

ORAL TRADITION AND INTERGROUP RELATIONS: NSIT AND HER NEIGHBOURS' EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Traditions of origin and migrations of various Ibibio groups – Nsit and her neighbours – reveal that, indeed, they originated from a common source, and that they must have stayed together for centuries, but dispersed after series of wars among them, or due to craves for spaces and food. Hence, the reason why Nsit and majority of her neighbours share a common tradition of origin from Usakedet; and a few like Ikono, Itak, Etoi, Ndiya and so on, explicitly point to Nsit as their place of dispersal. Also, every Ibibio group has at least a tradition of her origin, migration and of her relationship with other groups within (and sometimes, without) Ibibio. Although these traditions vary as a result of environmental and social influences, but their conclusions still point *somewhatly* to one direction as the root and route through which they penetrated their present locales. The paper relies on interdisciplinary method of research. The reason for the reliance has been that this method gives the research the impetus to foray into related disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and so on, for information gathering. The finding and conclusion of the paper point to the fact that the contents of various oral traditions of Nsit people and their neighbours expose them as people of the same stock who had related many millennia before the advent of colonial rule, which is why they share the same traditions.

Introduction

The strongest evidence in favour of the model postulating a network of intergroup relations, according to Afigbo, comes from oral traditions. Oral tradition is viewed in this sense because "it contains the only authentic effort on the part of the people to explain their world, their environment, how it was built up and how it functioned."¹

Traditions of origin and migrations of various Ibibio groups - Nsit and her neighbours - reveal that indeed, they originated from a common source, and must have dispersed after series of wars among them, or due to crave for space and food.² In fact, Nsit and majority of her neighbours share a common tradition of origin from Usakedet,³ and a few like Ikono, Itak, Etoi, Ndiya and so on, explicitly point to Nsit as their place of dispersal.⁴

For instance, the Ikono and Itak traditions maintain that they dispersed from Ikot Oku Anyang in Nsit due to a fight for rulership between Ikono and *Abaam*.⁵ Ndiya tradition points to Nduo Eduo in Nsit as their cradleland,⁶ and Etoi tradition claims that they came to settle at Obio Etoi through the leadership of *Anyang*.⁷ Besides Ibibio tradition maintains that Nsit is the oldest Ibibio

¹A. E. Afigbo, *The Igbo and their Neighbours: Intergroup Relations in Southeastern Nigeria to 1953* (Ibadan: University Press Limited, 1987) p. 32.

²John Basse Ituen, 89 years, Village Head, Ikot Ambon Ibesikpo, Ibesikpo Asutan LGA. 7March, 2019.

³Monday E. Noah, "Ibibio Origin and Migration in historical Perspective" (Nigeria Magazine, Nos 134-135, 1981) p. 89

⁴Thomas Thomas, "Nsit Clan of the Ibibio: A Study in Origin and Migration" (M. A. Dissertation submitted to the Department of History and International Studies, Delta State University, Abraka, 2021) p. 20

⁵Basse Nsentip, "Ikono Ibom People, their Origin and Background", in the souvenir programme of Ikono Ibom Day, 2020, pp. 5-6

⁶Udo Effiong Akpan, "Traditional Religion in Ndiya Clan of Ikono Local Government Area and its impacts on the people"(NCE Project, Department of History University of Cross River State, Uyo 1987), p.1

⁷Ita Mbaba, *The Burden of a Judge* (Uyo: Robertminder International Ltd; 2003), p. 33

group.⁸ The Oron group sees Nsit as the mother of Ibibio;⁹ the Ekid refer to other Ibibio groups as *Mbio Nsit Ibi* and the main Ibibio language as *Ikwo Nsit Ibi*.¹⁰ According to Nkenta, Nsit was the progenitor of everyone living or dead occupying the present Akwa Ibom State, including ancient Ibibio clans subsumed into Igbo, Igala, Nasarawa, Southern Kaduna and Western Cameroun. He had three sons, Ikono, Afaha and Oku... Ikono was Nsit's first son... the second son, Afaha took over the manorial rights of Nsit estate... Afaha begat Esinwo... *Anyang* which is the primordial deity (of Ibibio) resides with the Esinwo family who had become the head of Afaha in entirety.¹¹

The earliest Ibibio people only preserved their history through oral traditions which were transmitted from one generation to another. Uya, while explaining Vansina's definition of oral tradition, holds that oral traditions are verbal testimonies, passed down by words of mouth.¹²

