpretation was given to the evacuation of the residents of Oron town, Eyo Bassey, Iquita, Uya Oron, Esuk Oron, Afaha Eduok and Ukpata. During the said evacuation which took place in August 1967, schools, homes, hospitals, government offices, and the Oron museum were plundered and pillaged. At the Methodist Boys' High School alone, the damage was estimated at over £37,000.00. Besides, during the rainy season of 1967/68, the occupying Igbo troops refused to allow the Oron people to farm and 50 people were killed at Udung Uko for defying this order which denied them of their means of sustenance. The soldiers commandeered everything - fish, crayfish, foodstuff, about 2,500 goats, sheep and poultry, bicycles, motor cars, and even human beings. Wives were openly raped before their husbands.

These atrocities were even more devastating when the Biafran soldiers began to retreat following the landing of Federal troops at Oron on March 17, 1968. In their flight, they mowed down jubilating Oron villages estimated at 25 at Ebughu, 44 at Atiabang, 5 at Uya Oron, 5 at Urue Ofong, 13 at Oyubia, 78 at Oyoku, 23 at Uboro Oro, and more than 104 at Okobo. Whole villages were burnt down. Equally devastating in terms of human life was the practice "whereby rebel soldiers went about in the nights to entice the civilians out by shouting the slogans - 'One Nigeria' and 'To Keep Nigeria One is a task that must be done'" Whenever people heard this, they would troop out to welcome the expected Federal troops. When they did this, the rebel soldiers would shoot them at sight. It was in this way, the document claimed, that 25 people were killed at Eyulo and Oruko and about 50 carried away to unknown destinations.<sup>23</sup>

These atrocities had the effect of galvanizing opposition to the Biafrans and solidifying the unity of purpose and action among the Oron groups in support of the Federal Government activities in the area. Indeed, they concluded their presentation to the Commonwealth visitors by declaring that "we will sink or swim with our South Eastern State and the Federal Military Governments. We know nothing about an empire called 'biafra' and will never support armed rebellion and secession of any kind in the Federal Republic of Nigeria!" These sentiments were translated into actual support in cash and kind for the Federal Armed Forces. Thus, the Oron communities donated £1,000 towards the Federal Armed Forces Comfort Fund in 1969. Similarly, the Oron community donated the sum of £4,700 to the Federal Government relief and

rehabilitation efforts as well as spending £2,060 on the reconstruction of the General Hospital, Iquita, which had been sacked during the war.<sup>24</sup> The whole-hearted support of the Federal War and Rehabilitation efforts by the Oron Community was clearly an appreciation of the Government's resolution of the problems of the minorities of the Eastern Region, a concern which had shaped the political behaviour of the Oron people since the 1950s. However, as it later turned out, the establishment of the South-Eastern State was to create yet other areas of disaffection which sought expression in the demand for Divisional status and lastly, agitation for a Cross River State.

### **The Demand for Oron Division**

Although the South Eastern State was officially established on May 27, 1967, and a Military Governor appointed, the Governor could not assume duties in Calabar since the area was still under the control of the rebels. Until March 1968, the new government operated from Lagos. As part of the preparations for his impending assumption of office in Calabar, the Military Governor, U.J. Esuene set up an Ad Hoc Committee or Study Group with the primary objective of informing "him of the magnitude of the task which he (was) expected to tackle on the assumption of duty in South-Eastern State." More specifically, the Committee was directed to make recommendations on:

- (i) the future political, constitutional, and administrative machinery for the South-Eastern State, and
- (ii) the economic and social problems and policies which would be pursued in the South-Eastern State.<sup>25</sup>

One of the issues that dominated the deliberations of the Committee, as recalled by the one of its members in 1970, was the debate over the whether the new State should adopt the Provincial or the Divisional system of administration. Advocates of the Provincial system, principally the Calabar Families Union in Lagos,<sup>26</sup> called for the division of the State into Four Provinces and that representation on all State Institutions should be on the basis of absolute equality. The majority of the members, however, supported a Divisional system of administration which, in their view, was the only system likely to enable "all sections to enjoy the full benefits of our hard-won self-determination." The Government subsequently endorsed this recommendation on the grounds that (i) the new system would make the administration of the State less cumbersome, less bureaucratic and more economical than the existing system, (ii) the system was the best to preserve the ethnic identities of the basic units of the State, (iii) the fear of any particular group having un-

due advantage over any other group, or other groups put together, would be removed. As the government argued,

The compelling consideration is that each division will under the new system be in a position to manage its internal affairs without the fear of being swarmed by other larger groups within the Province.<sup>27</sup>

In a view that would set the tone for the ethnic competition in the State, the government rejected the idea of equal representation by all Provinces in all institutions in the State, arguing that:

If, for example, there are six yams to be shared between two families, one with ten members and the other with five, common sense dictates that if three yams are given to each family, the chances are that one family will starve and the other will be too amply fed.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, it was the same kind of argument that the Igbo who had recently been accused of using their numbers to dominate the Eastern Region had advanced! This, as we shall see, was the immediate cause of the irrational ethnic competition that came to characterize the politics of the South-Eastern State, later renamed Cross River State!

The Oron community took advantage of the public debate over the administrative structure of the new State to press their claim to a separate Division. It should be recalled that agitation for a separate Division for the Oron people had surfaced in 1949 when R.A. Stevens observed that "the Orons were extremely unwilling to be dragged into a predominantly Ibibio (Eket) unit." The request for a separate Divisional status had also been made immediately after the military intervention in 1966. Indeed, the Eastern Nigerian Government Edict No. 33 of 1966 had granted Divisional Status to Oron - but this could not be implemented because of the war situation.

