

Enugwu-Agidi History - Advent of Christianity and Commerce

ADVENT OF CHRISTIANITY

As the forerunner of colonial administration, the white man's religion, Christianity, reached the Igbo-land before the Whiteman's government. The Church entered Igbo land through Onitsha in 1857. Because of apparent backwardness and hostility of the natives, it took quite a long time for the gospel to move from Onitsha to the hinterlands, getting to Abagana, Awka, Nawfia, Awkuzu, before reaching Enugwu-Agidi.

Church Missionary Society (CMS) Church

From an interview recorded by Mr. Benson C. Okeke in late 1970, the late Mr. Joseph Ndupuechi confirmed "The late Mr. Daniel Anene Obianyido was the first son of our land (Enugwu-Agidi) to discuss with Rev. J.E. Ibeneme (an Awkuzu man), then living in Onitsha about the need to inaugurate a Christian Church in Enugwu-Agidi. Before then there was no Church here, either Roman Catholic or other." This discussion must have happened in about 1917, during which time Mr. Obianyido was Rev. Ibeneme's houseboy to a catechist Mr. Elijah Uzoagwam, a native of Obosi, living at Awkuzu. When Mr. Obianyido met Mr. Ndupuechi at Awkuzu, he mentioned the idea and two of them started planning to make the dream come true.

An opportunity for quick realization of the dream offered itself in November 1917, when a conference of the Anglican Church Council was held at Ufuma. These two young men attended this conference where they requested for immediate establishment of a CMS or Anglican Church in Enugwu-Agidi. Their request was granted, and in January 1918 the first Catechist, Isaiah Okeke, from Igbo-Ukwu was posted to Enugwu-Agidi. On arrival, the Catechist was accommodated in Chief Idejuogwugwu Onubuiyi's compound where Church services and meetings also started to be held. Six months later and as the number of the converts grew, the Church was able to acquire a piece of land at Agu-efi (Ogheveli-Onu). The land was offered to the Church by Chief Odogwu Onuora of Achalla village through the efforts of Chiefs Onubuiyi and Nwankwo Akunne.

After putting up thatched buildings for the Church, the school and the catechist's house, the church moved from Chief Onubuiyi's compound to Aguefi. The isolation of this site from the town made it an easy target for thieves and other hostile enemies of the foreign religion. As the result of constant harassment from these elements, the church had to move again from Aguefi to Ezi Ogbugbaiyi. That was in 1926 after the buildings for the church, the catechist and the school had been set up. Apart from Messrs., Daniel Anene Obianyido and Joseph Ndupuechi who fought to introduce the church to the town, other important pioneer members of the Church included Miss. Eunice Nwakor of Iruogbuebune (Irunnebo) village who was the first woman convert in the town, and who later got married to a staunch Christian at Nawfia.

Others were late John Ejinaka, Madam Dorcas Anawana and Jonathan Okoye.

Roman Catholic Mission (RCM)

In 1922, four years after the establishment of the CMS Church at Aguefi in Enugwu-Agidi, the Roman Catholic succeeded in opening its own mission in the town. But not without a stiff resistance, which started when, it was learnt that in Enugwu-Agidi, a rival religion had been established at the neighboring town, Nawgu. From the outset, the reaction to the new faith at Nawgu was mixed in Enugwu-Agidi. Some members of the older Anglican Church saw the new faith as a welcome alternative to the CMS church, which they considered to be very conservative. They did not take quite kindly to the idea of the existing church erecting a stone division between its new converts and the town's traditional, cultural and social life. For example, the converts were not allowed to participate in the traditional ceremonies, particularly where it involved eating any food sacrificed to the idol and taking part in or watching masquerade outings. It was this group of converts that joined a few natives to head to Nawgu to join the new faith. On the other hand, loyal members of the CMS church who feared the rivalry that would follow the advent of the new religion, vehemently opposed not only the idea of people from the town going to Nawgu to join the church, but its introduction to Enugwu-Agidi members of the new church on their way to Nawgu.

