

A DIARY OF MY JOURNEY THROUGH LIFE

GABRIEL ANIGO AGWO

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2021

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Published and Printed by
Mbeyi & Associates (Nig.) Ltd.
23 Mukandasi Street,
Okota, Isolo, Lagos.
Tel. 08033316235
E-mail: mbeyi.associates@gmail.com

ISBN.....

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work, first, to my late wife, Anwara Agwo (nee Obio) and our five children: Ogbonnia Agwo, Osondu Otu Agwo, Oriotu Agwo, Abani Agwo and Uchennia Egele Agwo, who should have a first hand knowledge of who and what their father was especially before they grew up to know him.

The second group are those close relatives and friends, who occasionally wanted to know the secret of my healthy life and living. They urged me to write my biography.

Finally, I dedicate it to the younger and growing generations especially *Nd'Ehugbo* who, I wish should learn some lessons from my own life history so far.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My prime acknowledgement goes to the Almighty God, who gave me life and good health of mind and body to successfully accomplish the task.

From April 1964 when former Miss Felicia Obio got married to me until August, 2005 when she passed on, she provided an ideal home environment for me to carry on, day and night.

A few years after my retirement from the public school system in March, 1987 and my children became aware of the memoirs in progress, they became very curious and pressed on me to hasten the speed. I did. At the printing and publishing stage they gave me the required moral and financial support. I thank them for that.

At different stages the following typists, some of them free of charge, helped me out: Blessing Oko of Amuro, Nnenna Nwachukwu of Ama-elu, Amaizu, Oleforo Ugwu of Amaha Amaizu, Chinwendu Okoro of Amikpo Ozizza and Nkiru Eluu of Amancho, who actually helped me effect the corrections on the nearly four hundred pages of the finished work.

My first daughter Mrs. Ngozi Orie-Otu Oka (nee Agwo) was the supervising typist who collated the work from the first to the last page. I cannot thank her enough.

Apart from my biological children, Emmanuel Idam Oko (Agala), my nephew, has been my link-man with all my children wherever they are. He has been part of the Agwo family since December, 1996 as a primary school pupil till date 2016 as a university graduate and staff of Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana, Afikpo. With him as my confidant at home, I usually felt relaxed and did not expect any unusual anxiety. That's a big plus for him.

It is impossible for me to mention, by name, the people I would like to acknowledge here. They are too many but I can only close the list with two names: Mr. Ben Obasi Egwu (Nwere m) and Sir (Chief) Emmanuel Agha Mbey, Enyo Ehugbo. Mr Ben Egwu Obasi the *Afikpo Today Magazine* Reader, did a marvellous work of editing the entire Autography, line by line. It took him several weeks to accomplish and the outcome was a thorough work and near perfect.

Honestly, I was astonished at the avoidable mistakes unearthed there in. I remain grateful to him for saving me some embarrassment.

Sir (Chief) Emmanuel Agha Mbey (Enyo Ehugbo), I say *jookwa I hugu gbaa. O medi gi m na enya.*

Enyo Ehugbo of *Afikpo Today* fame, is a round peg in a round hole. The way he has brought his expertise to bear on the packaging and printing of my autobiography has given the finished work a class of its own. I thank him.

May God bless you and all those who have not been named but contributed immensely towards these memoirs seeing the light of the day. I acknowledge and appreciate every one of you in the Mighty name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lady of Perpetual Help, remain honoured.

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FOREWORD

Horii (Chief) Gabriel Anigo Agwo's AUTOBIOGRAPHY/MEMOIR is a rare gift to humanity. Many have allowed theirs interred with them and in the process denied succeeding generations the benefit of lessons from their loaded life of quality achievements, diverse lessons therein, and positive human impact. Unveiling this autobiography stands Chief Agwo out as a mirror through which substantial part of the populace can draw inspiration and guidance.

His biography could not have captured this depth and vastness of his life as much as this autobiographical account of himself. This is a multifaceted compendium of the life of a sage that can pass for not just a mere memoir or autobiographical perspective of his very rich and eventful life, but qualify as history of Ehugbo (Afikpo), issues in Nigeria politicking; governance and governmental affairs; a literature or novel; a collection of natural occurrences and important dates in some people's lives and milestone events, etc.

This autobiography chronicles Horii (Chief) Agwo's life of rough, tumble, and bumpy road to formal education attainment, education services and development, services to community and the general society. It also captures services to local government, the state and the nation; restoration and maintenance of peace in Ehugbo (Afikpo), establishment of Ehugbo Technical College and Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic Unwana, and issues in the creation of Ebonyi State. It is an example in resilience, focus and determination to succeed in spite of daunting odds. It is an unquenching desire to attain the pinnacle of set educational and life goals from bare modesty and seeming hopelessness. There was no dull moment in his life as he did anything and everything morally right to survive. He was always found developing himself studying, working or both. To him, no work or activity was menial so long as it was legitimate and could sustain and make for independent existence.

This is a guide for the youths of the future on having a direction in life. He had no-quitting attitude to challenges when realities on ground

clearly demanded quitting. Reading this memoir did not show when and where Chief Agwo played juvenile or was delinquent contrary to what obtains now. He played fatherly roles as well as family and community leadership roles desirably very early in life. All these, at the same age most of our youths are languishing their productive lives smoking away indian hems and indulging in unbridled consumption of other hard and illicit drugs. He proved a rare optimist who displayed a never-despair attitude in the face of any obstacles in life's race.

Reading through this masterpiece, one can rightly conclude that the author's name, devoid of Ehugbo, is incomplete. This is because he thinks Ehugbo, sleeps Ehugbo, dreams Ehugbo, eats Ehugbo, and drinks Ehugbo. This is a case of abounding love for one's town. He lives for Ehugbo and is ready to die for Ehugbo. At an age some of his mates are suffering from age-related amnesia, he is still intellectually sound and alert to be part of the history of the 'one-time' *Afikpo Today Magazine*, displaying, as it were in spite of age, strength, intellect and deep grasp and knowledge of Ehugbo culture, tradition and history.

This autobiography is vivid and profuse in the writing styles he employed, which is a combination of literary styles and philosophical expressions. It also has all the writing styles of renowned Africa's and Nigeria's celebrated novelists. Going through Chief Agwo in this autobiography/memoir takes the reader through Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* fame and other literatures and novels from the rich collection of Africa's Writers Series (AWS). The language they employ, characterization, culture and tradition they feature, readily come to mind. His style is also laced in humor, colour, proverbs, Ehugbo dialect that is immediately explained; wise sayings, fun, and play on words, and general command of English, which is his constituency. It is a hypertension therapy, a vintage portrayal of great mind in great Agwo that can hardly be dropped when picked up to read even as one chuckles along.

Chief Agwo is a man of many parts. He is reputed as English 'wordsmith'; historian, which makes him an archival resource personified; culturalist and traditionalist, which make him a repository and custodian of our

shared and cherished values. As a media personality (nay journalist) he informs, educates, entertains and enlightens, as well as keeps us abreast of contemporary issues. The latter has made his many write-ups on many issues a reader's delight for wide ideas, facts and life's lessons.

For those that Nigeria/Biafra War is still but a fairy tale, this autobiography will give them a small idea of the futility of war and how not to welcome it or indulge in acts that can provoke it with potential to 'totally eclipse' a nation. His autobiography presents him as a man we see from the prism of a teachers' teacher; who makes teaching second nature – retiring from teaching and retiring into teaching. A trans-generational person representing the past and the present, he makes us to appreciate the glamour of school life in their days of chalk and slate. He is a seasoned and consummate academic and versatile person who made foray into various strata of life.

His memoir is a comprehensive collection of aspects of his life worth harnessing and packaged for us to shape our own lives knowing fully well that life is not eternal. He appeared in great hurry to make his mark and impact lives. How with the many people he lived with and trained; and the many foster grand and great-grand children that have been produced for him by his equally foster children? Reputed in philanthropy and human capital development, his fructifying investment in human beings is not limited to his five university graduates children but transcended many closely and distantly related, and even totally unrelated, people. All these and more can be summed up as "investments with the right currency". To his credit, many of his students are contributing handsomely in various spheres of life and he is reaping the fruit of his labored magnanimity and good-will most bountifully.

Octogenarian Agwo, showcased from 1933-2016, is a handbook for teachers, manual for administrators, moral compass and service booklet for politicians, a lesson in seriousness and determination to students, and general interest reading for knowledge and wisdom to the wider public. The citizenry and public figures are encouraged to emulate him and avail the people of their own autobiography so that positive lessons

from their lives are not buried with them to the regrettable denials of the living and posterity.

Having existed in human society, Chief did not claim infallibility, as in his humility he acknowledged the fact that he must have offended people in conduct and actions just as people also must have offended him. To all these people, he asks for their forgiveness same way he has forgiven those he has offended, in order for him to make heaven.

He did not keep God far from himself. He credited every little progress and achievement he made to God and expressed his full gratitude. The case of Chief Agwo is a case of from whom much is expected, much is given. He did not disappoint his God for the multiple endowments, which he utilized to benefit humanity maximally.

Chief Agwo saw the good, the not so good, the bad and the very bad in his life. He saw the good with respect to his teachers and the people who impacted his life in many positive ways. He saw the not so good manifesting in the challenges of survival he encountered. He saw the bad in terms of the life of lack and near-total despair he faced at various points in life. He saw the very bad regarding death of his father early in his life, death of his mother who sacrificed all for him as a single parent including masterminding his espousal without the opportunity of witnessing the wedding proper, and death of his beloved wife Mrs. Felicia Anwara Agwo and others dear to his heart. This is life presenting itself as not a bed of roses.

Worldwide, people as strong and intellectually endowed as Chief Gabriel Anigo Agwo have lived up to a hundred years of age. Toeing this uncommon path makes this his autobiography a first edition, keeping us in expectation of a second, updated or revised edition. We are indeed in high expectation. Happy reading.

Egwu Ben Obasi,

*Formerly, Assistant Registrar,
Federal College of Agriculture
Ishiagu, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.*

PREFACE

When I was in primary school in the early forties, during the Civics lessons, also known as, Local History, we used to be asked by our class teachers to go to our respective villages to ascertain certain pieces of information. They included the names of the founders of our villages, what roles those people played in the history of the town and the periods they lived. All such pieces of information were transmitted orally as all our informants could neither read nor write in any language. The discrepancies were obvious. So, the idea of keeping records in a written form became a passion. I began making jottings of anything or event I thought worthwhile.

Towards the end of my final year in St. Thomas's Teacher Training College, Ogoja, 1956, I decided to record, in a diary form, some highlights of my life history from the time I was told I was born. I was then some twenty-three years old.

Thus, what I have in these Memoirs represent some high points in my journey through life from when I was informed I arrived here on earth to 2016 when I attained the Horii Age set (83 age bracket) in Ehugbo. It is sweet-bitter-sweet record but certainly, a deliberate and honest statement of facts – barring human errors. The main reason for this is to leave for my children – the primary consumers – a TRUE STORY of their father throughout the period covered by it.

I also have in mind that some people who were my close associates in whatever form and therefore my contemporaries, may still be alive when the Memoirs are published and read them. It will be a shame and a big dent on my image as a person, if I am economical with the truth. I am hoping too that no typing errors may lead to wrong interpretations. I expect my children to stand firm and say of this record: “THIS IS WHAT MY FATHER WROTE, I CAN VOUCH FOR IT”. Anything less would be telling a lie against myself, God forbid.

The eighty three (83) years covered by these Memoirs took some sixty years (60) of a sort of continuous writing – start, stop, discard, pick up, write, recast, then continue till the self-chosen target date. The diary method I adopted certainly minimized the inevitable spatial effects on the recording itself. What you have before you is a mere synopsis of what I lived through.

I started my primary school education earlier than was usual that period. The first twelve years of my life was that of a humble “rich” man’s beloved first son. At my father’s death in August, 1945, when I was under thirteen years old, the table turned so fast to the opposite direction that my mother, his first wife of five, was always beside herself in grief for the next eighteen years when she died. Providence played out marvellously to see me through the rest of my primary school education to the teacher training colleges and to the university level. Most of it was on: work, study, work, study – some on credit to pay after graduation. There was nothing like unemployment for trained teachers and university graduates then. That was how I managed to wriggle through.

It is still a miracle to me how I survived the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War.

Some three years after the war, I was teaching in a secondary school as a Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) Teacher. The Principal of that school at one occasion reminded me that: “You are just an NCE teacher, so you should not continue to occupy a senior staff quarters”. I was ordered out of the house I had lived in even before the Civil War, for a university graduate teacher. It hurt me to the marrow. But the man was right so I told myself: “Agwo you must be a university graduate before long”. I took the challenge cheerfully. By October, 1974 I, at 41, gained admission to read Education/English in the University of Nigeria Nsukka.

That incident opened a very large door for me into the outside

world. You have the details in the memoirs.

My attachment to Ezi Agwo will take a sizeable book of its own. It is a life long project. My involvement in Afikpo Town Welfare Association (ATWA) matters, association with Ehugbo Traditional Elders and the Traditional Rulers, excursion into party politics, led me to garner a lot of rare information of and about Ehugbo and her people. By the grace of God, I have not compromised my Catholic Christian faith. I was just lucky to be one of those in my time, who would be consulted in Ehugbo affairs. According to my revered Afikpo Autonomous Community, traditional ruler, HRH Ezeogo John Obeni Ekuma: “Chief Agwo, *a naa cho ekpu ejeye na ugbo* If one is looking for knots (ekpu) one has to go to a net (fishing or mask) and find it Chief Agwo, you are that net. Knowledgeable Ehugbo readers should pass the verdict for or against the above assertion.

Finally, this my Autobiography summarizes the high points from the cradle through primary school, Teacher Training College, the University, my profession as a teacher, a community leader up to 2016 when I attained the Horii status in Ehugbo.

Gabriel Anigo Agwo

Afikpo

PRELUDE

The first draft of this my autobiography was among the precious documents I lost during the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War (July 6, 1967 - January 12, 1970). The initial document had real day-to-day records as it appeared in my daily diary especially between and including 1956 and 1966.

In this autobiography, I have done my best not to exaggerate anything as this will defeat the main purpose of this exercise, that is, to put down accurate records of my life history as I know it and believe as a Christian to be true. As other contemporaries must have been observing me and some of them may be in a position to read this during my life-time or when I must have been dead, it will not do me any good to raise ghosts where they didn't exist. So help me God.

My father, Agwo Anigo (popularly known as Nwata Agwo) was a native of Ezi Agwo in Amaha-Amaizu village of Ehugbo (Afikpo), in Afikpo North Local Government Area, in the present day Ebonyi State of Nigeria. His father i.e., my grandfather, Anigo, I was told, was not a pauper. He happened to be of my mother's maternal lineage – Ibe Okwu. Due to the heterogeneous dwelling of Ehugbo people, he was desirous to secure whatever wealth he had in the hands of his “sister.” Ehugbo lineage is matrilineal and inheritance (in the main) matrilineal as well. So with this type of diplomacy in his head, my grandfather negotiated marriage between his first son (my father) and his own close sister (my mother). My grandfather anticipated that as my mother was my father's first wife and was likely going to bear a male child for him, he, my grandfather, could bequeath whatever he had to his sister but with instruction that my father should, during his life, be the custodian and partaker in any such wealth. In that way, whatever wealth he bequeathed to his son's wife was not contestable in any native law and custom of Ehugbo. That's how my father came to marry my mother. I'll come back to other details about my father, Nwata Agwo. However, it

should be noted at this point that my paternal grandmother was Ogbo Ugwuome, married from Amebo, Ugwuegu Elu. Her father was Okoro Ugwuome of Amebo.

Orie Otu was the name of my mother. She was born of Orum Uche (Urom) and Otu Uro (Uzo) of Ezi Ukwu-Amaizu village, Ehugbo. She was the third of seven daughters of her parents. They had no male child in the family. She was betrothed to my father and was courted for three years before the actual marriage. My mother was the first of my father's five wives, viz Orie Otu, Ude Okoche, Eleje Ekuma, Ogeri Alu and Akpu Ugbo. As was customary in Ehugbo, the first wife was chosen by one's parents – usually the father - but if the mother happened to choose the father was the final arbiter.



My Aunt, Mgbo Otu

I have placed my aunt's picture here because of the nonavailability of my mother's picture.

Subsequent wives could be chosen by the first wife. Under such circumstances, the first wife – a gift from one's father – was usually beloved and confided in especially if she had the man's *okpara* (first son). My mother was lucky to qualify in this and other aspects hence she, after my father, had the next say in the polygamous family. My mother maintained that position and respect even after the death of my father in August, 1945.

It was only for the last three or four years of my father's life that I can claim to have personal knowledge of him and his family relationships. From 1940 when I started schooling in Government Primary School, Afikpo to 1945 when my father died, I used to accompany him, during the holidays, on his trading expedition along the Cross River. Occasionally, Sunday Chukwu would accompany us en route Calablar to spend his holidays with his father or relatives. We enjoyed shrimps and water snails (*nkom*) on sand beaches.

For the eighteen years my mother lived after my father's death, she told me quite a lot about him. From my father's personal friends, some of whom were still alive after the Civil War in 1970 and from elderly men and women of our compound, I had gathered much. Here are a few more things about him,
Nwata Agwo – My Father

In his youthful years my father was a reputed wrestler hence he was known to have beaten ALL wrestlers that ever had any contest with him (*ogbari eni*). He was known as such throughout the length and breadth of Ehugbo. As a 'cat', he was conveyed to and from the wrestling arena in a hammock (*ega*). After his usual unbeaten bouts he danced to the drum beat (*iga oduge*) in the hammock.

When he was out of the wrestling age after *ikpo* (the final stage of wrestlers), he became uncomfortable staying at home and just

accompanying his father to farm. He and his age mate Abani Chukwu of Ezi Idume-Amaha, Amaizu decided to flee home for Arochukwu to work in a palm plantation. Both of them were said to have between them five shillings for the journey. After some four years in Arochukwu, they found their way to Calabar where they became house boys and served as cooks to some white men.

My mother told me that my father worked briefly as a house boy and found a job as a sales boy to a Lagos Business woman in Calabar. While serving the white man he made his first contact with Western Civilization where he picked up common communication words in English Language and numerals. He adopted DICK as his English name, hence DICK AGWO. He thus became literate of a sort in the English Language but certainly he had no formal education.

As a sales boy he developed interest in buying and selling but preferred canoe ferrying trade up and down the Cross River. He relocated to Ehugbo, and had otu Anison (Allison beach) as his take-off base. He got married to my mother in 1930 after some three years of courtship. Their first child, female, Ugwome Agwo was born about 1931. His success as a trader of note proved to the people of Ehugbo that an unbeaten wrestler (onye gbari eni) can after all achieve economic success and well being and not end up as a pauper as the people used to believe. When I started schooling in 1940 my father attempted teaching me A, B, C and 1, 2, 3.

He died in 1945 when I was approximately twelve and a half years old and in Standard Three in primary school. I collected some sheets of paper and small note books bearing his name in his own handwriting. There were simple calculations he jotted down.

He could write his name DICK AGWO correctly and do simple Arithmetic. His spellings of the words he used often were more phonetical than grammatical. For instance ‘pepe’ for pepper;

‘kasava’ for cassava; ‘bot’ for boat; ‘kanu’ for canoe; ‘fis’ for fish; ‘buk’ for book; ‘pensuru’ for pencil. He could write the sums of money used in buying and work out the profit or loss though with awful signs of (pounds, shillings and pence). That is why I describe him as literate of a sort in English Language. Unfortunately, those note books and scripts in my father’s personal handwriting were among the several precious things I lost during the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War. My mother repeatedly told me that it was my father’s ardent love for the white man’s education that made him insist that I must start going to school even before I was of school age then.

My father’s biggest fault as far as I am concerned was that he lived up to his age and spent practically every bit of money he had in title buying. The last he did, ekwa ozu, ended about February, 1945 barely six months before his death. About a week after he bought the title, he went down to Abanyong (Amoni) where he had business enterprises and fell sick there. He was rushed home with stomach abscess (itacha ime eho). He suffered for some three months and breathed his last one Eke day afternoon in August 1945. I was carrying my younger brother, Otu, and we were there with him at the last minute of his life. He was the first death I witnessed and the first corpse I ever saw. May his soul rest in peace.

It is pertinent to note that though my father was commonly known and described as a rich man, when he died, not up to five shillings was discovered in his house! His mother, Ogbo Ugwome who survived him, was said to have indulged in some foul play as later events proved. However, my mother managed to survive all the pains of widowhood for some eighteen years.

I have gone into the trouble of putting down what I was told and what I actually know of my family background for this might serve as a means of determining what break or otherwise existed between my parents and myself about whom I am now going to write.

For the first few years, the account of myself is based on what my mother told me and what I gathered from other close relatives. I shall therefore lump the events of the first few years of my life into a chapter.

CHAPTER ONE

PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOL YEARS (1933-1939)

My mother told me by word of mouth (she was a stark illiterate) that I was born about nine o'clock at night on an Nkwo day (of the Igbo four market days of Eke, Orie, Aho and Nkwo) that year. Later inquiries from Mr. D. O. Aluu a.k.a. Nnade Madujibe Eluu, a fairly lettered man in our village, revealed that the likely day and year was January 20, 1933. From later revelations through age mates and juniors whose fathers had written records about their dates of birth point to the probability that the year of my birth was in 1933. In the primary school, the year of my birth was put as 1935. However, I allowed the 1935 date remain "official" in order not to complicate all other official documents through the years from 1940 when I went to primary school to 1987 when I retired from public service. Swearing to an affidavit was an unnecessary exercise for me.

I was said to have been fairly robust at birth and cried very little. Within this period under review my mother had other children but none survived beyond the first five years of birth. My elder sister born about 1931 was named Ugwome Agwo. I was told she died when I was about three years old. My mother had five other pregnancies within this period and only two survived after me.

They were Ugwome Agwo (a.k.a. Ogbulu) and Otu Agwo. I recall that during the first maize harvest (put at about the middle of May) in 1942 my mother gave me fresh maize for our teacher, Mr. Ohia Mbrey, and to announce to him as well that she, my mother, was delivered of a female child hence I missed school for a day. That female child was my sister, Ugwome Agwo (a.k.a. Ogbulu). She was given that name (Ogbulu) because she was said to have been my elder sister who had earlier died but reincarnated and came back to our house. Throughout her reproductive life with my father, my mother had nine pregnancies but only three of us survived by 1945 when my father died.

Being a surviving male child and the first male of my father, my survival seemed to compensate my parents for other losses. For my mother in particular she was sure she had had a strong foothold in my father's polygamous house. I was told I was hardly sick and my parents conjectured I was a reincarnate of my grandfather, Anigo, hence I did not want to torture them.



Mrs Mary Ugwome Oko (Nee Agwo)

CHAPTER TWO

PRIMARY SCHOOL YEARS (1940-1948)

As early as January, 1939 my father wanted me to start going to school but the normal process of putting the right arm over the head for the fingers to touch the left ear disqualified me. He repeated in 1940 and I was given provisional admission. So, I started schooling in late January 1940 (barely a year after the start of the Second World War, 1939-1945) as an A B C pupil. Government School founded in 1924 was the popular choice of most parents even though St. Mary's School Ngodo and C.S.M. Ukpa, were there as well. Therefore, it was into Government School, ("Primary" was added in 1953 when the Secondary School opened), that I was admitted. I understand we had up to five groups of Infant I numbered A to E. Each group constituted a class of its own and dull pupils required as many as five years to go through the A B C class. Some had to skip some of the divisions but at least one year was required to go through Infant I. Very much depended too on the performance, age, size of a pupil at the time of admission. Pupils of average age required not less than one year for the A B C or Infant I class and another year for Infant II. It was in 1942 that the two-classroom blocks at the north western end of the school compound was ready for use and our batch was the first set of pupils there.

In December, 1940, I was promoted to do Infant II in 1941. I passed to Standard I in January, 1942. Within the first week of my first term in Standard I a yaw (ekpesu), appeared on my forehead. Mr. O. Oti of Ajalli-Awka was the Headmaster of the school then. As yaw was considered an infectious disease, the Headmaster ordered that I should go home and be cured before getting back to school. Within a few days' stay at home more of the yaws appeared on all parts of my body. For the next two to three months flies hunted me and made life very uncomfortable for me. My parents were as anxious as myself that I should return to school, but the more injections I had, the more the yaws appeared until they finally disappeared

in August of that year. That was during the second term holidays. When schools reopened for the third term in September, I returned to school just to be told that it was unwise to leave me in Standard I for some three months only. By then Mr. O. Kubiagha of Calabar Area had come to relieve Mr. Oti as the Headmaster of the school. Thus, I had to get down to Infant II for the remaining third term of 1942. I eventually did Standard I in 1943

My two previous teachers from Ehugbo were Miss Ugbo Isu (later Mrs. P. U. Elem) and Mr. J. O. Mbrey of Ngodo and Ukpa villages, respectively. There were many other Infant class teachers to take the various Infant classes but the man I remember very well is Mr. Onyemenam from Onitsha Area.

The Infant classes were a great fun. The slates made of hardened graphite and their pencils were so fragile that some of us who were a bit careless used several slates in a year. They cost about nine pence and pencils cost about three pence per dozen. But when one recounts that school fees stood at four pence a term that is one shilling a year, then one would realize how expensive it was to buy slates and pencils in a year. As my father was well-to-do, I was said to be breaking the slates at will with a boast that my father would use the “scraps” of his money in buying new ones for me. Funny enough, he did, with a broad laugh and a shout “Nwata Agwo!”

I remember one small girl – Akama Effem of Itigidi whose father was also a teacher in the school. She was so fond of crying that we nicknamed her “Mrs. Cry”. She was one of the very few pupils who wore shoes to school. I also was among the few that wore shoes to school, though the shoes were locally made of llama skins. My father even bought a raincoat for me when he was down at Calabar during one of his business trips. As one of the smallest children in school I was always on the front seat throughout my primary school career. It was in vogue then that small boys and girls (no matter

how huge) must occupy the front seats in the class.

Our assignment during manual labour was singing and dancing. I remember a case of a teacher's housemaid who stole some fish and we had to tie the remnants of it around her neck, flogging her, singing and dancing "Thief Nwanyi, Tankoriko; Thief Nwanyi, Tankoriko". As I mentioned earlier, the Infant class was a big fun.

From Standard I onwards, we were made to realize that we had come to school. In 1943 when I finally did Standard I, our class was housed at one end of the school store – a building lying parallel to the mission-barracks main road on the Southern end of the school compound and to the South East of the main school 'T' block. Incidentally, our class was the first to use that building as a classroom.

An incident I recall with shudder was a case of the Ngwugwu Okpo stream flooding on a Monday morning in late July 1943. It had started raining from about 4.00 a.m. and continued till after 8.00 a.m. that pluvius morning. Teachers in the then Government School were not ready to hear that a pupil was absent from school because of rain. From our compound in Amaizu to the school is a distance of roughly one and a half miles. In any case, on rainy days, except it rained up to ten o'clock in the morning, it was better to be late to school than not to go at all. My father happened to be at home in this occasion and having a good knowledge of swimming agreed to take us in relays across the flooded Ngwugwu Okpo stream, under five hundred yards from our house. As he was yet feeling his way through a sort of exploration, he was swept off his feet. He disappeared under the water. For about ten minutes we wailed and panicked until we spotted him clinging weakly to a palm raffia twig some fifty yards down stream from where he had been swept away by the angry flood. We needed no fortune-teller to warn us to go back. When the first shock was over he led us through Ogberehi to St. Patrick's School, Ndibe up to the Eke market before

leaving us as there were no more streams to debar our movement. That was the spirit of schooling in those days! That detour covered a distance of some four miles. So, to go to school that day took us nearly six miles.

Up to about 1946, streams' flooding were common scenes during the rainy season as most streams had two or three palm trunks across them as bridges. These were easily swept away and pupils had to walk great distances on very wet days to go to school.

The Second World War

It is worthy to note that during the Second World War (1939 – 45) we, the primary school children, were affected in various ways. Trenches were dug at the outskirts of the school compound so that we could hide in them in a case of air raid. The Nigerian Civil War 1967 - 70 revealed to us how childish those early 1940 trenches were. However, I cannot remember more than one occasion we ever used the trenches. Apart from the fact that most of us were more interested in observing the aeroplanes, they were less than a dozen shallow short trenches (each about 10ft by 2ft by 3ft) dug for a school population of nearly four hundred pupils! It was just a big fun as we had no conviction we were hiding from anything.

The next significant event of those war years was the collection of palm kernels by us, school children, boys and girls. Just before the end of the war – late 1944 up to 11 November, 1945 – (This was the official date the war ended) we were also made to collect calapagonia seeds. These seeds sold for about two pence a cup while cracked palm kernels fluctuated between three cups to six cups for one shilling. The collection of palm kernels was compulsory but one could bring as little as one could afford and be paid at the government rate. Failure to bring any was punishable. Besides, the quantity of kernel brought was credited to the pupil each week –

usually on Fridays. At the end of two weeks or a month, each person was paid accordingly. As was expected, most of the pupils spent the money paid to them on trifles without showing it to their parents even though most parents had to buy the kernels from the market just to make sure their children weren't punished. As I handed over mine to my parents they always gave me a share as pocket money. The coins paid to us were usually brand new pennies, three pence and six pence pieces or shillings. Traders always looked forward to days following "kernel days" so as to collect new coins. There were no currency notes then. The collection of kernels served a very useful pastime to most pupils. Even outside the ones supplied to the school and long after the end of the war, most of us earned substantial income into the household through kernel gathering. In my own case the usefulness of this pastime was very well manifested within the first year of my father's death. I was a proud contributor to the upkeep of our family of four – mother, myself, Ulu and Otu Agwo.

The most lasting effect left on me by the war was the wearing of tarpaulin material for pants, shorts and shirts. Three pence could fetch, then, a pant; four to six pence a pair of shorts and tarpaulin jumper sold for anything from nine pence to one shilling and six pence depending on the size and quality of the tarpaulin. These materials were 'stood' to dry after washing. No soap was needed for washing – fine sand and sponge were useful apparatus. For some three years these clothes that were worn almost continuously 'refused' to tear even though there was a deliberate attempt to cause it. Instead, two or three pence were needed every year to re-sew the seams whose threads wore out through washing.

I seem to have wandered away wanting to be systematic with the war years' events. In 1944 when I did my Standard II, one Mr. E. Otuu from Itigidi in the present day Cross River State was our teacher. His class was such a welcome change that for the first time

in three years, we felt pupils could be free in class. In 1942 and 1943 we had been taught by Mr. J. O. Mbrey in Infant II and Standard I respectively. It was a hell remaining in his class. Any mistake in written work was punished with special B.B. pegs. The pupil was expected to stand in front of the teacher's table with both palms face down on the table while his or her work was being corrected. Any mistake made earned for the pupil a stroke or two of a peg on the fingers resting on the table.

For more grievous mistakes he would either give "dirty" slaps on the cheeks with his right hand followed in quick succession with the left to counter balance the falling pupil, or he used a steadying device of both hands simultaneously on the cheeks thus stupefying the child and causing brief dizziness. There was a case where he used a pencil against Sunday Ehihia's left ear and tried to pull him up but bore a hole there. He, Sunday, bore the mark till his death during the Nigerian Civil War in 1968. That was not the only case. There were several of them of which Ogonnia Oko Alu's (Matthew Alu) was one. Yes, Mr. Otuu was a great relief and a good father to us.

The Death of My Father

The fateful year, 1945, started off fairly joyously with Mr. Ikebuwa as our Standard III teacher. Though he seemed and behaved like a psychiatrist case, we enjoyed his lessons and learned quite a lot from him. As January usually coincided with the later part of the Ehugbo dry season when title buying was usually rife, that year opened with my father – a title adept – preparing to do the 'Ekwozu' for the title holders. That title precisely led to the next step to the highest second burial ceremony any man in Ehugbo could perform for a dead father. It entailed over one month-long daily cooking for people of various ages and categories who normally poured into the compound. Even though the cost fluctuated with the cost of things

and as such there was no pegged price, it was estimated to run into several hundreds of pounds. Several goats, whole wild animals e.g. elephant, mgbada, nchi, ebi (deer, duiker, grass cutter, porcupine) etc., and real big fish (iko), were among the necessary requirements, excluding physical cash, for buying of the title.

I had earlier remarked that almost immediately after this title buying, my father died in August, 1945. It draws tears from my eyes to recall that that sort of “beautiful feathers” title left all of us penniless and wretched. It is a matter for great shame that such a renowned personality, each of the five families he left to mourn him couldn’t even raise from his reserve the cost of a coffin for him! I understand some planks left in the house were used for knocking up a rough coffin for him. The construction was on gratis. May his soul rest in peace.

But there’s this mystery about my father’s wealth! He fell sick soon after buying a very expensive title and died some six months later after several native doctors had charged exorbitantly and tried in vain to cure him. The nearest hospital then was at Uburu in the present day Ohaozara Local Government Area (LGA) of Ebonyi State, but our people believed stomach abscess was best cured by Idike of Amasiri and a team of other traditional healers. When my father died, less than five shillings were recovered from the entire house.

Yet after over half a century from the date of his death, no one has dared to say that my father was owing him any sum of money! And this is the crux of the mystery! Should I believe the notion that my father’s sister and their mother, i.e. my father’s mother, removed whatever money my father had left when they sensed he was becoming hopeless? Or could the solid cash of my father have been so spent in such a way that it got exhausted just at the point of his death? I certainly feel nonplussed at this sort of miraculous

equation. Is it one of the accidents in nature? Perhaps I may never know the true position of this rare situation. God help me.

Barely a week after my father's death his mother, Ogbo Ugwome (May her soul rest in peace) announced that before my father died he had told her that all of us whom he had sent to school must stop. Anyone who knew my father when he was alive disbelieved that statement. That became a great challenge to my mother, who was determined to see her children educated. For at close intervals after that shocking incident, her cry was always: "Anigo nna, you see how your father has lured me into the centre of a big ocean and left? What can I do? Tell me." Invariably that was followed by a flood of tears, and little knowing what the implications were I just had to say, "Mama, kaa (sorry) please don't cry."

She always summoned courage and said, "All right, Agwo you have done your worst, but as long as I am alive, this boy you sent to school must complete his education. You impregnated me and I bore this child. Let me see how "Ali Eziagwo" and this Amaizu soil will not help me to get enough to feed this child so as to learn the book you were so desirous he should learn." At about twelve and a half years old, it didn't fully register in me what my poor mother was talking about. By a strange feeling, I had an inkling that a vital source of our livelihood was closing. Thanks be to God that despite the fact that my father had a special love for me, I had for the greater part of my life, been in closer association with my mother. My father was most of the time away at the Cross River and while at home he was too busy to be very close to us.

The Five Wives My Father Married and Their Children

However, the strange pronouncement of my grandmother resulted in the stoppage of the schooling of Isu Okpo (Isu Okpara) the son of my aunt and several other relatives of my father. At the time of

his death we were a total of eleven children – five males and six females. About six months later Francis Agwo (Anigo Akpu) was posthumously born thus making six males too, bringing the number to twelve. The line up is as follows: (a) By Orie Otu (my mother): Anigo Orie (me), Ugwome Orie (Ogbulu or Ulu for short), Otu Orie who died in 1953. (b) By Ude Okoche: Ugwome Ude, Anigo (John) Ude and Orie Ude. (c) By Eleje: Ugwome Eleje, Anigo Eleje (Christopher) and Orie Eleje. (d) By Ogeri Alu: Ugwome Ogeri (Mrs. Julia Otu) and Anigo Ogeri (Lawrence). (e) By Akpu Ugbo: Anigo Akpu (Francis). Of these only my younger brother (a real pet of mine and a budding genius) died early. He died of a prolonged illness in 1953 aged eight. My only sister, Ugwome orie (Mrs Mary Oko Ogbo) died in 2014 at the age of 62. By the grace of God I am still the eldest in this polygamous family of twelve and I am still looked upon as the “father” alive. May God help me to maintain this position until I see the generations of all of them. Meanwhile, five of the six girls are mothers to children. (Ugwome Eleje has not been blessed with an issue). As at 31st December, 2016, nine (9) of the twelve (12) children of late Dick Nwata Agwo, were still alive. Otu Orie, Ugwome Orie and Anigo Eleje had died earlier.

A little More on Our Education

The other wives of my father imitated my mother’s resolve and left all those already in school to continue. Something like a reprisal followed from my father’s relatives. In under six months after the interment, his relatives made a swoop on his property. That included his helmet, walking stick, old bicycle, steel chairs, about ninety-six planks and scantlings, three swords, a giant saw, five hoes, four wrestling bells and even iron pots being used by my father’s widows’. I shed tears when two of my mother’s three iron pots, four gallons and two gallons respectively, were removed by the heartless brothers and sisters (especially Eze) of my deceased father!

There was nothing I could do but cry. And my father's Umudi by our custom and tradition couldn't raise a finger in protest thus justifying the well known Ehugbo maxim that "a small child accompanies the father to the grave". However, that was the custom then. The attitude of that unsympathetic group hastened the departure of my father's wives from our compound immediately after the customary mourning rites of widows. For reasons best known to my mother, she was very reluctant in leaving the compound. She couldn't reconcile herself with getting married to another husband and taking three of us as second-class children to a stepfather. She was more concerned about my schooling, she told me. From 1946 to 1948 when I did my Standards four, five and six, were really very difficult years for Orie Otu's family. School fees had gone up to four shillings and six pence a year in Standards five and six. As semi-final and final year pupils, we were expected to look smart, neat and responsible in our dressing and behaviour. I just had to be extra careful with whatever my mother could afford.

On November 11, 1945, the World War II was declared ended. Thanks be to God. I was in Standard III then aged twelve plus.

Barely four months after my father's passing away, it was Ehugbo dry season. My umudi (father's people) decided I should be initiated while there were still avenues for getting some income from my father's canoes. At the time of his death, my father had five canoes on the Cross River but only two of them could be rented out. Mr. Francis Iduma Akpo of Amangballa happened to be having the canoes on rent at that time and paid a little over five pounds for them. My umudi seized that and other proceeds, which then amounted to some ten pounds. I cried bitterly for that decision to use the money for my initiation instead of using it for my schooling. But there was no alternative. Their decision was final and my mother could have been accused of various unspeakable crimes in Ehugbo if she dared protest. I resumed school in Standard IV in 1946 an initiated person

– a man in the community sense.

Despite the fact that my mother was conserving every farthing, she had about a pound for my school books. Some seven pounds, the proceeds from the sale of my father's canoes were used in doing ogo (acquiring small titles) for me. Those comprised ibuzo okochi and the two oke maah (big spirits). What a deceit and a cheat to the ignorant! Save that it is a sign of manhood I'll ever live to blame all those who preferred ogo initiation by mass deceit to formal education. However, that has passed into history now. Paradoxically, that initiation, in later years gave me a rare privilege of being at home with Ehugbo customs and traditions before I became a baptized Christian in the Roman Catholic Church.

In Standard IV, Messrs F. Okoroji and F. Obiozor Abutu were our teachers at various periods of the year. There I came in contact with Gregory Oko Ali of Ezi Oti in Ukpa, who later became one of my dear friends. I recall with glee the standard we attained in moral upbringing. One of my classmates Mgbeke Okoro later Mrs. Beatrice Mgbeke Egwu, whose mother was then living at Amankwo was fond of calling on me in our compound on her way to school. But for the few strands of bead (alagbo) she wore, she, like other girls, left for school nude. At the bottom of Government School Hill (Teachers Quarters PWD) she would put on her gown, which used to be in her school box. On our way back, she, like other girls, undressed and we returned together. I used to escort her to Ogberehi or beyond where she joined other people home. We didn't see the nakedness then. It was at the end of that 1946 that the Oxford Reader was introduced up to Standard IV. In Standards V and VI, it was optional till the end of 1948.

1946 was the year immediately following the end of the Second World War. Some of the men who went into the army voluntarily or by conscription, began to return. That gave rise to serious social

problems. It was a common scene for ex-service men to seize palm wine and various articles and foodstuffs in the open market. They even married girls by force or by enticing girls for marriage through “throwing” their wealth about. Prospective mothers-in-law or wives had gifts of pounds for the purchase of “okaze” (a wild climbing edible leaves). Okaze then was bought at the rate of from four to six ‘heads’ for a penny! Interpret what this meant. At that time money and material were scarce and those new breed of citizens caused prices to soar very high. Before then, okaze, pepper, vegetables, salt, etc., were bought by barter. They came back with stories of Burma, India and Egypt, their military encounters and their love affairs with the white people. The redeeming side of it was that those returnees were in love with Western education and did much to encourage it. The result was that in the next few years, the school population increased tremendously. But school materials and clothes became very dear.

Here I would like to mention that it was in 1946 that doors and windows were provided for the main school block in Government School, Afikpo. Before then, it was an open T-shaped space accommodating Standards II to VI, but separated with moveable mat screens.

I would also like to record that we still had to study Igbo Language as a compulsory subject. I need not comment on the quality of teaching because the teachers had the requisite knowledge and taught with confidence and dedication. It was in 1946 that Mr. Pius Ugwu Alu (Ugwu Etuu) of Amaizu passed his Cambridge Grade I with exemption from Matriculation. Mr. J. O. Mbrey of Ukpa on the other hand, became a certificated Grade II teacher (Higher Elementary Teacher).

1947 wasn’t quite an eventful year. Mr. Mbrey came my way again for the third and last time as my primary school teacher. Work on

the glass windows of Standards V and VI wings continued till late in the year. The Headmaster's office was shaded off from view but with three doors connecting Standards IV, V and VI respectively. At a certain stage that year, one Mr. Ogolo (a left-limb deformed River's man) taught us in Standard V.

The entertaining part of that teacher was that whenever there was noise-making in the class he would just beat up all the pupils in the front seat irrespective of what part of the class the noise came from. The result was that every body had to vacate the two front rows. In the event of any noise then he had to pounce on the second row and every body would jump from one long bench to another. Usually there were uproars and he would just say while clearing sweat from his sweaty face with the finger: "You children are disturbing the school, if the HM (Headmaster) comes, I'll defend myself". We enjoyed his classes more for his fun than for what he managed to teach us.

The 1947 Total Eclipse of the Sun

On Tuesday, the 20th of May, 1947, there was a total eclipse of the sun at about 4. 00 p.m. We called it, "chi ejihie n'ehihie (night fall in the day). Shortly before and after it, the whole place was in confusion as people were thinking it was the end of the world! The elongated human shadows that appeared were longer than normal. I was a little distance away from Ezi Agwo where I went to cut jatropha sticks (ekpu) for school the following day. The unusual darkness was closing in on me. I had to feel my way back to our house, colliding frontally with human beings running to various directions crying or just shouting hopelessly.

On the other hand some reached for their goats and fowls and slaughtered them for their last supper. Confusion personified. Thanks be to God, in less than one hour, the seemingly dream

acting was over. But many of those I met after told different stories of their imaginations. The less than two hours to normal night fall was a period of serious and reflexive cogitations: “What sign is this? Two days within a day? Name it.” Luckily, the real night enveloped us and nature’s soothing sleep with accompanying dreams and nightmares ushered us into a new day. At school the following day our teacher was ready with explanations about the previous evening’s phenomenon. He called it Eclipse – the total Eclipse of the sun and taught us all we needed to know about it. What an experience!

For me as an individual, the school hardship was beginning to bite deeper. My two years old home cloths of tarpaulin knickers and jumper were becoming unbearable, they “refused” to get soft nor tear. But I had no alternative. Any time, even if only five shillings expense were to be made, I had to go on my knees before my father’s immediate relative Uncle Oko Akpu Onuu Ola of Amangballa. He was the leader of the group of maternal family that carted away my father’s property a few weeks after his death. My father had some sheep, which I later learnt rightly belonged to me as my grandfather, Anigo, who was my relative left the sheep with my father only as a custodian. At my father’s death, this Oko Akpu Onuu Ola took charge of the sheep and that was why I had to go to Amangballa to ask for permission to sell one of the rams to buy my needs.

A full grown ram sold between five to ten shillings. Whenever I sold a ram, the wretched man would want a share even though he was aware of the insufficiency of the money. He always expected my mother to make it up. Only goodness knows from where she was expected to make it. My mother’s honesty and chastity was never in doubt till her death on 10th August 1963. However the year had to pass.

It was about the first term of 1947 that my cousin, Irem Oko from

Eziukwu Mgbom, came to my aid. He gave me one pound to enable me buy my school textbooks. The very essential ones cost a minimum of three pounds. The rest of the money was raised from the sale of my Standard IV textbooks, the sale of two sheep and from my mother's last pennies she made from the sale of clay pots. I can still recall that the sale of used textbooks was a very common feature in the history of my education from 1946 even up to college level in 1956. All the textbooks used in a lower class (most were bought at second hand) were sold at the beginning of a new class so as to buy the required new ones.

Alice Oko, Mgboro Nwosu, Ugo Okpani, etc., were among the few girls in our class. Innocently we observed, on the benches we sat, stripes of blood, which we later learnt were marks of menstrual flow that the girls themselves were ignorant of, and they were between thirteen and sixteen years of age. Thus, even in school light, we wallowed in the darkness of innocence throughout our primary school days.

Towards the end of the year, my cousin ordered I must get over to St. Mary's Catholic School, Afikpo. That, he said, would make it possible for me to get a teaching job at the end of my Standard VI course. By then, Standard VI Certificate holders sold like hot cake in the teaching field and it was easier to get a job if one was an ex-pupil of a Mission School. I was very reluctant in taking the order. I tried to convince my mother that I didn't like the idea, but my mother who was recently being helped by my cousin dared not object to his orders. Moreover, my cousin was an "educated man". Luckily for me, I was refused admission into St. Mary's mainly because our headmaster would not issue me a transfer certificate as he didn't see the reason for such a change.

Personally, besides getting over there to begin reading Oxford instead of New Method Reader by Michael West, all of us from

Government School looked down, rightly or wrongly, on pupils from Mission Schools. It was regarded as a step backwards to go into a Mission School. We expected that a boy in Standard IV in Afikpo Government School (AGS) should read Standard V in St. Mary's. The way our Headmaster rebuked and commanded their Headmasters and Teachers especially during Empire Day periods, strengthened these funny feelings. Besides, the Mission boys took Diocesan exams at the end of their Standard VI class while we sat for the First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC) exam set by the Ministry of Education Lagos, for all government schools in Nigeria. Incidentally, we were the last set that took such centrally set exams. As I mentioned earlier, the year had to pass and the beginning of 1948 saw me a final year primary school pupil in Government School, Afikpo.

Before winding up the year's activities, may I recall that due to pressure from relatives and well wishers as a result of the humiliating treatment she was then receiving from my father's mother and her daughter (Nne Isu Okpo), my mother had to leave our compound at the end of 1947 to remarry. She sojourned at Ukpa in Nne Elem Oko's house for some three months. Sometime in 1948 (I can't say precisely when but it must have been within the first term) she was remarried to one Ohuche Alum of Ezi Ukwu, Egeburu. My mother told me several times that her decision to get married to that elderly man was because he was the first suitor from a nearby village to ask for her hand in marriage. She accepted the proposal because Egeburu is less than half a mile from our compound through the bush path (Ngwugwu Okpo). That, she felt, would make her to be near to me.

Besides, it was on the route to my school so I could afford to take my breakfast on the way to, and my lunch on my way back from school. Strange enough, I couldn't bear living outside our compound despite the obvious hardships I knew lay before me by

her absence. Nevertheless, I strove to see her daily, and at the worst of it, every other day. Of course, she made sure she saw me on the third day if there happened to be anything that disrupted my visit. My younger sister Ulu and our youngest brother Otu were my mother's comforters while she lived outside our village.

From the time my father died in August, 1945, Eluu Elogo became more or less my foster father. When my mother left to remarry, I moved over to live with him. He was married to two wives Akpu Eluu and Okwogho. Akpu happened to be my relative. I wasn't directly living with anyone of the wives but had more attachment to Akpu while attempting to serve both of them equally. Coincidentally, Akpu Eluu was the biological mother of Patrick Ogbonnia Eluu of Ibe Okwu maternal family. He became a professional plumber in his adult life. So by January, 1948 I had to be loyal to two homes while facing my Standard VI final exam.

