

THE AFAHA FACTOR IN THE RECONSTRUCTION OF AKWA IBOM HISTORY

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Abstract

The question of the common ancestry of the people of Akwa Ibom State who are currently segmented into various groups such as Ibibio, Annang, Oron, Eket, Obolo (Andoni) has been a subject of intense debate particularly since the early 1980s. In the process, two schools of thought have emerged. The first school of thought is the Pan-Ibibio origin, while the second school of thought maintains that the groups are of distinct origin. The stance has created and sustained unhealthy “ethnic” competition, thus, undermining the progress of the State. However, it is agreed by both schools that the groups migrated from a location known as Usak Edet in present-day Cameroon Republic. It should be pointed out that most of the commentators tend to create the impression that the groups mentioned above migrated with their current nomenclature. However, research has shown that while the forebears of the people of Akwa Ibom were in Usak Edet, they were known as Afaha and occupied a location known as *Edik Afaha*. Thus, the Usak Edet and Afaha theses permeate all the sections of Akwa Ibom State. This means that the names the groups now bear were acquired after their settlements. The paper maintains that the Afaha phenomenon should be adopted in the reconstruction of the history of origin, migration and settlement of Akwa Ibom State. This will strengthen the common bond, douse suspicion and engender the progress of the State. Primary and secondary sources of evidence are applied and historical analytical method used in the writing.

Keywords: Ancestry, Pan- Ibibio, Migration

Introduction

The Afaha group is the largest group in Akwa Ibom State. Afaha people inhabit all the Local Government Areas in the State. According to Nyong and Mkpong, the Afaha people descended from a common ancestry and migrated from Usak Edet in the Cameroon Republic and later moved in-land and created settlements for themselves throughout the areas that became Calabar, Ogoja, and Owerri Provinces of colonial Nigeria. They assert that “today, Afaha people occupy not less than 710 villages in present-day Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Abia and Imo States of Nigeria”.¹

According to Noah, “Afaha is the core of the Ibibio.” Noah buttresses this claim with the fact that Afaha kinship and Usak Edet thesis permeate all sections of Akwa Ibom State. In this context, he remarks that, the Ibibio are Afaha people whose original home was at Usak Edet in the Cameroons.² Obio-Offiong also states that the Ibibio people are of Afaha stock and had once settled in the region of *Akwa Akpa* - the estuary of the Cross River. According to him, the settlement was named *Afaha Ukpoppo Ukim* or *Afaha*.³

Research also shows that Annang people are of Afaha extraction, that is why Afaha Obong is regarded as the ancestral home of Annang people and events of significant proportions in Annang land are held at Afaha Obong.⁴ All the clans in Oron area are referred to as Afaha, an indication that the people of this segment of Akwa Ibom State are of Afaha extraction.⁵ In Eket area, Afaha is the largest group and some of the present independent clans in the area are believed to have emerged from Afaha stock.⁶ Afaha also exists in Obolo (Andoni) with the name Afaha Obodom. Abasiattai states that the District Officer, M.D.W. Jeffreys, reported in 1930 that "the town of Mkpanak (Afaha Ibeno) in the Eket District is said to be an offshoot of Ababie".⁷ In Ibeno, the Afaha section is known as Afaha Ibeno.⁸

The above scenario is a pointer to the fact that the people of Akwa Ibom State have a common ancestry and migrated from the same source probably at different times via different directions to settle in their present abode. On the above score, the contemporary appellations such as "Ibibio", "Annang", "Oron", "Eket", "Obolo - Andoni", are names which were acquired after the people had settled in their present locale. It is therefore necessary to understand the Afaha phenomenon and adopt same as the basis in reconstructing of the history of Akwa Ibom State.

The Usak Edet Homeland of the Afaha People

The Afaha people are part of the Bantu stock that migrated from the Congo Basin in Central Africa. In the course of their expansion, they settled in different locations before they formed a homeland (Edik Afaha) in Usak Edet in the Rio del Rey region of the Cameroon as a cluster of the Coastal Bantu.⁹ Afaha kith and kin in the Cameroon include the Bakweri, Douala, Bakoko, Bakolle, Balondo, Kole etc. One of the closest being the Bakweri who still perpetuates the traditional *Enin* dance called *Njoku Male*.¹⁰

The word "Usak Edet" is pronounced as *Usak-Areh* meaning "shiny smiling teeth", thereby conveying the characteristic of a sea-fearing riverine people who typically were very happy and self-contented fellows. The daily composites were usually full of joyous mode, glimpse of smiles and happiness especially on amazement of catches from fishing; hence, the origin of the name Usak Edet. It is believed that since the Efik language was the language of commerce and other forms of inter-group relations in the pre-colonial Lower Cross River region, the original name *Usak-Areh* became corrupted to Usak Edet which, however, still conveys the same meaning.¹¹