Those fighting to bring the Church to Enugwu-Agidi did not relent in spite of this opposition. They were led by James Okonkwo Chukwura, William Ugwumba and Peter Ezeudu and supported by other pioneer members like Albert Igboanugo, Okafor Nwofo German, Anenye, Pius Okeke, Joseph Ifitezue, Michael Ikeli, Alfred Ezue, Jacob Ifebunso and others. Father Joseph was the only Reverend available in the neighborhood then. He was living at Nteje where the maiden delegation from Enugwu-Agidi went to request for the establishment of RCM in the town. It is understood that on receiving this first request, the Rev. Father told the delegation to go home and secure a piece of land for the church and come back. They therefore came back home and directed their request for land to the ruling Chiefs: Idejuogwugwu Onubuiyi, Okam, Nwankwo Akunede and Okoli Ekwughe.

Chiefs Okam and Onubuiyi were said to oppose the request because of the problem, which the traditional institution was already having with the existing CMS church. But Chiefs Nwankwo Akunede and Okoli were in support of the new faith. As the result of such disagreement, assistance for the resolution of the problem was sort at Awka, whereupon, the District Officer summoned the community leaders. There at Awka, approval was given for the establishment of the second faith. This approval was largely as the result of the support expressly given to the existence of the two faiths in Enugwu-Agidi by Chiefs Nwankwo Akunede and Okoli who also offered a parcel of land for the establishment of the new Church. That land was Ugbo at Amawbia road.

As stated earlier, Enugwu-Agidi was then under Nteje parish which was later moved to Nimo and from Nimo to Adazi, where Rev. Father Bubendorff was the parish priest. This change then placed Enugwu-Agidi under Adazi parish, from where a catechist was posted to the town as soon as it was learnt that the new church had been granted a piece of land. That first catechist sent from Adazi by Rev. Father Bubendorff was Mr. Stephen Ezeanya, an Adazi man. While waiting for the church building and his own house to be completed at Ugbo, the church teacher had to put up at Chief Okoli's house, just as the first catechist for the CMS did at Chief Onubuiyi's compound. On

completion of the building, he moved into the isolated location where some strong young men were assigned to be keeping him company, particularly at nights.

Finding this location unhealthy after a while, the church moved to Ifite village, from where it again moved to its present permanent site at Ezi-Udo. It was that frequency of movement that provoked the town's popular slang: 'Ikwaghalikalia fada', meaning that you pack away more frequently than the Catholic Church. It is understood that the Eziudo land was freely given to the church by Chief Nwankwo Akunede and Achalla village on the one hand, and Iru-Nnebo village on the other.

THE GROWTH OF COMMERCE

You have read in the preceding chapter, the account of Enugwu-Agidi's dramatic first encounter with the Whiteman. That was the occasion of the visit to the town of 'Nwangwele' and 'Otikpo'. That followed with the appointment of Warrant Chiefs through which the colonial administration extended its indirect control to the town. With the first link so established through the Warrant Chiefs, the next step in the process of colonization was the introduction of Christian religion and education through which the town opened up to Western Civilization. This brings us to the saying often heard during popular address in the town that "Oyibo si na be Obianyido bata Enugwu-Agidi", meaning that the Whiteman's civilization reached Enugwu-Agidi through this family.

From our oral source, it started when Rev. Ibeneme of Awkuzu requested from Enugwu-Agidi for a boy to be trained in school. That was about 1913. It is understood the request was made through Warrant Chief Onubuiyi. As was the case during the request for a candidate for appointment as Warrant Chief, many people in the town feared to send their children to the 'Whiteman'. At long last, Mr. Obianyido Ikeogu from Irunnebo village sent his second son, Anene Obianyido. He took the decision to do this because he had little idea of the importance of education through contact with this mother's kin's men at Ukpo. With that decision, the young Anene Obianyido became a houseboy to Rev. Ibeneme, who made sure he received primary school education. Fortunately for Enugwu-Agidi, Anene Obianyido made very good use of this opportunity and made the benefit of his education immediately available to Enugwu-Agidi.