As stated earlier, every Ibibio group has a tradition or two of her origin, migration and of her relationship with other groups within (and sometimes without) Ibibio. Although these traditions vary as a result of environmental and social influences, but their conclusions still point somewhatly to one direction as the root and route through which they penetrated their present locales. The susceptibility of oral tradition may have been the reason Vansina describes it as "more fragile than written records."¹³ Curtin adds that however the traditions are collected; the most important step is critical evaluation.¹⁴ According to him,

This is not so much a question of finding the best version of a particular tradition but of finding what truth it may contain. Most formal traditions, repeated from memory, were preserved because they served political ends. They are "official history", no more worthy of complete credence than a pentagon press release. They are not to be taken at face value, but they contain clues to the truth, and sophisticated methods for disentangling truth from error have been worked out in recent years.¹⁵

Vansina however encourages the use of oral traditions in African history by stating that "there may be several written versions of a single event and, conversely, there are stereotyped and fixed versions of oral traditions."¹⁶

Traditions of origins and migrations of various villages within Nsit and her neighbours clearly spelt out existence of relationships among various Ibibio groups under study. For instance, the tradition of origin of Ndon Utim in Iman which points to Obotim in Nsit; the tradition of origin of Ikot Anyang in Offot Clan which claims Nsit as her cradleland, and so on, are typical examples of oral tradition as evidence of intergroup relations, and according to Akpan, "the explanation is that

⁸Udoekong Etuk Obio-Offiong, *An Introduction to Nsit History: A History of Afaha Obio Offiong and a First step to the study of Ibibio History* (New York: Timeless Avatar Press, 1958) p. 16; Edet A. Udo, *Who are the Ibibio?* Onitsha: Africana-Fep Publishers Limited, 1983), p. 25

⁹Kojo Baffoe Maison, "A socio-political Identity of the Oron People, 1600-1900" (PhD Thesis submitted to the Department of History, University of Calabar, 1988) p. 132

¹⁰ Manfred Ekpe, "A Bird's Eye view of the Origin, Migration and Dispersal of the Peoples of the Former Eket Division of the Defunct Calabar Province" (An Unpublished Manuscript).

¹¹Elijah Nelson Nkenta, *Antiquities of the Ibibio: From Prehistory to the Early Days in the Gulf of Guinea and Western Sudan* (An Unpublished Manuscript).

¹²Okon Edet Uya, *African History: Some Problems in Methodology and Perspectives* (Calabar: CATS Publishers, 2009), p.24

¹³Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago, 1968), p.27

¹⁴Philip Curtin, *Pre-Colonial African History* (Washington DC: American Historical Association, 1974), p. 17

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 17-18

¹⁶Jan Vansina, "Recording the Oral History of the Bakaba"(Journal of African History, Volume 1 No1, 1960), p.3

centuries before the nineteenth century, there were waves of migration and settlement of people across Africa and in the Ibibio area, across the Lower Cross River Region.”¹⁷

There are traditions which explain other forms of relationships between Nsit and her neighbours. For instance, the tradition that explains the *imaanship* between Nsit and Ikono; between Obotim Nsit and Afaha Efiat in Iman; between Ikot Oku Nsit and Ikot Obio Inyang in Iman; between Ikot Ntan Nsit and Ikot Ekpeyak Ikono; between Ikot Ntan Nsit and Ntan in Ibiono, and so on. Some traditions exist in the area of study which point to war and conflicts in the course of the relationships in the period in view.

The various contacts made by various groups in the past with their Nsit neighbour were as important as their diverse identities, and were meaningful to them just as they were equally meaningful to the Nsit people of that time; hence, if they were not so, they would not have preserved them in the forms they are found in their various traditions. That these contacts were rationalized in terms of kinship bonds or blood bonds suggest that they were for the most parts peaceful and beneficial.¹⁸

Six Traditions (Hypotheses) of Ibibio Origin and Migration:

It is pertinent, however, to state that for want of a possible conclusion, and/or end to the intensified debate and speculations on Ibibio origin and migrations, some traditions (or hypotheses) had emerged, yet, none of them was able to give an acceptable conclusion of where the Ibibio originated from. Hence, none of these traditions was adopted as the sole hypothesis of Ibibio migration history as at the period under study.