Usak-Areh is a language group and people located in Ndian Division of the South West region of the Republic of Cameroon. The name of the region was officially changed to Isangele by the Cameroonian Government on the 30th of December 1974 and consequently created as a council area under the Presidential Decree No. 77/203 of the 29th of June 1978. The area is characterised by low lying ecosystem. It serves as a major route to the Nigerian towns of Oron, Ibaka in Akwa Ibom State, Calabar, Iking, etc. in the Cross River State.¹²

Afaha Migrations and Settlements

The Afaha thesis has attracted the attention of writers, historians and other scholars across all the sections of Akwa Ibom State. Obio-Offiong who first addressed the Afaha phenomenon in 1958 states that:

The Afaha people had settled at the bank of the Great River, at the mouth of the Great Sea, i.e., they settled in the region of the mouth of the Cross River joining the sea – *Akwa Akpa*. They had

dwelt there for generations and developed as a people...the the land of the region was productive and the people enjoyed both the sea and the land equally in their industries, fishing and farming....During the reign of one great and powerful man (king), by name Obio-Offiong, there arose constant periods of dangerous floods. This river...started a dangerous overflowing of its banks. This... resulted in complete destruction of spurs in the valley and consequently as the river was rapidly approaching naturally constant dangerous floods occurred, destroying many houses and farms. In addition, there was the strong effect of the tidal waves on the shores of *Akwa Akpa*, the main sea. All these contributed to render the people homeless and their farms continuously flooded. Then there were also other factors – constant family strife...combined with these geographical dangers to worsen the peace and social condition of a people whose economic conditions had already been rendered precarious and miserable. Life became that of the survival of the fittest...these were the circumstances which forced the Afaha people at *Akwa Akpa* to disperse to different directions of the sea and of the river and of the mainland, to seek for new homes and settlements.¹³

Noah confirms the above assertion and adds that migrations at this early period did not necessarily involve tens of thousands or even thousands of people; rather, the pioneers may have been few in number, who achieved their success through rapid reproduction. This suggests that the people had been gradually migrating in trickles from the Cameroon highland over the centuries and through a variety of routes, settled in various parts of Ibibio land including the estuary of the Cross River.¹⁴ Noah further comments on the subject thus:

The Ibibio people migrated from Usak Edet in Cameroon. Usak Edet is known among the Ibibio as *Edik Afaha* (literally meaning the pond from where all Afaha came). In general, evidence is overwhelming that the core of the Ibibio people came from Cameroon and there is hardly any Ibibio group which does not have the Usak Edet linkage. Beginning with the Oron to include Eket, Ibeno, Annang, traditions of their origin reveal a familiar pattern of Usak Edet...¹⁵

Noah however stresses that the routes of migration were many and varied. Some reached Ibibio land by land while others reached by sea. According to his account, the seafarers included parts of Oron people, segments of Eket people as well as Ibeno. He states that the segment of Ibibio people that later settled at Ibom in present-day Arochukwu region of present-day Abia State accessed the area from Usak Edet. He also established that the migrants from Usak Edet had occupied present-day Akwa Ibom before those that came in from Ibom and points out that “the much documented Ibom affairs which resulted in the expulsion of the Ibibio people is a recent affair because by this time, the Ibibio mainland was

already teeming with Ibibio people who had lived there for several hundreds of generation”.¹⁶

Noah, however, states that the preponderance of Afaha does not suggest that all the Ibibio are the Afaha people from Usak Edet, because no ethnic group can be considered a biologically homogenous breeding population as people do migrate, relocate and subsequently identify themselves with original settlers and become known as such. He adds that the Ibibio, as perhaps the earliest settlers in the area, had every opportunity of absorbing people from different and disparate parental stocks not necessarily from the Afaha groups but who identified themselves with the Afaha and accepted the identity.¹⁷

Abasiattai also notes thus:

Population explosion following agriculture and more settled life partly accounted for the perennial, southward movement...during this movement, besides smaller Ibibio communities, several large centres of concentrated Ibibio population successively emerged known as *Ibom* where the various Ibibio groups lived. One of such was reported in “the Oban forest”, that is, in the Eastern Ibibio migration route. Another was located in the present Arochukwu district; while Usak Edet, Ikot Oku Ikono and Ibeno districts grew on the *Ibom* – settlement principle....Among the Ibibio thus moving further down both routes, the Afaha people were so much dominant that an Afaha community exists among the Okoyong, the western branch of the Ododop....Moreover, another Ibibio name for Usak Edet is Edik Afaha (or Afaha Creek) which further signifies that the Ibibio core were the Afaha who once lived in, and later migrated from Usak Edet.¹⁸