As early as July 1968, the people of Oron in a Memorandum addressed to the Military Governor of the State congratulating him on "your merited appointment as Governor of our State," re-opened their claim. Noting that "we as a people have shared fully in the hardships" of the recent past, the chiefs and people of Oron drew attention to a number of problems confronting them, most especially "Oron identity and Request for Oron Division." They rejected the proposal for a Provincial structure of government on the grounds that the experiment with the system in the recent past had shown that (i) it was wasteful of manpower and financial resources, (ii) it entailed a lot of duplication of effort in social, economic, and political development. In fact, they continued, "there were evidences to show that the Provincial system tended to retard the rate of progress, especially in the then Minority areas which frequently came under the political vendetta of successive N.C.N.C. Governments

of the then Eastern Nigeria." Accordingly, they observed that in a state whose major pre-occupation should be "how to husband all our human and material resources to the satisfaction of all the sections of the South Eastern State Community," the Divisional system was more likely to help all sections "enjoy the full benefits of our hard won self-determination." Quite understandably, the memo reminded the Governor that Oron was "a distinct tribe" and expressed distress to find that, contrary to the situation before the creation of the South-Eastern State, "in recent publications of the South Eastern State we have been denied recognition as a separate tribe." They averred that this apparently deliberate policy of the new government was calculated to deny the Oron people "the fair share in the scheme of things - in appointments, siting of industries and other development projects and in the provision of government amenities." Assuming that new Divisions would be created, they requested "your Excellency to consider the creation of an *Oron Division* amongst others in the State."

Similar points had earlier been made in separate memoranda to the Governor by the Oron Communities in Calabar, Ibadan, and Lagos.<sup>29</sup> The Calabar Memorandum insisted that:

For quite a long time now Oron people have been feeling ill-at-ease and much concerned about the administrative inconveniences and undesirability of running the present Eket Division as a single unit.

It went on to emphasize that "we take it that Your Excellency is not unaware of the fact that Oron constitutes a distinct ethnic community in its own right; it is not, and has never been, a part of any other tribal group in Nigeria for that matter." The Ibadan memorandum, titled "Climate of Opinion" and authored by an undergraduate at Ibadan University, Nnenim Isangedighi, condemned the proposed division of the State into 20 Divisions (Abak, Ikot Ikpene, Calabar Urban, Western Calabar, Akpabuyo, Biase, Oron, Eket, Uyo, Ibesikpo, Western Nsit, Iman, Ibekwe, Itu, Ikom, Obudu, Obubra North, Ugep and Agbo Clan, Ogoja North and Ogoja South) as unwieldy and economically wasteful. He suggested the creation of only two additional Divisions (Oron from Eket, and Iman Nsit from Uyo) to bring the total number of Divisions in the State to 13. He concluded "As a citizen of the State from Oron, I have noticed that no Oron man has so far earned an appointment to a State Office."<sup>30</sup>

The pressure for the creation of Oron Division was kept up in a series of other activities and memoranda. The "humble request" for Oron Division was re-iterated in all the memoranda written to receive State Commissioners of Agriculture (13-14th November, 1968), Finance and

Economic Development (January 21, 1969), Home Affairs and Information (January 31, 1969), and Attorney General and Commissioner for Justice (August 30, 1969). Apparently, all these requests had the sympathetic ear of government. At a meeting with the Secretary to the Military Government, in 1968, for example, the chiefs of Oron were assured that a claim to a separate Division such as they had made "would not be overlooked but would be given the consideration it deserved." Similarly, a Memorandum from the Calabar Families Union, Lagos, and the report of the Committee set up by the government to investigate the administrative structure for the State in 1968 had recommended Oron among the 20 Divisions it proposed for the State. Besides, the Mbong Ikpaisiong Ibibio Ye Annang, in an address presented to Governor Esuene on his visit to Uyo in June 29, 1968, supported that Eket Division be split into 3 divisions, namely, Oron, Ubium and Eket. And most importantly, the Government Policy paper on the Administrative Structure of the South-Eastern State already referred to had quoted rather extensively from the Oron Memorandum in support of a Divisional arrangement as being representative "of the numerous representations which have been received from those who advocate the abolition of the (provincial) system." The Oron community was accordingly optimistic about the achievement of their objective when government announced the setting up of the Akilu Commission in January, 1969.

Unfortunately, the Commission did not start work in April as promised. Rumour started to circulate that "because of the strong opposition by some important personalities in Government circles against the requested Oron Division," the Commission might be delayed and even suspended indefinitely. This alarmed the Oron communities who claimed that the rumoured indefinite suspension was "to enable Eket section of the present Eket Division to continue to have undue advantage over Oron/Okobo in appointments and in the distribution of State amenities." The Oron community both at home and in the various urban centres became rather hysterical. The Oron Community in Lagos, for example, requested audience with the State Governor who was then in Lagos on April 14, 1970. At that meeting at which the Oron Community was represented by E.O. Ita (Leader), E.O. Ebiefie, E.E. Eneyo, E.B. Etienam (Spokesman), Ambe Bassey, E.E. Esang and N.I. Nkereuwem (Secretary), the Community re-stated their demand for a separate Division on the basis of Oron distinction, population, and above all

That Oron being administered as part of Eket Division, almost all Government amenities and patronage allocated to the division go to the Eket section of the Division - a situation which is most unfair to the Oron people.<sup>32</sup>

On his part, the Governor assured the delegation that "the creation of Oron Division is a deserving case and I have no doubt that Oron Division will be created in time." Thus assured, Oron people were most confident and enthusiastic when Alhaji Akilu arrived in Oron to take oral testimony on August 31st, 1970.