The Year I Sat for My Standard VI Exam – 1948

In January 1948, Mr. O. Kubiagha was still the Headmaster of our school. As usual, I had to sell my Standard V textbooks to buy those of Standard VI. It wasn't without tears. I was provided with the barest minimum. As remarked earlier, we were ending the use of New Method Reader in the school. That made it impossible for me to sell my New Method Book Five, one of the costliest textbooks. And so it was with greater difficulty that I bought the New Method Book Six.

Beginning from Infant I to Standard VI, I was always assigned to the front seat. As stated earlier, that seat in the then school sense, was reserved for the smaller boys and all the girls (irrespective of their size) in the class. My immediate mates in the class that year were Agnes Chi Oko of Ngodo (left) and John Durujaye Uyo (John Bull for short) of Bonny, Rivers State (right). Agii was of great help

to me in Arithmetic. On the same seat was one Janny Uto, may her soul rest in peace. She died at child birth barely three years after we left school. The following seeming trivial occurrence left a scar on me which will probably linger as long as I live.

After our first term test in 1948 this Janny by what means we are yet to learn, turned out to be placed third in the class of thirty-six pupils. Every other person in the class was disturbed by this because for the third year in succession, she had never moved beyond tenth position in our class. Later weekly tests and the subsequent terminal exam confirmed our doubts. It gave rise to a sort of ostracism by most pupils in our class. In the same class were Uche Olughu of Mgbom, Oko Okpara a.k.a. M. O. Green of Amachi, Idam Irem of Amaechara, Oko Elem of Amangbala, Oko Ibe of Ndibe, Oko Alu of Ndibe, Eze Ekuma of Ibii, Ogbonnaya Agbii of Ukpa, Uche Oko of Amaechara, John Ani of Itigidi, Ngwu Okoro of Edda, Bassey Akpoke of Igbo, Elem Ihe of Ozizza, etc.

One of us, Oko Okpara, happened to be a jester and started calling Janny “Uduru”. He was certainly not alone in it and soon it became a common name for her. The girl reported the matter to the H/M (Head Master), Mr .O. Kubiagha. Our class teacher then was Mr. A. D. Okpukiri from the Delta area. Neither he nor the H/M could interpret the meaning of “Uduru”. As Mr. Mbrey was not on seat then Mr. Okoroji a teacher from Arochukwu was called for the English interpretation. He interpreted ‘Uduru’ to mean: “A hopeless, ugly, stunted, dirty and useless fellow”. On hearing that, the H/M brought the girl to our class for her to point out those who called her by that name. She called out the first four but was urged on to call more. At the end ten of us were named as the culprits. Mr. Mbrey was later called in to administer the punishment. In his usual callous manner he gave each of us twelve sound strokes of the cane on the back and buttocks. Each of us was held over a form by the four strongest boys in our class.

I recall this incident in this detail because of (a) the brutish manner in which the punishment was given, leaving visible scars on my back; (b) not allowing any of us to say a word in defence; and (c) the fact that up till date it was the first time I had ever received a punishment (even a rebuke) for being rude or insolent to anybody. Those who had known me for long should be the judges. However, that's one of those things that happened in the primary schools in the nineteen forties.

During that final year, we were put through what I may call an "academic mill". We were so drilled on how to answer Standard VI exam questions that a number of us felt and acted as if we had learnt "all the book on earth". We even sang a greater part of our lessons on gender, parsing and General Knowledge. I must say we were grateful to our teachers when in November that year we were very confident in ourselves in the examination hall. However, the twenty-six of us in our class of thirty (AGS) were successful in the F.S.L.C. By then, pupils in all the government primary schools in Nigeria sat for the same exam for our First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC). The examination was set by the Education Department, Nigeria (Revised in 1946). Our school, Government School, Afikpo, was the centre for the whole of Ogoja Province, which then included Southern Cameroon. Forty-seven of us sat for the exam. I was the 16th in the list of those who passed.

In May 1948, I sat for my first and only unsuccessful common entrance examination to a post primary institution. It was to King's College, Lagos. Interestingly, the nearest centre for the exam was at Abakaliki – some forty miles away from Afikpo. I managed to rake up two shillings and six pence from my mother to pay for the entrance fee. By then, even though the motor-road from Afikpo to Abakaliki was there, Lorries hardly went that way. When they did go, they would stop at Akpoha, and even that was about once a week on an unspecified day because there was no bridge across the

Akpoha River as at then. To travel to Abakaliki then, one had either to trek to Akpoha through Ibii, or go on a bicycle or lastly go by canoe to Itigidi and then by lorry to Abakaliki. On the other side of Akpoha River, Lorries did occasionally come from Abakaliki to carry passengers from Afikpo side. It wasn't uncommon however, that people had to trek up to Abaomege – fourteen miles away – to board Abakaliki Lorries.

Three of us: Oko Elem of Amamgbala, John Ani of Itigidi and myself, who registered for the entrance exam from our school, decided to travel to Abakaliki via Itigidi. We started a week earlier to be sure we would have a transport lorry. Then, Lorries going to Abakaliki from Itigidi did that on Sundays only. Since our exam had to be on Saturday, we left Afikpo the preceding Saturday to Itigidi. We were ferried over in a canoe from the Amorie-Ozizza beach of the Cross River to the east beach at Igonigoni. We kept close to the eastern beach of the river until we reached Obubra, where we were again ferried over to the western side in a pontoon. We passed the night at Itigidi and reached Abakaliki around six o'clock in the evening of the following day. That was my first time of travelling in a moving lorry and certainly my first time of visiting Abakaliki. Throughout my one week stay at Abakaliki, I stayed with Mr. Chukwu Idume a.k.a. Ajaja or Ogbeka. He was a bicycle repairer then. After the exam we travelled in a lorry to Akpoha and trekked home from there (10 miles).

How I Became a Baptised Catholic

At the close of 1948, I certainly did not know what else to do. One thing I seemed convinced of was that further education was impracticable. I could as well say good-bye to education since neither the money nor a sponsor seemed to be coming. By that time, I was already a Catholic Church goer. It was a chance attendance at a Benediction Service after one of our fairly regular Sunday

afternoon games in our school field that attracted me to be a member of the Catholic Church. On our way back, I followed people to St. Mary's Chapel, Ngodo, for the Benediction. There was an aura of holiness around the place. I decided that was my church. I strongly believe it was a divine call. Thank God for that light. By some strange imagination, I day-dreamed of finding a job – government or private – which would enable me to earn money for some years and then save up some for further studies.

Meanwhile, during the Christmas holidays of 1948, I joined a group of catechumens in the Catholic Church at New Site. Up till 1947, the Catholic Mission was at the Old St. Mary's Ngodo. When Rev. Fr. Macmanus, the then Parish Priest came around to check on the catechumens, I lied that I was then in Standard V in Government School Afikpo. I had to lie because the Mission was becoming aware that many boys from Government School either changed their schools in the final year or pretended to be Catholics just to enable them gain employment with the Mission schools. Immediately, one of our Government School teachers, Mr. Onyemenam, who was a staunch Catholic but did not know me well, confirmed that I was an enthusiastic catechumen.

With that, I was allowed to continue but under the catechist's personal supervision. Mr. Michael Sunday Chukwu (later, Mr. M. S .C. Abani) was one of our catechism teachers. He was on holidays from St. Thomas College, Ogoja where he was undergoing the teachers training course. Within the two weeks retreat, I was able to scratch up in Igbo Language enough Catholic doctrine to merit baptism. On December 23, 1948 I was baptized with the name Gabriel and had Sunday Michael Chukwu as my God father. From then I started calling him dad until he died. I must confess that "Gabriel" was the first Christian name that I saw in the catechism book when I was asked to choose a Christian name I would like to bear. I certainly knew nothing further about the name save that

Angel Gabriel gave the sacred message to the Blessed Virgin Mary at the Annunciation. Perhaps I might have had another Christian name if I had a wider perspective of the Catholic Church. I, however, have grown to love the name and have no regrets whatsoever, since my formal initiation into the Catholic faith. I think I haven't done badly if I may be allowed to be my own judge. I was confirmed in the church two years later with the name, James.

CHAPTER THREE

A PERIOD OF TRANSITION (1949 AND 1950)

1949 arrived, meeting me a very confused man despite being in possession of a FSLC, which I collected on 26th January of that year. I did not know what to do with myself. Eluu Elogo, my foster father, was a trader/farmer. I wasn't in the frame of mind to attach myself to any of these but I had no option. Meanwhile, one of my cousins, Mr. Ewa Isu a.k.a. Ewa Mgbo of Amechara Village, who was a tailor by profession insisted I should come to him and be trained as a tailor. In fact, from the previous year he had sort of been dragging me to his workshop at week-ends and during holidays. To be candid, by early 1949 I could make button holes, cut and sew my pants, do quite a lot of patch-work and could even do the straight stitches of shirts and trousers.

Again, I couldn't reconcile my desire for further education with doing such work at that stage in my life. As if I had not been sufficiently confused in the choice of a career, Joseph Oko Oyim a.k.a. Oko Uche, who was a bicycle repairer and a close friend (though much older than myself) worked overtime to divert my attention to bicycle repairing. I did learn much from him and still have a gentleman's knowledge of bicycle repairing. Therefore, within the first two months of that odd year, I was in part a tailor, a bicycle repairer, a farmer and a trader. Through the help of Joseph Oko Oyim, I learned how to ride a bicycle. Mr. Irem Oko even made arrangements for me to become a photographer. I turned that down outrightly. Surprisingly, some fifteen years later when I was a student at the Advanced Teachers Training College (A.T.T.C), Owerri, photography had become one of my dear hobbies.

Early in March when Eluu Elogo was ready for his Cross River trade mission, I had to go with him. We travelled by canoe to Ikom. It was a hectic journey through the drying creeks and rivulets sitting all day long on the six-inch wide crossbars of the canoe - a real

memorable riverine experience. But that was only the beginning. We stayed at Ikom beach for a fortnight. From there we travelled into the hinterland on foot for marketing. For instance, we went to Akparabong, Okwini, Bendeghe Ayuk, Nde, Ekoi, etc., to buy cocoyams, plantain and some tubers of yam as well. Generally, I was meant to look after the canoe at the beach.

My going to the “bush markets” was occasional. When I recall the look of Ikom in the early seventies after the Civil War, I appreciate the great development that had taken place in that part of the country. By the time we got back to Ehugbo, we had been away for a little over a month. For four days we stayed at the Anison Beach of the Cross River. We engaged more hands to go down the river with us. We also bought the provisions that would last us another one month. As nwa ugbo (canoe boy), I was allowed to load some of my mother’s clay pots to be sold at Calabar. I think I was allowed twenty of them. I was happy about that.

The journey by canoe from Anison Beach, Ehugbo to Calabar was not as strange as the one from Ehugbo to Ikom. As early as 1942, I had made series of journeys with my late father along that route. Of course, by that time I went on sight seeing and never paddled canoe nor did any work whatsoever. I was very well provided for. But in that 1949 journey, I had to toil under sun or rain, as hard as any other fellow in the crew. It was roughly four days journey from Ehugbo to Calabar. Despite the tedious work, we felt very happy because we fed well and occasionally had nice swim while hunting periwinkles and lobsters.

At Calabar, we had no difficulty at all in selling all our goods. To my least expectation, the boss decided we should move towards the Atlantic Ocean via Ironbi. At Calabar, I had a glimpse of the ocean. I had thought our geography teachers in primary school exaggerated a lot when they talked of the immensity of the seas and

oceans. I was face to face with the facts.

We left Calabar at about two o'clock in the morning when the tide was ebbing. At day-break I couldn't believe what my eyes saw, I thought it was madness making that trip. We, of course, kept at safe distance from the Nigerian shore. We mounted a sail on our canoe and it was of great help. More than three quarters of the crew in the fleet of six canoes were caught by sea sickness. I managed to be free from the attack. At about nine o'clock in the morning the tide began to change so we had to anchor in creeks. We were there till about three o'clock in the afternoon when our leaders thought it was safe enough to keep moving.

We had scarcely done an hour when the eastern clouds turned, betokening rain. We were about a nautical mile from the shore and before we could paddle for a hundred yards the waves were on. The speed must have been up to eighty or ninety miles per hour and the crest and trough of the waves were very staggering. The amplitude of the waves was enormous. That we escaped to safety was nothing less than God's kindness. Most people made promises of goats, cocks, etc. to their gods if they would save them from that cursed wave. As a four-month old baptized Catholic, I recited my prayers fervently. For the three days and three nights we did before getting to Ironbi – along the coastal edge of the Cameroon Mountain (Bakassi) – we suffered terribly from waves, mosquitoes and rain. We got to within two nautical miles from Santa Isabel. On bright days it was clearly seen and at night the light appeared to be some two or three hundred yards away.

Our five days stay in that fishing port was very enjoyable. Fresh crayfish and lobsters were so common that a basin full of either was worth a few pennies. It was the eating of these fresh sea creatures that caused me the very first dysentery sickness I ever had. But it was short-lived. While there, I used part of the fifteen shillings I got

from my mother's pots in buying nearly a full sack of crayfish. The journey back was not very striking as we decided to do most of it at night.

It might sound unreal to say that the sizes of mosquitoes in those creeks were about the sizes of wasps and they attacked people in scores. But I can't say how much of malaria vectors they were, for we hardly had malaria or fever. As for the rains we had to be under it till it ceased. At a corner of the iboto (shed in the canoe), our meal was prepared and since it couldn't take all at a time the food was eaten under the rain. You can't imagine dipping a lump of foofoo into soup and it is washed away between the plate and the mouth. Besides, instead of the soup decreasing, it increased. So the solution to it was very fast eating.

On our way home, we called at Calabar and Itu respectively to make some purchases. One shilling and six pence or two shillings could then buy up to two yards of good material cloth. If one spent up to one pound on clothes then, one must have been buying them for family members. Coconuts and "fancied" chewing sticks were usually not left out as presents for those at home.

At home, my mother was already becoming anxious over our delay in returning, which was a little over six weeks. Needless to say that we were welcomed home with joy. We returned about a week to Empire Day (May 24). Though I was able to give my mother up to forty-five shillings out of the two pounds five shillings net proceeds, I swore I would never engage in the river trade. I explained the risks to her and she saw no reason for taking such a risk any further. So far I have never made more than a day's journey on the river since then.

My adopted “Step-Brother” – Mr Joseph Okpani Oko

A day after the Cross River adventure, I had to go to the Catholic Mission, New Site Afikpo to see Mr. Joseph Okpani Oko, and, of course, to make some adorations in the Chapel. For the next three years Mr. J. Oko dominated most of my life.

In a nutshell, Mr. Oko was a son to Ogeri Alu, my father’s fourth but oldest wife. She later gave birth to Mrs Julia Ugwome Otunta (nee Agwo) and Lawrence Agwo for my father. Before my father got married to her, she already had Okpani Oko at Ndibe; Ogbonnaya Otu and Otu Eke at Ukpa; Ugbo Isu and Alu Isu at Ngodo. By the time she was married to my father, Mr. Okpani Oko was already a student in St. Thomas College Ogoja. As my father was considered rich in Ehugbo, he had to help in the training of Mr. Oko at College. When he observed I was loafing about with no possible help from anywhere, he recalled my father’s kindness to him and offered to intercede for me with the Mission.

Incidentally, he was in the Mission’s good books and was then the Headmaster of St. Mary’s School, one of the Mission’s premier schools in the Province. By the time we started talking of this, it was already around Christmas period. From May ending to December ending 1949, I did any honest odd job that came my way. I spent some of the time at the backyard bushes (usuho) and delighted in hunting rabbits and collecting kernels and wild yams (asu) for mid-day lunch. Of course, my interest in bicycle repairing and tailoring were not left out. That year my mother tried to show me our farmlands, which, unfortunately due to lack of interest and later absence from home, I do not now know. I was then sixteen plus. Mr. M.S.C. Abani was then teaching as a Grade III teacher at Amofia Ukawu.

1950 – Teaching Pathway (PTC)

“A Bumpy Start but Spiced with Fun”

Mr. J. Oko asked me if I could be a teacher. Though I was prepared to do anything to earn a living, I reluctantly agreed but added I would have preferred going to College first. However, he took me to Rev. Fr. Mac Namara, the then Parish Priest, and asked if the priest would consider employing me as a CD teacher. The priest made fun of my size, asking if my hand could reach the blackboard. On a more serious note he announced he was sorry there was no vacancy in the Parish. Rather he advised I should apply for admission into the (P.T.C.) Preparatory Training College for a year’s preliminary teachers’ course. I had a secret joy on hearing that advice, but had a disgusting dismay on the realization that if I were accepted, the funds weren’t there. Mr. Oko gave me an idea of what to write as an application.

Throughout the following night I worked on the application and took what I thought a fair copy to Mr. Oko for approval. He said it was all right and asked me to submit it to Rev. Fr. Henry Bradley, the Principal of P.T.C. “Eri” as he was popularly known for he was a smallish man and talked quite a lot and fast. We looked on him as a wicked orphan (we were told Monsignor T. MacGettrick, later Bishop MacGettrick, picked him up as an orphan and trained him as a priest). Barely four weeks after the sub-mission of the application, (Feb. 1950) and during one of my purposeful visits to the Mission, Mr. Oko said the Rev. Fr. would like to see me. I timidly went to the Fathers’ House and leaned at one corner of the raised foundation steps.

Rev. Fr. Bradley saw my shadow and moved towards me gingerly, cigarette in hand and the long white soutane unbuttoned all through revealing the hairy pair of chocolate short legs, a pair of light green shorts fastened with a black belt above the navel and

a sweaty absorbent white semi-singlet. My knees seemed to give way underneath me, my heart throbbed and I coughed very lightly to clear my drying throat. “My fron, what do you want?” I later learnt he said, “My friend, what do you want”. “I ... I ... I ...” I began. “I am the boy the Headmaster said you want to see”. I managed to speak out. “Oh yes! You are the boy who wants to come to College? “Yes Father”, I said, in astonishment. “What is your name?” I told him Gabriel Agwo. “Yes Gabriel, Fr. Mac Namara told me about you and Joseph the Headmaster also spoke to me about you. Now I have not taken boys from other Parishes at Ikom and Obubra but I will give you a trial. Do you hear?” “Yes Father”, I replied, hesitantly.

“Go now and pack your things to the College tomorrow. If you do not come in time you will lose your chance. Go, see the Prefect in the College and he will tell you what to buy. Buy all of them and bring your College fees. It is ten shillings a month and it must be paid at the beginning of every month”. I half believed what he said and went down to the dormitory where I met James B. Ogonnia Oko of Amangballa who was the prefect.

James Oko handed over a list to me from where I copied the requirements among which were: A pair of white long trousers, a pair of white shorts, a pair of canvas shoes, a white shirt, a bucket, a machete, a white bed sheet, a pillow and a pillow case, a mat and one or two casual dresses. In addition I was expected to bring textbooks, which apart from Hints and Methods of Teaching” were predominantly Standard VI textbooks. As I did not use Oxford at school, I had to buy one. Everything calculated, I needed an initial sum of five pounds to start off. That was my nightmare. My mother, my only hope then hardly had more than five shillings at a time she could call her own. It was a bitter delight reporting this to my mother. But I had to.

I looked around the 'world' for help but there was nothing coming from anywhere. As for moral support and advice, Mr. Joseph Oko was unparalleled but I needed hard cash. I suggested to my mother I wanted to meet my father's relatives at Amangballa and her own relatives, especially Messrs Irem Oko of Mgbom and Ewa Isu of Amaechara. She agreed provided I first met Irem and Ewa. Irem gave me one light red shirt and ten shillings, and Ewa made a pair of white shorts for me. My mother asked around from well wishers and raised fifteen shillings.

Of these fifteen shillings my grandmother, Orum Uro, contributed five shillings, her six other children (Nne Ogeri Uzo, Nne Elum, Nne Ugo, Nne Ewa, Nne Egwu Utom and Ogeri Otu) six shillings and the other four shillings from my mother's close friends. That means each of my mother's six sisters contributed one shilling while their mother (my grandmother) alone gave five shillings - eleven shillings from all of them. Some six years later Nne Ugo Oko Ugo, my mother's immediate younger sister, reminded my mother she should always note they contributed money to send me to College. My mother wept about it remembering her own help to the woman. Both were right I think.

Meanwhile, I was constrained to ask Mr. Joseph Oko to please appeal to the Principal to allow me one week to get ready. He agreed saying it was at my own risk. By the expiration of the week there was hardly any improvement. I had to borrow a pair of canvas shoes from Matthew Oyim Obioh while Joseph Ogbonnia Iduma gave me a pair of over-sized white shorts. Joseph Oko dashed me a pair of stripped light blue shorts which I mended to get my correct size. My mother and I spared no time in going to cry before my father's relatives to allow me sell three or four sheep (which would fetch about two pounds) depending on the size. That permission was not coming by the end of the week. So I had to go to the College, prepared for any eventuality.

I carried my mother's wooden box, her old knife and pillow. My cousin, Irem, gave me a fork and a spoon. I must remark here that I was extremely careful over the use of the canvas shoes and a pair of slightly over-sized white trousers for they were to be returned to their owners at the end of the first term. Within the first term holidays, we were able to buy a pair of cheap canvas shoes for two shillings and six pence, a pair of white long trousers for five shillings and six pence, and a white bed sheet for three shillings including the sewing. I even had a pocket money of five shillings!

On arrival at the P.T.C, I reported to the prefect, Mr. James .B. Oko, who assigned a bed space to me in the dormitory. In the classroom he assigned a locker to me. As he left I cleaned the locker and placed it properly and underneath the cover of the locker I inscribed "Way to London". Some fifty one years later precisely in 2001, that dream was realized!

Despite the monthly agony of how to raise ten shillings for the month's fees, I was obviously happy throughout the year in the P.T.C. The studies were within reach, as at its worst, I could easily come within the first ten in a class of thirty. As we enjoyed a privileged position as students, social life was not lacking. We had easy communication with *ndi uguu* (Holy Child Convent Girls) though not more than how one could communicate with articles in a locked store when doing "window shopping". The occasional 'good morning' or 'good evening' after religious services were very gladdening and pride evoking. If it happened that someone exchanged letters or verbal messages with *ndi uguu* at a remote end of the Mission, other students grew jealous as it was a feather on the student's cap. I remember one John Woga from Ogoja, who was a known malapropist. He earned the name Professor Woga. He used to describe students intentionally walking behind girls as following them "colloquially". A number of some funny sayings were abundant. That was rampant during May and October devotions.

They were good avenues for mental health.

Very expensive jokes were not foreign to the P.T.C. students. Maurice Okoronkwo and Francis Ohuche both of Ngodo-Ehugbo seemed to be at the helm of costly jokes. Maurice was a more tolerant ‘joker’ while ‘Ohu’ (short for Francis Ohuche) half jaunting sideways would like to abuse others but would always come to blows, with anyone who dared comment on his very uncouth eating habits. Gilbert Oji Nwokike of Enohia Itim whom I had known some three years earlier, and who for many years to come could be described as my friend, happened to make my life more uncomfortable with his utterances. One such remark which I think may linger in me as long as there’s life, was about my “pandora’s box” as he called it. I had earlier remarked I had to carry my mother’s very old wooden box of about 30”x18”x18”.

I certainly had no clothes of description to put into it, rather I used it as ‘chop-box’ where I put in my crockery, garri, beans, pepper, salt and a few other food items save oil. One Saturday afternoon, this my ‘friend’ when I was getting out some garri to ‘drink’ called out: “Gabriel, onwa onobu nde nke unu n’apa igbe n’awuyeje eku n’aya, na gioni anapa igbe ose ya igari (when other students carry boxes for clothes you carry a box for garri and pepper).” In fairness to him it was a legitimate remark but why must it be himself, who happened to know me in and out and down to my family background, before and after the death of my father that should be so careless, casual and callous in the name of a joke? Funny enough, despite other students’ resentment towards that remark, he refused to see anything wrong with it. However, it didn’t end our friendship but it greatly dulled it. Of course, I forgave him completely.

Some of the poverty-driven funs of that St. Mary’s P.T.C. included ironing of canvas shoes on Sunday mornings; using of mashed beans extracted from yam bean pottage as soup for swallowing balls of

garri foofoo; and using salt in pap (akamu) in place of sugar. Bread was not for students then. Once in a while we had glimpses of slices of loaves of bread on “Father’s” breakfast table.

My First Time in the Western Region of Nigeria

Our P.T.C. final exams ended in good time for us to be at home by December, 18. While waiting for deployment, we were sent back to the Parishes from where we came.

Mine was St. Mary’s Parish, Afikpo. We were allowed about a month’s holiday. In the company of Mr. M.S. Chukwu I travelled to Ilesha to visit relatives and in-laws. Mr. Chukwu went to see Uro Uche (a.k.a. Uro Ukpom) while I went to see Uche Akpu and Item Iduma. We spent the Christmas period, 1950 and the New Year Day 1951, over there. That was my first time of travelling to the Western Region of Nigeria. It was a good relaxation in preparation for the teaching work.

Though we had practised teaching in surrounding primary schools while in the P.T.C., some of us never had any other teaching experience. We left the College with mixed feelings – anxiety to go and try out what we had been drilled on during the past ten months; and misgivings for going to teach in some parts of the Parish where some pupils, were obviously older and bigger than ourselves. Nevertheless, it was a task to be done.

Afikpo Parish to which I belonged was a very large one, which then included Afikpo North, Afikpo South, Ohaozara, Ivo and Onicha Local Government Areas of the present day Ebonyi State. It also included Erei, Igbo, Itigidi, Ediba, Obubra, Ugep, Upper and Lower Igonigoni then known as Ikumoro in the present day Cross River State. I was afraid I could be posted to any of the out stations. Luckily Mr. Joseph Okpani Oko asked for and saw to it that I was

posted to St. Mary's School where he was the Headmaster. That had been our practising school some hundred yards from our P.T.C. classrooms.

CHAPTER FOUR

BEGINNING AND DEVELOPMENT OF MY TEACHING CAREER – (1951-1957)

Life as a Full Time Teacher

1951, the first year of my official employment as a full-time teacher, was a memorable one. Some events of that year look hazy but a few things stand out clearly in my mind. I was assigned to teach the Standard II class.

On 6th January, 1951, I was registered as a teacher N0. AF/CD/2/51 under the Catholic Mission, Afikpo, Ogoja Province.

My first three months salary was one pound ten shillings a month i.e eighteen pounds or thirty six naira per annum. At the beginning of the fourth month i.e. April, our P.T.C. results were released and my success earned me a pay rise. I was then placed on twenty one pounds per annum, i.e. one pound fifteen shillings per month as a trained CD teacher. Meanwhile, I had an arrears of fifteen shillings for the first three months I was underpaid. That ‘huge’ sum of money came in good time for me to make a suit for the forthcoming Empire Day celebrations on May 24. The coffee-brown suit (shirt and short) of silk material (obey the wind) cost me five shillings. It could have cost six shillings but my cousin Ewa Isu, the tailor, didn’t charge the usual one shilling for the sewing.

It is worthy to note that from the day I was paid, I discussed with Mr. J.O. Oko what to do with the money. We agreed I should save some part of the money with him every month. It was expected that after some years I would save enough to enable me have a College education. I reported the discussion to my mother and she had no objection whatsoever. I bought one small pocket size note book in which he entered and initialed any sum of money he received for safe-keeping at the end of the month. By the end of eight months I

had saved five pounds with him. Very unfortunately, Mr. J.O. Oko died of tuberculosis in August 1951. His brothers Samuel Eke Otu and John Otu Eke both of Ukpa, though aware of the savings, raised up complications which made it impossible for me to recover my hard earned five pounds. That was how I lost that sum of money. The memory of it always gives me pain but I thank God it didn't hinder my progress in life.

My mother was particularly happy that barely six years after my father's death I had received the Whiteman's education that had enabled me to earn a salary. Besides, she was no longer thinking of how to clothe me or bear my school expenses. Even though I was living at Ezi Agwo – our compound, and going to teach in St. Mary's, I had my meals, especially lunch and supper in my mother's house at Egeburu. Eluu Elogo's wives occasionally provided my breakfast. The financial contributions I made towards that was so meagre that it would amount to ingratitude to say I spent money on those occasional breakfasts.

Eluu Elogo's sudden death in late October, 1951, initiated another dramatic change that year and affected my life's career. Just some words about his passing away: One Saturday, he had arranged we go to "Obikpe Agha-Isu" oil press to process the palm fruits he had cut from Ohia Ezali. His two wives Akpu Eluu and Okwogho Esee in our company were to do it. Mr. Eluu Iduma (a.k.a. Eluu Elogo) went earlier in the morning to boil the palm fruit so as to return and take some native purgative medicine. We completed the rest of the assignment and began returning the products – kernels and oil – by head loads. We had each done three or four trips; had our bath at the stream and were happily chatting and coming home.

About a hundred yards to our compound, we heard some wailing of women. We sensed something wrong somewhere. As we entered into the compound - running and panting, we noticed quick movements

by men around grandpa's (Eluu's father's) house. "Eluu Elogo is dead" was the news that greeted us. I didn't believe the news. Less than an hour earlier, he had helped me down with the load of kernels I brought home. Nevertheless, we joined in the crying chorus. That was about four o'clock in the evening. By seven o'clock in the night we had bidden his remains goodbye with handfuls of dry earth. The next morning found me as a temporary head of the deceased family of seven – including his ageing mother.

By then his younger brother Item Iduma was still living at Ilesha. My mother, still at Egeburu, had the greater shock. She couldn't convince me to leave our compound, especially as I was resolute on staying on, at all costs. Later events made it imperative for me to temporarily but painfully live outside our compound – Ezi Agwo – for some eighteen years. I sojourned at Ezi Iduma with the Abanis.

Back in school, I fondly remember four of my class pupils – Michael Otu Agha, Vincent Ogbonnia Eze and Edward Isu all of Agboride in Amaizu. The other Amaizu chap, Michael Oko Agha of Okpoota, I remember more for his dullness in the class than for any other thing. As it is sometimes the case, this boy later became a brilliant army officer and made a successful career in the military in adult life.

It was in that same year that I made my first contact with Mr. Patrick Isu Oko's family of Ndibe. He was then the Assistant Headmaster and his wife Agnes Chi Oko was the Standard I teacher. When their first child and daughter, Fidelia Ogeri Oko was delivered (March 20, 1951) of a baby, I took charge of her class as well. I had the experience of teaching two full fledged classes of the junior primary alone. As if I hadn't had enough challenge that year, Mr. P. I. Oko became very sick and was sent to Amachi for treatment. Fidelia was just a few months old. We had to visit him and report back to the wife as she was not allowed to see him for it was believed that her

presence aggravated his fury. He would want her to remain glued to his side. Coincidentally, one day during our visits, it was time for him to eat. He insisted I must eat with him. “Hey!” I shouted within me. “Eat with such a sick man with a contagious disease.” I contended within me. But I had to eat. I cursed myself for ever going there that day. However, I prayed silently and sincerely to God to save me from an attack. Incidentally, it was boiled yam with oil. I picked a big piece and held to myself and ate without dipping it in oil. I announced I had taken M & B tablets which prohibited the eating of oil. It was the belief then and that was a big relief in the critical situation.

I can’t remember now, if at all, I did enjoy the Christmas celebrations of 1951, which I looked up so much to being the first one I would celebrate as a salary earner. Alone, I travelled to Ilesha in the present day Osun State to visit my in-law Samuel Ekuma Otu. It was a wonderful experience – bad road conditions and life, ignorance of the road, help of policemen at Ilesha to find out Iregun Camp. Nevertheless, it was a worthwhile experience and my sister, Ulu, was extremely happy throughout my five weeks stay with them. However, I very well remember I offered several decades of the rosary to God on the 31st of December that year, to keep away from me a repeat of the agony of the passing year.

1952 – The Challenge of Survival

In the 1952 January postings of teachers, I was transferred to St. Michael’s School Amangwu Edda – some eight miles from Afikpo town through Amasiri. That was my first time of going to live on my own as an individual. Were Mr. J. O. Oko alive, I am sure I couldn’t have gone on transfer. The compelling call to duty, the restraining attachments to home and the anxiety of living an independent life constituted a unique conflict. “If I must eat and if I must think of further education, it was imperative I must go to Edda”. I had to

prepare.

I needed cooking utensils, crockery and bedding. Bed and bedding was no headache at all. I just bought a sleeping mat for three pence to spread on whatever floor space I happened to have. For crockery, I still had the old plates, spoons and fork I used in the P.T.C. two years earlier. As for cooking utensils my mother came in to help. She let go one tinker corrugated iron sheet pot “ite pot” she was using and bought about a half gallon sized clay pot ‘achapoto’ for my soup. I had also to deprive my mother of one of her wooden ladles and her small grinding stone for kitchen use.

Foodstuffs such as pepper, salt, garri, tubers of yam would be purchased with anything from half a penny to three pence – depending on the quantity required. But for the five shillings worth of foodstuffs and the grinding stone, I hadn’t enough load for my mother’s big basin. I had no need for a servant or a houseboy though I told my mother I would like to take my seven-year-old brother, Otu Agwo. She said she had no objection but insisted I must first go to experiment on living on my own before taking him along. There was no argument in it. I went to Amangwu Edda as a ‘C’ Teacher (C7/1342) on monthly salary of three pounds i.e. Thirty-six pounds a year instead of twenty one pounds - nearly double the previous year’s salary.

In a fairly warm January morning, I trudged behind my mother and Eze Egwu (Mr. Abani’s mother). They were carrying some of my scanty belongings. We arrived at Amangwu Edda School – a little over a mile from Amangwu Edda village and were welcomed by Messrs M.O. Chukwu of Amaizu, who was the H/M then, Celestine Ewa and James Okoro (London Boy) to mention just three.

For the first few days I shared a room with Mr. M.S.C. Abani (then commonly known as Sunday Chukwu). As a Higher Elementary Teacher, he (Mr. Abani) was entitled to a whole house, made up of

a parlour and a room. When it became obvious that I must move away for a senior member of staff, Mr. Michael Obiahu of Ugwuegu Elu, who was also teaching there as a ‘C’ Teacher, took me to his staff quarters’ residence. I had to fence off a section of the parlour with raffia bamboo. I then became a proud owner of a five-foot by nine feet room. The remaining parlour was commonly used by both of us. After erecting my bamboo bed, I had just enough space to walk sideways to the end of my bed. Underneath my bed were my “pantry, store and room”. The gable end of the house where my ‘house’ perched, looked very much like a man at feet astride with both hands up and bent slightly backwards. However, the consolation was that if it did fall, it would fall out. But thanks to goodness it never fell till I left the school at the end of the year, 1952.

I seem to have forgotten my mother’s company to my new station. She was with me for two days only putting me through how to prepare soup and other dishes. I was nineteen years old then. She promised to be coming from time to time, and she kept to it.

Before she left in her maiden visit, we agreed that when we would have been paid at the end of the month, I would go for my younger brother, Otu Agwo. That I did about the second week of February as teachers were usually paid on the first Friday/Saturday of every month.

I can hardly describe what my living with Otu was like. Briefly, it was my real first education in child care and rearing. He was sickly but intelligent, very conversational while disposed, but very naughty and demanding at will. Even though he was almost seven years old, I did everything from cleaning him after easing himself, to carrying his stool and rocking him to sleep whenever he felt like. We continued like that till about the end of April when Anigo Ogeri (Lawrence A. Agwo) joined me at Edda.

I recall that Law lived with the late Okpani Oko and that since his death in August that previous year, Law stayed with their mother, Ogeri Alu. By some strange coincidence, Law decided if he must live with any other person, it was to be myself. Frankly, I had no choice but to accept him as a step brother. In all earnestness, individual differences notwithstanding, Law grew up to be the most responsible and understanding of all the four brothers my late father left under my care.

Yes, Law joined me to care for Otu. He did his Standard II for the second time and in my class. Among his classmates in my class that year, 1952, were Ndukwe Okoro of Ngodo, Ekuma Chukwu (the class prefect) of Amangwu Edda and Chima Oduko also of Amangwu Edda. Some sixty years later, I met Chima Oduko (then Osuu Oduko) as a retired Permanent Secretary in civil service and a big-wig party politician.

Otu Agwo was in Infant I. After August holidays that year, his ill-health deteriorated to the extent that my mother saw with me she should keep him at home. Poor boy and poorer mother, the innocent one suffered for over a year before the cold hands of death snatched him away from us. May his soul rest in peace.

Generally, my one year stay at Amangwu Edda was a very eventful one. I had a large farm of yam, cassava, groundnut and vegetables. My mother used to come along from home to supervise work and in most cases work in the farm. She would stay up to a week in most tours.

During one of the August Saturdays we were working in the farm and trying to combine future plans with grass weeding, it slipped out of me that I may be going to the College the following January. She stopped short and asked me to repeat what I said. I obeyed her without at first realizing what that meant to her. The

immediate effect on her was that her speed of work slowed down and she was really in a pensive mood. After about ten minutes of seeming concentrated work clouded with Ehugbo native airs, she straightened herself, looked to my direction and asked in a most shivered voice in Ehugbo dialect, “Ogbonnia, isi n’I je omegini na kọleju? Ọbụghu ọnwà asi na ọnori okam okpogho? Ayi anya duwo nke iki hi futa (what do you say you are going to do in the college? Is it not this one that is said to be very costly? Have we recovered from the one you just finished)?”

It then dawned on me what my statement meant to her. I quickly tried to cover up by telling her that the Mission will send me if I passed the exam. I had sat for the exam in the previous May and had actually been assured of a place if the Parish Priest approved of my going. My mother wasn’t easily convinced for she wanted to know what extent the financial burden was to be on me. Thanks be to God that though my mother would not directly oppose my views, she did everything to guard against my being seriously distressed. For the next three or four months she always liked to rub in the College issue whenever we talked together. Her main fears, I later discovered, were: (1) How she would finance my studies again after the P.T.C. sad experience; (2) Cutting short her expected yields from the farms I had then; (3) Losing up to thirty-six pounds in a year for two years (As a ‘C’ teacher my salary then was £3 a month i.e. £36 p.a.; (4) My going to far away Ogoja (Mbembe) for studies and (5) My ailing brother Otu.

It was in June that year, 1952, that Princess Elizabeth was coronated Queen Elizabeth II. We had a public holiday for it.

Sometime around September that year, one Mr. P.J. Toogood, an Education Officer, visited our school for inspection. His visit was significant for two reasons: He was to visit our school on a Friday without notice but the Oso Edda-Amangwu road was so muddy

that he had to postpone the visit by two days hoping it would dry up. Luckily to us, one of our never failing Amiyi (Convent) week-enders, returned late on the Sunday to break the news. An emergency staff meeting was summoned to discuss the visit. School children couldn't be summoned to clean up the compound. The classrooms were dirty and needed renovation. The ten-man staff was re-grouped for emergency work – one other teacher and myself were sent to Afikpo before 6:30 a.m. to confirm the news; six teachers were detailed to white-wash the very dirty classrooms that night and early morning using bush lamps.

The rest lined the paths before 7 a.m. Incidentally, that P.J. Toogood who was actually “too bad” detested weeding paths. He advocated just cutting and in fact, growing Bahamas grass on the paths and walks. When the school children arrived at school the following morning, what a surprise! The man did come around 10 a.m. and we beat him at his game. Just a little bit of what teaching work was in the fifties.

I certainly enjoyed my one year's stay at St. Michael's Amangwu, Edda. The two main problems we had were that of water supply and very bad road links. The approach road from the Amasiri end was seasonal for motorists as a result of bad bridges and culverts aided by gullies in the centre of the road. That from Owutu end was very horrible especially during the rainy season when mud pits between St. Patrick's Owutu and our school – some three miles distance – were knee deep. And it was only from Owutu and Amasiri that we could do all the local shopping required.

Our nearest source of good water supply was about two miles from the school on the Amasiri road near Okpuma. About a quarter of a mile of this was through a very rugged meandering and narrow stony bush path. In the rainy season water for all washing and cooking was drawn from numerous bursts a few yards from the kitchen. Cost of

living was very low as some thirty shillings could feed three of us in the house for a month. It was only on rare occasions that I spend up to five shillings in one market day and there was a maximum of eight of them in a month. Three shillings worth of yam could last us a full month. I remember a shilling meat could give us two pots within a native week. Oranges sold at between twenty and thirty for a penny. In short, we had no problem of feeding well.

I recall with grief the very unmanly way Eni Anigo – my father's step brother and Otu Oyim – my father-in-law's brother - abandoned our compound – Ezi Agwo. They packed away to Ezi Idume and Ezi Oka respectively. As the two old wattle-houses they lived in our compound fell in the early rains of 1952, I tearfully attached myself to the Abani's at Ezi Idume where I had to sojourn till late 1970. I became firmly integrated into that family and cannot imagine a complete break in my life's time. In appreciation I named my third son Okechukwu Abani Agwo.

Otu Oyim died in 1969 during the Nigeria-Biafra War. Eni Anigo survived the war, but he died and was buried in the new Ezi Agwo house in 1972.

At St. Thomas College, Ogoja

Around August, 1952, I was already sure of being a student in St. Thomas College, Ogoja. Entrance exam took place between May and June and interviews for final selection were conducted in July and early August, 1952.

In January, 1953, I had celebrated the New Year's Day with mixed feelings. My going to St. Thomas meant losing a minimum of thirty-six pounds a year. But staying on as a common 'C' teacher was insulting. At the base of my anxiety and confusion was the fact that I hadn't a penny saved up for the expensive course, which

came to six pounds a term for tuition and boarding fees only. Textbooks, school uniform and other requirements could take about half as much again. There was only one way out. By then, we were expecting arrears on increment in teachers' salaries. The Parish Priest gave a guarantee to the Principal, Rev. Fr. J. O. Driscoll that he would make sure the money was paid in full. With that assurance and the friendly gifts from people, which amounted to ten pounds, I left for the College late in January, 1953. My mother had to take possession of the farm crops – yam, cassava and groundnuts I left at Amangwu Edda. Some of the proceeds from there helped to defray my initial expenses at the College.

Travelling to Ogoja from Afikpo was no joke. We first had to trek from Ehugbo through Ibii to Akpoha where we would catch any mammy wagon coming then, to carry loads of all descriptions. There was a John Holt store at the Akpoha Beach, which attracted big traders from Abakaliki. In a number of cases, we had to continue the trek to Abaomege – some fourteen miles from Ehugbo – where we were surer of Lorries going from Itigidi to Abakaliki. We normally arrived Abakaliki any time between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. The fare then from Akpoha, I think, was one shilling and six pence. There were occasions when we had to pay as little as six pence from Akpoha to Abakaliki. At Abakaliki we used to stay the night with some Afikpo men.

My usual place of lodging was with Mr. Daniel Abani Ugwu, then at N0. 5 Awka Street. He was a reputed and well known bicycle repairer. He was certainly very good and accommodating. Apart from food and 'scarce' water he supplied to me, he often paid my transport fare either to Ogoja, two shillings or to Afikpo one shilling and six pence. Besides having a ready floor space to pass the night, we enjoyed his company very immensely.

Just in passing, at Abakaliki then, it was easier for one to be given

food than to have water. Iyiokwu and the swimming pool were two main sources of water supply especially during the dry season. People – natives and visitors alike went for days without real bath. Limbs ‘dry washing’ was better known than complete body washing. Abakaliki was such a dusty place that clean dressing was almost unknown during day time. In the early fifties it was only the Enugu-Ogoja road up to near the present St. Theresa Catholic Cathedral then known as “coaltar end” that was tarred.

The journey from Abakaliki to Ogoja – a distance of some seventy-two miles, though rugged and dusty, was not as bad as that between Abakaliki and Afikpo. Big Lorries going to Iyalla and Gboko markets were often got. Even on non-market days, chance Lorries were not completely absent. In any case, I can’t remember any occasion when the seventy-two miles journey took less than four hours. It was usually anything between five and seven hours.

Life at the College

The life of a first year College student was anything but peaceful. It is not possible to recount the major events especially as I lost, during the Civil War all sorts of personal diary I tried to keep. I can only recall the outstanding ones. The college prefects were the greatest symbol of hate and punishment. The Principal and the academic staff were friendly and not feared as such. The senior prefect and the other prefects were very unfriendly and wicked. We saw in most of them, torture experts specially picked to dehumanize other students especially the first years.

One Charles Enem, who was the senior prefect in our first year, deserves special mention for his wickedness and callousness. There was a Wednesday afternoon we were in the dining hall, just adding some bit of water to soften the thick hard-boiled bean porridge. The fast ones had hardly started eating when the black, tall shylock

of a prefect, strode into the hall. He banged the first table he met in his usual characteristic noisy manner and ordered: "I want all the foxes outside at once. If I move outside before you, you will get it very hot from me." In a most military precision, all of us concerned jumped outside. Those who had friends on their tables, had their food covered while others were left as playgrounds for the numerous buzzing flies always at hand.

While outside, Enem announced: "You are all aware that for the past three days, the nightsoilman has not emptied the buckets in the latrine. Every place is smelling and the buckets must be emptied now. So all of you, go straight to the latrine. Monitor, assign them two to a hole to empty the buckets before they come in to continue their lunch. The same exercise will be repeated tomorrow morning before classes if the man does not come". There was no question to be asked, and no audible remarks made against his order. Of course, we paired up, opened the low latrine windows; plucked some leaves, grabbed the buckets overflowing with maggot-ridden stinking excreta! These were emptied into waiting trenches and covered. The buckets were replaced. We reported back minutes later to him. In his derisive laughter, he allowed us go.

What it caused most of us was the lunch for only few could subdue vomiting on going to sit over a plate of marshed beans porridge – not very different in appearance from the excreta thrown away a few minutes earlier. The way that order was given and executed both hardened and gladdened most of us. Hardened in the sense that we became persistent in our dislike of him and gladdened because we realized anybody could do any type of odd jobs. As a person, I forgave Enem, but I can't say how many of us have really forgiven him!

Another incident occasioned by the same saddist attitude was one in which all of us in the first year had to be fetching water

till a little after midnight. That night, the stewards had finished washing the gutters around the dining hall and left the water pots virtually empty. After the “goodnight” bell at about 10:30 p.m., our dormitory prefect, one Benedict Kekon, went into the dining hall to collect water for his late bath. That prefect reported he couldn’t collect enough water as most of the pots were empty. That was a nice chance to show his naked abuse of power. He walked noisily to our dormitory, banged the doors so heavily that those who were still awake, feared there was a serious mishap. His voice rang in the dormitory that quiet night. Every one of us – twelve in number - who happened to be supplying water for use in the dining hall for that week were called up. He commanded: “There is not even a single drop of water in the refectory and all of you are sleeping. Just as I am looking at you, you get your buckets and fill every container in the refectory”.

Of course, we had to obey quietly and no questions were asked. The most annoying aspect of this punishment was that after filling EVERY container in the refectory that night, which took us between 10:30 p.m. and 12:30 a.m., the entire water was used in draining the gutter the following morning. They were said to have gone stale. We had to fetch fresh water for the morning routine assignment. And the Prefect was referred to by the College’s authorities as one of the best Christians. The lesson I learnt from that is anybody’s guess but I know what it was.

It is impossible to recount the inhuman treatment we received in the hands of fellow students, who happened to be a year or two earlier in the College before us. Suffice it to say that we felt safer and freer in the presence of the Principal and his staff than with the prefects. However, when we had got fairly used to the harsh treatments, we found the funny place quite interesting. Studies-wise, we had no unusual problems. The rising bell was always at 5 a.m. during weekdays and 6 a.m. on all other days. The routine exercises were:

“on hearing the bell jump out of the bed, go to the toilet if you felt like it, have your morning bath, get ready for Holy Mass, dress your bed before leaving the dormitory, make sure the bucket and/or other personal property were neatly pushed under the bed”.

There were no store spaces for first years. Immediately after Mass every student went to his morning assignment (grass cutting, sweeping, fetching water, cleaning workshops, etc.) where applicable before breakfast at 7:30 a.m. By 7:45 a.m. students were expected to be in the classroom for the first lesson that usually started at 8 a.m. on the dot.

As regards religious life in the College, everybody was or had to be a Catholic. There was morning Mass at 6 o'clock in the morning save on Saturdays when Masses were at 7 a.m. Everybody was expected to be a daily communicant even if he had slept throughout the rest of the Mass period. Every lesson in the classroom started and ended with prayers. Of course, the prayer routine was such that students could recite the Hail Mary and Our Father while mentally concentrating on anything under the sun except religion. Sunday Benedictions were fascinating and the 6 a.m., 12 noon and 6 p.m. Angelus formed part of our school character.

