AFIKPO-ABAKALIKI RELATIONS: TRACING THE ROOTS

DR. FRANCIS C. ODEKE & DR. IKECHUKWU O. ONUOHA

*Department of History and International Relations, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ebonyi State University,
Abakaliki*

ABSTRACT

There has been a serious controversy over the origin of Afikpo and Abakaliki people of Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The argument borders on whether the two groups had shared a common origin before they parted ways as a result of wars and other factors in their early histories. This paper is a comparative study of the two cultural groups. It intends to examine their similar and dissimilar traits with a view to unearthing their common grounds in the early times of their history. The study uses both the primary and secondary sources of data. A thematic study, the paper adopts the analytic and narrative approaches of history as its methodology. The paper finds facts in some deities bearing the same name in both clans, initiations rites that serve the same purpose among the groups, same belief systems, some common customs and norms, veneration methods for social violations, and many other common traits in the lives of the two groups, as proofs that the people had had many things in common in their early history. With these findings, the paper holds that Afikpo and Abakaliki people migrated from same place, and later settled together for some centuries at a common location where they evolved some of their cultures before wars and other exigencies of the environment scattered them to new settlements. It was in their new homes that those their earlier cultures were influenced by alien ones which they respectively came in contact with.

KEYWORDS: *Afikpo, Abakaliki, Common Origin, Egu & Cultural Similarities*

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INTRODUCTION

Between Afikpo and Abakaliki people, *Egu* is a common identity. Though no community in the two areas is known by that name, it appears as an affix in the names of their communities. Examples, *Ugwu-Egu* is a community in Ehugbo; *Ohanwe-egu* and *Ama-egu* are in Akpoha town (in the Afikpo area); and in the Abakaliki area, there are within *Izzi Clan*, *Nkwo-egu*, *Inyime-egu*, *Anma-egu*, and *Ndi-egu* communities. In *Ikwo Clan*, there are *Agala-Egu*, *Ama-Egu* and *Egu-Nwenu* communities; and in *Ezza Clan*, there are *Ndi-Egu*, *Egu-Ogu*, *Ezza-Egu*, and *Ama-Egu* communities.

Dialectally, an *Egu* is a savannah region. It becomes *Ozara* in some sub-dialects of the people, if farm works have or are taking place there. When a living quarter is attached to that farm land, that home is called *Obu-Egu* (Farm settlement). Thus, there are in Afikpo and Abakaliki, communities like *Ama-Ozara*, *Oha-Ozara* and so on. Sometimes, palm trees may be much within a particular farm land. Any section of such a plantation that is inhabited by a group of people, is called *Ama-Ebo*. The *Ebo* is a shortened form of *Ebo-nkwu* (palm plantation). The group of people living in such settlements becomes *Ndi-Ebo* or *Nde-Ebo* (people of a palm plantation). There are many communities in the Afikpo and Abakaliki areas that are known by that name. For instance, there are *Ama-ebo* in Ehugbo and *Ama-ebo* in Akpoha (all in the Afikpo area), and *Ndi-ebo* community in Izzi (Abakaliki area).

Oral traditions in these regions describe the people as *NdeEguor NdiEgu* (*Egu* group) because of the group's preference and love for deforesting virgin lands for settlements and farm works, especially in their early periods in history.¹ In Afikpo, the *Egu* group is identified as the earliest settlers of the area.² Assenting to the common origin of Afikpo and Abakaliki people, A. E. Afigbo was of the view that the "North eastern group also known as Ogu-Ukwu" (that is, the Abakaliki people), is also identified with the "Ada group of the Cross River Igbo (Aka-Eze, Edda, Nkporo, Afikpo, Amasiri, etc)" most of whom believe that they migrated from the Okigwe-Arochukwu ridge.³ These assertions will be critically examined to ascertain whether or not Afikpo and Abakaliki people started their migration from a common area or met at any particular point in their search for permanent homes. More importantly, the study will consider the various cultural traits among the two groups to establish whether or not any of the groups borrowed the cultures from the other. Finally, the forms of government practiced by the two groups will be examined to establish whether their government systems are adoptions from a system that had been jointly practiced by the people in their earlier place of settlement.