Before the arrival of the Commission, the Oron communities at home, Calabar, Ibadan and Lagos had submitted separate memoranda in support of their publicly declared agitation for the creation of Oron Division. The main Memorandum endorsed on behalf of Oron Chiefs and the entire people by Chiefs O.U. Akan, M.A. Eyo, Bassey Mbedekong, and Charles Ante, Messrs O.J. Eminue, A.M. Uting, O.E. Etifit and I.U. Iyanam (Secretary), called for the splitting up of the State into 14 Administrative Divisions. It observed that "a 14 division structure not only appears realistic but also, at least in terms of population, gives a feeling of fairness and equality. Each one of our 14 divisions contains people with cultural homogeneity - common customs and traditions, common cultural heritage, common ethnic characteristics and common economic organisations." In pressing their claim for Oron Division, the document stressed, among other things, the distinct historical experience of the Oron people; the fact that the then existing Eket Division with a population of over 754,000 was too large and unwieldy to be effectively administered for the economic and social advancement of its two major component units - Eket and Oron; that the youthful, virile population of about 273,071 (excluding Okobo) in Oron was capable of sustaining a Division; that existing educated manpower and economic potentialities were such to enable Oron stand "firmly on its feet"; that the revenue base was adequate as shown by the fact that the proposed Oron Division from 1962 to 1967 contributed more than 56% of the revenue raised from Eket Division; that the area was potentially rich in petroleum as confirmed by recent geological investigation carried out by Shell-BP company; and finally, that the request for Oron Division enjoyed the support of all Oron people and had been openly endorsed by different government functionaries in the recent past. The document concluded by insisting that "The people of Oron severally and jointly wish and desire their Division to be known and called Oron Division *only*." This was calculated to reject the designation of Okobo/Oron which was being canvassed in certain quarters.<sup>33</sup>

The memoranda from the Oron Communities in Calabar, Ibadan, and Lagos re-inforced the above demand. The Calabar document, however, advocated 13 Divisions instead of the 14 proposed by the home memorandum. Significantly, too, while the home branch document did

not include Okobo in the proposed Oron Division, the Calabar memorandum did. It further drew attention to the position of Oron as a natural "Sea Port, the terminus of a long network of roads connecting and leading to other parts of the Federation," in support of the argument for viability. It insisted that "the case for a separate division for the people of Oron is so glaring and popular that it has received the blessings and support of people who cannot, by any stretch of imagination, be said to be direct beneficiaries of or have vested interest in its implementation." In view of the above, the memorandum concluded that the case for Oron Division was "a clear, clean and straightforward case" and that "even if the decision is to create only one additional division in this State, that one division should be ORON DIVISION."<sup>34</sup>

The case for Oron Division was of course so glaring that most Oron people regarded the visit of the Sole Commissioner as an occasion for great festivity and merriment. August 31st was more or less a day of festivity in Oron. All markets were closed and business came to a standstill. The Sole Commissioner was himself surprised at the large crowd that gathered at the Commission venue for oral testimony. Indeed, the two issues that dominated the hearings were the inclusion of Okobo in the proposed Oron Division and the boundary of the Division in the riverain areas.

In his oral evidence, I.U. Iyanam, the spokesman for Oron, outlined the basis for the demand for Oron Division as indicated above. He added a catalogue of the monopolistic tendencies of the Eket section of the existing Eket Division which had tended to deny the Oron people their fair share of government positions and amenities. Above all, he insisted that Okobo should *not* be included in the proposed Oron Division. This last point was softened by the presentation of the veteran administrator, Chief A.M.E. Mba, who spoke on "The Origin of the Oron People." The presentation sought to justify the creation of Oron Division on two grounds, namely, the historical distinctness of the Oron people which should be respected, and the potential viability of the proposed Division which had contributed "56% of the Eket County Council revenue, (and) . . . more than a quarter of the building materials used in putting up council buildings at Oniong-Nnung-Ndem-Awa and Ubium." On Okobo, he admitted that "Okobo is a separate group north of Oron district" and that the two groups had remained "peacefully with no visible misunderstanding" throughout their association in one administrative unit since 1947. He concluded: "It is now left with them if they choose to remain in Oron divisional status."<sup>35</sup> The Okobo group had in fact submitted a memorandum to the Commissioner in which they

requested a separate Division of their own mainly on grounds of discrimination against them by the more numerous Oron people. However, they did not press their claim. As the Sole Commissioner observed in his report:

The people of Oron put to the Commission the view that if the people of Okobo wish to go on their own they had no objection to that area being made a Division separate from Oron. The people of Okobo however evinced no strong desire for separation from Oron/Okobo.<sup>36</sup>

The Commissioner, consequently, had no difficulty in recommending the creation of Oron Division, "especially as both the people of Eket and those of Oron/Okobo strongly support this plan."

More tentatizing for the Commissioner, however, was the adjustment of the Divisional boundary between Eket and Oron. At the Commission hearings the Eket people, for the first time, made a claim to the areas of Stubbs and Widenham Creeks "now lying in Oron County." The relevant Section of the original White Paper on the Report read as follows:

The fourth case concerns the areas of Stubbs and Widenham Creeks. The Commissioner does not see the claim for these areas, which was hotly contested before him by spokesmen from Eket and Oron as a boundary dispute but a dispute over ownership which should be examined by another tribunal. As the areas lie within the proposed Oron-Okobo Division they should be administered as part of this Division but the claim of Eket over the areas should be settled in Court. *The Government accepts this recommendation.*

Rumour has it that this acceptance alarmed powerful Eket elements in government who feared that the loss of the oil rich lands would deprive them of substantial revenue. They thus brought pressure to bear on government over which they had a controlling influence. The original white paper was thus hurriedly withdrawn but not before several copies had disappeared. Thus, when the new White Paper was published, Section 23, which now appeared on page 9 read as follows:

The fourth case concerns the area of Stubbs and Widenham Creeks. The Commissioner does not see the claim for these areas, which was hotly contested before him by spokesmen of Eket and Oron as a boundary dispute but a dispute over ownership which should be examined by another tribunal. *Government finds as a fact that the area of Stubbs Creek does not lie within the area of the proposed Oron/Okobo Division. If there is any area on which a dispute can arise it is that of Widenham Creek part of which falls within Eket and part within the new Oron Division.* (emphasis mine).