Personally, serving at Mass had such a charm for me that I would offer to serve for other students when they showed any reluctance. This brought me in contact with many church dignitaries such as Bishop Moynah of Calabar, Monsignor (later Bishop) Thomas MacGettrick, Rev. Fr. (later Bishop) Usanga and Rev. Fr. (later Cardinal) Dominic Ekandem. Serving of Bishops is a bit different. Bishop MacGettrick often kicked servers out of the altar. Luckily, I was never kicked out of the altar in his Masses.

I was never a good sportsman in the sense people think of sportsmanship. I was, however, always interested in sporting

events. Lawn tennis was my favourite game closely followed by table tennis. We had lots of games facilities and games generally received good attention. Inter-house and inter-class competitions were keen. During one of such competitions – I think it was St. Patrick’s Day (March 7) I won third prize for our class in pole vault.

On September 29, 1953 a send-off party – the first of its kind then was organized at home for Mr. Michael Sunday Chukwu (later M.S.C. Abani) on his departure to Ireland for further studies. Earlier in the morning between 1 and 2 a.m., during a heavy rainfall, Ego Catherine Abani (later Mrs. D.A Ugwu) was born just on the backyard veranda with a wall separating Mr. Abani and myself from the delivery place while we were lying on the floor inside the sitting room. Incidentally, it was that Catherine’s delivery on the eve of Sunday Chukwu’s send off to the UK that gave rise to naming her, Ego Nnia, needed for the ‘alibekee’ journey.

November 11, 1953, needs a special mention. At precisely 11 a.m. on that day, one of the Mission trucks conveyed me to Ogoja General Hospital. I suddenly developed very acute pains in all the joints of my legs and hands. At its first signs the previous day, I and a few close friends attributed it to “centering” – a popular sliding exercise we used to indulge in on the floors of the dormitories and classrooms. By the time I was rushed to the hospital, the doctor in charge, Dr. Ekoma, thought I was kidding despite the fact that I couldn’t walk. The sickness later confined me to the hospital bed for five weeks and three days!

I underwent such great pains and sufferings that a couple of times during the peak period of the sickness I actually prayed very earnestly to God to take my life away and end it all. The worst period was the second and third weeks of my stay in the hospital. Apart from the scratchy and uncomfortable “scotch dressing” applied to parts of my limbs, I couldn’t bend any of my hands to eat. I had to be

fed like a sucking infant. I suppressed tears whenever it was meal time. During the first week, one Louis Onya Oko of Ukpa, Afikpo a patient too (then a second year student in St. Thomas), washed and fed me. When he was discharged there was no washing for me for two weeks. I just couldn't make it and nurses felt it was not part of their duty. One Patrick Bankong then a sort of Ward Steward was God sent – that was in the last days of the third week. He undertook the job of bathing me twice daily and periodically brought me food from his house. Earlier I had thrown away all food or gave them out to the needy ones as I couldn't get it up to my lips. When I lay in bed, it took anything from ten minutes to an hour to change the position of a painful limb. I wept, moaned and groaned to move any of my limbs even an inch distance. The five odd weeks sojourn in the hospital gave rise to regular intermittent pain in the muscles and joints of my legs a few years later. Thanks be to God I have overgrown it.

Our first final exams came up while I was in the hospital and at that time my hands were literally useless to me so I didn't sit for it. Thanks be to God that my performance in the previous term's exam qualified me for the final year's work for the Teachers' Grade III Certificate Examination.

When I left the hospital on December 18, 1953 I was a moving skeleton. When Rev. Fr. T. Bierne took me back to the College's compound, all the students had gone home, the College having closed for the Christmas holidays a week before my discharge. That one night I spent alone in the dormitory where some sixty students usually occupied, was a horrible one. It was a night of dreams – bad dreams, good dreams of all descriptions, one after another in quick succession. I even dreamt that I died that night. And it was a very l-o-n-g night for me. At last it was dawn, 8 a.m. of 19th dragged in, I shuttled my way to the Principal's house to bid him goodbye. He advised me to remain at home - the re-opening date

notwithstanding – until the Mission doctor at Afikpo declared me fit to return to the College.

Meanwhile, from the day I was admitted into the hospital I warned all my friends and known well-wishers NEVER to inform my mother of my sickness. Thanks goodness they all co-operated. Funny enough, in my second week in the hospital my mother wrote inquiring about my health. I dictated the reply to a friend. I told her that I was “quite well”. Her fears grew worse when other students returned without me. Then again I dictated a letter to my ‘illiterate’ mother saying I had an assignment to accomplish in the College. For fear that she may break down on seeing a scarecrow of a son, I delayed for three days at Abakaliki so as to “fill in” a bit. Five days after my discharge from the hospital I still couldn’t walk steadily without a walking stick.

I thought I would be able to deceive my mother by putting on three clothes under my long sleeved shirt. I wore a beret cap and a thick muffler round my neck. My thin face and sunken eyes belied my camouflage. When, therefore, on the 23rd afternoon, by a sheer coincidence my mother saw me sitting in front of the lorry which brought me from Abakaliki to the Eke Market Motor Park. She grabbed me in tears. In her anxiety she pulled me down from beside the driver in a five ton lorry. Of course, my limbs rebelled at once and the truth of the seriousness of the sickness was out. I convinced her to allow me stay at Mr. Uwa Oko’s house till late in the evening when I carefully picked my steps home.

As she was then married at Egeburu and was living there, I returned to Ezi Idume, Amaha-Amaizu to the care of Eleje Ewa (Mrs. Chukwu Iduma Ogbeka). She was sick with abscess in the right calf and was then nursing her first son, Sunday. By nightfall, my mother still in tears, was at Ezi Idume to find out what happened. For the rest of the year and up to the second week of January, 1954,

my mother visited me at least twice daily bringing choice delicious meals.



As a second year student in 1954 at St. Thomas' College, Ogoja at 21 years of age

1954

A few days after New Year's Day, I went to Mater Hospital for medical check-up. Dr. H. Hinds of blessed memory subjected me to real medical examination. After all the laboratory tests, he said I could return to school by the middle of January but with instruction that I must go for periodic tests during the term. On January 15, I was back in school at Ogoja fairly fit for routine student's school life. For the whole of the first term I was exempted from serious manual labour. Though it was a rare privilege, I felt ashamed of

being treated as a special case. However, as it was doctor's advice, I 'suffered' it patiently but I was not happy to 'disappear' from the class list for manual work for that long time.

In that year Mr. Martin Ude Ajah from Ishiagu was our class (Elementary Two) prefect. Though in his previous year he was in Elementary Two and on "crossing" became a prefect, he treated us as if the gap between us couldn't be bridged in a life's time. During a reconstruction work in our classroom, a two-step stair case was newly constructed on to a new door way opened at an end of the building – a former Chapel of the College. That stair case happened to be along a major road from the staff quarters. The maids and servants were always on the road. Just on the day the step was dressed with cement, an unknown person, while we were in siesta, stepped on the fresh work and about one inch length of the concrete came off. By 3:15 p.m. when we went to class for the afternoon prep, we discovered the slight damage and politely reported it to Mr. M. U. Ajah – our class Study Prefect.

This man seized that opportunity to inflict the first of his unreasonable punishments on our class. For the rest of that afternoon until 6 p.m., we were subjected to rigorous grass cutting in the adjoining football field. We had to stop then because the College regulation required that either games or work must end at 6 p.m. in preparation for supper at 6:30 p.m., followed by evening prayers and night studies at 7:30 p.m.

I could write a book on Martin Ajah on his inhuman treatment of our batch but I wish only to have on record that as far as we were concerned, he was religiously sadistic. He was never glad that we were happy. If he felt we were happy he would punish us. If we dared request to know why, he would tell us: "It is to remind you that you are in College". We, of course, learnt in time to ignore him completely and that heightened his "hatred" but we didn't mind it.

However, we thank God for sparing our lives to prove that we did not deserve those unjustified punishments.

Our Principal/English Teacher, Rev. Fr. J. C. Young took fancy of a group of students in that our 1954 Grade III final year. He would walk into the classroom and half facing the class, muffle the usual prayers for us to answer ‘Amen’. He would open the passage (from the class text any way) he must have ‘prepared’ for the period and read at a terrific speed. The first problem was how to find out the page. Luckily as we used to mark the textbooks, any student first to discover the page would just call out a number indicating the page. At the end of what looked like a gospel he would raise his face and yell out: “What’s the major point of this passage?” almost at once he would mutter “now Patrick Orji” or “now Solomon Anozie” or “now Christian Ozor” or “now Gabriel Agwo” or “now Samuel Agbor” or “now Emmanuel Nwachi”.

Of a class of thirty-two, these six names and about four others were asked questions every time he had lessons with us. The effect was that while people from that “answer box” were always more prepared for his lessons, the rest in the “listening box” hardly participated in the lessons. It was a very serious teaching defect.

The Practical Teaching Experience

One European, Mr. J. E. H. White, was the external examiner for that year. Topics were given late in the evening of the previous day. Students and Teachers worked throughout the night to prepare for the test slated for 8 a.m. the following day. Other students were used as pupils for the practical teaching practice at night. Results of the teaching were released a few hours after the last student/teacher. The two or three days exercise was very hectic and anxious period for the candidates and the College authority. Nevertheless, we always had the presence of mind. I taught “Telling the Time”

to a Standard I class. I was among the successful 20 out of 26, who did the test.

From November to December of 1954, we sat for the Grade III Teachers' Examination and dispersed to our various homes. Having been trained, we were to check up our postings in our respective parishes. Usually the postings would be out within the third or fourth week of December.

Earlier in the year we were told of a new policy on Teacher Education, which made provision for allowing the graduating Grade III students, who performed exceptionally well to continue with the Grade II studies instead of the mandatory two years teaching break before going back for the Higher Elementary (HE) course. Thus, such students would do STRAIGHT COURSE rather than the normal break, two years a piece, which was challenging. The number of students who may qualify for the Straight Course was purely speculative.

The Marian Year and the Encounter with the Military

Other interesting aspects that affected my life in 1954 included: the Nigerian Army tour of various parts of the country; the Marian Year Congress; the birth of Maria Uchenna Ekuma in May, 1954 and the formal wedding of her parents, Mr and Mrs, B.A. Ekuma in December, 1954.

The military tour gave me and other students the first opportunity of seeing and meeting the Nigerian soldiers in real life. Before then we only heard of them, read about them and saw their pictures or photographs. Once in a while we saw them in films (cinema) during film units mobile cinema tours. I recall that between 1940 and 1945, Nigerians in the British Army came home on leave wearing the military dress. But they were few and their period of leave far between.

So, seeing over a thousand uniformed soldiers was very exciting. Besides, we saw them march, play football with our College team and mix with us ordinarily. But they used their fists very freely at the slightest provocation with such funny jargons as: “I go pieces your mouth. For three moon I never fight”. However, their officers were readily on hand to caution and discipline any of them who actually molested any non-military person. After a week’s camping in our College premises, the soldiers marched away with their loads on their backs and their heavy boots in unison causing vibrations nearly a mile away.

The Marian Year was in honour of the appearance of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Lourdes. The Catholic Church worldwide organized Congresses at Diocesan levels. That of Ogoja Diocese was at Ogoja, the headquarters. Delegates from places over a hundred miles from Ogoja attended the Congress. The few school buildings in St. Benedict’s Primary School, Ogoja, all classrooms and open spaces in St. Thomas College compound formed the camping ground for those religious delegates. And the occasion was in May with its early rains. All participants enjoyed the showers of rain, which was regarded as blessings from above. I was at Ogoja, live, for the historic congress.

It was in that year and in the month of May, 1954 that Uchenna Ekuma was born to Mr. and Mrs. B.A. Ekuma as the second daughter and child. The couple wedded in the Catholic Church, Ajalli in December 1954 i.e. after the second child. Some twenty-one years later in May, 1975, Maria Uchenna Ekuma and I were undergraduates together at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. She studied Food and Nutrition (Food Technology) while I read Education/English.

The Christmas holiday of that year, 1954, was full of anxiety and hope. Anxiety for those few of our batch, who would be selected

to continue in the Higher Elementary class and the likely Station/Parish one may be posted to in the coming year as Trained Teacher. The hope was there for any of the alternative choices. If one was called back to continue for Higher Elementary or posted to teach in any Parish, one had the hope of doing something in the New Year.

The Christmas day came and passed and there was no news from the Parish Priest. All communications then was through the Parish Priests. On Boxing Day, 26/12/54, I had met one of my classmates from Edda, Francis K. Okoro, who told me he had received a letter to report to the Parish Priest, St. Mary's Parish, Afikpo. That made me more anxious. I had to meet Mr. Emmanuel Ama Nwachi of Mgbom, the third person in our set from this Parish to know his position. He, like myself had not got any letter. The year was fast ending. The New Year was at hand and schools were to re-open in the second week of January. It was an unusual situation. Those for continuation used to know it about the middle of December to enable them prepare. But it was already the last day of December and no news about my fate. I did not lose hope for something to do in the New Year, though, I kept the usual midnight vigil to welcome the New Year.

1955 – Toward a Bigger Teacher

Saturday, 1st January, 1955 I attended the customary New Year Day Holy Mass. I had to wish the Parish Priest, Rev. Fr. Mac Namara, a Happy New Year. After the pleasantries I turned to leave when he retorted: "Wait, Gabriel, what is happening to your letter of posting! That question on a New Year Day was unexpected from my Parish Priest and certainly very embarrassing to me. I became more confused but managed to force a smile and replied, "Father I was just about asking you of the letters posting us to the Parish". In a rather derisive laughter, he giggled and opened his incomplete set of teeth browned by cigarette smoke: "Well Gabriel, I haven't got any. May be you have been posted elsewhere" he concluded and moved fast towards "Fathers'

House”. Crest fallen but determined not to be weighed down by the uncertainty of the New Year, I gaily joined those returning to the village after the Mass.

I managed to have a very Happy New Year Day with friends as I did all I could to hide my unhappiness and anxiety over the uncertainty of my fate that year. The first week of January dragged through without news.

On Saturday, 8th January, 1955 evening, I went to the Mission for a routine visit. The long expected letter had just been handed over to the Parish Priest the day before. Gleefully, the Parish Priest’s Assistant, Rev. Fr. H. Bradley passed on the letter to me. It read:

St. Thomas’s College, Ogoja,
3rd January, 1955.

Dear Gabriel,

I am inviting you back to the College this year to take the Teachers’ Certificate Grade II Course. Please inform me before Jan. 12th if you intend accepting the invitation.

In this regard, I would like to point out that at a Board of Governors Meeting held in December, it was decided that henceforth all students should pay fifteen pounds school fees.

Yours Sincerely,
(Sigd) J. C. Young
Principal.

For a few minutes, I stood glued to where I was. My throat was dry, I read the letter twice more over and yet couldn’t make up my mind on what was the import of the content of the letter. The Assistant Parish Priest broke the silence. He said, “Yes, Gabriel, you will be going back to the College for your Higher Elementary. You will be

a big teacher then”. A little punch of his fist on my left shoulder jolted me back and I involuntarily said: “Thank you Father. Good Night, Father”. As I sauntered away, I gave the 8”x13” sheet of paper two folds. That was a bitter sweet package for me.

About fifteen minutes later I was at Amaizu. I located Mr. Abani, M.S.C. I greeted him and handed over the letter to him. Immediately he read the first paragraph he shouted, “Very good, Agwo. Congratulations! Shake me. Go and inform your mother. First thing on Monday, take the acceptance letter to the Parish Priest, who will send it to Ogoja. You can even send a telegram on that Monday. It will get to Ogoja before Wednesday, 12th January!”

When I made no reply he looked at me again and asked, “Why are you looking sad? I couldn’t restrain the hot tears that rained from my eyes. A flash back on my P.T.C. course and the two previous years’ experience in the College revived grief in me. As on that 8th day of January, 1955, I was still owing St. Thomas’s College some eighteen pounds as outstanding debt from books and other materials supplied to me on credit! By that invitation to get back to the College, I was to start with clearing old debts. Worse still, more expensive books were needed for the Grade Two Teacher course in addition to the new creation of fifteen pounds school fees a year!! To further worsen the situation, the allowances normally paid to Student Teachers in the Grade II Course, who had taught for at least two years as Grade III Teachers before the Course, would elude me. These thoughts and more concretized in my mind’s eyes and made me feel it was a mission impossible. Nevertheless, I braced myself at once and told him I was imagining what my mother’s reaction would be over the piece of news. He assured me we would go together to inform her of it. Throughout that night, I dreamt dreams about the letter and the financial involvement. Who would bell the cat?

As I had known my mother very well, I decided to see her alone at Egeburu very early in the morning. Before she could get out of bed (it must have been before 5:30 a.m.) I was knocking at her bamboo door. The first knock and my saying: “Mama, unu nnaa” made her say in a shrill voice: “Nna, o gini (father, what is it)?” I was told I was her own father, who reincarnated as her son. I replied mildly: “Odighi, gbahaa ulo” (nothing, open the house).”

She reached for matches and lit the small hurricane lamp always beside her bed at night. I forced myself to smile while I greeted her the second time on entering the house and sitting on the low stool she used to sit while making pots. In the night and as I was going that early morning, I had rehearsed what to tell her. I began: “Mama, I could not come last night as I promised. The Rev. Fr. at New Site sent for me to give me a message from our College at Ogoja. The result of the examination we sat for about three months ago has been released. I passed very well.” She straightened herself on her mud bed and with both hands stretched upwards she said: “Obasi n’elu, ekele kweri Ngi. Nna, idi ike. Agwo Anigo di m, I mu enya na maa (God above, I thank you. My father, you have done well. Agwo Anigo, my husband, your eyes are open in the land of the spirits).”

It was then the time to touch the troublesome spot – my return to the College and the financial implications. In a quite relaxed mood I told her that: “Because I did so well I was among the few ones being asked to come back to the College to study higher for another two years. In the next two weeks we shall be required to report at the College.” I then lied by telling her that most of the things we shall need I have them already, but quickly added: “Before the day we are expected to go, I will look for some rams from among the sheep and sell.”

I stole a look at my mother’s face and she was steadily watching

the hurricane lamp losing its brightness to the overshadowing daylight. I requested her to put out the lamp. She rather lowered the flame saying she would make fire with it. In a fairly consoling voice, she said: “God our Creator and your dead father will always guide you. You shall not have any obstacle in your studies. You hardly stopped breast feeding when your father sent you to school. You must continue and complete the book assignment your father sent you. Today is Sunday your church day. Any time from today’s evening, go round the places the sheep move around and see how many of the rams you can catch. When it is getting to the day you will leave, remind me.”

I heaved a sigh of relief. She had welcomed the piece of news without really realizing the implications. The way she received it and called on God and my dead father who had died some ten years earlier, to guide and protect me was enough impetus for me. I dared not falter again. My mind was made up and I trusted firmly in God for the future.

In the next few days, the news spread like wide fire that Anigo Agwo was going back to College to become a Higher Elementary teacher. Meanwhile, I had met with and discussed with Ama Nwachi about our preparations for returning to Ogoja. He had no problems at all as both of his parents were still alive, strong and rich by Ehugbo standards. He, Ama Nwachi Emmanuel, commonly called “E.A.” was usually boisterous, made great news of it. In any case he was older than myself in age and very often reminded me of it.

Later on Sunday 9th of January, I went to Amangwu Nkpoghoru to inform my in-law Mr. John Otu (Atuu) of the offer. He, a one year plus Higher Elementary teacher was so excited and almost confounded that “this boy, who was fetching water for me in the College would soon become an HE teacher like myself”. He called his wife, my younger step sister, Julia Ugwome Otu (nee Agwo)

and told her of it. Her joy knew no bounds and for the first time in life, she grabbed me in ecstasy and nearly pushed me down. Ordinarily she kept a safe distance more out of her respect for me as her 'father' alive than fear. John ordered all sorts of drinks in his room even though he knew drinks (mia) did not interest me as such. He insisted I must drink beer that day to celebrate the news. He wanted me to know that, that marked my becoming a 'big man' as a prospective H.E. teacher. For the first time in my life I had a sip of beer. It tasted like mini akoi (liquid from banana stem). After about an hour, I found I was able to consume a half pint of the stuff despite myself. Mr. Otu had to see me off as he slapped and stamped his feet between conversations. I must say I felt high that day though in my subconscious mind I was locked up in thought on how to solve the financial problem associated with the chase for higher greatness.

Within a week I had to take one of my friends and age mate, Ezeali Okpani (Oji Oso) to help me catch four rams for sale. A good sized ram (ebulu) could be sold for between seven shillings and six pence and ten shillings (one naira) depending on the season/time of the year. From the sale of the rams, some of my mother's farm crops and stored earthen pots in addition to cash gifts from well wishers, I was able to raise eight pounds (sixteen naira). Ogudu (nwadim), then a bicycle repairer cum rice farmer at Enyibuchiri, Ikwo requested me to branch to his station on my way to Ogoja. He promised to help me with some money.

By the third week of January 1955, I was on my way to Ogoja to continue my studies. In obedience to Ogudu's wishes, I made a stop over at Abakaliki. I sent words to him and he had to come to Abakaliki to convey me on a bicycle to his station some fifteen miles away. The bicycle journey is better imagined than described. We walked more than a third of the distance due to rugged roads and hills. In any case, it was delightful doing the journey especially

as it was the only sure means of transport over there at that time. After two days of enjoying real natural bush life, I was brought out to Abakaliki to continue the journey. I was richer by two pounds (four naira) with a promise that he would pay my second term's fees of five pounds.

Back in St. Thomas's College, Ogoja that late January, 1955, after under two months absence, the atmosphere seemed changed. As Higher Elementary Students, we were quartered in dormitories, which were more spacious with a few unoccupied stores that could be used as study rooms. Occasionally, we could study in the dormitories – usually at weekends and holy days of obligation. Besides, the dormitory was very close to the Principal's residence separated only by a tennis court with grass lawns around it. We were then exempted from fetching firewood for the College kitchen.

Within the first two days, I discovered that we were nine of us out of thirty in our former final Grade III Class, invited to take the Teachers' Certificate Grade II Course: (1) E. A. Nwachi from Ehugbo, (2) E.S.A. Okorie from Akaeze (3) Patrick N. Orji based in Abakaliki, (4) Solomon Anozie based in Abakaliki, (5) Fabian Ellah from Obudu, (6) Samuel Agbor from Ikom, (7) Christian Ozor based in Abakaliki, (8) Gabriel Agwo from Ehugbo and (9) Albert Oyiogu based in Abakaliki. Twelve Grade III Teachers who had been teaching for upwards of two to seven years had been re-admitted to do the same course with us. When fully constituted, the HE I class was thus made up of twenty-one students of ages ranging from twenty to thirty-five. Of the twelve old Grade III teachers, five were from the Western Cameroon, which was still part of Eastern Nigeria administered by the British Government.

For two weeks the number of students to be in our class was not confirmed. That arose, we were informed, from the delay at the Enugu end, the then headquarters of Eastern Region in processing

the previous year's Grade III results. It was to make sure anyone who had not passed the exam was not allowed to be registered in the Higher Elementary Class. In previous years students had been invited to do the Grade II course just to discover that about half way in HE class, they failed the Grade III exams, thus complicating issues for both the school authorities and the affected students. By mid-February, the four classes: Elem I, Elem II, HE I and II were set for serious studies. None of the classes was more than a stream of thirty students. In fact, some classes were as few as eleven students.

The average yearly college student-population in St. Thomas's College, Ogoja, was between a hundred and a hundred and twenty during my four years (1953 to 1956) unbroken stay there. That population greatly enhanced effective teaching, learning and discipline.

In this new higher class, the Principal, J.C. Young and later Rev. Fr. Mac Cabe did everything to allay my fears about my old debts to the College. I, of course, paid the first term's fees of five pounds. Textbooks and writing materials in addition to any required tools for class work were supplied without comment on the outstanding debts. All that was required of me and a few others like me, was to take record of things supplied and their prices. So the initial anxiety and the reluctance intermixed melted away within the first month. But it was short lived.

About the last week of February, news filtered through to me that Ogudu Obioh – the one who gave me two pounds with a promise to pay my second term's fees of five pounds had died rather mysteriously. He, in the company of Mr. Chukwu Idume (Ogbeka) had travelled to Aba to buy a lorry. While there he fell sick and before the next morning he died. That piece of news unnerved me. For a better part of a week I wept secretly and bemoaned his death. Luckily, the religious atmosphere in that Mission College helped

me get over the grief sooner than what it would have been. I rather resorted to praying for his soul. I assumed that his promises to me were as good as fulfilled. He was then just engaged to be married. The one person his death drew so much tears to my eyes whenever I remembered her was Anwara Obioh (Anwara Oti) later Felicia Anwara Agwo. She was the last and only daughter in their family by the same father. She was then in Elementary three in primary school and specially beloved by Ogudu. In 1954 their elder brother Ikwo Oti (Oko) born at Ubam had died. The grief was hardly over when Ogudu's death occurred. Poor little girl! I prayed I could be of help to her whenever I was in the position to do so. It appears the Good Lord in His mysterious ways did grant that request some five years later.

The following Easter holiday was nothing to write home about. The two weeks break at home passed away solemnly as most of it was in grief with the bereaved sister in their Ubam residence. The situation was worsened by Oyim Oti the next elder brother of Anwara. He was more concerned with what the native juju priest had to divine as the cause of death and what happened to the money he took to Aba for the supposed purchase of the lorry. He alone knew the outcome of that wild chase.

As usual, I managed to get back to the College at the beginning of the second term. I had a dialogue with the Principal and he correctly appreciated the situation. I was assured of the completion of the course provided I passed my exams and obeyed the College rules and regulations. I settled down for real academic business.

About the middle of May, the result of the Grade III Teachers' Certificate Examinations of the previous year was released. As anticipated, all nine of us doing the continuous course were successful. We became qualified to be registered in part A in the Register of certificated teachers of Nigeria. However, it was not

until June 1960 that the actual registration was concluded with my Registration Number ER/A/55/7538 with effect from 1st January, 1955. Thanks be to God.

In fact, it was only after the release of the result that the twelve other members of our HE I class stopped teasing us. They had all along reminded us that we were not certificated teachers but just CTR, that is ‘C’ trained or trained ‘C’ teachers. They were already salary earners even as students in the College. They, therefore, felt more secure in the academic world than us. As obvious as that was, we consoled ourselves we were younger and aimed higher than Higher Elementary Teachers’ Certificate, which most of them had as the apex of their educational qualification.

The CTR Saga

If a Grade III trained teacher couldn’t pass the required number of compulsory and optional subjects to merit the certificate, he bore the qualification, CTR and had a special salary scale as a classroom teacher. If he attempted it three times without success, he was prohibited from repeating the exam. His grade as a teacher would remain CTR for life except he was awarded Grade II certificate after over ten years of teaching and on application and recommendation by the manager of his educational zone. A CTR had little or no honour as a teacher.

Here, I would like to comment on a universal idea then about teachers and their training institutions. Up to the mid-fifties, it was a common assumption that anybody who was admitted into a teacher training institution was not a university material. Such a person’s educational qualification terminated with the Teachers’ Grade II certificate or at best with the Grade I teachers’ certificate. In other words, the Teachers’ Training College (T.T.C.) was a terminal course. It was assumed no teacher then could get admission into

any university. But an incident in the two previous years, 1953 and 1954, opened our minds for higher ambitions. In September, 1953, Messrs Michael O. Chukwu and Sunday Chukwu both of Amaizu, Ehugbo (Afikpo), and Higher Elementary Teachers were sent to Cork, Ireland by the Bishop of Ogoja Diocese for their first Degree in the University.

After what was described as brief illness, our renowned History Master, Mr. T.O. Nnaemeka of Nnewi, died. It coincided with the return from Ireland of Mr. J.U. Odey, an ex-seminarian of Obudu origin. He had about a month earlier completed his degree course in Humanities or B.A. General as it was then known to us. Because of the serious vacuum created by the only one history teacher in the College and his missionary disposition to help out especially in the final year classes, Mr. Odey had to forgo his due post graduation holiday. By that single action, Mr. John U. Odey became the only African graduate on the staff of seven, the first indigenous Vice Principal and later the first Nigerian Principal of the College.

In some of the many digressions that characterized Mr. Odey's lectures, he made us to understand that teachers of our calibre could become university graduates. He cited very remote examples of people who passed through the teacher training colleges in other parts of Nigeria and overseas that were then University graduates. He even mentioned the previous year's case of the Chukwus of Afikpo currently in Cork University, Ireland. Though he did some casual teachings as a seminarian in training, he was not a professional teacher as such. So with that knowledge and well stocked College library at our disposal, a few of us swore to be graduate teachers in no distant future. And the good Lord heard our prayer.

To generate a healthy academic competition and progress in class, most of us, mainly the nine continuous course students, undertook extra exercises in Arithmetic and English. We had to solve every

sum set in C.V. Durell and Shillings Arithmetic. P.B. Ballard was a supplementary textbook. The exercise in the General Arithmetic for Schools by Clement V. Durell were graded under minimum course, extra practice and advanced with a copious appendix. It was a five hundred and seventy two-page book excluding the answer section at the back. As a habit, we made sure that after every siesta, which was, of course, compulsory, there must be one Arithmetic problem on 'Orji's Board' (named after one of us, Patrick Orji later known as Nzebunachi Oji, backing the wall on which the board was mounted). It was not used for normal class work. The problems served as a warm-up exercise. Those of us interested in that exercise would set to solving the problem on entry into the classroom and would turn to a member of the known circle and ask: "What did you get?" If there was any difference one or two others would be contacted very politely and noiselessly. If there were any general differences in the answer then further discussions and solution would wait till the next break period.

For English Language problems mainly on the grammar aspects – analysis/parsing – those were discussed in groups during 'prep' periods. I owe most of my later academic achievements to the self-given task of being part of a brain-storming group in that class. A score of years from our HE I class, the least educational qualification any one of us had was the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) or its equivalent. Four, including my humble self, became university graduates in various fields while one of us (Oji), in addition, got a PhD in Linguistics. Thanks to the sound background we had in St. Thomas's Training College, Ogoja, Cross River State. The virile seed must have been nursed to a stable state in the HE I class of 1955.

Meanwhile, the then Prefect Apostolate, Monsignor Thomas MacGettrick was on 22nd May, 1955 consecrated the first Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Ogoja, thus ending her dependence

on Calabar since 1920, that is, after thirty-five years association. However, Ogoja had been a Prefecture out of Calabar since 1938.

The UNICEF Milk Saga

In that year, 1955, the UNICEF, an agency of the UNO decided to help nourish nursing mothers and children in the Commonwealth of Nations of which Nigeria was one. The organization shipped tons of canned/pasturized milk in one pint tins for distribution – free of charge – to Nigerian mothers, school children, students and infants. The free gifts were sent through health and education ministries throughout the country.

Strange enough, that well-intentioned gift was bedeviled by very vicious and wicked propaganda. News went round that the milk was poisoned and meant to sterilize the women and render the men impotent. For school children and students, the milk was said to contain substances that could dull the brain and stunt the power of reasoning. And for unborn babies and infants the milk was said to possess ingredients capable of deforming them. Even some of the few news media made comments that suggested to the regional and federal governments to carry out further investigations on the bases and sources of the very magnanimous gifts. At that time, a tin of milk of that size cost between six pence and one shilling. The value of this could be imagined when considered that a six pence loaf of bread then could comfortably feed a family of four. Any person to receive the milk was assigned between five and ten tins. The unfortunate rumour embarrassed and upset the Nigerian government and well-meaning people in the country.

Through her young politicians and the government information services including public addresses, demonstrations and mobile film shows, counter campaigns were carried out throughout the country. It took quite some time and money to convince people to

accept the milk. Those of us in school and by the very nature of the religious atmosphere were coaxed to accept the gift. It was a high quality milk, we later discovered. Some hospitals and educational laboratories carried out tests and confirmed that the milk was of a high quality. Even then, most of the mothers and children for whom the milk was sent to were denied it. As a result of the stigma already attached to it, some of the containers were abandoned and later buried or thrown into the sea. It sounds like a fairy tale! But it happened in 1955 in Nigeria. Thanks be to God I was not deceived too. We consumed lots of it in the College.

An outstanding extra-curricula activity I was deeply involved in that year was my election as the President of the College Senior Debating Society. In that capacity, one could be equated to a micro college orator. It involved presiding over intra and inter-college debates where the Principal, Staff and outside guests were invited. Invariably, impromptu speeches and vote of thanks were delivered by the President. It was a very challenging job. I thank God I gave dignity to the post and earned a commendation award in our final year.

At the end of that 1955, while we were doing our end of the session examinations, my childhood friend, Chief Lawrence E. Oko a.k.a. Oko Ngodo was sitting for his Grade II Teachers' Certificate papers in the same College.

1956 – My Final Year as a Grade Two Teacher in Training

This final year in school appeared to be a shorter year than others. It was full of activities – accelerated lectures by tutors and extra study hours in the day and at night plus taking of practical examinations. Within the second and third terms of the year, we had to take three practical examinations and the main written tests in fifteen primary school subjects.

The practical examinations were in Physical and Health Education (P.E. for short), Agricultural Science and Practical Teaching. The practical Agric. Science test came up in late May when crops and flowers were easily available for collection and analysis. One Mr. Ekere of the School of Agriculture, Umuahia, conducted the test. It involved the display of selected leaves, stems, roots, flowers and insects for identification, labeling and or comments. Some of the roots and or leaves were infected by crop/plant diseases and students were expected to classify such infections. Such detailed observations led to our extra interest in crops, plants and microbes generally. No wonder most of us, including myself, developed great love for gardening and farming. Our Agric. teachers, Messrs S. E. Effem of Itigidi and A. U. Agwu of Ohafia were such masters of the subject that we felt insulted by simple demands of the practical exams. At the end we scored hundred percent pass – most at credit levels.

Though the Physical Education test was part of the practical teaching, it was treated as a separate paper. Mr. E. A. Akisot, our Handicraft and P.E. teacher (CV teacher), was really good. Despite the fact that we were aware, as Grade III teachers already, we were his professional seniors, we obeyed, loved and respected him. We took his orders and even punishments, with smiles. Our love for the subject teacher was reflected on our performance in exams. None of us was referred in the subject.

The Practical Teaching itself was very unpredictable because of the mode and nature of the conduct of the exam. Subject matters to be taught were given to student-teachers less than twenty-four hours to the time of actual teaching. Those of us having surnames beginning with ‘A’ and therefore first to be assigned subjects were always hard hit. That was the case again. Worse still, the subject matters were, in most cases, vague and far-fetched. There were therefore the problem of correct interpretation and effective delivery of the

lessons. We had such topics as “The Immensity of the Universe”, “Deep Sea Fishing”, “Pleasant Surprise”, and “Market Scene” among others to be taught as Geography or English lessons. My lot was “Deep Sea Fishing” to a Standard VI class. Thanks be to God I came out of it with a good pass. Four out of the twenty-one in our class couldn’t make it. They were to repeat Practical Teaching the following year in their stations.

A naughty aspect of Practical Teaching was the deliberate attempt by some primary school pupils to destabilize student-teachers while teaching. One Joseph Elemei was notorious for failing student-teachers. They did that through asking foolish questions or making various types of noise to test if such a student-teacher was capable of maintaining discipline while lesson was going on. Some nervous teachers did fall victims to such pranks and had to repeat the exam. In order to avert such a disaster, some weak student-teachers actually organized gifts for the troublesome pupils before the lesson started. The most effective remedy for such threats was to identify such miscreants, isolate them and tell the class teacher to warn them. Asking such evil minded pupils questions in class also did the trick.

During the year, virtually every one of us doing the Continuous Course was very confident of passing the Higher Elementary examination. It was a matter of how many credits to collect and in what subjects as we felt we had covered all the necessary grounds.

At that time “distinction” terminology had not been introduced in the teachers’ examination. “Credit” was the highest. The four known categories of results expected after a teachers’ certificate examination were: credit, pass, referred or failed. To obtain credit then, one had to score up to seventy-five percent; pass was anything from 40/45 to 74. Other sub and internal details were “good pass”, “average pass” and “poor pass”. A reference meant that the candidate did not obtain pass marks in up to four of the

required minimum seven subjects, provided that he passed at least three of the compulsory subjects. A failure meant that the candidate failed two or more of the five compulsory subjects. In other words, the candidate must have failed two or more government approved compulsory subjects irrespective of his performance in the optional subjects.

The government approved five compulsory subjects were: English Language, Arithmetical Processes, History, Geography and Practical Teaching. For our own College, a Roman Catholic Mission School, it was additionally compulsory that the students must enter for Religious Knowledge and English Literature. These two we referred to as “optionally compulsory” subjects. A candidate from the College must sit for them among the optional subjects. That is to say that the minimum seven subjects were already chosen for the candidate. He was then free to add three or more to get a maximum of ten subjects allowed candidates. The list of subjects to choose from included: Agricultural Science, Vernacular (Igbo, Efik, Yoruba and Hausa), Practical Mathematics, Advanced History, Advanced Geography, Music, Handicraft and Fine Art. In all, fifteen subjects were provided for in the school curriculum for the Higher Elementary Certificate Examination.

A rather nasty aspect of the HE exam was the condition attached to repeat of papers. A candidate who failed the exam i.e., who could not score pass mark in up to three of the five compulsory subjects had to repeat the entire exam, including the subjects he passed even at credit level! Whether it was Reference or Failure, the candidate had a total of three attempts to make it i.e. two more times after that in the College. If he could not make it after those attempts his chances were exhausted. He would then remain permanently a CTR or grade III trained with a definite salary scale lower than a Grade II Teacher. However, after about ten years in the field, such a CTR or Grade III Trained Teacher may apply to the appropriate government

department with a recommendation from the School Manager for an award of the HE Certificate. If eventually granted, such a grade II teacher with an award certificate had certain limitations. He was not permitted to head a senior primary class i.e. Standard IV then nor teach those subjects he did not pass to the senior primary classes. Nevertheless, his salary as a HE teacher was not affected once the award was granted. Generally, it was a position no young person liked to be.

The Visit of Queen Elizabeth II

In the midst of the HE final year academic work, I was chosen as one of the ten students from St. Thomas' College, Ogoja to represent the College in Enugu for the Queen of England's royal visit to Eastern Nigeria. We were quartered in Queen's College, Enugu. It was a three-day affair – one day each for going and returning and the other day for the civic reception at the Stadium. It was a memorable occasion. That 1956, marked her fourth year as the Queen of England having been coronated in June, 1952. Other places she visited in Nigeria were Lagos, Ibadan and Kaduna.

The months of June to November seemed less than six months which they were. We drew up individual private study time tables, which made provision for group discussion periods. From our tutors we requested for and were given extra assignments especially during the months of August and September. The whole of October and part of November was used for revision of the previous year's work. From about the middle of November till the final written exams in the month of December, group discussions were the in-thing. Four or five students formed a group. Each of the compulsory subjects were adequately tackled. Possible questions on the subjects were given out to members of the group to prepare. That involved reference to class notes and or relevant textbooks on the subject matter. While other members of the group were asked to read up assigned

topics, the individual who was given a definite topic was expected to lead the discussion at the subsequent meeting. Such a member was required to research into the topic and give summary. Some provided mnemonics for memory guides. For example a mnemonic for things to remember in giving a Geographical description of a region was PCVAHO standing for Position, Climate, Vegetation, Animal, Human life and Occupation. Members of a discussion group therefore looked forward to memory guides from each discussion leader. Such discussions paid off handsomely. While there were no stereotype answers to questions, members had enough material for doing justice to any questions asked at the examination. By the time the actual exam came up, most of us, but particularly members of our discussion group, were quite prepared for it. It was like every other class test. After the two weeks war of wits, every member of the five-man discussion group was confident that the battle had been well fought and must be won. By the grace of God we had the desired reward.

Whenever the thought of our HE certificate exams results flashes through my mind, I remember two outstanding incidents: the first was the one that concerned one of our photographic brained classmates Justus. He was the Senior Librarian and could be said to have read all relevant textbooks in the College library, which was by then standard. He would commit to memory, line by line, and repeat same, what various authors said about a topic. His problem was how to choose what to include or exclude within the specified time. A rather peculiar thing with him was that close to a promotion or a certificate exam, he would anticipate and actually had a day or so severe headache. Then he would say he was fully prepared for the exam.

It happened that in that very important academic milestone, he hadn't his usual gauge headache. He expressed disappointment. Curious enough but to the delight of some members of our class,

the year's questions were such that did not give scope for rote answers. They required reasoned and logical answers. They needed the candidate to show he had internalized what he was putting down as answers. He had to use his own words sort of. And it turned out that despite his four credits in the certificate exam, he failed English Language and therefore had a reference. It sounded like a fairy tale but it was a fact that had many lessons to teach humanity. A little more on this later.

A second incident was that of an ace college footballer. He was repeating one of his referred papers in our final year. Half way during the exam he fell asleep while sitting in the position of a candidate writing a test. About five minutes to the full time, the invigilator started announcing, at a high pitch, that candidates should tie up their papers for submission. He was awakened by the announcement. He broke down in tears especially as that was his last chance in the exam. Information has it that he was later on awarded the certificate. I learnt that a few years later he was awarded an N.C.N.C scholarship to study medicine in Western Germany. By the 1980s, he was already a medical doctor with the Cross River State Government. That is fate and life. Thanks be to God.

On the lighter side, we had periods of relaxation and un-official social interaction. It was a taboo for boys and girls to be seen together by the College authorities chatting without express permission. Up to the period of the Nigerian Civil War, St. Thomas' Ogoja was an all-male College. Three or four avenues usually lent themselves to semi-official interactions with Convent students of Mount Carmel, Ogoja. One Miss Maria (as we knew her then) a sister to my friend, Oko Ngodo was the Headmistress in the primary school section. During free days – once a month – those of us from Ehugbo took our friends to visit our sister at the Convent premises. There and then it was possible to exchange greetings un-hampered.

During football matches, especially in the primary school field, we were free to watch the matches together without questions or punishments. Of course, occasional Holy Masses brought the two groups together. Though there were specified places for each group to sit in the Church, the after-Mass greetings were overlooked as long as they were brief before each group lined up for controlled march back to their institutions. At weekends and Holy Days of obligation, some students who wanted a change of atmosphere had the opportunity to stay for sometime down the College source of water supply. The female folks also drew their water from the same source. It was a daily affair but during weekdays their times to fetch water from our spring were periods we should either be at siesta or at prep. Weekends and free days had no such restrictions even though they were supposed to be led to the source of water by prefect escorts.

When it is recalled that we all – male and female students – spent our holidays together at home it is difficult to understand why such restrictions were necessary during the term. Looking at it carefully, the school authorities were doing their own part of the upbringing while the parents and guardians did theirs at home during the holidays. The moral rectitude then was very high and we enjoyed the honest obedience we exhibited at home and at school. What a change now? How much obedience do parents and guardians get from their children and wards now? C'est dommage – It is a pity!

1956 marked another significant mile post in my academic journey. The end of the Grade II exams was the beginning of an indefinite long holidays from uniformed studentship. There were some two weeks to 'kill' before the Christmas day. I was able to collect a few shillings from my mother and with it I travelled to Ajalli in the then Onitsha Province to spend sometime with Mr. Bernard Aluu Ekuma.

He was a teacher in the Government school there. I had been there in December, 1954 when he wedded Mrs. Roseline Ekuma, a colleague of his. I therefore hoped for and had a very ideal surrounding to cool off. Then the school was in a fairly isolated large compound – free from village noises and the hustles of town life. Madujibeya Oko Alu, my age mate, and a student at Government College Umuahia, was also there on holidays.

As my Christmas present, Mr. Ekuma bought for me a set of three aluminium pots. They were to form part of the necessary cooking utensils I needed as a bachelor-teacher in my new station. That was a very big help for me and my mother. I therefore looked forward to 1957 with great hope. I returned home on Saturday, December 29 quite refreshed and happy. My anxious mother was delighted at the gifts I had from my hosts. But the letter of my posting had not been received. It didn't bother me then.

1957 – My Experience at St. Benedict's School Igbo in Agbo Clan

Even though there were no indications of the likely Parish I was to be posted, I encouraged my mother to begin assembling a few of the household goods I must need. Schools were billed to re-open on Monday, 21st January. The school calendar showed that.

Within the first week of January, I found time for myself and summed up the financial debts I still owed St. Thomas' College, Ogoja. It amounted to approximately forty pounds, four pounds more than the annual income of the then 'C' Teacher. As a hopeful Grade II teacher, I would earn about thirteen pounds a month i.e. one hundred and fifty-six pounds per annum. But until the results were out and we were officially placed, we were still to earn the Grade III teachers' salary, which was about eleven pounds (£11) i.e. one hundred and thirty-two pounds a year. Based on all the above calculations, it was difficult to plan on how best to liquidate the

College debts. In any case, my consolation was that since I was sure of earning regular salary from the end of January 1957, I was in a position to settle the debts without serious headache. After all, I was still a bachelor and had only my lone mother to cater for. Besides, she hardly needed anything from me as she saw in me the one charge she had to feed. She was living alone with occasional house helps from some of our distant aunts. My only sister, Ugwome Agwo (Ogbulu) was already married away.

Nevertheless, I decided to discuss the matter with my cousin, Mr. Irem Oko, then a Court Clerk based at Ugwulangwu. I couldn't say how much he was earning then but he promised to help me pay the outstanding debt with the College. He accordingly wrote a letter to the College authority giving an undertaking to that effect. I appreciated the offer and thanked him immensely. I felt relieved initially but the deal later turned out a very bitter experience.

On Saturday, 12th January 1957, I received an 8"x2" partly cyclostyled letter in the following format:

Mr. Gabriel Agwo
Supervisor of Schools
P.O. Box 52
Abakaliki 5. 1. 57

Dear Gabriel,

You are appointed to teach in Afikpo Parish.
Please report to the Rev. Manager Catholic Mission, Afikpo at your earliest convenience and not later than 21st January, 1957.

Yours faithfully
J.C.E. McNamara
Supervisor of Schools.

This was the long awaited document to confirm my engagement as a teacher with the Catholic Mission, Abakaliki Educational Zone. The Supervisor's office though based in Abakaliki served the entire Ogoja Diocese, which included all Mission Schools in Obudu, Ogoja, Kakwagon, Ikom, Bansara, Obubra, Abakaliki Parishes and the schools in the old Afikpo Division that formed the then Afikpo Parish. It stood to reason that I could have been equally appointed to teach in any of these Parishes. I therefore counted myself lucky to have been so appointed without any request or pressure.

The letter, of course, was sent through the Parish Priest. On Monday, 14th January, I went to report formally to the then Parish Priest, Rev. Fr. Bradley. He already had a full list of all the newly appointed HE teachers for the parish. Headmasters who heard about the new teachers and had need for them applied to the parish priest, who knew the areas of need. He did the posting to the various schools single handedly. The only person, who may be consulted if necessary, was the supervisor, who had the official position as the Education Secretary. Each of the parish priests was the manager of the schools in his parish. Whatever level of education or experience he had was immaterial. The schools then were the main avenue for getting converts and, of course, yielded income through affordable school fees. The government did also give grants to the schools.

At the visit, the Parish Priest asked all of us concerned to attend the usual "last Friday before re-opening date meeting" slated for Friday 18th January, 1957. Every teacher in the parish was expected to attend without fail. Immediately after the morning Mass, the list of all the schools and the teachers was ready at the notice board outside the Manager's office.

I checked and found that I was posted to teach in St. Benedict's School, Igbo, Agbo clan, about seventeen miles away from Afikpo. The school, some three miles from Abaomege was located on the

Abaomege to Itigidi Road. It was a Standard Six School and headed by my in-law, Mr. John Ogbonnia Otu of Amangwu Nkpoghoru. It was a happy coincidence in many respects. John was my master in St. Thomas' College, Ogoja in 1953, in my first year. He was the person who in January 1955 gave me the first beer I drank in living memory in appreciation of my admission to undergo the HE teachers' course. To cap it, he was married to my step sister, Julia Otu (nee Agwo). I sought him out in the midst of scores of teachers in the St. Mary's School building. He was equally thrilled at the coincidence. We agreed to move to the station the following day, Saturday, January 19, 1957.

