

## A CONCISE HISTORY OF UNEME

By

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### Preliminaries

My motivation comes from my stay in Accra, Ghana (1961-1969). Ghanaians live peaceably, harmoniously together as one family with varying background. In the years of reference 1961-1969, every Ghanaian, young and old knows and recites easily without-asking the history of the nation Ghana and the history of the their own particular people. Some would even challenge me to tell them the history of my particular people, Uneme. I could not tell because I knew nothing of the sort. So when I returned to Nigeria in 1969 with General Ordinary and Advanced level certificates I got a job as a tutor at Saint Paul's Anglican Grammar School, Igarra. With my Ghanaian background experience I drew up a number of simple questions because there were no History text books on the subject Uneme, known to me. The questions include:

- (i) Who is an Uneme?
- (ii) How many Communities are Uneme?
- (iii) What are they called?
- (iv) Where are they located?
- (v) How did we come into being?
- (vi) How come we are scattered?
- (vii) Where is our original home?
- (viii) How did we leave our original location for where we are now?
- (ix) Why is it that Uneme language varies from Communities to Communities?
- (x) Who are friends and enemies of Uneme people?

The above are just a few of the questions my Ghanaian friends told me would help me to know about my people Uneme. My Ghanaian friends counseled me to carry out the fact finding fast before the then generation passes away leaving behind men who grow old with little knowledge of their history, I acted fast. I followed their instructions strictly. Another instruction they gave to me is that I must centre my questions on men and women who must as that time be 70 years and above. If I find younger people who volunteer information on Uneme I must cross-check such facts with people 70 years and above. Finally I must not confine my questions to Uneme citizens. Both friends and opponents of Uneme must have their input in order for me to have a clear and true picture of Uneme people.

From 1969 to 1990, I traveled to a number of Uneme Communities, I discussed with my colleagues and fellow students, I used some of my students at: (i) Akoko-Edo Grammar School Uneme-Nekhwa (1974-1976); (ii) Auchu Polytechnic Auchu (1975-1985), and (iii) Bendel State University, now Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma (1985-1990). The students and colleagues come from Awka, Ogidi, Onitsha-Ado, in Anambra State, Etsako Communities, Akoko-Edo Communities, Ugboha, Emu, Ubiaja all in Edo State and Jesse in Delta State.

In what follows, Academic Historians must pardon me because I am not writing an Academic paper and so those Academic finesse are not in here. What you have here is pedestal. It is a material any Academic can rely upon as faithfully compiled facts to enable him write these and papers on Uneme History and present any requisite Analysis. This paper is a down to earth account of Uneme History that any Uneme and non-Uneme people must possess and keep in the family library for the present generation and the generations to come.

I put on hold the write-up to enable my basic non Mathematics English rise above ordinary level G.C.E. In this way, I would be in a position to present an easily readable material. Thank you for your attention; I wish you happy reading.

## 2. Introduction

Uneme was born about the middle of 15th century (about 1450 AD) to a man named Uka by his only wife Esohe. Esohe was then popularly known as Eso, a name which has been corrupted to Etso. Uka was among the leading Blacksmith inner caucus of the then Benin Empire that produced Military and Farm Equipments for the then Benin Empire. Uneme as the first born to Uka and Esohe naturally followed his father's footsteps by learning the Art and Science of Metal Technology. Oral tradition and folklore had it among the elders that the despotic nature of the rulership in the Benin Empire made Uka to take his wife, his first son Uneme along with their two other younger children who passed on along with their father at the time of migrating to the expected Promise Land. They left Benin along with other Newfoundland seekers. Nothing much was heard of Uka and the two children who could not make it to the Newfoundland now known as Etsako. However, according to the elders, it was being sung in Uneme folklore of the Uka who lovingly struggled to carry two children, at the same time fighting forest fever which eventually claimed his life and the two younger children. Thus leaving his only wife Esohe and the first born Uneme who eventually made the journey.

The order of the Oba of Benin at that time was that Uka must be brought back to Benin alive and in good health. The reason for this is that the Oba cherished the safety of every member of the Technological cult to which Uka was a prominent member. If he falls sick, according to the Order, he must be cared for by the messengers. Uka's decision to leave the Empire was in the main initiated by his maternal uncle who the Oba slighted in words at a Palace meeting.

