

COLONIALISM AND ANIOMA STRIDES IN NIGERIA UP TO THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA WAR

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Abstract: The story of European colonialism and the forces it let loose in modern Nigeria can never be over-emphasized as they continue to shape and define socio-political developments in many ways. This work traces the dynamics produced by the relative early contact the Anioma had with Europe and how that propelled them to the high echelon of modern Nigeria up to the end of the Nigeria-Biafra war. The Anioma had been pace-setters and high-flyers in Nigeria before the war. Against that background, this work further examines the Anioma group within the context of the Mid-West and the larger Nigerian community from the inception of colonial rule in Nigeria. It examines the pre-colonial advances of Europeans into Anioma territory; the incorporation of the Anioma into colonial Nigeria; the advantages conferred on the Anioma by its early contact with forces of Western education as well as Anioma strides in post-colonial Nigeria before the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war. It also demonstrated how the Anioma were quite visible within the pre-war Nigerian socio-political milieu.

INTRODUCTION

THE ANIOMA GROUP IN MODERN NIGERIA is relatively small but quite significant in relation to other groups in the Nigerian polity. The ancestral land of the Anioma is the predominantly Igbo-speaking region on the western bank of the Niger River in Delta State. Today, the area is referred to as Aniomaland. The people are also known as Anioma people. They have been quite influential among the forces that shaped Nigerian history, particularly in the decades leading up to the Nigeria-Biafra war. The critical role some Anioma-born personalities and the Anioma group came to play in modern Nigeria was shaped and caused by the early contact of the Anioma people with western education and other ingredients of western modernization. In other words, colonialism gave them a head start that propelled them above many groups and placed them in what

appears to be a special class. That Anioma-born military officers got so involved early in the Nigerian armed forces as officers is a throwback to this early contact with Europeans. That the Anioma territory became a major battlefield in the Nigeria-Biafra war; witnessed some unique experiences like being marked out for harsh treatment and the fact that certain family houses and compounds were targeted for destruction during the war are also traceable to who the Anioma became and came to represent in modern Nigeria. This work x-rays the Anioma people in the Nigerian state and society up to the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war in 1967. This shall involve looking at how the Anioma were incorporated into modern Nigeria, and their general strides in the Nigerian socio-political scene, particularly in the fields of education, politics, and the armed forces. It looks at the army personnel of Anioma extraction involved in the Nigeria crisis of 1966 and their fate from the January 1966 military coup down to the coup of July 1966. It also attempts an examination of some Anioma experiences of the pogrom that befell the Igbo group in Nigeria in 1966. This will also include the roles the Anioma played in the sparks of the Nigerian crisis, which started in 1966 and culminated in the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra war on July 6, 1966.

The story of how the people of the old Mid-West (where Aniomaland is located) got involved with Europe stretches back to the fifteenth century when Portuguese traders and Christian missionaries visited a part of what became the Mid-West and interacted with the Itsekiri and Benin kingdoms in the process. However, it took another four centuries for Europeans to visit the Anioma area. It started with the European attempt to understand the course of the River Niger. This commenced around the Fouta-Djallon Highlands, where the Niger has its source and reached the Anioma area when the Lander brothers reached Aniomaland on the Niger on their way to the Mouth of the River Niger in November 1830. European success in subsequently reaching the area where the Niger empties into the Atlantic opened the hinterland of the Niger area to European traders and missionaries. Between 1832 and 1834, Macgregor Laird, a British merchant, had established preliminary contacts with Aboh.¹ The first European Christian missionary party reached Igboland and Aniomaland in 1841 when a Church Missionary Society (CMS) evangelizing party on its way to Lokoja stopped briefly at Aboh.² European Christian evangelizing enterprise in Aniomaland effectively took off in 1875 with the establishment of a CMS station at Asaba.³

The very large picture of the origins of how the Royal Niger Company chattered by the British Crown acquired the area and eventually sold the same to the British, who eventually administered the area directly as a colonial power is well-documented in a book by Sanche de Gramont. The company was headquartered in Asaba on the western bank of the Niger

in Aniomaland complete with a supreme court, central prison, and the main fort for the five-hundred-man constabulary from where it ran the affairs of Nigeria.⁴ That Christian missions of the Anglican (1875) and Catholic (1884) communions planted their missions at Asaba in the early days of European enterprise on the lower Niger is well-documented. That the presence of those missions combined with that of the company to produce multiplier effects that took the Anioma to higher heights has been well highlighted in a work by Augustine N. Ndili.⁵ The introduction of western education was a major factor that propelled the Anioma to unsailable heights in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. The advantage this afforded the Anioma has been an issue that attracted the attention of Daniel Olisa Iweze in a work on the Anioma on the eve of the Nigeria-Biafra war.⁶