Abasiattai adds that “the Eket, Oron (including Obolo), the Afaha group in Ibeno and Afaha Annang arrived the Ibibio Mainland at various times through Usak Edet, mostly sea-borne. These various peoples occupied the littoral as a community for about a century. Thereafter, disagreement over political leadership manifested in inter-group rivalry. He adds that the people of Mkpanak, Adaha Esuk, Ibuot Ayang, Okoroutip in Ibeno are members of the Afaha People's Union”.¹⁹

Ini Udoka corroborates the above submissions on Afaha thus:

...the peoples of the Lower Cross River region originated from the Nigeria/Cameroon corridor, precisely Usak Edet. The Ibibio trace their original homeland to Usak Edet in the Cameroon. The Oron through Uya accept the Usak Edet origin. The Eket and Ibeno people agree that they left Usak Edet for present homeland. Ejituwu posits that the Obolo (Andoni) people had at one time or the other made the Nigerian/Cameroon border their homeland....The existence of...Afaha in almost all the ethnic groups could not have been a

coincidence. This is informed by the fact that Afaha areas appear to be one of the earliest settled communities in the Lower Cross River region....the fact remains that there is an Afaha group in Usak Edet area of Cameroon. In the Lower Cross River region there are Afaha groups among the Ibibio/Annang, Oron and Eket. This suggests consanguineous affinity.²⁰

Edet Akpan Ukpong posits thus:

It is however, generally agreed among the Ibibio that the area or region where they inhabit while in the Cameroon was/is Usak Edet, which still exists by that name today. While at Usak Edet, the Ibibio were referred to as Afaha people and the area they lived, *Edik Afaha* (Afaha valley). That is why among the Central Ibibio, Eket, Annang and Oron, the original place where the Ibibio occupied in their present homeland in Akwa Ibom State, before dispersing to elsewhere, was /is being referred to as Afaha or Afaha group.²¹

Okon Edet Uya comments on the migration of Oron's people thus: In the present state of our knowledge, however, it is probably safe to limit our discussion of Oron origins to the Usahaedit region in the Cameroon. Indeed...Oron groups, namely: Ebughu, Okobo, Idua and the Ukpabang proper, agree that the Cameroon was the point of their dispersal into Nigeria, either together or separately.²²

Inyang notes that Oron came from the Cameroon, particularly from among the Bakweri and Bakoko. He cites similarities of names and places such as Otu, Abang and Nta, Mbang (or Ibanga – Ibibio), found in both geographical locations as evidence. He points out that the Bakweri are the coastal dwellers of the Cameroon while the Bakoko lives along the coast of the Eastern Cameroon. Stressing further evidence of historical links between the Ibibio and Oron, Inyang observes that Oron is divided into clans known as Afaha such as Afaha Okpo, Afaha Ibighi, Afaha Ubodung, Afaha Okuiso, Afaha Ebughu, Afaha Idua, Afaha Ukwong. Each clan comprises several villages under a clan head.²³

Inyang also asserts that:

Afaha has many connotations in Ibibio. Afaha may mean followers; it may mean “the children of”. But it also stands for the name of villages...and clans... it is quite probable that the idea of dividing Oron into Afaha or clans was introduced by those who migrated from these areas into Oron...if therefore place names and geographical locations must be used to establish the identity of “Oro Ukpabang”, the Afaha phenomenon seems stronger and the direction of the Cameroon very cogent (This is the direction that the Ibibio came from).²⁴

Udo Essien Udo, an Annang scholar, comments thus:

After many years of settlement along the Eastern part of the Niger Delta...the Annang decided to migrate. This time along the coastal

part of Eket and also remained there temporarily because of unfavourable conditions....The Annang settled at Eket for many years....From the coastal part of the Cross River, some of the Annang migrated in small groups into different directions...some settled at Eket Local Government Area, some moved to Oron Local Government Area known as "Ikpe", some to Western Nsit, known as the "Ibiakpan Clan" and many other areas not mentioned here....Even today, there is some link between the Annang villages and Eket villages...it is possible to trace the roots of Afaha in Eket Local Government Area, Afaha Ikot Ebak in Essien Annang Local Government Area, (sic.), Afaha Obong in Abak Local Government Area and Afaha Nsung in Okobo Local Government Area, and many other Afaha. All these are "Imaan" who were separated along the bank of the Cross River and they moved in small groups leaving their folks behind but maintaining the original name of their ancestors.²⁵