Indeed, there are about six traditions of origin and migration of Ibibio people. These traditions are the Sudanese tradition, the Usakedet tradition, the oriental tradition, the Benue-Congo valley tradition, the Ibom tradition and the autochthonous tradition. Perhaps other tradition exists or will emerge, but for now it is proper to deal with the six mentioned above.

The Sudanese Tradition: This tradition states that the Ibibio people dispersed from somewhere around Darfur about 1515 during a certain war that scattered most of the earliest inhabitants of that region. This tradition holds that the Ibibio people migrated from there to Nigeria. From the suggested date (1515), the Sudanese tradition sells the Ibibio as a recent group in Nigeria who arrived at their present locale long after the Portuguese had arrived and commenced their commercial activities in the Gulf of Guinea. The Portuguese are said to have arrived the Gulf of Guinea in 1472.¹⁹

The Usakedet Tradition: This tradition points to the Southern (Southwestern) Cameroon – the Balondo, the Bakoko, the Ekondo Ekiti, the Usakedet (now Isangelle) areas as the original home of the Ibibio people, from where they migrated through the sea to their present locale in Nigeria. This tradition, in effect, claims that the areas mentioned, including Akpayafe, were Ibibio territories in the Cameroun, and that the Ibibio presence in Nigeria was a mere expansion. However, some persons, families and villages in Cameroon, especially around Douala, Usakedet, and so on “are equally reckoned to have been founded by Ibibio persons.”²⁰

Linguistic evidence such as toponyms, anthroponyms, hydronyms, lexis and semantics are used by proponents of this tradition to arrive at their conclusions. However, one cannot say with a degree of exactitude if the similarities in the linguistic and cultural particulars of Ibibio and Southwestern Cameroon were as a result of contacts or not. But almost all the Ibibio groups point to Usakedet area (South Western Cameroon) as their original home.²¹

¹⁷Otoabasi Akpan, “Akwa Ibom State: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow” (A Distinguished Lecture presented at Ibibio Academic Roundtable, University of Uyo, 8 January, 2012), p.3

¹⁸Afigbo, *The Igbo and Her Neighbours*, pp. 19-25

¹⁹E. U. Aye, *The Efik people* (Calabar: Glad Tidings Press, 2000)

²⁰Ini Etuk, “Economic Change in Akwa Ibom: 1885-1987” (A Ph.D Thesis submitted to the Department of History and International Studies, University of Uyo, Uyo, 2010), p.30.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 29-30

The Oriental Tradition: The Oriental Tradition, otherwise called "Palestine theory" states that the Ibibio people originated from Israel/Palestine, and sojourned through Egypt, Nubia, Sudan, Chad Basin, Cameroon and finally to Nigeria. This tradition is the most recent of all the traditions of Ibibio origin and migration. The promoters of the Palestine tradition are mostly influenced by biblical teachings which claim that Adam and Eve were the first parents; that unless one taps from the blessings of Abraham he or she is not of God. Due to this Christo - Biblical injunction and imposition, some people tend to believe that the Ibibio people are "the lost tribes of Israel" who migrated from Israel some thousands of years ago.²²

However, the oriental tradition is further split into two: Palestinian tradition and Pharoanic tradition. The former rely solely on biblical stories and somewhat similarities (or mere coincidental) in anthroponyms and some cultural practices, like circumcision; while the later tilts towards "Black Brotherhood" concepts which seeks to first of all establish that Egypt was originally owned by the Blacks (Africans), and secondly that majority of the Blacks who were pushed out by the invading Arabs migrated to different parts of Africa, including Nigeria, through Sudan.²³

The Benue-Congo Valley Tradition: This tradition holds that Benue-Congo Valley was the birthplace of the Ibibio people.²⁴

The Autochthonous Tradition: This tradition has it that the Ibibio people did not migrate from anywhere to their present locale. It believes that the Ibibio people have always been where they are from the very beginning of the world.²⁵

The Ibom Tradition: The Ibom tradition speculates that the Ibibio people migrated from Ibom. It attempts to link the Ibibio genealogically to the Igbo. Indeed, the tradition was propounded by E. N. Amaku in 1949 while attempting to trace the origin of the Efik.²⁶ Amaku was a native of Enyong clan- a few kilometers from Ibom in Igboland. Then resident at Calabar, Amaku brought forward the Ibom cradle hypothesis.²⁷ In his *Edikot Nwed Mbuk I*, Amaku maintains that "Ibom ekedi ata akamba Obio ke ini emi Efik ekedungde do"- that is, "Ibom was a very large town when the Efik lived there."²⁸ The tradition came up at the time (three years after) Nigeria was split into three regions. The Eastern Region had numerous linguistic and ethnic groups which did not understand themselves. So, the Igbo and their collaborators in the minorities (E. N. Amaku was one of them) wanted to "make" the region a one-ethnic region to be able to rival the pan-Yoruba Western Region, and the Pan-Hausa-Fulani Northern Region. To achieve that, they thought that foisting the "Ibom hypothesis" of Ibibio origin on the Ibibio people would do the magic.²⁹

