

IGWEBUIKE: THE PLACE OF AFIKPO TOWN WELFARE ASSOCIATION (ATWA) IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFIKPO-IGBO CLAN

By

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Abstract

Community development is a dynamic process involving all segments of the locality, including the government, the traditional royal fathers, town-union leaders, the Church, the women's groups and the youth population. Different governments at all levels in the past made efforts geared towards community development in Nigeria by providing basic social amenities. However, government interventions alone were not adequate. This necessitated many local communities to apply self-help method in their development trajectories. The Afikpo community applied the principle of Igwebuike to rally supports for unmet needs. The instrument used is a town union organization called Afikpo Town Welfare Association (ATWA). ATWA was established solely for the purposes of organizing resources, planing community initiatives that will bring development, and fostering a sense of shared responsibility among members. Therefore, the aim of this study is to assess and evaluate the contributions of ATWA in the development of Afikpo community since inception. Basically, the study is qualitative, utilizing both primary and secondary sources of data such as oral interviews, books, journals, newspaper articles, ATWA convention papers, among others; all considered relevant in understanding the origin and achievements of ATWA. The findings of the study reveal that ATWA has been an important agent of community development in Afikpo, although there are areas seeking great attention. Thus, the study concludes by recommending the establishment of digital and communication links that will connect the entire community to the activities of ATWA. Again, there should be regular seminar and workshops in order to increase the skills and knowledge of ATWA leadership for effective and efficient administration.

Keywords: Igwebuike, ATWA, development, Afikpo, Igbo.

1. Introduction

Studies show that the study of traditional knowledge of indigenous populations was vitalized in Brazil and other developing countries (Posey, 2000). According to Posey, "there will be nothing 'new' if we do not develop new methodologies for dialogue with local knowledge holders." It is this indigenous way of solving problems aiming for harmonious and equitable society that Afikpo people call *IGWEBUIKE*. Igwebuike emphasizes strength through unity and togetherness, which ultimately promotes sustainable development and the well-being of the society.

Igwebuike as a sociological concept emphasizes the importance of mutual support and cooperation. Its nearest equivalents in English according to Kanu (2017) include complementarity, harmony and

communality. Thus, the concept of Igwebuiké is rooted in African values of humanness, caring, respect, and collective responsibility, aiming for a harmonious and equitable society. Thus, whether in the ancient or modern day Afikpo, Igwebuiké plays great roles in community development. The Afikpo leaders of old applied the concept in communal farming, market-holding or festival celebrations. The modern leaders are still using the concept to engineer great development in Afikpo society.

The Afikpo Town Welfare Association (ATWA) was founded on the principles of Igwebuiké. ATWA as a sociocultural organization was established solely for the purposes of organizing resources, plan community initiatives, and foster a sense of shared responsibility among members. It was also meant to serve as agents of social change, by advocating for improved living conditions and defending common causes. It is against this background that the study seeks to examine the role ATWA has played in the development of Afikpo community. To achieve this aim, the study will be structured into sections. The first section served as the introductory part where Igwebuiké was presented as an indigenous word that engineers development and harmonious living; the second section will discuss the concept of Igwebuiké and the underlying principles in order to deepen our knowledge of the concept. Section three will focus on the origin and the historical evolution of the people of Afikpo; section four will discuss the emergence of ATWA and the various names it was known with; section five will examine the various reasons achievements ATWA has recorded, while section six concludes with policy recommendations.

2. Igwebuiké: Conceptual Explanations

Igwebuiké, rests on the African principle of solidarity and complementarity. Its nearest equivalents in English according to Kanu (2017) include complementarity, harmony and communality. As an ideology, Igwebuiké captures the philosophical, religious, political, economic and social life of the African people. It is an all-embracing philosophy. One can simply say that it is a type of philosophical thought that is anchored on the fact that a part cannot be greater than the whole. Thus, it can be said that there is strength or power in multitude or large number of people.

The Igwebuiké concept emphasizes togetherness and strength in unity, a situation where one represents all and all represent one. Iroegbu (1999) demonstrates this one-for-all principle of Igwebuiké thus: “to be is to belong and to belong is to be.” Again, Mbiti (1970) in his work on African religion and philosophy also speaks of African ontology in terms of unity, solidarity and complementarity. Thus, the concept of Igwebuiké finds expression in the Kenyan philosophy of: “I am because we are and because we are, therefore, I am.” Further, Kanu (2016a) supports this all-encompassing role of Igwebuiké by saying: “when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force. At this level, no task is beyond their collective capability.” This means that people achieve more in groups than as individuals. This is amplified by a popular African proverb: “If you want to go fast, walk alone; but if you want to go far, walk together.” More so, Igbo adage has it that a single broom stick cannot be used to sweep but when they are brought together as a bundle, the bundle of broom can be used to sweep. The above proverbs are to further explain the notion of igwebuiké philosophy (Ndubuisi, 2019).

