

IBIBIO HISTORY: Implications for the Future Generation.

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Introduction

Let me begin by thanking the organizers for the honour done to me by inviting me to come all the way from Nigeria to be part of this Global Congress of Ibibio people. I accepted the invitation out of my deep sense of commitment to the cause of Ibibio people. I had wanted to address the Congress in Ibibio language, but I was informed that there are a lot of Ibibio people present who cannot speak or understand Ibibio language so I have to suffer the agony of speaking to Ibibio people with the idioms that are foreign to them.

You have asked me to speak on "Ibibio History: Implications for the Future Generation." This is a very difficult task because the notion of Ibibio and what constitutes its history have been very fluid and unstable because of its ancientness and years of misconceptions. What is more, to determine the implication of a fluid history for a future which in itself is very unpredictable makes the subject much more complex. Apart from this complexity, there is the problem of which aspect of Ibibio history that should be addressed. Should I speak on the history of origination and migration, or the history of Ibibio language and culture or its political history and relations with their neighbors? The subject is vast for the period allowed.

However since they are all inter-related I will take the liberty of approaching the subject holistically. I will try at least to raise some of the major issues involved in the subject and also hopefully try to clarify those issues that seem to confuse the thinking of many of our compatriots. My main aim in doing this is to challenge our minds and make some pointers in the direction of where I think we should be going as a people if there is to be a hope for the future generation. I will first of all begin by proposing a theory of history and then proceed to raise the question who the Ibibios and what their history is. I would like to note also that I have no intention dwelling on ancient history and debate because it is my conviction that while past history is important, that the present history is most important and more relevant in the determination of the future. I will dwell more on what I see as the present history.

Towards a theory of History

History is understood here in a very elementary sense of not only as a record of events and facts but as what is said about events and facts. Events and facts by themselves are a-historical or neutral. What is historical is what is said about the events. History therefore is basically a said thing. What is said and how it is said depends on how the event or fact affects the human life or society. What is more, what is said is always contingent on the narrator's or historians disposition (be it knowledge content or cultural and socio-political background). This is why the subject itself is called history (his story). It is a story that is told by someone about an event or fact. In contemporary discourse, because of the feminist input, it is sometimes referred to as "herstory" (her story) when narrated by a "her" (woman).

That we are gathered today in Atlanta city at The Westin Atlanta Airport Hotel is a fact. But what will be historical would be what would be reported or documented about what happened at the gathering. So many events would take place but only a selected few would be historicized. The implication or lesson here is that the historical process is selective and purposeful. In narrating Ibibio history therefore we must not only note that it is selective but we must also note its purposiveness. The Ibibio history that we are concerned with is that which would constitute an identity that would guarantee a future for Ibibio people. I am aware that past and ancient history is important and valuable but I am convinced that the present history is more valuable and most relevant in the determination of the future. Since

we are concerned with the implication of Ibibio history to the future, I would therefore, while noting the past and ancient history, pay more attention to the present history

What is Ibibio History?

To answer the question what is Ibibio history is to answer the question who are the Ibibio. At the center of the two questions is the issue of identity. Identity is the sum total of who we are from the moment we were born or constituted till the now moment. It is interesting to note that no one has ever named himself. One is always named by another. Only God succeeded in naming Himself. This is how it happened. Moses said: "When I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?" God replied, "I am who am," (meaning you can only know me through what I do. As for my name you are free to name me according to what you experience of me). From their experience the Jews offered to name him Yahweh (YHWH), Jehovah, Elohim, El-Shadai etc. We can say that God did not name himself in a constitutive way but at the same time allowed the people to name him as they understood him. If it is true that no one has ever named himself the question is who gave us the name Ibibio? What is the meaning of Ibibio? Who are they?

When I became conscious of myself and wanted to know who I was, and who the Ibibios are. I went in search, began by reading the books on Ibibio. The following books became very handy: Monday Noah (1980), *Ibibio Pioneers, Old Calabar: The City States and the Europeans 1800 - 1885*; A.J.A. Essen (1982), *Ibibio Profile*; E.A. Udo (1983), *Who are the Ibibio?*; Udo Udoma (1986), *The Story of Ibibio*. These authors [who relied heavily on source materials from Hope Masterton Waddell (1863), *Twenty-nine years in the West Indies and Central Africa*; Hugu Goldie (1857), *Principles of Efik Grammar with a Specimen of language*; J.J. Hutchinson (1858), *Impressions of West Africa*; Roger Casement (1895), *Report on the Administration of the Niger Coast Protectorate*; M.D.W. Jefferys (1935), *Old Calabar and Notes on the Ibibio Language*; G.J. Jones and Daryll Forde (1967), *The Ibo and Ibibio Speaking People of South-Eastern Nigeria*; P.A. Talbot (1969), *The People of Southern Nigeria*]; are unanimous in their conclusion that Ibibio people are of a common stock despite the slight