The Ibom tradition also makes Ibibio appear very contemporaneous as compared to her neighbours. This tradition states that the Ibibio people were driven out of Ibom in about 1900 during the Igbo-Ibibio war. Some date the war to 1550AD.³⁰ It should be noted that the antiquity of the

²²Nabi Umoh-Faithmann, *Ibibio Jews of Nigeria* (Uyo: Menorah Publishing Commission, 1999) pp. 18-23, Hope Waddell, *Twenty-Nine years in the West Indies and Central Africa* (London: T. Nelson, 1895) E. U. Aye, *Old Calabar through the Century*, (Calabar: HWTIP, 1962), p. 22) see also Aye, *The Efik People* (Calabar: Glad Tidings Press, 2000).

²³*Ibid*

²⁴Edet A. Udo, *Who are the Ibibio?*, 107

²⁵Monday Effiong Noah, *Ibibio Pioneers in Modern Nigeria History* (Uyo: Scholars Press (Nig.) Ltd, 1980) p.7

²⁶Udo, *Who are the Ibibio?* P. 10

²⁷Amaku, *Edikot Nwed Mbuk I*, p.2.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p.2.

²⁹Bassey John Ituen, 89 years, Village Head, Ikot Ambon, Ibesikpo Asutan LGA. 5 September, 2020. Chief Ituen had his Master of Arts (MA) History from Portland State University, USA in 1971. He had taught history in many schools including primary and secondary schools, and became principal of schools between 1976 and 1985.

³⁰Monday B. Abasiattai, "Prolegomenon to Akwa Ibom State: A Historical Framework", in Etop J. Usoro and Philip A. Akpan (eds) *Akwa Ibom State: A Geographical Perspective*, Enugu: Immaculate Publication Limited, 2010, pp. 1-11; P.A. Talbot, *The People of Southern Nigeria* (London: vol.1, 1926, pp. 95-96; M.D.W. Jeffreys, *Old Calabar and Notes on the Ibibio Language* (Calabar: Hope Waddell Press, 1935) p.18.

Ibibio in their present home has been attested to by scholars³¹ and even Ibibio neighbours, hence, the reason why Noah warns that

...the much documented Ibom affairs which resulted in the expulsion of the last Ibibio people and the taking over of the long juju by the Aro is a recent history because by this time, the Ibibio mainland was already teeming with Ibibio people who had lived there for several hundreds of generations.³²

The people who were driven out of Ibom by the invading Igbo were offspring of those who expanded into the region from places in Ibibio mainland such as Ikono, Enyong, Annang, Itam, Itu Mbon Uso, and so on, long after the Ibibio people had settled in their present locale. According to Ina, "Arochukwu was founded by some Ibibio immigrants after Ibibioland had been firmly established and so very likely not a major dispersal centre of the Ibibio people to their present location."³³ The Ibibio people founded Ibom, according to Isichei, in the 17th century.³⁴ Upon settling there, they adopted Ibritam - one of the sub-deities of Nsit which shrine, as at the period under review, was still at Afaha Offiong as their major deity.³⁵

Reconciliation of the Six Traditions of Ibibio Origin

Looking critically at the six traditions of Ibibio origin, one would notice a nexus. Though they are all speculative because of lack of any archaeological or other scientific backing, suffice to state that each of them contains some facts about Ibibio origin and migration history.

Assuming, but not conceding, that the Ibibio people migrated from Palestine/Israel, it therefore means that they must have crossed from there to Egypt, and from Egypt to Sudan, perhaps from Sudan through Chad Basin to Benue-Congo Valley, where they descended to Southwestern Cameroon, and finally to their present locale through Usakedet. Of course, these are all speculations, and only hypertechnological archaeological finds will reveal who the Ibibio people truly are. Until then, it is prudent to rely on oral tradition to reconstruct the history of the Ibibio people.