The Oron Community was alarmed. Petitions flooded the Governor's office following the release of the White Paper in which they contended that the portion of land on which the fishing villages comprising the Ine Development Area as shown in the recently released survey map of the

State was "within Oron Division." They pointed out that the alienation of Oron land to Eket was a flagrant disregard of the principles and spirit of the South Eastern State "Development Edict" No. 7 of 1972 which stipulated that the consolidation of territory occupied by a number of small villages into a development area can only be done if the territory belongs to one division. They pleaded, in vain, that the boundary dispute between Oron and Eket should be referred to another Commission as recommended by Akilu. In frustration, the Oron people hired the legal firm of Obafemi Awolowo to take the matter to court. The matter formed a major part of a Memorandum of welcome and congratulations by the entire Oron people to Lt. Col. Paul Omu on his assumption of duty as Military Governor of South-Eastern State, following the overthrow of the Gowon regime in 1975. In June, 1975 the Government set up an Administrative Inquiry comprising O.O. Duke (Chairman), A.O. Aqua, E.D. Ogolo, O.P. Nkereuwem and B.S. Umoh to look into the matter. The Committee held hearings at Ikot Ubo where the two sides made representations, each claiming ownership of the land. Significantly, the Eket representatives claimed that

Even though the colonial masters had drawn a line south of the Stubbs-Widenham water way which was regarded as part of the Eket/Okobo-Oron boundary, this boundary was never observed in the defacto administration of the area claimed by Oron. It only remained on paper.<sup>37</sup>

The Oron delegation, on the other hand, objected to the fact that the letter inviting them to "An Important Meeting" at Ikot Uboh had not spelt out what the matter to be discussed was. They suspected the motives of government and became unco-operative. It therefore proved impossible for the Committee to do its work. Significantly, however, the Committee observed that the source of the confusion was the "unfortunate" phrase in the Government White Paper - "part of which falls within Eket and part within the new Oron Division." The correct position, according to the Committee seemed "to be that the Widenham Creek falls within the area of the proposed Oron Division, but part of it is claimed by Eket Division."<sup>38</sup> Eventually, in October 1977, the boundary dispute between Eket and Oron was referred to the Olatawura Probe set up by the Cross River State Government. The Probe, however, was unable to resolve the issue and recommended that the matter be handled in the law courts. The land dispute, which most Oron people regarded as day-light robbery and theft of Oron land by the Esuene government of the South-Eastern State became a major issue in the alienation of Oron elements from the South-Eastern State and later Cross River State. Again feeling their interests threatened, the Oron Community joined the Calabar and Ogoja Com-

munities, who felt similarly aggrieved, in a new demand for a new state which would free them from "Ibibio domination and subjugation."

### **The Agitation for a new State**

When the twelve State structure for Nigeria was decreed into being on May 27, 1967 by the Gowon Administration, the minority areas of the country welcomed it as a momentous event. There was little doubt, however, that several communities regarded the new twelve state structure as an important first step towards removing, once and for all, the structural imbalance in the Federal set up that had frustrated proper and even development of the country. Many communities expected that the twelve state structure which was necessary for effective prosecution of the war would be reviewed at the appropriate time.

The main spark for the agitation to have another state carved out of the newly established South-Eastern State was the rejection of the proposal for a Provincial system of administration which for saw equal representation for the four Provinces of Ogoja, Calabar, Uyo and Ikot Ekpene discussed earlier. As the new South-Eastern State government began to settle down and recruit senior civil servants, it became obvious that, for understandable reasons, the majority of the posts were being filled by people from the Ibibio/Annang areas, since they were in the majority. The first pressure group to draw attention to the emerging pattern was the Calabar Families Union in Lagos. By October 1969, the Calabar and Ogoja Provincial Communities expressed their dissatisfaction openly and declared in a widely publicised memorandum that:

Faced with the stark reality of our pitiable circumstance that neither a change of leadership of the State nor any belated haphazard attempts to redress now can undo all the injuries we have suffered so far, or persuade our more populous Mainland brothers from always exploiting their numerical and manpower advantage over us, we deem it proper and timely to confide in you our earnest desire to have the South Eastern State split, at the appropriate time into two or three new states.<sup>39</sup>

This important Memorandum marked the beginning of the agitation for the creation of what was initially a Cross River and later a New Cross River State. As it finally emerged by the time of the visit of the Irikefe Panel in 1975, the agitation sought to constitute the minority communities in Oron, Calabar, and Ogoja into a Cross River State, leaving the majority Ibibio and Annang in a Mainland or Akwaibom State.

Oron people were intimately though not openly involved in the agitation for the new state right from the beginning. The major link between the Calabar Families Union and Oron Community in Lagos were Chief Bassey Effiom Bassey, National President of Okobo National Union and Chief Ambe Bassey both resident in Lagos who attended the meetings of

the Families Union regularly. It would appear, in retrospect, that the generality of the Oron people who had opposed the Provincial system of administration were more interested, through 1970, in pushing the case for Oron Division.

By 1971, however, the picture had changed. In a series of carefully co-ordinated activities at the major centres of Oron population in the country, especially Ibadan, Lagos, Calabar and Oron, came a near unanimous cry for the splitting up of the State into two, with Oron going with the other minorities into a Cross River State. In a telegram to the Head of State, the Oron Community declared that

it is our wish, and this wish is not negotiable, that Oron Division be included in the proposed Cross River State when the Federal Military Government is creating more states in Nigeria.<sup>40</sup>

This position was canvassed through all the villages in Oron, and by 1st October, 1974 when Gowon made his National Day Speech in which he announced the intention of Government to set up a machinery for the creation of more states, the agitation had achieved total unanimity in Oron. Gowon's speech was greeted, first by a congratulatory telegram, and then a memorandum endorsed by all the chiefs, community leaders and leaders of thought on Oron. It declared:

The people of Oron Division are unanimous in their struggle for self-determination to go the Cross River way and there exists no basis for any other option. If by any unfortunate circumstance either of omission or commission, Oron people are left out of the proposed Cross River State, then the only option open to the people of Oron is to demand irrevocably that the Division be administered as a "Federal Territory," a component part of the Federation.<sup>41</sup>

This was followed up with yet another memorandum in December, 1974, in which Oron people declared their conviction that, in the interest of even development and to generate a sense of belonging among the various minority groups in Nigeria, the country should be broken up into more states among which should be the Cross River State, comprising the Oron, Calabar and Ogoja communities. This agitation for a Cross River State dominated all activities in Oron until the arrival of the Justice Irikefe Panel on State Creation in 1975.