Dialectal meaning and use of Egu among Afikpo and Abakaliki People

Among the Igbo, *Egu* stands for a savannah area or a large expanse of land where farm works and other agricultural activities could be carried out. Such areas may be left fallow for many years after which it will be returned to for cultivation. When a portion of that land is cleared and inhabited by people it becomes an *Ama* (a living quarter or settlement). The settlement may be named after the first settler/ settlers or after particular species of trees that were common in the area when it was first occupied. In Igbo land, examples include communities like *AmaNnachi*, *NdeUcheAlu*, *NdeOfeke*, *Amachi*, *Amaobolobo*, and so on. Sometimes, a new section within the same forest would be inhabited as a secondary home by a group from their primary settlement. This often results to a duplication of the names of the primary settlements. The new settlement may be distantly located from the initial settlement as in the case of Akpoha town in Afikpo North Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, and the Akpoha community in Igbo Ekureku in the Agbon group of Clans in Cross River State.⁴ Space will not permit a comprehensive listing of such communities within Igbo land but suffice to say that portions of farm lands that were turned into living quarters were often named after the first settler or settlers, or after their primary settlements.

In Afikpo dialects, *Egu* or *Ozara* refers to open grassland whose sections are recognized according to their peculiar features or the particular purpose that they serve. Thus, within one area, there may be found *Ubi* (farm) and *Ama* (Settlement). *Ubi* is a farm while *Ama* is a community or living quarter. Examples are *AmaOzara* (A community within a farmland) and *AmaEbo* (A community within a plantation of palm trees). Again, there is always a demarcation between the living quarters and the farm areas. That demarcation is recognized as *Eezu* (A bush that is close to the home). Major farm works are hardly done here, save for some crops like vegetables, coco-yams, potatoes, tomatoes, and other such garden crops planted mostly by the women. Sometimes economic trees like coconuts, local pears, oranges, and plantains are also planted hereby themen.

In the Abakaliki region where the scattered pattern of settlement obtains, families are often settled distantly from each other. Each family afterwards, sets a demarcation between their living quarters and the area they would use for farm works. Within the demarcated sections, the family may have mini farms known as *Eguonu-uhu* (Home farms or gardens). Within the home farms, economic trees like coconut, orange, local pears, mango trees, paw-paw, and plantains may be found as in the Afikpo area. Actual farm works may be done within the *Eguonu-uhu* where crops as in the distant farms, are equally planted. A section of the demarcation between the distant farms and the living quarters may be reserved for the

rearing of some domestic animals like cows, camels, goats and sheep.

In both Afikpo and Abakaliki areas, *Egu* appears as part of the names of many communities. This is in recognition of either a particular feature of the environment or definition of the circumstance that informed the creation of the community. For instance, *Ugwu-Egu* is a community in Ehugbo (in the Afikpo area). It is so called because of the hilly topography of the community. *Ugwu-Egu* means the hilly or upper part of the savannah or forest area. Historically, the community is believed to be the earliest settlement in the entire area today known as Ehugbo.⁵ Also, Ohanwe-Egu, a village in Amaogu-Akpoha (in the Afikpo area) was said to be the first village in that section of Akpoha town. The village derived its name from the people's believe on arrival, that all the uninhabited expanse of land lying before them was theirs.⁶ In Amata-Akpoha Autonomous Community, *Ama-Egu* is a village said to bear that name because its site was originally part of the farmland of Amata-Akpoha people.

In the same vein, there is an *Egu-Ogu* village in Umuezekoha community, Ezza North Local Government Area. Ezza is a major Clan in the Abakaliki area of Ebonyi State. *Egu-Ogu* village was said to be an important war front where many wars were fought in the pre-colonial days in the cause of Ezza expansion. Again, Ezza-Egu is an Ezza community founded by the people of Ezza Nkomoro within a distant farm land at a boundary between the Ezza and AmaguNze community in the Nkanu area of Enugu State.⁷ In Izzi Clan (still in the Abakaliki area), Nkwo-Egu (now a major community in Abakaliki Local Government Area) had served as a central market every Nkwo day to all communities of Izzi Clan. But because the market was located within a forest or farmland area in the pre-colonial days, it was called Nkwo-Egu⁸ (now corrupted to Nkwegu).