I relayed the good news to my mother in the village. She raised her hand in praises to the Almighty God for His guidance. She thanked my dead father for being alive in the spirit world. We were to leave before eight o'clock in the morning, so my mother put in extra hours in the night to arrange my loads and prepare some dishes I could use for the next few days.

Before 7:30 a.m. we were all assembled near the Eke Market where the "Urgent Bus Service" had its park. It was a daily bus service to Abakaliki and had to pass through Abaomege – fourteen miles from Afikpo. I think it was between one shilling and one shilling and six pence we paid each because of the few personal effects we had.

It took a better part of two hours to do the journey of fourteen miles because of the delay at the Akpoha River Pontoon. The materials for a later wooden bridge were being assembled. (There was then NOT ONE INCH of tarred road in the whole Afikpo Division – from Afikpo Road (Mile Two through Akaeze, Amasiri, Afikpo to Abaomege – Ohaozara inclusive.)

We alighted from the bus at Abaomege and had to walk the three miles to Igbo where the school was located. Later in the day we

rode down on Mr. Otu's bicycle and hired some cyclists to convey our loads. Those we could not accommodate on the bicycles were left in a member of staff's residence at Abaomege for the big school boys to head-load within the following week.

Over the weekend the staff quarters were allocated and classes assigned. As the Assistant Headmaster I had the quarters next in size and convenience to that of the Headmaster. I was assigned to teach Standard Six – the final year class and the class from where those sitting for entrance examinations into secondary schools were drawn. The HM himself was to handle Standard V class. I was anxious to work. I prepared hard for it and was desirous to mould my ambitious pupils. Glory be to God I succeeded in achieving that.

I would like to recall at this stage the “coming” of Christopher Agwo (Anigo Eleje) and Francis Agwo (Anigo Akpu). In August, 1945 our father, Dick Nwata Agwo died. Christopher was still a toddler then and could have been anything between eighteen months and two years. His mother, Eleje, did not wait long. She left our compound before the end of 1946 to re-marry, it appeared. After several years she was not re-married she decided to make do with her three children, Ugwome, Anigo (Christopher) and Orie Agwo. Christopher was left with one of their male relatives, who lived with him down Calabar.

Sometime in 1955, it came to my knowledge that he, Christopher, then in Infant I, had an accident and badly sprained his waist. It affected the right hip and was heading to deformity. Acting on behalf of our deceased father I, though helpless, ordered he should at once be sent home. I was heard and obeyed. He was left in the intensive care of bone setters in Amuro Village. Thanks be to God he grew to use both legs effectively, though occasionally the slight deformity was noticed from the way he walked.

In January, 1956, while I was preparing to return to the College for my final year in the HE course, I appealed to Mr. Emmanuel Egwu Abani (a.k.a Egwu Joe) to please help me accommodate Christopher. I requested him to debit me with expenses on Christopher. His (Christopher's) mother could not accept to even buying pencil and ink, which cost about three pence then. However, Emmanuel Egwu Joe accepted to help though Christopher lived with his mother at Amuro. He bore Anigo's other school expenses including school uniform. Emma never accepted any refund from me. He said it was his own contribution and personal help to me. In January, 1957 when I resumed teaching, I had to take Christopher Agwo with me to Igbo. We lived together from then. He was in Standard I.

Francis Agwo's case, of course, was slightly different. Francis was born some six months after our father's death in August 1945. That should be about January or February, 1946. His mother, Akpu Ugbo was our father's last of his five wives. She was married in December, 1944 still living in my mother's house, as was customary, when papa died. About September/October, 1947 she left Ezi Agwo and eventually re-married to a fairly advanced civil servant, Uhiom Ibe of Ndibe. He was working at the Enegeje Oil Palm Estate, Calabar.

In August, 1955 Francis' mother was at home on a sort of maternity leave. She revealed to me that she was not happy that the man who was marrying her had changed my brother's name to Anigo Ibe instead of Anigo Agwo. I requested her to please take it as a point of duty to bring Francis home during the Christmas holidays. By the third week of December, 1955, Akpu Ugbo, her husband, Mr. Ibe, and Francis were at home on holiday. I visited them at Ndibe.

Without complaining about the change in name, I expressed my wish to help train my step brother. I had earlier got the consent of Akpu and Francis on the proposed change of abode. During my discussion with Mr. Ibe, I casually mentioned the discrepancy in

Francis's name. In a rather passive remark he, Mr. Ibe, said that the 'Ibe' surname added to Anigo was the handwork of the class teacher. According to him, he just sent his children including Anigo, to school and the teacher having known the family just assumed they (the children) bore the same surname. He, Mr. Ibe overlooked the mistake and allowed it stay. Without further comments I thanked him immensely for sending him to school in the first instance. He welcomed my proposal to take Anigo along with me. Before they returned to Calabar in January, 1956, Anigo Akpu some eleven years old, came over to stay with me at Ezi Idume.

As I must return to the College to complete the HE Course, I agreed with Emma Egwu Abani that Anigo Akpu stay with him under the direct care of his wife, Eliza, Mama Joe. Christopher Agwo lived with his mother at Amuro and visited regularly. Francis Agwo lived with Emma at Ezi Idume – my home of sojourn. Both attended Amaizu/Amangbala Primary School and taken care of by Emma at my instance. While Anigo Eleje went along with me to Igbo in January, 1957, Anigo Akpu joined us in December that year.

Fresh from the teacher training college after four solid years of studies, the passion to impart the knowledge gained was almost consuming. I had a Standard VI class of thirty: twenty-four boys and six girls. Out of these pupils, one Fidelis Egbe of Igbo Ekwurekwu was very outstanding. Not only that he was very attentive in class, he would worry me after the school periods for extra lessons and assignments. I gladly gave him the required help. He was also in the group of ten pupils who were specifically under my charge for preparations towards entrance examinations into secondary schools. Six of them, five boys and one girl, eventually secured places in secondary schools the following year. I was very happy for them.

It is worthy to note that in this year Lawrence Agwo (Anigo Ogeri) was one of the pupils in the Standard VI class I taught. He was then

living with Mrs. Julia Ugwome Otu (nee Agwo), his elder sister. It will be recalled that from April 1952 to the end of that year when I left for St. Thomas' College, I lived with Lawrence Anigo Agwo at Amangwu Edda. He was in Standard II then.

Among the members of staff who I was familiar with were, of course, Mr. J. Otu, the H/M and my in-law; Messrs Elemi (Premier), Pius Ekpe and Mrs. Mary Chukwu (nee Ngwuoke). Mrs. Chukwu lived with her husband, a Sanitary Inspector then at Abaomege – some three miles away.

A Jolly Good Time with My Mother

For about three weeks in June/July 1957 my beloved mother, Orie Otu, stayed with me at Igbo. I always recall that stay with happiness. It was the first time in my life I had the opportunity of actually caring for my mother without tears. I had the money and wherewithal then and could afford to live like a lord and I cared for her like my queen.

She visited in the midst of plenty (obiari n'uju). At a salary of over twelve pounds a month, I hardly spent half of it in a month. Barely a week after her arrival, I received the Grade II teacher's result and that meant more wealth. While she was there, I travelled to Abakaliki and bought a brand new Raleigh Bicycle (Superb). It had all the accessories – light, "king of the road" bell, hand clips full gear system, well designed seat slips and lovely pedal covers for fifteen pounds! I seemed on top of the world and my disposition generally increased my mother's happiness.

One day she actually shed tears of joy. That day I had ridden to Abaomege after school and made some purchases and came back, parked the bicycle at one end of my very large parlour. Just after leaving the things I bought on the table she softly addressed me:

“Ogbonnia (she was fond of calling me so), I sidi na obu onye nwo ugbo elu ali m (who do you say owns that bicycle)?” I didn’t fully realize the implications of that question. Fairly amused, I replied, “Mama, obu nke m (it is my own).” She added: “Onye gbayerigi nzi I ji zua ya (who lent you the money with which you bought it)?” in reply, I said to her: “Odikwagi, obu na okpogho wo n’akwu m bu ibe m weterie. Obu okpogho eka m (no one. I bought it from the money I am paid. It is my personal money).”

Not contented yet she asked again: “Obu okpogo ole bu ihe I zurua (how much did you pay for it)? “Pon irile ise (fifteen pounds),” I said to her. “Esokwa! Pon irile ise!! Ahia isi nwanyi eto, Gwa o! The bride price for three wives, waoh! Chineke d’ike. Nde nna gi riri na I mighi gba igwe n’uwaa. Onye nwo ayi, I hukwa eka. (thanks be to God. Your father’s relatives thought you would never ride a bicycle in life. Our Creator, I raise my hands in thanks).” When I looked at her she was wiping off tears of joy with the back of her hand.

The last remark by my mother reminded me of the incident after my father’s death some twelve years earlier – 1945. Among the items of property my father’s relatives carried away (as allowed then by custom) from our house was his old bicycle. So my poor mother shed tears of joy that she had lived to see me earn enough money to own my personal bicycle. What an irony of fate!

Apart from the many interesting ancient stories and history my mother delighted in telling me, her ideas and attitude towards life was funny. Shortly before she visited, I bought a ‘vono’ bed and its mattress for her use. On the first night of her stay I showed her her sleeping place. She first pressed it with her right hand then sat on it. She at once jumped up with a shout and said: “Ogbonnia, Onoriba ariba” (it is sinking). Three of us in the house laughed long and loud at her expressions and behaviour. She insisted it was too soft for

her liking. “Onotu holi holi. Madu jadafu n’aya” (it is too soft and appears to be breathing. Some one can fall through it).”

She was used to sleeping on hard mud bed and said she would rather sleep on the floor. We went into a brief dialogue. I then laid on the bed and moved about a bit assuring her she would like the change. Reluctantly she ‘sank’ into the bed and I bade her good night. When I got up the next morning at about 5:30 a.m. I was surprised she had not left the bed. I greeted her and she responded with added expressions of relaxation and said: “Ogbonnia, onobu nnaga ono n’odia ka m jije adafu. Obu na yaa ugbo unue n’atu ura okam. Obu ihe mereni unu n’arahi ura nwa Bekee (when I tried to turn in the bed, it appeared I was going to fall through. But this your kind of sleeping place makes one sleep much. Is that why you people sleep like whitemen?” I was very happy that foundation for a change had been laid through a serene atmosphere. There were some changes she resisted to the last.

While my mother then couldn’t take pap (akamu) with sugar she wouldn’t tolerate milk in it nor would she drink tea or coffee. She found it difficult to finish one whole boiled egg. She could manage fried egg but abhorred bread. She referred to it as “pagripa” the light brownish nest of praying mantis. However, four years later, there were substantial changes in her attitude towards beverages and light food.

The three weeks of my mother’s stay at Igbo was a period of intensive farm work. She planted acres of cassava farm for me. A year and a half after I had left the station I had to give part of the farm to Julia Otu.

In this year Julia was nursing her first daughter Grace Otu. She had funny ways of behaviour. She would come to my chop box and or kitchen to demand some dried meat. She would tease that the

meat was ‘looking’ at her. It was a way of showing her attachment to me and the freedom in my house. I enjoyed her presence and concern over what was happening in my house especially as a young Higher Elementary teacher and a bachelor. And the school was a co-educational one with girls almost as old as myself. In addition, there was, one mile away, a Catholic Mission Convent school, which the manager virtually handed over to us for protection and guidance. Outside the normal school hours the three female teachers had various reasons for being in our compound. We had games facilities, source of water supply and wayside kiosk for local purchases. Sunday services and occasional Masses were held in our school premises. We actually “fathered” them properly.

I recall with ecstasy an incident with the Headmistress of the Convent School, Miss Rose Mgbakor (I hope my memory of her name is right). She was an Elementary Teacher from Owerri. She had a nine or ten year old sister/maid in the lonely school compound. In the fairly large school compound there were two buildings – a four-room classroom block and a two-room staff quarters. The H/M lived in the staff quarters while the other two junior members of staff occupied a large store at one end of the school building.

The Rose Saga

One of the several weekends Rose was wont to spend away from station ended up a very sad one for her. At about 9:30 p.m. I heard a tap at my door. My house was the first on the left hand side after the school gate. I waited for the second and third knocks. I asked who that was and she said, at the third asking, called out “Rose”. Rather surprised at her presence at that odd hour, I reluctantly opened the door to let her in. It was drizzling and she was fairly soaked. She asked to be led to her station. At once I told her I could not do that because even in the day time the road to that school was not that good. It was bushy and rugged. I directed her to meet Mr. Elemi who was friendly with her and who understood the language of the

vicinity. For reasons best known to her she refused moving another step into the school compound. I offered her a bush lamp to go to her station if she insisted. She sat tight on the second back chair beside the writing table where I was. For the next one hour or so this mild drama continued. The cold air coming through the half opened door was becoming uncomfortable. I closed the door and continued writing my notes of lesson. At about 11:45 p.m. I was through with my assignment.

While at work that girl's presence gave me additional mental exercise. By family upbringing and Mission College discipline, I found myself in a very awkward situation. This girl was friendly with another member of staff, older in age but junior to me in rank and he often called me "master". Why did she refuse to go there even though he was a bachelor too? What would be his reaction to her behaviour? My younger step brother, Christopher Anigo Eleje was sleeping in the next room and probably overheard some of our discussions. Save the rickety old iron bed I was managing, there was no other bed nor mat in the house. There was however, a "me and my darling" cushion chair flanked by two school stools in the "playing ground" that was my parlour. Beside the four/five months acquaintance as professional teachers in the neighbourly school, I had no knowledge of her family or social background.

She could be anything but good, she could be a friend and a source of danger to my future life and career. How can I explain it out? What are the consequences? What must I do? By the time I finally made up my mind it was already after twelve midnight. She must stay alone. She had to manage the cushion chair or bend over the table she was sitting on till day break. She opted for the latter. I put in more kerosene into the hurricane lamp and handed over a novel – *A Basket of Flowers* – to her. I bolted the main door to the house, bade her good night and secured the door to my room from inside.

The five or so hours that followed were full of nightmares, I guess, for both of us. I got out of my bed a few minutes past five o'clock in the morning just in time to answer good morning from Christopher at my doorstep. He must have been startled by the sight of the visitor at the parlour. I opened my door. Anigo's greeting and the noise of the door must have awakened Rose. While we exchanged 'good morning' my eyes caught what looked like traces of wet tears on the table at the region of the edges where her head lay. A few overfed mosquitoes dotted the walls beside the table. The lamp was still burning bright and the novel wide open but the edge of the left bottom page was wet and slightly squeezed.

She managed a wry smile in response to mine. She barely agreed to wash her face and accept a chewing stick. Before six o'clock in the morning, I had led her to her school and met the little maid just stirring from sleep. She looked quite composed and welcomed Miss heartily. After school that same day Rose came over to our compound and reported the incident to my in-law Mr. Otu, the H/M and Mr. William Elemi. Wasn't that curious? We later joked over the incident many months after. Luckily our person to person and staff to staff cordial relationship remained cordial until I was transferred away from the school at the end of that year.

My HE Result

On Thursday, June, 6, 1957, my Headmaster Mr. John Otu was at Afikpo for the first Friday of the month and usual "accounts day". That was the popular name for our pay day, collected the letter informing me of the November/December 1956 HE results. He hurried back the following day and gleefully handed over the letter to me. It read as follows:

Agwo, Gabriel A. – C7/1342
St. Thomas' College,

Ogoja.

27th May, 1957

GRADE II RESULTS

Dear Gabriel,

I have pleasure in informing you that you have passed in your examination.

Certificates will be forwarded when they become available.

Congratulations!

Yours Sincerely,

V. Cullin

Rev. Principal.

My joy knew no bounds. My sister and everybody around hugged me. It was congratulations galore. Mr. Otu sent for drinks and his gramophone was set to dish out series of highlife tunes. We danced and cheered. Of the eight teachers in the school staff only the Headmaster and I were Higher Elementary teachers. At twenty four years of age, I was certainly among the few under thirty years HE teachers in the entire Ogoja Diocese. I was flattered by that knowledge but surely, I maintained a very level head about it. I thanked God for his blessings and kindness. I was particularly keen to get the detailed results and very anxious to inform other people at home of my success. My mother was there and had it first hand.

I applied for and got two days off duty to enable me travel to Ogoja for the detailed results. At Ogoja the detailed results revealed very shocking surprises. The first surprise concerned me. I expected CREDITS in English Language, Arithmetical Processes, Agricultural Science, Religious Knowledge and Geography, but it was only Arithmetical Processes that I had CREDIT. The others I

scored what was then described as good pass. However, I thanked God for saving me from a repeat of any sort.

When I read the comprehensive list for every member of our class I was even more thankful to our Maker for His kindness. Failures and references affected many of the students classified as ‘brilliant’. The most outstanding was that of a student we used to call “encyclopedia”, and it was in English Language that he was referred. That meant that at once he and the likes were at least one full year behind our set in grading. The whole result showed that our class scored over seventy percent pass. Everybody that passed made at least one credit. Even those who either failed or had references attained credit levels in, from one to five subjects. This student’s reference sent shock waves down my spine.

In anticipation that he must pass the Grade II Teachers’ Certificate exam he was posted to teach English Language in a Mission’s Teachers’ College, in the Diocese, but it turned out that he didn’t make it. And he was teaching English Language in the College. To worsen an already bad situation, one of the girls he had snobbed sent him a “congratulatory” message for his ‘brilliant’ success in the exams. How would one grade such a congratulatory message? The one manifest effect of this dent on his professional career was that he had to quit the classroom within a year. He did grow fairly fast in the civil service and administrative sectors of the public service. We remained great friends, anyway.

The Return of M. S. C. Abani & Michael Akpu Chukwu from England

In July, Mr. Michael Sunday Chukwu Abani and Mr. Michael Oko (Akpu) Chukwu returned to Nigeria after their four years study overseas. Both studied in Cork, Ireland but Mr. Abani did the postgraduate studies in Oxford University while Mr. Chukwu

did his in the London College of Economics. Mr. Chukwu took appointment with Ahmadya College in Lagos and Mr. Abani returned to Ogoja Diocese and was posted to St. Thomas' College as the Vice Principal.

My stay in Igbo was short-lived but thrilling. Approximately one month I bought my Raleigh Bicycle, Law Agwo was involved in an accident with it. I sent him to Afikpo with it and on his way back, less than a mile to Abaomege he missed the correct track on the linking wooden bridge. The front wheel was trapped and bent. There was a fall. He and the bicycle had injuries. That is one of the possible outcomes of having any sort of transport vehicle on the road. I, of course, quickly changed the affected parts. It was a chicken feed then.

The Marriage of M. S. C. Abani and Daphne Hunt

On Friday, 6th December, 1957, I was in the company of Messrs D.A. Ugwu, M.S.C. Abani and William Chima to welcome Daphne Hunt at the Enugu Airport. Late Michael Ogon of Ogoja was then a Parliamentary Secretary (Junior Minister) in the Eastern Region Government. His official quarters was our base. He provided the transport to and from the airport. That was the first time in my life I watched an aeroplane taking off or landing. That was also the first time I saw an aeroplane at base and a few yards from me.

At the airport Mr. Abani introduced me to Daphne as his God son. From 23rd December, 1948 I began calling Mr. Abani 'dad' as my God Father in baptism. With effect from Friday, 6th December, 1957, I began calling Daphne 'Mum' as I was quite aware they were already deeply engaged for wedding.

Yes, from towards the end of 1956, Dad, in his letters from England

regularly mentioned Daphne Hunt, an English girl with whom he was deeply in love. Until he returned, our letters (which were at least once a month) bore photographs of Daphne and their plans for marriage. On his warning, I maintained sealed lips on the issue until October/November when it was blown open at home. I received a number of uncomfortable comments and accusations from Dad's parents, brothers and close relations about the role I played. I was accused of encouraging him to marry a white woman. I personally knew how much I wrote against the idea and how black I painted the picture to him at first. When I realized he had made up his mind and had actually formerly engaged her, I gave in but politely cautioned him to do his homework very well.

I must confess he did that homework thoroughly and told the girl naked truths about Ehugbo and Nigeria. In certain aspects he exaggerated out of proportion the state of underdevelopment in Ehugbo. Both had agreed and decided the wedding must be at Ehugbo if people at home were brought to their side. It was in this role as the 'go between' person that I humbly accept I must have been useful. From about mid November, 1957 when Mr. C. A. Ugwu (Ajuka Ugwu of Ozizza – dad's close relative) came to know of the proposed marriage, he showed a very good and mature understanding of the issue. Two of us with Mr. M.O. Chukwu who was in England with the two, did the "agi-prop". Mr. Chukwu's revelations on how much he opposed it overseas and the attitude of the girl's parents disarmed all opposers. They gave in. The required atmosphere was created for Daphne's return in December. Dad's parents and Ogbeka (Chukwu Iduma) had no option.

Dan Ugwu and myself left dad and Daphne at Enugu on 6th December, 1957. At Abakaliki Dan dropped at his station while I returned to my station at Igbo Ekwurekwu. Dad and Daphne later travelled to Port Harcourt to collect her luggage that was shipped from England.

Between the 7th and the 20th of December when dad and Daphne arrived Afikpo, I was burdened with most of the plans for the wedding, which had been fixed for Sunday, December 29. Luckily primary schools closed for Christmas holidays on Friday, 13th December, 1957 so I was steady at home from that date.

At about 7.30 p.m. on 20th December, Mr. Dan Ugwu drove the pair in a hired taxi cab from Abakaliki to Afikpo, arrived at onu ogo (village's entrance of) Ezi Idume. Ogo okochi was on quite all right but they arrived in the cover of the night. A handful of us welcomed them at the onu ogo (entrance gate).

Ogbeka's two room house was the only "zinc house" in the compound. There they had to stay. A tilley lamp was provided to give her light. I think about three or four back chairs and a double cushion, dotted the unceiled parlour. The ten by ten bedroom was ceiled with mat (ute) and served by one 3"x 4" wooden window. The 'family bed' in the room covered more than half of the floor space.

On entry into the tilley lamp-lit parlour, dad and Daphne were shown the lone cushion chair to occupy. Daphne looked round the almost 'besieged' room, all the faces save dad's and mine were strange. She turned to dad and asked: "Michael, when do we continue to our home?" "Why?" dad asked, "This is our home, he retorted". "Then you haven't succeeded. You told me there was no single zinc house in your home. I was prepared for a smaller grass hut", Daphne remarked. Three of us who understood that remark laughed over it. Almost immediately dad said: "Excuse me, the taxi cab and Dan must return to Abakaliki at once. Let's see them off at the gate". When three of us arrived at the onu ogo dad addressed Daphne: "Daphne get back to the house and stay with Gabriel until I come back. It is night and females are barred from crossing this point at this time. I'll be back soon," and she said to him, "but we passed

there a while ago.” “Yes, but now the ogo is closed”, He left. It was days later she understood what “ogo closing” meant.

She and I returned to the house. It was only two weeks earlier I had met her for the first time in life. There and then the surrounding atmosphere was completely different. And we were there together for more than one hour. Having acquired enough of her native language, I discussed with her very confidently – the few occasional unfamiliar slangs and intonation notwithstanding. For a better part of an hour we discussed her experiences so far in the country within the past fortnight. Dad came back after about an hour. A few minutes later when the crowd thinned, I returned to our common room in oke (senior) papa’s house.

In late morning the following day, Saturday, 21st December, 1957, I had real ‘Cudjoe’ work to do. I was the interpreter in a closed family meeting in mama’s (dad’s mother’s) parlour. Daphne decided to personally ascertain how welcome she was to the family. Present at the meeting were the father and mother of Mr. Abani, Chukwu Iduma (Ogbeka), dad, Daphne and myself. Dad’s father, having served whitemen for many years had a smattering knowledge of English Language but could only communicate in broken (pidgin) English. Daphne addressed the father and mother-in-laws through me.

In a paraphrase, she told them how unsuccessfully Michael tried to stop their getting engaged for marriage when they were in England. She said she was aware of the attitude of Africans towards the number of children a family could have. She was prepared to have as many children as it would please God to give them. She was not for the one or two children as generally practised in her homeland, England. She said that even though she came fully prepared to marry and live with their son, Michael, she would not mind returning to England by the next plane at her personal expenses if the family

decided not to bless the marriage. She assured the family she had already started adapting herself to the common Afikpo/African diets like garri, foofoo, yam and various soup dishes. Finally, if she is accepted, she had decided to spend the rest of her life in Ehugbo with Michael as her husband. She had befriended other men and had offers of marriage before meeting Michael. Therefore, she fully understood and was committed to all that it takes for a white woman to get married to an African man.

On behalf of the family, dad's father welcomed her to the family. Having heard from her personally in their home, the family was satisfied they were not being deceived. He assured her that since they had already eaten of the food she (Daphne) prepared in the hearth (ekwu) of Michael's mother, she has become a daughter of the family. The family was looking forward to the first male child as a grand son from them in the next nine months. He blessed her in the traditional way. The church wedding was done on Sunday 29th December, 1957 in St. Mary's New Site. Reception was in palm leaves shed at onu ogo Ezi Idume.

1957 was the second year, since 1940, I never sat for any promotion, entrance nor certificate examination. The first was 1949, which I spent trying my hands on various trades as detailed in the chapter on 1949.

Election campaigns for elections into Regional Houses of Assembly, were in top gear for the polls in the following year. The political parties then were N.C.N.C, Action Group and Dynamic Party. Chief Isu Oko (a.k.a. Akpa), of Nkphoghoru was a candidate on the platform of the Dynamic Party.

The Christmas and New Year festivals that year were really festive. Dad's wedding on 29th December, added colour to the season. I played grand host to friends and relatives – young and old. My new 12"x7" German, made white transistor radio was at hand.

CHAPTER FIVE

MY TEACHING EXPERIENCE AT OBUDU: 1958-1961

Around Christmas period news filtered to me that I was being posted to Obudu to teach in the then one year old Mission Elementary Teachers' College. I was upset and complained to Messrs Otu and Abani and the manager at Afikpo. All encouraged me to go if it was true. I travelled to Abakaliki to see the Education Secretary/Supervisor, Rev. Fr. O. `Conor.

Immediately the supervisor saw me he welcomed me with a warm handshake. When I requested to know why I must not be allowed to settle down in my new station, his reply was: "Gabriel, you are the type of boys we want to staff the new Teachers' College". We discussed you and put many things into consideration. In fact, you ought to have been there from the beginning of this year. Be there by or before January 10, 1958. Congratulations. I left for home more worried about the transfer.

At home I discussed the issue with my mother. She was not happy about it as she felt that Obudu was too far away even though she had never been there. She reasoned that my station at Igbo was near enough as she could visit me from home and return the same day but Obudu was very far. Yet she couldn't imagine where Obudu is. And by then I had not been to Obudu myself. I couldn't explain but I pretended I knew it as it was not far from where I studied in the College. I succeeded in pacifying her and assured her of my regular visits.

My Movement to Obudu

In obedience to the supervisor of schools' transfer order, I collected every movable property of mine and moved to Obudu. It was a two-day journey. I went along with Christopher and Francis Agwo. We passed the first night at Dan Ugwu's residence, N0 5 Awka Street,

Abakaliki. The following morning, Friday, 10th January, 1958, we boarded an Ogoja bound five-ton lorry. We travelled in the second class section. At Okuku junction, we had to change vehicles as we still had some forty more miles to go. From Abakaliki to Okuku was sixty-six miles. So from Afikpo to Obudu, we covered a distance of one hundred and forty-six miles. Through the Ogoja-Boki Sankwala route, the mileage is different.

A little before six o'clock in the evening, we arrived the college compound about a mile to the town's motor-park from the Gboko/Tiv end of the town. I appealed to the driver to tarry a little for me to know where I was to unload my belongings. He obliged my request.

In under two minutes, I met a familiar face, Mr. Alphonsus Okwuewulu. We were colleagues in St. Mary's School, Afikpo in 1951 – my first year as a teacher. He and his house boy helped us take in my loads. After some ten minutes, Mr. Dominic Akpan, a staff in the College then and one of the senior students I met in St. Thomas' College, Ogoja, joined us in Mr. Okwu's parlour. I was already beginning to feel at home. After about thirty minutes chat both of them accompanied me to see the Reverend Principal living at the Northern end of the College compound. That was yet another old face.

Rev. Fr. O'Brien, the Principal, was one of our English Teachers during our Grade III Course in St. Thomas' College, Ogoja. In his usual humble manner, he clasped his palms, half closed his eyes and said: "Gabriel, you are welcome. Just last week I was informed of your coming to join us. You have already met Messrs Okwuewulu and Akpan. You know one another. Where have you kept your luggage? We have a little house problem which the Council will have to sort out now that you are here. Again you are welcome. Mr. Akpan, please help him settle down". I thanked him and informed

him Mr. Okwu had accommodated me for the time being.

As he was seeing us out, he informed me that one of the students I shall teach was a classmate of mine in St. Thomas'. Francis Abetiambe was the person. I didn't give it much thought but thanked him for the advance information.

Saturday and Sunday 11th and 12th January, 1958 were familiarization days at Obudu. Mr. Okwu took me round Afikpo indigenes living within the Obudu town. They included Mr. Michael Okorie Ikwegbu of Ndibe, Afikpo. He was the Principal of the Preliminary Training College (P.T.C), Obudu. His wife, Beatrice Ikwegbu, was nursing their second child, Law. Their first child and daughter was Victoria Ikwegbu (Vicky). More on this family as they affected my stay at Obudu later.

The next family was Mr. and Mrs. Benedict Oko Elem of Ukpa, Afikpo. Mr. Elem was an Agricultural Assistant II while Mrs. Ugbo Elem (nee Isu) was a Grade III teacher. It is worthy of mention that Mrs. Elem taught me in Infant I in 1940, some eighteen years earlier in Government School, Afikpo. Then she was Miss Ugbo Isu from Ngodo, Afikpo. The woman was therefore thrilled to see me occupy such a position in the teaching profession far ahead of her, my former teacher. Both at once regarded me as their son and I did everything to remain their good son throughout our stay and many years later.

Patrick Irem Oko of Amaizu Afikpo was a reputable carpenter and shared a building with the Elems. He, Patrick was of course, my closest 'brother' (nwadi) by Ehugbo tradition. He was attached to the Catholic Mission as her official carpenter.

Mr. and Mrs. John Otueke (aka Chikadibia) was also at Obudu. He was a motor-mechanic by profession while the wife was a

housewife and petty trader. Lawrence Anigo Agwo was then living with him (Chikadibia). William Umahi of Mbowo, Awgu, was a senior nurse in the Sacred Heart Hospital, Obudu. We had known at Afikpo when he was a nurse at Mater Misericordiae Hospital. Besides, he grew up and schooled at Afikpo. By that January, 1958, he was trying to learn how to settle down with a Cameroonian girl he had to marry.

Sometime in May, 2011, I had the pleasant surprise of meeting Mrs. Umahi, a great grand mother, at Afikpo North Sub Treasury when she came for pension's routine screening. That was some fifty-three years from 1958.

Mr. Emmanuel A. Agim was one of the outstanding natives I met at Obudu. We knew each other some four-five years earlier at Ogoja. I met more people later. I spent a total of four years less two months – January, 1958 to October, 1961 in Obudu. In this memoir, I shall attempt to put down the events on a year to year basis. Some events certainly over-lapped.

Before the week ending 17th January, 1958, Mr. Samuel Onyaka Mgbada of Abakaliki – then the Secretary of the Obudu County Council – informed the Principal that an accommodation space at the Council's staff quarters had been vacated for a college staff. Mr. Okwuwulu chose to continue living in the college compound. So, I had to occupy the quarters in the town – about three quarters of a mile from the school.

The house was quite large. It had two bedrooms, a big parlour and a spacious store. A little detached from the main building were the kitchen, pantry and toilet sections. About an acre of arable land lay behind the yard. Behind the garden space was the Nigerian Prisons compound. A lovely oil bean tree provided shade in front of the house. Though a building well over twenty years old, it was

well kept and away from the traffic and market noises. The prison yard's hourly bell tolls a little distance in the south, soon became part of the unnoticed noises. I quickly familiarized myself with other Council workers among whom were Messrs Undie, Bissong, Agim and Undelikwo. Mr. Undelikwo was the staff who had been re-located from the house I was assigned. Though the head of a polygamous family of many children, he was a junior staff. He was old enough to be my father. Before long we became family friends. He was very understanding.

Prior to my movement to the council quarters in the town, I met a number of the students individually and collectively outside the classroom setting. Francis Abetianbe was among the first I met even before my opening lessons. Francis himself on hearing of my posting was anxious to meet me, which greatly reduced my imaginations of his feelings. We were classmates in St. Thomas's College, Ogoja from January to December, 1953. At the end of the school year, it was customary that students who could not make the required grade for promotion would either repeat the class or, if the performance was too bad, such students were expelled. They could repeat the entrance exam at a later date.

Francis was one of those who couldn't cope and had to be dropped. So, still desirous to be a trained teacher, he was one of the pioneer students' in the Obudu (his home town) Elementary Teachers' College when it was opened in January, 1957, four years after he dropped out of St. Thomas'. The possible relationship could be imagined. Despite the attempts to narrow the teacher/student relations, he continued addressing me as 'Sir' or Mr. Agwo. We got on fine till the end of the year when he passed out.

My teaching subjects in the College were initially English Method, Arithmetic and Arithmetic Method. After Easter holidays when Mr. Okwuwulu left the College for further studies, Geography was

added to them. In addition I became the College Teacher/Librarian. I actually had the challenge I longed for. The previous year in the primary school, I made minimal references to textbooks to prepare my lessons. Most of my textbooks were never opened and I was literally on academic holidays.

As stated earlier in this memoir, 1957 was the second year I took leave of any sort of examination. 1949 was the first. That was the year after I had passed out from Primary school. I read for leisure only. So, this 1958 was a fitting warm-up year for another academic race. Having passed the English Language at the TCII level, I was exempted from the usual Qualifying Test as it was popularly known for the General Certificate in Education (GCE). It was an Overseas Examination and moderated by Cambridge University. I registered with the Wolsey Hall, London for a Correspondence Course in preparation for the GCE. I took courses in Economics, British Constitution and History of the British Empire.

I borrowed Rapid Results (Cambridge) lecture papers from Mr. Okwu to update my knowledge in Literature and Geography. One sure thing though was that 1958 was a very busy academic year for me, which eventually became a good prop for future academic achievements. In June that year, I sat for and passed GCE (O/L) in English Language, British Empire History and British Constitution. In addition to my studies, I also organized private but free classes for younger students and teachers around Obudu town. The names that come readily to my mind are Emmanuel Utande and Emmanuel Akomaye Oko both of Obudu.

Some sixteen years later, these young men had become academic doctors in their chosen fields and did approach me to show their gratitude for my kindness to them earlier in life. Emmanuel Akomaye Oko even invited me to his book launch in the University of Calabar in 2002.

The Ikwuegbu Family and I

Michael Okorie Ikwuegbu of Ndibe, Afikpo was the Principal of the P.T.C. when I was transferred to Obudu to teach in the Catholic Mission College (E.T.C.). He was a very peace loving man but happened to get married to a wife he could have wished not to come his way.

Unfortunately, I had causes to be brutally frank in telling the wife, Beatrice Ikwuegbu (nee Ukpabi) that she was a lazy woman and must change as she was still a young lady. She took it quite lightly even though she knew I was not joking. Incidentally, her husband, Mr. Ikwuegbu, enjoyed the expensive joke and was always looking forward to my visiting them. And when I did visit – usually not less than twice a week – his wife would welcome me with the statement “Nyee dim, I bia wo (my co-wife, have you come).” Before we realized what was happening, both Mr. and Mrs. Ikwuegbu always called me “nyee di”. That incidental expression persisted even after the death of Mr. Ikwuegbu some twenty years later. Even as grand parents we continued to preface our greetings or discussions with nyee di m” without bitterness or reflections. That was a very rare and unique association.

Through my close association with Mr. Samuel Onyaka Mgbada, who was the Secretary of the then Obudu County Council – the proprietor of the College in which I was teaching – I got to know the District Officer (D.O.) Mr. O. U. Ikpa of Ohafia. Before the end of the year I had become acquainted or even friendly with those who mattered in the town. I enrolled in the Local branch of the Divisional Tennis Club and could therefore solve most of my social problems at the Club’s bar counter as the Council Secretary, the D.O, the police boss and most Heads of Department were also members of the then elite club.

Mr. Fabian Ellah, a native of Ohong in Obudu, who was also my classmate for four years in St. Thomas' College, Ogoja, made my settling down in Obudu much quicker. It was an interesting experience.

Within the year, I paid constant visits to Ehugbo to assure my dear mother at home that we were getting on well at Obudu. I spent the Easter and August holidays at home. As soon as schools closed in late November, we (Christopher Agwo, Francis Agwo and myself) travelled home for holidays.

It was an historic December for me as it marked ten full years since I passed out from primary school in 1948. For the past one year I had been engaged in the training of teachers, in other words, a teacher of teachers. Above all, it was the second year so far in my life when I could comfortably say I had no financial problems. Even the occasional allowances I gave to my mother were hardly used as she always told me she had enough. There were no banks then at Afikpo and Obudu so I had no need for them. My capital expenses were on correspondence tuition fees and textbooks for the GCE examinations. In Afikpo, Obudu and other places in Nigeria, political activities were gathering momentum. The following year 1959 had been tagged a general elections year for the first time in the history of the country in preparation for the Political Independence in October, 1960. The Christmas holiday/Afikpo dry season festivals (iko okochi) was a uniquely interesting period – new social/cultural status in the making, and people plunging into national politics, which they, at best, imagined what it was all about.

I recall that the previous year 1957, Chief Isu Oko of Nkpoghoru Afikpo, among others, moved round quite a lot in a red volkswagon car soliciting support for a seat in the Eastern Regional House of Assembly.

At Obudu, my constant visits to the Elems at their residence and the Umahis both at home and in their work places in the hospital, had inadvertently brought me into contact with some other workers in the hospital. One of them was Miss Dymphna Nya, a staff mid-wife from Uyo who worked directly under Mrs. W. Umahi. For the next two years Dymphna was to influence my life and living.

By the second week of January, 1959, we were back in Obudu after the Christmas holiday; fairly refreshed to face what turned out to be a very busy year in all aspects of my life. In the previous year I had applied to sit for the GCE Advanced Level in British Empire History, British Constitution and Geography. Economics and Bible Knowledge were at the Ordinary Level. The exam took place in January and my centre was at Abakaliki. I passed British Constitution at the Advanced Level but had the other subjects offered at the Ordinary Level. Another niche on the academic ladder!

I recall that when Mr. Okwuwulu left the College about the middle of the previous year 1958, I took over quite a lot of his job in addition to my initial ones. By 1959, I found myself also in charge of the College football team and other extra-curricula activities. In that capacity, I was responsible for students' social and academic engagements outside the school compound and town. The Principal, Rev. Fr. O'Brien, was very liberal and understanding. He was so disposed to giving the students a broad-based education that he always encouraged students' excursions.

Our Excursion to Obudu Cattle Ranch

The first of such outings took place in May – early rainy season. I took the final year students of some thirty people to the Obudu Cattle Ranch for a weekend, Friday to Sunday. Mr. Nobert Akpan,

another member of staff accompanied us. He was the Agricultural Science Teacher.

We had a real feel of natural and unadulterated temperate climate on the Cattle Ranch – some three thousand feet above the surrounding Sankwalla lowlands and the sea of grassland adjoining the Western Cameroon side of the plateau. Mr. Akpan and I were lodged in one of the charlets of the Ranch Hotels. The students ‘camped’ in a school building. Every building there was constructed with the temperate climate in mind. There were fire places and central heating gadgets in all the buildings for the cold seasons. Our two nights and a greater part of two day’s stay at the Ranch were very memorable and eventful.

We experienced the temperate cold-day and night, conducted tour of the cattle grazing grounds and the milking areas. We had a good taste of fresh milk from the cattle, roasted chicken and beef from the ranch stock. The entire ranch, which covered over five hundred hectares of grassland, was mosquitoes and flies-free. In fact, but for very hairy moths and butterflies, we never encountered such pests that disturb people’s lives just less than ten kilometers down the foot of the ranch.

Saturday was our busiest day there. We began the day with visits to the milking centre and grazing grounds. We toured the vegetable gardens and closed the day with a friendly football match between the students and a team of the ranch staff. It ended goalless. We were feted by the resident Manager of the establishment, who described the visit as a unique one that should be copied by other schools and our ‘big men,’ who would prefer travelling overseas for vacation to availing themselves of the conditions and facilities available locally. He hoped the anticipated political independence of Nigeria the following year would open the way to the patronage of the ranch. But some thirty years after independence, the incumbent

resident Manager hadn't anything very much different to say from that of his predecessors of the fifties. What a pity. This is Nigeria and her people!

MY PARTICIPATION IN THE 1959 GENERAL ELECTIONS

Less than a fortnight after the ranch excursion, I was invited to a training workshop for the upcoming general elections. At the end of the four-day intensive training, I was appointed the Supervisory Presiding Officer and also had to act as the Assistant Returning Officer for Obudu Division. That appointment made it imperative for me to receive an additional briefing in the Resident's office at Ogoja, the Provincial Headquarters. I was elated and gained very much from the Ogoja instructions.

A week to the actual elections we had to train the polling clerks, rehearse the conduct of the election with the presiding officers, address the party representatives and distributed election materials to all the officers at separate meetings. The three main political parties that contested the elections were the National Council of Nigeria Citizens (NCNC), the Action Group (AG) and the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC).

On the Election Day, I was up by 6 a.m. and reported at the District Officer's office at 6.30 a.m. in time before the Presiding Officers arrived between 6.45 and 7.00 a.m. when the distribution of election materials started. Since the materials had been orderly packed according to the number of polling booths, by 7.30 a.m. most of the officers had left for their stations of work. The election was billed for 8 a.m. The secret ballot system was used. Voting started on schedule.

A Land Rover jeep was assigned to me for the supervision. There were fifty wards with a hundred and thirty booths under my care.

Most of the polling areas were separated by steep hills, deep valleys and partly cultivated farm lands. They were scattered over the town's Northern boundary with the Tiv people, the Eastern boundary with the Cameroon land area and the Southern and Western boundaries with Ogoja and Okuku towns. The job took me to the cattle ranch, Sankwalla, Bedia, Ohong, among other places in Obudu District. I also had the instruction to get to the Provincial Headquarters at Ogoja in case there was any situation report – from the resident's office.

As the election lasted from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. (ten hours) and I thoroughly enjoyed the touring job in a road-worthy vehicle with a seasoned driver, I was able to cover a lot. Those polling stations out of the motorable road were visited by different officers familiar with the terrain. The voting was concluded as scheduled with no unusual incidents. Of course, I was on duty till the early hours of the following day when the last ballot boxes were brought to the counting centre at the District Officer's meeting hall.

For the next twenty four hours counting and recounting of the votes cast took place. At the end of that exciting exercise, Messrs Michael Ogon of NCNC and Emmanuel Inyamagun Morphy of the Action Group were among the successful candidates to represent their constituencies in the then Eastern Region House of Assembly in Enugu.

While Nigeria was seriously getting set for her Political Independence the following year, the Western Regional Government under the leadership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, launched a television station. It was based at Ibadan the Region's capital and was the first ever in the whole of black Africa!

My Relationship with Miss Nya

I encountered Miss Dymphna Nya, a staff nurse/midwife of the Sacred Heart Hospital, Obudu late in 1958. In 1959, she came so

much into my life that no day I spent in Obudu passed without at least saying hello even at a distance to her. I was then about twenty five years old and she put her age at about twenty one. It appeared we were in sincere love ventures but our heads were never over our heels in that ‘sickness’. Some fifteen months after our first chance meeting at a public gathering in the hospital, I proposed to her, but she quickly and surprisingly turned down my proposal.

According to her, I am Igbo (Unege) and she Ibibio: “Your people will not allow you to marry me even though I really love you. Let us continue being friends. You have offered me the protection I badly need in this place so far away from home and my people.” I couldn’t understand the implication of that at first. I then had to seek advice from the Elems, Ikwuegbus, Umahis and my nearest ‘brother’ there, Mr. Patrick Irem Oko. In fact, all of them without exception, urged me on and even went ahead to call her their daughter-in-law and/or ‘Nne Agwo’.

Of course, I never discussed it with my mother at home. I did, however, casually inform her about my proposals. She did not take me seriously as she rightly felt that my umudi (people of my kindred) should normally be properly informed if I meant what I told her. Mr. and Mrs. M.S.C. Abani were fully aware of my intentions as I had discussed it with them.

The reactions and comments to Dymphna by Afikpo people at Obudu, some members of staff of the hospital and the Abanis at Abakaliki convinced her I was not joking. By December, 1959 she agreed to convince her brother Basil, who was a teacher at Uyo, her home town. The reply was not long in coming. She gave me directions on how to get to her home and what to expect on arrival at Urua Akpan her locality.

Luckily, Miss Maria Oko, Mr. Lawrence Oko Ngodo’s step sister

was married to a native of Urua Akpan. Her house served as a base for me. My first visit was not so eventful but I was apparently welcomed with open arms. The main purpose was for them – Dymphna’s family – to know the Igbo man their daughter had agreed to marry after rejecting several suitors from Uyo and Eket. Her father had died many years before we met but her aged mother, her immediate younger brother and a younger sister (though already married) plus her late father’s elder brother were at hand to meet “that nurse’s choice”. She was the first daughter of the family. I was visibly and genuinely satisfied that her relatives and family were not disappointed in my person and disposition. I spent two nights there and returned to Ehugbo with a list of the requirements for the first official betrothal visit.

About two weeks later, I got ready for the commencement of the preliminary marriage visits. As it was around Christmas period, it was not easy to assemble a large team though I was warned that two to four people would do for that very first engagement visit. Mr. Daniel Oko Alu (late Sunday Alu Oko’s father of Ezi Ukaka – Amaha, Amaizu) and Mr. Patrick Ogbonnia Arua of Amaokwu Amambala accompanied me to Uyo. There, Miss Maria Oko and one of her in-laws joined us. It was a one night’s affair.

Our discussions were seemingly cordial. They tried to create obstacles here and there, which Dymphna herself dismantled in her own way. And her brother, Basil, was very understanding. As if to express their acceptance of our visit, they arranged for a group photograph, which the mother insisted would remind her of the first daughter’s commencement of the journey to a married life. The next visit was fixed for Easter 1960. The following morning we returned to Afikpo. My mother appeared to be accepting the realities of the situation then, though very reluctantly but never wanted to appear to displease me. She was a great and loving mother, who I must continue to honour and love throughout living memory.

On agreement and in an attempt to placate her mother, Dymphna withdrew her services from the Sacred Heart Hospital Obudu to work briefly at home in the Urua Akpan Hospital. I was anxiously looking forward to a new life in 1960.

A Breach of Faith

About the middle of March, 1959, I had a letter from the Principal of my Alma Mater, St. Thomas' College, Ogoja. It was a shattering letter. I think it was my first real taste of a breach of faith. Two years after and resulting from occasional request as to how far my cousin, Mr. Irem Oko Ola had gone, I discovered he had not gone beyond the written promise. He could not keep his promise of paying my school fees. The letter was about the repayment of forty pounds, which was my outstanding school fees by the time I passed out in December, 1956. I then decided to pay it through him (my cousin) in four installments spread over a calendar year. To worsen the situation, the three installments I paid did not get to the College. By that time my cousin was working at Abakaliki still with the native court. He apologetically owned up the fault of not channelling the money as agreed. I forgave my cousin and remained grateful he initially eased my problem by his promises. I had to take up the challenge after I had personally gone to the College to explain to the new Principal what actually happened. Rev. Fr. MacCabe was the man. He was one of our English teachers in our final year. I was thoroughly ashamed and actually wept before him for the apparent ingratitude. He showed a good understanding and allowed me sometime to clear it. Thanks be to God I was able to free myself from the burden in good time to enter the Independence year in 1960 free of debt.

However, by the end of 1959 with the College debt cleared and Dymphna and I as good as engaged, I assured myself I was ready for Nigeria's Political Independence on October 1, 1960.