Etymologically speaking, the term "Igwebuiké" is derived from the Igbo words: "*Igwe*" (number), "*bu*" (is), and "*ike*" (strength), signifying "strength in numbers" or "togetherness is strength". Thus, Igwebuiké views the world as a universe of interconnectedness and shared resources, emphasizing the importance of mutual

support and cooperation. Echeruo, in his 1979 Ahiajoku Lecture, described the Igbo as a people who should have disappeared from the face of the earth a long time ago from the multiplicity of vicissitudes but have miraculously avoided doing so: from famine when the soils suddenly failed them. How did the people survive the famine period? Igwebuiké principle of all-for-one and one-for-all made it possible for the strong to protect the weak, and those who had plenty food distributed to those who do not have.

It has to be observed that it was not only the soil alone that threatened the Igbo as Echeruo alleged, wild animals, dangerous animals also sought to annihilate the Igbo in those olden times when the population was few with thick forests everywhere. Living in group was the only way to contain and limit the devouring tendencies of those dangerous animals. Uniting against existential threats from wild animals must have been the origin of the mutual support and cooperation Igwebuiké is known for. In traditional Igbo setting, land tenure was based on communal management system. Agricultural labour and building of traditional thatch-houses were equally organized on the basis of Igwebuiké concept. Hunting, fishing, market building and initiation rites were all performed collectively.

Although, Igwebuiké is a philosophy captured in an Igbo word, it has a universal taste with universal principles. Some of the principles of Igwebuiké are include:

1. Complementarity: Igwebuiké views the universe as a system of interconnected parts where differences complement each other rather than divide.
2. Community: The individual's identity and meaning are found within the community, and the community's strength lies in the collective efforts of its members.
3. Shared Responsibility: Igwebuiké emphasizes that individuals have a responsibility to contribute to the well-being of the community and that the community has a responsibility to support its members.
4. Mutual Helpfulness: Igwebuiké encourages individuals to assist one another and to work together towards common goals.
5. Respect for Others: Igwebuiké promotes respect for the dignity and equality of all individuals, regardless of their background or status, thereby promoting a culture of inclusivity and tolerance.
6. Equity and Justice: Igwebuiké ensures equity and justice in Igbo integration of knowledge through its nature of all hands must be on deck (Kanu 2020).

3. Afikpo: the Historical Evolution

The Ehugbo village-group Anglicized as Afikpo by the British colonial government covers an area of roughly sixty-four (64) square miles (164 sq.km). Afikpo is in the present day Ebonyi State. It is made up of five traditional autonomous communities namely: Npogoro, Ugwuegu, Ohaisu, Itim and Ozizza. Afikpo is often geographically grouped among the Cross River Igbo. However, the people differ remarkably according to Aja (2015) from many other Igbo groups in their double descent system of kinship, composite nucleated village patterns, and age grade system of government. But they share most of these characteristics with their other Cross River Igbo like Edda, Ohafia, Abiriba, Arochukwu, Abam, Bende, Nkporo, Item, Alayi, Igbere and other nearby sister communities.

The origin of Afikpo has been a matter of controversy occasioned by the inconsistencies of the narrators. Until 1902 when the British conquered the area and imposed their authority on the people, Afikpo did not

have a recorded history of migration and settlement. What has survived as the history of Afikpo is an aggregate of fragmentary oral traditions, each recounting the past of the villages or village groups and in some cases, of various compounds.

Explaining the origin of the people of Afikpo, Ottenberg (1968) reports that “the earliest inhabitants of the area were non-Igbo populations (the Egu and the Nkalu) and that they practiced the matrilineal system of inheritance. That the Igbo groups who arrived later seemed to have come in stages in small groupings of families, sometimes led by two or more brothers, bringing patrilineally controlled shrines with them. They pressed-in in considerable numbers, gradually conquering the smaller matrilineal groupings, who probably lacked firearms or other weapons the invaders had acquired through their trading activities.”