Following the setting up of the Irikefe Panel, the attention of the Oron community, like that of most communities, was focused on consultations with the other groups in the proposed state as well as the preparation of a comprehensive Memorandum. *The Case of Oron Division for the Cross River State* submitted by the Oron community was regarded in many quarters as one of the most comprehensive memoranda on the state crea-

tion issue. The preamble of the document spelt out the position of Oron Community on the state creation issue as follows:

1. The Oron, Okobo, Effiat, Mbo and Idua Peoples of Oron Division support the creation of more states for the continued peace, stability and even development of Nigeria.
2. Consistent with our publicly declared position since 1969, we reiterate our considered opinion that, in the interest of communal peace and even development of the Ibibio/Annang, Oron, Calabar and Ogoja Communities of the South-Eastern State, the present state should be split into two: an Ibibio/Annang State, and a Cross River State, the later to embrace the present South-Eastern State administrative divisions of Oron, Akamkpa, Obudu, Ogoja, Obubra, Calabar and Ikom.
3. Given the history of our association with the Ibibio/Annang peoples of the present South-Eastern State of Nigeria, we are unalterably opposed to any attempts to associate the peoples of Oron Division with the aforesaid groups in their proposed state.
4. We unhesitatingly declare our conviction and determination to be associated with the Calabar and Ogoja Communities in the proposed **CROSS RIVER STATE.**<sup>42</sup>

The memorandum then proceeded to review the different positions taken by the Ibibio/Annang people against the proposed splitting up of the State into two, including the claim of ethnic homogeneity of the Ibibio, Annang, Oron, and Calabar Communities; the argument that the state was too small to be split; the contention that the areas of the most pronounced agitation for the Cross River State enjoyed the highest concentration of government amenities, and concluded that:

- (i) The opposition to the breaking up of the present South-Eastern State had been articulated and publicized by the Ibibio/Annang dominant majority and that this was consistent with the attitude of most ruling majorities everywhere.
- (ii) Even some well-meaning Ibibio and Annang personalities had accepted the fact that the Oron, Calabar, and Ogoja Communities had genuine fears and grievances, although they would prefer to have these remedied through overdue reforms of the existing machinery of the State government.
- (iii) The aggrieved communities, Oron, Calabar and Ogoja, were firm in their commitment to the creation of a Cross River State as the **ONLY** acceptable solution to their fears and grievances.

With regard to the preferred option of the Oron people, the Memorandum insisted that that choice was consistent with the desire for self-determination of the Oron people as a distinct group in the State. It then outlined the basic grievances of the Oron people against the Ibibio majority in the State. These included: the alienation of Oron land to Eket, "the most significant commentary on the destructive and oppressive designs of the South-Eastern State Ibibio/Annang dominated administration against Oron Division"; attempts by the Ibibio to subvert Oron ethnic identity by refusing to recognize the time honoured practice of listing Oron in all government records as a distinct group, and the insistence on classifying them as Ibibio, a classification which, in their view "was designed to subvert our ethnic identity, corrupt our sense of peoplehood and alienate us from our historical roots;" discrimination against Oron people in government employment; and discrimination in the siting of industrial establishments. The section continued with the observation that

The behaviour, public utterances and general disposition of the "newly arrived" Ibibio majority in offices, markets, streets and social gatherings are completely at variance with the sense of respectability of our people.<sup>43</sup>

It concluded that:

The history of our association with the Ibibio peoples in the former Eket Division. . . before 1971 and within the present South-Eastern State clearly indicates that any political association with the Ibibio/Annang group will spell ruin and disaster for our peoples. We cannot be expected to participate in a political association that threatens our sense of peoplehood, degrades our manhood, insults our traditions and condemns us to eternal servitude in our own lands.<sup>44</sup>

Their bases for opting to join the Calabar and Ogoja Communities included: common cultural outlook as indicated by the use of Ekpe by all three groups as the instrument of traditional authority; long contacts through trade and intermarriages; the common experience of having been "exploited, dominated, insulted and shamelessly kicked about by the Ibibio/Annang majority" which has produced "in our communities a common resolve and determination to exercise our options for self-determination expressed in the proposed Cross River State of Nigeria"; and finally:

The most telling commentary on the basis of our option for inclusion in the proposed Cross River State is to be found in the democratic principle, i.e., the expressed popular wish of our people.<sup>45</sup>

The Oron Memorandum concluded in its last section that there were several unifying influences that would mediate competing ethnicity in the

proposed State and claimed that the proposed state was richly endowed with agricultural, industrial and mineral potentialities.

We have given a detailed description of the Oron Memorandum to the Irikefe Panel because, by and large, it remained the basic argument of the people throughout the state creation tussle. When Irikefe arrived in Oron on October 7, 1975, for the public hearing at Uruc Ofong, he was greeted by a tumultuous crowd which turned out to participate in what many regarded as a "referendum" on the state creation issue. The principal spokesmen for Oron on the occasion were: Professors O.E. Uya, and U.K. Enyenihi; and Chiefs Ambe Bassey and O.U. Akan. Justice Irikefe himself confessed openly that he was utterly impressed by the maturity of the Oron presentation, the genuineness of their cause, the absence of rancour, bitterness and hostility in their statements, and the general decorum and comportment of the Oron people on the occasion. As reported in the *Daily Times* of Saturday, October 11, 1975 under the title "Oron gets a part on the back," Justice Irikefe "praised the people of the town for showing maturity in their demand for the creation of, and their inclusion in the proposed Cross River State. He said the turn out at the public sitting and the orderliness with which they approached the issue showed that they knew *what they were doing*," (emphasis mine).<sup>46</sup> Needless to say that at the end of the hearings, the Oron people had no doubt that their request would be granted. Indeed, it has been said that the Oron presentation formed the major basis of the Irikefe Panel for recommending the creation of a Cross River State exactly as demanded by the Oron people, but with the capital at Ikom.