Amegu (Ama-Egu) is also an Izzi community. Nico van Steensel wrote that it was the first home of Nnodo, the ancestor of Izzi Clan.⁹ Lastly, in Ikwo Clan, another of the Clans of Abakaliki people, Enyinwe-Egu is believed to be the ancestor of the three Clans of Abakaliki-Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo.¹⁰ Though the people reject the idea that the name could be a nickname for their supposed legend, Enyinwe-Egu is translated as "Elephant that owns the forest."

This extensive use of *Egu* as an affix in the names of persons and places in Afikpo and Abakaliki areas, show some common links between the two groups. That the word has ran through the generations from the early times of the people's history could mean that they had actually existed together somewhere in that past.

Origin, Migrations and Settlements of the Egu Group

The *Egu* group was originally used to identify the adventurous people who first settled the area today known as Ehugbo in Ebonyi State of Nigeria. What is often remembered about the people's common past is that they were extensive farmers and hunters who loved venturing into virgin lands for that purpose. Thus, from the Ohafia-Arochukwu ridge, the group ventured into the Afikpo area where they were recognized as the *Egu* people in about the middle of the seventeenth century.¹¹ There is no doubt that the group was part of the larger Igbo group that dispersed southward from Eri-Aka (now in Aguleri, Anambra State) where Eri, founder of the Igbo race, first settled.¹² Fidelis Idigo maintains that the growth and dispersal of the Igbo from Eri-Aka to other parts of Igbo land after the death of Eri, was "slow, gradual and peaceful."¹³ The *Egu* group who later had a further dispersion out of the Arochukwu-Ohafia region created sub-clans like Nkporo, Item, Akaeze and Edda, before reaching Ehugbo¹⁴ in about 350 B.C..¹⁵

In the mid-seventeenth century, Omaka Ejali, escaping the Ibibio-Akpa-Arochukwu war, led his followers to Ehugbo after brief stopovers at Ohafia and Asaga Edda. But he was already advanced in age; and so died shortly after

arrival in Ehugbo. His son, Igbo OmakaEjali who was also called Igbo Ukwu, took over the leadership of the OmakaEjali group but soon started fomenting troubles against the Egu group (and Nkalupeople who joined the Egu group later) for refusing to give him one of their daughters in marriage. Igbo OmakaEjali's incessant troubles eventually culminated to series of fierce wars popularly known as "Igbo-Egu wars" in Afikpo tradition. The wars forced the emigration of many Egu and Nkalu leaders and their followers to different places like Ezza, Izzi, Ikwo, Nkalagu (Nkalu-Egu), and other places.¹⁶ It was EgwuUrochi, acclaimed son of Igbo OmakaEjali, that later waged the disastrous war called *Agha OgbugbuUmuruma* (Children's pogrom) in Ehugbo, which finally disorganized the remaining Egu population, leading to the migration of more of the people to different new settlements like Amaogu-Akpoha and other places in the Cross River region. EgwuUrochi was said to have planted Aja Ogbeyi as a spy among the Egu people. Ogbeyi monitored his targets for many years before the pogrom that wasted the children and aged people of the Egu group who were hidden for safety in a specially designed catacomb. Today the catacomb stands as a secret groove for the initiation of young men of UgwuEgu community into the Ogo cult in Ehugbo town.