On the possible connection between Igbo public ascendancy in modern Nigeria and the Nigeria-Biafra war, Paul Anber's "Modernisation and Political Disintegration; Nigeria and the Ibos," is stimulating and remarkable. A very thorough study, it provided very handy historical data on the subject. It presented statistics on how the Igbo (of which the Anioma is a part) led other Nigerian groups in nearly every index of modernization, including education up to 1966.⁷ For this work, this is important for a deeper understanding of the seeming omnipresence of the Igbo in the Nigerian public scene, including the armed forces up to 1966. The work forms a solid background to an understanding of the ordinary Igbo in modern Nigeria who became a victim of narrow-mindedness on account of the general upward movement of his group within the Nigerian setting. When it is understood that interpretations given to the Igbo dominance in the public sector attracted loathing and accusations of plotting to dominate Nigeria to the exclusion of other groups and that the animosity that bred towards the Igbo in Nigeria was instrumental to the prelude to the civil war, the significant nature of Anber's work comes into clear focus. None of the works interrogated above dealt with the role of colonialism in giving the Anioma an apparent strong voice within the Nigerian setting prior to the Nigeria-Biafra war. The current work is an attempt to focus on that by seeking to explore the connection between colonialism, western education, and the Anioma visibility in Nigeria up to the outbreak of the war.

ASCERTAINING WHO THE ANIOMA PEOPLE ARE

The Anioma people live on a section of the lower reaches of the western bank of the River Niger in modern Nigeria. They are essentially an Igbo sub-group separated from the majority of the Igbo groups who live on the eastern bank of the Niger in the former Eastern Region by the River Niger.

At different times in their history, they have also been called 'Ika Igbo', 'Western Igbo', when they were a part of the Western Region from 1946 to 1963; 'Mid-Western Igbo', when they were in the Mid-West between 1963 and 1976; 'Bendel Igbo' as part of Bendel State, when the old Mid-West was renamed, from 1976 to 1991. From 1991, when Delta State was carved out of Bendel State, some refer to them as 'Delta Igbo'. The Anioma tag for them has a history of its own. In fact, it was first employed as a term for the people around 1976.⁸ Most of them essentially speak three different dialects of the macro-Igbo language. There have been contentions about their identity.⁹ But they are generally regarded as an Igbo group.¹⁰

THE ORIGINS OF THE ANIOMA CONTACT WITH EUROPE AND COLONIALISM

In relative terms, the Anioma came into early contact with the powerful forces that eventually produced the building blocks of colonial Nigeria. Their early contact with European explorers, traders, and missionaries was facilitated by the fact that a large section of them live on the western bank of the River Niger's lower reaches. This contact was responsible for sweeping a section of the Anioma community into the network of very early relationships with Europeans. This conferred some advantages on the Anioma group within the context of modern Nigeria. The earliest contact the Anioma had with elements that eventually resulted in ties with explorers and the agents of European trading companies was through the River Niger. In this connection, Asaba and Aboh played very crucial roles. Both of them lie on the western bank of the Niger River. Sponsored European explorers had been on a mission to discover the source and explore the full course of the river for the purposes of using the Niger as a highway into the African hinterland. For them, the exercise was necessary in their efforts to establish trade ties with African territories in the interior. The search for Niger's source and mouth had lasted from 1788 to 1831 with the Lander brothers (Richard and John) finally reaching the point at which the magnificent Niger empties into the Atlantic Ocean.¹¹

After this 'achievement', there was a floodgate of European activities in the hinterland of what eventually emerged as Nigeria. The River Niger was a major artery in this enterprise. In fact, the British had established a Consulate in Lokoja in the lower Niger area which they closed in 1869. A merger of three rival European firms in the area soon produced the United African Company in 1879 under the leadership of George Goldie, otherwise known as George Taubman Goldie. In 1882, the company was re-organized and renamed the National African Company. Rivalries between the French and the English in the lower Niger got the British government to establish a protectorate over the Niger Delta in 1884 but had

no money to pay for its administration. Goldie got his request that his agent on the Niger be given consulate status approved by the government. With that, the company was now able to make treaties for England and advance its commercial interests in the lower Niger area. At the Berlin African Conference, Britain insisted on administering the area Goldie's company had carved out in the lower Niger. That is how the Anioma people came into the picture and became part of the Nigerian state that evolved from that contact between Europe and people in the lower Niger area. The British got into most of Anioma territories through their initial trading contacts with the Anioma towns directly on the Niger and later, the hinterland. It was from such ties that British influence spread into the hinterland. This exception to this general trend will seem to be the Agbor axis where British penetration of the hinterland came immediately following the bloody Benin-British encounter in 1897. The British had entered Anioma territories first as explorers, traders, and missionaries. These activities eventually led to a successful attempt on the part of the British to call the shots in the concerned territory. The result was the colonization of the different Anioma communities by the British. This signaled the beginning of British control over Anioma territories. Under some agreements, Anioma communities and their rulers were cajoled into opting for 'protection' under British rule and monopoly of trade in their territories. In 1884, Asaba came under British attack and surrendered with a treaty of 'protection', friendship and peace.¹² The British government established a protectorate over the Niger Delta the same year.