## 3. Military and Farm Technology

Uneme eventually continued his father's technological work until the coming of the new white men (Probably the British) who banned the Art and Science of Gun production throughout Bini land by classifying the practice among illicit activities. Uka had along with the Bini Technology cult as they called it in their time derived and developed the gun technology from the early, now primitive guns supplied to the empire by the first white men (likely, Portuguese) that brought the guns and Agricultural tools. Uneme's first child was a girl named Uzanu. The sons of Uneme, according to their seniority are:

- (i) Ava: He was born during thunder and lighting. This made Uneme his father to name him Ava. All the descendants of Ava today are called Imiava. He established Anegbette.
- (ii) Oguluka: By resemblance in form to his late father (Uka), Uneme named his second son Oguluka. Oguluka in latter years passed on in the heat of war.
- (iii) Uzoshi: He was the third son. He established Udochi.

## 4. The Dispersion

There are various versions. However, as diverse as they are, a common denominator has it that Uka's death was in the first 3 months unknown to the Oba of Benin; what was known to the Oba was that Uka left with the precious secret Technology and must return. Uka was given sharp ultimatum in absentia to return to Benin from wherever he was else himself and his seeds would forever scatter. When Uka was not forthcoming after 3 fruitless months, the Oba obtained a fully ripe palm-fruit and had it dropped from the palm-tree top, pronouncing that as the palm fruits scatter, so shall Uka and his seeds scatter. Since Uka died and had only one seed Uneme alive, naturally, though Uneme produced his own children, Uneme's descendants scattered. According to the folklore and oral tradition, these events surrounding the birth of Uneme's children took place in Ugboha where Uneme himself stayed, died and was buried. However, the Benin war threat made latter generations of Uneme to move to Oghomeze. This according to the elders explains why the most senior Uneme from Ugboha had the right of kola nut breaking where other Uneme were in those days.

According to the folklore, Uhi a traditional community near Ehor is one of the major resting places of Esohe, his son Uneme along with the other Newfoundland seekers on the way out of the Bini Empire.

Ava and his generations to come eventually settled in what is today known as Anegbette. The name Anegbette came to be on the day the then District Officer (D.O), a white man, visited Imiava and asked the chief of Imiava, pointing all over the direction around him, what these people are called by name. as was common in those days of language interpretation, the interpreter misunderstood the question to mean who owns all these lands. The chief told the interpreter to tell the D.O that it is not a land for one

kindred but that we are all pushing one another to possess whatever quantity each one can control. The interpreter then told the D.O; meaning we are struggling for space. The D.O then recorded the community's name as Anegbette.

Generations of Uzoshi children moved to what is today known as Udochi. Generation of Uzanu the female child of Uneme moved to the present location called Uzanu. Other large but mixed Uneme parties moved to virgin lands where they could find what they called ROCKS-MELTABLE-TO-IRON. The excavation for Iron ore, iron smelting and usage of Iron ore to produce farm implements and local guns determined the movements to new virgin lands. This movement gave rise to Uneme settlements such as Imiava both in Etsako valleys of the hills in Anviawu area of Etsako, Akpama, Uneme-Osu, Ekpedo, Erurun, Enekhua, Aiyetoro all in Akoko-Edo LGA, and Ekpedo in Okene.

At Oghomeze during the dispersion, seeing that the Bini troops did not come down in the way they expected them, some of the mixed groups comprising Imiava, Uzanu and Uzochi, and upon also hearing about the CURSE, went back to Bini to live their lives as Binis that they had always been in Bini land, saying after all our various opinion leaders here and rulership are tending to be more despotic than the Oba of Bini. To Bini, therefore this small went and they were restored joyfully. However some of this mixed group joined their forefather Uneme at Ugboha. So to this day, those who know it regard Unene Ugboha as senior.

#### 5. Effects of Dispersion

There are as many marriage and social rules, regulations and rites as there are Uneme communities except those communities that live close to one another. Even in the case of those Uneme communities that live close to one another, variation still exist. Since this concise history is not on analysis of the reasons for such variations, it is obvious that since Uneme began as a person, indeed the first and only surviving son of Uka, apart from metal work technology Uka had sparsely settled down enough to build up a culture and social norms for Uneme and his descendants before the dispersion. Because of the scattering and non-existence of any opportunity to gather for long in a single location before dispersion, the summary below shows the main dispersion effects.

- i. Blacksmithing technology is the main cultural heritage.
- ii. Each Uneme settlement has its unique definition of various social norms, and rites, though similarities obviously exist.

#### 6. Reconciliation

Long before we grew up, this need existed and our forebears explored various avenues for it. Among such personalities are Oliola Ali Gbagada Ugbodaga I and Chief D.I.J. Igenuma. For more details, the reader should check and read some possible items emanating from Uneme National Development Association (UNDA) files.