variations in their theories of migration roots. It should be noted that the source materials were written at a time when scholarship was not politicized in Nigeria, and since the writers were non-Nigerians it is very likely that their claims are certainly more genuine and most objective. The word Ibibio was used by the researchers in the 13th century A.D sense (as preserved in the American Library of Congress) when the Map of Ibibio nation included the people who came to be known as the Efiks, Annangs, Orons, Ekets, Ibunos and Obodoms. [See Claudia Zaslavsky, *Africa Counts: Number and Patterns in African Culture*, (West Port: Lawrence Hill and Co, 1979), p.202]. The researchers all agree that the Ibibio people are the first to have settled in the South Eastern part of Nigeria; that their ancestry is traceable to the Bantu people of the Nile valley in central East Africa; that they first settled in a place called Ibom before they dispersed in the various migration routes and settled in the various geographical location in the South South Eastern part of Nigeria.

It was this original notion of the common ancestry of Ibibio people that informed the formation of Ibibio Union in 1928 as an agent of self-determination and development. A sense of oneness and unity of purpose was engineered when the self-help scholarship was distributed among the various segments of those who called themselves Ibibio. The Ibibio people gained respect and forged an identity in the Nigerian nation as the fourth largest ethnic group. Today it is "Ichabod" the glory has departed. Some sections of the Ibibios have denied their origins and ancestral links (See Uya ,1984; Udo, 1983). The result of which is that we have lost our collective identity as the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria. A development that Akwa Esop Imaisong and Mboho Mkparawa are also worried about. What is more, we are now faced with the challenge of distorted history and personal identity. If you visit some major cities in Nigeria such as Port Harcourt, Lagos and Abuja you will see such nationality meeting places as Annang House or Oron House. The question that we need to ask our self is: Why is it that Annang or Oron people are able to build community houses in cities but Ibibio people or Akwa Ibom as a whole cannot afford one anywhere? Even here in the Americas, among the various nationalities who were said to have been of Ibibio extraction there is more unity of purpose within their groups than what obtains for the larger group of Ibibio. Ibibio has been decimated. This is the situation that informed my consciousness that perhaps the old paradigms are no longer working and hence the

need for a paradigm shift on what it is that constitutes Ibibio nation. A situation that has necessitated a rethink and a refocusing.

Given this new reality and challenges, may be the time has come for us to rethink the concept of Ibibio; may be the time has come for the people who were named Ibibio to reconstitute themselves and redefine who they are. May be the time has come for the Ibibio people to reclaim their Ibom origins and heritage. The point that I would like to make and with emphasis is that the people who speak Ibibio language are the Ibom people. It was on the basis of this that when a state was created for the Ibibio people our founding fathers named it Akwa Ibom as a way of capturing the peoples' history and their origins.

Given this history what must we do?

Because of the emerging realities about our history, we must develop a new grammar of self-understanding. I say this with a conviction because of the impending danger of inaction. This is what has informed the new grammar of identity and self-determination by a people who once were brothers and sisters, and had a common language, had a common culture and a common ancestral heritage. It was a common saying as it was "In the beginning" that "Blood is thicker than water" but "Now never shall be," Christianity has proved that this is no longer so. Now, the water of Christian baptism has become a stronger bond of unity and association than natural blood relations. How else would one explain the fact that in the same household, blood relations would become enemies because one is a Christian and the other is not, because one is a "born again" and the other is not? Jesus even anticipated this break in family ties when he said "Do not think I have come to bring peace (unity) ... I have come to bring not peace but the sword (division, war), for I have come to set a man 'against his father, a daughter against her mother...and one's enemies will be those of his household'" (Mtt. 10:34 -36). The same thing can also be said of the bond of Moslem brotherhood. How else would one explain the fact that a group of Moslem brothers can come together to fight, destroy and kill their blood relations? And of course everywhere in the world Moselms are always fighting Christians even if they are blood relations. Today's reality seems to indicate that you cannot force people to be brothers if they do not want to. Even Cain in the Book of Genesis had to scream "Am I my brother's keeper?" when he was accosted by God on the way about of his brother Abel