For further understanding the place of the Anioma area in the emergence of modern Nigeria, it is instructive to note that the administrative capital of the Royal Niger Company was set up in Asaba between 1886 and 1900.¹³ There, it had the Supreme Court, Central Prison, and the main garrison for the Royal Niger Company's Royal Constabulary. The relics of Asaba's old romance with being Nigeria's administrative headquarters: the seat of the Royal Nigeria Company, the U.A.C House, the old Court (now renovated), the oldest county club in the country (the Asaba Club), and the old staff quarters are still there in the town's old G.R.A. With Asaba as a beacon of the company's powers, British imperial light was beamed on the hinterland. In 1897, the leading chiefs of Ibusa were compelled to sign the treaty of friendship and peace with the British under the seal of the Royal Niger Company.¹⁴ Aboh had earlier signed a treaty of friendship and trade with the British in 1841 before the advent of the Royal Niger Company.¹⁵ The same process of treaty-signing was replicated all over the Anioma hinterland by the British. At the end of the nineteenth century therefore, the Anioma area had been secured for British imperial exploration by the Royal Niger Company.

It must be stated that the relationship between the Royal Niger Com-

pany and the Anioma people was not always smooth sailing. This is even though the topmost ruling classes among them had been coerced into signing the so-called treaties of friendship with the company and the British crown. British influence was spreading among the Anioma people in all ramifications. Christianity was already introduced by European missionaries but was being stoutly challenged by the adherents of the indigenous religion. In some cases, local chiefs who converted from the indigenous Anioma way of worship to Christianity faced titanic battles with their communities. As we shall see shortly, even those suspected to be friendly with or sympathetic towards Europeans and their ways were considered enemies. The Anioma group resolved to attack Christian churches and stores owned by the Royal Niger Company, identifying both as sources of a new scourge brought upon their land by Europeans. They loathed it all and sought ways of degrading and doing away with everything European completely. As a corollary to the first, the Ekumeku movement erupted to restore the Anioma country to the ways of their ancestors. Anyone who was on the side of the European cultural imperialists was considered a saboteur and a foe. For instance, the paramount ruler of Ebu, Chief Emina, was sanctioned by the Ebu people for receiving the Reverend Father Carlo Zappa in his house. Zappa, the moving spirit behind the spread of Catholicism among the people of the old Aniocha Division (now comprising the Aniocha and Oshimili Council Areas) had reached Ebu in 1879 only to be fought off and sent away by the people. On his second attempt, he was received by Chief Emina. Thereafter, as a way of demonstrating their opposition to what had transpired between their Chief and Father Zappa, the people sent word to Chief Emina that his visitors should not extend their activities beyond his compound. They subsequently rejected his summons for meetings. He continued his friendship with the Catholic missionaries, however, and gave a piece of land on which the modern Oja Model Primary School, Ebu is situated, to the catholic mission.¹⁶ His (Emina) lineage is about the most educated and prominent in Ebu today. At Ibusa, the first Eze titleholder to convert to Christianity was Obi Ajufo of Umuehea Quarter. He paid for that decision in the short run. His children refused to work on his farms; his eldest son threatened him with an axe and his twelve wives threatened to sleep outside his compound if he did not go back to the religion of their ancestors and turn away from his embrace of the foreign ways.¹⁷ Today, the Ajufo family is armed with all sorts of professionals and prominent people. An Akwukwu-Igbo Chief was also said to have been visited by some indigenous anti-Western partisans and warned that he would be shot if he did not wash off the water he was supposed to have received on his head on baptism.¹⁸

Finally, the Ekumeku warriors stepped into the picture. In a series of

events after another, they resisted and defied the activities of the missionaries; rejected the authority of the Royal Niger Company and defied the government it represented. This they demonstrated in campaigns of destroying churches and sacking the company's trading stations between 1883 and 1914.¹⁹

THE FIRING UP OF BRITISH COLONIAL DOMINATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW ELITE CLASS IN ANIOMALAND

By 1914, the Ekumeku uprising had been quelled and British colonial rule was effectively established in Aniomaland. Despite the quarrels of the Anioma with the new scheme of life being introduced to them by the British government, they eventually, albeit reluctantly, embraced the new schools being introduced by the missionaries who went on establishing more and more of them. Before the colonial rule was established in Aniomaland despite the armed opposition of the Ekumeku uprising, Aboh had been the first Anioma town to receive missionaries in 1841, when Obi Ossai received three Church Missionary Society representatives: J. F. Schon, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, and Simon Jonas, a Sierra-Leonean ex-slave of Igbo extraction, on their way to Lokoja. Jonas was left behind by the party at the request of Ossai. The party eventually fetched him on their way back after a short stay at Aboh preaching the Christian Gospel.²⁰ However, Aboh was not to be the center of very serious Christian activities in the Anioma area. That Asaba was to be, may is not unconnected with the fact that the Royal Niger Company moved its headquarters to Asaba in 1886. The Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) got to Asaba before any other Christian group, having established its first mission there in 1875. However, if Asaba came to be the nerve center of Christian enterprise on the lower Niger and the fulcrum on which modern developments around Anioma turned, it was the Catholics that made it so. The establishment of schools in the Anioma area was kicked-off by the Catholic Church in Asaba in 1888, two years after Asaba became the headquarters of the Royal Niger Company and by extension, that of the emerging Nigerian nation-state. From there, it quietly spread to other areas of Aniomaland.