##### 6.1 With the Oba of Benin

I Professor, Chief, Dr. U.S.U. Aashikpelokhai, the Aigbodeheini of Central Uneme, had the singular privilege of being in the large Uneme delegation, along with the late Chief F.O. Idaomi and all prominent Ineme Chiefs that went before Oba Akenzua II a year or so before he passed on, who then renounced the DISPERSION PRONOUNCEMENT of his forebears. Uneme shall come together again said Oba Akenzua II.

##### 6.2 With our Neighbours who forbid us

Wars, Aristocratic display and vanity are registered allegations against subsequent generations of Uneme before the time of British rule. There is a folklore which associated Uneme-Nekhua with Somorika. The folklore holds that both of them were very close, friendly and brotherly. If the story in the folklore is true then there exists very serious and urgent need to have a close look at Uneme and Somorika. The folklore holds that a serious quarrel led Somorika to be in its present location. Somorika people according to the legend vowed never to have anything to do with Uneme people. Consequently this is the reason why

Somorika forbids Uneme. This is a problem the present day Elders must sit and find full remedy for its solution.

Wars and mercilessness were attributed to Uneme people who then according to the present day communities misused the gifts, the good gifts GOD gave them. Serious anger and resentment among Okpella people whose forebears, a relationship with Uneme people, the Okpella people claimed did not favour the Okpella man. Consequently, according to the legend or folklore Okpella people resolved to distant themselves from Uneme.

It is the duty of Uneme people of this generation led by our elders to seek forgiveness and full reconciliation with Okpella people. In this manner shall we end formally the age-old tag, we forbid Uneme. Other towns and villages especially in the geopolitical zone called AFENMAI then borrowed leaf from our unfriendly communities to say Uneme is forbidden without finding out the root-cause of the tag the Uneme's behaviour placed on Uneme. Today, we Uneme people are no longer arrogant if indeed we were. However, there is no denying the fact that Uneme like the Israelites, we are specially gifted and blessed by God in Christ Jesus. The specially inexplicable Divine blessing of God Almighty still exist among Uneme people till date. We arrogate to ourselves the tag Africa Israelites of African Jews.

#### 7. Existing Uneme Communities

Under this heading we only list them and give you names of the environments where you can find them.

##### 7.1 Esan Land

Here, you have them in (i) Ugboha, (ii) Emu (iii) Ubiaja and neighborhoods.

Ugboha deserve a little more attention than mere mentioning here; being that it was the place Uneme himself lived and died. At the time of the great dispersion that took place in Oghomeze (Oghomeyele), a group of the Uneme people returned to Ugboha where their father lived and died. They felt secured since other inhabitants latter joined their remnants left behind at Ugboha.

From here, Ugboha after some years stay, some of their groups left for the towns known today as Emu, Ubiaja, (Ubiaza) and other neighbouring Communities. It must be noted that the people Esan, which Uneme groups met in these locations, particularly in Ugboha are new arrivals from Benin. Consequently the language of the Esan people is closer to the current Benin. Uneme people having left Bini, a very long time back, mixed up with other foreign groups therefore the Bini language Uneme used to speak changed. This then gave rise to the differences in Uneme dialets. I do remember that our elders used to caution some of our youth in those our early days on why we are changing Uneme words.

Where do you get such and such word from, our elders would query the younger generations who traveled in and out of Uneme towns. A trip to Ugboha would convince every Uneme speaker on this. Ugboha language as an Esan dialet differs from Ekpoma dialect. When an Ugboha man speaks this language, the Uneme man from Akoko-Edo finds it easier and clearer to understand than an Ekpoma man speaking. In the same way the Ugboha Uneme is more original than Akoko-Edo Uneme, so is Akpama Uneme in Akoko-Edo more of an original Uneme than any other Akoko-Edo Uneme. I leave the rest for Uneme history researchers. Do not tear me to pieces concerning language corruption observation!

##### 7.2 Etsako Land

Uneme People exist in Etsako land in distinct communities by the following names:

(i) Anegbette, were the clan head naturally resides. He has the title of Oliola of Anegbette and Clan Head of the entire South Uneme. The Uneme in Etsako are referred to as South Uneme. The permanent South Uneme Headship is here, being Imiava; the first male child of Uneme. The others are (ii) Udochi, (iii) Uzannu, (iv) Oghomeyele. The Clan Head of South Uneme is the permanent Chairman of Ineme (plural for Uneme people) Traditional council.

##### 7.3 Akoko-Edo Area of Edo State.

In this environment Uneme people also live in Distinct communities and these are Akpama, Uneme-Osu, Uneme-Nekhua, Ekpedo, Uneme-Erurun and Aiyetoro in order of their seniority.

