



THIRTY YEARS OF EKELE IN JOURNALISM: CULTURE AND LIFE OF UKWUANI PEOPLE IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This study reviewed the speech which was presented at a gathering to celebrate an Ukwuani personality in local journalism. Alaska Ekele is a household name and in the past thirty years he had etched his name on the space and desired to launch a fund for a Research Centre to cap his dreams for his people to be located at Novena University, Amai. It placed the speech in the context of the travails of his people in their quest for rapid development in Nigeria. It made a content analysis of the speech and used it to x-ray the role of the local media as an instrument of development. It agreed with the speech that the development of the ethnic community may not come from political representation from the ethnic group because development has eluded the space despite its continued flirtation with the government and despite the enormous oil and gas resources it bore. Rather, the study concluded that the ethnic space might have to seek development through the patriotic efforts of its non-political leaders who had taken the bull by the horn to establish private Universities and industries. It concluded that harmful practices in space are under-reported.*

KEYWORDS: Alaska Ekele, Community newspapers, Cultural heritage, Ukwuani people, Delta State, Nigeria.



INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the local media have made a permanent presence in Ukwuani. Several news organs have come and gone but the Ndokwa Vanguard appears to have come to stay; others which have gone were Ndokwa Now, Ndokwa Today, Grass-root Trumpet International, etc. Those currently online are Ndokwa Star, Ukwuani Trumpet, etc. Published by Alaska Ekele, Ndokwa Vanguard is an avowed local newspaper covering news reports on the Ukwuani ethnic nationality of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This study is aimed at assessing the achievements made by the news organ after 30 years on the newsstand and the challenges it currently faces in an era of social media and the Publisher's desire to establish a Research Centre for the organ at the Novena University, Amai (another giant and successful project of indigenous Ukwuani people) or on any other spot in Ukwuani-land.

Statement of the problem

Does local journalism have any significant role to play in the socio-political and cultural development of micro-tribes in large countries like Nigeria? Since the emergence of local newspapers in Ukwuani, what has changed arising from the desire of the people to develop a western post-colonial model? What subcultural practices peculiar to Ukwuani people have been exposed or underreported by these newspapers and what has been the reception enjoyed by them in the area? Has the writing and reading culture of the Ukwuani people improved and increased or are they still stymied by disinclination to the written word? A bunch of tribal practices are harmful and baleful in the Ukwuani space particularly against women and the girl child. They are restricted from the grounds and precincts of so many juju deities, just as in some notorious communities, stranger elements are hardly encouraged to settle amongst Ukwuani areas yet they are predominantly emigrants populating other tribal spaces in the country. The scrabble lifestyle of a typical Ukwuani man and his family in the cities has not helped in the development of the Ukwuani homeland. The rich amongst them are in the first generation and are hardly capable of transforming the lives of others on the landscape, as their 'stupendous wealth' has come from employment (and corrupt practices) in government services or in the oil economy. The productive skill of an average Ukwuani is low compared to the cultural skills to be found in her neighbouring space in Igbo, eastern Nigeria. Ukwuani is hardly noted for any gift to the modern state of Nigeria; as such, the journalism of the Ekele era, which this study is centred on, has appreciably nothing to write home about and present to the modern world. But in terms of negatives, it could be stated that the cultural practices in the Ukwuani space have largely been responsible for its relative backwardness and self-under-development.



CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Ekele era in journalism

Journalism in the Ekele era is referred to as the period in Ukwuani history (dating back to approximately three decades) during which indigenous and local newspapers emerged in Ukwuani-land that were solely published by indigenous Ukwuani people, with the coverage of the newspapers made to predominantly concern the news of the people of Ukwuani ethnic nationality in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It is an era in which the Ukwuani people began to report themselves to the world. As newspapers are known to survive mainly on advertorials, obituary announcements of prominent natives began to take the centre ground. Local industries also began to publicise their products, such as hotels, farms, schools, hospitals, etc. Issues concerning ethnic agitations against multinational oil companies in the area began to surface due to environmental degradation, pollution and lack of electricity in the area made up of three local government areas out of the twenty-five local government areas that make up Delta State, which also houses the largest independent power plant in West Africa at Kwale-Okpai.

Furthermore, it is an era in which there was an explosion in communication technology in Nigeria arising from the introduction, during the President Olusegun Obasanjo administration, of telephones 'without wire' or handsets and laptops and computers. For so many decades previously, the military and the rulers of Nigeria feared the introduction of handsets into the country, believing that the introduction may lead to socio-political awareness that the government and security agencies may be unable to control. It was felt that a people with vital and critical information would be more difficult to govern than a people with a lesser quantity of vital information about government and the activities of those in government. Therefore, when social media was coupled with the journalism of the Ekele era, an explosion occurred in the country and the Freedom of Information Bill was passed into law. Mobile communication was introduced and the State privatized the communication, leading to the emergence of giant mobile communication firms like MTN, GLO, etc. In effect, Nigeria and her local citizens were plugged into the World Wide Web.