As pointed out earlier, Reverend Father Carlo Zappa of the Society of African Missions (S.M.A.) was the moving spirit of the evangelization around Asaba and a huge section of the Anioma hinterland. Though the Catholic Church had been late in arriving in the Anioma area, Zappa threw a lot of energy into the work of the church, including the establishment of schools. Soon after arriving Asaba in 1884, he established the first primary school in the town, Saint Joseph's Primary School. It was the very first primary school in the whole of the Mid-West area. In 1890, the Church Missionary Society also established a primary school in Asaba,

Holy Trinity School. In 1895, the Catholic Mission established the Convent School, Asaba specifically for girls. Boarding facilities were made available in the school which was run by the Congregation of Our Lady Queen of the Apostles.²¹ It was rare at that time to have schools dedicated wholly to the education of the girl-child. Asaba and Aniomaland had that distinction quite early in colonial Nigeria. Beyond teaching normal reading and writing, the school also offered courses in domestic science. It attracted pupils from as far as Etsakoland in today's Edo State in Nigeria.²² Together, these schools and many more that followed them in the Anioma area came to have a multiplier effect in Aniomaland. Their graduates became seed apostles of an education revolution that spread through Aniomaland and beyond as they became teachers and catechists in many places, particularly around Aniomaland.²³ The colonial government established its first school in Asaba in 1901. In 1907, the Anglican Church opened a primary school in Akwukwu-Igbo in the interior. The Catholic mission again opened another school at Ibusa, the Sacred Heart Primary School, in 1909. To show how fast the opening of schools caught on in Aniomaland, Ubulu-Unor, a place still considered to be in the interior even today, got its first primary school in 1913.

It is very noteworthy that the very first post-primary institution in the old Mid-West was established by the Anglicans at Asaba. One of the most prominent Nigerians who schooled there is Obed Azikiwe, the father Of Nnamdi Azikiwe. The school was later moved to Awka in modern Anambra State.²⁴ It is not remembered by many. The educational institution that is remembered as the first post-primary school in the whole of the Mid-West, the famous Saint Thomas' Teachers' Training College, Ibusa, was established by the Catholic Church in 1928. This school eventually supplied teachers to catholic primary schools scattered around Nigeria. In the words of Bola Ige, former Governor of Oyo state and former Attorney-General of Nigeria, who grew up in Kaduna, St Thomas' College, Ibusa '...for many of us catholic pupils in the North, was the 'University' from which all our good teachers and headmasters came.'²⁵ In 1944, the Catholics opened a secondary school in Asaba. That was and remains Saint Patrick's College, Asaba. In 1946, the American Baptists established the Baptist Girls' High School at Agbor.²⁶ It has also been established that the very first catholic seminary for the training of Catholic priests in Nigeria was established at Asaba. It was later moved from there and is today at Ibadan as SS Peter and Paul Major Seminary. The last alumnus of the school to depart the earth is the late Monsignor Pedro Martins of the Catholic Archdiocese of Lagos.²⁷ Within the Mid-West outside the Anioma area, Edo College had been established in Benin City in 1937. What eventually became Government College; Ughelli had been established in 1945 as Government Secondary School and later Warri Col-

lege, Warri and Warri College Ughelli. A deeper peep will show that there were five post-primary institutions in the Mid-West by 1946 and three of them were in the Anioma section.

The early contact the Anioma had with western education in colonial Nigeria gave them a head-start in terms of the opportunities offered by the phenomenon thrown up by the establishment of the Nigerian state by Britain. Armed with education, which a lot of other Nigerians lacked, Anioma elites fanned out in different sections within the larger Nigerian society. They got exposed to other places and cultures, thanks to their education. Some statistical figures produced by a government-sponsored survey on the various southern peoples living in different southern provinces will be useful here. We shall focus specifically on the Anioma whom the report referred to as 'Ika Ibo'. Figures tabulated from some statistical data provided by P.A. Talbot show that by 1926, there were 92,834 Anioma (Ika Ibo) persons living in other provinces in Southern Nigeria outside their Anioma homeland.²⁸ The extent to which the Anioma had moved out of their homes to other places in Nigeria can be demonstrated by similar statistics from the other surveyed Mid-West ethnic groups. There were 34,359 Bini people living outside their province then. For the Esan, it was 55,979. The Kukuruku (Afemai) had 57,237 while the Sobo (Urhobo) had 32,577.²⁹ As further evidence of how the Anioma had left home in colonial Nigeria, they were very much involved in the colonial service, where their prevalence was quite high. By the 1930s, there were at least four produce inspectors in Nigeria's colonial service from Ibusa alone. These are Julius Nmei, Nwanze Gbalahor, Benedict Okeleke Elege and Louis Abuah.³⁰ Another source corroborated the high visibility of Anioma indigenes in the colonial service by asserting that there were many of them in the colonial Public Works Department (PWD) as masons, bricklayers, painters, plumbers, carpenters, and electricians. The informant who speaks fluent Hausa said she lived with her husband, Gabriel Ilechie, the Ogwashi-Uku-born and bred bricklayer in many parts of Nigeria, including Malumfashi, Sokoto, Katsina, Funtua, and Benin City in colonial times.³¹ By the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war, the Anioma had a lot of retired colonial public and civil servants. This was particularly true of Ogwashi-Uku, Ibusa and Asaba. Some of these retirees were killed by federal troops in their onslaught against the Anioma people during the Nigerian civil war. It is also interesting to note that virtually all the Anioma military officers in Nigeria before the war were children of these Anioma colonial workers.