He started by first introducing Christianity into the town as stated in the preceding chapter. According to late Mr. Joseph Ndupuechi, to whom he first mentioned the idea, and with whom he started the project, Anene Obianyido was the first person to discuss the idea of introducing Christianity in the town. That idea materialized in 1918 when a catechist was posted to start the conduct of church service in Enugwu-Agidi and when schooling also started at its lowest level: Kindergarten. On completing his education, Daniel Anene Obianyido taught for a while before going up North where he worked for some time at the Public Works Department (P.W.D.) as a clerk, before taking up a job as a nurse. He died a chief nurse. It is understood, it was he who inspired the first generation of Enugwu-Agidi citizens who received basic education and who did the 'Whiteman's work'. Among them was his brother, Theophilus Nwogbo Obianyido who worked as a sanitary inspector in the North. The next person he sponsored was late Chief Aaron Okoye who joined him at Kaduna in 1920 and worked for a while as a driver at the P.W.D. before branching out to start a lucrative private business. He invited Mr. Nathan C. Okam to join him in 1922 when he took up appointment as a nurse too in Kaduna. Of course his nephew Mr. B.J. Morah grew up and received his education under his sponsorship. Other people said to have received

directions and inspiration from him are Godfrey Chiobi, Josiah Onubuiyi, Jonathan Okoye, Charles Okoye, Alfred Ozugha Ezue, Micah Anumba.

Francis Okeke of Iruobieli village had written and circulated the idea of formation of Enugwu-Agidi town union, before 1937. When the union was actually formed at Aba, Daniel Obianyido was the president. He died three years then, leaving the batten to his immediate lieutenants Aaron Okoye, N.C. Okam, Josiah Onubuiyi and B.J. Morah.

Commerce

While Obianyido-led civil servants from the town and established in the Northern Nigeria, others interested in different areas of commerce were encouraged to venture out. These people were mainly farmers: young men who were no longer satisfied with the returns from their farming efforts at home. As Kaduna was popular with our first generation of white-collar jobs, so was Agyragu in Benue State for the first generation of those in commerce.

Mr. Alfred Ozugha Ezue, whom was the first Enugwu-Agidi man to work in the Nigeria Railway started his job on 10th March 1929 at Zaria. It was believed that the first group of Enugwu-Agidi people who went to Agyragu never went there direct from the town (Enugwu-Agidi). They first went to Dumbi, a station before Zaria in Northern Nigeria. Quarrying stone for the railway line was the job for some time before moving down to Agyragu. When that job was completed, that first group which included Nwankwo Enenmoh and Patrick Nweke from Iruobieli village, Nweke Anenyeonu from Ifite village, and Dennis Meje from Etiti village left for Agyragu. They were said to have arrived Agyragu in 1933 and started farming, sawing of timber and selling to potential buyers. Mr. Peter Ekwealor confirmed that he was in the second group of people to join them in the company of Nwanekwe Igweonwu in 1935. Felix Ifitezue, Jerry Nwunne, and Francis Anakeokwu also joined them in the same year. Two years later (1937), Bernard Ojukwu Nkejianu and others followed. At our level of development then, business at Agyragu grew quickly, attracting more people from Enugwu-Agidi. That made this Northern town as popular in late 1930s and 1940s as Jos later turned out to be, from 1950 to 1967 when the civil war started and up till this date.

Yam was the first commodity. It was in the leading commodity for a while before the almighty TIMBER with which it had been competing, took over for good. This sharp turn in favor of timber happened when in 1943 when the Enugwu-Agidi Sawyers started to venture outside Agyragu in search of market for their commodity. Our source stated that Mr. Ojukwu Nkejianu was the first person to take timber outside Agyragu to Jos, Gusau and Sokoto. Messrs. Peter Ekwealor and Simon Okoye followed and went further to secure a shed at Jos. Anenyeonu and others followed, thus laying the foundation for the grand historical movement to Jos; a congenial town in the Plateau section of Northern Nigeria, which many Enugwu-Agidi citizens have long learnt to regard as a second home.