Oral traditions of the Abakaliki people collated by Professor U.C. Anyanwu, maintain that Anekiwhaliki, grand ancestor of all Abakaliki Clans, migrated from the Arochukwu ridge, and had stayed at Ehugbo before he and his followers continued their journey till they settled first at Amana in present day Onueke in the Ezza clan. According to Peter Nwafor of Ezza-Umuhuali:

*The descendants of the Ezza migrated from Afikpo area; (they) share kinship ties with the Izzi and Ikwo. (The three) came from one grand father known as Anekiwha. Anekiwha begot Una Enyi ...Enyi was an adventurer (who) frequented the area between Afikpo and Ogoja...in one of these adventures, Enyi settled ... (at) Amana.*¹⁸

NwigbojiAlao of Abakaliki town told Anyanwu that:

*We the Izzi, have a common ancestor (known as Anakiwha) with the Ezza and Ikwo. Anakiwha begat Ekuma (Enyi). Enyi was a hunter and in the course of his hunting adventures, in which he frequented the areas between Afikpo and Ogoja, he finally settled in the area between Umuaka (Ikwo), Amana (Ezza) and Amegu (Izzi).*¹⁹

According to Jacob Nweke, an elder and traditionalist in Enyigba community of Izzi Clan, the ancestor of the Abakaliki clans of Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo, came from Ehugbo in a long and tortuous journey before settling at Onueke. Nweke said that is why in a gathering of Afikpo, Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo people, any Afikpo man present would be asked to pray over the kolanut, and to pick first when it was broken. He maintained that such is "our sharing formula with the people of Afikpo till date."²⁰

From Amana, the supposed ancestral home stead of the Ezza people, ChukwuNwafor told Anyanwu that his grandfather used to tell him that the Ezza migrated from somewhere in Arochukwu a very long time ago; and that he was equally told that the migration was not smooth but fraught with difficulties and challenges posed by local inhabitants.²¹ Nwafor said that:

From all indications, the (Abakaliki people) never had any particular place in mind to which they were migrating to, and their migration was not accomplished in one swoop. The migration on foot involved men, women, children, infants, toddlers, pregnant women and nursing mothers. Safe conduct pass was negotiated between (our) ancestors and the local chiefs. The long journey was made on foot and took the form of stage by stage (long trekking). Several personalities who led the journey included Anekiwha, EkumaEnyi, Ezekuna, Olodo (Nnodo), Noyo, and Oroke Onuoha.²²

A 90 year old farmer, Nweke Igboke, told Professor U.C. Anyanwu at Onueke, that “the Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo share the same ancestor who migrated with his followers from Arochukwu and settled somewhere in Afikpo before migrating to their present location”²³ (in the Abakaliki area). Njoku Afoke and Paul Nworie affirmed the exact site was Amuzu village, close to the Eke Imoha market in Onueke, headquarters of the Ezza clan.²⁴ But Izzi people claim that all Abakaliki groups started from Anmegu, their ancestral home, where Enyi, their own ancestor, descended to and from heaven by a rope until he did “something bad” which led to the cutting of the rope.²⁵

The evil deed of the Izzi ancestor, according to opinions, was the contraction of the small pox disease (*Igbogbo*) believed in those days, to be a punishment from the gods for one’s secret evil deed.²⁶ Thus, Anekiwha is affirmed the grand ancestor of all Abakaliki clans but the small-pox disease which later killed him, led to the erasing of his name from the people’s history. His remains were cast into *Ebonyifuru Egu* (an evil forest) at Onueke Ezza because victims of small-pox were denied befitting burials and other honours even after their death.²⁷ That could be the reason why the Izzi chose to mask Anekiwha Enyi simply as *Enyi*, and his small-pox disease as “*something bad*”.

Common cultural traits of Afikpo and Abakaliki people

There are several cultural traits that are common to Afikpo and Abakaliki clans.

Though some scholars see this as mere coincidence, closer examination reveals that some events in the early life of the people prompted the deliberate creation of most of these cultural traits. So far, there is no account on when and why any of the two groups borrowed these traits from the other. Similarities may exist in the cultures of other Igbo groups with the Afikpo and Abakaliki groups as a result of the common origin of all Igbo communities, those similarities are not enough to explain away the obvious cultural ties between the Afikpo and Abakaliki clans. The commonest cultural similarity among Igbo communities is the believe in, and worship of *Ali, the earth-goddess*. In Afikpo and Abakaliki clans there are several gods and cultural identities that are peculiar to the people. For example, gods like *Ukoro* or *Ikoro* for war and hunting, *Okukeuwa* for fertility in women and child care, *Njokuji* for better yields of yams, *Njaji* for the protection of the yam barns, *Ogbube Ali*, a support deity to the earth-goddess, and Oriete or Orinte for peace covenants and detection of the truth, and so on.²⁸