The Oron, Calabar and Ogoja Communities were thus stunned when the recommendation of the Panel was set aside and the Cross River State was not one of the 19 states approved for the country. Although the military authorities had insisted that "the creation of states, as far as this administration is concerned, is one time operation and future agitations on this matter will not be tolerated," the three communities jointly addressed "An Appeal to the Head of State on the Issue of the Non-Creation of the Cross River State" dated February 23, 1976. Because it illustrates more fully than any other document the depth of the commitment of the minority communities of the Cross River State to a new state as the surest guarantee for the groups, this Appeal is summarized rather fully below.

After congratulating the Head of State and his colleagues of the armed forces "for the bold and decisive manner in which you have handled the sensitive but extremely important issue of the creation of more states in our great country," the communities expressed the view that

Our euphoria on this occasion is however, punctured by the manner in which our heart-felt, long-standing and consistent demand for the creation of a Cross River State. . . was apparently ignored in the national political equation.

According to the three communities, their's was "perhaps the oldest, certainly the most consistent of all the demands for state creation." Against this background, they alerted the authorities to "our frustration and sense of alienation as a result of the non-creation of the state of our dream which has become the symbol of our political aspirations and our only salvation within the overall political contour of this country."

They insisted that they had regarded the visit of the Irikefe Panel to their area as a "Referendum" since "at no time in the political history of this country had any people been allowed to choose freely the type of political association they wanted." Thus, during the Irikefe sittings, they tried to convince the Panel and the Nigerian people that

Our case for our Cross River State was not based on spite or hatred against our more numerous Ibibio/Annang neighbours. Rather, it was our position, re-iterated with unwaivering consistency, that mutual trust and confidence between the Cross River State People and the Ibibio/Annang group had been so destroyed that continued political association was bound to adversely affect the development of the two communities.

The Appeal observed that since state creation was primarily designed to bring development nearer to the people, they had been denied such development because:

In the circumstance of the Cross River State as at present constituted, the even development process is bound to be stifled by certain structural imbalances between the Ibibio/Annang parts of the State, and the Oron, Calabar, Akamkpa, Obubra, Ikom, Ogoja and Obudu Divisions.

They insisted that while the majority/minority problem in the Cross River State could be blamed partly on bad administration, the main source of the problem was "population imbalance between the two component parts of the State." The fact that the Ibibio/Annang group constituted 2.3 million of the State's estimated population of 3.6 million meant that "the concentration of political and administrative power in the hands of the dominant majority was more or less/automatic." Furthermore, their sense of frustration was heightened by their knowledge that the Irikefe Panel had, in fact, recommended "the splitting up of the then South-Eastern State into a Cross River State, comprising Oron, Calabar, Akamkpa, Obubra, Ikom, Ogoja and Obudu Divisions (capital at Ikom) and a Qua Iboe State comprising the rest of the then South-Eastern State with its capital at Uyo." Worse still:

We are made to understand that it was in the tortuous process of political bargaining that the recommendation of this expert panel was set aside.

By setting aside the recommendation of the Panel, they continued, the government was insisting that "the two mutually antagonistic communities should continue to exist in a political union in the face of overwhelming evidence that such a union is impracticable" as it would "institutionalize perpetual friction." They prayed the Head of State not to regard their Appeal as "a future agitation" but "a humble appeal to the conscience of the nation." Finally, this tear-jerking Appeal concluded:

We trust that you will not dismiss off-handedly the sincere yearnings of the peace-loving people of Oron, Calabar, Akamkpa, Obubra, Ikom, Ogoja and Obudu who have always stood by this country in peace and war, who have utilized all constitutional means to address their grievances to what seems now to be an unconcerned audience. We hope that the Supreme Military Council will not consider the acceptance of the Irikefe Report as it affects us as a reversal of earlier decision but a recognition that our interests as Nigerians have tended to be ignored in the State creation exercise.

The Government, of course, remained tough and unmoved. But the tone of the appeal had clearly served notice that the Calabar, Oron and Ogoja Communities would be heard from again on the state creation issue. It is not surprising, therefore, that the representatives of the proposed state were in the forefront to smuggle the issue of state creation into the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly. When this happened, the Oron Community, as before, in a series of telegrams, paid advertisements and memoranda, re-iterated their unwaivering commitment to the creation of the Cross River State as the culmination of their historic struggle to maintain their separate identity and determine for themselves with whom they wanted to associate in a political arrangement. Though it is rather early to make any meaningful assessment of what transpired during the political nightmare of the Second Republic, it is clear that when that assessment is made it will show that this struggle for self-determination expressed in the creation of a Cross River State, comprising the Calabar, Ogoja and Oron communities, was the major determinant for the political preferences of the Oron people during the ill-fated Second Republic of Nigerian history.<sup>47</sup>

Two things stand out clearly in the involvement of the Oron people in the major events that took place in the country from the 1950s described above. First, all the groups in Oron were firmly united in the agitations for state creation and demand for Divisional status. This underscores the fact that by the 1970s, the sense of Oron peoplehood had been widely accepted by all the groups. Secondly, the dominant issue in all these agitations was the desire to create a political environment in which Oron identity as a distinct component unit in Nigeria would be respected and recognised in the allocation of government resources at the State level!

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## Notes

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- 1 Interviews with E.A. Anwana, Chiefs O.E. Isong, A.M.E. Mba, I.E. Nyong, J.B. Okon, Dr E.A. Esin and Chief (Dr) Okoi Arikpo, conducted by Asuquo Okon Esu, November 1980 and reproduced as appendixes in Asuquo Okon Esu, *Oyokunyi Olu Ita. The man and His Time* B.A. Project, University of Calabar. June, 1981, pp. 90-106.
- 2 O.O. Ita, *Private Papers*, p. 15 in the custody of E.A. Anwana at Oron.
- 3 Interviewed in October, 1980.
- 4 Interview with Etim Antai, 1980.
- 5 See O.O. Ita, "Education: An Address to Oron Youth," February, 1950; and "Education for our Children" *Eastern State Express*, June 18, 1951, p. 3.
- 6 Chief Siquo Osung, interviewed in July, 1980.
- 7 See *Memorandum Submitted to the Minorities Commission* (Calabar, St. Theresa's Press, 1957), pp. 1, 40.
- 8 O.O. Ita "Fortunes of the COR State Movement," and "Jos Convention Decision" in *Eastern State Express*, January 28, 1958, p. 3.
- 9 This widely quoted statement can be found in E.A. Ayandele, *The Educated Elite in the Nigerian Society* (Ibadan, 1974), p. 121.
- 10 Ita, "Fortunes of the COR State Movement," *op. cit.*
- 11 For details, see Andrew Bassey, *The People's Struggle for Survival* (Calabar, 1980).
- 12 O.O. Ita, *Private Papers*.
- 13 *Report of the Minorities Commission* (London, 1958), p. III
- 14 O.O. Ita, "Planning Government for COR State," *Eastern State Express*, June 29, 1957, p. 3.
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## Postscript