These Anioma pioneers in colonial Nigeria may not have been very well educated by modern standards. The little education they got, however, was a catalyst that propelled them to great heights. For instance, Chukwuma Nzeogwu's father, James Okafor Nzeogwu who was educated to standard six and joined the Anioma dispersal to Kaduna, was to

produce an elitist child in Major Patrick Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, whose place in Nigeria history has become almost indelible. As time went on, however, building upon the achievements of those who had cleared new paths for them, the Anioma elite class produced top professionals in all fields in colonial Nigeria. The first West African to be ordained a priest of the Catholic Church was the Ezi-born Paul Obodoechine Emecheta who was ordained in 1920 at Asaba. Equipped with just standard six education, Father Paul worked his way up to the prestigious priesthood of the Catholic Church as a pioneer Nigerian priest. The first lawyer in the Benin province was also of Anioma origin. Barrister Nwajei hailed from Ibusa and by dint of hard work and personal sacrifice qualified as a lawyer around 1940.³² He spent virtually all his working life as a lawyer in Kano, where he became the National Legal Adviser to the Northern Elements Progressive Union (N.E.P.U.).

THE ANIOMA RESISTANCE TO BRITISH COLONIALISM, THE ELITES, AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW IDENTITY

The point with the Anioma and their role in modern Nigeria goes beyond having had early contact with western education. It was the use to which they put that advantage that catapulted them to the top of the social ladder in colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. They simply seized their opportunities with both hands and pressed home their advantages. In a way, they made their early contact with western education count by putting it to good use. They were not the most advantaged people at the beginning of colonial rule. They had resisted British rule at a very heavy cost. Besides the Ekumeku movement which is very well-known and principally centered around the old Aniocha Division and its environs, the Ika and Kwale groups had also created resistance movements of their own, though not on the Ekumeku scale. The reaction of the British to the Anioma on account of these uprisings was to place them at some peculiar political disadvantage in the Nigerian state that emerged from British conquests around modern Nigeria. Owing to what they considered to be profound and detailed opposed reservations about the British colonialism, particularly the way the British district commissioner, Captain O.S Crewe-Read understood his authority, the Owa people revolted violently in 1906, killing the District Commissioner, S. O. Crewe-Read, at Owa-Nta in the process. In retaliation, the British had fallen on Owa which they sacked militarily.³³ In two separate uprisings in 1905 and 1914, the Kwale people revolted against British rule. The colonial government's emissary had been flogged and driven away at Ezionum. This attracted British military attacks and the conquest of Ezionum and Amai in 1914.³⁴

Arising from the many troubles which the British felt the Anioma had

given to them, efforts were made to keep them in check in post-1914 Nigeria. Joseph Egwu has hinted that the British decided to employ a policy of keeping the Anioma separate in two different provinces in order to manage them in a way that suited the colonial government. This he pointed out, forced the British into consigning the Anioma (though one people) into two separate provinces.³⁵ The truth of the matter is that the Anioma were gerrymandered into two different provinces. The Asaba and Ika divisions were lumped with the Edo group in the Benin Province while the Ukwuani Division was forced into Warri Province to co-habit with the Urhobo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, and Isoko. This made the Anioma political and numerical minorities in both places.

It is important to point out that the Anioma did not seem to have allowed this obvious disadvantage to weigh them down. It did not stop them from seeing themselves as one. In 1939, Anioma elites that had spread out from their ancestral home in the provinces of Benin and Warri to different parts of Nigeria got together to form a group pronouncing their oneness. This was the Western Ibo Union that brought together nineteen Anioma town groups under a pan-Anioma umbrella group.³⁶ Their coming together was a defiance of the artificial division the colonial Nigerian state had attempted to impose on their aspirations as a group. They saw themselves as one despite the way the colonial state classified them.

This Anioma solidarity was to be a major factor in their collective push for what they felt was theirs in colonial and even post-colonial Nigeria. It was with this united vision that the Anioma group asked for a separate province for themselves in 1954. The push for a law that would have removed the Aboh Division from the Warri Province as well as Asaba and Ika divisions from the Benin Province to form a new West Niger Province was spear-headed by frontline politicians from the four modern political sections of Anioma. Chief Dennis Osadebey represented Oshimili; Aniocha was represented by Chief F.H Utomi, Ika by the Obi of Akumazi, and the Ukwuani people by Chief Oputa Ututu. All four were members of the Western House of Assembly.