Among cultural practices that are peculiar to Afikpo and Abakaliki people include the adult circumcision culture which qualifies men for full manhood, public responsibilities and a share of family and community lands in their respective communities. The circumcision is called *Isi Ji* and *IbaOgo* or *ImeEvo* in Afikpo clans. In Abakaliki clans it is called *Obvuubvuogurennya* (*Adult circumcision*) in Ezza and Izzi clans while in Ikwo clan, it is known as *Afiafia* or *Ofiasha*. No man was seen as complete without under-going the full circumcision rites. In pre-colonial days, the circumcision was a kind of military training that was rigorous and hazardous, especially in Afikpo areas where the Egu group were said to have initiated it as a defense strategy against external attacks.²⁹ In the Abakaliki areas the process has been reduced to a mere formality that qualify men for marriage and a share of family and community lands.³⁰

Another common culture among the people is the *Ogbu Isi* society which was another qualifying culture for men, especially warriors that brought home fresh human head or heads from battles. The society was popular as *Ogbu Isi* in Afikpo, Ezza and Izzi while it was called *Ishi-agu* in Ikwo clan. In each of these clans the society was exclusive to brave men only, and bravery was the cardinal condition for membership. Men aspired to join the society because of the social rights and privileges accorded the members. For instance, praise names like *Dike* (*Strong man*), *Ogbu agha* (*Warrior*),

Ochemba (Defender of the community), and many others, were some of the public honours accorded the warriors.³¹ For both initiation and burial of members, a prerogative *Ikoro* or *Ukoro* music and dance were played as additional honour. The *Ikoro* (in Afikpo) and *Ukoro* (in Abakaliki areas) is a wooden drum designed out of a tree trunk and used for many traditional rites such as initiations, wrestling contests, burials of warriors, and so on. In most Abakaliki communities where wrestling competitions are not popular, the *Ukoro* was revered as a sacred instrument for warriors.

To encourage men to join the *Ogbu Isi* society, those returning home with fresh human heads were eulogized as heroes through the *Ikoro* or *Ukoro* music while their counterparts returning without any head were derided as weaklings likened to women, and were open to public ridicules.³² In the Ezza clan of Abakaliki, the *Ukoro* had a special war role. NjokuAfoke and Paul Nworie maintained that:

*(Ukoro) directs and saves the people in the war front. It is a drum for tough men (Nkwaike). It beats on its own after sacrifices are offered to it and it shows the boundary of the land in dispute. It (turns) a land in dispute into a play ground (which) will become ...Ukoroplay ground (NgangboUkoro).*³³

In the early days of the Igbo, the *Ukoro* (spelt as *Ikolo* in some Igbo communities) was introduced by Eri, founder of the Igbo race, who used it as an instrument of communication to announce time of worship and communal works. Fidelis Idigo said that the *Ikolo* was indigenous to the forest region of Nigeria, especially South-eastern Nigeria, where it was ritualized to serve as an instrument of social communication, tonal telegraphy, drum poetry and signal, and so forth.³⁴

Peculiar to Afikpo and Abakaliki people also is the peace covenant culture called *Oriete* in Afikpo, *Orinte* in Ezza, and *Erinte* in Izzi. R.O Ajah said that the culture originated from Igbo OmakaEjali or Igbo Ukwu, founder of modern Ehugbo clan, who initiated it to end his protracted wars with the Egu and Nkalu groups, original settlers of the Ehugbo territory.³⁵ The wars were at their peak in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The peace covenant was necessitated by the marriage of a daughter of Igbo OmakaEjali, NwataOrie, to an Amaizu Prince. It was to honour her that the covenant was made at Amaizu play ground where the small pot containing the covenant items was buried. Since then Amaizu play ground has remained a central meeting place for all Ehugbo general assemblies, especially when important decisions on matters of common interest to the people are to be taken. NwataOrie has been deified and is now worshipped annually at the same venue.³⁶