The Concept of Afaha

The word "Afaha" as used in present-day Akwa Ibom State, has its origin from Usak Edet region of the Cameroon Republic where the people who lived around the region were known as the "Afaha people". They settled around *Edik Afaha* or *Akwa Afaha* area of Usak Edet. Currently, *Akwa Afaha* creek is at present inhabited by a detachment of the Cameroonian Army. Upon their arrival in Akwa Ibom area, some families, villages, group of villages and clans applied "Afaha" as prefix and suffix to their names to depict the memory of their genealogy and identity.²⁶

Afaha folklore, oral tradition and written evidence compiled by Abasiattai and Ukpogon provide some insights into the concept of Afaha as follows:

- (i) Afaha was once a united people, probably a kingdom who later disintegrated and expanded.
- (ii) "First settlers in Akwa Ibom State", "the core of Akwa Ibom State". That is why in Akwa Ibom State, the original place where the Afaha forebears settled before dispersing to elsewhere, was/is being referred to as Afaha or Afaha group. These places include: Afaha Ikot in Uruan, Afaha Ibesikpo, Afaha Nsit (Afaha Ekpo Udo), Afaha Effiat, Afaha Offot, Afaha Idoro, Afaha Oku, Afaha Ibiono, Afaha Itam, Afaha Itak, Afaha Ediene, Afaha Obong, Afaha Ikot Akwa, Afaha Ikot Ebak, Afaha Odoro Ikot, Afaha Eket, Afaha Obodom (Andoni), etc. Indeed, all the clans in Oron area have the appellation "Afaha" such as Afaha Okpo, Afaha Ubodung, Afaha Ibighi, Afaha Ukwong, Afaha Ebughu, Afaha Idua, etc.²⁷
- (iii) Afaha has a large population – undoubtedly, it is the largest group in Akwa Ibom State. This fact is supported by a dictum – *idung mfen ewak nte mfang ikot, Afaha ewak nte ntan* (if another group of people is as large as the leaves in the bush, Afaha is as plentiful as the sand).
- (v) Afaha has from the dawn of history been a place of refuge for fugitives.
- (v) Afaha were conquerors, kingmakers and users of the double-edged knife – *afaka* - by which they became known.
- (vi) Afaha have from the beginning been associated with power/authority - this is

evident in the Afaha totemic symbol of the *enin* (elephant) and the dictum - *Afaha nte enin, ikpong ibene* (Afaha is like an elephant, it cannot be lifted by an individual).²⁸

Historically, Afaha were warlords/defenders in time past. They enjoyed unquestionable executive, legislative and judicial powers. This accounts for their wide spread in Akwa State and beyond. One of the outcomes of the prowess of Afaha exists in a dictum: *akpa odo ekpe isimme Afaha ebak?* (can a leopard be killed and minced or dressed when the game has not been brought to Afaha?). When a leopard - the "king of the jungle" - was killed anywhere in Akwa Ibom society, the game must be taken to an Afaha community so that the Afaha elders can extract the whiskers/bile which contain deadly substance. It was the responsibility of the Afaha authorities to mince or dress the game and then share the meat. Traditionally, Afaha usually go with the head of the game.²⁹

Obio-Offiong underscores the authority exercised by the Afaha thus: Afaha people originally possessed strong and warlike temperament. They were bellicose..."it is said that in most cases the traditional heads of tribes and sub-tribes or clans of the Ibibio people can always be traced in genealogy to be directly or indirectly of the Afaha origin or kin. In most cases, the Afaha occupied a position of priority as a class to supply the supreme judges in questions of our common law for example, the passing of death sentences and their administration.³⁰

It should be added that Afaha are naturally rulers; hence the dictum - *Afaha nda ubong*. Historically, most of the paraphernalia such as *ekprikpu, oruk, iqua Ibom, edet ekpe, ikpa ekpe* etc., which had governmental influence in the traditional society, were traceable to Afaha. The Afaha hegemony in the traditional Akwa Ibom society also came to the fore in the ownership and control of *Obodom Enyong* (log bell on top of a tall tree known as *mkpa*). This high-governmental instrument heralded the beginning of new seasons and important ceremonies as well as signaled perceived dangers. The dictum, *nso idiok Afaha nno anyam mkpa?* (what misfortune can warrant Afaha to lease the ownership/control of *mkpa* tree?), explains the above construct.³¹

Afaha antiquity can also be premised on the fact that most of the major deities in the traditional Akwa Ibom society were owned and instituted by Afaha forebears who appointed their respective priests. They include *Anyang Nsit, Etefia Ikono, Anantia Ibiono, Abam Itak, Atakpo Ndem Uruan, Ubo Ekong, Udoe Oku, Udoe Ediene, Ukana Offot/Awa Itam, Okoso Afaha, Asung Afaha, Akuku-yogho, Anantigha, Obio Ufre, Eka Eme Oro, Olughu Ubuoho*, etc.³²