The Ukwuani people

Ukwuani people occupy three local government areas out of the twenty-five local government areas that make up Delta State, one of the nine states in Nigeria that are collectively known as the Niger Delta region. Alaska Ekele, the Editor-in-Chief of Ndokwa vanguard, holds a degree in Business Administration but has been in media practice for thirty years. He hails from Igbe-Ogume, one of the seven communities that make up the Ogume clan in the heartland of Ndokwa West Local Government Area of Delta State. The other two Local Government Areas are Ndokwa East and Ukwuani Local Government Areas.

Nationality in marginalization

Ukwuani people share the characteristics of marginalised peoples of the world. The Nigerian government taps the hugest gas in the IPP plant in their land (the largest in the West African sub-region) but since the country gained independence, the land has been in utter darkness. Its indigenes are currently the Deputy Governor of the State yet the Delta State government has no significant state project in the land. The federal government does not even think that such an ethnic nationality exists. Ukwuani people are most often profiled as Igbos and Igbos in



Nigeria are often currently considered a cursed people never to do well from the wealth of the nation. Yet, the people desperately argue that they are not Igbo.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Media in development theory

The role of the media in development is phenomenal. A US President, Thomas Jefferson, had once proposed that if he had the choice between a government without media and a media without government in the US, he would opt for the latter. Development is a wide concept and its relationship with the media is genial. For the local press or community newspapers such as Ndokwa Vanguard in the Ukwuani information space, the challenge is tremendous in an era that has first and second generations of newspaper readers. The challenge of the high mortality rate of the papers has been identified by Austin (2015). Although it has been submitted that local newspapers got lesser attention, acceptance and value from the populace, the first generation of readers in Africa got so enamoured with the colonial and postcolonial press, which struggled for independence, such that the emergence of the national press was a veritable tool for national governance and development. The era of community newspapers therefore must be plugged to communal news and development. Oso (cited in Austin, 2015) argues that community newspapers are driven by social objectives instead of profit. They aim at empowering the people rather than dealing with them passively. They seek to nurture and modify local knowledge rather than to replace it. Like national media, they are also committed to human rights, social justice, and environmental and sustainable development.

In Alice, South Africa's Eastern Cape Province, Metula (2023) found in his study that the Idikeletu newspaper contributes to development while covering community-related stories on education, agriculture, road accidents, poverty, sports, unemployment, etc. Similarly, Babalola (2002) reached the conclusion that the invaluable function of informing, educating, entertaining and constructively bringing the activities of government to the people (particularly, the rural people) through community newspapers is important in promoting literacy. Furthermore, a study on the impact of Urhobo Voice Newspapers found that its contribution to the development and the standard of living of the Ovwain people is tremendous and it urged the government and the private sector to encourage them through the granting of loans.

Agenda-setting theory

The fact that local newspapers are reporting local news about the people could be quite hilarious and it could also be captured as part of the dynamics of communal development (Nwabueze, 2021). The agenda-setting theory postulates that the media has the capacity to create and nurture vivid images of events in the minds of the people. Ate and Ikerodah opine that through community media crimes at the grassroots could be curbed or averted while civil education, cross-gender dialogue, and cultural literacy can be harnessed for development. In demographic terms, the number that reads and writes in the current era is huge and the impact of the news reports on the Ukwuani population is tremendous. The development issues that the local newspapers are thus to concern themselves with have also been captured in this conversation. To state it perfunctorily, Ukwuani communities are caught up in an era in which native cultural practices have clamped on the development agenda of the people. The people want to live in the past of war, hatred for one another, fetishism, clannish divisions and political



docility and still want to embrace an uncertain future in which, as it is argued in this study, their development cannot be guaranteed by their political leaders because the leaders are actuated towards self-fish and self-serving gratification in their pursuit for public office. The development of the ethnic group is not paramount to its leaders. The leaders pay lip service to the collective issue of their development. This can be exemplified by the lack of electric power in the space even when it has had the hugest independent power project in the whole of West Africa since the turn of the century and the space has consistently had representatives at the highest echelon of political leadership. Records even show that its political leadership sabotages its development efforts for the same self-serving purposes. The role of the local media in expressing this affliction is thus imperative. The agenda of a local media outlet to expose corruption is a tedious one and the reason why the local political class shuns the local media may not be far from this conclusion that the 'maggot may turn against them and expose their corruption' and their role in under-developing the Ukwuani socio-political space.