Nigeria's Independence Year

The New Year day of 1960 was one with a difference in many aspects. As an individual I resolved I would conclude all marriage arrangements – traditional and church and I looked forward to getting married before the end of the year. At twenty-five, I felt confident in myself to have a home of mine. That feeling was fueled by the unfortunate incident that my only sister Ugwome Agwo (Ogbulu) who had been married over twelve years earlier in 1948 had not had any issue. Her twelve years of married life was haunted by delayed conceptions, miscarriages and death of her infants who died within one or two weeks of birth. And my mother was not getting younger. So my planned early marriage was a way of calming her (my mother's) nerves.

A Taste of Disappointment in Love

In the life of our nation, 1960 was billed to stand out clear as a most momentous year. October 1, looked like a day of days that would be the panacea for all the nation's ills. Again, another wishful thought. So, from day one in 1960 it was a count down for me. And it turned out to be a count out for me in my bout with the conjugal hope.

For the first six weeks in the New Year, our letters were very regular and some crossed in the post. Towards the end of February, there was a lull in the mail. In the first week of March, I received a shocker. Though it came in the usual blue envelope and writing pad, it was shorter than the previous ones. In it was, inter alia:

“Dear Gab., I am very sorry to tell you this. I cannot hide anything from you. Since after your visit last December, my parents' relatives and some of those who had earlier proposed to marry me have threatened to punish me for deciding to get married to an Igbo man. I know my people. They are witches

and wizards. We call them efori. They will certainly punish me if I marry you. Dear Gab, because I love you, I have decided to tell you to leave me alone. Please, look for another wife. I do not want to be the source of your unhappiness in your married life. If I am punished alone I won't mind it but if I live with you, you will surely bear the punishment. "I know you have already spent a lot of money coming to see my people. Tell me how much it is, I will send it to you by the next mail. "Meanwhile, in re-action to their behaviour to me I have decided to (1) leave home without information and a contact address (2) refuse to marry any of those men they want me to marry and (3) seek a job among the Eket people – a place that our people fear to go or have anything to do with their people. Attached is the address you should use in your next letter. "Good-bye my dear. I am sorry to disappoint you but it is for your own good. God bless you to get a good wife." **Dymphna**.

I cannot remember how many times I read that letter. What a paradox: "I love you, that is why I won't marry you". And each time I re-read it, I studied the writing and 'listened' to the language to convince myself it was neither a fake Dymphna nor a dream. However, after some three days I replied to the letter anticipating a counter even though I managed to state that if her love for me made her take that decision, which I could have wished to discuss with her personally, she should completely forget about any sort of refund. That chapter should be closed.

I think I wrote two to three other letters using the latest address. There was no reply whatsoever. And that was the abrupt end of our connection. For the next few years I made enquiries even from her brother, Basil, (by letter) and there was no word about her

whereabouts. I had to close that chapter for good. It was a knock out win for my dear mother, Orie Otu.

Some fifty-six years after this incident I have every reason to thank God for my miraculous escape. Fate actually worked through my mother, who again paradoxically, out of great love and admiration for me did not injure my feelings by persuading me to leave the person I had chosen as my would-be wife. It was about a year later my mother herself recalled to me how relieved she was to learn of that “Ibibio girl’s disappointment”. According to her “Ekeleri m Chineke” (I thank God). Yes, I should honestly thank God for giving me Felicia Anwara Obio who was the best and invaluable life partner.

Sister Julia Otu’s Visit

I earnestly prayed to God to guide my thoughts to overcome the shock and grant me the fortitude to adjust accordingly. He certainly answered my prayer and more. Less than two months after the abrupt end of that venture, my brother-in-law, Mr. John Otu, granted my request for my step sister, Mrs. Julia Ugwome Otu (nee Agwo) to come along with her six month old baby son, Joe and her other older son, Francis, for a few months stay at Obudu. He saw that as a welcome request and I saw it as a soothing visit. Therefore, Julia took with her to Obudu, her first son Francis Otunta (some two years old then) and Joe Agwo Otu. When the three of them arrived in the first week of April, we were then six in the house. The other two were Christopher Agwo and Francis Agwo.

April to November, 1960, was a unique period of my life. Julia played the mother of the house while I concerned myself with the supply of the required funds for the family up-keep. Even though every other person in the house recognized her as “mma,” she was quite conscious of the fact that she was my younger sister whom I

was fond of calling either Julia or nne Joe – the two names I use interchangeably for her. Occasionally, I call her Ugwome Ogeri. Her immediate younger brother, Law Agwo was then living with John Otu Eke (Chika Dibia – a motor mechanic by profession), about a kilometer away from our quarters. He was, however, part of the house most of the days in the week and was always thought of and treated as if he was a permanent member of the family.



Celebratng Nigeria's Independence Day, on 1st of October, 1960

Celebratng Nigeria's Independence Day, on 1st of October, 1960

Nigeria's Independence Day Celebration

It was actually Julia and the children who selected the cloth the family used for the Independence Day's Celebration. The interior and exterior decorations for that Red letter Day as well as the quantity and quality of the menu for the day, were entirely hers save for the bill, which was passed on to me for settlement. I thoroughly enjoyed that role-playing which neatly dove-tailed into the independence of Nigeria as a nation.

September 30, and October 1, 1960 were days better visualized than described. The last days of September were ones in which knowledgeable people appeared to be getting ready for a journey into utopia but without assembling nor packing any luggage. People just got mentally set for a leap into a new world but without changing abode. Greeting cards had them; the few newspapers available printed them on their front and back covers. Fewer radios blared out information in their headline news items. Luckily I had a transistor radio. It was only in Ibadan, Lagos and a couple of public places in parts of the Western Region that a handful of people had the rare opportunity of watching the event live on Television.

The Ibadan television station was then barely a year old. It was several years later that those of us "up country people" saw on the TV screen, the September 30, 1960 mid-night hoisting of the green white green Nigerian flag and the lowering of the United Kingdom's Union Jack. However, on the 30th of September, 1960, those of us at Obudu kept vigil throughout the night as we listened in clusters, to the minute by minute comments from my Berec-battered radio on the last lap of the journey to Independent Nigeria. We added our voices to the "Happy Independence!" chorus without really understanding what that meant.

In the preceding months, school children and public servants had singing and lecture classes on the National Anthem and the pledge and the significance of the colours of the national flag and the

country's Coat of Arm. Among other things that last colonial day 30th September, 1960, saw was the distribution of the 6x8 inches hand flags mounted on treated and rounded plywood materials. They were many, enough to go round the estimated millions of Nigerians then. Everybody was so excited about the small flags that it looked like the one passport each person needed to cross the "rubicon". Typical of Nigerian 'rushians' some 'loaded' them for keeps even with their nuisance value later.

Like Christmas, October 1, 1960, arrived. "What next?" Everybody seemed to ask. "Has that paradise eventually come?" The feeling was everywhere in the air but certainly not more than the milling around of school children, the parades of ex-service men, the police, boy scouts and girl guides – in the fields. Eating and drinking was localized in institutions and private houses. In big towns and cities, it was said there were parties for top civil servants and parliamentarians. Back in Obudu we had our own rural taste of the feast. After the morning to early afternoon marching activities in the town's foot ball field, people retired to their homes. Some gaily dressed children went round in groups in the fashion of Christmas and Easter celebrations for gifts.

The day passed without unpleasant incidents as we looked forward to the unfolding of events in our independent Nigeria. We feasted lavishly and joyfully till very late in the night. For the next few months there were discussions and speculations on what we stood to gain from independence – all white men would go back to their country England – the heavy "goodbye package for each of them notwithstanding. We were happy Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe had taken over from Sir James Robertson as the Governor General of Nigeria while Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa of the Northern People's Congress (NPC) was the Prime Minister. That was our colonial

master's legacy to us.

Our Second Excursion – Obudu E.T.C. Students' Tour of Eastern Nigeria

Meanwhile in the last week of October, the Principal of Obudu Elementary Teachers' Training College, Rev. Fr. O. Brien, obliged us another excursion. The last one was in May the previous year. This next one was meant to last for five days – Monday 7th to Friday 11th November – and to cover the accessible major towns and industries in the then Eastern Region of Nigeria and to have a good feel of the Region at Political Independence.

As a major part of the preparations for the journey, we had to go to confessions the Saturday before followed by a Holy Mass requested for us for a safe journey during the excursion.

The towns and industries slated for the tour included Abakaliki (Nkalagu Cement Factory); Enugu (the airport, coal mine, Bigard Seminary, Eastern House of Assembly, Presidential Hotel, and Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation); Onitsha (Onitsha Main Market, Niger River at the bridge head); Owerri (Shell B.P. Camp, Palm Oil Mills at the suburbs of Aba and Ariara Market); Port-Harcourt (the harbor, some oil pumping stations, the Port-Harcourt Stadium and the Eastern Railway Line Terminus). Before we set off we had received approval letters from most of the authorities responsible for the industries billed to be visited.

Mr. Samuel Agbor (of Ikom), a classmate of mine in St. Thomas' College Ogoja (1953 – 56) who joined the staff of Obudu E.T.C. earlier in the year, was my aide for the management of the students during the tour. The school hired a five-ton Mercedes lorry for forty-five pounds (ninety naira) for the five days journey. That sum included the driver's fees, vehicle maintenance costs and fueling

expenses. Each of the thirty students had a daily feeding allowance of one shilling and six pence i.e., six pence a meal. Mr. Agbor and

I were each rated at five shillings (fifty kobo) a day to cover food and drinks. You may appreciate what that meant then, when you realise that students were fed in the school (boarding house) at four pence a meal or one shilling a day. In average homes around the Region then, two to three pence could fetch a full meal. So, you may imagine how happy members of the excursion team felt at such a 'generous' offer plus free transport to places, which hitherto were mere names on the pages of newspapers and textbooks.

Before leaving the school compound each student was instructed to get a jotter or note book and a pen for taking down notes during the excursion. One of the students served as the Infirmarian and took charge of our first-aid kit. In addition to a scout's "Be Prepared" out-fit, I took along with me my box camera. We set off on Monday, 7th November, 1960 as early as 7 a.m. after morning Mass and a hurried breakfast.

We took the Vandikka (Tiv) route on the way out from Obudu. Mary Knoll Secondary School, Okuku – Ogoja, was our first prompt flag stop. The school then in her seventh year of existence was the only full-fledged Catholic Mission Secondary School in the then Ogoja Province/Diocese. The catchment area included Obudu, Ikom, Ogoja, Bansara, Abakaliki, Nkalagu, Onueke, Abaomege, Itigidi, Oshiri, Onicha, Okposi, Uburu, Ishiagu, Akaeze, Afikpo and Edda. Just to name the outstanding towns then.

In the afternoon, we arrived Abakaliki town, briefly visited the Agricultural Farm at Ikwo (the only existing one then in the whole province), the water works pumping station, the Catholic Mission, the leper settlement at Mile Four (Abakaliki – Enugu Road). and made another brief stop at the County Secondary School (now

Izzi Boys Secondary School, Ishieke) then just two years old. It was opened in January, 1958 by the Abakaliki County Council but managed by the Catholic Mission. Mr. M. S. C. Abani, the pioneer

Principal addressed us briefly. We set off for the Nkalagu Cement Factory. Mr. Donald Okorie Egwu of Ngodo, Afikpo was the pioneer Personnel Manager.

We were given to understand that the factory was the first of its kind in Nigeria then. It was under five years old then. We had a red carpet reception and were conducted round all the departments – from the raw materials (lime-stone, gypsum, etc.) depot to the finished product (cement) store. It was a wonderful firsthand knowledge of how this gold dust is got ready for our building projects. Thanks be to Science.

By the time we got to Enugu from Nkalagu it was too late to visit any place of importance. At Enugu, we were given a dormitory accommodation in the College of Immaculate Conception (C.I.C.) Secondary School. I remember one Rev. Brother who was then in charge. He was very good to us and made sure we were well quartered for the night. Most of the students kept awake for a greater part of the night discussing what they had seen in the places visited. From time to time we reminded our students that we were in someone's premises and should not therefore constitute a nuisance. We secretly enjoyed their conversation.

After morning Mass and breakfast and bidding good bye to the Principal, we headed for the Bigard Memorial Seminary. One of the senior seminarians took us first to their Chapel, the assembly hall and other parts of the compound where we did not disturb the peace of that religious environment. We then went to the College of Arts, Science and Technology then located at the present site of Enugu Campus of the University of Nigeria Nsukka. The Campus was still

under construction. The College of Arts, Science and Technology Enugu, was one of the three existing such institutions in the country. The other two were at Ibadan and Kaduna, respectively.

At the College, the Principal (a white man) took us round some of the sections. On a question why some students were playing table tennis while lectures were going on in classes he retorted: “Well that is what they have chosen to do now. They are free to fail their exams when the time comes. It is then the College authorities will tell them where they should be”. That was an object lesson for the student teachers with us.

The other places of interest we visited at Enugu were the Hotel Presidential, the Eastern House of Assembly, the Railway Station, Enugu Airport, Onyeama Coal Mine, the Enugu Sports Stadium, and the Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation. In each of these places we had access to the sections visitors were usually allowed in. However, the coal mine was not free to us. The main reason was that the number was too large and they hadn’t enough steel hats, torches, etc. needed for the underground walk. Besides, taking the students in bits would mean a whole day’s job with the attendant dangers. So, we were contented with seeing some of the administrative staff outside the mine itself and the overhead pulleys on which dark oval containers bore coal out of the mining area. Of course, we picked pieces of coal for studies in the school.

From the coal mine we hastened to Onitsha through the very dangerous Milikin Hill. Thanks be to God that route is no longer the main thoroughfare from Enugu to the Ninth Mile and beyond. There was hardly any day, not to talk of week, when fatal accidents were not recorded at the hill despite the road signs warning drivers to: “Be right but not dead right”. However, the good Lord safely guided us through the death route.

At the Oji River, we had to breeze in to see the then electric power station and the leprosy settlement. We just slowed down at Awka and Abagana before entering the Onitsha main town through the Christ the King College (CKC).

At the Onitsha Main Market, we allowed the students ten minutes to buy whatever they could and to admire the multi-million pounds modern market – the first and the best then in Nigeria and West Africa. Within thirty minutes, we were pulling up at the Onitsha end of the bridge head across River Niger after having a ride across it and back. At the nearest point where the Niger water could be reached, Mr. Agbor and the students recounted Mongo Park's words with a moderation thus: "I touch with infinite pleasure the great object of my mission, the search for the majestic Niger glittering in the (morning) sun".

I had performed that ritual in December 1950 but without the bridge. Thus within a few minutes, the students accomplished four memorable operations: seeing and touching the River Niger, and seeing and matching on the Niger Bridge at Onitsha. Like the Biblical Simeon, their eyes had seen what they had heard so much of, so the Good Lord could call them away. We left without undue delay and headed for Owerri.

Our route was the Nnewi, Oguta, Owerri road. We got into Owerri in good time to admire the reflections of the vanishing evening sun on the glazed doors and windows of the Catholic Holy Ghost Cathedral. It was also a fitting period for a 'thank you' evening prayers in the Cathedral itself. The enormous structure, its spacious inside and the rainbowed tops, the resonant walls made nonsense of the size of even a giant. It is difficult to say if we actually prayed there or just gaped at the architectural designs even though the building was far from being completed. However, we were there for some fifteen minutes.

We had to eat and rest for the day. During the course of the journey and visits from Enugu through Onitsha to Owerri we hardly thought of lunch. Those who felt like did pick up snacks and shared bottles of Coca-cola or Fanta along the road. The day-long jolting in the mammy wagon on the dusty roads and the accompanying “burning off” inside, signaled dangerously that “re-fuelling” was imperative. We pulled up at a local eating house for the evening meal. Those who, out of a feeling of exhaustion, asked for a shilling food panted badly to push in the last bit if they insisted on finishing the food. Whatever dish one requested for, one had the satisfaction of quality and quantity. No complaints at all. For the night we were accommodated in a dormitory in the Holy Ghost College, opposite the Cathedral. Most of the students slept like logs and it was a very short night.

It was Wednesday. Our routine morning Mass and breakfast were religiously kept to. Apart from the church building, we had already worshiped in, there was hardly any establishment of importance then for us to see. Mainly because we expected to see where oil was drilled at Port-Harcourt, we decided to visit their base at the Owerri Shell Camp. The stone-faced people we met at the gate to the camp told us in no unmistakable terms that we were not welcome. We only peeped at their caravans and cursed away.

I persuaded the driver who claimed he knew the town to take us round. From the Shell Camp we sighted the Residents quarters, which seventeen years later in 1976, was renovated and upgraded to the Imo State Government House.

We burst at a point opposite Agric/Civil Service/Works Compound on the Okigwe-Owerri Road. We took a right turn as that was virtually the end of Owerri town then. The high tension iron structures to Oji side were in thick bushes where serious farmers ventured to cultivate. A couple of yards down the southern thrust

we got to the Government College on the right hand side of the road and fairly close to the Prison Yard. Less than five minutes drive from that point we were almost at the road we took earlier to the camp and then took a left wheel near the now Imo Hotels and got to the then Osuji Circus where there was a clock tower. That is, Douglas Road. In another three minutes we were in front of a Catholic Church opposite the Owerri Market and its Motor-park.

By the time we got to Emmanuel College, we found we had virtually encircled what was Owerri Township – a name I had read about in Peter Nwana’s *Karada K’obia Odi Ocha Maa Mma*, etc., nearly twenty years earlier. The underdevelopment was criminal for whoever must have been responsible for that. Thanks to goodness, Murtala Mohammed named Owerri the Imo State Capital in 1976 before he was mowed down by Dimka and his men.

We felt relieved leaving Owerri as the lorry groaned its way up the hillock after the valley below Emmanuel College. Our discussions on Owerri caused our not noticing the fairly long journey from the Nekede Zone through Owerrinta to Osisima junction on the new Enugu – Port-Harcourt Express way. We had a smooth drive though, through the old Isiala Ngwa – Aba road up to Ogbor hill, Aba. It was already 3 p.m. – a little after our usual lunch time.

We pulled up some hundred yards adjacent the Aba Township Hall and opposite the Aba Motor Park. Everybody had a hurried meal as our target was to get to Port-Harcourt before the night fall. However, we had to visit the Aba Textile Mill, Aba Old Market, the Psychiatric Hospital, and had a drive along Zik Avenue up to close to the “over railway” where we flanked left and soon linked the Aba – Port-Harcourt road. We had a smooth journey from the Aba rain forest area to the “Management and Fresh water Swamp Forest” around Port-Harcourt.

As we drove further south, the shadows lengthened. By then, most of the surrounding areas looked marshy and unusual noises of insects and birds rent the evening air. We got to the “Garden City” at the peak of evening rush. The Hotel Presidential – a replica of that of Enugu – was easily visible. We made a few stops to find our direction to the Catholic Mission Secondary School where we had been assured of dormitory accommodation. We were being expected when we arrived just as the Angelus was on. A few minutes later, the senior prefect showed us the vacated dormitory and a store accommodation converted into an emergency two-bed room for two of us – teachers.

After settling the students’ needs and handing them over to Mr. Samuel Agbor and a responsible House Master, I went to seek out Mr. Pius Ugwu Alu popularly known as PU. He was of my kindred back home and an admired elder cousin. He was the pharmacist in charge of the then Eastern Region Medical Store in Port-Harcourt. He was then married to Christiana Mgbo Alu (nee Joseph). It was at my second attempt and with the help of his wife that I met him in a near neighbour’s house.

He was pleasantly surprised to see me and insisted I should pass the night at his residence. Of course, I told him the implications, so he took me out to a nearby restaurant for about an hour, after which he dropped me off at our school accommodation just in time to take part in the students’ night prayers. The unwelcome disturbance of mosquitoes notwithstanding, we managed to have a good night’s rest.

We got up on Thursday morning ready to travel to Degema for a real touch of an ancient riverine town. That was not to be. The driver reported that he had flat tyres and could not, in addition, identify the cause of an unusual sound in the motor engine! We, therefore, could not move. After thirty minutes, the driver came back in the

company of a motor mechanic. They opened the bonnet, fiddled with some knots and wires and declared that the fault would take about half the day. We were crestfallen. But funny enough, most of the students appeared happy at the vehicle breakdown as they desired to have a full day's rest. They had been in motion for three consecutive days. I heaved a sigh of relief but decided I must visit Degema.

I quickly got in contact with the school authorities and acquainted them with the development. They were very understanding and adjusted their programme to accommodate us for another night. We agreed on a friendly football match in the evening. Meanwhile, the students were confined to the school compound for the day while the driver saw to it that the vehicle was back on the road within the day. Our own senior prefect took over control of our students while we were out.

Sam agreed to accompany me to Degema for a half day's visit to that area. We took a taxi from the school compound for a fare of six pence each to the motor park where we boarded a Degema combi bus. We paid one shilling (10 kobo) each to the beach of the riverine town. It was wonderful and we enjoyed every second of our stay there. We were lucky to have access to the local king – the Amayenabo of Degema, as we later learnt. With ease, we recalled the incidents in J.P. Clark's *Song of a Goat and the Raft*.

The people of the beach did anything they felt like with the canoes. We felt real and unadulterated rural life in its actual primitive stage. Even though the traditional ruler, we later discovered, could 'manage' pidgin English, he chose to speak to us through an interpreter. We had the opportunity of observing first hand, some of the acquisitions from the early colonial slave dealers and oil trade company bosses. They included large flat brass receptacles (nainai), muskets (short fire-arms guns), brass-headed curved swords

(akanka), double handed china ware jars (ite-otu), brass anklets, bangles and staff. Huge three-legged iron pots, about three gallon measure iron pots and fanciful gimlets adorned the compounds and houses mainly for the women. We had a taste of a special type of fish (onio) roasted in open fire and seasoned with native salt. It was regarded as a delicacy. Had the students gone with us we would have visited more ancient spots.

By midday we were back in Port-Hacourt and met the students in high spirits. Thanks be to God, the lorry was on a test run as we arrived at the school gate. A full feeling of accomplishment for the day was thus realized as we returned to the tumultuous welcome of the cheerful, relaxed and confident students. For the rest of the day we conversed with the students in small groups, even during the football match and at night, about our trip to Degema. They didn't seem to miss what we experienced in Degema as their interaction with their new found friends down south meant a lot to them. Addresses changed hands. The night appeared shorter than any other one before it.

By 8:00 a.m. on Friday morning, we were at the P.H. harbour and it looked like the day was already old. Dock workers, as we watched from a safe distance, hummed songs as they head-loaded or shouldered sacks of palm kernels, groundnuts, pepper and rice into ships. Some rolled drums of palm oil to convenient places for easy loading. The cranes did their own bit, unloading heavy crates and iron containers on to waiting trailers and other heavy duty lorries. We could not afford to stay longer than sixty minutes there. We couldn't reach any oil exploration/drilling site nor a pumping station so we headed for the Eastern Railway Terminus. Short engines shunted around. Passengers jostled their way into the waiting enormous coaches numbering tens in a row to a distance of some two hundred yards.

At one end, we observed cargo trains being loaded mainly with petroleum products tanks, seasoned logs and poles. There was a beehive of activities. We left after another sixty minutes and made a stop at the then famous Port- Harcourt Stadium of Onyeawuna and Uwalaka fame. The flood-light gadgets were fascinating even though we had no opportunity of seeing them in use. It was a special privilege for the students to step on the “carpet grass” (the turf) which some had read of in text books and other publications or heard of it in radios, which were luxuries then. By 11.45 a.m., it was time for us to depart P.H. on our homeward journey. We hurried out of the stadium, made brief stops at the Catholic Cathedral, the Shell BP senior staff quarters and the Diobu Market area before bidding goodbye to the Garden City.

The original plan was that we should be back at Obudu by Friday evening. But by 5 p.m. on that Friday, we were still snailing our way through Aba township roads and still had nearly four hundred miles of horrible and dusty road to Obudu. However, we prevailed on the driver to keep moving. He cooperated but decided we should return by the Owerri-Okigwe route. We had no option. By the time we reached Owerri at about 7.00 p.m., it was obvious we couldn't continue. We never bargained for another night outside Obudu, but it had become inevitable. After a late cold supper we found accommodation in a primary school building almost at the outskirts of the town. There was no opposition from anybody. At day break we were on Saturday – already a day late in returning.

Most of the students were awake by 5 a.m. We had short morning prayers and left that place before 5.30 a.m. It happened to be the day we had the shortest distance to cover and the saddest experience to undergo in the seven-day tour of the Eastern Region of Nigeria. On getting to Anara, some twelve miles from Owerri the lorry began to jerk unusually. The driver's countenance changed. “What's wrong driver”, I asked. “Oga, ibi like this motor done get some

trouble again o”, he answered, after a bewildering sigh. “What kind of trouble?” I heard myself asking. “I no know. Na him I won see oga.” Almost immediately the lorry jolted to a halt. Some of the students who were still dozing away were awakened by other students’ shouts of “Driver na wetin. Why you stop so suddenly.” I cautioned them to beware of how they addressed the driver.

In the next minute the driver was peering at the open bonnet in that early morning dim light. He fiddled with one or two plugs, hit the battery and appeared to adjust some clips around the carburettor. He closed the bonnet noisily and jumped into his seat. He slipped in the ignition key and attempted to start the engine, first, second up to the sixth time but the vehicle could not start.

He requested that the lorry be pushed. The students cooperated and pushed the moving house for some fifty yards before it hissed twice and sent a thick smoke through the exhaust pipe and roared. The driver left the engine on while the students, thoroughly warmed up and with sweat streaming down their faces that early morning, climbed back to their seats. The unplanned fatigue increased their anxiety about the behaviour of the lorry for the rest of the journey. But the worse was yet to come.

Some five miles from Anara, within the vicinity of Okwelle, the lorry finally broke down. The driver repeated his emergency ‘first aid’ but all came to naught. The nearest town, if that place could be so called, was half a mile away. Even there, there was no mechanic to help. The driver decided to see his oga at Nnewi since the fault with the lorry needed complete change of some ‘expensive’ parts. He waved down a passing lorry which took him to Okwelle where he boarded another lorry heading for Nnewi via Orlu. It was 9 a.m. then. No breakfast yet and no eating house in sight.

Three students volunteered to do some distance to fetch bread for

the rest of us. They returned forty-five minutes later with shriveled loaves of bread for everybody. The bread had just to be gulped like that, nothing accompanying it. However, we were lucky to discover a running stream some two hundred yards from where the vehicle broke down. For over eight hours we had to practise the art of doing nothing. Very close to six o'clock that evening the driver reappeared in the company of a mechanic in dress and action. He was from the lorry owner's home base.

The motor mechanic succeeded in fixing up the engine even as he did the final tightening of the bolts and knots with the aid of a torch light. We could not risk a night journey so we just drove up to the Okwelle junction to look for food.

One hotelier we met was already packing up for the night. The husband was patiently waiting for her and the shabbily dressed maid, to hasten up. Our arrival met with mixed feelings. They had a fairly long distance to get to their village and it was late already. But the number of hungry mouths gaping for any kind of food at that late hour out-numbered the ones that patronized the hotel throughout the day. And they needed our money.

The confused woman sat down on a low stool, she rested her elbows on her thighs – the hands hanging loosely in front. The maid wore a very long face and sighed away. The husband shook his head, sighed and ordered: “Misis, make you dey! Ụmụ m, unuanwụ na ka m sinye mmiri n oku” (my children, be patient let me boil water).” In the next thirty minutes the garri for all of us was ready. Each pounced on his plate of food throwing in four or five morsels before realizing there was no piece of meat or fish in the soup. However, the taste of crayfish and onion was pronounced. It was food all the same as it settled the disturbed nerves. We passed the night in the lorry parked outside that wayside eating house.

As we were not sure of attending any Mass that morning, we read two passages from the Bible, which dealt with having faith in God and kindness to our neighbours, respectively. The driver and the mechanic appeared to have enjoyed the prayers and promised to thenceforth go to Mass on Sundays. The mechanic had to go with us for the rest of the journey.

At precisely 7.30 a.m. we left Okwelle and hoped to be at Obudu before night. We refueled at Okigwe. Our route was Okigwe-Afikpo Road via Akaeze, Amasiri/Afikpo junction then to Akpoha-Abaomege-Onueke-Abakaliki. To make sure we did not run out of fuel, the driver filled the tank of the vehicle at Abakaliki. As we still had some one hundred and twelve miles to Obudu, we relaxed to a good lunch at the then Rendezvous Hotel at New Market Road, Abakaliki. For the rest of the journey most of the students slept away mainly out of exhaustion and probably wishing there would be no further breakdown of the lorry. There was none after all.

We arrived the school compound on Sunday, 13th November, 1960 as the students were returning from Benediction. The welcoming students broke loose and ran to hug everyone of us. Some narrowly missed falls from over-hugging by several students at a time. They had all been anxious over our late return – two days later.

The Principal, Rev. Fr. O. Brien, joined the students in the welcome race. He hurried to where Sam and I were standing, watching the boys in their hysterical shouts and laughter. He held me firm in his hands and said: “Gabriel, what happened. Thanks be to God you are here at last”. Before I could reply he quickly added: “Gabriel, I was worried about two main things – your safety and the likely extra demand from the lorry owner”. In a nutshell I told him we had a safe and successful journey but suffered a lot of delay and inconvenience as a result of two-time lorry breakdown. As for the lorry owner, we had nothing extra to pay, I assured him. “Thank

God”, he retorted.

The Principal paid off the driver with an additional one pound for him and the mechanic. He (Principal) was full of gratitude to Sam and myself especially when he had conversations with some of the students.

The long term result of the successful excursions was the passing on of more responsibilities to me. I was virtually the Vice Principal in all but name. Thanks be to God all the members of staff worked like a well-knit family. That greatly raised the tone of the College.

At the end of November, Julia, Francis and Joe Otu returned to Ehugbo after some eight months stay with me at Obudu.

As we continued waiting in vain for visible effects of our independence, we, who could read and listen to the radio, were informed that as a result of the independence, Nigeria had voluntarily become a member of the Commonwealth of Nations – an association of former British colonies with Great Britain herself. About the same time, Nigeria was admitted as the 99th member of the United Nations Organization (UNO) – a world organization. What the independence eventually brought to us is now common knowledge and a historical fact.

Yes, I like to recall that just as the independence fever was on, I had the joy of being formally issued my Certificate as a teacher in Part A (for Trained and Certificated Teachers). My registration number is ER/A/55/7538 with retrospective effect from the first of January, 1955 i.e. when I started doing the Higher Elementary course. It was based on the Grade III Teachers’ certificate gained in December, 1954. The registration was therefore only six years “early” in being completed. I understand some received theirs any time from ten years. If it were now, the HE certificate would have been laminated

or framed and displayed at a conspicuous part of the living room. We didn't know that then.

In the last two months of the year, work was on top gear to complete a new staff quarters meant for me in the College compound. I was allowed free hand in the choice of the paint for the building. About the middle of December when I left to Ehugbo for the Christmas holiday, the house was virtually ready for occupation so I was looking forward to packing over there as soon as I returned in January, 1961. Meanwhile, I had some Ordinary and Advanced Level papers to sit for in January 1961. My centre was the CMS Primary School, Abakaliki and the subjects I offered included Economics, Geography, History and British Constitution at the Advanced Level while Bible Knowledge and English Literature were at the Ordinary Level.

That, of course, meant that Christmas and the New Year celebrations had no festive value for me. The period was for a very serious academic exercise. I did that to my satisfaction.

As soon as I was through with the GCE exams about the second week of January, I hurried back to Obudu. The next few days were used up for moving over to the staff quarters, which I had the privilege of being the first occupant.

The new quarters – popularly called the ‘Type C’ house – was a three bedroom apartment with a twelve by twelve living room, moderately ventilated and neatly coated with light blue emulsion paint. Attached to the house, at a convenient distance, was a chimneyed kitchen and an adjoining pantry. Close to that, and nicely ceiled off, was a two-apartment structure for toilet and bathroom facilities. In brief, the house was portable and to my taste in almost every design of it. However, the entire building was roughly a quarter of the old quarters in terms of ground space and size of the rooms. My two

younger brothers particularly loved the new place for they had smaller sweeping spaces. The hourly prison yard bell and occasional wild shouts from the walled “white college” had ceased to reach us up there. Perhaps, the most indelible mark that ‘new home’ made on me was that it was the first time in my life I was a pioneer dweller of a brand new house. So my twenty-eighth birthday anniversary in it on the 20th of January was one with a difference.

As I was then living amongst the students, I voluntarily took up more responsibilities with them and spent most evenings and nights in the school library where I was also the Teacher/Librarian. I thoroughly enjoyed flipping through the school library collections.

I have always felt that apart from the company of reasonable human beings at leisure hours, books of any sort are the best companions one can reasonably have. In each effective contact, one comes out wiser by at least an idea.

It may sound funny or puerile but it is a fact that after four years I had qualified as a Higher Elementary teacher in December, 1956 I had no clear vision of where I was going educationally. Though at a remote part of my mind I wished I could have a university education, but how without money or anyone who would finance it? The three years post college education debt clearance had its gloom influence still lurking around. It seemed an unrealizable dream but somehow I drew inspiration from a few people I knew, who sat for and passed their degree exams through correspondence tuition. That was my last hope. I plunged head long into Wolsey Hall & Rapid Results Correspondence Courses. Both were United Kingdom-based.

My Quest for Higher Education

To be a Grade I Teacher, I needed two A/L papers in teaching

subjects hence my inclusion of History, Geography and Bible Knowledge in the GCE A/L. Then, there was no English Language at the Advanced Level, but English Literature. I had to add it to satisfy my personal love for the language. What I would eventually become was in the lap of the gods. But the notch had to be made.

In February, I received a letter and an application form from Mr. Alphonsus Okwuwelu, who was my colleague at Obudu up to March, 1958. The form was for the Associate Diploma course in Education in the University College, Ibadan. He had successfully completed the one academic session course and recalled my earlier discussions with him on further studies. He was kind enough to send me the entry form. Even though I didn't fully understand other details about the course, I quickly filled it and was about to post it when I noticed a footnote. It required the approval and sponsorship (if possible) of the employer of the serving teacher. That meant I had to see the Ogoja Catholic Diocese Education Secretary based at Abakaliki.

First thing the following morning I obtained an official permission from the Principal of our College, Obudu, to enable me travel to Abakaliki to confer with the Education Secretary. I left Obudu later that day so as to pass the night at Abakaliki and see the boss in good time the following day. It was a journey of nearly one hundred and twenty miles one way, which could not be made to and fro in a day.

By 8 a.m. that Thursday, I was knocking at the office of Rev. Fr. O' Conor who was the Education Secretary cum Supervisor of Schools in the entire Ogoja Catholic Diocese. He was the very person who had, at the end of 1957, transferred me from St. Benedict's Primary School Igbo Ekwurekwu to the Obudu Teacher Training College with effect from January, 1958. He was surprised to see me that early and asked me a few questions about Obudu before I told him my mission. He quickly took the filled form from me and signed

the necessary columns. He concluded with a revelation that there was a Ministry of Education, Eastern Region, provision financial aid to voluntary agency schools' teachers, who were recommended by such agencies. He assured me he would take up the issue with Enugu and wished me good luck in the quest for that course. I was thrown into a rapturous mood and was very profuse in my thanks to him. He promised to get in touch with me as soon as he got a response from Enugu.

As I left the Supervisor's office, I saw in my mind's eye a flicker of light in the horizon. I cannot now exactly recall the ecstatic feelings I had after the meeting with the Supervisor till I got back to Obudu late in the evening. I was in a really dreamy land and had all sorts of ideas about the anticipated university education. Could it be true? Did I hear the Supervisor well? How soon will that unnamed financial help come? I never even reckoned on the possibility of the university authorities turning down my application; 'God forbid,' I heard myself soliloquizing.

At Obudu, I reported to the Principal on my visit to Abakaliki. While he ordinarily wished I would be offered admission, he didn't mince words in saying he would have preferred my staying a little longer with him in the five-year old college metamorphosing into a Secondary School. In any case, if I gained the admission I still had up to October to remain.

There arose an approach-avoidance-complex situation. I told the Principal in no unmistakable words that the issue of possible leaving for further studies later in the year was not for even a mention to either any other members of staff or any of the students. I assured him I would keep my own side of the promise. For the next eight months or thereabout, I faithfully and conscientiously carried out my duties as a dedicated teacher in the school.

Yes, Obudu Elementary Teachers' College was that year in the process of changing over to becoming a Secondary School. The Obudu Local Council had her reasons (not quite explained to us then) for preferring a Secondary School to a Teacher Training College. The former would absorb the primary school leavers as the nearest Secondary School, then was the Mary Knoll College some forty miles down south. Approval had actually been given earlier by the Ministry of Education and the College authorities instructed to adjust accordingly so that the first batch of students of Government Secondary School, Obudu would be admitted in January the following year, 1962. Before I left Obudu in October, the entrance exam had been conducted and probable students short-listed for interview and admission. Save for the type of students admitted and the change in name from T.T.C. to Secondary School, every other set up remained unchanged.

It is worthy of note that I met the first batch of Student-Teachers in the Obudu T.T.C. in their second year – 1958 and left the last batch in the last term of their final year in 1961. In other words, in my four odd years (Jan. 1958 to Oct. 1961) of teaching in the College, I taught EVERY-ONE of its five batches within its six-year life span as a Teacher Training College. In my living memory that is the shortest life span of an educational institution I am aware of. To me, it was a rare and unique chance to be a teacher of EVERY TEACHER of an entire generation of teachers trained in one College!!

How My Mother Chose the Wife I Married

Easter Holidays that year was the foundation laying period for what later became my taproot as a man: a head of an amiable family, a father in more than one way, a graduate teacher, a community leader and an honoured Chief of Ehugbo Town.

Having lived at Obudu for three years and nine months, I invited my mother to visit me there. My intention was to give her some relaxation before the serious planting season; to give her that traveling education as that was her first (and in fact, last as it later turned out) long distance journey in a motor vehicle; and to let her have the feeling of where I was living. During the previous Christmas holiday, I had agreed with her that Gabriel Okpani (a.k.a. Ubom), a friend and the son of her age mate would escort her from Ehugbo to Abakaliki, from where I would travel with her to my place in Obudu. On the agreed day – Good Friday – I was at the Abakaliki Motor Park to receive her.

When the Afikpo Urgent Service vehicle arrived, she was well-sandwiched in the front seat between the vehicle driver and Miss Felicia Anwara Obioh. Our eyes had met and I rushed to the stopping vehicle to help her down. Felly jumped down first, greeted me and asked mama to get down. On alighting from the vehicle, she inquired if that was the Obudu. I managed to say ‘no’ and quickly asked, “Where is Gabriel Okpani? She replied: “Obiadighi (he did not come)”. ‘Why’ I added at once. “Obu ma Anwara Obioh yiri bia (I came along with Anwara Obioh) she said in her accustomed tone of finality whenever she was not in the mood for any argument or discussion. I then returned to Felly to inquire about her health and her studies at College. She was in her final year for the Grade III Teachers’ Certificate Course in the Women Training College (Teachers Training College for girls) Afikpo. It occurred to me they were on Easter Holidays too. While exchanging greetings, we picked up their luggage and headed to Mr. D.A. Ugwu’s residence where we passed the night. It was about a quarter of a mile away.

Between the motor-park and Dan’s residence, my mother informed me she preferred traveling in the company of the girl and so asked her to accompany her to Obudu. Up to that moment, I thought Felly would stop at Abakaliki. It didn’t make any difference then as every

one of us was in a holiday mood. I accepted without reservations the declared reason of my mother for taking Felly along with her. After all, by Ogudu's death, I had volunteered to chip in whatever little aid I could to off-set her school needs. In recognition of that gesture, she had from the first term in the College routed all her academic reports to me as her guardian. I, therefore, had no cause then, to read meaning into my beloved mother's action.

Early the following morning, three of us boarded an Ogoja bound mammy wagon – a seven-ton lorry. Two of them occupied passenger's seat in front of the lorry while I took a convenient seat directly behind them in the second section of the lorry. As it was the first time both of them were going on that road, I constantly drew their attention to the names of some of the land marks on the way. Such names as Iyahe, Mfuma, Bansara, road to Ikom, Okuku and Ogoja particularly thrilled my mother. She recalled with excitement how my father used to mention those places as the towns he went to buy such food stuffs as yam, pepper, cocoyam, melon, ogbono, etc. My father was a trader along the Cross River. They got to those areas through the river ports and told my mother stories of their long treks to those places. According to her, such places sounded like fairy land. Some sixteen years after my father's death, my mother was all ears to hear of and see the wonder lands. Only then did she appreciate how far afield my struggling father had to go to keep the family going. Such pieces of information and the cords they struck enraptured my mother and caused her not to notice the dusty and bumpy road. She felt being in a new world, which was precisely one of the reasons for my ordering her out of farm work for a while.

We changed over to another lorry at Okuku junction. By the stroke of luck we secured the front seat even though the lorry had almost the required number of passengers. Most people then preferred the back seat either out of convention or because of the higher transport fare which was anything from a hundred percent of the fare for

the back seats. The lorry was a 911 Mercedes Benz lorry and had enough space to take three of us in front with the driver. The forty odd miles journey took us nearly three hours to cover. The date palms, cactus shrubs and the expanse of grassland along the Tiv area of the middle belt were of great interest to my mother.

She literally gaped at the mode of dressing of the Tiv men and women. In her own words (interpreted in English Language) “so there are people who still wear barks of trees, animal skins and bunches of leaves as clothes... I have seen something in this my journey. Perhaps that is how the people in that place where Ogbulu and her husband live also dress...” No, mama, I cut in amused. That place they live is Ilesha in Yoruba land far way down that side where the sun sets. They are a very different type of people. One day I will take you there”. “Me? No! Am I the ants that keep moving up and down the road? Let me reach home first after this,” she said without even looking at me. Felly was equally thrilled by the first-hand experience especially as a teacher in training.

At first I couldn't imagine why my mother had to link up what she saw up there to the place my sister was living then in the south west. The answer was not long in coming as she ruminated aloud within the next few minutes. “Ogbonnia,” she spoke up, “Ogbonnia” was her pet name for me: “You know I was thinking of Ogbulu and her stay away from home for so many years when the sight of those people interrupted my thought. I always think about that your younger sister and her sufferings. You know she is of the same age grade as Nyee Nnia here. Your father's death – when she was not quite four years old – had been the source of her sufferings from that early age. It also gave rise to her getting prematurely married before her age mates. It is up to fourteen years since she went to live with her husband, and up to this moment she has nothing to show she is a married woman. I don't know if God will keep me alive to carry any living child from her...”

I did not need a soothsayer to tell me she was becoming too sentimental on the issue. It had been a prickly point all the time. Our arrival at the College premises before I could intervene saved the situation. I then gleefully announced to them, “We have reached. Driver, please stop us after that sign board – just at the beginning of that hedge path on the left side of the main road”. The driver complied. We alighted and the vehicle continued its journey to the town – about half a mile away. Christopher and Francis Agwo rushed out to the warm embrace of my mother and Anwara. We trooped to the house which has been got ready for my mother’s holiday visit (and now incidentally Felly’s too).

I showed them round the house before my mother sat down to unpack the contents of her cloth-covered medium-sized basin. As she brought out and untied some of the dried banana leaves parcels, Felly continued commenting on the conveniences and general outlook of the house. The parcels out of the basin contained various items of food stuff ranging from salt, pepper, melon, crayfish to dried fish and garri. She had even a gallon of palm oil. She did not forget some quantity of local potato (edu) and three leaf yam (ona), groundnut and cracked kernel – my cherished occasional delicacies. The atmosphere therein could better be imagined. My mother’s attitude towards modern living had changed drastically from what it was some four years earlier when she spent three weeks with me at Igbo Ekwurekwu. She had become very receptive to change. That first night at Obudu was another memorable experience.

The College had a plant which supplied electric light up to about eleven o’clock in the night. She had the childlike excitement of switching on and off of electric light. “Mbeke (white men)!” she muttered with lips and hands expressions. That time around she had no complaints about vono bed and mattress and had no problem with the radio, which she used to describe as “those people in the box

who were never tired of talking nor had cracked voice. It doesn't appear they were ever hungry".

Three of us – my mother, Anwara, and myself – sat up till late in the night when the College generating plant was put out. I lit a hurricane lamp, left it on the floor in the parlour. It burnt low. It is difficult to pin point what we discussed but I recall that my mother was unusually happy and made a number of insinuating statements about my botched engagement with Dymphna. She wondered how she could have been conversing with her son's wife as she (my mother) neither understood nor spoke Efik or English. In a rather sarcastic manner she asked Felly if she heard of the engagement to which she honestly said no. I cut in and requested her to close that issue permanently. She did. Our other discussions centered on our father's relatives and their notoriety in maltreating the families of their deceased relatives. We also touched on the eleven surviving children of five boys and six girls of Nwata Agwo with me as the current 'father' of the polygamous family. It was well past midnight when I observed we were no longer coherent in our discussions. Mama and Felly moved into the visitor's room while I retired into my bedroom.

By 5:30 a.m. the electric lights were on. My mother and Felly were already stirring. I reminded Felly of the early morning Mass for students. It usually started at 6:30 a.m. on the dot. We were at the church in good time. By 7:30 a.m. the Mass was over and we were back in the house. Before 7:30 a.m. my mother was standing outside looking around the vicinity. We greeted one another again and the children – Christopher and Francis Agwo – greeted mama and vanished into their room to change over for the morning assignments.

Some thirty minutes after our return from the church, some Ehugbo

indigenes at Obudu who had the information began to arrive to greet my visitors. Playing host to relatives, friends and well-wishers was a regular feature in our College compound residence for the two weeks my mother was with us at Obudu. In each of the intervening weekends I had to take her out to see friends, neighbours and places.

About the second day after my mother's arrival, she, in a very subtle way, asked me a very rhetoric question. It was around 11 a.m. Felly was busy with the two children in our garden. Mama called me: "Ogbonnia, ka kweleri m ihe merini I maghi alu (tell me why you won't marry) Anwara Obio". The statement/question took me by surprise. It had no yes or no answer. She had never even remotely mentioned the issue to me. That statement appeared to suggest I had rejected such a suggestion. I was completely put off. I queried my understanding.

Did I really understand what she asked me? I looked at her straight in the face. Our eyes met and I said to her: "Mama, I si na obu ngini (what do you say)?" She repeated the question in its original form. Then I found some words to reply with a question. "I sim si ngini (what do you ask me to say...)" She snapped: "A sim, ibe Chineke dike kwafu onye Ibibio m, kunye Anwara. Nna ghi wo no ndu na maa. O zara ahia n' oguduwo ekwukwu a. O katawo uhu. Obunwa ezibe nwata eka mgbe amurua na Ezi Agwo. I nonwa aru oru. A si muo, jee ja lutari mua. I nuwozuu ihe m kwuru (I said, since God has kindly pushed away that Ibibio girl, engage Anwara. Your fathers are alive in the spirit world. She has almost completed her studies in the College. She is mature. She has been a good girl since she was born at Ezi Agwo. You are now working. I say you should marry her and keep for me. Have you now heard what I said?"

By any interpretation, that was a loving mother's wish and an order to her only son. For the next five minutes or so I couldn't talk, but several thoughts crossed my mind. I stole a look at my mother whose

face radiated with unusual cheerfulness as she gently rubbed her left knee while peering vacantly through the low window opening on to the veranda. Among the numerous thoughts of that historic moment were two vital ones: I had promised myself a minimum of four years from the time Dymphna broke off (March 1959) to cool off any issue concerning engagement and marriage.

From 1955 when Felly's beloved brother, Ogudu died in mysterious circumstances, I made up my mind to help her as *nwadi ezi m* (a member of my kindred) to the best of my ability with no strings attached. Accepting my mother's polite order may be misinterpreted by hitherto close observers and even Felly herself. Though there was no matrimonial impediment no matter how they were stretched, I had up to that moment, regarded her as a sister. In fact, before that date she had shown me letters and written letters to me as her guardian about a couple of marriage proposals to her. In each case, I had given her genuine pieces of advice, which she took religiously. I, therefore, couldn't imagine what she would make of my proposal.

I rose from my seat, looked outside, glanced at my mother again and then told her to allow me sometime to think over what she said. In her rather witty response she retorted in impeccable *Ehugbo*: "*Nke' I niriari arighi ari, I nuo ihe m doyeri* (Whichever way you may think about it, you have heard what I said)." That was a serious assignment.