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### Ethnicity and Unity in the Cross River State

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**M**OST commentators on the social ethos and non-development of the Cross River State since its creation as the South-Eastern State in 1967 have concluded that disunity and irrational ethnic competition have been at the very centre of the problem. Ethnic hostility and suspicious have been so dominant in the affairs of the state that a one time Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calabar, Professor Emmanuel Ayandele, was compelled in 1978 to describe the Cross River State, with some touch of exaggeration, as "an atomistic society perpetually at war with itself." More recently, the state administration under, first Captain Edet A. Archibong and now Col. Dan Archibong, has concluded that ethnic disunity has been the main cause of the failure of the state to exploit her enormous human and natural resources for meaningful development. The administration has accordingly launched the War on Disunity as one of its major programmes and this has won the support of all citizens of the State from all walks of life. Ethnic heterogeneity and consequent ethnic competition and suspicions bordering on hatred have been identified as the most important problem which has plagued the Cross River State since its inception.

It has, however, also been insisted that ethnic heterogeneity *per se* is not necessarily antithetical to development efforts and that the problem of the State has arisen from lack of mutual respect and acceptance by the ethnic groups that inhabit the State for each other. This, it has been claimed, has surfaced in the form of efforts by the majority ethnic groups to usurp and monopolize positions in government as well as government amenities, and, in more recent times, threatening the time

honoured identities of the minority groups through scholarship calculated to show that "the Oron and Efik" in particular, derived from the Ibibio. The minority groups, on their part, have re-acted by insisting on their separate identities and peoplehood and sought to arrange the social and political environment to ensure their survival as distinct entities in the State. Tribal jingoism and bitter ethnic rivalry have thus come to dominate the politics and social interaction of groups in the State. This history of Oron suggests clearly that, given appropriate environment of peace and mutual respect for each other, different groups of people can live together and evolve in the process a sense of peoplehood that transcends their original kinship-based ethnicity.

As we have seen in this study, although the majority of the people now known as Oron derived their origins from the common region of Usahadit in the Nigerian/Cameroon border area, the groups arrived their present abode separately and through different routes. First to arrive were the Esu Oro group, who were soon followed by the Enwang, Ebughu, Ubuoho Ekung, Idua, Effiat, and Okobo groups. As the different groups fanned out to establish their different villages, they were forced to inter act with each other peacefully most of the time, although conflict over land occasionally threatened to pull them apart. Eventually, a number of historical processes occurred which cemented relationships between the groups. Among these was, firstly, residential proximity between villages of different groups, which, separated physically from their dan centres, began to relate to villages of different clans around them. It should be noted that apart from the Okobo, none of the other Oron groups inhabit a coterminous land mass. In the process of these interactions, each group came to develop mutual respect and acceptance for each other's idiosyncracies. With time the language of the numerically dominant group, *Nsingi Oro*, became spoken, with some variations by each of the groups. Eventually, a common cultural tradition, including common language, similar and common political, social, and religious institutions, developed and this facilitated interaction between the groups. The emerging social ethos was re-inforced by the economic system where a mutual dependency developed between the fishing, riverine communities and the predominantly farmine hinterland. The exchange of commodities led to the establishment of important markets in strategic positions which were patronized by *all* the groups. As these interactions reached mutually acceptable levels and the idiosyncracies of each group began to dissolve into a larger entity, the groups, except the Okobo, began to articulate a relationship based on the memory of a distant mutual ancestor, Oro, even though, as we have seen, no such ge-

ruine common ancestor for all the component groups existed. This fictive kinship, however, bound the groups together and gave them a distinct identity.

This process, which had reached great maturity by the end of the nineteenth century, was consolidated during the colonial period. The colonial administrative set up grouped all the Oron communities together, especially after 1947 when the Okobo Native Authority was made responsible to the Oron Native Authority. By 1951 when the Okobo/Oron County Council was created, this process of administrative consolidation had been completed. During the colonial period, also, the activities of the Christian Missions, especially the Methodist Mission which dominated the Oron region until recently, tended to strengthen the bonds of unity among the various groups. So did the building of roads and improvement in water transportation. The schools that were built brought children from the neighbouring villages together, regardless of their clan affiliation. Oron town which emerged as a Second Class Township during the period also pulled people from the different communities and beyond together.

The colonial period was also important in associating Oron with her immediate Ibibio western neighbour, Eket, in one administrative unit. This, as we have seen, was protested by the Oron people who felt threatened by the more populous Ibibio. The Oron communities began to see in this situation a common threat to their distinct identity. This was also compounded by the colonial environment which was potentially disruptive of Oron norms and values.

One response to the above situation was the formation of the Oron Union in 1925. Throughout the colonial period, the Union served as "the Voice of Oron" and tried to mediate and direct the colonial influence for the positive good of Oron. The decision of the Union to use the clans as the basis for sponsorship for its overseas scholarship award served to reinforce the loyalty of the various clans to Oron peoplehood.