As an agenda-setting mechanism, the media is an organ of social engineering, social integration and development. It must thus give the development programmes accentuated reportage. Development communication agenda would inspire people towards development by advocating poverty reduction, literacy and keeping people informed to enable them to take action (Talabi, Adaja & Sanusi, 2019). Further, Dawodu and the World Bank (2021) in *Nigeria: The community-led approach that is helping inclusive development submits* that a critical agenda of local newspapers is to give voice to marginalised groups. It need not be suffered to be stated that the Ukwuani people are a marginalised ethnic group which in recent times is caught in the fever of self-assertion, having been nearly left behind in the corridor of development. The sectors the group lags so much behind are education, health, water, electricity and environmental degradation.

The rights theory

The theory of right is popular and wide. It rose from the doctrine that man is born free but is everywhere in chains. It touches on fundamental issues of discrimination and deprivation. Laws and regulations which seek to give to a gender or sex what is not available to the other have always come under serious attacks for long. In local communities where antiquated customs that discriminate against the female gender are prevalent, searchlights are beginning to be directed to such communities with a view of isolating the harmful practices and calling them out for abolition. Although the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria makes copious provisions for these rights and the instrument or procedure through which the harmful practices can be ventilated in court for the purposes of their voiding, not many attempts are made with respect to presenting these harmful customary practices before the courts in the land for their nullification. Because these cultural practices exist in isolated parts of Ukwuani communities and are shrouded in secrecy and mystery, challenging them has remained difficult, if not unpopular, in such spaces. Political office holders whose mandate in these spaces is to bring up legislations for their proscription have also remained unconcerned or uninspired about them. Campaign promises have never been able to articulate these discriminatory practices, nor has any plan of action against them been taken by the government in these spaces. Local government councils and councillors have equally remained unaware of what to do to bring the harmful practices to a stop.



LITERATURE REVIEW

The Kwale Township-Stadium Speech

“Protocols: as an admin, Alaska Ekele provides one of the largest and busiest chat groups of Ukwuani people that we know. He has also written some well-researched works, including but not limited to The History of Ogume People, 40 years of Ogume Grammar School, the Malison Report, Ndokwa Torch Bearers, etc. He has also etched his authority on great forewords on the writings of other Ukwuani ethnic nationality writers. Ekele is therefore in the pantheon of Ukwuani writers like Rev. Dr. Okolugbo of Umuebu, Robert Eka-Iloma and Johnson Ebeli Oweh, both of Abbi, Barrister Chidi Egweni of Utagba Uno, Ikechukwu Izuegbe of Ossisa, and Barrister Michael Ozah of Onicha-Ukwuani. What goes for Ekele is his consistency and determination to remain on the turf. That he has not given up on the pen profession is perhaps one of the reasons that we are having this conversation today. It must be stated that the Ukwuani people have not sufficiently reinforced Ekele. We still pay lip service to him. He is yet to get any significant endorsement from us as a people. Year in and year out, Ekele has been in the throes of calling on the Ukwuani people to support him to serve them better but we have almost always rebuffed and shunned him in lip service. This should not continue. If we do not support people like Ekele, who should we support? Who have we helped? We have had occasions to listen to Ekele narratives about the use to which the politicians and the rich men of Ukwuani ethnic extraction have put him and we can state that a handful of us have been of immense assistance to him. Let us continue in that direction because it is what is written about us today by the likes of Ekele that posterity will know about us. Let me state it this way: the disconnection that exists between us and our past is largely due to the inability of our forebears to commit to writing. The written word stands the test of time. So, let us get committed to it. Let us patronise those writing today for in two hundred years and more to come, what is written today may become immutable and difficult to erase. Let us participate in writing and creating our history because nobody can write it better than us. We have started grieving today that we are being called Ndokwa people instead of Ukwuani people. The Yorubas were given their name by the earliest writers from the north (across the Sahara desert) and they have not been able to erase it till today.

The genre of journalism we are confronted with in this conversation is ethnic nationality journalism: local newspapers and private social media. Most newspapers in Nigeria are privately owned. Thus, to consider Ndokwa Vanguard, published by Alaska Ekele, as a local newspaper, while the Vanguard, published by Sam Amuta, is a national newspaper, is entirely a question of national spread and coverage. The desire of publishers like Ekele to limit the scope of the coverage of their newspapers to the three local government areas of Ukwuani ethnic nationality is not necessarily an exercise in self-limitation but one in community service. This is because it reaches anywhere in the world that an Ukwuani reader resides today. The ability of the publisher to transform Ndokwa Vanguard into a National newspaper is, therefore, one of the basic challenges of his project and this conversation. It is this community that is gathered here today that has the capacity to transform Ekele and his newspaper from a community to a national newspaper through the instrumentality of a research centre. This we can do by devoting equivalent commitment and dedication and complementing the perseverance which Ekele has put into the newspaper publication by patronising the same. We can patronise him by advertising it all the time, by writing columns, by sending in news items from our communities to the tabloid and propagating the idea that Ndokwa Vanguard is the national newspaper of Ukwuani-speaking people. The capacity to transform a local newspaper



into a national one is a question of self-determination and courage. And the desire to have a research centre is an integral part of controlling and gauging the socio-political discourse of 'Nde Ukwuani'.