It was many years after the death of Igbo OmakaEjali that EgwuUrochi, his acclaimed son, renewed the settled wars against the Egu and Nkalu groups, forcing many of them out of their earlier settlements in Ehugbo to seek new homes in Akpoha, Ezza, Izzi, Ikwo, Nkalagu (Nkalu- Egu), and other places. Apart from the group that founded Akpoha, the rest of the emigrants from Ehugbo later settled first at Amana in present day Onueke where the *Oriete* deity was established as *Orinte* by the Ezza group. To the Ezza, *Orinte* is a wise god with the powers to solve all problems. It is particularly consulted to unravel the truth in times of dispute. The people believe that *Orinte* is one of the guardians of morality in Ezza clan.³⁷ Afoke and Nworie maintained that it was part of the *Orinte* culture that a person in a dispute should stand bare footed on the ground with a piece of kola-nut in his hand while affirming or denying the truth or lies in the dispute.³⁸ In the Izzi clan, *Orinte* is called *Erinte*, and is used as an *Agwa* (*Juju*) for oath taking.³⁹

Similarly, there are peculiar cultural festivals that are simultaneously celebrated in Afikpo and Abakaliki clans. Prominent among these is the new yam festival that takes place in all the clans, starting from the Ezza clan, between July and September every year. In Ezza, the new yam festival is celebrated in July as *Nesweoha/ Okeaku* (New Year/ New Yam

Festival). In the Izzi clan, it is celebrated as *Ojiji* in July also but after the Ezza clan has celebrated. Ikwo clan celebrates the same festival as *Nefioha* between late July and early August every year. In Afikpo clans, the new yam festival is celebrated as *Iri Ji ohuu* in all the communities between August and September annually, beginning from the Ehugbo clan.

In all these clans, the new yam festival is celebrated in two phases. The first phase holds between July and September while the second phase takes place between September and October, usually in honour of the gods and ancestors of the people. One god that is prominently honoured with the second phase of the new yam festival is *Njoku Ji, the yam god*. But other gods and ancestors of the people equally receive sacrifices. Izzi clan takes the first shot in the second phase that comes up between August and September when it celebrates the *Otutara or Jioha (Feeding of the ancestors)*. It is simultaneously celebrated in Ezza land in October when all yams and other farm crops must have been harvested into the barns,⁴⁰ and in Ikwoclan where it is observed as *Ori-nji* when the spirits of the ancestors are fed by their living off-springs.⁴¹

In Afikpo clans, the second phase of the new yam festival is celebrated in the month of October as *Ji Eroshi*, in honour of the deities of the people. During the festival both personal, village, lineage and community gods are all venerated in appreciation of their roles in the good health, progress and successful farming year of the people.

Superstitions also are commonly held high among the people of Afikpo and Abakaliki clans. In all their communities, signs and unusual events are seen as pointers that an evil deed has been committed secretly by a person or persons in the land. Such signs could come from ordinary creatures like fowls, lizards, cows, bees, and many other creatures. For example, when a lizard climbs a corpse or runs into a newly dug grave for a corpse, or when the dead smiles or laughs, it became a clear sign that the dead person had committed some abominable deeds while alive. The sign could be an unusual development anywhere in the community such as when an adult defecates publicly in a market place or along the street. It was a proof that the earth-goddess and the ancestors of the land had decided to expose the evil deeds of the person. In general, such signs were recognized as *Ahuma*. They portrayed a looming danger as a result of the anger of the gods and ancestors over the secret evil deeds of the people, and meant that an immediate atonement to cleanse the land was imperative if the looming danger was to be averted.

Governments of Afikpo and Abakaliki Clans

As Igbo areas, Afikpo and Abakaliki clans run unique government systems that are based on the family, kindred, village and clan or town. While the *Okpara*, the oldest male child of a family, is the head of his family, the oldest *Okpara* in a line of families that make up a kindred, was the head of that particular kindred. As families and kindred expand by marriage, the village likewise developed and expanded into village groups that formed clans or towns. At every level, the Igbo carries their members along and allow the opinions of all to count on all matters of public concern. No member is allowed absolute authority over the people and their affairs, especially in the olden days when every family, kindred, village and clan was autonomous with its independent elders' council that represented it at the general elders' council at the village or clan level. That way, the indigenous Igbo government is both segmental and unitary. There is never a central authority that dished out orders and was revered above the people. Scholars have described the Igbo system as democratic, republican or a combination of both. In reality, the indigenous Igbo system of government is an all inclusive arrangement that operated through an aspecial instrument called *Age Grades*.