#### 7.4 Uneme Speaking Communities in other Areas.

This researcher is unable to explain the existence of Uneme dialets in the two prominent places below. However the author has visited the localities in question and found them speaking Uneme dialets. There are:

- i. JESSE TOWNSHIP IN DELTA STATE
- ii. OKENNE TOWNSHIP IN KOGI STATE.

Uneme spoken in these locations can best be regarded as LANGUAGE INTERSECTION. These locations will provide good research materials for Historians of different classes and depth. However, Okenne being close in distance to Ekpedo, there would be good and close cultured relationship with the Uneme in Okenne and Ekpedo communities. I had the privilege of charting with prominent people in both places. The materials here will not contain the findings. For Jesse I merely spoke thus: (I hear what you are saying). In response in Uneme dialet, there were surprised, saying: Ataa? (True?)

#### 7.5 Jesse Factor

What the author desire our Historians to research into here as a very rich research study is stated as follows:

- i. When we the Uneme left Akpama for our present locations, Uneme-Osu in Akoko-Edo L.G.A, could it be that some of our Uneme people left here and migrated to Jesse or other part of Urhobo land?.
- ii. How did Jesse come about speaking Uneme dialet?
- iii. What is the origin of Jesse?
- iv. Is such movement the birth of LANGUAGE INTERSECTION?

The earlier this research is carried out before the Historical cultural custodian fade away the better for the Uneme people, Jesse township and Okpe people in general.

#### 8. Christianity and Islam in Uneme Land

Before the entrance of CHRISTIANITY and ISLAM, we had ANCESTRAL god (Ogun, god of iron) worshipped in Uneme Land.

The largest proportions of Christian Uneme are found in Akoko-Edo Local Government Area. They are mostly non-Catholics. This non-Catholicism began very early years back with the influence of Yoruba Anglican Preachers. The influence of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther could be said to have formed part of the accelerated emergence of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) now Anglican Communion in the environment. There are claims that Christianity entered Uneme Communities earlier than 1920; however, at Uneme-Osu for example, the first Christian Church Saint John Anglican Church was said to have been established in 1920. Shortly after this establishment of Saint John Anglican Church in Uneme-Osu, Catholic Missionaries arrived in Uneme-Osu but met with hostilities propagated by the leadership of CMS, the Anglicans. However, with the existence of Catholicism at Ososo and Dagbala it became easier for members of Uneme-Osu community to have their interest satisfied. Consequently our sons and daughters entered Catholic Primary Schools outside Uneme-Osu Communities. The first Catholic Church at Uneme-Osu, was established in 1962 using grass-roofed hut as a worship centre. Reverend father Maurice Maguire and Chukwumah were said to have played prominent roles in this regard since 1962.

The largest proportion of Uneme Muslims exists in Etsako land. The emergence of Islam in Uneme can easily be traced to the emergence of Islam in Etsako in Afemai Region of Edo State. It is well chronicled in oral tradition that the spread and interest of Islam took place in all areas of Afemai after the NUPE invasion of Afemai.

This author therefore leaves the research in this area for Historians to carry out.

#### 9. CLOSING REMARKS.

Uneme-Osu and Uneme-Erhunrun are one. We migrated as one body from Akpama about 1420 to occupy the virgin land, both of us now inhabit separated by forest for iron ore exploration. We have

everything in common; so I was informed, so I see the two communities so the two communities are till today.

We stayed in one location as a town but a group of the town as the folklore had it, moved up the hills (Erhunrun is Uneme word for hill) and when we visit them we say we are visiting our people up the hill (Erhunrun). That is how the name Erhunrun came to exist. For Administrative convenience in an emerging modern world we currently have autonomous identical Native Administrative Structures.

Uneme people arise, shine and hold firm to all our Divine gifts and blessings with honour, dignity and kindness. Go ahead and research into your rich history, improve on what you had and grow in the lord economically, politically, technologically and spiritually.

I, Professor U.S.U. Aashikpelokhai, am the Lay Apostolic Chairman of Holy Angels Catholic Parish, Uneme-Osu. I am a native of Uneme-Osu.

Many thanks go to the old generations of men and women who contributed immensely to the facts contained in here. My immeasurable thanks go to Dr. Abraham Ohiomiogue Elakhe, my dear EMAI brother from AFUZE, who did this typing. Thank you and God bless you in Jesus' name, Amen.

Prof. Udumeighe Samuel Unuamameh AASHIKPELOKHAI 4th July, 2011.