Afaha Communities in Akwa Ibom State

The exact number of Afaha communities in Akwa Ibom State has not yet been ascertained. Obio-Offiong claims that there are 275 Afaha villages in Abak, Calabar, Eket, Enyong, Ikot Ekpene and Uyo Divisions of the Old Calabar Province.³³ Edet Akpan Udo states that in the 1952/1953 population census, Afaha villagers numbered about 205,908 and were distributed in eight out of the nine divisions as follows: Abak 76; Calabar 1; Eket 48; Etinan 79; Ikot Ekpene 10; Itu 21; Oron 22; Uyo 18. Abasiattai, drawing his statistics of Afaha villages from the *Traditional Rulers Edict No.17 of 1973*, suggests that the number of Afaha villages in Akwa Ibom State is about

290, spread over nine former Local Governments of Abak, Ukanafun, Eket, Etinan, Ikot Ekpene, Itu, Ikono, IkotAbasi, Oron and Uyo. He however notes that “the number will certainly increase as the identity of more Afaha villages are laid bare.”³⁵

Mboho Akwa Afaha officially posits in 2009 that Afaha people occupy not less than 710 villages in what is now Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Abia and Imo States of Nigeria. It adds that in Akwa Ibom State, for instance, Afaha people make up a remarkable percentage of the population of the contemporary ethnic groups, namely: Ibibio, Annang, Oron, Eket and Obolo (Andoni).³⁶ In 2019, *Mboho Akwa Afaha* further stated in a document entitled *Afaha Day 2019*, that there exists “over 686 gazetted villages of Afaha” in Akwa Ibom State.³⁷ However, the above information should be regarded as tentative until the scholarly historical research on Afaha communities commissioned by the leadership of *Mboho Akwa Afaha* in 2007 is concluded.³⁸

Afaha Association

According to Abasiattai, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Afaha is their disposition to form unions, whether at the village or group level. Such unions stretch far back in their history but were particularly stimulated by the advent of Western education and literacy during the British colonial rule (1900-1960). The earliest of the modern Afaha group Unions was formed by the Afaha Eket in April 1914, to promote the unity and welfare of the people. The president of the Afaha Eket Union was Pastor Davis E. Otu. Other Afaha communities similarly led by educated persons, Pastors, teachers, or clerks—and borrowing a leaf from Afaha Eket or acting independently, had similarly formed their Improvement Unions.³⁹

The Afaha in Southern Iman, Etinan Local Government Area and Opobo (now Ikot Abasi and Mkpato Enin Local Government Areas) for example, formed their own union in August 1931. By 1934, the desire of the Afaha people to come together was ignited in the consciousness of Afaha people who in that year formed themselves into an all embracing Afaha People's Union to which all Afaha unions belonged.

Abasiattai adds that:

The efforts of the various Afaha Groups to organise improvement union culminated in 1934 in the formation of an all-embracing Afaha People's Union, to which all Afaha peoples and union belonged. The prestige, power and respect that the Afaha People's Union achieved, was partly reflected in the Union attracting ever more followers and members. One of these was Professor Eyo Ita. Professor Eyo Ita, already a renowned educationist, politician and philosopher on his own inquired about the Union, participated actively in it, thoroughly identifying himself as an Afaha man (from Ibeno); in 1941 he drew up the Union's constitution which was formally adopted.⁴⁰

The composition of the executive arm of the Union in the 1940s reflected the wide spread of Afaha people thus: President – Pastor (Chief) Davis Ekasi Otu (Afaha Eket), Vice-President - Obong Benjamin Inyang Ekpote (Afaha Offiong), General-Secretary – Mr. D.I. Udo (Afaha Eket), Treasurer – Rev. Jonathan Udo Ekong (Afaha Ibesikpo – Founder of the

Lutheran Church of Nigeria), Financial Secretary – Chief Johnson Udokang Udom (Afaha Ukanafun), Adviser – Professor Eyo Ita (Afaha Ibeno).⁴¹

The Union formed branches in Calabar, Ogoja, and Owerri Provinces. General meetings of APU were held quarterly, according to the constitution, rotated among the various Afaha communities. Such meetings were held at the following places among others: Afaha Eket, (Eket), Afaha Obong (Abak), Afaha Ikot Ebak (Ikot Ekpene), Afaha Oku (Uyo), Afaha Ibesikpo (Uyo), Afaha Offiong (Uyo), Afaha Iman (Uyo), Mbioto II (Uyo), Afaha Ibeno (Eket), Afaha Efiat (Uyo), Afaha Itak (Ikot Ekpene), Afaha Obo (Abak), Afaha Inang (Uyo), Afaha Itam (Itu), Uyo Afaha Nkan (Uyo), Afaha Ikot Akpan Nkpe (Eket), Nkana Iman (Uyo). Other Afaha groups also attended APU meetings, notably several Ibiaku and Obolo (or Obodom or Andoni) villages in the then Opobo District (now Ikot Abasi and Mkpato Enin Local Government Areas).⁴²