Before the arrival of Igbo Ukwu and his group, the Egu and the Nkalu had already settled in the area now known as Ehugbo. Anigo (2009) asserts that Igbo-Ukwu settled at Oroghoro in Amaobolobo, one of the villages in Nkpogoro. Having subjugated the earlier settlers – the Egu and the Nkalu, Igbo Ukwu invited them for a peace pact at Okpoota, Amaizu. He made a proclamation that there should be no more war. The Egu and the Nkalu were to practice their culture under the name and control of Igbo Ukwu. An earthen pot with concoctions was buried at Okpoota to seal the peace agreement. It was the Okpoota Peace Pact that gave Ehugbo its name (Ehugbo) which was later corrupted and changed to Afikpo by the British colonizers. The migration of the Igbo group into Afikpo might have been as a result of warfare, for historians often talk of the Akpa–Ibibio–Aro war which occurred in the mid seventeenth century. Afikpo oral traditions also make constant references to the Akpa–Ibibio–Aro war, but could not account for the exact dates. Their traditions of origin agree that there were migrations during the war period.

From available evidence in Igbo history, according to Aja (2015) the later Igbo groups that migrated into Afikpo might have formed part of the general movement eastwards of the Igbo from the Amaigbo–Orlu axis in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This movements, according to Afigbo (1972) was deflected northwards leading to the foundation of Edda, Ehugbo, Nkporo, Akaeze, Amasiri and other groups of the Cross River Igbo and of the north-eastern groups also known as Nde Ogu-Ukwu.

As more groups arrived from various places, there arose the problem of administering a large group of people and territory, coupled with pockets of insecurity experienced intermittently from groups who refused to accept the authority of the leader of the Igbo group in Ehugbo. Aja (2015) submits convincingly “that Igbo Omaka also known as Igbo Ukwu, who was the leader of the Igbo groups that arrived in Afikpo, summoned a meeting of the elders to discuss how their new home was to be administered. The elders unanimously adopted the age grade system of government”, which brought sanity and order in the system and helped in the allocation of functions, made the inhabitants highly egalitarian and republican in outlook.

The age grade system of governance, which was instituted immediately after the Okpoota Peace Pact, was concluded is still in practice in Afikpo till today. The age grade system of governance in Afikpo vested both judicial and legislative powers to a group of elders known as Nde Ekpuke Esaa. Nde Ekpuke Eto and Nde Isi Elia were to assist the elders in maintaining laws and order in the society. These traditional systems of governance laid serious emphasis on equality, social justice and active participation of the people both in commerce, farming and festival celebrations.

4. Why was Afikpo Town Welfare Association (ATWA) Formed?

We have already established that Afikpo instituted a governance system that made the inhabitants egalitarian in thinking and in approach; a system that denied no man justice. With the emergence of colonialism, education and urbanization, Afikpo people started moving to different parts of Nigeria either to school, work as civil servants or settle as business people. Having been used to a system that guarantees justice and fair hearing at home, having been used to Igwebuike system of life where one's family intervene on one's behalf when trouble comes, now in a foreign land, who advocates for the interests of Afikpo indigenes? This, and other similar questions, led to the establishment of ATWA.

The Afikpo Traditional Council (Uloubi) and ATWA are similar in approach and both complement each other. When Unya (2024) was invited by ATWA leadership to speak during the 2024 Afikpo Age Grade Ascension, he described the relationship between ATWA and Afikpo Age Grades thus:

ATWA and Afikpo Age Grades are similar in many aspects, they also have their differences. To be sure, both ATWA and Afikpo age grades are powerful agents of development. However, there are areas ATWA can intervene or penetrate, that age grade will not. ATWA is made up of different age-sets and they are located in different towns and cities all of the world. Age grades' activities are within Afikpo environs.

The quest to protect the interest and welfare of Afikpo people in foreign lands and to ensure that no Afikpo son or daughter is disadvantaged or suffers unnecessary discrimination both at home and abroad is one of the reasons why ATWA was formed. We have to recognize and accept that ATWA is Afikpo Traditional Council in foreign lands established for the protection of the interests and welfare of Afikpo people.

5. ATWA: The Historical Formation

Town unions in Nigeria emerged based on the desire for community members living away from home to remain in contact and work towards replicating some of the social amenities seen in the metropolitan areas to their home towns. The colonial period saw the rise of town unions, thus, the first town union by Afikpo people was established in 1932, in Lagos.