In Afikpo and Abakaliki Clans, age grades are generally called *Ogbo* or *Uke* which, literally interpreted, mean

Grade. The grading of the ages starts as soon as a child is born. An unwritten record of births within an interval of one to two years is kept to guide the communities assign appropriate public duties to the age grades as they grow up. The system ensures the involvement of all in the development drives of the communities.

In Afikpo clans the youngest age set is called *Umuruma*, *Umuegrima* or *Umutakiriwhile* in Abakaliki areas it is called *Unwegirima*. Ezza people of the Abakaliki area called their youngest age grade *OgboAkpapi*. The members are too young for any direct role in either the government or wars of the communities.⁴² Their ages range from 1-14 years. Next after this group is the youth age grades generally called *UmuOkorobia* (in Afikpo areas) and *UnwuOkorobya* (in Abakaliki areas). Their duties include clearing of community path ways, maintaining the streams, construction of bridges and markets, defending the communities from external aggression as well as enforcing the decisions and orders of the Council of elders on all communal matters. Every age grade in the set is graded according to the birth periods of the members. Their ages range from 15-50 years. It is the largest age set, and carries out the hardest assignments for the communities.

The youngest age grade of this set is between 15 and 29 years. In Afikpo they are called *Umu Ela* or *UmuEbobut* are differently identified in each of the communities. In the Abakaliki area, they are generally grouped as *OgboNgburumabut* their specific identity in the Ezza clan was *OgboIruali*. It is from this group that people are drafted for initiation or circumcision into adulthood in the early days. That circumcision (*Ibuubu* in Afikpo and *Ibvubvu* in the Abakaliki areas) starts with the *Isi ji* initiation in Afikpo and eventually qualifies the initiates for the next initiation into the *Ogo* or *Evocult* after which the young men are qualified to take wives, partake in wars as well as have shares in family and community lands.

Between age 30 and 49 years the young men are mature enough to become actively involved in the day to day affairs of their communities. At this stage, the age set is commonly identified as *Uke Ikpo* when the members are expected to prepare for their last wrestling engagement to qualify for exemption from wrestling and general community labour. In Afikpo, the *Ekpu- Uke- Eto* emerges immediately after the *Ikpo* ceremony when a new set of *Uke Ikpo* comes on board. The *Ekpu-Uke-Eto* is the last three age grades that graduate from the *Uke Ikpo*. The group forms the executive arm of Afikpo government.⁴³ In the government of Ezza land in the Abakaliki area, the Council of *NdiNz* that doubles as the *Ochinkpuru* Council, is the equivalent of the *Ekpu-Uke-Eto* group in Afikpo. In the early history of the Ezza clan, *OgboEzekuna*, *OgboIbina* and *OgboNyirije* who were the *Ogurenaya* (Elders) of the land, could be likened to the *Horii* and *Onikara* groups in Ehugbo clan. The *Horii* age group is formed of people of about 100 years and above while the *Onikara* group was made up of men between 70 years, and above.⁴⁴ Though they did not play any active role in the government of Ezza land except advisory, Ezza age grades were later re-organized to involve all age grades in the wars and government of the clan. This was necessitated by the frequent wars the people encountered from some bellicose non-Igbo groups in their new homes in the Abakaliki area.⁴⁵ But the *Ndi- bu- Ogurenaya* (Elders of the land) formed the Council of elders in Ezza land, and performed both legislative and judicial functions for their people. Nonetheless, after the age grade re-organization, the new military roles of the *Ndi-bu-Ogurenaya* included training the soldiers in Ezza traditional military tactics, preparing war charms that ensured victories for the people, and recruiting fit soldiers and supervision of their different actions in the wars.