The first group to move from Agyragu to Jos had to put up with Mr. Nwaguiyi who had earlier set up a tailoring trade. The pattern of the movement was that the established timber sawyers at Agyragu had to employ young assistants, many of who were related to their masters. They would stay mainly at Jos and other far Northern towns such as Kano.

From their masters at Agyragu, they would receive Lorries or wagonloads of sawn timber, which they sold at their stations. The first group of such assistants at Jos were Messrs. Sylvanus Enweani, Pius Ewulu, Mr. Augustine Okonkwo (Onyeukwu) and Vincent Mgbajiaka. These young men pursued their trade aggressively, procuring and supplying 'orders': a word, which suddenly was connoted with wealth. Their wealth was abrupt. That was quite unlike those of their predecessors: Chief Aaron Okoye at Gusau, Mr. N.C. Okam at Aba, Mr. Nwoyeocha at Idah and B.J. Morah at Onitsha, whose wealth built up gradually. The fact that the acquisition of wealth was general and happened almost at the same time, created the strong attraction that made almost a whole generation of young men in Enugwu-Agidi rush to timber trade from late 1940s to the out-break of the civil war in 1967. Though many of these young men who joined the trade also moved to Kano and Kaduna, Jos was the 'gold mine' that held out the brightest prospect. And indeed, of the towns where citizens of Enugwu-Agidi have moved to in pursuit of commerce, Jos yielded the greatest fortune; just as among all commodities in which they dealt, timber brought them the most success. This explains why the success story of Enugwu-Agidi generally starts with timber trade.

Other centers to which the people were attracted in the early days for commercial pursuit were Gusau, where Chief Aaron Okoye was 'Seriki Igbo' or Igbo king, Aba under the influence of N.C. Okam; Onitsha with Mr. B.J. Morah as the attraction and Idah where Mr. Nwoyeocha had established and attracted others. Chief Daniel N. Umeano, the Otigbuanyinya of Enugwu-Agidi and the Ome-okachie of Umu Nri, is said to have started his commercial efforts, which led to his great wealth at Idah.

ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT EFFORT

With complete destruction of the five primary schools in the town during the civil war, the self-sponsored effort at rural development in Enugwu-Agidi which has progressively developed to a peak in 1988/89 can be said to have started in 1970. That was at the end of the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War. Under the control of the newly constituted Enugwu-Agidi Community Council led by D.O. Ikeanyi, the reconstruction of the damaged primary schools was given priority attention. With it, was the rehabilitation and widening of all approach roads to the town, with concrete culverts and bridges. The building of a Health Center followed this. It was at this juncture that the chieftaincy dispute erupted in the town dividing it into two unequal factions. Naturally the confusion resulting from the dispute initially interrupted this trend of development, making it difficult for the town to continue its development program in a concerted spirit. But it was not long before each of the factions settled down to embark on separate development projects.

The bigger faction embarked on a post office, the town's hall and secretariat and two secondary schools (Girls' and Boys). While the smaller faction embarked on the construction of the town's general hospital. The method for financing the above projects were the same in both factions: Wealthy members of the Community were generous enough to volunteer to finance major parts of the projects. Chief Daniel N. Umeano, the Otigbuanyinya of Enugwu-Agidi single-handedly built the post-office and donated to the town. He also built a block at the Enugwu-Agidi Girls Secondary School. Prince Augustine Ike Okoli and Mr. Francis I. Nnaegbuna built two blocks each, one at the Girls' and the other at the Boys' Secondary Schools. Others who built a

block each at the schools include Chief S.N. Enweani, F.N. Ubunama, Chief Edward Okeke, and Clement O. Mgbajiaka. Apart from blocks built later by the schools' Parent/Teachers Association, the Peoples Club of Nigeria Enugwu-Agidi Branch played a leading role in the building of the schools, completing a block in each of the schools. It is understood that Prince A.I. Okoli has, in addition to the two school blocks, built other smaller structures such as netball court and has made a substantial contribution in cash and kind towards the maintenance of the two secondary schools. This voluntary system of financing projects, did not only save the citizenry the strain of general levy, but also led to faster completion of the gigantic secondary schools' project. The same is the case in the hospital project which, at the time of writing this book, is getting to an advanced stage of completion. The leading financier in this area is Prince C.C. Okam who has completed a block of building. Others who have put in substantial sums of money into the project include Mr. F.O.B. Ndibe, Ozo Aaron Okoye and Sir Augustine Anigbogu. Others such as engineer Joseph Ndupuechi and architect Benson Okeke have contributed valuable professional services, which included the production of the hospital plan, supervision of the already completed approach road to the hospital with a wide span of concrete bridge over the Otokwuma Stream.