As at 1932, the number of Afikpo indigenes in different cities in Nigeria were insignificant and since Lagos was the colonial capital of Nigeria as at then, the city must have been the home of the early educated men from old Afikpo Division. The Afikpo indigenes formed a union in Lagos called Afikpo Division Union (ADU). ADU comprised the following clans: Akpoha, Amasiri, Edda, Ehugbo (Afikpo), old Ohaozara (Ivo, Onicha and Ohaozara) and Unwana. Omezue Nnali Mbe Agada, one of the founding members of ADU provided valid reasons why Afikpo indigenes decided to form a union in his book titled, *"The Origin of Afikpo Town Welfare Association (ATWA)"*. According to him, "there was need to establish a permanent body and committee to give assistance and protection to Afikpo traders and fishermen operating along the Cross River who hitherto, had been subjected to all sorts of hazards and humiliation". Again, Omezue Agada and his group wanted an Ehugbo that will be inhabited by highly educated people, thus, he asserts that another reason was "to establish a floating fund to enable Afikpo people train at least a lawyer which we very much lacked, having got already a Medical Doctor in the Division, in the person of Dr. Akanulbiam" (Agada, 1978).

Agada provided another strong point which can be interpreted as a foundation-laying background for future ATWA interventions whether at home or abroad. It was an issue of molestation that borders on unethical conduct. According Agada (1978), “it was the Manager/Shop Clerk in charge of John Holts, Ozizza Beach, who developed the habit of delaying the purchase of produce from our women. He would keep them for hours on end or even for days before he would measure and pay for their goods. He made all sorts of advances to them before doing so. We, that is Messrs Jameson Enwo, Ohia Mbrey, Agha Uche and myself after due consultations waded into the matter. This time, we did not go to plead with him, but threatened court action. And here again, we succeeded”.

After the emergence of ADU in 1932, the next phase was the formation of Afikpo Fishermen and Traders Association (AFTA) in 1949. The meeting that established the Afikpo Fishermen and Traders Association signified the official birth of Afikpo Town Welfare Association (ATWA). Following the apprehensions of fishermen and traders that they may be abandoned if other categories of Afikpo indigenes were left out, a new name was sought and conceived. It was then, that a member suggested that Afikpo Fishermen and Traders Association be renamed Afikpo Town Welfare Association (ATWA).

In addition, immediately after the Nigerian/Biafran war, when the military government disbanded all socio-cultural associations, ATWA operated under the name of Afikpo Reconstruction Organization (ARO), but reverted to her original name in 1975. The following have presided over the affairs of ATWA as Presidents since 1975:

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| 1. Barr. Christopher Oko Okpani | - 1975 – 1981 |
| 2. Chief (Hon.) Nze Lawrence E. Oko | - 1982 – 1988 |
| 3. Omezue (Pharm.) Anthony O. Ekoh | - 1988 – 1991 |
| 4. OmezueEze O. Eze | - 1992 -- 1996 |
| 5. Omezue (Senator) Emmanuel A. Agboti | - 1996 – 2000 |
| 6. Chief Cyril O. Otu | - 2000 – 2002 |
| 7. Prof. Arua Okereke | - 2002 – 2004 |
| 8. Chief (Sir) Ralph Okole | - 2004 – 2008 |
| 9. Barr. (Chief) Ewa Agha Ewa | - 2008 – 2012 |
| 10. Prince (Pharm.) Victor Chukwu | - 2012 –2016 |
| 11. Dr. Vincent Abani | - 2016 – 2021 |
| 12. Chief (Hon.) Sunday Okogwu | - 2021 – to date |

6. Achievements of ATWA

Since its establishment, ATWA has made significant strides in fostering community development and governance in Afikpo land. The association has been instrumental in conflict resolution, community mobilization, infrastructural advancement, educational support, and in preserving the cultural heritage of Afikpo people. The achievements of ATWA, as identified by Ewa, (2019), are discussed under thematic headings in this section.

6. 1. Conflict Resolution, Security, and Governance

ATWA has played a critical mediatory role in maintaining peace and stability in Afikpo land by consistently intervening in communal disputes, political disagreements, and security challenges affecting the community. For example, ATWA successfully mediated in a potentially violent conflict between Ozizza

and Nkpogoro communities over a pontoon dispute between August and September 1998. Also, the association intervened in several crises involving the ESAA Traditional Council of Elders and the Ezeogos, the Etos and Esaas groups, and in disputes involving political office holders and community factions.

Furthermore, ATWA interceded in land disputes between Nkpogoro and Enohia Nkalu communities, the Evuma youth and Police crisis, and the Amaizu youth and Police crisis, emphasizing dialogue, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence. During periods of intense armed robbery attacks in Afikpo, ATWA collaborated with traditional rulers and prominent sons of the community to petition the Ebonyi State Government for urgent intervention. Their action led to the deployment of security personnel, which significantly improved security in the area.

The association also played an important role in the institutionalization of traditional rulership in Ehugbo. In consultation with Nde Ichie Ehugbo, ATWA drafted and secured approval for the Ehugbo Omaka-Ejali Ezeship Constitution of 1976, which later became the framework for the emergence of autonomous communities in the area.