whom Cain had killed. By killing Abel Cain had denied himself the right of brotherhood. Blood is no longer thicker than water. Political independence and economic ties have superseded blood relations as grounds for brotherhood and association. The Ibibio saying *ayin eka owo adong ke okpor usung* has become a reality. This was why late Professor Ime Ikkideh in a paper titled, *Ibibio Nation: A Common Vision, a Common Destiny*, delivered at the Ibibio Millennium Converge 2005, argued that Ibibio people must now look for the *okpor usung* where they could find their brothers. And I would want to add that the height of self-mastery is the freedom to take responsibility of who and what you want to be. People must be free to choose who and what they want to be. People must be free to choose who they want to associate with. Friendship or brotherhood that is forced is never productive. Such a relationship is often characterized by that of the proverbial "Ekpeku ekpu." (*Ke ata owo kesit ibak ke ofiori ei-ei. Uma ke inua inua esit atak ye udu. Asuk uta asuk ufuud, Nwariwa etang eko, Nwud udiana ayin eka; Afo ambup abo ntang, afo andad asok ewot*). People who claim that they are Ibibio must authenticate their claim by working for the overall interest of Ibibio people. Those who claim that they are not Ibibio must be free to be what they want to be provided they do not infringe on the rights privileges of Ibibio people. The time has come for Ibibio people to redefine their history and establish their identity bearing in mind that the old paradigms are no longer functional.

Challenges

Our problem in this new project is how to salvage Ifim Ibom Ibibio, Akwa Esop Ima Isong Ibibio, Mboho Mkpawara Ibibio, Ibibio People's Union, Ibibio Academics Round and all Ibibio associations from the negative philosophies of *Nkorotoism*,¹ *Asikpak-ebaism*,² and *Asaboism*³ to make them think the progress of Ibibio people and not think greed and selfishness, to make them think cooperation and unity not arrogance and *Akpan nkpon iwuud; afid owo edo itam itam nte mfi*; to save them from the kind of greed (*idiok itong*) that allows them to mortgage the collective interest of Ibibio people (*etie ke akwa ntit ikpong enyime owork awaak*). On Five occasions I have had the opportunity to address Mboho Mkpawara Ibibio on these issues at various Congresses (Port Harcourt 1993, Uyo 1994, Mkpawara Enin 1999, Ikot Abasi 2008, Omoku 2010) . The high point was during the 4th Sampson Udo Etuk Annual lecture (1994) where I spoke as the guest lecturer on "*Akwa Ibom Solidarity: An Effective Strategy for Socio-Political Relevance*. I had another

opportunity to address the whole Ibibio nation as a lead paper presenter at a joint Ibibio Millenium Converge in Uyo (2005) on the occasion of the Launching of Asan Ibibio Building Fund. Here I spoke on "*Harnessing Ibibio Potentials for Self-actualization in the 21st Century.*" I took the same message to Akwa Ibom People in the Americas at Charlotte 2007 Akwa Ibom Convention where I spoke on "*Engineering New Techniques for Business Success and Sustainable Development in Akwa Ibom.*" Recently I took the challenge to Ibibio Academics at the Uyo 2011 Ibibio Academic Roundtable Conference as a lead presenter on "*Ibom Phenomenon in the Evolution and Development of Akwa Ibom State.*" Despite these efforts still our history seems to remain unchanged. However I am pleased to note that all is not lost, there is a renewed hope. The recent Communiqué that was issued in June this year at the end of the Akwa Esop Imaisong Ibibio Convention, Atlanta 2012, echoed a positive direction. In the the same vein, the recent Communiqué at the Annual Mboho Mkparawa Ibibio Convention, Detriot June 2012 has some positive notes on how to move Ibibio people forward. The two Communiques lay emphasis on the need for unity and responsible leadership. All I would want to say at this point is that we must be seen now to be "working the talk" especially in the area of providing productive leadership to enhance unity.

One important point that must also be made here is the responsibility of Ibibio cultural organizations (associations) such as Akwa Esop Imaisong Ibibio, Ibibio Elder's Forum, Mboho Mkparawa Ibibio, Ibibio National Union, Ibibio People's Union etc. These are veritable organs which should serve as mediating structures for association and development of Ibibio nation and its people. At the home front, the problem often comes when these cultural associations want to assume the role and function of the legitimate traditional rulers. Instead of being the eye and the *ebe iso inyang ase omoon enyin mmong* for the traditional rulers, they become competitors, plotting for supremacy. The result is that there is always conflict which is often exploited by politicians as a way of weakening the fabric of Ibibio unity for their political gains. Such conflicts were experienced in the logic of self-destruction that ensued between the traditional rulers and the Akwa Esop Imaisong on the one hand and between the Ibibio Elder's Forum and the Ifim Ibom Council on the other. And in recent times in the conflict in the process of the selection of Oku Ibom Ibibio. While it is acknowledged that the cultural

associations are very important agents of development, it should be pointed out that they are subject to the traditional rulership of Ibibio land. According to the present traditional leadership arrangement of Ibibio land, the Oku Ibom remains the highest traditional ruler in Ibibio land.