ANIOMA STRIDES IN THE MID-WEST AND PACE-SETTING ROLES IN NIGERIA

This demand for a province of their own will seem to have presaged the role Anioma sons and daughters eventually played in the micro-politics of the Mid-West as well as that of Nigeria and their many accomplishments. Prominent Anioma sons and daughters plunged seriously into the politics of Nigeria both at the micro and macro levels. As leader of the National Council Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) opposition in the Western House of Assembly and the arrowhead of the NCNC in the Mid-West, Chief Den-

nis Chukwuade Osadebey was one of those who carried the burden for the demand for the creation of the Mid-West Region. He became the head of the Mid-West State Movement while the Oba of Benin, Akenzua II held the honorific title of the Leader of the movement. It is also instructive to note that the very first time the idea of creating a new state out of the Western Region was officially raised at a meeting, it was almost an Anioma show all the way. This was a meeting of the leaders of the Benin Province held at Ogwashi-Uku in 1952 chaired by the Oba of Benin and addressed by the Resident, H.L.M. Butcher. At the meeting, a motion for the creation of a Central State was moved by Chief J. I. G. Onyia and seconded by Chief F.H. Utomi.³⁷ Both were retired educationists from Asaba and Ogwashi-Uku, respectively. Again, the inaugural meeting of the Mid-West State Movement was held at Agbor on May 5, 1956.³⁸ Such prominent Anioma personalities as Dennis Osadebey, Opute Ututu, F. H. Utomi, Ogeogbunem Dafe, Afam Mordi, Mrs. B. U. Kerry, and Mr. Mark Uzorka played quintessential roles in both the creation of the Mid-West and its eventual administration. As the leader of the leading party in the Mid-West area and of the NCNC Parliamentary Caucus in the Western Region, Osadebey emerged as Mid-West Administrator and eventually as Premier when elections were held in the Mid-West later in 1963.³⁹ The creation of the Mid-West showed how far advanced the Anioma were compared to other areas of the Mid-West in producing professionals. In the political field, apart from Osadebey who sat atop the government of the Mid-West as Premier, the Anioma section produced the following in the very first Mid-West Cabinet inaugurated in 1964: Chief Ogeogbunem Dafe was Minister of Finance, Chief F.H. Utomi was Minister of Education and Chief F.U. Osuhor served as Minister of State in the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources. Justice Chike Idigbe became the new Chief Judge of the Region. He had been the most senior judge from the Mid-West in the former Western Region. Besides that, a large bulk of the senior civil servants who had returned to the Mid-West from Ibadan was of Anioma origin.⁴⁰ These included F.C. Esedebe, Chukwujekwu, E. C. Halim, F. C. Halim, Israel Amadi-Emina, George Orewa, Isaac Okonjo, and P.I.G. Onyeobi among others. They all became permanent secretaries in the Mid-West. Of the first set of twelve permanent secretaries in the Midwest, nine were of Anioma extraction. On its creation in the new Mid-West, the region's Ministry of Health had nine medical doctors. Eight of them were of Anioma origin.⁴¹ Some of these were Dr. Patrick Ofili, Dr. Francis Ogeah, Dr. R.O. Nkeaka, Dr. Ngozi Allanah, Dr. J.B. Azinge, Dr. B.O. Azinge and Dr. Eugene Akwule. As a result of this, the Central Hospital in Benin City was also dominated by medical doctors from the Anioma section of the Mid-West.

If the Anioma group was in a dominant position to call the shots in

Midwest affairs, it was not because they conspired against other Midwest groups. It was their education and consequent attainments that took them to what will tend to have facilitated their general prominence in other fields within the Nigerian space both in colonial and post-colonial times. A few examples will suffice here. The first Nigerian to be commissioned into the Nigerian Army was Lt. Ugboma, an Ukwuani man of the Anioma group. The first Nigerian cadet-trained officer in the Nigerian Navy is Commander O. Z. Chiazor of Atuma. He obtained a combined Honours degree in Chemistry and Physics in 1954 before gaining a commission into the Royal Canadian Navy. He joined the Nigerian Navy in 1958. By the time of Nigeria's independence on October 1, 1960, the Anioma had ten officers out of a Nigerian officer population of fifty-seven in the Nigerian Army. This eleven excludes the pioneer Nigerian officer in the Nigerian Army, who had left before then. If we include him in the count of Nigerians who had been enrolled into the officer cadre of the Nigerian Army before independence, then the Anioma produced eleven out of an officer population of less than sixty in the Nigerian Army. After independence more Anioma officers were added to this list. This includes the first female officer in the Nigerian Army, Josephine Okwuekeleke-Tolefe. Trained in England as a professional nurse, she has her ancestral roots in Umudei, Ogwashi-Uku, and was commissioned into the Nigerian Army as a Second Lieutenant on 7th May 1961.⁴² All of them and many other Anioma officers who got commissioned after them between 1961 and 1967, with the exception of Alabi Isama and Iweze, lost their commissions as most of them were dismissed from the Nigerian Army at the end of the war.⁴³