It is understood that currently a group of patriots called the 'Stars of Etiti' has volunteered to complete the financing of what remains of the hospital. With the re-unification of the town in 1984 after eleven years of chieftaincy rancor, self-sponsored developments effort in Enugwu-Agidi gained a long expected momentum. The first President and General Secretary of E.B.U. at re-unification were Prince C.C. Okam and P.C.D. Obianyido. The President started the reunited Enugwu-Agidi Brotherly Union off with a bang. At the Union's emergency convention of December 1984, he boldly launched the town's rural electrification project. For effective financing of the gigantic project, Prince C.C. Okam chose a game of football as the metaphor for his launching slogan. As the authoritarian captain of the football team, the president with his executive, agreed on the first group of Enugwu-Agidi citizens to whom the ball would be passed in its zigzag journey to the goal. The strategy worked. This was partly because of the general enthusiasm for the project and the newly won unity, and partly because the president kicked the ball off with an exemplary handsome donation. At the end of the first day of the launching, over five-hundred-thousand naira was raised in cash and pledges.

After the launching in December 1984 a contractor (OKU BROTHERS) was immediately engaged and the electrification project started in January 1985 in earnest. Half way into the project, Prince Ike Okoli and his new executive, at the general election of December, 1986 saw reason to retain Prince Okam and his secretary Mr. P.C.D. Obianyido as the chairman and secretary respectively of Electricity Committee.

Continuing from where Okam's executive stopped, Prince Okoli maintained the momentum of the project, extending the network of wiring to all the villages in the town. As the work progressed, effort at collection of donations and ward levies was stepped up, making it possible for the job to reach a very advanced stage of completion in November 1987 when the system was energized by NEPA and commissioned on 30th November 1987 by then Governor of Anambra State Group Captain Sampson Emeka Omeruwa.

The union found the occasion of the commissioning opportune for reminding the government, in a well-prepared address that the town had done more than enough on her own to qualify for a substantial dose of government aid. The governor got the message and wasted no time in calling on the union leaders to work out the modality for government assistance towards the union's proposed road project.

With the rumor of the imminent termination of the governor's term in Anambra State, Prince Okoli and his Executive wasted no time in setting up a road task force committee, chair manned by Eng. F.O.B. Ndibe which immediately approached the government and obtained approval for financial assistance to cover about 80% of the cost for tarring the town's. Work on the road would, according to the government, start as soon as the town produced her own 20% share the cost. With this condition, the union was to choose; either to shelve the road project until the electrification, which was at the final phase of completion, was finished, or to take the road the road project of the burden of contributing towards the on-going electrification. They were forced to choose the later. This was mainly because doing otherwise would mean a risk of losing this long awaited first chance of securing the government financial assistance, seriously promised by a Governor whose term of office in the state was almost running out.

The union therefore had to move fast and with Okoli as the president and Alex Onubuiyi as the secretary general, the town was immediately mobilized. The union fell into Northern and Southern zones for the purpose of facilitating immediate collection of over three hundred thousand naira calculated to present the town's share of the cost of the road project. In spite of the weight of the increased burden, the town responded with enthusiasm. Such a response was evidently owed to the dynamic leadership and unprecedented sacrifice of Prince Okoli, the current President of the union and his loyal executive. With constant consultation and timely provision of the town's share of the road cost, the two-tier levels of government were pulled out.