The objectives of the Afaha People's Union were to enhance the welfare and progress of the people by promoting their unity, by building capital and developing business, industry, trade and agriculture; promising sound health and education; and by co-operating with other peoples and with the Government in the development of the area. To raise funds, the Union imposed membership dues, and also hoped to earn income from the various businesses it would establish and from part of the Government taxation.⁴³

The Union flourished throughout the colonial period and recorded many remarkable achievements. In the area of education, Chief (Mkpisong) U.U. Inwang's passage to the United States of America for further studies in 1947 was paid by the APU which also kept in touch with him throughout his stay in the USA. Asumoh Ekukinam Bassey and Columba Ekanem were similarly assisted. Local branches also awarded university and secondary school scholarships. Prosperity was achieved through the spirit of enterprise. For example, a brick factory was established at Afaha Eket with the help of Professor Eyo Ita after the example set by Professor Ita at his school – The West African People's Institute (WAPI) in Calabar.⁴⁴

With the advent of Military regime of Major-General Agui Ironsi in January, 1966, ethnic based unions including Afaha People's Union was proscribed. Between 1989 and 1993, the Afaha consciousness was rekindled through the consistent advocacy of Obong Joseph Dickson Esem of Afaha Ubium. Thus, on the 8th of January 1994, *Mboho Akwa Afaha* was inaugurated at Uyo. The first President was Chief Ukpong Odungide (Afaha Eket). He was succeeded by Obong Joseph Esem (Afaha Ubium). The third President was Chief B.U. Awakama (Afaha Obong). A period of interregnum was filled by Chief Bassey Albert Nyong (Afaha Uruan). Abom Aniekan Amos Akpan (Afaha Ukanafun) was later elected as a substantive President and was succeeded by the current President, Abom Samuel Ekaso (Afaha Eket).⁴⁵

The Leadership of Mboho Akwa Afaha Since 2001

The constitution of *Mboho Akwa Afaha* provides for the existence of “the philosophical leader and patriarch who serves as the custodian of the tradition and culture of Afaha people as well as the President of Akwa Afaha Supreme Council”. The leader, who must mandatorily be a high-ranking Paramount Ruler, is ascribed the nomenclature of the *Enin Akwa Afaha* and the Supreme Leader of Afaha people. Since 2001, three *Enin* have mounted the saddle, namely:

HRM Okuku (Dr.) Johnson Udokang Udom, the late Paramount Ruler of Ukanafun Local Government Area (2001-2004); HRM Edidem Robert James Obot, the late Paramount Ruler of Nsit-Ubium (2007-2011) and HRM Edidem (Dr.) Nathaniel James Oduenyie, the late Clan Head of Eket Afaha and the Paramount Ruler of Eket Local Government Area (2013-14). HRM Edidem Raymond Timothy Inyang, the Clan Head of Awa/ Afaha, Paramount Ruler of Onna Local Government Area (2023).⁴⁶

Afaha Elite and the Development of Akwa Ibom Society

It can be stated without any fear of contradiction that there is no facet of developmental strides in Akwa Ibom area that the indelible foot prints of Afaha forbears cannot be identified with. Space would constrain the enumeration of these purveyors. But the significant areas that ought to be pointed at include the resistance of the British incursion into the hinterland especially in places such as Ubium, Ibiono, Eket, Uyo, Afaha Ibesikpo, Afaha Obong, Ukana, Udung Uko, Uruan etc., the missionary enterprise which institutionalised the torch of enlightenment through the instrumentality of Western education, colonial reforms and the struggle for independence.⁴⁷

In the contemporary era, Afaha elite have held the enviable position of Governor. They are: Brigadier Udokaha Jacob Esuene of Afaha Eket (South Eastern State), Obong Akpan Isemin, Arc. (Obong) Victor Attah, Senator Godswill Akpabio and Mr. Udom Emmanuel. Happily, the in-coming Governor of Akwa Ibom State, Pastor Umo Bassey Eno is also an Afaha son from Ikot Ekpene Udo in Ibiakpan Clan, Nsit-Ubium Local Government Area.⁴⁸

The Afaha Phenomenon and the Akwa Ibom Unity Project

Undoubtedly, the Afaha phenomenon holds the key to the unity of Akwa Ibom State because of the wide spread of Afaha people across all segments of Akwa Ibom State. The people understand their common origin and the fact that their ancestors migrated and settled as "Afaha" from Edik Afaha in Usak Edet, before the emergence of the contemporary segmentation and distinct identities. A quote from an address presented by the Afaha People's Union to the District Officer for Eket, H.R. Ross, at a meeting held on the 23rd of October, 1943, to formally intimate him on the aim and objectives of the Union suffices:

Wherever in the Calabar Province the name "Afaha" occurs, whether it is in connection with a village, an *Ekpuk*, a social custom or an individual, it carries a common significance. All those men and women connected with the name acknowledge themselves to be a unity. The Afaha are thus a people, and recognise a distinction between themselves and their neighbours. They may be widely separated, but an Afaha man from one part of the Province, who visits an Afaha village in a different part will there find himself accepted on equal terms by the people following his own customs. In many cases, the Afaha live in close relationship with those who are not Afaha, but always preserve this distinction of behavior and outlook.⁴⁹

The sense of oneness of Afaha people was openly demonstrated during the investiture ceremony of HRM Edidem Raymond Inyang, as the *Enin Akwa Afaha IV*, and the Supreme leader of *Mboho Akwa Afaha* Worldwide on the 18th of May 2023, at Awa Ndon, Onna Local

Government Area, when the Paramount of Ruler of Udung Uko Local Government Area from Afaha Okpo stock, the Paramount Ruler of Mbo Local Government Area from Afaha Ebughu stock (both of Oron nation), joined hand with another prominent Afaha monarch, HRM Edidem Edet Akpan Inyang, the Clan Head of Ayadehe, who is also the Paramount Ruler of Itu, to perform the historic duty of the capping and the presentation of the staff of office to the *Enin Akwa Afaha IV*. This historic act has evidently debunked the claim that Afaha in Oron stands for the word “clan” and not a people.⁵⁰

Conclusion

One issue that has generated controversy and invariably undermined the developmental effort of Akwa Ibom State is that of common origin of the people. The issue of a common origin of the people has often been contested. In most cases, the matter is approached as if the groups do not have any basis of common ancestry but only met after their settlements in their present abode.

However, the Afaha factor tends to prove the advocates of separate identities wrong. The Afaha people had a common homeland in Usak Edet region of present-day Cameroon Republic and migrated from that region in waves via different routes to settle in present-day Akwa Ibom State and beyond. Even though one cannot say that all the people of the State are Afaha, the preponderance of Afaha and the common culture should bind the people together.

The existence *Mboho Akwa Afaha*, as a voluntary welfare association that exists primarily to promote unity and solidarity, integrity and industry, economic, cultural and intellectual advancement among Afaha people and also seeks to foster co-operation between communities and the government in the interest of societal well being, should be embraced by the Afaha people and used as a platform of unity. The spirit of the organisation should promote oneness, peace, and mutual co-existence, devoid of rancor and acrimony. Use the communal platform to galvanise a strong and formidable assembly for the enhancement of peace and progress of Akwa Ibom State in particular and Nigeria in general.

Notes

¹Okon Mkpong and Bassey Nyong. “An Address Presented by *Mboho Akwa Afaha* on the Occasion of the Installation of Edidem Robert James Obot, the Paramount Ruler of Nsit Ubium Local Government Area as the *Enin Akwa Afaha II* at Ikot Edibon” on Saturday, 11th April, 2009. p. 1

²Monday Efiang. *Proceedings of the Ibibio Union, 1928-1937*. Uyo: Modern Business Press, 1988, p. 6

³Udo-Ekong Etuk Obio-Offiong. *A First Step to the Study of Ibibio History*. Aba: the Aman Press, 1958, p. 10

⁴Uwem Jonah Akpan. “Ibibio-Annang Relations”. *Ph.D Dissertation, Department of History & International Studies, University of Calabar*, 2012, p. 120

⁵P.E.B. Inyang. "A Geographical Approach to the Study of Oron (Oro Ukpabang) People". Institute of African Studies, UNN, Workshop on "The Peoples of South Eastern Nigeria", 5th to 8th December, 1972, p. 6

⁶Okon Umoetuk. *Royalty. Uyo: Robertou Communications. 2004, pp. 79-80*

⁷Monday B. Abasiattai. "The Afaha, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow": *An Address Delivered on Akwa Afaha Day '97 – 27th December, 1997 – of the Mboho Akwa Afaha Iman Ibom, Etinan Local Government Area.* p. 4

⁸Monday B. Abasiattai. "The Ibibio: An Outline History – 1960". *The Ibibio: An Introduction to the Land, the People and their Culture.* Calabar: Alphonsus Akpan, 1991, p. 66

⁹Edwin Arderner. *Coastal Bantu of the Caameroons.* London: International African Institute, 1956, pp.10-12

¹⁰*Programme of Events. The Investiture Ceremony of Enin Akwa Afaha Worldwide. Awa Ndon, Onna Local Government Area, Thursday 18 May 2022, p. 7*