Although we consider ourselves a minority ethnic group, which has been marginalised and suppressed by the other ethnic groups in the Nigerian framework, much has depended on our inability to lift Ukwuani into the national stage of awareness and reckoning. Lack of self-worth or self-immolation is a basic problem that we must surmount as a people. If we can produce a deputy Governor at this period of Nigerian history, we can try more, and we can see that nothing is beyond our reach as a people.

What has ethnic journalism produced in the Ekele era? It has produced people arguing daily and interminably about identity crisis and lack of cohesion. Debates about what language we speak, where we originally came from, and what relationship we have with other ethnic nationalities like the Igbos and the Yorubas, what our cultures are should no longer trouble us. We have bestirred ourselves recently with so many revisionist narratives in our cultural outlook. We should look forward towards how to admit that we are kwales, eboshs, ndosumilis, ukwuanis, igbos, akashiedes, enuanis, aniomas, egbeomas, etc., because these are social constructions that colonialist heritage has brought upon us as a people. Our desires to live beyond these social constructions are what the journalism of the Ekele era should be able to give to us. Our ability to make quantum moves beyond ethnic limitations and revisionist tendencies is our challenge today. The more we get entangled with debates such as those outlined above, the more we would retard as a people. We should look forward to what the future has for our ethnic nationality rather than what the past has dictated to our forefathers and passed on to us. Today we gather under readymade canopies; yesteryear, our forefathers gathered under communally and manually built canopies of palm fronds. The ability to know that we have to confront the future more than the past is perhaps where we can find the capacity to catch up with modern civilisation. Our past was largely undocumented and uninformed by a scientific disposition. Our cosmology today requires progress,, which is impossible without change. Change must begin with the mind because those who cannot change their minds, according to Bernard Shaw, cannot change anything. How, for instance, shall we be able to extricate our peasant farmers from a system of scrabble-agriculture that has allowed our land to waste away in perpetuity? That entails change in our mode of production. We should be able to appreciate the social and economic forces that shaped our cultural and historical past and be able to appreciate the fact that we are caught in a social bind (if not a web) in which we have no other plausible alternative to development than the western model.

A politician without a mouthpiece in the form of a local or national newspaper is a non-starter. Noam Chomsky teaches that who controls the media controls the mind. We believe that who controls the media also controls political discourse. Let us refer to Ukwuani Political leaders as Nnamdi Azikwe, Obafemi Awolowo and even Bola Tinubu. They came to the limelight and the control of their peoples and indeed Nigerians from the newspapers they established and their writings. We cannot be strutting around and calling ourselves political leaders when we have no mouthpiece in the form of an organised newspaper. Some of us keep dropping uninspiring lines on social media, YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp platforms day for us to like and comment on. The likes on the posts of political actors are often less than two digits and the comments are most often negative, indicative of their unpopularity. Let me be a little uncouth: until the recent emergence of the Deputy Governor in the Ukwuani political space, the popularity index of Ukwuani politicians was at its lowest ebb. And the point must be made



clearly that the journalism of the Ekele era has clearly demonstrated that the development of the Ukwuani-speaking people may not likely come from their political leadership. The spark is not there, the will is not there, and the heart is also not there! They represent us to develop elsewhere! They represent us but they take instructions from elsewhere!

The Ekele era in journalism demonstrates that political office holders in Ukwuani appear to have done below expectation for the ethnic area, inducing the people to lose confidence in the capacity of the Ukwuani people in government to help in attracting development to the area. The critical masses of Ukwuani people have lost hope in political office holders. Even as the Ukwuani ethnic nationality occupies the second position in Delta State currently, they are not eager that there is hope and they still view us as a spare tyre. But we must resist that docile profiling by physical development. The point being made is that during the Ekele era, so much freedom of expression and so much political exposure and awareness have been given to the Ukwuani people that they are able to see political representatives from a close range and have found that they are not the kind of people that Ukwuani can hitch her development upon. This is because they have been unable to fix any state or federal presence on Ukwuani terrain from 1990 to 2024. They have tried with four bridges across Ase and Ethiope Rivers because we must be able to realise that before the 1990s we were unable to have a bridge even on the Okumashi River between Amai and Obiaruku! But beyond the four bridges, nothing tangible has transformed the landscape. We must be able to state that Obiarukwu and Umutu political leaders seem to have a monumental challenge to push development to the vast forest farm reserve across the Ethiope River rather than to embrace the Ukwuani corridors of Umuebu, Eziokpor, Ebedei, Umukwata, Ogume, Utagba Uno, Onitcha-Ukwuani, Amai, and Ezionum. The strategic importance of the reserved land to Obiarukwu and Umutu is more enchanting to her politicians than the integral development of her brother communities mentioned above. The same crazy challenge is playing out in the Aboh axis. The Aboh political elites would also wish to capture what is supposedly an Ukwuani project to place it before the difficult Niger River corridor of Ogbesu and Ozizor, thinking more of having an affinity with the Ogbaru-Ndoni corridor than with Ukwuani proper. These two tendencies have not helped the development of Ukwuani-land. There is no gainsaying the fact that a third Niger River bridge at Aboh is necessary as a federal government project to connect Ukwuani from Aboh to Port Harcourt; the desire for it must be a pan-Ukwuani project and it can only come if the political economy of Ukwuani communities has significantly improved with the electric power that the Ukwuani communities desire from the Independent Power Project, Gas-gathering facilities and other social infrastructure like federal schools.