It was then it dawned on me what must have been at the back of her mind when she decided to substitute Felly for Gabriel Okpani as her escort from Afikpo to Obudu. I wouldn't know if my mother had in any way discussed that issue with Felly at any point in time before that day. But within the next few days, I observed that our pattern of association was changing gradually especially after the initial embarrassing questions and or statements by many of our visitors. Some addressed Felly straight as my wife brought by my

mother and others inquired when the wedding was to be. At times I laughed with my tongue in my cheek doing everything to hide the mental war raging inside me.

Before the date they were due to return to Afikpo, it happened that Felly and myself agreed to accompany Agha Ugwu in his seven ton lorry to Gboko and thereby see the Benue River at Makurdi. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to see that main tributary of the great River Niger I had crossed a couple of times at Onitsha down south. The four-day journey took us to Lafia to say “hello” to Matthew Obioh at his Masam Engineering Works. Felly was Matthew’s step sister (the same father but different mothers). The journey/excursion was as brief as it was exciting. It appeared that my mother looking after the house at Obudu, thoroughly liked the exercise and expressed surprise at our early return after just four days. She was happy for us.

The Gboko/Lafia “expedition” pushed the period of my mother’s stay at Obudu to some three weeks of memorable family life. It turned out to be a unique turning point and about the tallest and most firm beacon that marked the turn of events in my journey through life on earth. Thanks be to God and blessed be the woman He kindly gave me as a mother – a rare gem.

When my dear mother and endearing “new” Felly left me after over three weeks stay, I had to endure their departure. I had to relearn how to live without their physical presence. To lessen the loneliness caused by their absence, I spent more time with my students and focused my thoughts more on the University education I was due to commence in October that year.

About the first week of September, I had to visit home briefly to fix up a few things before my departure to the University. Francis and Christopher Agwos’ continued schooling had to be arranged. I

had to secure some space in the Abani's house for the handful of belongings I had acquired over the past years.

During that period, I formally applied for palm seedlings then in progress in the Eastern Region under Dr. Michael Okpara's Oil Palm Plantation Project. I had for it, a five acre area in Usho Ezi Agwo between Ezi Egu Ubam and extending across the Ugwuegu road to Uhu Ikee and spilling over to Ezi Okpara where Mr. M.S.C. Abani later built up his residential home.

As I had projected building my personal house at Ezi Agwo in the next few years, I took all legal and traditional means to ensure no outsider intruded to cause confusion. The stages included ascertaining the exact boundaries of Ezi Agwo through contacts with Egu Obele and Ukpai Uche of Ubam. By then Eluu Udume of Ezi Agbo Amancho had a small cocoa plantation at the portion where Oyim Otu and Emmanuel Udu Otu later built their houses. To get the man out of that parcel of land, which he maintained belonged to their maternal family of Ogbagi Eze, I had to reclaim it through their eldest surviving man, Abani Ude of Amaekwu Nkpogho with the sum of fifteen shillings. Messrs Oko Okwe (our in-law) of Ezi Ukaka and Otu Oyim of Ezi Agwo then hibernating at Ezi Oka accompanied me, on an Eke day, with a keg of palm wine. After the cordial discussions and sealing the deal, I assumed there were no further obstacles on the way, but I was mistaken as events in the next four years revealed.

Still within the period under review Uwa Oko and Otu Ume of Ubam requested for portions of land to build living houses. In consultation with Eni Anigo and Otu Oyim their requests were granted. However, Otu Ume had to abandon his own area in obedience to his mother's advice. He was warned against co-habiting with Uwa, who was said to be diabolical.

Of course, I had to feel the pulses of my mother, Felly and members of our kindred at home about the palm plantation. I had no problem in covering the grounds I planned to within the stipulated time. But I maintained a dignified silence over Felly's issues even when my mother made several allusions to it the night before I returned to my station. In any case, the rumour mills at home worked overtime in attempting to interpret Felly's visit to Obudu.

Even though I had not actually made a proposal to her, the news was going round that Anwara Oti has been betrothed to Anigo Agwo. Felly herself politely accused me of telling people she was my would-be wife. The way she occasionally told me what she heard people saying about us, in a way encouraged me to reflect on my mother's genuine wish. My silence was correctly interpreted to mean consent. That was probably the best method of recognizing people's approval of the union. The actual proposal came about two years later – in May, 1963.

CHAPTER SIX

THE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE IBADAN (U.C.I.)

EPISODE: 1961/1962

Back in Obudu I rounded up the term's exam, compiled the results and formally handed over every aspect of the College charge under my care. It was not an easy job but since the movement was primarily for my academic growth, there was no going back. As the students were returning for their final exams in the 1961 academic session, I was moving out to start the Associateship Diploma in Education course in the University College, Ibadan (UCI).

The parting ceremony organized by the staff and students of the school was impressive and drew tears from most of the students. A day before my leaving Obudu, the Afikpo Community there surprised me with a lavish send-forth party and personal gifts. My friends who were indigenes of Obudu were not left out in their expression of appreciation for what was achieved during my almost four-year stay there.

Earlier in the year and before I left for UCI, I tried to apprentice Lawrence Agwo (Anigo Ogeri) to an Amuro photographer. The arrangement fell through as Law, mid-way during the negotiations decided to change his mind. He then preferred motor mechanic to his earlier choice. I accepted his new choice and convinced his brother (on the mother side) John Otu-Eke to let him (Law) have his way. But John could have wished Law learnt the trade from him, who was a renowned motor mechanic at Obudu. However, Law eventually did the apprenticeship at Aba with little Servant Garrage, the same place as Matthew O. Obioh.

Life in University College Ibadan (UCI)

I celebrated the first anniversary of our Independence (1st October, 1961) at home. Less than a week later I traveled to Ibadan via

Abakaliki to see the Supervisor/Education Secretary, Rev. Fr.

O'Connor with regard to the sponsorship issue. He informed me that Enugu never replied to his letters and reminders on the matter. So, I left for Ibadan with little hope of getting the otherwise normal help for students of my category. I handed over that gloomy journey to God Almighty. He was my only hope.



My Matriculation at the University College, Ibadan, 1961

On arrival at the UCI, I was checked into Melamby Hostel for about a week pending the allocation of rooms to us at the then recently completed Independence Hall between the International Secondary

School and the main UCI campus. I was not asked to pay money for anything. My name on the admission list was all that was required. In the next few days, we had orientation course to acquaint us with University life and the campus. We were introduced to the university community – the halls of residence, lecture halls, departments, labs, libraries and recreation centres. Every Education Department had to register in Additional Maths and English. Geography was one of my teaching subjects that is why I registered it.

When eventually we moved over to the Independence Hall, I occupied room 70, which was upstairs with one Mr. Onwudiwe, who spent only two months and left for Western Germany. We were the first occupants of the then brand new room and hostel. For the rest of the 1961/62 academic session, I alone enjoyed the luxury of that beautiful apartment meant for two students.

Each room was equipped with two six spring Vono beds (with every item of bedding in double supply); two centre tables with accompanying cushion chairs, two reading tables with drawers all built on to the wall with additional book racks to match; a wall-fitted electric light for each reading table; two wardrobes each with built-in mirror. Apart from the switch on the inside wall near the door, there was a bed switch at a convenient place near the head bed. A student could switch the light on and off while lying comfortably on his bed. Each of the louvred windows had good wire meshes to keep off mosquitoes and other insects. Nothing was omitted for the comfort of the students.

Every Monday morning, students were required to push out the clothes that were for laundering. All that they needed to do was to list the clothes they wished to be washed in a small note book and leave both at one side of the door. The washer-men went round to collect the clothes. Every Thursday/Friday, students went to the laundry house within the hostel area to collect their neatly washed

and pressed clothes with the laundry note book. Some students even wanted the clothes to be returned to them in their rooms just as they were collected. Human nature indeed!

Of course, no student did any sweeping. The beds were made and rooms swept clean every morning by labourers from the Porters Department. Students had to leave the key to their rooms at the porter's lodge for easy access. Even that was a problem to some indolent students!!

For each of the three meals in the day, plus four o'clock coffee/tea with cake on Sundays, students chose what to take. There were at least three dishes to choose from at each meal. For instance, on days when foofoo was the menu for the lunch, there used to be yam foofoo, eba (garri) and amala with their types of soup/sauce to choose from. Some would go in for mixture. The quality and quantity were such that gentlemen and ladies just asked for what they would finish. For chicken, it was on the average of four students to a full grown processed fowl. In short, the standard of life and living set for the students "spoilt" most of them, hence a handful of them opted for professional studentship.

The American Peace Corps took off in earnest in Nigeria about October 1961. As UCI was the premier tertiary institution, it was made a base for the orientation and deployment of the young men and women fresh from American Universities, who volunteered to work in Nigeria. They were lodged in Independence Hall (Hostel), where I was also an occupant. One of them, Maria Michelmo, created a scene that marred the whole programme and caused a bilateral misunderstanding between Nigeria and the United States of America. Honestly, the girl's comments on a post card about dirty environment in Lagos, often, were correct. I picked a flyer on it underneath my hostel door the next morning of that fateful day. The "offence" was that she is not a Nigerian. Thanks be to God

the issue was patched up neatly following the timely intervention of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the then Governor-General of Nigeria. Nevertheless, that initial culture-conflict left very sour taste in the mouth and caused the average Nigerian to view the program with suspicion. Perhaps, that must have contributed to its being short-lived.

Late in November, I was among the 450 students who matriculated for the 1961/62 session. It was a historic date for me. Thanks be to God for granting me the opportunity to be a University student, a dream come true!

By the second half of December 1961 when the University broke up for the Christmas holiday, I had a one-day maiden visit to Lagos. Onyiba Aja Nwachukwu, representing the Old Afikpo Division in the then National Assembly, was the first Federal Minister of Education of Nigeria. I took advantage of our earlier acquaintance at Afikpo to visit him in his then Queen's Drive Avenue, Ikoyi, Lagos. I was there principally to see if he could help me about the M.O.E Financial Assistance for my Associateship Diploma in Education course. I did not meet him as there was no prior information about my visit. But for the ancillary benefits of the knowledge of our Federal Capital, Lagos, just a year after our Political Independence, sight seeing and making one or two new friends, the journey appeared fruitless. I certainly treasured the experience of the Carter Bridge, Idumota Square, Ijora Power Station and the Lagos Railway Terminus, among others. What I saw was a clean and orderly Lagos Island "bequeathed" to Nigeria by her colonial masters. Even the ancestral homes betwixt the colonial buildings made the dwelling areas unique.

Back in Ibadan, in the company of Anthony Ogonnia Ekoh (then a student of Pharmacy in the then College of Arts and Science, Ibadan), we visited Ehugbo indigenes living and working at

Ife. We met a cross section of Ehugbo people (especially Amaizu indigenes) during the one day visit. They were full of joy that their people visited them from such Higher Institutions of Learning. Nwachi Inya (alias Nwachi Enya Ogeri later “Ogbu pem”) made frantic efforts to entertain us in his dingy dwelling. We appreciated his genuine offers commensurate with his own level and standard of living. That was another side of the human coin. Both journeys on two different days, were worthy experiences for me

Within Ibadan itself, it was only Ekuma Eze alias Ezeyi (a.k.a. Odeku) of Ezi Nwachi Ndibe, a teacher by profession that was an Ehugbo man we identified. He was quite distanced from us for obvious reasons. In the university itself, only Theresa Ibe Igu, Mrs. Ama (born at Ndibe but married at Mgbom) was the other Ehugbo person. She was repeating the courses she lost in Associate Diploma Education as a result of child birth the previous session. We eventually passed out together successfully.

Before the end of the first term, I had registered in some Academic, Religious and Social Associations. Among them were the Students Union, the Pax Romana (later known as the Nigerian Federation of Catholic Students (NFSC)), and Sigma Club.

It was a wonderful experience for me to view the Television I had read of long ago in books and magazines. The then Western Region Radio Fusion in private homes, offices and institutions of learning made a lot of news items to write home about.

Back to the Ibadan academic community, I recall the excitement I had to behold and be admitted as a student by Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike the Principal, (who later became the Vice Chancellor of the University) in the All Purpose Trenchard Hall. He was rarely seen - usually only twice in a Session during Matriculation and Convocation ceremonies. During visits of international figures he

may be seen conducting them round their places of interest in the University. His office at the top floor of the University Tower was even more rarely visited by students. In any case, there was hardly any need for that.

In our Department of Education, Mr. Stitodeshi, a Mathematics lecturer from Tanzania, was my tutorial adviser. Mr. Batram, a UNESCO expert took us in Audio Visual Aids and Appreciation of Music. Dr. N. Uka, then newly recruited, was our Psychology lecturer while Mr. (later Dr.) E. Yoleye took us in Geography. Mr. G. Shaw (an Englishman) was our lecturer in English Language and English Methods.

Those of us doing the Associateship Course were forty-four in number and grouped in an average of eight students in tutorial groups, which met for a couple of hours once a week in the Adviser's office. It was actually there lecture topics were x-rayed, arguments raised and opinions made for or against by students on any topic discussed. We and our Tutorial Advisers were great friends and interacted more as colleagues than masters and students. We had the real stuff.

My Christmas holiday in 1961 was different in many respects. The University re-opened for the second term on 2nd January, 1962. I had to be there as normal lectures started in earnest two days later. Lecturers entered the class and "talked away" irrespective of the number of students present. Most of them had no need for the blackboard, which always spanned most part of the wall in front of the class. Questions were hardly asked nor answered by the lecturers. As it approached the one hour duration for a lesson, students who had lectures elsewhere would mill out of the class if the lecturer was still on. Taking effective part in tutorials was the main thing.

Luckily, the weekly tutorials made up for most of the deficiencies in the lecture rooms. Even though during the four-year Grade III & II Teachers Certificate Courses at Ogoja, I took active part in the preparation and use of teaching aids, the experience of using electronic gadgets like video tapes, film projectors, close circuit television, etc., in UCI was for me a world of its own. And my one year Academic Session at Ibadan greatly influenced my life and enriched me as a professional teacher thenceforth. The course ended in mid-May, 1962.

In the midst of the Associateship Diploma in Education exam, I was invited to Enugu for a Commonwealth Scholarship interview for a year's course in the United Kingdom. I was refused the award because, according to the Chairman of the Panel, Mr. Ibi Mboto of Itigidi, that course was just what I was completing in Nigeria. I was very sad about it especially as I had hoped that that would be a wonderful opportunity to travel outside Nigeria for the first time. However, the bitter truth was that it would be unjust for me to duplicate one course at the expense of other equally qualified Nigerians. Therefore, I had to suppress that human nature in me for naked truth.

Honestly speaking, I cannot explain precisely, how my Diploma course fees in UCI was paid. I believe the Ministry of Education of Eastern Region of Nigeria's provision for financial aid to recommended voluntary agency teachers took care of it without involving me. No university authority ever said a word to me about the training fees. Glory be to God.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BACK TO MY ALMA MATER, THEN MARRIAGE AND FURTHER STUDIES AT ATTC, OWERRI: 1962 - 1966

By June, 1962 I was a proud possessor of Associateship Diploma in Education (Dip.Ed) of the University College Ibadan. The certificate was sent to me at Afikpo by post office registered packet a few days after the release of the result. I just acknowledged receipt of it by post too. This is another example of honesty, trust and transparency, which was a matter of course then. What a deep cleavage between then and now.

I reported back to the Supervisor, Ogoja Diocese, based at Abakaliki. I was, at once enlisted to teach in the then St. Joseph's Teacher Training College, Igbeagu, still in the formative year. I was granted a two-week resumption leave. I retired to Ehugbo to get ready.

A week later an S.O.S. was sent to me to proceed to my Alma Mater, St. Thomas' College, Ogoja to help out there. In other words, I was "transferred" from Igbeagu to Ogoja a week after I was introduced to the Igbeagu staff and students. However, I was allowed to complete the two weeks leave.

During the half-a-month leave I concluded arrangements for the continuation of schooling of my step brothers – Christopher Agwo and Francis Agwo in the primary school at home. It was not worthwhile going along with them to Ogoja in the second term of the academic year as the school year was still from January to December.

My mother was very happy I had come back after nine months of not earning any salary. She, as usual, drained her lean income to equip me for the journey to Ogoja. She did not fail to remind me at any opportune time of nyee nnia (Felicia Obioh), who the previous

year she had chosen for me to be my wife. The exposure I had at Ibadan helped a lot to make me be more inclined to her. So, most of the period I was at home courtship actually caught us firmly. At that very period, she was preparing very seriously for her Grade III Teachers' Certificate exam due in November/December, that year 1962. Though she was a boarding student in the Holy Child College, Mayfield, Afikpo we managed to see a couple of times before I left for Ogoja.

July, 1962 saw me in St. Thomas' College Ogoja doing some unconventional duties. Mr. Pius Ekuma of Enohia Itim was a staff of the College. The Irish Rev. Father who was the English Methods Tutor was about to leave the College in August and I was slated to take over his classes. At the same time of waiting, I was in charge of evening/night classes for the students in St. Thomas and serving as a Supervisory Headmaster in the Practising School, St. Benedicts School, Ogoja across the road and beside the Catholic Church building. Fresh with the knowledge I gained from UCI, I operated the College's film projector for occasional film shows and conducted seminars for Primary and Secondary School teachers on audio visual aids. It was one of the ancillary courses I did at Ibadan. I wished it were made a permanent course in the College but it was short-lived.

I was already in my twelfth year as a teacher – five of them in Teacher Training College, three in Primary Schools and four as a student teacher in St. Thomas', Ogoja.

Apart from my first year in teaching (January – December, 1951), I had always lived with my younger brothers and other siblings, who served as house helps. But because of the situation already mentioned above, I had no younger one from Ehugbo with me in July, 1962. While carrying out the ad hoc assignment in St. Benedict's Primary School, Ogoja, I stumbled on Joseph Nwachi

Alu. Stumbled in that, I never knew him nor his parents before then. As I needed a boy of Ehugbo origin to stay with me, I met the standard five teacher whose attendance register I checked and asked him to call for me the boy I suspected the name was like an Ehugbo name.

The about three feet six inches tall, light complexioned boy, clean shaved head and a pair of bulging but bright eyes was called out from the class. In a brief interview in Ehugbo dialect of the Igbo Language, I gathered he was living with his parents at Igoli Ogoja. They were from Ukpa village in Ehugbo. He himself was born some ten years earlier and started his primary school education there at Ogoja. He was a member of Boys Scout (Cob). I was a Cob myself in the mid-1940s in Government Primary School, Afikpo. His external appearance, fluency in Ehugbo dialect and being a Cob at once attracted my fancy. I asked him to see me at the staff quarters after school that Thursday. He did and I told him we shall visit his parents the following day. That I did too.

At their Igoli residence I met the parents and two other older children, a boy and a girl. The other children took after their mother in dark skin while Joe resembled his father. After some introductions, his father had a fairly good knowledge of my late father, Dick Agwo Anigo. I was informed he was from Ezi Oti, Ukpa while his wife was from Ngbo in the Abakaliki area. They met when he was a P.W.D. road worker at Ngbo.

I requested them to let Joe spend the weekend with me and later the August holidays around the corner. Without hesitation they granted my request. That was how Joe came to live with me till the end of the Nigerian Civil War in 1970 when he joined the ageing parents and later secured a job with the Nkalagu Cement Factory. Some thirty years after, though he still maintained a weak link with my family, he was no longer the good young Scout Boy I lived with for

some ten years. Drinks and smoking had ruined his life.

My Palm Plantation Project

During the August holidays, I concentrated on setting up the palm plantation at home. That involved pegging for and digging of the spots and planting of the palm seedlings supplied by the Ministry of Agriculture. That first phase was focused on Ezi Okpara and Usuh Ezi Agwo. The seedlings were planted in good time to take roots before the late October dry season. Christopher Agwo and Francis Agwo who were waiting on the wings at home helped quite a lot as suitable for their tender ages. Lawrence Agwo (Anigo Ogeri) helped too when he visited.

When the palm seedlings had been planted, I personally appealed to my elderly nwadi (Messrs Eni Anigo and Otu Oyim), to be part of the venture by caring for the palms for token financial allowances. My offer was informed by the fact that the parcels of land the palms were planted belonged to Ezi Agwo and they were the surviving elderly Ezi Agwo men. Secondly, it was another way of their earning steady incomes for their 'snuff'. Both rejected the offer for different reasons. Eni Anigo, on the ground that he had no strength to move about seeing growing palms around usuh and Otu Oyim for having no time for such work. I regret to recall that the responses I had from them reflected their true life styles. It's a pity though.

Since someone had to care for the palms especially the periods of my absence from home, I had to engage the services of one Ojo of Amokwu Amangballa as a casual labourer at a monthly stipend of ten shillings in 1962.

When I had already established my palm plantation by the grace of Premier Michael Okpara, I formally agreed to allow Emma Egw Abani (Egwu Joe) to use my Ezi Okpara (palm grove then) for

planting of his yams. I handed over the labourer, Nwachi Ibe (a.k.a. Maitama Sule, who was fencing it for me), to Emma to complete the fencing on a gentleman's agreement. His father, Mr Joseph Abani Chukwu, knew the details of that age mate (nw'ohibe) mutual agreement.

For the rest of the third term in the 1962 school year, I continued my "floating teacher" job in St. Thomas' and the adjoining primary school, St. Benedict's. I recall that by July when I was already a staff of St. Thomas' Teacher Training College, Ogoja, the Principal of the College was an Irishman, Rev. Fr. J. O. Driscoll. Mr. John Odey of Obudu, who had been in the College since 1954, was the Vice Principal. Mr. Pius O. Ekuma, an Ehugbo brilliant Grade II Teacher and a former Rev. Frs' boy, was then teaching first year classes in the College. He was then single like myself but was younger than me in age, qualification and teaching experience. He occupied one of the junior staff quarters newly built then while a senior staff quarters beside the Vice Principal was vacated for me. There I lived with Joe Alu till May, 1964 when I left for the National Certificate in Education Course in Owerri.

I have always liked honest adventures and there were many of them in my life. For example, on 27th October, 1962 I applied to the Ministry of Defence to join the then Royal Nigerian Army (Education Corps). I was expecting the reply till the end of 1962. In the third week of May, 1963, I received a reply from the Ministry of Defence, Lagos which stated in part: "I am to acknowledge receipt of your application letter dated 27/10/62 and to inform you that there is no vacancy now to which you can be appointed" signed by one A. Akanbi Okumo for Ag. Permanent Secretary. That was after some seven months! Now, there may be no such reply at all.

1963 – A year of Memories

Late the previous year, 1962, I had registered to do the GCE exam at Jos, purely, for adventure purposes, There were centres at Afikpo and Abakaliki but I chose Jos just to know the place and experience the cold weather (temperate climate). I had learnt of Jos in the classroom. Transport fare by rail was less than five shillings from Afikpo. Mr. Unya (Wayne) of Amaechara Elu and his then wife Veronica, were my hosts for the one week's adventure. Even in the freezing January, 1963 cold, they showed me round Jos.

From January, 1963 I was assigned to teach the Higher Elementary (HE) classes Arithmetic Processes, Theory and Practice, which later included Additional Mathematics. Occasionally, I helped out with Geography and English Literature. Among those in my H.E. classes were Messrs Vincent Ogbonnia Eze of Agboride Amaizu and John Abang of Ogoja, who some ten years later was the Principal of that College. It is worthy to recall that Mr. Vincent O. Eze was one of my standard two pupils in 1951, my first year as a teacher. In January, 1963, Christopher Agwo started Secondary School in Obudu County Secondary School – an offshoot of the County E.T.C. where I taught from January, 1958 to September, 1961. He managed to stay there till the end of 1963 but he could not cope with the academic demands of the school. I withdrew him and he later became a motor Mechanic.

As a young man of thirty years, I dared honest and challenging jobs – be they academic or physical. In April, 1963 I applied for admission into the Scottish School of Librarianship Glasgow. I had a negative reply some three weeks later. I strove to improve my qualification via the GCE exams. In St. Thomas', in addition to my very tight classroom teaching, I took up the games mastership of the College as well as the College football team coach. By the grace of God the team became so formidable that it got to finals in all the

Catholic Mission Schools football competitions in the then Eastern Region of Nigeria. It lost narrowly to St. Charles' College, Onitsha due to what the Principal said was due to "your absence".

My Participation in the 1963 National Census

One of the odd aspects of that exercise I didn't understand was that I was living and working at Ogoja but had as a Co-External Census Supervisor, a non-indigenous teacher at Afikpo. I was away in Ikirun near Oshogbo in the Western Region of Nigeria on a national assignment – the 1963 Census. From Eastern Region, I was one of the External Census Supervisors' Exchange Programme, which lasted for over one week.

I will, for life, treasure my experiences during the 1963 National Census. One Mr. O. Okoronkwo then teaching in St. Mary's Primary School, Afikpo happened to be my companion during the exercise. Though I had known him for over five years, it was as a roommate and as census officers at Ikirun that I found out he had a very peculiar nature. He never drank water 'by nature' he told me. If I saw him sip water previously it was to ward off gossips. Orange was his main source of liquid requirement, just that. I seriously doubted him at first but my later observations there and enquiries back home confirmed his statements. Up to the moment of compiling this document – some forty years later- I've not known of any such case of a person not drinking water as any normal human being does.

The other striking experience was the make-belief 1963 National Census as an external census supervisor. Make-belief in that, at each registration spot, the officer-in-charge had an exercise book containing pre-written names of all those supposed to be resident in a household. We were supposed to see EVERY person to be registered, they were to say their names, age, sex, etc. For infants, their parents or guardians were to give out the required details.

But during the exercise, a person over thirty years was TOLD his/her name from the compiled list. He had to mope. When we protested, we were directed to the Emir who told us to “cooperate”. And that was final. However, a customary tradition prohibiting men, especially strangers, from entering the pudah (the part of the dwelling house where married women are confined) was lifted to allow us (men) to supervise the supposed census exercise therein.

The situation of make-belief was the same. Nevertheless, we (visiting census officers) were treated like Ambassadors/Diplomats. In one of the guided excursions to recreate us, we visited the reigning Oba of the area where we had the unusual privilege of entering his palace with shoes on and not prostrating. We also visited the home of a late political activist – Chief Bode Thomas in Oshogbo. The meals were lavish though we had to battle with the peppery dishes. Those with loose body constitutions had running stomach most of the time because of the excess pepper in the food we ate. Of course, plenty of pepper in food is common in that part of our country.

The Death of My Mother

Back from the census, two outstanding events of the year included the death of my mother and my preparations for getting married within the first quarter of the following year.

The end of the second term in a school year then used to be about the second week of August after the terminal examination. Our school, St. Thomas’ Ogoja closed for the second term on August 10, 1963 and all the students had to go home. Every student was, of course, a boarder. Every tutor was duty bound to stay back for at least a week to mark the exam. scripts, process the results, and hand them over to the Principal for dispatch to parents/guardians.

After the usual morning Mass on that fateful 10th August, I called

Vincent O. Eze and gave him five pounds for my mother at home with an additional message that she should expect me at home in about a week's time. That was not to be.

Less than an hour after the students had left and I was busy on my study table marking scripts, a friend, Mr. Ogbang, an Agric. Officer in the Ministry of Agriculture Ogoja visited and informed me he was on his way home for a break. We had a brief chat and he moved. Barely another hour later, our Senior Agric. Teacher Mr. O. C. Agwu hurried in "Good morning Sir", I said instinctively. "Good morning" I heard him reply. His countenance wasn't what I had always observed of him as he sat on the chair close to my table. "Gab" he started. "I have a message for you from Afikpo". "Did you travel Sir", I asked. "No, through the telephone."

In what I later discovered was an intuition, I quickly asked him with fear: "Is my mother dead?" I guess it was a most unexpected question. "Why that question" he queried. "Because, my mother is the most precious person I have now on earth". He became silent and after some moments said: "Yes." "Gab, a few minutes ago, I had a telephone call from one Egwu Joe, of Amaizu. He told me to give you the message. "When did she die?" "About seven a.m. today. He said you should come at once. Please accept my heartfelt sympathy. Get ready and go now. I will tell the Principal about it". As he stood up to leave, I managed to say "Thank you sir for the message. I will get ready and go to Ehugbo at once."

I got up from the chair, dazed. My mother dead! But there was no news about her illness. I was with her just about two weeks ago at Afikpo. For a few minutes, I gazed into blurred space followed by total darkness before me. Then I felt warm tears down my cheeks and soaking the shirt I had on. An unknown force moved me into the lone cushion chair at my small parlour. I went into a trance and there recalled that some eighteen years earlier (August, 1945),

my father, Nwata Agwo was the first human corpse I saw with my childhood eyes. I was beside him, cuddling my only brother then, Otu, on an Eke market day. I was then in Standard III. From then on, any education I had up to the Diploma in Education I obtained from the University College Ibadan drained whatever income my mother could afford. She was looking forward to my getting married to the girl she chose for me and having children so she could play the grand mother role. She was never one in all her life! “With her demise, what future do I have?” I asked myself. God knows best and He’ll provide for me, I consoled myself.

I jumped up from the seat, picked up a few things and emptied my small box treasury in my room. I was fully prepared to give my dear mother a befitting burial.

By 10 a.m. I was boarding a 911 lorry bound for Abakaliki. The seventy two-mile journey was bumpy and dusty and lasted till 4 p.m. I was a few minutes late at Abakaliki to catch the Urgent Service Bus that plied the Afikpo-Abakaliki route. I walked down to Azuiyiokwu to board any available vehicle to Afikpo. By serious luck, the friend who called on me at Ogoja earlier in the day, was still on his way to Itigidi. He was surprised at seeing me there and queried why I never told him I was traveling home. I just shook my head. He picked me up. In the car, I revealed to him the reason for my traveling without prior preparation. He sympathized with me and raced in comfortable speed in an attempt to catch up with the Afikpo bus ahead, which was the last for the day. By another stroke of luck we overtook the bus less than a hundred yards to Abaomege motor park from where my friend had to branch off to Itigidi. He waved the bus down for me. Thanks be to God. At 6 p.m. I was at Eke Market, Afikpo from where I walked briskly to Ezi Ukwu Egeburu where my mother lived.

I walked into a deep mourning crowded room. A quick exchange

of glances and subdued mourning welcomed me. Felly was sitting by the lifeless body of my beloved mother. “Unu jokwa,” I greeted them. I specifically greeted Felly and she responded, “Jokwa, I biawo? Chineke di ike ehuwa I rute woru (Welcome, we thank God that you are here).” I quickly sat near her and my dead mother on the ugbo (earthen bed). I guess the spirit of my one and only mother, at that moment blessed our life union in marriage.

With tear-filled eyes, quivering lips and shaking hands, I bent over the motionless corpse and gripped the cold remains of the body that warmly harboured me for nine months and sacrificed everything for my comfort through infancy, childhood, even up to adult life. I ended with: “Mama, tokwa uhu. Chineke gozie gi. N’okwua gi ugwo ihe oma oohu I meri m, na eha Jisos. (My mother, fare thee well. God bless you. Let Him reward you for all the good things you did for me in Jesus’ name. Amen). I got out my handkerchief and wiped my tearful eyes. I reminded myself that I was approximately thirty-one years plus that month. I then picked up courage, looked around the room closely and noticed a coffin neatly covered with white cloth and said: “Thanks be to God, but who bought them?” “Egwu Joe”, replied Felly.

I conferred briefly with her and she briefed me on the preparations that have been made both at Egeburu and my Amaha Amaizu villages. Shortly after, I observed some young men from Amaizu around the house. I then directed that the corpse be put into the coffin and taken over to Amaizu. All were waiting for that directive, so in less than thirty minutes, the funeral march began with me and Felly leading the mourners. We took the Ogo Amangballa – Ngwugwu Okpo road to Ezi Idume where men and women were patiently waiting at the grave side. It was an Orie day. And my mother’s maiden name was Orie Otu.

Aho the next day is a woman’s day in Ehugbo. The other is Eke.

Under a sort of candle light, the remains of my first abode in this world, was lowered and partly covered. The full burial ceremony would hold the next day. We the people of Ezi Agwo were still sojourning at Ezi Idume having been forced out of the village by circumstances (a supposed curse) causing untimely deaths in our compound. My wife's elder brother, Oyim Oti, had laid a foundation of a house for himself at Ezi Idume. It was at that foundation that a space was used for my mother's grave.

All the essential ceremonies for the burial of a woman of her age and social standing were concluded the following Aho day. Thanks be to God I comfortably contained the expenses. I must forever remain grateful to Egwu Joe for his wonderful help. He bluntly and happily refused my humble offer to re-imburse him for the earlier burial expenses he incurred before my arrival. My greatest thanks and gratitude go to Miss Felicia Obioh later Mrs Felicia Agwo, who bore most of the financial burden before Egwu Joe came into the scene.

It is pertinent to recall here that Felly was then teaching at St. Brigid's Primary School, Ozizza where Mr. Michael Ikwuegbu was the Headmaster. I had left standing instructions with my mother that she has to report her ill-health to Felly who would arrange for the hospital medication. Felly informed me that exactly forty-eight hours before her death (Nkwo day) 8/8/63, my mother visited her at her residence at Imama Ozizza from Egeburu. She stayed with her till very late and Felly thought she would sleep over, but she did not. My mother went to Ozizza just to see her. According to her (my mother), "i gurum egu" she longed to see Felly. That was the only reason she had to visit Felly for a whole day. It turned out to be a final fare-well visit. She accompanied Felly to school to greet the HM Mr. Ikwuegbu, among other things, she exhorted the HM to please look after her daughter-in-law (nyee nwa m). The meaning of the statement came to light two days later when at precisely half

past seven o'clock in the morning of 10th August, a messenger from Egeburu arrived to break the news about mama's death a few minutes earlier. From that date at about the age of thirty and a half years old, I became an adult orphan. However, for the rest of my life, occasionally, I relish saying, "Oh my mother", sincerely.

Orie Otu was not only my beloved mother, she was also a very dear friend as well. Her exit set an alarm in my head on how best to manage my future. That's it! The probable solution flashed in my mind. "Hasten up arrangements for marrying Felly" was the answer. That would be the best mother substitute. And she was.

As I hadn't concluded the second term result for my students at Ogoja, I returned to the school on Wednesday, 14th August, Orie. All other burial rites and the accompanying ceremonies – fairly minor ones – were suspended for about a fortnight when I was expected back in Ehugbo for the August holidays. Meanwhile I sent an S.O.S. to my sister, Ugwome Ekuma (nee Agwo) at Ilesha with her husband, to come home.

Back at Ogoja, the Principal of our school, other members of staff, Ehugbo indigenes at Ogoja, friends and well wishers thronged my residence in the College premises to commiserate with me over the death of my mother. I put in extra hours at night to make up for the time used up by condolence visitors. In less than two weeks after the interment of my sweet mother, I was at Ehugbo again.

Having earlier finished with my maternal relatives of Ibe Okwu lineage, regarding the burial of my mother, my sister, Ugwome Ekuma (nee Agwo) guided by other male and female lineage, concluded every other outstanding rites for our mother. I was personally satisfied that I gave my departed motivator and soul mate the honour, respect and total appreciation within my means and standing in the Agwo family and Ehugbo community. Above

all, I felt fulfilled that the Almighty God allowed me accomplish one of the main goals of being a son – burying my parents. So they truly had a child and a son.

Throughout the period of grief, Anwara Obioh, my deceased mother's last diamond gift to me, was at once a mother substitute and a dear friend. That space of time, she virtually moved over to Ezi Ukaka at her step sister's (nne Ugwome Oko) home – about five minutes walk to my abode. The grief also increased our love for each other. Some three months before my mother died, I had formally proposed marriage to her. Typical of an ideal humble girl, she promised to give the reply later. She replied in the affirmative about a week later. And then the turning point.

My mother's call to glory and our sharing the loss quickly metamorphosed into concrete plans to get together as husband and wife forever. I recall that over fifteen years earlier Felly had lost her mother, Oti Egele, to death while the father, Obioh Otu Ugo died about three years earlier. Both of us had become parentless children. The urge to start our own home was very great so, we were convinced that was the answer to our apparent loneliness in the midst of people milling around us.

By Christmas season, 1963, arrangements were in top gear for our wedding proposed for Easter period of 1964 – about the time I was due to commence the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) programme in the newly established Advanced Teachers Training College (ATTC) Owerri. It therefore became necessary that Felly be transferred from Ozizza to St. Patrick's Primary School, Afikpo. It is worthy to note that the Catholic Mission, then the proprietor and manager of the Mission schools, was always sympathetic towards allowing couples stay together in a station or a convenient abode

for both. So, as the Parish Manager was aware of our plans, we had no problem in effecting the transfer with effect from January, 1964 in anticipation of the April event.

1964 – My Marriage to Felly

From January to April, 1964, all the traditional marriage rites on Felly were concluded. In keeping with the Eastern Nigeria Marriage Act, on 2nd April, 1964, I paid the prescribed fee of five shillings for Notification of Marriage to the Revenue Officer, Afikpo. The end of the twenty one days of statutory clearance for the wedding was given. By that time every item of wedding dress had to be bought at Abakaliki, Onitsha or Aba through clothes traders at Abakaliki. On Sunday 26th April, 1964, we were joined in Holy Wedlock in the then St. Mary's Chapel, Newsite by Rev. Fr. Coughlan, an Irish Rev. Father. Mr. and Mrs. B. A. Ekumah of Amaha-Amaizu sponsored the wedding i.e., they were our God parents.

As was the vogue then, reception took place in a palm frond shed at Ezi Idume end of Ogo Elogo. It was a second such, after that of Mr. & Mrs. M.S.C. Abani in December, 1957. The beer served then was bought in wooden crates of forty eight bottles each. In fact, the wooden crate was later converted to chop box. Our wedding cake was baked by Mrs. D. Abani's mother – Mrs. M. Hunt – an English granny who happened to be in Afikpo on a year's visit to her daughter and the husband.

I had sojourned with the Abani at Ezi Idume for some twelve years by the time I got married to Felicia Anwara Obioh. She joined me there even though both of us happened to be bonafide indigenes of Ezi Agwo.



Our Wedding Day, Sunday, 26th April, 1964 at St Mary's Catholic Chapel, New Site, Afikpo

Flash Back:

My intuitive resolve in March, 1960 after Dymphna's disappointment not to think of marriage for four years, by strange coincidence came true as by the 26th of April, 1964 when I wedded with Felicia Obioh, it was exactly FOUR (4) years and a month! Chineke Kaa! After our wedding on Sunday, April 26, I traveled to Owerri on Thursday, April 30, to register as a student of ATTC for the three-year NCE course. I completed the registration the same day and returned to Afikpo. The following day Friday, 1st May, 1964, Felly and I traveled to Ogoja for a post wedding reception on Saturday 2nd May, 1964 for the Afikpo community and my colleagues at Ogoja in St. Thomas' College hall. It was an historic gathering, which doubled as my send-off from the College. On Monday, 4th May, 1964, I was back in Owerri to commence the course.

For the first four months (May, June, July and August) it was only at weekends I stayed with my wife. Imagine the type of “honeymoon” we had! Late August to late September was a holiday period in school and that was when we had a semblance of honeymoon.

Thanks be to God she was very understanding and gave me no cause to worry unduly.



With my dear wife in honeymoon mood

The dual self-imposed assignment of being a fresh student of French in a tertiary institution and a fresher husband in the newest nuptial knot of that time were challenging enough. Thanks be to God He

showered His blessings on me and the entire family.

As I left for further studies in ATTC, Owerri it became mandatory to make provision for the future of Christopher Agwo and Francis Anigo Agwo my two step brothers. Christopher became an apprentice motor mechanic at Aba while Francis took up the study of Draughtmanship at Abakaliki. Francis lived with my uncle, Mr. Irem Oko Ola of Mgbom. I was able to maintain them as a result of my status as a married student in ATTC. Married couples were given a monthly allowance of ten pounds while those single received five pounds. Each student had, in addition, a yearly grant of ten pounds, for books.

From May to mid August was my first term in the institution. The study of French as one of my teaching subjects was very exciting. It was then I heard “qu’es que c’est” for the first time as a language student. “Mademoiselle” (Ms) Sparling and later Madame, a French Canadian, was a UNESCO personnel and the Head of the French Department. We were the second batch of students in ATTC, which took off in May, 1963. The woman and the French Language teacher was so domineering that “bonjour, bonsoir, monsieur, mademoiselle, merci, oui, comment a le vous, je m’appelle, etc.” virtually became the lingua franca, second to the English Language in ATTC, Owerri.

It was more so because the French Department students of over four hundred were constituted into ‘pupils’ for the French practice. As a matter of course, every student in the first two years had to understand and respond to common place French expressions. The French students became synonymous with bonjour and monsieur. But the study of the French language itself from scratch to University Undergraduate level within three years was not easy. It was not a funny venture for me.

Towards the end of that year, 1964, we were informed of an adjustment in the Academic Calendar. With effect from January, 1965 the Academic Session was to be from January to December instead of the then May to April of the following year. As a result of the adjustment, each of the two batches had to gain a term of four months. So, we sat for the end of that session's exam in December, 1964.



At A.T.T.C., Owerri French Language Studio in 1964

About August, 1964, I requested Mr. Samuel Ekuma Otu my sister's husband to come along with her for medical check-up after over fifteen years of marriage and no living issue. My sister had had several pregnancies – some lost through bleeding/miscarriage, and in others delivered infants died between 1 and 4 days after. Both of them were then living at Alaba Camp, Ilesha where her husband was a labourer in a gold mining company. They arrived Afikpo in the second week of December.

I took both of them to Mater Misericordiae Hospital, Afikpo and handed them over to Dr. Twomey, a renowned Irish Gynaecologist. After thorough medical examination of both she found that they were biologically all right but that their blood grouping was not compatible. She performed D & C on my sister and prescribed some drugs for them. She gave two of them specific instructions about regular hospital visits immediately conception takes place. They kept strictly to the directives.

That Christmas period was a very unique one for me. It was the first Christmas festival I shared jokes with my wife while preparing our meals. It was then we became aware that Felly and I were about to be parents to a child! The external features manifested on Felly, the early morning sickness, Mater Hospital reports and her selective feeding habits combined to keep both of us on the alert. We had to imagine many things about our family in no distant future. Our one room apartment in Abani Chukwu's house, Ezi Idume, would not comfortably accommodate us – both of us, a new child and a possible maid. A mother-in-law substitute was bound to spend sometime with us. Before the New Year we had concluded a request for an additional room or we re-locate to another place. We did the latter.

After confirming Felly's transfer from St. Patrick's, Afikpo, to St. Anthony's Amaizu/Amangballa, Mr. M.S.C. Abani allowed us move over to his new building at Ohia Etoro on the Eke Market/Ugwu Odo road side as Care Takers. By night fall on 31st December, 1964 we had taken full residence in our new home. Its location was secluded in a swampy surrounding. We didn't mind that especially as we had two large rooms, a "football field-size" parlour and kitchen apartments. We had our first close contact with Ogbo (a.k.a. Able To Do), a driver from Amankwo who drove an Italian Engineer, who was our co-tenant.

While at home for the Christmas I observed that an elderly man in his late seventies (Nnade Oko Okwe) of Ezi Ukaka – some two hundred yards from us visited at least once every day – usually in the afternoon. He came to drink water from Felly’s water pot given to him in a clean cup. Ogberehi was everyone’s source of water but he confessed ours was “sweeter!” Can you beat that, because it was in a neater environment and he was served the water in a clean cup.

1965

January, 1965 was the beginning of my second year in ATTC Owerri. After some nine months as an English/French student, I founded a Drama Club later known as ATTC Drama Group. My first drama production was a play: “The Incorruptible Judge,” which we acted for the College community. The cast included a few of my course mates, namely, Messrs Peter Etunwoke, Tobias Ukaegbu, Mesdames Victoria Ogueri, Vicky Ekwem, Scholastica Dim Ochiabuto, and my humble self. Mrs. Agnes Chi Oko (later Mrs. Esiaba) facilitated the stage equipment brought down to Owerri by the then Enugu-based John Ekwere troupe.

Besides the really serious academic work, I was the Chapter Chairman of the Pax Romana (later NFCS), Co-Founder of the Amateur Photographers Association (APA)/Studio Manager. Occasionally, I played lawn tennis and squash racket games. For sure, I had no dull moments at home and at school, especially as I shuttled between Owerri and Ehugbo to see Felly.

On Eke day, 24th May, 1965 between 4 and 5 p.m. our son, Augustine Ogbonnia Agwo was born. It was a prime beacon in my life history. As an ATTC student, I was at Owerri when it happened. The following day I got the wonderful and heart-warming piece of news. I could not wait a minute longer, I hurried back from Owerri to the warm embrace of Felly at Ehugbo. I carefully picked up

the day old first fruit of our matrimonial union, my carbon copy, and said: “Thank you God, thank you Felly,” holding Ogbonnia delicately close to my chest and peering, with indescribable glee, into his visible blue eye balls. “So, Felly and I are now parents in keeping with the biblical injunction. “Nwata Agwo and Orié Otu, be glad in your graves for your desired first grand child has arrived twenty and two years, respectively after you had passed on. Fate cheated you as none of you had the privilege of cuddling or seeing any of your grand children.” I said in my mind.



With the pioneer Drama Club I founded at A.T.T.C., Owerri in 1965

The joy in me then is better imagined than described. Before I returned, Felly on the very day of delivery, had given the women their nri okokoriko – an accompanying child delivery food. For the next two days the men were entertained with good quality palm wine and assorted bottled drinks. Thanks be to God we could afford that to welcome our first issue.

That change in status automatically gave rise to real responsibility.

Rebecca Oti Oyim, (Baby, as she was then known), Felly's niece on the brother's side, joined Idam Urom another niece on the Sister's side in our house to help out with the household chores. Both of them were between six and seven years of age when they came to live with us.

Idam's mother, Ogwu Enyi, then living at Orra, Ozizza came over for the omogho – baby nursing and care of the young mother and her child. She was with the family for over three months with only occasional short visits to her matrimonial home. From that late May to late August, I had to shuttle between Ehugbo and Owerri. During week-days, I was in school but at weekends I had to be at home to keep them company and watch our beloved child's unseen growth process and observe the daily changes. It was a welcome experience to compare my book knowledge of "child growth" with the practical aspect right before me. Wonderful! For some three weeks in August/September we were on second term holidays so, Felly and I had enough time to make the necessary adjustments for the emerging inevitable family life.

The third term (September to December) in my second year turned out to be a very busy one. In addition to my brain child – the Dramatic Club – I was a member of such other Societies/Clubs as Nigeria Federation of Catholic Students (NFCS), Nigeria Association of French Teachers (NAFT) and Amateur Photographers Association (APA). As the President of the NFCS, I was in a very close contact with one Rev. Monsignor Duru, who was the College Chaplain. I had great respect for him not just as a humble lecturer in Religious Studies but also as a possible candidate for the office of a Bishop in the Catholic Church. Later years' events, very unfortunately, forced me to change my views of him. Some fifteen years later he was on punitive transfer to Macgergor Teachers College, Afikpo, as a married man. He, however, was still a Catholic adherent.

We had occasional Students Union Nites with all the fun and

feasting. Roasted chicken costing about three to five shillings each were imported from Mgbidi on the Owerri-Onitsha major road. Students who cared to drink, had beer at two shillings a bottle and/or soft drinks at six pence a bottle subsidized from Student Union Funds. We, especially the comparatively younger ones, were properly guided to become disciplined, dedicated, knowledgeable and God-fearing teachers and citizens.

Thanks to Ashby and the UNESCO personnel in charge of the ATTC programme. Everything considered, academics was given the prime place. Departments competed for industry and excellence. The well-qualified and well-experienced lecturers notwithstanding, each Department occasionally invited renowned authors and personalities to interact with the students. For instance, the English/French Department invited Messrs Cyprian Ekwensi, Robert Okara and Tai Solarin of Mayflower School, Ikenne to Owerri to dialogue with us on their works – Jagua Nana, At the Bar Beach & Mayflower Project., respectively.