In addition, the first Nigerian cadet officer in the Nigerian Police Force is Josiah Okwuraiwe of Asaba. The first Nigerian to serve as a nurse in Jos was Leo Okogwu, the father of Maryam Ndidi Babangida (Nee Okogwu). Rev. Nwadei Martin of Issele-Uku was the first Nigerian graduate of a U.S. University. Born in 1875, he traveled to the U.S.A. in 1895 and returned to Nigeria in 1922.⁴⁴ Today, a street (Wadei Martins) is named after him in Nigeria's premier University, the University of Ibadan. The first Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Warri is the Ibusa-born Lucas Nwaezeapu. He was enthroned in 1964. Nigeria's independence Beauty queen was Rosemary Anieze (later Anieze-Adams) who hails from Ugbodu in Odiani clan. Peter Anieke of Ibusa was an ace footballer with Stationery Stores of Lagos and later was among the first set of Nigerian footballers to represent Nigeria in the Olympics at the Mexico Games of 1968. Sidney Asiodu, an Asaba indigene, was a champion athlete from his Igbobi college days down to the University of Nigeria Nsukka. He ran for Nigeria at the Olympics. Violet Odogwu (later Odogwu-Nwajei) was also an athlete who won many laurels for Nigeria. She hails from Asaba. In 1965, Mrs. B.U. Kerry of Owere-Olubor had emerged as a Senator for the Anioma

people in the Nigerian Senate. With that, she became the second woman in Nigerian history to be a member of the Nigerian Senate.⁴⁵ In the world of music, the Anioma group had also given the world the Asaba-born ace-trumpeter, Zeal Onyia, and the much-beloved and celebrated Akwukwu-born but Lagos-bred high-life crooner, Eddy Okonta. In a way, it will be fair to say that the Anioma people contributed greatly to putting the building blocks that built up Nigeria from the inception of the colonial state right into the post-colonial era.

To a great extent too, the Anioma had attained some distinction in the Nigerian society before the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war. They may not have been at the very top, but they were holding their own *vis-à-vis* other Nigerian groups. They were thus not a group to be easily overlooked. Without even realizing it, the Anioma group was already playing at the very top of the Nigerian power game. Their entrenchment in the armed forces, particularly the Nigerian Army, gave them a level of visibility that was not to be taken for granted. They had emerged as a key group within Nigeria and controlled the government machinery in the Mid-West, a region that linked the East and the West of the country. The importance of the Anioma area for Nigeria was further strengthened when a bridge was constructed by the federal government to link Asaba in the Mid-West with Onitsha in the East. It was a very powerful link and connected west and east in a flow of commerce, people, and culture. This bridge was commissioned on January 4, 1966, by no less a person than the Federal Prime Minister Tafawa-Balewa. It was and still is the only bridge across the Niger in southern Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

On the eve of the Nigeria-Biafra war, the Anioma group had become a critical stakeholder in the Nigerian project. Her elites got into vantage positions mostly on account of their relatively early contact with the forces of western education. They had scored many firsts and provided Nigeria with powerful blocks, beams and pillars in her nation and state-building processes. Her people had gone far and wide all over Nigeria. They also occupied very key positions in civil and military establishments. They enjoyed privileged positions in many fields of human endeavor on account of their early contact with western education, and their push and determination. They had worked hard and earned the fruits of success. When the Nigeria-Biafra war came, however, their territory became a major battlefield. The result was cataclysmic for them and their privileged position within the Nigerian setting. At the end of the war, the influential Anioma group became victims of the struggle for power and influence in Nigeria. They lost out and have been playing catch-up ever since.

NOTES

¹ Obaro Ikime, "The Western Niger Delta and the Hinterland in the Nineteenth Century" in Obaro Ikime, ed., *Groundwork of Nigerian History* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980), 267.

² Ikime, 267.

³ F. K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1857-185* (London: Frank Cass, 1971), 46-49.

⁴ Sanche de Gramont, *The Strong Brown God: The Story of the River Niger* (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1975), 271-319.

⁵ Augustine N. Ndili, *Asaba, 187-2006: Reflections on Her Growth and Development* (Asaba: His Bride Ventures, 2008), 74-84.

⁶ Daniel Olisa Iweze, "Anioma (Western Igboland) on the Eve of the Nigerian Civil War" in Nana Akua Amposah, ed., *Beyond the Boundaries: Toyin Falola and the Art of Genre Building* (Trenton: Africa World Press/The Red Sea Press), 473-495.

⁷ Paul Anber, Modernisation and Political Disintegration: Nigeria and the Ibos, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 1&2 (1967), 163-179.

⁸ See Emma Okocha, *Blood on the Niger: An Untold Story of the Nigerian Civil War*, (Washington DC: U.S.A. Africa, 1994), xv.

⁹ See for instance, J. O. Ijomah, *Igbo Origins and Migrations* (Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers, 2010), 13-18; K. O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), 25-26; Kunirum Osia, "Anioma Ethnic Identity," in Kunirum Osia, ed., *Anioma in Contemporary Nigeria: Issues of Identity and Development* (Ibadan: Bookbuilders, 2012), 1-22.