In the dying years of colonial rule, the Oron people, like other minorities in the Eastern Region of Nigeria, saw the creation of the C.O.R. State as essential to preserve their distinct identity. They thus fanatically supported the C.O.R. State Movement. This fanatical support was transferred to the agitation for the South-Eastern State during the crisis that tore the nation apart. When the new State came into being and decided to re-arrange the administrative structure of the state, the Oron people unanimously demanded a separate Division of their own. Such a division, they argued, would not only free them from the domination of the Eket, but more importantly, would enable them preserve their

distinct identity. It is significant that in his report, the Sole Commissioner, Alhaji Ali Akilu, observed as follows on the demand for Oron Division:

Although the two areas [Eket and Oron] appear to be friendly on the surface, the demand apparently stems from discernible tension which it is not in the interest of future harmonious relation to expatiate on. Suffice it to say that future good relation will be better served by association at the centre which is provided by the State Government.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, as soon as the Oron people perceived that the South-Eastern State Government had failed to provide a "centre for better association," they joined with the Calabar and Ogoja communities to demand the creation of a Cross River State for the minority groups. Oron people were passionately fanatical about this demand because they sensed in the activities of the South-Eastern State Government attempts to "destroy our ethnic identity, corrupt our sense of peoplehood and alienate us from our historical roots." Not surprisingly therefore, any voice of individual dissent from the ranks as were occasionally heard during the struggle, drew an avalanche of public denunciations by Oron traditional rulers and community leaders on behalf of the Oron people. As we have already seen, the agitation for a Cross River State comprising the Oron, Calabar and Ogoja communities dominated all activities in Oron from 1970. It determined preferences for the political parties that contested the elections in 1979 and 1983. It is instructive to note that in 1979 when the U.P.N. sold itself as a party for state creation in Nigeria, it won greater support in Oron than its rival, the N.P.N. By 1983, however, the U.P.N. lost control of Oron mainly because it had allowed itself to be outstaged by the N.P.N. as the party which supported the creation of the New Cross River State. Besides, from 1979 to 1983, prominent Oron indigenes in the N.P.N. had used their centre stage position to advertise and project the distinctness of the Oron people in Nigeria beyond reasonable doubt. What is clear from these political preferences and choice of communities to associate with is that the Oron people sought associations within which their sense of peoplehood would be respected and taken into consideration in the allocation of government positions and amenities. Where these were not assured, they felt alienated.

This history of Oron thus suggests clearly that it is possible for people of different kinship backgrounds to evolve a common ethnic identity provided the associating groups do not see in the new identity threats to

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<sup>1</sup> *Akilu Commission of Inquiry: The Report*, Cabinet Office, Calabar, 19th September, 1970, p. 22.

their sense of peoplehood. In the larger context of Cross River State, the story shows clearly that the main source of disunity in the state has been the perceived threat to identities of the smaller groups from the larger groups and the failure to respect such identities and use them in the allocation of government resources and amenities. The lesson here is clear - peaceful and united political units seem to evolve best where the associating groups learn to accept and respect each other's idiosyncracies, especially identities supported by their separate histories.

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## A Note on Bibliography

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**R**ESearch into the history of Oron is in its infancy. This can be explained partly by the paucity of archival materials on the Oron area as well as by the general state of research into the past of the peoples of the Cross River Basin. Because of her early contact with the Europeans, the vast majority of the early European documents on the Cross River Region focus on the City States of Old Calabar. Although Oron is located on the west bank of the estuary of the Cross River, there is hardly an extensive mention of Oron in the pre-colonial European records. In the circumstance, one is forced to rely almost exclusively on oral sources for the reconstruction of the history of the Oron groups in the period before the end of the nineteenth century. The history, however, is not poorer for this since all the groups have rather vivid though sometimes conflicting traditions about their origins, migrations and their social, political, economic, and religious institutions before the advent of colonial rule.

Accordingly, we have relied rather heavily but cautiously on oral traditions for the reconstruction of the early period of Oron history. In this process, more than 500 informants were interviewed in the period 1976 to 1983. The informants were carefully selected to cover all the groups in Oron and included all the clan heads, the heads of the important villages, community leaders and recognized traditional historians of Oron.

The earliest European records on the Oron area were those left behind by agents of the Primitive Methodist Mission who arrived Oron in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The best known of these is W.J. Ward's valuable book, *In and Around Oron Country* (1911). Impressions of the Oron area by other missionaries were also recorded in the *Herald*, the official organ of the Primitive Methodist Church. Most

of the important documents on the mission can be found in the Methodist Mission Archives in London.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Intelligence Reports on the Oron area were compiled by R.N.O. Marshall, Jeffreys, and Shute. These reports, which are cited in the footnotes of this study, can be found in the National Archives both at Enugu and Ibadan. The Calabar Provincial Records (Calprof) at both places also contain useful pieces of information on the Oron area during the colonial period, especially on matters relating to the activities of the Native Courts. Equally useful in this regard are the 4 volume anthropological studies of *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* by Talbot.

The records of the activities of the Oron Development Union and the numerous releases issued by the Oron community through their traditional rulers, nominated spokesmen, and others on such matters as the creation of Oron Division, the Oron support for the South-Eastern State, and the agitation for the Cross River State are still in private hands. The fullest private collections are those of Chiefs I.U. Iyanam, A.M.E. Mba, O.E. Isong, and Professor O.E. Uya. The author is collecting the most important of these materials together to be deposited in the archives of the Oron Development Union to be housed in the Oron Civic Centre now nearing completion. The most important of these are cited in the footnotes in relevant sections of this work.

Published work on the Oron area are generally scanty. Etim Bassey Akan's little volume, *A History of Ebughu*, (Calabar, 1970), is a most welcome exception in this regard. Similar efforts at reconstructing the history of Oron Union by Chief O.E. Isong, Ahta of Oron and the history of the entire Oron people, "A Peep Into the Oron Past" by Chief A.M.E. Mba have remained unpublished. The story of the two important Methodist Secondary Institutions established in Oron is told in Mary Hanney Memorial School, *Fifty Years, 1909-1959: A Souvenir Handbook*, (Calabar, 1959), and Rev S.K. Okpo, *A Brief History of Methodist Boys' High School*, (Oron, 1980).

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As indicated earlier, this study has drawn rather heavily from unpublished B.A. Projects undertaken by students in the History Departments of the University of Calabar and University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The most important of these projects are cited in the relevant footnotes. The projects can be consulted in the University libraries at Calabar and Nsukka.

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