Ifeanyichukwu Agwo Factor in the Family

In the first week of June, an incident occurred. Mr. John Agwo (Anigo Ude) my step brother, brought back his five day old son Ifeanyichukwu Agwo, all the way from Ilesha in Western Nigeria. The child's mother had died four days after delivery. So, John midwived the tiny son traveling in a 911 lorry for over twelve hours to Afikpo for the child to be handed over to the Rev. Sisters at Mater Hospital for care.

Carrying the pale looking boy in swaddling cloth, we met the Rev. Sisters. While agreeing to accept the responsibility, they wished some one who could be adequate mother substitute, should nurse the child. Just as we were filling the required documents for the handover of the child, Orie Agwo – John's younger sister married at

Ezi Agbi Ukpa, then a nursing mother too, hurried into the maternity section where we were. She had been informed of what befell her elder brother, John. She came to take the child and nurse him along with her few days old daughter. “Afterall, women now have and nurse twins” she said.

That was a God-sent relief. Rev. Sister Dr. D. Twomey thanked her and advised that she should not hesitate to consult the hospital authorities at any time their help was needed. That is part of who and what Ifeanyichukwu Agwo John came to be.

Recall that on 20th December, 1965, my sister gave birth to her first live and surviving child (son), Otu Ekuma. By the end of December, 1965, three male children of the same age bracket had been added to the Agwo extended family within eight months. They were Ogonnia Agwo (May), Ifeanyichukwu John Agwo (June) and Otu Ekuma (December).

The First Military Coup in Nigeria and my Final Year in ATTC, Owerri

1966 was a very eventful year. Less than one week we reopened, the first military coup in Nigeria took place. It was on 15th January, 1966. Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu of Kaduna Cantonment led the coup plotters. By the following day we were informed that the Sardauna of Sokoto, and Premier of Northern Nigeria, Sir Ahmadu Bello; S. L. Akintola, Premier of Western Region; Alhaji Tafawa Belewa, Nigeria’s Prime Minister; Festus Okotiebo; Federal Minister of Finance, and others were among the casualties of the coup.

Ignorantly, we hailed the coup as a clean up exercise for the country. I recall it was an Egyptian lecturer in the Department of Maths in ATTC, Dr. S. Ali Samaan, who politely warned us: “My dear

students it is too early to jubilate. Pray hard and watch the events as they will certainly unfold. Military takeover of the government of a country is not a good thing”. We ignored those honest remarks that were perfectly right. Some thirty-five years later Nigeria had to groan under the pains of military rule. However, student’s normal life in ATTC continued.

My Practical Teaching Experience at Egbu Girls’ Secondary School
We had to spend the whole of the first term (January to April) doing Practical Teachings in public Secondary Schools in our teaching subjects. In the company of three others – a man, Sam Eke and two girls, Vicky Ogueri and Scholastica Dim, I was posted to Egbu Girls’ Secondary School on the Owerri-Mbaise road. But for the two of us on the practical teaching exercise, every other person on the tutorial staff and students, was a female. It was an uncommon experience.

The Principal, an expatriate Missionary woman regarded all of us as ladies or women. Of course, that was understandable as the population was 99.9% females. I was assigned the duties of Form ‘Mistress’ and a house ‘Mistress’ for the three months duration. Some twenty months old as a married man and a seven full months old father of a boy, I had to learn to answer Miss, Maa, Madam and rarely Sir. Any time it became necessary to chase the girls out of their dormitories, I had to shout from a safe distance to warn them to ‘check-up’. Like a palm wine tapper, I was aware that one needed not say everything one saw from the top of the palm tree. Most of the time it was safer to be “blind” with two functioning eyes wide open. My experience in Government School, Afikpo (co- educational school) in the 1940s, had taught me just that.

Thank God it was a Mission School where make-ups were strictly forbidden but their carelessness even in the class could be very embarrassing. There was an instance I had to remind them they

should realize a male teacher was standing before them. Hear a reaction from one of them: "...but you are now a woman". Laughter. Yes and No. What with my being a lone male in a staff versus senior girls in a basket ball match.

That basket ball game reminded me of the "obegele" games in our village in the 1940s. Boys and girls made "balls" out of dried banana leaves tied to the size of lawn tennis balls or a little bigger. On specified evenings and days, mixed teams were formed and the games were played on playgrounds or any open space. If one caught the ball, one would either run with it to the scoring point or throw it to a team mate. There was a lot of struggling, running and catching even other bulging parts of the body. These were boys and girls in their teens and played completely bare bodied. At best, the older girls used loin cloths while the boys used narrow-long towels "onungwo" to form triangular pants – "owuwa". Every other part was nude. Apart from the players, adults and even parents enjoyed watching the energetic games – the players sweating out of the sandy/dusty bodies. You can understand why I remembered the "obegele" games vis-a- vis the Egbu Girls' Secondary School basket ball games. It will not be wrong to assume that the Primary School I attended contributed to my being very relaxed in the midst of both male and female folks. Save for the four years I did in St. Thomas' Teachers College, Ogoja, an all-male institution, the other sixteen years I spent in various regular schools – Primary to University – were in mixed schools. Besides, I grew up in a polygamous family of five wives, many sisters and of course, my own wife, and several house maids. So, I was no stranger to their strange ways.

By May we were back at the ATTC for the penultimate and final term in the race for the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) course. For the remaining months, and including December, studies for the final exam took up every minute of our non-eating and non-sleeping hours. We literally slept in the school library and classrooms. The exams came up in the first half of December

1966 and before the Christmas rush we had bidden farewell to one another and the College. We headed for the labour market mostly schools, at various parts of Nigeria.

As a Catholic Mission teacher on an in-service training, I had to report to our Diocesan Headquarters at Abakaliki to formally inform the Authority of my completion of the course. I was directed to report back after the Christmas and New Year celebrations, January, 1967.

SPECIAL NOTE:

The ATTC brilliant graduates in French who later went to Canada were admitted at once into the Master's Degree class. Within the next three years, they returned to Nigeria as Ph.D holders to teach in ATTC, Owerri and other Institutions of Higher Learning in the country.

Personally, it was through serious determination that I was able to wade through the French lessons. The attraction it had for me as a virgin language I ventured into at the age of thirty plus years vanished along the line. I put in extra hours and years to merit a pass in it at the NCE Level. I was a poor French student compared with my colleagues and the standard of the language in ATTC, Owerri. Nevertheless, for the rest of my life I could read and understand the French textbooks and novels. Up to date, my family library has a handsome stock of French textbooks. From January 1967 to October 1974, I was a French Teacher in addition to other school subjects in Izzi County Secondary School, Ishieke and Ezikwo High School, Onueke, respectively. So, I did add something to my academic height with the study of French to that level and beyond.

For the period of my stay in ATTC – May, 1964 to December, 1966, there was no single Ehugbo student in that Institution. But Mrs. Agnes Oko (nee Orji) from Ngodo was a staff in the College.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RESUMPTION OF DUTY AT ABAKALIKI AND THE NIGERIA/BIAFRA CIVIL WAR: 1967-1970

The Nigeria – Biafra Civil War

In the first week of January, 1967 I resumed teaching at Izzi County Secondary School, Abakaliki. Mr. Christopher Nwankwo was the, then Principal assisted by Mr. Martin Nwancho Elechi – a French teacher who some six months earlier had joined the staff of the school after his university education in Lovain University, Central Africa. Mr. Elechi introduced and taught the French Language in the senior classes while I was assigned the lower classes for French in addition to English Language, which covered both junior and senior classes. The other members of staff in Izzi County then included Messrs G. Nwaghanata, Obianika, Augustine Oche (later Ocheoha) who introduced Economics as a subject of study in the school, and Njaka, normally resident in the U.S.

My son, Augustine Agwo (Ogbonnia) was some eighteen months old in January, 1967, Felly and I decided she, Felly, should get back to College and do her Teachers' Grade II Certificate course. She left that January to the then Holy Child Teacher Training College, Afikpo. I took charge of Austin ably assisted by Felly's nieces, Rebecca Oyim and Idam Urom.

The first term which ended in April was stress-free. I thoroughly enjoyed the “qu' es que c' est” French Language work and had real job satisfaction even with added family responsibility of Sir/Dam (Sir and Madam). But that relative peace was soon jolted. The real effects of the January, 1966 military coup began to manifest. Nigeria was in trouble.

The Secession of Biafra

By May, it dawned on us – people of the East Central State, the

area predominantly occupied by the Igbo race – that the Chukwuma Nzeogwu-led military coup had been construed as an Igbo revolt against the rest of Nigeria – particularly the people of Northern Region. Every Igbo person in every other part of the country was declared an enemy that must be eliminated. Upheaval, unrest, race for dear life, name it, were rife. War fever took over. The then Military Governor of Eastern Region, Col. Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu didn't take it kindly. A bitter war of words followed culminating in a most bitter shocking war of survival.

On May 30, 1967 Ojukwu announced the secession of Eastern Region from Nigeria with the name BIAFRA. It comprised the area which later came to be known as the South-East and South-South geo-political zones. The main tribal groups of the new country were Igbo, Effik, Ijaw and Urhobo. It sounded like a fairy tale to me. June passed with the euphoria of a new and uncharted country. On the 6th of July, 1967, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria under General Yakubu Gowon declared war on Biafra. It was only then it became clear we were in real trouble. The first effect was that all schools from nursery to the University in Biafra were closed. Miss Mgbo Irem (my niece) then a student at Ezzamgbo Girls' Secondary School ran to us at Ishieke for a few weeks.

Felly rushed over to Abakaliki to take our lone child and our house helps: Joe Alu, Rebecca Oyim and Idam Urom back to Ehugbo. They took some furniture along with them. As previously agreed with the Land Lord, Ogbeka's uncompleted building at Uhu Ohuu was our new residence. They moved into two rooms at the ground floor of the decked house. At our Ezi Idume residence I had a temporary structure for my some ten sheep. I alone continued to stay at the Ishieke school enormous staff quarters. Frankly, I thought it was a mere nightmare that would soon vanish. But it never did. Nevertheless, I made sure I was at Ehugbo at least once a week to enjoy family life, encourage Felly to hold on and interact

with the community in the troubled times.

I lingered on at the staff quarters partially to watch the events and mainly to carry on some poultry and onion farming. I raised scores of pullets and layers supplied from Ezillo and Nkalagu poultry farms. My transistor radio was always beside me anywhere in the rooms and outside while working. Mr. Martin Elechi (later D.O. and Governor Elechi) lived in the adjacent building. We used to while away time discussing the situation in the country and sharing his experiences in Lovain. He was still a bachelor then but seriously searching. We delighted in “shaving” the flowers and slashing the grass to maintain the lawns. We slugged on till about the middle of December when I decided to return home. I evacuated the poultry and myself to Ehugbo, into the Uhu Ohuu residence.

By late November, Otu Agwo’s (Eddy) presence in Felly had begun to manifest. With war drums sounding everywhere, we managed to celebrate the Christmas and the New Year. Within that period, Felly and I had discussed and agreed we had to put up our own building at Ezi Agwo. As we still played down on the possible consequences of the raging civil disturbances, our New Year focus was on the development of our Ezi Agwo ancestral home.

Meanwhile, Matthew Obio (Lafia), Law Agwo (Lagos) and Christopher Agwo (Aba) had returned home. Before long, Messrs Law and Francis Agwo enlisted in the Biafran Army. So, what happened in the battle field and the trenches became of great anxiety to us. A short while after his return, Matthew Obioh established his mechanic workshop beside our Uhu Ohuu residence. He constructed the pit for overhauling motor vehicles which one “Assumpta” later “captured”, unceremoniously.

1968 – The Fall of Afikpo

Some seven months after, Biafrans and the unending surge of Ehugbo people from other parts of the country with their stories of woe, a lot of doubts arose on where we were heading to. The number of vigilant groups and their kinds grew by the day. “Agha Biafra” became a household expression. I had to identify with the Biafran Home Brigade. We had no clear vision of what we were doing but had the satisfaction we were working for the stability of our new found country.

In preparation for my return to Ezi Agwo, I engaged youths and adults of Amaha and Amancho to clear the entire old settlement from our boundary with Ezi Idume, that is, from Ochie Ohoro Ogo down to our boundary with Ubam and Ezi Uzu Ugwuugu where some ten years later we gave Ugwuugu Catholics for Church building. At the back of my mind was to check any incursions by our neighbours. I farmed the greater part of what was Usuho Ezi Agwo but we could not reap the crops because of the Civil War. Despite signs of war, I began making arrangements for farming later in the year but that never was as the Nigerian Army overran Ehugbo much earlier than we had imagined. We fled Ehugbo on Friday (Orie) 19th April following the invasion of the Nigerian Army through the Ikumoro (Igoni Igoni), Cross River axis.

I was involved in serious farm work from February to April, on the farm lands at Ezi Agwo and Uhu Ohuu. Egwu Joe also farmed my palm plantation area at Ezi Okpara. Our crops – yam, maize, etc., were in the farm when we ran out from Afikpo on the 19th of April, 1968.

Four days to the invasion of Ehugbo, Idam Urom, went to Orra Ozizza to spend sometime with her mother. The day before, that was on Thursday (Eke), 18th April, Rebecca had gone to see her

sick mother at Amankwo and did not come back. So, we ran out from Ehugbo without both of them. By strange co-incidence, Ola, Peter Okpani's sister, ran off with Felly and Agwo.

How I Saw Ehugbo Fall

At about 5.00 a.m. on that fateful Friday, I was awakened by unusual artillery fires and shots. Though I had almost been accustomed to the persistent shots along the river-side areas, I was very much disturbed about its increased tempo. Nevertheless, I decided not to be unduly worried. Felly was to go to the hospital for ante-natal check-up. Meanwhile I left for the village to consolidate arrangements for roofing mats to house my sheep.

As I alternated between riding and pushing my bicycle to the village, I found I was moving against currents of people scampering out of their dwelling homes for unknown destinations. I managed to get to our compound at Ezi Idume where all had fled except two of my sheep that littered earlier that morning. Close to the pen were the poultry that motioned for attention. They had not been fed that morning. Of course, I had no ear for them. Instinctively, I mounted my eleven year old bicycle and hurried out of the village. To what place? You may ask, first to our Uhu Ohuu residence.

Just around Ozo Esaa, at about 6.30 a.m., a jet bomber on a bombing raid appeared in the Ehugbo sky. I had to take cover behind the market and in the palm raffia grove. For nearly twenty minutes the plane hovered, and among other places, bombed spots around Mater Hospital and the Convent. Series of bombs were dropped along the beaches.

Completely dazed but with a good amount of self-control, I managed my way back to Uhu Ohuu. Earlier, Mrs. D. Abani had sent words saying they (she and Felly) won't be going to the hospital again. Felly decided to work in the farm behind our dwelling house

watching the developments.

I left for the Presbyterian School, Ukpa for a meeting of the Public Enlightenment Committee (PEC). The meeting didn't hold. At about 9:15 a.m. when I was still contemplating on what next to do, the air raid started again. I escaped death by the breadth of a hair. A shrapnel of bomb narrowly missed me at the Presbyterian field where I lay for cover. Moments later, I mustered courage and picked two of the cooling shrapnels and hastened back to our Uhu Ohuu house. In a chain-bomb operation, Amaechara, Amangbala, Amaizu and Ndibe were bombed. Bullets from the plane also killed and wounded several people. That second air raid on Ehugbo in a space of an hour followed by increased gun shots and the news that the vandals had crossed the river, caused a lot of panic. Before 9.30 a.m., some people from Ozizza began to desert their homes.

For the first time in my living memory, I was part of a people in panic and confusion in practical terms. I believe my Guardian Angel took over control.

Frenzy, confusion, disbelief, indecision ALL combined to confound me. I heard myself yelling out to Felly: "Quick, quick, collect just what you can. Don't leave Agwo's box. Here is my travelling bag containing my certificates and a few other personal documents. Hasten into that Matthew's motor. Christopher, join them". Looking outside as they hurried out, I shouted on Matthew "please move, no further delay. Keep going I will join you later wherever you may be. Let me watch the situation for a while". My wife called out: "Biakwanwa, biakwanwa" (Come along, come along), as the vehicle puffed out thick black smoke from the exhaust pipe indicating movement. Vuum, they sped off.

Moments after they had left, I imagined very many things including the imminent fall of Ehugbo. That notwithstanding, I confided in

God and completely submitted to His will for us.

Among the things I tried to camouflage in the room were the sewing machine, the gas cooker, cushions and some cooking pots. At about 10:45 a.m. the shooting had spread all over the town from St. Anthony's and the Convent towards the Cross River. It was no longer safe to remain in Ehugbo so the only alternative was to move out with a heavy heart and tears in my eyes.

A few minutes before I finally left the house, I tried to put Felly's machine and Law's box into Mr. John Otu Eke's bus that was parked in front of our residence, seemingly ready to move. When the bus won't start, I hastily decided to abandon every other thing. I had a cursory look at the room with bits of our property strewn all over the floor. I rode away on our ladies bicycle with a machete strapped at the frame. I hoped the hostilities would be short-lived and I would come back to re-arrange the things. I never did.

Captured by the Invading Nigerian Army in Ehugbo

Some three hundred yards away – at Ogo Amuro junction, I stopped, on meeting a few Militia boys standing there. Just a few yards to that spot, I passed some armed Biafran Soldiers pacing towards the market. They left their land rover at the junction. Sooner than later they began shooting into the market. That confused and annoyed me rather than encourage me that our men were going to save the situation. After about eight minutes on that spot, I rolled the bicycle for some other two hundred yards to Ogo Amachara Agbo. There I met Mr. Ogonnia Eloy. Scores of us stood there hopelessly questioning one another why we should desert our home like that.

Almost immediately, the half-a-dozen army chaps I passed before the Amuro junction met us there. We stopped them and asked them to explain the situation around Eke market square. Very reluctantly, the officer admitted that the vandals had crossed the river into Ehugbo.

He diplomatically added that his men were engaging them at the beaches while he was going for reinforcement at the Macgregor College compound. His admission of the entry of the vandals gave us a great shock, which I did all I could to suppress. In less than five minutes interval, Hannibal Nkama Okpani of Kpogirikpo, drove furiously in a military Land Rover from the market side. Half alighted from the car he railed in Ehugbo language, "I told you people to wait for me at the Eke Market. Why are you here? Get down there every body. Do you hear that? I am coming just now. I am going to get some reinforcement. Don't move until I come". Of course, all of us assured him we were waiting. He drove away. We followed his car with our eyes. Suddenly the car stopped. It was almost a hundred and twenty yards off. In a military fashion, several soldiers rushed out of the vehicle and disappeared into the bush near the Amuro yam barn, on the Afikpo North Local Government headquarters road. The movement was very brisk. After three or four shots they reappeared and drove off. We didn't very much like the exercise. We began to doubt the seriousness of our soldiers. On hearing some gun shots along Amachi-Ngodo-Ukpa region, we quickly agreed we should move up to Ukpa play ground where we understood many able bodied Ehugbo men were waiting.

We took a right flank and burst at Ogo Amaechara Elu, then to Ogo Ukpa. We reached there without incidents. Our number increased as we moved up. Some of those who joined us were members of the Afikpo Special Home Brigade (ASHB) and Commandos. At Ogo Ukpa we stopped all able bodied men who passed by. While doing that, scattered gun shots were heard at Ezi Oti. Bullets flew past us. As if we had an order, we charged to the direction at Ezi Ukwu from where the bullets came. Before leaving, I parked the bicycle behind the "onu ogo" Ezi Agbi. I didn't realize for a moment, I was saying the last good-bye to the old friend and second pair of legs – the bicycle.

Very cautiously and on our toes we moved towards the direction of the shots. Soon the staccato bursts of the bullets told us it wasn't safe to move in a hurry. The advance party of our group shouted: "Eh eh, Biafran shooting Biafrans. Hasten up men, let's round up these saboteurs". As we came within view of a soldier, some one hundred and fifty yards away, he cocked his gun and beckoned at us rather sadistically. Of course, we dared not move an inch further. We took cover behind the houses. Some members of our group signaled that those still left at the play ground should be asked to come.

I volunteered to run back and call them. That was a risky thing to do but I did it not sensing any imminent danger. I didn't even imagine that the enemy could have come that far. I was still thinking of saboteurs only. Simultaneously, with my appearance at the side of the playground was this horrible shout: "Stop there! Drop your machetes and clubs. Hands up. Don't move! Or I shoot you. Is that clear?" Another voice from nowhere yelled out: "What's that? Who are those?" Then the response from the stern faced fully kitted Nigerian soldier, who escorted us: "Sir, na Ojukwu people. I de tell dem make dem surrenda". "What was that gun shot I heard a few minutes ago?" "Sa, na one Ojukwu man wee I tell make e no run but i run, na him I shut am". "You kill am"? "Ye sa, i dai fine. Look am der". "Right, let those standing before you fall in. "Do not shoot anybody who surrenders without running. That is the order from the HQ., Understand?" "Ye sa, you buck-up. Hold your hands up. Move! Move! Move!"

As we breathlessly joined the captured Ehugbo lads, the tip of my eyes caught the lifeless body of an Ehugbo youth at the Ezi Agbi side of the road. It was there and then I realized that Nigerian soldiers had infiltrated Ehugbo at least a day earlier. At least, twenty well armed soldiers conducted – about thirty of us from Ogo Ukpa to the stone paved triangle "round about" the present location of

Omaka-Ejali Park backing the Internal Revenue Offices. The time was 11:30 a.m.

A few minutes after arrival, three of us captives were escorted by armed soldiers to No 2 and Ezi Ukwu Ukpa to get some sleeping mats. The only ones we could get were those used for drying parboiled rice. We removed them leaving the rice on the ground. On our way back, we went into the prison yard and rooms for the first time in life. There were no inmates as they had fled along side their warders. The mats there were too old and smelly to be taken. Outside the then Council Secretary's residence (the present Magistrate Court), some of our (captured) mates were busy roasting and dismembering goats caught or killed from the neighbourhood. In less than one hour from that time we were 'deposited' there, over a hundred of us could be counted as inmates of that open prison yard. Meanwhile, machine guns had been mounted facing the four directions of the compass with a warning to all of us that no one should dare attempt running away. Doing so meant a sure death. As to convince us they were not joking, sets of the machine guns were mounted at each of the three sides of the triangle facing the centre where we sat on the ground. By rough estimate, we were about 200 of us between the ages of 20 and 40.

Frightened by the questions asked by the soldiers, I had to cautiously move on my buttocks to the BIR (Board of Internal Revenue) end and emptied the Biafran coins and currency notes on me into the terraced stone openings. I parted with some twenty Biafran pounds. I was then penniless. So many thoughts flooded my head especially when some of the Scorpion Battalion members arrived from the Police Barracks end and screamed: "Habba, dis Ajukwu piple still plenti so? Wusai fud for gib dem. Make wi begin kil da Ajukwu soja". "Sharap" thundered the heavily lacerated face soldier very close to me. "Dem no tell wi so". "Ye sa", came the answer from a boisterous young man who appeared unconvinced.

My Lucky Escape

Within me I thought: “It was past 5 p.m. and the night was fast approaching. These vandals may massacre all of us this night or torture us to death”. In a short meditative prayer, I had a flash of inspiration: “Yes let me try it out. Good Lord guide and protect me. Amen”.

Having identified one of our escorts to Ukpa for mats hunt, I walked up to him and said: “Officer, dis place wey wi dey no water for drink. Abeg give me that water bottle make I go fetch water down there (I pointed at Ngwogho stream). Without a question he picked up a one gallon plastic container and handed over to me. “GO come quick”. “U won go too? He asked Otu Otubo, Nelson of Amangballa, who was beside me. “Ye sa, ye sa” “Make una go”.

From the slope of the Dispensary/Health Centre, we agreed we should attempt an escape route. The track road between the Dispensary and the Police barracks came to my mind. There were, of course, army guards in pairs every fifty yards. As we got to each, the question was the same. “Where u de go”? Our reply: “The Officer there say make wi get am water for drink”. Quick! We looked very relaxed even though our heart beats appeared to sound loud enough for those close to us to hear them. Some ten yards into the bush path were two armed soldiers who were also satisfied with our explanation. By the time we did another fifty yards we were at the brow of the slopy hill again confronted by the last pair of armed soldiers. From that point they had a clear view of the road down the hill to the Ibii/Ogwugwu valley beyond the glimmering stream of the valley. They felt confident they could pick us with their bullets even beyond the stream.

In under five minutes walk from the last soldiers, we observed a bushy side track on the left. The good Lord had heard our prayer.

Piam! We slipped off and showed the dexterity of boys who had good isubu (Ehugbo initiation). It was down, down, down the slope along the snakey tracks. Immediately the watching soldiers could no longer catch sight of us, they opened burst shots left and right the road within their view. Luckily, they didn't know the terrain and couldn't dare to move down a bit. The bullets whistled past over us several yards above our heads.

We were in a race for our lives. We had no alternative. It would be a sure painful death if we were caught. The merciful God did it again for us. In what looked like a twinkle of an eye, the eastern clouds darkened betokening rain. We were still falling over stones and heaps (mounds) when driving rain landed on us. The gun shots became very faint and soon died away. Welcome bullets of rain as the dusk closed in, on us. The degree and nature of our panting is better imagined. Still clinching the water containers we held each other with the free hand. Darkness was a welcome companion. Our feet could no longer carry us so we had to sit down on two close heaps under the rain blitz. "Nnaa, ayi no na wee (Mate, where are we)?" was the rhetorical question we asked each other.

Before we could repeat the questions a few times – the pause for each succeeding one became longer than the preceding one as both of us fell asleep, the receding rain drops, notwithstanding. Whatever reptiles and wild animals we shared the bush with that wet night is left to conjectures. I could write a book to that night in the bush. At the appearance of the early morning sun, we realized the heaps were our pillows; the grasses in-between, our rumpled green mattress and our 'soja' water bottles waiting to be picked up. The damp clothes were beginning to dry through body heat while the laced shoes had no problem. My black leather strapped Idris wrist watch ticked on as I glanced on it to note it was just time for the morning Angelus. Fervently, I said it for a twin purpose at 6 a.m., 12 noon and 6 p.m. routine prayer for Catholics in honour of

the Blessed Virgin Mary; and to commit our fate to God.

Involuntarily, I stroked the back of my left upper arm and felt a streak of damp brown earth. On close examination, I saw it was left by some white ants that slightly burrowed into the black coat I wore – a sign that I had a sound sleep despite the ominous race for survival. Over forty years after the war and up till today, December 31, 2016, that my black coat with the indelible mark, is comfortably hanging at a place in my wardrobe.

We looked round, touched the wet cassava leaves with our palms; rubbed on our faces, cut a stem of a nearby ‘abosi’ for chewing stick and set off. About fifteen minutes walk from where we passed the night, we hit the tarred road at the Amasiri/Akpoha side of Ugwu Ukwu. We placed our ears on the tarred road for possible sound of vehicular movement. We bent down, surveyed with our eyes the horizon within focus. There was no sign of life save for the early morning chirps of birds and insects. We dashed over the road and headed for Amasiri – stumbling, rising, trotting and/or running until we found ourselves on the Okposi-Amasiri road some two hundred yards to the Amasiri main market. That was on Saturday (Aho) 20th April, 1968.

The mood in and around Amasiri was that of anxiety, confusion and day-dreaming all centred on the previous day’s invasion of Ehugbo by the “vandals”, as the Nigerian soldiers were commonly called by Biafrans. “What next?” was on the lips of everybody. The up and down ant-like movement of people was quite disturbing. Our ears caught the information that some Biafran Militia men were mustering around the Amasiri/Amangwu/Oso Edda junction. We met a handful of them and introduced ourselves as escapees from the vandals, captives at Ehugbo the previous evening. Our looks and the plastic containers were enough evidence to authenticate our story. A few other people who slept in the Macgregor College

bushes narrated their own experience. They added that by the time they left there, earlier that morning, the Nigerian soldiers had not moved beyond Government Secondary School grounds. Besides, they conjectured that one could still get to Eke Market from Macgregor through Oba Amuro to Uhu Ohuu.

There and then I made up my mind to be part of the militia group that decided to go on reconnaissance to the Macgregor area. At the back of my mind was the great desire to reach the abode I left in disorder the previous day. Before the melee group set out towards Ehugbo, Mr. Otu Otubo Nelson (my co escapee), had left me till we met again about mid 1970 after the war.

We took the track road from Poperi Amasiri through (Ebe Akwa) “Ogbugba Ndu” stream to the western outskirts of Macgregor enormous compound. Treading cautiously, we surfaced at the premises of the Assembly/Exam Jamaica Hall and made for the main road through where Ebonyi Hotels now stands. As we were approaching the road leading to the town through the Afikpo North Local Government offices, we heard three fast shots of Shebarator rifle. In a split second, the bullets whistled past us. We dived for cover. Four other rounds followed in quick succession and so did the flying death pieces. No screaming. No talking. Each one of us crept with dexterity in retreat. By the time some of us got to the Macgregor entrance road, an adventurous Abakaliki-Afikpo bound tipper truck made a copybook ‘U’ turn on sighting us and detecting one or two of us, he briefly applied his brakes, switched off the ignition sensing we were in danger.

We were bare handed as we had dumped whatever cutlass and clubs we had to flee for dear life. No one waited to be asked or begged to be let into the moving vehicle. I frog-jumped into it and landed on the metal floor of the tipper. We rolled down the Macgregor hill till we got to the junction where he switched on again and

sped to Amasiri. Unceremoniously, we jumped down and vanished among the bewildered one day old refugees. It was eleven o'clock in the morning. Breakfast or any form of food at all was out of the question.

Together Again With My Wife and Child

Somehow, I spotted some people I could ask about my family – Felly and Austin Agwo. Someone informed me that my wife and my son were staying in an abandoned one room apartment very close to Owutu Edda main market. I moved on foot, of course, and got to where they squatted. Up to that moment my wife had refused to eat. For over a whole day there was no word of my whereabouts. With the Biafran cry of genocide being carried out against the Igbo, anything could have happened to me. She welcomed me with tears of joy, asked me several questions I had no answer for. My sympathy for her cannot be adequately expressed in words. My presence alone brought back warmth, life and hope to the family. I reached out for our almost three-year old son, kissed him passionately and held him warmly to my chest as he peered into my face. For sure, he could not understand nor imagine what his dad went through some thirty hours earlier. I was as good as dead but for God's providence. He Austin, was very close to being the only fruit from Felly's womb by me and who had an idea of me. I thank God that I lived to see him and Felly again and continue to thank Him.

Life as Refugees

That night I had my meal for the first time in two days. So, this Saturday (Aho) of 20th April, 1968 stood out as a special day in the history of my life. It was the night six of us: Felly, Austin, Matthew, Christopher, Ola and myself used one of the cloths like a mat on a dusty floor for a bed. We lay in various directions making sure Austin was comfortable between me and Felly. The cranky

wooden door was left half open to admit some air into the 10x10 feet windowless room. At several points on the aged thatched roof were openings that let in star lights. It was a rough night. Whatever went for household property shared the room with us. Can you imagine that! But there we were for the night. For the greater part of the night Felly and I got lost in memory lane. We had no illusions about the bleakness of our tomorrow. Nevertheless, we braced ourselves to face whatever it had in store for us.

From Amasiri to every part of Edda, the impression was created that nde Ehugbo (Afikpo people) were saboteurs who had given their town away to Nigerian soldiers. And so, we were labeled as sabo (short form of saboteurs). As a result of this, Afikpo people were given very hostile reception everywhere they ran to and were treated worse than lepers of old. A little rambling around Owutu Edda market area on arrival and early in the morning convinced me the place was not a safe place for us. By eight o'clock in the morning of Sunday (Nkwo), 21/04/68, the entire family was already at Oso Edda. We traveled in Matthew's smokey motor. Our Sunday devotion was done in the moving vehicle.

At Akaeze Ukwu, we saw many Ehugbo families squatting at unhealthy areas mainly in or beside dilapidated buildings. Around Ogidi Akaeze Motor Park, we made a brief stop, spotted Mr. Oko Okwe our in-law of Ezi Ukaka- Amaha, Amaizu. By God's plan he moved close to the motor he knew very well and shouted: "Mr. Agwo, bia belegi ibe ayi no. Lee enya na ulo m di n'elu m (Come and see where we are. Look at the house up there)," he persisted. I moved a bit in the front seat to accommodate him. In under five minutes, we were in front of the building – a refugee camp of a sort. For over thirty minutes, I was literarily deafened by such questions and comments as: "We heard you refused to run out of Ehugbo and the vandals caught you?" "I heard you were killed around Eke market." "Someone told me that bomb hit you and scattered every

part of your body”. “I heard it was at Ukpa they killed you”. “Yes I heard you escaped from the Nigerian soldiers”. “How did you get here?” “I have been crying for my sister and her only child. Poor widow after just three years...” “Ali Ehugbo idi ike, ntutu ntutu bukwari na nro” commented Anwara Obioh, my wife’s elder step sister. Some even grabbed and shook me to make sure I was real. These were shades of rumour, especially war rumours. For it is said that, “in war, truth is the first casualty”. So it was as I personally experienced it during the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War.

One Mr. Silas Ibe, said to be living somewhere in Northern Nigeria, was the owner of the house converted to refugee camp. He was very sympathetic with our plight and did everything humanly possible to make us feel at home at his personal inconvenience. I have no doubt in my mind that the Good Lord would reward him a hundred fold. Amen.

A quick count showed we were about seven families numbering over fifty individual members. It was a collection of people who were forced by war to live together in a 10x20 feet parlour, spilling over to the veranda and surroundings at night time. We had to live with the prevailing commingled body odour, unwashed clothes and stench from children’s urine and faeces, which posed serious health hazard. There was no alternative. Endurance was the living spirit based on an absolute faith and trust in God.

Mr Peter Etunwoke, a Friend in Deed

Felly was six months pregnant with Eddy Otu Agwo. A few days after we arrived Akaeze, I asked for and located a make shift military hospital a couple of metres from the Secondary School on Ogidi-Akaze major road. There, Felly was taken to for formal registration and routine check-up. She was there at one time when a message from Mr. Peter Etunwoke “found” me in Akaeze. It read

thus: “Monsieur, I understand your town Afikpo has been taken by the vandals. Please come along with your family to my home town Dikenta Avutu, Obowo. When you get to Seven and Half, any bicycle rider will convey you to my village. I am expecting you soon, Pierre.”

Yes, the message “found” me. Found me because I cannot even now recall through what means Peter sent that message in that troubled time when every other person was a suspect, a possible saboteur. The post offices were not functioning and there were no phones for communication. However, I had no reason to doubt the authenticity of the message from my very close friend and colleague at the ATTC, Owerri for the better part of 1964 to 1966. I discussed it with Felly before I left the following day for the “recce”. I spent just a night with Peter at Dikenta Avutu. We made all the necessary arrangement for my family’s accommodation there.

With military precision, I moved Felly, Austin and Ola Okpani to Avutu. It was on the 11th of May, 1968. We traveled in a rickety lorry from Akaeze to Anara on the Okigwe-Owerri road where we boarded a smoky three-ton lorry to the Seven and Half at Mbano. The rest of the journey of twelve miles was on a bicycle, though about a quarter of it was on foot as we had to dismount from the bicycle at the hilly and heavily eroded bush paths. Nevertheless, by sunset we were already a unique guest to the sympathizing Etunwoke family. Our own room apartment was next to Peter’s octogenarian mother. Some adjustments had been made for our comfort a little while before we arrived. Thanks to Peter and his amiable family.

For the first time in our one-month refugee life, we slept quietly without hearing close or distant gun shots and heavy thunderous rocket landings. Surely, we all felt happily relaxed. I could have loved to hide away there against my wish but I had to return to Akaeze for tactical reasons. Peter Etunwoke appreciated my stand.

At 35 plus, I was a member of the Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters (BOFF) and attached to a refugee camp where we had periodic allocation of relief materials. From that, my family's meals were assured. We earnestly lived with the false hope that the war would end before long. And so I felt it was better to be as close as possible to the home front for easier and quicker return to Ehugbo. I had learnt that Idam Urom, my wife's niece, who left us on the eve of the fall of Ehugbo, was at Okposi with her mother. It became necessary to get her rejoin the rest of the family at Obowo at a later date.

The Birth of My Son Eddy, in the Heat of the War

At least every other week I paid a visit to my family at Avutu. They were well secured there. My very kind diamond friend, Peter Etunwoke, was a near perfect gentleman. He took up the responsibility of registering Felly for ante-natal care in Dr. Ogonna's Hospital at Mbaize – about three miles ride through a very rough terrain.

On Thursday, (Orie), at about 9 a.m. on the 4th of July, 1968, Eddy was born in a thickly forested spot at the outskirts of Dikenta Avutu where Felly and our first son, Ogonnia, in the company of one other woman had gone to 'take cover'. The sage-femme was Edward Etunwoke's wife. Ogonnia at three years, one month and ten days old, watched on through leafy screens and happened to scream and babble out 'ta-ta' on hearing Otu's first ever cry.

The news of the birth got to me the day after. It was three days later, precisely Tuesday (Aho), 9th July, 1968, I traveled from Akaeze to Avutu to see and feel my second son, Osondu Otu Agwo. Felly's ill health immediately after Eddy's birth was a serious concern especially with no money at hand for medication and feeding. On my arrival at Avutu, Peter informed me that Felly's survival

after the child delivery, was a great miracle. She was anaemic with serious malaria attack. That was another of the numerous mercies God bestowed on us during the war period and after!

On Tuesday (Eke), 23/7/68, I travelled to Okposi from Akaeze on a bicycle to bring Idam Urom. We came back safely and she remained with us at Akaeze until 30/07/68 when I took her to Avutu to join Felly and the rest of the family. She was a lost but found house help. Wednesday (Eke) 31st July, 1968, France declared her support for the young Biafran state. The Nigerian Government described France's declaration as unfortunate, but we Biafrans had morale boost and celebrated it.

SPECIAL NOTES

Below are some jottings I made during the war and the dates I made them. I made them on loose sheets of paper and dumped them in a tattered plastic bag particularly in 1968. I luckily stumbled on the bag with its contents some years after the war. I therefore decided to attach it to this my Autobiography as an appendix. Some of the jottings may be duplicated but they are reasonably abridged.

January, 1968: Shuttled between Ehugbo and Abakaliki trying to really settle down. Monday (Eke) 29/1/68, New Biafran Currency notes one pound & five shillings came into circulation.

February, 1968: Persistent tension throughout Ehugbo and most parts of East Central State as a result of the shooting and bombing. The people gathering momentum by the day in readiness for war. Papal delegates (two of them) visited Afikpo and celebrated Holy Masses.

March, 3 1968: Sunday (Aho) a suspected white missionary was publicly executed by firing squad at Ogo Okpoota, Amaizu, Afikpo.

It was my first experience of such a brutal exercise. In between war activities, I was deeply engaged in farm work. Biafra Youth Front (BYF) launched in Ehugbo. War tensions continued to rise.

April, 1968: a very sad month. Thursday (Aho), 4th April, Francis Agwo's mother, Akpu Agwo, (nee Ugbo) died. I bore the burial expenses at Ndibe, Nkpogoro in the absence of Francis, who was at the war front as a Biafran Soldier. Friday (Orie), 19/4/68, Ehugbo (Afikpo) fell to the Nigerian vandals. We had to flee the town. A very unpleasant experience. My family (Felly and the house helps) assumed I was dead as they learnt I was caught by Nigerian soldiers. I met them at Owutu Edda after two days. We all left Owutu for Akaeze on 24/4/68. Akpoha Bridge blown up by Biafran soldiers on 30/4/68.

May, 1968: Saturday (Eke), 11/5/68, had to send Felly, little Agwo and Ola Okpani to Dikenta-Avutu, Obowo for security reasons. Felly's ill-health was of great concern to me throughout the month. Austin Agwo's third birthday anniversary (24/5/68) was not celebrated at all. Ding dong peace talks with Nigeria continued with little hope.

June, 1968: As a member of Refugees Welfare Committee, Akaeze, I spent most of the month on meetings at Edda, Akaeze, Okigwe, Ugwueke, etc. though almost on gratis, I enjoyed using the opportunity to serve the more needy ones. But for my young family, I had the temptation to enlist in the Biafran Army. My financial position during the month was at the lowest ebb. Thanks be to God we survived it.

July, 1968: Edward Otu Agwo was born at Dikenta Avutu Obowo on 4th July, 1968. Most of my activities this month were on refugees in the camp around Akaeze. I was officially appointed a Camp Warden on 25/7/68. Other children close to us born this month were Ngozi

Ugo Uche 8/7/68 at 2:30 a.m., Mary Ugo Obioh 11/7/68 at 1 p.m., Stella Eze Egwu Abani in far away Emekuku, Owerri had been born in the evening of 24th May, 1968.

August, 1968: At the Ehugbo battle front, intelligence reports showed that matters were going from bad to worse. The spirit of self-determination kept especially as I visited or sent relief materials. Nigerian soldiers were closing up from all sides. Anxiety over the ravaging Civil War was very high.

September, 1968: Exactly five months we ran out of Ehugbo, we had to leave Akaeze on Thursday (Aho), 19th September, for an unknown destination.

We, two hundred and fifty refugees mainly Ehugbo indigenes, just headed towards Afikpo Road railway station, keeping strictly to the tarred road and passing the night at the road sides. A small group took Ugwueke road a little distance from Akaeze. A few miles from Akaeze we flanked to Acha en-route to Isuikwuato. Worthy of note is that we, my extended family, had to abandon for good, Matthew Obioh's three ton lorry at Acha when it developed engine trouble.

I recall with horror, the case of Mrs Joseph Alu Onya of Ndibe Nkpoghoru who was delivered of a male child about two or three hours before the exodus from Akaeze. The child was carried in swaddling cloth by hand, in relays, throughout the journey from Akaeze through Ugwueke to Oguduasa, Isuikwuato.

After five days trek 19th to 23rd September from Akaeze, we gathered at the Methodist School premises at Umunekwe, Obinohia Oguduasa, Isuikwuato. The following day, Mr. Oko Okpani (later Barrister C. O. Okpani) and myself had to go to Okigwe on foot to secure clearance for refugees accommodation at Isuikwuato. It was a whole day's walk to and from Okigwe.

The day after, I sent Christopher Agwo to bring my family from Avutu Obowo as we were getting set to move to Nguzu Edda. Friday (Aho), 27/9/68, Felly and the children joined us at the refugee camp at Oguduasa, Isuikwuato. By the end of September, I, as the Camp Director, had registered some 572 refugees – over double the number we left Akaeze with – eleven days earlier.

October, 1968: Before the end of the first week, refugees from disturbed zones had crowded our camp increasing the population to 995 actually registered – many waiting to be taken on strength even though everybody already there was given some relief materials mainly for children, women and the sick. Even open space accommodation became difficult. This is an experience I wished only to have in dreams but I lived through it. Following the hostility of the natives at all levels, continued stay at Oguduasa became very risky as EVERY refugee, including those of us controlling them, were termed saboteurs. Many of the refugees vanished unaccounted for.

On Friday (Eke), 11/10/68, more than half of the refugee population moved out en masse mainly because of the previous day's bomb attack on Otamkpa Ovim – a nearby railway station. That left 47 people dead and over 100 seriously wounded.

In the company of other refugees, Felly and the rest of the family left the refuge camp on Saturday (Orie), 12/10/68, leaving Christopher Okpani and myself to formally declare the camp closed. I instructed them to wait for us at Ovim until further notice. Two of us took our exit on Tuesday (Eke), 15/10/68, after handing over the school property to the Executives of Umunekwu Leaders of Thought. I headed for Ovim to join my family after three days separation. A really rough journey of some ten miles lasted for about five hours – 7 a.m. to 12 noon. Ogonnia was 3 years and 7 months while Otu Osondu Agwo was a little over three and a half months old.

Ogbonnia was Ola Okpani's 'load' while the carrying of Osondu alternated between Felly and Idam Urom.

Occasionally Ogbonnia had to toddle holding on to one of our fingers. But we discovered that after a little distance both of his legs were swollen and painful. For the last two miles to Nguzu, he rode on my shoulders. We had cooling stations to rest and gulp dry packs. The Agwo family and the dependants finally arrived Nguzu Edda on Monday (Aho), 21st October, 1968. I lived in a room upstairs in Senator Uka's family house.

My family and the rest of nde Ehugbo in Nguzu Edda area got adapted to the hostilities against us even from nde Edda. Mr. M. S. C. Abani was the camp Director at Nguzu Edda. I was re-deployed as a Camp Warden.

November, 1968: As a refugee Camp Warden at the Presbyterian Primary School, Nguzu, I met and adopted Thomas Unya, a refugee from Ezi Uzu, Ugwuegu. At the Nguzu/Abriba axis, Ehugbo elders established a make-shift Ulubi Esaa yaa Eto (Ehugbo Council of Elders) in exile. Notwithstanding, the Nigerian/Biafra war continued unabated with greater heat.

December, 1968: On Monday (Aho), 16th December, 1968, the Biafran Military Police handed over to the Ekpuke Eto (the executive arm of Ehugbo council of elders) two sons of Ehugbo, Messrs Uro Uche a.k.a. Uro Ukpom and Chukwu Ebi, who were alleged to be sabotaging the Biafran effort. The following day they paid the supreme price. That was an unfortunate fall-out of the Civil War.

Air raids around Nguzu and the suburbs had become rampant. We "took cover" in the day and enjoyed night life using hurricane lamps and oil palm faggots. In the last week of October, 1968, Rebecca

Oyim who separated from us on 19th April, rejoined us from a refugee camp near Ekoli Edda. A welcome reunion after some eight months absence. The Red Cross organization and Caritas (the Catholic Church's Humanitarian Organizations) were fantastic in supplying virtually every need of the refugees but the number of refugees who shared them made it appear as if enough was not done. They tried very, very much in the name of God.

General Summary:

January 1968 to December 1968 as it affected my life

Some seven months old as Biafrans, we entered 1968 with high hopes and great expectations for a better tomorrow. We went headlong into farm work – crops and animal farms. By the third week of April when we fled Ehugbo to become refugees outside Ehugbo, we, of course, abandoned everything. The greatest loss was my library of over a thousand collections on various subject areas. The birth of Eddy on 4th July, was sweet-bitter. By December, we had been a little over eight months as refugees. But for the relief materials accessible to me as Warden cum Director in refugee camps, the story could have been another thing. Put straight and short, we lived by the hour and day and went to bed fully dressed and packed for any eventuality.

1969

Thanks be to Almighty God that my entire family and I lived to see Wednesday (Aho), the 1st of January, 1969. The close of 1968 indicated very seriously that the Nigerian Army was closing in on us. So, as 1969 opened, we began monitoring events with the intention of moving over to Ohafia or Arochukwu, which appeared safer. However, everything possible as human beings was done to ease the tension.

In collaboration with the Abakaliki Provincial Administration in exile, the Refugee Camp Directors in Nguzu Edda zone opened an emergency Primary School situated in a thick forest at Igboro, Amaoji also known as Akpa. The adult male refugees and the natives cleared a large space under the ageless trees on the Nguzu-Ekoli road.

Since July 1967 when all schools in the, then Biafran territory were forced to shut down because of the war, there was no formal schooling in the entire territory known as Biafra. Therefore, the reopening of the school after over eighteen months served at least two main purposes. First, the impression was created that part of Biafra was safe enough to continue the interrupted schooling. That, on its own, reduced tension. Another was that the numerous teachers (mostly females) became assured of weekly relief materials in lieu of wages and salaries. Besides, their teaching experience was rekindled.

On Monday (Nkwo), 3rd February, 1969, the school opened with pupils population of six hundred and thirty-four and staff strength of twenty-five. We ran classes from Elementary I to Elementary VI. Mr. M.S.C. Abani, the then Assistant Refugee Officer (ARO) for the zone, doubled as the Manager of the school. Messrs B. A. Ekuma, J. C. Okonta, M. O. Ikwuegbu and my humble self were joint Headmasters. Mr. Okoro Onuma, my Primary School teacher in the late forties, was the Local Education Assistant.

After two weeks, and based on their age, Messrs Ekuma, Okonta and Ikwuegbu were re-assigned to less strenuous sections while I, as the youngest person, was made the substantive Headmaster of the school. Some fourteen years later, I was a substantive Principal in the Nguzu Edda Community Secondary School.