In the traditional Ibibio political life, values like respect for legitimate authority were held in high esteem. Also, even though, the structure of the social relations was highly hierarchical, democratic ideals were upheld in the system of government. This is why, among the Ibibio, their philosophy of government is expressed in the saying: *Obong isibongo ikpong* (the chief does not chief alone) and *Ke Obong ase-abet nsiong isibetde enin* (one is forbidden to insult the king but is not forbidden to disagree with him where necessary). From these sayings, it is clear that any leader be it traditional or organizational is required by tradition to rule in council. It should also be noted that in the traditional society, authority was exercised exclusively for the sake of the common good.

Another democratic ideal that existed in the traditional Ibibio society was that decision-making process was a joint effort of the ruler and his council. It was customary at council meetings that there would be free and unfettered freedom of opinion; and the readiness to consider all possible alternatives were special ideals that were common in traditional ruler's council proceedings. Even though dissenting opinions were accommodated, once consensus was reached, it became mandatory and binding on all. This practice was based on the Ibibio philosophy that *ke mboho ado odudu; ndukoppo ado ntimnam* (Unity is strength and cooperation are the main sources of strength). These are the kinds of positive values that must be reinvented for the purpose of harnessing Ibibio potentials for the future generation.

These are the kind of values that must be reinvented by Ifim Ibom Council leadership and all the cultural associations both at home and abroad to avoid internal internecine squabbles that bring self-destruction and thwart Ibibio progress. These are the kind of values that would guarantee progressive good governance as a way of ensuring a good heritage for the future generation.

Conclusion

My task was to narrate Ibibio History and examine its implication for the future generation. What has emerged in the narration is that the historian, as R.G. Collingwood noted, can discover what has been completely forgotten, in the sense that no statement of it has reached him from eye witnesses. The historian can also discover what, until he discovered it, no one ever knew to have happened. In this discovery process I have shown how the old paradigms of interpreting Ibibio history are no longer functional. I was constrained to advance a theory of history that has allowed us to reinterpret Ibibio history in a way that guarantees self authentication.

With the awareness of this new discovered history, the future generation of Ibibio people would be aware of their authentic identity and such awareness would engender political emboldenment, economic empowerment, and a sense of vision and purposiveness in their collective endeavours. This is our hope, this is our dream. I hope that my presentation has met the theme of the Congress of Assessing the Present and Harnessing the Future. I therefore urge us to rethink our present situation bearing in mind what has been proposed in this presentation.

Thank you for listening and God bless you

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Notes

1. **Nkorotoism** -- (*Nkoroto anam idem mbo ke inam ofob* -- *Nkoroto* is a type of sweet yam that harms itself, thinking that it is harming the roaster). *Nkoroto* is a specie of yam that is very small but very sweet and delicious when roasted. The problem is that it is very difficult to roast it successfully. Most of the time by the time it is roasted properly it is already burnt. The belief is that the sweet yam does not want to be eaten by the person roasting it. So in order to escape from being eaten, it allows itself to be burnt. So in the process of not wanting to be eaten, it

destroys itself by being burnt. Nkorotoism therefore is a philosophy of unconscious self-destruction in one's self-preservation strategy. When it is adopted in human social relations, it could be counterproductive.

2. **Asikpak-ebaism** - (*Asikpak ebai ana iso ikpa, fror dork anye idokho, nung yak iyak efen adork anye iyakka* - The tilapia fish that stations itself at the trap entrance, it will neither enter nor allow another fish to enter). This saying is rooted in the experience of the practice of a certain kind of tilapia fish that always positions itself in front of bait or trap set by the fisher man. It would not eat the bait or will it enter the net, but at the same time it would not allow any other fish to enter. This practice of this breed of fish, even though its action saves other fish from being caught or trapped, frustrates the effort of the fisherman. Human beings have adopted this habit of the tilapia by learning how to prevent others from progressing. Asikpak-ebaism therefore is the "If I do not have you won't have it philosophy." It is self-defeating and unprogressive when applied in human social relations.

3. **Asaboism** - (*Asabor ama abo nke imor ikpakpa unam efen adia ikot* -- Asabor said that until it dies no other animal would prey in the woods). The saying is derived from the habit of *Asabor* (a python in the animal kingdom who says or acts in such a way that until he dies no other animal would feed or prey in the woods. Asabor has the habit of denying other animals of available opportunities. Asaboism therefore is a negative philosophy and selfish philosophy that emphasizes the welfare of only one privileged person or group. It is antithetic to human progress.

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