Izziclan (also in the Abakaliki area) recognize only four age grades that are generally grouped as *Okoro* and *Uke*. Their duties are as in Afikpo and other Abakaliki areas. The first and youngest of the *Okoro* group is called *Unwegirima*; the next is the *UnwuOkorobya*. The third group is *Unwoke-kporuepfu* which comprises of the circumcised and married

young men. The last and fourth age grade is *Ndu-bu-Ogerenya* (The *elders*). They constitute the general Izzi Council of elders. Their main functions are legislative and judicial as well as organizing, supervising and encouraging the young men to be active in community services. It is from this elders' group that the *Uke* institution is created. The institution has the heads of Izzi families who collectively perform religious functions in the villages and at the clan level.⁴⁶ Though each village has its own *Uke* institution with an *Ishi Uke* (Leader of the *Uke* group), only four *Ishi Uke* are recognized as the authentic leaders of the *Uke* institution in all Izzi land. The four are selected from the two main lineages of *Igbojima* and *Unwuwerwa*, each providing two of the general *Ishi Uke*, with the oldest of them emerging the overall head of the institution in the clan. The office of the overall head is for life.⁴⁷

In Ikwo clan government is also based on age grades as in Afikpo and other Abakaliki areas. Three age grades – *OgboNyirije*, *OgboIdagu* and *OgboEnyiIgwe*, rule the clan and constitute the Council of elders. All other age grades belong to the *OgboNgburuma* who make up the youths age grades that enforce all decisions of the ruling age grades. However, the decisions cannot be enforced except with the ratification of the village head who is in charge of all affairs in the villages. The village head is a member of one of the ruling age grades. The *OgboNgburuma* is also responsible for the security of the clan as well as engaging in other activities that serve the interest of the communities.⁴⁸

In summary, the governments of all Afikpo and Abakaliki clans are segmental at the village level because each village is autonomous but unitary at the clan level where the villages form general assemblies that preside over the common affairs of each section of the clans. In each clan the council of elders control the people's assemblies while the village council of elders control affairs in the respective villages. They settled domestic and other minor disputes but refer serious matters like murder, protracted land disputes or external threats, to the clan council of elders. It is this position of the elders in the governments of Afikpo and Abakaliki clans that qualify the pre-colonial political system of the people as gerontocratic. That position is informed by the fact the elders, as custodians of the people's customs and traditions, and are believed to be closer to the gods and ancestors of the clans. Thus, it is assumed that they know better how to approach these immortal beings to curry their favours and turn their anger away from the people.⁴⁹

CONCLUSIONS

Afikpo and Abakaliki people share traits of a common origin. This is evident in the several cultural practices they share together till the present times. Besides these, the two groups have the same historical experiences of intractable wars and dislocations. Also, a name like "Egu" (a savannah or open grassland) is common to the groups even in the present times as can be seen in the names of their persons and places. One incontrovertible fact is that the two groups are generally identified by outsiders, especially other Igbo groups, as "NdeOguUkwu" (A people of big hoes).

This study traced the first common home of the groups to Ehugbo land where they are assumed to have settled in about 350 B.C. It was only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the people began to experience internal hostilities due to the arrival of OmakaEjali and his followers from the war torn Ibibio-Akpa- Arochukwu region. The determination of OmakaEjali to dislodge the Egu group from Ehugbo land in the seventeenth century lingered until his death. But his son, Igbo UkwuOmaka, continued in the determination till his supposed son, EgwuUrochi, forced a wide migration of many of the Egu people and the Nkalu group, their later neighbours, to leave Ehugbo for new homes elsewhere.

Nevertheless, before the mass exodus, Igbo Omaka had tried to restore peace to the territory through the Oriette

covenant which all the three main Abakaliki clans of Ezza, Izzi and Ikwo, have replicated in their new homes with slight differences, particularly in their pronunciations. There were other cultural practices like the Isi Ji initiation that were introduced by the Egu group before the disastrous wars that forced them out of Ehugbo land. As they migrated out and were settled in their new homes, they re-enacted these cultures as seen in them till this day. But the cultures have suffered some changes in the new homes as a result of environmental influences and other factors.

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