On the oriental/ Palestine tradition, suffice to state that it is rather droll to rely on the Bible for the reconstruction of the history of the Ibibio people. The Bible does not contain any historical fact about the Ibibio. It is the best book on Jewish history, but the worst book to consult on Ibibio history. Those who claim that the Ibibio people descended from Israel or Palestine simply because of mere coincidence of some anthroponyms or because few Bible passages have admonished the Christians to "claim the inheritance of Abraham in order to become heirs to God's Kingdom,"³⁶ are committing historical, racial and intellectual genocide. Such religious-induced concoction is more dangerous to a people than political pogrom.

Also, the Ibom hypothesis is vague, and as Ifemesia rightly remarks, "the structural layout of the Ibibio does not support Ibom in Arochukwu as the ancestral home or a major dispersal centre of the Ibibio people but rather suggests an area further south."³⁷ However, a critical look at Ibom tradition of origin as espoused by Amaku, one would observe that the Efiks originated from Ikot Ntung in Ibibioland, and then migrated to Ibom.³⁸ This suggests that people migrated from Ibibioland to Arochukwu for various reasons, including marriage and trade. Ina corroborates this assertion by stating that "Arochukwu was founded by some Ibibio immigrants after Ibibioland had

³¹P.A. Talbot, *Tribes of the Niger Delta: Their Religion and customs* (London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd., 1932) p. 130; Robert M'Keown, *Twenty Five Years in Qua Iboe* (London: 1912), p. 23

³²Monday Noah, "Ibibio Origin and Migration in Historical Perspective" (*Nigeria Magazine* Nos. 134-135, 1981) pp. 91-92.

³³Ina, *The Changing Faces*, p.5; Udo, *who are the Ibibio?* p. 108.

³⁴Elizabeth Isichei, *The Ibo people and the Europeans*, London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1973, p. 41

³⁵Obio-Offiong, *An Introduction*, p.50.

³⁶See Romans 4:11-18; Acts 4:24-26; Galatians 3:8-9, 14.

³⁷C.C. Ifemesia, *Southern Nigeria in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Nok Publishers, 1978) p/ 8

³⁸Amaku, *Edikot Nwed Mbuk I*, p.2.

been firmly established and so Ibom in Arochukwu was very likely not a major dispersal centre of the Ibibio people to their present location."³⁹

The Ibibio people accessed their present locale from Usakedet and after some centuries, some of them found their ways northwards and established Ibom. According to Noah, Information regarding Ibibio origin is so repetitive that a summary is only appropriate, and in this respect Usak Edet in the Cameroons stands out as possible centre. The only variant to this story of Ibibio origin is one that claims that the Ibibio came out of Ethiopia and migrated through the Cameroons to Nigeria... but this version seems nothing but a dim reflection of a historical migration from the east (the Cameroons). Written accounts of Ibibio origin often times testify to this eastern (Cameroons) origin. Writing in 1846, Daniel noted that the ancestors of the people of Old Calabar "had migrated from a distant country up Cross River."⁴⁰

The truth is: all Ibibio groups share these traditions of origin and migration (of Ibibio people) and acclimatize same to their migration stories. However, within some groups, opinions are sometimes divided, some supporting the Usakedet hypothesis, some Ibom and recently some tilt towards the oriental hypothesis. But the most popular and almost gaining general acceptability is the Usakedet hypothesis. After a painstaking study of their traditions of origin and migration, Uya submits that some groups in the southern part of the country, such as the Oron, and other Ibibio groups, and the Ekoi, would appear to have entered Nigeria from the present Cameroun/Nigeria corridor.⁴¹

Conclusion

It should be concluded that Nsit and other Ibibio groups share the same traditions of origin and migration, just as they share the same language and other cultural practices. That is why the more one searches for differences among various Ibibio groups; the more one discovers their similarities and relationships. Irrespective of who writes a history of any of the groups in Ibibio land, the seaborne route and consciousness of the people would be unconsciously brought to the fore. Thus, the fact that Nsit and her neighbours share the same tradition(s) of migration is a clear evidence of their genealogical and social relationships.

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³⁹ Ina, *The Changing Faces*, P. 5

⁴⁰Noah, "Ibibio Origin", p. 89.

⁴¹ Okon Edet Uya, "Nigeria: The Land and the People," in Uya, O.E (ed) *Contemporary Nigeria* (Buenos Aires: EDIPUBLI S.A, 1992), p. 15

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