6. 2. Infrastructure and Community Development

ATWA has also distinguished itself in the provision and facilitation of infrastructural development projects in Afikpo. The association partnered with community stakeholders and government agencies to improve the living conditions of the people. For example, between 1979 and 1981, ATWA contributed financially and logistically to the Afikpo Rural Electrification Project, which eventually led to the commissioning of electricity in the area. The association also made sustained interventions to improve electricity supply by engaging officials of the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN) and the Federal Ministry of Power. Consequently, ATWA contributed to the siting of an undertaking station at Abaomege and later played a role in attracting the 132 KVA substation project at Amasiri. The association equally mediated disputes relating to electricity billing between PHCN and the Esaa Council of Elders, leading to concessions for consumers in Ehugbo.

In addition, ATWA initiated and supported the relocation of the abattoir at Eke Market to a more suitable location at Otu Eke. The association also embarked on the revalidation and construction of lock-up shops in the Afikpo Modern Market. At the organizational level, several ATWA branches acquired land and constructed secretariats and meeting halls. Land was also secured for the building of ATWA's national headquarters and market stalls.

6. 3. Educational Development

One of the most remarkable contributions of ATWA has been in the area of education and human capital development. The association has consistently supported educational advancement through scholarships, institutional development, and advocacy for quality education in Afikpo. Further, ATWA has granted loans and scholarships to deserving sons and daughters of Ehugbo extraction. Under the auspices of the association, Omezue A.O. Ekoh sponsored university scholarships that produced medical doctors, pharmacists, and engineers. Other notable individuals such as Hon. M.S.C. Abani and Sam OkoAlu also contributed to scholarship programmes through the platform provided by ATWA.

In partnership with the Afikpo Town Students Organization (ATSO) and the wider Ehugbo community, ATWA played a crucial role in addressing the “Obu Eno monster,” a developmental challenge that persisted for nearly twenty years. The association also contributed significantly to the establishment of Ehugbo Technical College in 1979 through collaboration with the nine age grades in Ehugbo. Similarly, ATWA participated actively in the processes that led to the establishment of Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic in 1981. Members of the association financed trips to Lagos and hosted federal government officials during the assessment and approval stages of the institution.

Furthermore, with the return of democratic governance in 1999, ATWA mobilized communities to establish new secondary schools across Nkpogoro, Ugwuegu, Ohaisu, Itim, Ozizza, and Enohia Itim. The association also advocated for the appointment of an indigenous Rector for Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic by organizing sensitization campaigns and making formal representations to the Polytechnic Council.

6. 4. Economic Empowerment and Welfare

ATWA has contributed immensely to the economic welfare and empowerment of Afikpo people through financial support initiatives, market development, and social welfare programmes. The association established loan schemes and bursary programmes to support members and students. In August 1991, ATWA purchased controlling shares in the Afikpo Community Bank to strengthen local economic participation and financial inclusion. The organization also deepened its internally generated revenue sources to achieve financial self-reliance and sustainability. Furthermore, ATWA mobilized financial support for Mater Hospital in 1982 when the hospital management appealed for assistance.

7. Conclusion

This study has argued that Igwebuiké is a concept that signifies "strength in numbers" or "togetherness is strength". The study's main aim was to systematically analyze how Igwebuiké's principle of togetherness and mutual support towards one another influenced the formation of welfare union known as ATWA. The study went further to review the historical formation of ATWA, the outstanding contributions or achievements ATWA has recorded since its inception. Although ATWA has attracted many and engineered great developments in Afikpo, there are areas that need improvement.

Therefore, the study recommends the establishment of digital and communication links that will connect the entire community to the activities of ATWA. The communication links can also serve as a feedback in order for the leadership to always know what the people want. Further, there should be regular seminar and annual lecture series where Afikpo culture and heritage will be explained in an enlightened way to avoid distortion and ambiguity associated with unexplained phenomena.

Furthermore, ATWA should consider building a National Secretariat with a library section where all the publications about Afikpo people should be domiciled. ATWA should undertake this project in partnership with Afikpo Traditional Ruling Council in order to appropriately document the names of all the traditional Afikpo judges (Okabue) since 1902 when Afikpo fell under the sphere of influence of the British colonial rule.

Finally, there should be a mobilized and focused training and retraining of ATWA executive members in order to increase the skills and knowledge of ATWA leadership for effective and efficient administration. Since it is an established fact that when union leaders receive modern information and technology skills, it leads to efficiency both in financial and human management, thereby, reducing corrupt tendencies amongst executive members.

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