The Ekele era of journalism has revealed to Ukwuani people that independent and private efforts on the part of Ukwuani people will bring more development to her than the efforts of those in public and government service that are largely motivated by selfish, parochial political interests of dominating the Ukwuani landscape. Novena University, Amai, has been quite tremendous even if our people have remained uncommitted to the project. His Royal Majesty, Enyi Friday Abaja, has also made tremendous efforts even as his subjects keep throwing brickbats at him ignorantly and undeservedly. At Abbi, Engr. Austin Avru has set up the Arupet College and Catholic Hospitals. What have our political officeholders done at their individual levels in and out of government? Political officeholders should be able to note that investing at home pays better than abroad or outside Ukwuani. It is the lack of the initiative to develop our homeland that has made it very repulsive for us at our retirement and old age. Rather than being an attractive home at our retirement, our homes become a recluse asylum in



old age. The culture that we have grown by making our home a tomb of resting place or occasional burial and marriage ceremonies cannot grow Ukwuani into an industrial hub. No one can develop our home more than us and we can do so by putting up cottage industries and business endeavours that can outgrow our children. We may need to note that what the journalism of the Ekele era is teaching us is to be proud of ourselves, of where we come from and of our people and culture. The era of the fear of the home should be gone; otherwise, we would not be worth the children of our fathers. Ukwuani people are proud of those who develop her. We would like to cite two simple examples: Hon. Chukwudi Dafe (Work Ukwani to Work) and Hon. (Dr) Obi Nzete. They both approached their tenures as Local Government Council Chairmen with a huge disposition to develop their offices and we can visibly identify that with the structures they have left behind. The same can be said of Hon. Obodoukwu Anigala, Hon. Bar. Anthony Uti, Hon. Emeke Ukpe and a host of others whose tenures saw facelifts in their offices. Other Ukwuani developers can be found amongst the recent President Generals of Ndokwa Neku Union. While High Chief Johnson Opone used his office to edify the Eke Modern Market, Kwale, Gen. Mike Ndubisi (Rtd) has given the NNU a lasting legacy of a befitting national secretariat.

The Ekele era in journalism is asking us to search ourselves and ask ourselves as Ukwuani indigenes whether we have done the best for ourselves, our people and our community. What have we fixed abroad that we have failed to replicate at home? What have we kept at home that can grow the economy of our community? Have we built a large house that may begin to decay as soon as we retire from active life or have we put in place a small enterprise that we can place our hands upon when we retire? Have we heard of Konum Farms Ltd, Amai? Have we been there? Let us think fast! We must not remain in Lagos and Abuja at old age only to be brought back to Ukwuani in a coffin bemoaned with a siren of insults that we were never attuned to our people.

Have we joined in the agitation for light in Ukwuani? Have we been in the forefront of the debate for the need for higher institutions to be sited in Ukwuani? Do we want other schools to come to Ukwuani to compete with our own? Do we give room for competition amongst political office seekers or do we impose our will on our people? Do we underrate our people and want our compounds to be the only ones lit with electricity at night? Do we employ our people if we have the opportunity? Have we replicated ourselves in our callings beyond our own children by placing qualified Ukwuani people in government establishments? Do we want others to celebrate us while we do not attend other people's occasions and celebrations? Let us think again! Are we the type that knows it all in Ukwuani and are not amenable to others' views? Do we oppress our communities with Police from Abuja? Do we kill the traditional institutions of our community by stifling their growth and manipulating one section against another? Do we forge declarations and go about dethroning traditional rulers of our kingdoms? Let us try to change; time is now! The Ekele journalism era has been able to expose in very benign terms those that have chosen not to see eye to eye with their communal and family members. Note that when we exit, the journals would write our obituaries and they may not be palatable by then.

Ukwuani reading culture has improved tremendously but we still suffer from an inability to accommodate criticism from within. Our political leaders are ready to be subjected to domination from without but are stiff to voices from within, which they often characterise as destructive criticism. Take it or leave it; no criticism is destructive because it may only expose our corruption, our immorality or our lack of genuine interest in the affairs of Ukwuani people.