¹⁰ Emma Okocha, *Blood on the Niger: The First Black-On-Black Genocide* (New York: Gomsam Books), 2012; P. A. Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, 4 Vols. (London: Frank Cass, 1969 edn); Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan Press, 1976), 16; F. K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1857-1914* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1971), 166-175; F. A. Onyekpeze, *An Outline of the Culture and Socio-Economic Interest of the Ika Nation* (Agbor: Krisbec Publications, 2003), 14-27; Ben Nwanne, ed. *Ika: The Land and its People* (Lagos: Up and Doing Publishers, 2004), 294-375; C. A. Akeh-Osu, *The History of Great Isi-Ile-Uku (Issele-Uku) Kingdom* (Onitsha: Etuokwu Press, 1992); Lambert U. Ejiofor, *Igbo Kingdoms, Power and Control* (Onitsha: Africana Publishers, 1982); Adiele Afigbo, "The Beni Mirage and the History of South-Central Nigeria," *Nigeria Magazine*, 37, (1981), 17-24; Don C. Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History of the Western Igbo People* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994); Dan Olisa Dieyi, *The Realities and Values of the Anioma Identity* (Lagos: Danfejim International, 1992); Joseph Nnabugwu Egwu, "The Marginality of the Anioma in Nigeria," *Anioma Essence*, 1, 5 (January 2009), 18 & 21.

¹¹ See de Gramont, 63-191

¹² Asaba Development Association, *Asaba History and Development* (Benin City: Manilla Enterprises, 1978), 11.

¹³ See Stanley Okafor, 'Community Mobilization and Development: The Asaba Development Association,' in Alex Honey and Stanley Okafor, eds., *Hometown Associations: Indigenous Knowledge and Development in Nigeria* (Ibadan: Sam Bookman Publishers, 1999), 55; Emma Okocha, *Blood on the Niger: The Untold Story of the Nigerian Civil War* (Washington D. C.: U. S. A. Africa), xiii

¹⁴ Don C. Ohadike, *The Ekumeku Movement*, 183-189.

¹⁵ Ibid., 171-181.

¹⁶ Jokey Lumi Emina, 'History and People of Ebu,' *Omania Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 2, April/May 2011, 30-31.

¹⁷ Don C. Ohadike, *The Ekumeku Movement*, 103.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan, 1976), 131-136; Don C. Ohadike, *The Ekumeku Movement*, 61-166 and F. K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1857-1904* (London: Frank Cass), 167-175.

²⁰ See Don C. Ohadike, *The Ekumeku Movement*, 63-69; F. K. Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland*, 2-3.

²¹ Ndili, 75; Okafor, 55.

²² Ndili, 75.

²³ Ndili, 76.

²⁴ Ndili, 38.

²⁵ See Bola Ige, *People, Politics and Politicians of Nigeria, 1940-1979* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1995), 8.

²⁶ B. O. Akwukwuma, "Education in Ikaland: Past, Present and Future", in Ben Nwanne, ed., *Ika: The Land and its People* (Lagos: Up and Doing Publications, 2000), 214; F.A. Onyekpeze, *An Outline of People, Culture and Socio-Economic Interest of the Ika Nation* (Agbor: Krisbec Publications, 2003), 135.

²⁷ Rev. Fr. (Prof.) A.D. Nzemeke, age 70, Benin City, interviewed on 20/09/ 2005.

²⁸ P. A. Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, Vol. IV, (London: Frank Cass 1969), 44.

²⁹ Ibid..

³⁰ Obi Gbonu Ajumeze, age 78, Farmer, Ibusa, interviewed on 16/04/2008

³¹ Madam Susan Mgboude Ilechie, Community Leader, age 102, Ogwashi-Uku, interviewed on 01/01/2012

³² Obi Nwanze Nwaobi, age 87, Ibusa, Community Leader, interviewed on 03/01/2004

³³ Don C. Ohadike, *The Ekumeku Movement*, 148-155.

³⁴ Ibid, 155-158.

³⁵ See Joseph Nnabugwu Egwu, 'The Ekumeku Movement', *Anioma Essence*, 1, no. 4, 2008, 57.

³⁶ NAI, Z/1CC 248/49 Western Ibo Union, 1940.

³⁷ Emma Okocha, *Blood on the Niger*, xv.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ David Abernathy, 'Nigeria Creates a New Region,' *Africa Report*, 9, no. 3, (March 1964), 8-9.

⁴⁰ Chief F. C Esedebe, age 80, Retired Permanent Secretary, Ibusa, interviewed on 29/12/ 2010.

⁴¹ Emma Okocha, *Blood on the Niger*, 2.

⁴² See *Vanguard* (Nigeria), December 10, 2011.

⁴³ Odigwe A. Nwaokocha, "Post-War Reintegration, Reconstruction and Reconciliation among the Anioma People of Nigeria", *UFAHAMU: A Journal of African Studies*, Vol 42, Issue 1, 2020, 1-22.

⁴⁴ See Chris Afumata Akeh-Osu, *The History of the Great Isi-Ile-Uku (Issele-Uku) kingdom* (Onitsha: Etuokwu Press, 1992), 32.

⁴⁵ See Stella Effah-Attoe, 'Nigerian Women in Top Political Positions 1923-2007: The Journey So Far,' *Calabar Journal of Liberal Studies*, 11, no. 1, (April, 2008), 109-139.