Njikoka local government led by Mr. Ejikeme was the first to get committed, completing the tarring of a 2.5 kilometer stretch of the road from Abagana end of the Express Way to Eke market square. As this section was being completed in the second half of 1988, the State Government represented by the Rural Development Authority – (R.D.A) started work on the greater part of the roads. The order, as proposed by the RDA, was to complete the tarring from Eke market square, where the Njikoka Local Government Area stopped, to the Enugwu-Agidi Community Boys' Secondary School, before turning to the section starting from Catholic Church junction to Enugwu-Agidi/Amawbia boundary. It is hoped that the Union should pay the last installment of her share of the road cost before the December 1989 E.B.U. convention.

It is pertinent at this point to observe that Prince Ike Okoli the current President of EBU stands out in his contribution to development efforts in Enugwu-Agidi both in cash and kind. This perhaps explains why his tenure as the president general of EBU (1986—1989) has witnessed the greatest volume of development activity in the history of the town. The major aspects of this include electrification, road project and Scholarship scheme and good maintenance of the schools.

The history of rural development effort in the town must record this period as its peak and accord the credit for its success, first to Prince Ike Okoli and his witty secretary-general Mr. Alex Onubuiyi and secondly to the other members of the EBU Executive, particularly the vice presidents and the chairmen of different development sub-committees. In this connection, Mr. David Onyeibo the union's able financial secretary needs a special mention for his experience, patience and maturity. The EBU could not have chosen a better financial secretary, especially at a period when the town union had the heaviest volume of financial transaction. This is a period when handling and recording of the union's account was a full-time engagement. David dutifully gave the time, patiently receiving the contributions and levies, advising and educating members, and meticulously keeping his books. He indeed will be difficult to replace as a financial secretary. And when this creditable record is added to the fact that this gentleman had once performed equally creditably as the secretary general of EBU, it should be understood why David should be well ranked in the assessment of the town's who's who.

On the history of the general development of EBU, the pioneering roles of late chiefs N.C. Okam and Aaron Nmo Okoye had been recorded. Also shown, are the periods covered by others who served the union in the past, particularly Messrs. Josiah Onubuiyi, B.J. Morah, the long-serving Daniel Ilozor, Ernest Morah and Bennett Okoye.

It was at this point that Mr. P.C.D. Obianyido described by the secretary of Enugwu-Agidi pioneer Organization, Mr. Pius Ewulu (Jnr.) as the 'EBU secretary emeritus' should be mentioned. As the EBU secretary general from December, 1976 to May 1987, assistant-secretary-general before 1967, Padamore does not only hold the record of serving the longest period in this capacity, but also has been in the center of EBU activities during the main phases of its history, namely before, during and after the chieftaincy rancor. If the town had retained P.C.D. Obianyido in this office for that length of time, it is not only because of his complete devotion to the union's activity, but also because of his outstanding skill in analytical recording of the union's functions. Added to this, is his good knowledge of the history, culture and tradition of the town. Though a few people were wont to accuse him of insensitivity to the controversial implication of some of his incisive minutes and reports, the popular view is that the town in general and the union in particular have benefited tremendously from his bold and forthright stand in all union's matters. Indeed the town is so far fortunate to have found the right replacement for P.C.D. Obianyido in an experienced and equally serious-minded character, Mr. Alex Onubuiyi. He has within the two and half year span in the office as the union's secretary general, used his balancing position to play a leading role in fostering and consolidating the nascent unity in the town. A role that would have been difficult without his forthrightness and general witty disposition.

Igwe D.O. Ikeanyi, the Okpalariam II of Enugwu-Agidi also deserves a special mention not only for his periodic advice and address to the union, but also for the maturity he displayed during the re-unification. He should take credit for being disposed at times to compromise his superior status in order to allow peace a chance. Finally, as the manuscript of this book is being handed over to the publishers, the obvious wish of Enugwu-Agidi citizenry is that the general election of the EBU 1989 convention produces another union leadership that would maintain the dynamic tempo of development initiated by the two Princes: C.C. Okam and A.I. Okoli and their hard-working and witty secretaries. P.C.D. Obianyido and Alex Onubuiyi.