For instance, how can we pride ourselves as Political Leaders in an era in which the government was to give us the School of Industrial Technology, Kwale; Federal Polytechnic Kwale; Delta State Polytechnic Aboh; Federal University of Agriculture, Aboh; and Federal University of Medical Sciences, Kwale and they all failed to see the light of day because of our anti-intellectualism? The journalism of the Ekele era has been able to expose the sour disunity between Ukwuani academia and Ukwuani political leaders. Ukwuani Politicians do not want intelligent people around them except as Face-book Journalists and in the Ekele era, all of them have become journalists and photographers of repute due to unemployment. Academics and Political Leaders in Ukwuani should be able to understand that leadership is the bane of the development of Ukwuani people, as ideologues like Professors Chinua Achebe and Steve Okecha have noted. A house that is divided cannot stand. Political Leaders should desist from the characterisation of academics as armchair critics, while academics should equally desist from profiling Political Office holders as inept, incompetent, docile and corrupt. Hardly have we been able to closely identify collaboration between academia and political office holders until recently established in the template between the Rector of Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku and the Office of the Deputy Governor of Delta State. More such templates and collaborations should be established even across political divides.

Ekele era in Journalism was enthusiastic about the arrival of kingship institutions in Ukwuani but after a few successful cases at Ezionum, Umuebu, Amai, Emu, Umukwata and Kwale, we have failed to redouble our efforts towards the investigation as to why great communities like Ogume, Onicha Ukwuani, Utagba Uno, Abbi, Umutu, Obiaruku, Eziokpor, Ashaka, etc., have failed to keep faith with the establishment of their kingship institutions. Even the great kingdom of Aboh has failed to rekindle its flagship on this score since about 2019 when the last Obi of Aboh exited. We must get it right that although Constitutionalism in the country lays scant emphasis on traditional institutions which are clamouring for enhanced constitutional roles, traditional institutions have been playing significant roles at communal and local government levels and the Ekele era in journalism should be able to foster the campaign and advocacy that institutions should spread to all the clans of Ukwuani. No clan should be subordinate to the other in the traditional institution. A situation where some clans are represented by kings while others are not does not augur well for an effective and equitable structure. We agree with the argument that monarchy is relatively alien to Ukwuani people and sometimes the argument from the Ndosumili perspective about a differentiation amongst Ukwuani people is anchored in the influence which long traditional institutions have had on communities closer to the River Niger bank than those closer to the Ethiopie River bank. But in all of these, the most connected but pernicious argument has been the desire to state that Ukwuani is not a subset of the Igboid group. So much fury has been brought to the table of the argument but not much historical data or contemporary conviction or evidence has been advanced. Authorities on the history and anthropology of the people of the Niger Delta and indeed Nigeria have nothing to do with the current argument vehemently postulated by Nde Ukwuani people like Osabenyi Onefeli. It is not enough to state that we are not Igboid, which Statesmen like ex-President Ebele Azikiwe Jonathan have affirmed. Much would depend on what historical and anthropological facts neo-ukwuanness would bring to the books of conviction. Let us cite the case of the Ezionum people as an example. The official history of the origin of Ezionum states that the people migrated from Asaba, with some countering that Ezionum people emigrated to Asaba instead. However, eighty percent of her Diaspora population resides in Yoruba-land as scrabble farmers. During the annual Nduku festival, the community becomes a Mecca of sorts but even before the festival is over within three days, it becomes desolate and barren. The current challenge of her King



has become what to do with his subjects to get them to stay at home instead of converting their home to a graveyard of emigrants. They have laboured so much in Yoruba-land that a significant part of their active life has been wasted developing the western region economy rather than their home so much so that when eventually age and time catch up with them, they could have only been able to put up scrabble-structures they never lived in, making the community often scanty in population and even desolate for the better part of the year. The come-back-home campaign of the traditional institution is yet to catch the concerned emigrants. The conundrum is so confusing to a native who operates ambulance services in that space that he was compelled to vehemently postulate that Ezionum people are essentially Yorubas! He canvassed further that if they are not, there is a certain covenant in relative antiquity between Ezionum people and Yoruba-land wherein they covenanted not to live at home. He drew his conclusions from sorrowful and horrifying narratives, dirges, requiems and harrowing cant and chants he encountered from relations of dead natives he plied from all corners of Yoruba-land to inter and entomb at Ezionum. Therefore, authorities like Osabenyi Onefeli who are heavy-handed that Ukwuani are indigenous to the area they occupy today may not be far from the truth. But we must all concede that Ukwuani people appear not to have any relative experiment in empire or nation building beyond the Aboh experiment. Village democracy and kindred settlement dot her antiquity like all Igboid groups.