¹¹Edet Efiong Okon. "Usakedet Hypothesis in Akwa Ibom History". *Ph.D Thesis. Department of Histoty & International Studies, University of Uyo, 2021, pp. 15-16* ¹²*Ibid.* p. 16

¹³Udo-Ekong Etuk Obio-Offiong. *A First Step to the Study of Ibibio History.* pp. 11-12

¹⁴Monday Efiong Noah. *Proceedings of the Ibibio Union, 1928-37.* Uyo: Modern Business Press, 1988, p. 8

¹⁵*Ibid.* p. 6

¹⁶Monday Efiong Noah. *Ibibio Pioneers in Modern Nigerian History.* p. 6

¹⁷Monday Efiong Noah. *Proceedings of the Ibibio Union, 1928-37, p. 9*

¹⁸Monday B. Abasiattai. "The Ibibio: An Outline History – 1960". *The Ibibio: An Introduction to the Land, the People and their Culture,* pp. 62-63 ¹⁹*Ibid.* p. 66

²⁰Ini Akpan Udoka. "Historical Background". *South-Eastern Nigeria: Its Environment.* Inyang, Idorenyin B. (Ed.). Kaduna: Abaam Publishing Co. 2000, p. 48

²¹Edet Akpan Ukpang. "The Origins and Migrations of the Ibibio People (Part One)". *Ibom Journal of History.* No. 8, 1999, p. 63

²²Okon Edet Uya. *A History of Oron People of the Lower Cross River Basin.* Oron: Manson Publishing Company, 1984, p.10

²³P.E.B. Inyang. "A Geographical Approach to the Study of Oron (Oro Ukpabang) People". pp. 5-7

²⁴*Ibid.* p. 6

²⁵Udo Essien Udo. *The History of Annang People, Cross River Nigeria*. Calabar: Apcon Press, 1983, pp. 8-9

²⁶Edet Efiong Okon. "Usakedet Hypothesis in Akwa Ibom History", p. 19

²⁷Edet Akpan Ukpong. "The Origins and Migrations of the Ibibio People (Part One)". p. 63

²⁸Monday B. Abasiattai. "The Afaha, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow": *An Address Delivered on Akwa Afaha Day 97'*, pp. 4-5

²⁹Udo-Ekong Etuk Obio-Offiong. *A First Step to the Study of Ibibio History*, pp. 22-23 ³⁰*Ibid.* p. 9

³¹*Programme of Events. The Investiture Ceremony of Enin Akwa Afaha Worldwide*. p. 9
³²*Ibid.*

³³Udo-Ekong Etuk Obio-Offiong. *A First Step to the Study of Ibibio History*, pp. 47-49

³⁴Edet Akpan Udo. *Who are the Ibibio?* Onitsha: Africana FEP Publishers, 1983, pp. 41-42

³⁵Monday B. Abasiattai. "The Afaha, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow": *An Address Delivered on Akwa Afaha Day 97'*, pp. 10-11

³⁶Okon Mkpong and Bassey Nyong. "An Address Presented by Mboho Akwa Afaha on the Occasion of the Installation of Edidem Robert James Obot, the Paramount Ruler of Nsit Ubium Local Government Area as the *Enin Akwa Afaha II*", p. 2

³⁷*Mboho Akwa Afaha Worldwide. Afaha Day, Maiden Consumption of all Sons and Dauhters of Afaha in over 686 Villages of Afaha. Held at the Playground of Nigerian Christian Institute, Uyo, 30th November, 2019*, p. 26

³⁸In 2007, the leadership of *Mboho Akwa Afaha* commissioned this author to write a comprehensive history of Afaha. He is about to complete the historical task. In the process he discovered that many Afaha villages do not attach the "Afaha" prefix or suffix to their identities and also that Afaha exists as families, villages, clan etc.

³⁹Monday B. Abasiattai. "The Afaha, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow": *An Address Delivered on Akwa Afaha Day 97'*, p. 3

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.* p. 6

⁴²*Ibid.* pp. 6-7

⁴³*Ibid.* p. 6

⁴⁵*Mboho Akwa Afaha Worldwide. Afaha Day, Maiden Consumation of all Sons and Dauhters of Afaha in over 686 Villages of Afaha. Held at the Playground of Nigerian Christian Institute, Uyo, 30th November, 2019, p. 24*

⁴⁶*Programme of Events. The Investiture Ceremony of Enin Akwa Afaha Worldwide. p. 11*

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Monday B. Abasiattai. "The Afaha, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow": An Address Delivered on Akwa Afaha Day 97', p.3*

⁵⁰*Okon Edet Uya. A History of Oron People of the Lower Cross River Basin. p. 41*