We must state a few facts about the native war culture that has developed in Ukwuani land in these past couple of decades. We see it clearly play out in oil-bearing communities in the Kwale-Beneku-Okpai axis and farmland disputes in the Ezionum, Amai, Umuebu, and Umukwata-Obiarukwu axis. So much revision to the native war juju worship has cropped up even in places like Ebendo-Obodougwa, Emu-kwale, Amai-Umuebu, etc. The traditional institutions have become so entangled that the brotherliness that ought to ensure development is taking flight in Ukwuani land. It has been found by researchers that the second significant factor that has led to our underdevelopment is hatred for one another and allowing some miscreants in the communities to foment warmongering and encourage human sacrifice and fetishism. The journalism of the Ekele era has largely underreported the bloodletting that has taken the centre ground in Ukwuani since Ndokwa Vanguard began publishing. Discrete observation has also shown that so much capital goes into fomenting of war and community leaders and even political leaders in Ukwuani are neck-deep in the masterminds of the wars and bloodletting. When community funds and even government security allocations are about to be embezzled, a certain kind of hostility and native war is promoted in order to 'retire the funds'. We have been able to clone certain local government regimes with these kinds of war efforts and security glitches. We are still understudying the phenomenon.

One aspect of Ukwuani underdevelopment which the Ekele era in journalism has also underreported and under-attacked is harmful cultural practices which have refused to wane. All over the land, strangers are not found and are glaringly discriminated against in spaces like Ezionum, Umuebu and Eziokpor, and women are treated with distasteful and disdainful cultural practices in such micro-societies. The Igba jujus of Akashiede for instance, have left that space with so much violent culture and bloodletting; the Eworo jujus have also left women horrified continually in communities like Ogume, Abbi and Ezionum; genital mutilation is still in vogue in some of these parts, not to speak about witchcraft, sorcery and slavery accusations in the Ndosumili parts of Ukwuani. There are too many deities, inscrutable jujus and ancestral shrines that have one discriminatory practice or curse or the other. And the gospel truth is that they have outlived their usefulness as a defensive mechanism against European incursion and



medium of social control in pre-colonial times. Today they are now albatrosses around our necks. None of our modern elites are out to identify these cultural practices and reverse them in our communities. Political office holders have naively surrendered the bold steps in these directions of their mandates to feeble non-governmental organisations and women societies. We cannot claim to rule and represent a people that have been badly afflicted by generational and malevolent practices and still timidly concede to such harmful practices in the Ekele era of journalism. The Iyieze people of Abbi for instance have completely eradicated the harmful practice of women having to pull off their blouses to go through the Iyieze community of Abbi, while in neighbouring Ezionum, women still dance naked in broad daylight to the Otolom stream deity during the annual Otolom festival, a worship dedicated to a seasonal stream. Women should have a rite of passage to view work in exceptional circumstances. Proclamations against several cultural practices and identifiable juju deities that are harmful are long overdue. In Ezionum for instance, a certain Nmili-Oku juju deity does not accept female visitation in its precinct yet the Eke market in Ezionum is well ensconced within the Nmili-Oku juju deity grounds and its Eke market is perennially sparse and unattended. But in the neighbouring Abbi community, on the other hand, the Olokoto juju deity is a fertility juju agreeable to the visitation of womanhood and its Eke market is always in full swing, even drawing women from Ezionum and as far as Warri. Your guess is as good as mine. But let us speak up! There are too many primitive cultures that we need to identify, own up to and eradicate.

We have seen strong opinions on the need to develop the Ukwuani language and to speak it more fluently and widely without interlacing it with the English language. But sometimes we fail to understand that its development is through the instrumentality of the English language and its alphabets. We pretend to have a language but we forget to appreciate the language through which Ukwuani language development and study can be made realisable. The desire to develop the Ukwuani indigenous language as part of our culture cannot be carried far because of territorial constraints but those who have found great vocation in it should be highly encouraged and commended because a cultural heritage without a language is difficult to conceive or comprehend. It is a language that marks off a people from others; that is why advocates of Ukwuaniness are very strong in these conversations. The Ekele era in journalism is not so much committed to language dichotomies and histrionics. Its mainstream medium is the English language. Its pander to the Ukwuani language is a pastime often in Ukwuani internet platforms with so much gusto but without depth or popularity because members have long given up their commitment to a mother tongue. Though that is discouraging, it is a position taken because of the exigencies of survival. But it should be pointed out that a language that is readily spoken but not readily written has a stricture so deep for its survival. Those who are against revisionism of the Ukwuani language thus have a long fight with the irreversible consequences of colonialism on the culture and language of Ukwuani people.”

Confronting the Stadium-speech

Reporting Ukwuani to the world with regards to the life and culture of its people in the twenty-second century can be traumatic and mind-bending. To begin with, they are chronically animist or euhemeristic (Otite, 2003). The worship of idols is given but it gets so commingled with the worship of animals that a participant observer gets put off by the level of commitment of the people to the worship of animals. Few instances of being out of the office. In the Onicha-Ukwuani and Okpai spaces, the crocodile is a totemic god. Their shallow streams are riddled with large crocodiles. Their population is so huge and the respect for them is far and wide



around the communities. Oil prospects in such spaces are often halted with devastating consequences for staff if any crocodile is mistakenly or deliberately harmed or killed. In the neighbouring communities of Ogume, the worship of tortoises is so pervasive that the Ogume people of seven villages consider the reptile their god but hardly want to be associated with the cunning wisdom of the reptile. In the Kwale-Ashaka area, the iguana is the totemic god of the people and it is so revered that killing it is forbidden but the people would not give in to the trait of the reptile being stubbornly dumb and deaf. In the Ezionum space, the monkey is a universal totem held in high esteem, and farmers are prepared to lose their harvest of corn, bananas and plantains to troops of monkeys without qualms and her people are prided as farsighted yet backward-looking. In the Umuebu-Amai axis, the act of foreswearing with guinea fowl or python is so prevalent that the bird can eat up corn before it germinates in the farmlands or the reptile can roam the bushes in their numbers and the Amai are taunted and known as emissaries (or spies playing emissary roles) in traditional communities around them for the Obi of Aboh, the Oba of Benin or the Europeans. What is forbidden is legion and to take a census may detain this conversation. In some parts, even dogs, sheep, cats, deer, etc., are on the long list.

People that forbid so many things at the same time are unlikely to travel widely or entertain strangers; they may not even drink from wells of strangers or neighbours. They are always suspicious of accepting gifts from strangers. There are likely to be few people ready to expose these prohibitions to the world and are most unlikely to be willing to speak up against them in public spaces. They are easily gullible to the spiritual consequences of disobedience and are most likely to even attack those who are out to expose these practices. Just as in Ikorodu space in Lagos State, where the proprietors of Oriwu Sun newspaper were attacked by exposed cocaine barons, Indian hemp barons in Abbi are most likely to attack community newspapers desiring to expose traffickers in the dangerous and illicit trade. Similarly, core practitioners of the juju cults of eworo, igba and related violent practices in Ukwuani are likely to attack newspapers that may condescend to publication and exposition of their dangerous outfits (Austin).

It is given that what makes news in local communities is negative. They appear in the form of communal clashes, tribal wars, native wars, primitive practices, gang rape, murder, suicide, fetishism and ritualism. A study claims that the press hardly reports 'good news' about rural communities in Nigeria before the emergence of the new media and online journalism (internet news: Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp, etc.). It is claimed further that the press is more favourably disposed to report news on urban than rural communities and planting communication infrastructure has favoured urban centres more than rural areas (Ate & Ikerodah, 2012). Another study by Kayode and Adeniran (2012) found that Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), just like Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are infrequently reported even as they concern rural communities.



CONCLUSION

The Kwale township-stadium speech is a scathing indictment of political office holders in the three Local Government Areas of Ukwuani-speaking people of Delta State. It demonstrates through an acute lack of federal and state projects like schools of higher learning and the lack of electricity in the space, despite being the host of the largest IPP in West Africa, that its political representatives have largely undermined the development of the area. It also demonstrates that the State in Nigeria is hugely ungrateful and incapable of reinforcing areas where natural resources are tapped for the general economic growth of the nation. The Ukwuani people speak with regret and disappointment against both the State and its representatives in the organs of State government. The conclusion reached in the speech that the Ukwuani people should not look up to the political office holders of their space as the harbingers of their development because they are corrupt and selfish but should look towards those who are bringing sprinkles of development from outside the government from their private efforts is food for thought.

The speaker believes that the Ukwuani people are also neglected because the people practice a backward religion and engage in discriminatory practices against their women. It postulates that if the womenfolk have been marginalised in the society, kept in social ostracism and spiritual deprivation, the land cannot blossom. The Ukwuani communities are likened to those which do not give a head start to women and even their women who are highly educated and talented, do not want to come up to participate in communal development because they are ab initio disentitled and disqualified in several traditional respects and are considered subordinate to the men-folk. In such communities that are perpetually in darkness, belief in witchcraft, wizardry, sorcery and wickedness prevails.

RECOMMENDATION

- Local newspapers should up-stick their reports and campaigns on harmful and discriminatory practices in local communities.
- Political office holders in the Ukwuani space should take it as a duty to identify harmful juju deities in the communities and commit to stamping them out of existence through legislative and executive action.
- Agitations for federal and state presence in the Ukwuani space should go beyond preachments to protests.
- Traditional institutions should look inwards to identify traditional and cultural practices and juju deities that are no longer useful to the modern development of the people of their communities and systematically abolish them or invite local government authorities to do so if they are arm-strung.



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