Through the generous help of relief donor agencies like Caritas,

UNICEF and World Council of Churches, exercise books, pens and packets of chalk were supplied to the school. Make-shift seats made of bamboos and sticks were constructed for the staff and the pupils. Everything went on fairly well, but not without daily reminders that we were in war for approximately two months. In a short while, the school population rose to nearly two thousand with thirty-six staff.

On the 27th of March, I, as the Headmaster of the School entered in the Log Book: “As a result of disturbing military activities around Nguzu and Ekoli areas, there was no school. Virtually the entire town had moved out to nearby bushes and caves to “take cover”.

Within a few days, the more jittery population fled the town to other zones they felt was safer. On my part, I kept close watch and went on ‘recce’ to Ohafia and the suburbs. I handed over everything to God and succeeded in infusing confidence into my dear wife, Felly, and then, the children and our dependants. We successfully managed to hang on until April and Easter period.

Early in May we had to move from Nguzu to Ohafia in the evening under a very heavy rain. We used a wash-hand basin for Eddy’s umbrella while a straw hat was Austin’s. The rest of us used rags or loin cloths just to cover the head for whatever that meant. We passed the night outside an Agric. Farm building near Ebem Ohafia. Our cold-bent hands formed a shield over the smouldering fire for warmth. The following morning we moved into Okagwe Ohafia where we managed outside roofs of the few who agreed to tolerate us.

Not quite a week at Okagwe, we changed location to Isiugwu Ohafia –some five miles at the outskirts on the Ohafia–Arochukwu highway. We sojourned there till mid-January 1970, when the Civil War ended.

Our eight months stay in Isiugwu was a period of relative peace and action packed even with the war drums sounding harder and louder. I formally enlisted as a member of the Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters (BOFF) with a protective rank of a Captain. Mr. M.S.C Abani was a Major in BOFF and a Camp Director.

The entire family felt relaxed as we were not only given a whole room to ourselves but also allowed free association, movement and petty trading. Most of the trading was at night-fall up to about nine o'clock in the night.

It was at Isiugwu I met Elem Uche of Amaechara Agbo, then of the Finance Department in the BOFF. That Department had wide network as it was in constant contact with Biafran forces in every part of Biafra – within and outside the war fronts in Biafra. We have remained very close friends since then.

Late in 1969, I sponsored a Catholic Church wedding at Akanu Ohafia of Mr. Gabriel Okochi of Amuro Elu and Felicia Idam of Amaozara. Thank God that all along we had the privilege and opportunity of carrying on our Christian duties and responsibilities as Roman Catholics. As the war raged on, we somehow managed to have a memorable Christmas celebration and feasted heavily, facilitated by relief materials supplied to us by various Donor Agencies. But as Ehugbo people would say, “Nri obu adarudigi ayi n’agbali eho (The food never got down to the proper place in our stomach). It literally remained undigested not to talk of its absorption. Frustration and depression were written on everybody’s face due to the fact that we did not know what would become of our lives the next day.



**At the wedding I sponsored as a Captain of the
Biafran Organisation of Freedom Fighters (BOFF) at Ohafia in 1969**

CHAPTER NINE

THE FALL OF BIAFRA AND THE RISE OF EZI AGWO: 1970- 1973

By the grace of God, we wobbled into 1970. Radio Biafra, Radio Nigeria, Voice of America (VOA) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported their angles on the Civil War in Nigeria. Those of us who religiously tuned to these stations at least once everyday, could read between the lines that while Biafra was the winner in radio announcements, Nigeria was the absolute winner in the battle grounds. We were in the twilight days of Biafra. Col. Ojukwu left Biafra on January 11, 1970.

At day break on 12th January, 1970, every available news media all over the world made very short intervals announcement that Biafrans have surrendered to the Nigerian Army. Repeated announcements were also made that the Biafran Head of State and Commander-in-Chief, Lt. Col. Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu fled the country to Ivory Coast the day before the surrender by Col. Philip Effiong. These announcements threw us in Biafra into confusion. It was confusion galore everywhere in the fading country. At our area in Isiugwu Ohafia, we watched from a safe distance the terrifying traffic of Biafran Soldiers, the armored vehicles, cars of all descriptions, wailing, sobbing, muzzled children and expressionless human 'ghosts' heading towards Abam. Moments later the blood chilling news of what happened at the boarder filtered through. It was a horrible and horrifying scene. Horror! Horror!! Horror!!!

Many high ranking Biafran Army Officers either ordered their aides to shoot them dead or shot themselves instead of embracing assumed sure death in the hands of the hated Nigerian vandals. Defenseless children were thrown into the nearby flowing stream. All the personal and military vehicles had a lavish baptism of whatever petrol that was available and all set on fire. It was a sorry sight to behold. There we were, helpless and hopeless for the future.

A harrowing experience of horror!

Back in our refugee dwellings at Isiugwu, day-dreaming took control of us. Our Camp Director in BOFF and my immediate boss Major M. S. C. Abani, left us late that day 12th January, 1970, according to him, to feel the pulse around Ehugbo and send for us later. The Assistant Refugee Officer unequivocally asked me to act for the Camp Director in the disintegrating refugee camp. For two days (13th and 14th) January, 1970, we neither heard of, nor heard from, Major Abani.

On 15th January, 1970, General Yakubu Gowon, the then Nigerian Military Head of State officially announced the end of the Civil War and received the surrender note from Col. Philip Effiong. That same day, the over twenty Ehugbo families and other Abakaliki Province indigenes still at Isiugwu moved out en masse. By God's special grace and the mandate of the Abakaliki Province refugees, I was at the head of the great trek to Ehugbo and other parts of the Province. Before leaving Isiugwu, I received from Mr. E. E. Abani, Mr. M. S. C. Abani's younger brother, the sum of five hundred and seventy six Biafran pounds being part of refugee rehabilitation money handed over to him for safe keeping.

Those of us who, as ranked BOFF personnel, had been assigned official riffles, made sure the guns and the ammunition were either buried in the swampy areas of nearby raffia palm grove or thrown into the Isiugwu stream across the road. It was a must.

It was a whole day's journey from Isiugwu through Akanu, Ebem and Okon Ohafia to Ali Ugbogo at the Ohafia and Edda boundary. That farm area also referred to as Ndia Agwu's, Jack Ikpo's, Ogbuagu Efa's, Ndiariko Ogbugbandu and Eseni Nnachi's Plantation was our camp for the night. Garri bought with the entire £576 mentioned above was shared among the refugees for supper.

There was hardly anything called sleep for the adults. It was simply a round the clock vigil at the transit camp.

At dawn on January 16, contiguous groups found their ways along the roads leading to their homes. The Ehugbo-bound groups had three flanks – the outskirts of Ekoli Edda, Eburnwana and Amangwu Edda. My family and I took the Amangwu Edda route and had our midday stop over at Okpuma. We then took the bush path that goes through Mini Uzei, burst at the foot of Ugwu Odo Mgbom, found our way through Ohia etoro to Ogbuatum stream.

From that point, the stench of decaying bodies slowed down our gentle mount of the hill. It was repelling but we had to continue the journey to our only home on earth. We closed our nostrils by all sorts of ways. Behold, that was it, as we saw a fairly stretched heap of human bodies at various stages of decay along the outside walls of Ogo Agboride. Hu hum, we stole looks at the decaying bodies of recently massacred Ehugbo men. Almost breathlessly, we trotted away until we got to Ihuogo Amaizu still panting.

Arriving at Ogo Amaha, and seeing my despoiled ancestral home by the thirty-month Civil War weighed heavily on me. It was a scene of utter desolation. I stood still and instinctively, tears roled down my cheeks into my gaping mouth. In that trance, Felly shook my shoulders calling out: “Papa Agwo, o kwanu ngini (what is it)?” With a heavy sigh, I reached for the stretched weak right hand of Ogonnia Agwo. Just then a muffled voice from behind addressed us: “Unu awawo? Unu jookwa. Unu bia (Have you returned? You are welcome. Come along with me)” Abani Chukwu was coming out from the men’s playground common room – obi-ogo. I looked towards Ezi Agwo, which was then an impenetrable thick bush with luxurious trees – including my abandoned palm trees.

Ezi Idume happened to be one of the very few compounds in

Amaizu where up to four buildings were standing. The buildings were those of Joe Abani Chukwu, Chukwu Idume, Okpara Iduma (Okpo Akpu), and then their compound common (Obu Ezi Idume). All the three whose houses survived never left Ehugbo during the period of the Nigerian/Biafra Civil War. For us who ran away for safety, they were in the enemy's territory. With Gowon declaring after the hostilities, that there was "No Victor and No Vanquished," we had to swallow the bitter pill and made up our minds to continue living in Nigeria as a people.

In Abani Chukwu's house, I was offered a one room apartment but I had to spread to the backhouse veranda (efe owoko) with my nine-member family made up of myself, Felly my dear wife, our two biological children, Agwo and Eddy, extended family members, Rebecca Oyim, Ola Okpani, Idam Urom, Thomas O. Unya and Joseph Alu Nwachi. A week later, Messrs Francis, Christopher and Lawrence Agwo joined from where they served in the Biafran Army. The family number rose to twelve resident members with occasional casual visitors, who had to spend a few days at a time. My home-coming was a mixture of sadness and joy – sadness because we had NOT one farthing of Nigerian money on us. The wads of Biafran money on us from refugee camps were worse than useless. This is a hard fact. The joy though was that we were home at last and that on arrival we learnt that Mr. M. S. C. Abani had arrived home two days earlier. He had allied with our Parish Priest, Rev. Fr. D. O. Sullivan, who was incidentally in charge of the CARITAS relief materials for the returning refugees. We managed whatever scraps we brought back from refugee camp.

The following morning 17th January, 1970 we had a gift of some quantity of flour, which Felly strictly used in preparing dough-nuts (kpof-kpof). We ate some and sold the rest to those we met at home. We heaved a sigh of relief in the knowledge that we were safely home. That was how we earned the first Nigerian money after

almost three years. Home, sweet home!

The day after, Mr. Abani took me to the Parish Priest who enlisted me as one of the people to help in distributing relief materials to returnee refugees within and outside Afikpo Division. The job took us to such places as Ikun (Ikwini), Erei, Ututu near Arochukwu and Agbawan. We were paid in kind. Every Friday we were given graduated quantities of rice, beans, salted stock-fish, vegetable oil, assorted tinned food and any item in the store. With these my family was assured of three square meals daily. Besides, many dependants from all directions had smiles on their faces through us. A very wonderful Christian Mission spirit I will always remember and appreciate.

By January, 1970, after the end of the Civil War, Mr. M. Elechi was Divisional Officer (DO) in Afikpo and from May, 2007 to April, 2015, he was the Governor of Ebonyi State. But the Chief M. N. Elechi of 1970 – 2015, was certainly a different one from that of 1967 in Izzi County Secondary School where in we shared classroom lessons, compound cleaning and jokes.

My determination to Rebuild and Live in My Abandoned Compound

In the spirit of Gowon's Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Policy, we plodded on.

After about a month's squeezing at Ezi Idume, I desired to build a house of mine at Ezi Agwo. To take Nd'Ezi Agwo back to their ancestral home, I organized a meeting of all the men. They were Item Idume, Matthew Oyim Obioh, Joseph Ogonnia Iduma, Oyim Obioh (Senior Oyim Oti). I volunteered to provide the food for work support while every other person offered direct labour. We all agreed in principle to build one house to accommodate all of

us, but Oyim Oti insisted he would get on with the foundation he had laid at Ezi Idume some eight years earlier, that is, before the Civil War. We no longer counted on him for he personally told me to keep off from Ezi Agwo as it was a sure death zone. Of course, I ignored him as I had made up my mind to live there. I handed over the project to God and had faith in Him that I must succeed. And the Good Lord granted my request fully and above as events proved over forty years later.

By the first week of February and using the “food-for-work” method, I spearheaded the clearing of the area where the proposed house would be built. Instead of siting the building on my late father’s house area (okpulo), I decided on a virgin space facing our compound’s common (obu) and backing the backyard (Usuho). Within two weeks, we uprooted everything within the building area, pegged out and dug the foundation to accommodate two passages and eight rooms, each measuring approximately ten feet by ten. We agreed to share the rooms as follows:

ITEM		MATTHEW OBIOH'S ROOM	NNE FELLY OYIM	MY OWN ROOM
IDUME				
COMMON ROOM (ULOTE)		JOE IDUME'S ROOM	OUR PAR-LOUR (SITTING ROOM)	MY WIFE'S (FELLY ANWARA AGWO)

BACK YARD

Item Idume, the oldest of us all (because his wife was not prepared to come over) had a room; Nne Felly Obioh (because her husband refused to move over), a room; Matthew Obioh and Joe Idume one room each as they would only visit occasionally from Lafia; one

room as the common room (ulote) for the younger ones; one room for our parlour and two rooms for me and my family as we were permanently at home in addition to the fact that I bore hundred percent the financial burden of building the house. Of course, the seed money was from the sale of processed relief materials (food for service) and later from my salary as a Secondary School Teacher.

As soon as the trenches for the foundation were ready, I had to go on mud blocks hunt all over Ehugbo. There were no moulds for those who knew how to mould blocks. Besides we were in a hurry to have the house ready before long. How was that possible? An unusual state of affairs occurred as a result of the just ended Civil War.

People offered to sell mud blocks extracted from collapsing or collapsed buildings whose thatched roofs were burnt down by the vandalistic Nigerian Army, who delighted in setting houses on fire for fun. Such people had no means of rebuilding their houses before the coming rainy season, and so they decided to sell the 'walls' to those who needed them. With the help of the nine-ton Nissan lorry, which the Parish Priest of St. Mary's Catholic Church, Afikpo kindly gave me for that purpose, I was able to convey the mud blocks I bought principally from Ugwuegu, Amangballa, Mgbom and other villages in Ehugbo to the building site. The blocks were of various sizes and earth colours. The masons I engaged had the extra job to harmonize the sizes to get even walls. Two paternal brothers, Alu Odaka and Okoro Odaka of Ezi Uzu Ugwuegu Elu were my masons.

The contract fee for the body work of the house was eighteen pounds. I paid a mobilization fee of ten pounds with a promise to pay the rest on completion of work. But late in March when schools all over the then Biafran territory including Afikpo were re-opened, I returned to my pre-war school, Izzi County Secondary School,

Ishieke, Abakaliki. The masons abandoned the work half way. While the block work was going on, I purchased raffia palm fronds (ngwo) as well as long Indian bamboos (echara) for the roof. Occasionally, Amaha men came handy to help in “sewing” and actually thatching the roofs free-of-charge. Whatever relief materials and/or small palm wine I could afford were highly appreciated. They were supportive and happy that I was re-founding Ezi Agwo. Thanks be to God.

I must confess that apart from Item Idume, the rest of the men and women of Ezi Agwo abandoned me in degrees in my determination to re-establish Ezi Agwo. About mid April, 1970, Matthew Obioh, my elder brother and in-law, convinced Joseph O. Idume (Snr) another elder brother and in-law to go with him to Lafia and continue their mechanic job instead of staying back at Afikpo to do the same job in the workshop Mathew himself set up beside the accommodation we had lived in at Uhu Ohuu. I was disappointed and lonely and I told them so as they left.

As earlier stated, Oyim Obioh (Snr Oyim Oti) had clearly told me I shouldn't dare the return to Ezi Agwo bid. Nne Oyim Otu (Orie Udu), not only instigated Nd' Ezi Agwo (including her child, Oyim, but also Otu Oyim, her husband and Eni Anigo, my own father's step brother), not to mind me in my “foolishness” in insisting on returning to Ezi Agwo, but directly spat on the raffia palm bamboos (ogugu ude) being carried to Ezi Agwo with the sniggering remark: “Obu owuwu ulo bu obubu na ya (is it building a house that means living in it)”. Praise God, that statement came to be a blessing instead. All of them eventually joined my family and me at the compound some ten years and more later. The Good Lord granted all of us much longer lease of life at Ezi Agwo than was envisaged.

Back to Work After the Civil War

At the end of March, 1970, schools re-opened. Felly returned to Holy Child Women Training College (WTC) Afikpo to continue her Teachers' Grade II Certificate Course (TCII). Rebecca Oyim, Austin and Eddy Agwo as well as Joseph Nwachi Alu accompanied me to Izzi County Secondary School, Abakaliki. Along the line Idam Urom and Thomas Unya found their ways to their respective parents and guardians at Ozizza and Ugwuegu Elu, respectively.

Late in the first quarter of that year, my sister, Ugwome Agwo, returned from Western Nigeria, where she was living with her husband, Samuel Ekuma Otu of Amancho. She came back very sick in the company of her four plus years old son, Otu Ekuma. I immediately assumed the responsibility for her medical expenses as her husband refused to help.

At Ishieke, the Principal was Mr. Christian Ndidi Ozor, my one-time class mate in St. Thomas' College, Ogoja some fourteen years earlier. It was a very welcome re-union. We exchanged pleasant memories and worked very cordially throughout our stay together in Izzi County Secondary School.

The United Nations International Children's Educational Fund (UNICEF) supplied us rehabilitation kitchen utensils, crockery and cutlery, as well as hurricane lamps and some farm implements. They were welcome relief materials. Regular payment of salaries – all in the spirit of Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation – facilitated my building project at home.

In March, 1970, the then Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon on the advice of his Finance Minister, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, ordered that all Biafran currency be paid into any existing bank. We did as was directed, but sadly, we were given only twenty pounds

in return for any amount of the Biafran pounds that was deposited in the bank. I had two hundred and eighteen Biafran pounds of my own while some relatives who were not literate enough to operate bank account gave me six hundred and thirty-three pounds, making a total of eight hundred and fifty-one pounds. For the whole of this amount of money, I was given only twenty pounds, which was shared proportionately among all those who gave me the six hundred and thirty-three pounds I added to my own. It was a crippling policy for a people struggling to exist after a devastating Civil War!

An Odd Event:

On the 30th of January, 1970 I applied to the Public Service Commission, Enugu for a job. On the 9th of November, the Secretary of the Commission addressed a letter to me inviting me for an interview that was to take place in Enugu on the same day - 9th November at 9 a.m. The despatch date at Enugu was 10/11/70. I received the letter at Afikpo on 23/11/70 – fifteen days after the interview was to take place! And I was required to inform the Commission of my coming before that date. ODD INDEED!

For most part of the rest of the year, 1970, I was at home every weekend, public holidays and, of course, Easter and Christmas holidays to fast-track the building project.

1971 – A Forecast of the Refound Ezi Agwo Home

Throughout this year I budgeted my time to conveniently and effectively accommodate my job as a professional teacher, my building project at home and my maiden rice farming in the swamps around the Secondary School land.

As an English Language/Literature as well as French teacher, I got the students to form a Press Club and a Debating Society. In addition to classroom teaching, I was the Dean of Studies. I also

assisted in organizing school games. During week days I made use of the slightest chance I had outside the school schedule to walk-over the main road and supervise those working in my rice farm. That was especially in the months of June, July and August. Of course, at weekends, public holidays and end of term holidays I was at Ehugbo to motivate and direct the workers on my house. Some weekends I spent some nights in the barely thatch-roofed house at Ezi Agwo. It looked like a dream but it was real. In April, 1971, I planted the seedling of the umbrella (Almond) tree in front of my house. I bought it from a roadside Agric. man at Abakaliki.

Decades after, I wonder how I was able to effectively coordinate those activities! Only God knows how. I thank Him immensely for giving me the strength.

At the end of the second term, Mr. Christian Ozor, the Principal, left on transfer to another Secondary School. He handed over to Mrs. C. U. Okoye (his vice) who acted for the rest of the academic year. Mrs. Okoye made a great impression on me in more than one way. Her motherly disposition was fantastic and her rapport with the school staff superb. That I was later an Oral English Examiner for the West African Examination Council (WAEC), was due to her. By then, she was a University graduate in English Language and Literature while I was still an ATTC trained English/French Teacher. However, both of us shared the English Language lessons in the senior classes.

Other members of staff I would not forget in a hurry are one Mr. Ochuba from Orlu area who was married to a Bulgarian woman. Over twenty years later, we were members of staff of a Catholic Mission School (M.C.A.) at Uturu. Messrs Samuel Eke and James Ukaekwe, Igbo and French Teachers, respectively, were course mates at the then Advanced Teacher Training College (ATTC) Owerri from 1964 to 1966. Not only that we renewed our friendship

but our individual family members became involved in the love circle. As I record this some forty five years after, the association is still waxing strong. In January 1971, Oke Irem, my cousin's (Irem Oke's) first son, came to live with me at Ishieke and also to attend the Secondary School.

In December, 1971, Felly concluded her Teachers' Grade Two Certificate Course in the Holy Child Women Training College, Afikpo. We started making arrangement for her re-absorption in the system at the beginning of the following year, 1972.

It was a feast galore during the Christmas period especially to mark the completion of Felly's course in the College. Besides, we were hopefully expecting our third child some time in the following year.

I spent the Christmas and New Year holidays in closely supervising my house project from within. The main block walls had been completed, thatched roof done, doors and window frames ready and make-shift shutters with corrugated sheets provided for three of the eight rooms. The transit camp state of the house notwithstanding, every member of the family had to stay in the house for the yuletide and New Year to remember the day and period when Mr. D. A. Ugwu wedded. He was a faithful friend and keen supporter of the family. He wedded Ego Abani on Sunday, 12th December, 1971. For the fun of it, we decided to have a fore-taste of our re-found ancestral home, Ezi Agwo.

1972

At 12:05 a.m. on the first day of January, 1972, I wrote the following down on a small sheet of paper:

REMEMBER:

"1972 should not give room to unnecessary self-deceit and pretence.

It should be a year of sustained good business and honest progress. REALISM should be the MOTTO. More visible and concrete plans have to be made for the Ezi Agwo cottage. Be brutally frank in all dealings no matter whose ox is gored as long as the prime purpose is to do the wish of the LORD.”

This was my third year as a teacher in Izzi after the Civil War. When schools re-opened, Felly with over four months pregnancy, was posted to teach in Ezzamgbo, Ishielu – about five miles away from our residence at Ishieke. That was the nearest primary school where a vacancy existed. However, she taught there for only the first term and was “transneared” to Ishieke, St. Nathy’s Primary School.

Among the students from Afikpo who were admitted to Izzi County Secondary School, where I was teaching, was Francis Ogonnia Otunta, my nephew. He gained admission into another Secondary Schools but his parents sent him to Izzi because I was there. As a result of the coincidence of my taking a fatherly care of him at school and conducting him back home on holidays, his siblings began referring to me as “papa dede” (the father of our elder brother) – a name still retained in the John Ogonnia Otu’s family of Amangwu Nkpogoro, to date.

On April 2, 1972 Nigeria changed from left hand drive to right hand drive. Our new Principal, Mr. J. B. I. Ikedinma, happened to annoy me during a staff accomdation allocation exercise (January 1972), when Elder Ulu Ewa of Ukpa, Afikpo from the Macgregor College, Afikpo was transferred to Izzi County Secondary School, Ishieke. The house I was occupying in 1972, was the same house I had been living in since January, 1967, as an NCE certificated teacher then. The Civil War caused a break but I resumed residence at the end of hostilities in January, 1970. In ordering me out of that quarters, he, the Principal, made me to understand that: “After all you are just an NCE certificate holder. And so you must vacate the Senior Staff

quarters for a graduate.” I took the remark with a very heavy heart while I re-located to another staff quarters. There and then I said to myself: “Agwo, you have to be a University graduate before long. Work for it and pray to God for it, I nuwo! (have you heard).” I thank God that, that order to move to a junior quarters turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

Luckily, Felly had already resumed running the home. We got used to the new but smaller quarters at the Abakaliki end of the school compound. Even with my sister, Ogbulu and her son, Otu, joining us shortly before we left the former place, we happily managed the accommodation. Thank God, for the discomfort lasted only for nine months.

In the interim, my sister had fully recovered after some two years of medical attention in various hospitals and traditional medicine houses. As the husband appeared very reluctant to come for her, I discussed with his paternal relations (umudi) at Amancho. They undertook to provide an accommodation for her, Ogbulu, in the husband’s compound until he, Ekuma Otu Samuel, was ready to come or send for her. To further ease her problem, I asked her to leave her nearly seven year old son, Otu Ekuma, with me while I provided a take-off capital to enable her take care of herself as she waited. That is how Otu Ekuma came to live with me and became an integral part of the Agwo family of Ezi Agwo, Amaizu.

I had the largest rice farm I ever cultivated in the school area swamps in 1972. The yield was bountiful to the entire family’s joy.

On Sunday (Aho), 21st May, 1972, Ngozi Orie-Otu Agwo, our first daughter and third child, was born at the then Abakaliki General Hospital at 9:20 a.m. Ngozi’s birth brought my family in contact with one Mrs. Obua – a nurse in the Abakaliki General Hospital. She delivered Ngozi at the maternity ward there. She and her

husband Mr. Obua, a staff of the Abakaliki Internal Revenue were natives of Oguta in Imo State.

Co-incidentally, in September, 1972, I was transferred to the then Ezzikwo High School, which was later renamed Ezikwo High School, Onueke, some eighteen miles on the Abakaliki-Afikpo road. For convenience sake – for the family and for myself – I rented an apartment at N0 5 Obike Street, Kpirikpiri, very close to the General Hospital. Mr. and Mrs. Obua were then living at the N0. 2 of the same street. The relationship between the two families was thus cemented for decades after we had left Abakaliki and the public service. Our children inherited the friendship, which is still alive as I conclude this memoir.

My unsolicited transfer out of Izzi County Secondary School couldn't have come at a better time. My working spirit there had been dampened by the Ikedinma administration. The change was very welcomed.

From October, 1972, I became a staff of Ezzikwo High School where I taught English Language and French as well as being the Dean of Studies saddled with the school Time Table. It was an enormous challenge to me. All the same, I put my body and soul into the work and enjoyed every minute of my stay there.

Mr. Lawrence O. Ndu was the Principal of the school. Virtually every academic staff of the school lived at Abakaliki and attended school from there daily. In the dry season the roads were bumpy and dusty. In the rainy season muddy potholes and most times water-logged stretches on the roads dictated the pace of the vehicular movement. During the rains, the weather and road conditions determined when one would leave Abakaliki to be at Ezzikwo before or by 7:45 a.m. when the normal day activities began.

Before Christmas period, we harvested a record number of fifteen

bags of paddy rice from my Ishieke rice farm. We parboiled some for domestic use and reserved greater part for storage and for projected income.

End of Ezi Agwo in Exile

As from the first week of December, 1972, I hastened preparations for our packing over to the Ezi Agwo residence. I constructed a temporary pit laterine, a palm fronds bathroom, and a lean-to-shape kitchen. I put up a live-stick (jatropa – ekpu) and palm fronds fence along the playground (western end of the compound).

On the 20th of December, 1972, we moved the last property of ours from Ezi Idume to Ezi Agwo thus effectively and finally returning to the one and only place under the sun that is my last bus stop on earth, my ancestral compound. This was after some twenty years – 1952-1972 – of our elder brothers fleeing the place for perceived evil attacks on the inhabitants. Glory be to God Almighty. THIS IS A DAY TO REMEMBER IN EZI AGWO.

A flash back: My father, Nwata Agwo, died in August, 1945 when I was a twelve-year plus old boy. Eluu Elogo, a paternal step brother who took over my care died about four years later in 1949. Between 1945 and 1950 series of deaths of young fathers and adults became very rampant under the name of uvu aho (epidemic). By late 1950, Ezi Agwo was virtually empty. The rest fled in fear! By 1952, when I was teaching in St. Michael's Primary School, Amangwu Edda, Ezi Agwo had been completely abandoned. It was by God's divine design that I was used as an instrument for RE-FOUNDING Ezi Agwo, Amaha-Amaizu. May He be eternally praised for making the return to Ezi Agwo a reality after some twenty years forced-fleeing from my bonafide home.

Within that period of “exile” outside, M. S. C. Abani was my

mainstay. From 1946, a year after my father's death, we got close. By 1948 when he became my God father through baptism in the Catholic Church, we literarily became one for the rest of his life. It was this divine association that caused my own exile to be at the next compound of Ezi Idume. In fact, of all of us who fled from Ezi Agwo, I lived the closest by the grace of God and the kindness of Mr. Abani. In appreciation of that friendship, I had to name my third son and fourth child, Okechukwu Abani Agwo.

That relationship also facilitated granting his request to occupy that part of Ezi Agwo ancestral home (Uhu Okpara Nd'Ezi Agwo, Agbi Enwuru Oku). There were no conditions whatsoever attached. Mr. Item Idume my elder, was duly consulted and he gave his explicit consent. Egwu Joe, Sunday Chukwu's younger brother and their father, Abani Chukwu, were on the know at every stage. END OF FLASHBACK.

Despite the lone-family-house in the compound, Ezi Agwo witnessed a unique lively Christmas season. People thronged to our new home in disbelief but went back convinced that the story was true. What a home coming!

A week after our complete return to Ezi Agwo, we invited our then Parish Priest, Rev. Fr. Sullivan, to dedicate the house and compound to God with Holy Mass celebrated under the umbrella tree in front of the house.

1973

I went into 1973 as happy as a lark having accomplished one of the basic needs of human beings – a personal roof over my head and that of my family. It was a sort of a rebirth. One of my life's targets was achieved at the age of forty.

On 1st January, 1973, Nigeria changed her currency from pound, shillings and pence to naira and kobo

At Ezzikwo, I was assigned a brand new quarters but I was there only on week days – Monday to Friday during normal session. As my family was resident at Abakaliki Township, I had to take Agha Urom my cousin, from Agboride Amaizu to stay with me at Ezzikwo. He was admitted into a nearby primary school where he schooled for only one year and decided to call it quits to formal school education. He would do any physical work very well, quickly and happily but any book work made him miserable. He opted for trading business against his father's wish. I advised his father, Urom Agha, to allow him take his (Agha) choice. This was informed by my close observation of him (Agha Urom) while we were at Ezzikwo. Thanks be to God, that Agha Urom, in less than two decades became a very successful trader in lager beer and allied drinks. He made a name and money as "Sir Paddy, the beer distributor" in Afikpo.



As Staff/Editorial Adviser, Ezzikwo High School, Magazine in 1973

With the memory that I was “only an NCE teacher” and my resolve to change that status, I sat for and cleared my deficiency in French Language at the Advanced Teachers’ Training College, Owerri.

Meanwhile, in January, Felly was posted to teach in the Urban Primary School, Kpirikpiri, Abakaliki – a ten minutes walk from our No 5 Obike Street. It was a big relief and afforded me a stress-free period to shuttle between Abakaliki and Afikpo as well as between Ezzikwo and Abakaliki. My attention at home was then focused on adding more conveniences to the highly prized new compound – Ezi Agwo.

By the middle of the year and based on improved financial income to both of us, I was encouraged to make the house more durable and convenient. We agreed that the mud walls be coated with cement, the height raised and the roof be changed to corrugated iron sheets. By His grace, the renovation was successfully executed and most of the floor and the walls in the rooms were also plastered for our comfort. We even used asbestos sheets for the ceiling.

Outside the house I tried some landscaping and shrubs/hedges planting. I planted many fruit trees I came across as the land space was there and I had economic and shed trees. Water system and soak-away pit were under way.

1974

My desire to be a University graduate grew more in the New Year. I nosed about the Universities of Nigeria and Ibadan for admission. The JAMB then was still just a concept. So it was a matter of every University admitting her students on her own conditions.

On Saturday (Nkwo), 9th March, 1974 at 8:20 p.m., Okechukwu Abani Agwo, our third son and forth child was born. That was in the

then Abakaliki General Hospital, later Federal Teaching Hospital Abakaliki (FETHA).

With Agha Urom's exit last December, I stayed alone at the Ezzikwo High School Staff quarters some week-days. It turned out that those week-days I spent alone at Ezzikwo, were very helpful to me. I had time for outdoor games with the students in the evenings. I got better acquainted with the school library and the entire environment. Besides, I had the rare opportunity of personal reflections and taking stock of my life's journey so far.

CHAPTER TEN

MY UNIVERSITY EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA (U.N.N.): 1974-1979

On 7th September, 1974, I received the following telegram message from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka:

“EN1/335 Nsukka 39 16 1035, Gabriel A. Agwo, Ezzikwo High School, Box 56, Abakaliki.

You are offered provisional admission for a three-year Degree in Education /French. Report for registration September 14, 1974 with First terms fee N120 immediately. Registrar 74/12669.”

I read the message three times before I was convinced it was for me. Unconsciously, my two knees were on the floor, I made the sign of the cross and gasped, “Oh! My Lord Jesus, thank you. Me! Admission! Nsukka! Degree! At my earliest opportunity, I raced to Felly to share the contents of the missive. In an unusual excitement, the six-month old nursing mother gripped me, hugged me passionately. I lost balance and both of us landed on a nearby settee. For the next few minutes we asked each other unanswered questions. We briefly went down memory lane. We agreed to keep the message close to our chest until after the registration the following week. I got the required funds ready for the journey.

At Nsukka, I had a shocker. I had actually applied to read Education/English instead of Education/French, which was my second choice. The shocker was that I was told I must go for the Education/French or forfeit the offer. Two unpalatable options, they were. I thought very fast and accepted the lesser of the two “evils” – read Education/French with tears. I paid the acceptance fees and obtained the receipt. Some days after the Nsukka trip, the news was on the lips of everybody I knew at home and Abakaliki.

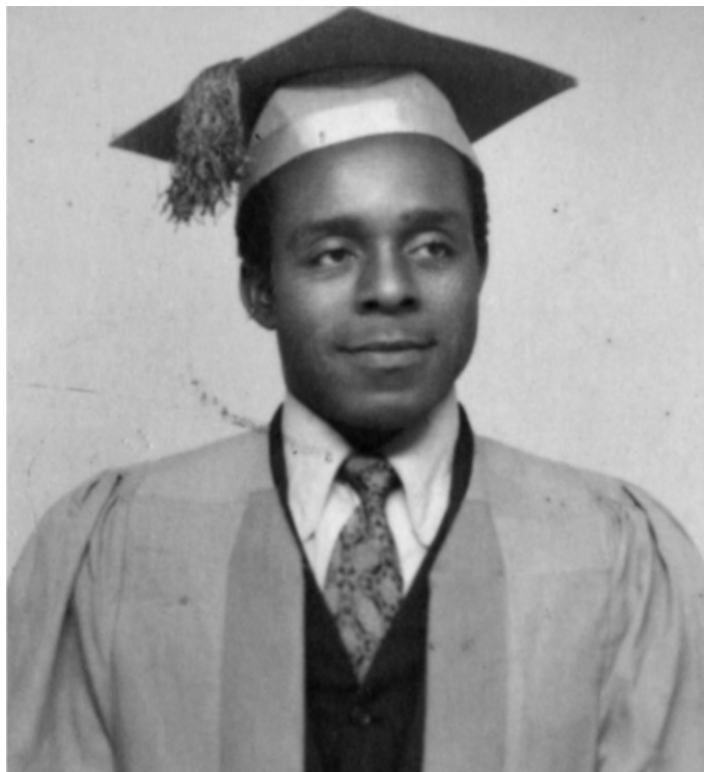
I had approximately a month to take up residence at Nsukka. I put a few things in place prior to my departure: I formally applied for study leave without pay; made arrangements for proper handover at school; secured our rooms at home for the period of my absence and the family's stay at Abakaliki.

On the 3rd of October, 1974, I arrived the Univeristy and commenced the rigorous registration exercise. I made vigorous but futile attempts to convince the Education Department to register me for Education/English. As I was being denied registration for the Education/English course, a female course mate of mine in the ATTC Owerri was being allowed to register for it. That was another disappointment. There and then I made up my mind I wouldn't mind spending a year longer provided I studied the course after my heart. As a Direct Entry candidate (because of my N.C.E qualification) I ought to complete the B.Ed degree programme in three years i.e 1977. But since I could only change the course after an academic year, my graduation year would be 1978. I regarded that one year stumbling block as a sacrifice I must make to become a University graduate.

Immediately after the registration, I raced back to Ehugbo for a formal send off, which came off successfully on October 5, 1974. Some 200 guests attended. They raised a total of N480.00 for me, a huge sum of money then! Donations ranged from ten kobo to fifty naira. My census of the guests showed that virtually all the twenty-seven villages in the five village groups in Ehugbo were represented. Some travelled from outside Ehugbo to grace the occasion. Most exciting was that over fifty of them were of the Esaa and above age sets.

In UNN I met the following Ehugbo sons and daughters: Mr. Hyacinth Ekuma Ikpor (Mathematics); Mr. Ikechukwu Igbo (Business Education); Oko Ole (History/Archeology); Michael Otuu

(History/Archeology); Mr. Ralph Oko Aja (History/Archeology); Miss Beatrice Oko (Electrical/Electronics); Miss Christy Oko (Pharmacy); Mr. Julius Aja Olua (Law). As a freshman at 41, they were all my seniors, but they gave me all due respect and honour as their elder brother. They accorded me a leadership role to direct them socially.



At the UNN Matric, Dec. 1974

I matriculated on 6th December, 1974, with the following Registration Number: 74/12669. It was usual for all matriculating students from the then Calabar and Enugu campuses to join the rest at Nsukka for the ceremony. That was a very memorable day for the

entire University family, the community and myself.

After the matriculation and resulting from the impromptu meetings held by all the old Afikpo Division students, we resolved to form the following Associations: Afikpo Town Students Organization (ATSO later NAAU), Afikpo Local Government Area Students Association (ALGASA) and Afikpo Town Welfare Association (ATWA), students' wing. In each of the organizations, I was elected the pioneer president. I was persuaded and assured of their total support for me. In truth, they had me as their rallying point. Thanks be to God I did not fail them throughout my tenure in office.

As if that was not top heavy already for me, in the second week of December, the Nigeria Federation of Catholic Students (NFCS), Nsukka Chapter pressurized me to accept the headship of the chapter. I was at the head of a five-man NFCS delegation to UNIBEN for that year's Annual National Convention. Before the Convention rose, I was unanimously elected the National President for three years – 1975 - 1978 sessions). In other words, University of Nigeria, Nsukka was the host National Secretariat for those academic sessions. Some fifteen institutions of higher learning across Nigeria were represented at the Convention. It was an enormous challenge.

Luckily, I had previous experience of NFCS – first at University College, Ibadan when it was known as PAX ROMANA and then at ATTC, Owerri when it became the Nigeria Federation of Catholic Students for Tertiary Institutions Students. Thanks be to God, I did not disappoint the people and myself. The then National Chaplain, Rt. Reverend Monsignor S. N. Ezeanya of UNN, was of immense help to me all through.

Life in the University and lectures were not new to me. In the 1961/62 session and from 1964 to 1966 I had been a student in the

University College, Ibadan and ATTC, Owerri, respectively. So, I had no problem fitting into the system.



**My 42nd Birthday Anniversary at Nsukka
as a 1st year student on 20th January, 1975**

Every other week or thereabout, I was at Abakaliki to stay the weekend with my family. Each visit convinced me there were no unusual problems at the home front. By the close of the third week of December, when I returned from NFCS Annual Convention at the University of Benin, we got ready for the Christmas vacation. My family vacated for good, our No. 5 Obike Street Abakaliki residence. Earlier in November, Felly was transferred to Ehugbo. I then concluded all the necessary arrangements for the movement to

Ehugbo. Her transfer was to a Primary School closest to our village in which Augustine, then nine and Edward, six were admitted into. At home, Felly and I decided to make Ezi Agwo our development centre. Decades later, it pleased our Maker to bless our decision with a grand success.

1975 – ATSO’s Involvement in the Resuscitation of ATWA

In the then Nigerian University system, we had three terms in an academic session – October to September the following year: 1st term, October to December; 2nd term, January to March; and 3rd term, April to June, after which the Universities had the long vacation that ended in September, a period when most undergraduates had paid vacation jobs. January to June, 1975 went on smoothly followed by the three months long vacation, July to September.

During the long vacation, and by God’s special benevolence, I led the ATSO members to attack head long, a number of socio-political problems confronting Ehugbo community. They included:

- (a) The Resuscitation of Afikpo Town Welfare Association (ATWA);
- (b) Selection/Election of the first Traditional Ruler in Ehugbo;
- (c) Moves for the creation of Wawa State in Eastern Nigeria.

We were able to resuscitate ATWA after a three-week house to house interaction with well selected Ehugbo sons and daughters at home and other parts of Nigeria. The then existing Afikpo Reconstruction Organization (ARO) had to give way on popular desire for ATWA. Barrister Christopher Oko Okpani was elected the National President with Messrs Lawrence Oko Ngodo and Chukwu Ube as the Vice President and Secretary General, respectively.

ATSO, under my humble Chairmanship set up a standing committee

to monitor the selection/election of the first Traditional Ruler of Ehugbo – Omaka Ejali Ehugbo. ATSO vision and mission were eventually realized, but not without dogged bloodless fight. The selection/election resulted to an almost ten-year court tussle, which we the “branded” non-Amadi exponents came out victorious. Thanks be to the Good Lord for guiding us all through the bloodless “war”. Our struggle for the creation of Wawa State hit the rocks almost immediately after we set sail. The organisation became so politicised that we, as undergraduates, withdrew our collective interest.

On July 29, 1975, General Gowon was deposed in a bloodless coup while in Kampala and replaced by Brigadier Murtala Mohammed. By December, 1975, the last month of the first term in my second year undergraduate studies, I had settled down as an Education/English student. I had scaled through the man-made hurdle of changing from Education/French to Education/English. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise as I had to make up the final year work load with some Science and Social Studies subjects normally not covered in the three-year direct entry Education/English Bachelor of Education course. In later years it made me a better and knowledgeable professional teacher and a community leader.

From the 18th to the 21st of December, 1975 I presided over the 1st NFCS Annual Convention during my tenure, which started in December, 1974. The theme of the Convention was “Preparing for Marriage”. Fourteen Institutions of Higher Learning in Nigeria attended the Convention. The various comments made by participants on the preparation and conduct of the Convention made me feel very happy. Our National Chaplain, Monsignor Ezeanya poured lavish encomiums on me. Thanks be to God.

In the University, I had the privilege of having Professor Chinua Achebe as one of my lecturers in the English Department. Others included: Prof. R. M. Egudu, Dr. (Mrs.) Chukwuma, Dr. Oluikpe,

Dr. D. I. Nwoga, Rev. Fr. (Dr.) Landy, Professor Obiechina, Dr. (Mrs) Onyenwusi. In the Department of Education, I took courses from Dr. J. B. C. Okala, Dr. N. Uka, Dr. O. C. Nwanna, Dr. (Mrs) Achebe and Professor Ikenna Nzimiro. In all humility, these and others like Dr. Inya Abam Eteng, were among the first generation of Nigerian University teachers. I love them and every bit of academic knowledge I came by through them.

It is worthy to note that earlier in the year, September precisely, Ogonnia Agwo, Augustine, our first child was, through the East Central State Common Entrance Examination, originally posted to Enuda High School, Abriba. At ten plus and Felly nursing our fourth child while I was away at Nsukka, I had to go through a very long process of reposting him to Government Secondary School, Afikpo, where he stayed till 1981.

1976 – Emergence of Traditional Rulership Tussle in Ehugbo

Who occupied the Ezeogo stool in Ehugbo dominated the town throughout the year. The ugly situation arose from the resuscitation of the proscribed Amadi/Obu Eno/Imete/Otosi of the early thirties by Dr. Isu Okogeri. He, in 1975, took the Omezue title and used the routine trek across Ehugbo to declare himself the Ezeogo of Ehugbo. But Afikpo Town Students Organisation (ATSO) under my Chairmanship came up very strongly against the Amadi/Umu Otosi group. Some Ehugbo patriots notably, Ewa Udu, Elem Uche, M.S.C. Abani, Anthony Ekoh and Eko Dike sponsored our various newspaper publications on the vexed Amadi/non-Amadi dispute.

At the National level, two events in quick succession occurred that jolted the country. On 3rd February, the barely seven months old Brigadier Murtala Mohammed military administration, created seven more new states in addition to the then existing twelve, bringing all to nineteen states in Nigeria. Exactly ten days later,

on February 13, he, Brig. Mohammed was assassinated in a coup d'état led by his fellow military man, Dimka. His deputy, General Olusegun Obasanjo, took over the reigns of government the following day 14th February, 1976. A few months later Obasanjo introduced Operation Feed the Nation (OFN).

All of us, undergraduates in Nigeria, underwent a compulsory training programme for the operation of the OFN. Consequently during the July – September long vacation we (Afikpo undergraduates), had to be deployed to construct fish ponds. The Federal Government through the local agencies provided the pick-axes, shovels, spades, hoes and machetes we used for the strenuous job. The two ponds were dug at the No 2 station valley directly facing the Government Primary School football field. Of course, we enjoyed the venture convinced we were doing it for the betterment of the Ehugbo agrarian community. It was one of the many dreams that never came true. Those fish ponds were never put into the use for which they were dug – wastage of human and financial resources.

During the academic session in the University, one had an almost unfettered freedom to choose between serious studies and loafing. I opted for the former in addition to modest religious activities. My hobbies included amateur photography, lawn tennis, attending clubs/society meetings and watching sports. I get surprised at myself whenever I recall that at a certain period in the University, I actually belonged to seven different Organizations! Viz: NFCS, ATWA, ATSO, International Students Association, Legion of Mary, NUT and Education Students Association. I thoroughly enjoyed University life without prejudice to the welfare of my family at home and the goings-on in and around Ehugbo.

About the middle of November, I was at home to find out the situation of things with my wife, who was on maternity leave as her expected date of delivery was close. I arrived late by a couple of

hours. Felly had been delivered of a still born female child who had been interred some two hours earlier. That was her fifth pregnancy. It was our first experience in the loss of any of our children. We, however, thanked God for sparing my wife's life. I showed her endearing love and minimized the grief in the family before I returned to Nsukka after one week.

In the third week of December, I presided over the year's NFCS Annual Convention held in the then Jos Campus of UCI now University of Jos, before joining my family at home for the Christmas and New Year festivals. In UNIJOS, I discovered that over 60% of the students there were of Igbo ethnic group hence apart from English Language, Igbo Language was the lingua franca. 1977 – Heading for the Final Lap of the University First Degree Race

My penultimate year in the University of Nigeria Nsukka was a culminating period in my undergraduate studies there: a session for Dissertations, Term papers, Seminars, Tutorials, Practical Teaching in Secondary Schools/Teacher Training Colleges; Intra and Inter-Departmental/Hostels debates. Nonetheless, day and night classroom lectures, seriously supported with long library hours and late night private studies were the in-thing. Group discussions on chosen/assigned study topics were also accommodated, the inconveniences notwithstanding. That was an ideal student's academic life. Happily, good food and feeding were not the problem at all. Rather, managing "wastes" was the University authorities' headache. The current "provision" craze was unknown as it had no relevance.

I used up most of the July to August long vacation period mainly for the collection of data for our final year Thesis. It was a four-man joint study of "The Educational Aspirations of Female Primary School Teachers in Selected Areas in Imo State." The other three

undergraduates with me were: Nwigwe, Bethel Onyemaechi; Nwancho, Rose Onyemaechi (Mrs.); and Orjiako Gilbert Ikechukwu. The areas covered were Aba, Afikpo, Asa, Ikeduru, Nkwere, Orlu, Owerri and Umuahia. From each of these eight areas, four schools were selected and it involved a total of five hundred and thirty-six female Primary School Teachers. Note that Imo State then included Afikpo Division, which is now in Ebonyi State. For me, the exercise was an object lesson in co-operative learning and honest joint execution of an academic project.

Within that session, we did six weeks Practical Teaching in Post Primary Schools. I did the first part of it at the Women Training College, Enugu. By an interesting coincidence, one of the students in my class was Mrs. Ikedinma, the wife of the Principal, Izzi County Secondary School Ishieke, who in 1972 had addressed me as “just an NCE teacher”. In all honesty, that I finally made up my mind to become a University graduate was largely due to his polite abuse. I found time to very politely thank her husband through her for playing a major role in my heading for the final year as a University graduate. I hope she understood the joke.

The second and last segment of the Practical Teaching was in St. Thomas’ Secondary School, Nsukka. Resulting from the Practical Teaching exercise, and during a tutorial with the Dean of Faculty of Education, Dr. O. C. Nwana, I observed that the so called Practical Teaching especially for non-professional teachers was a farce. He, Dr. Nwana, retorted: “This is a University not a Teacher Training College. We do this for record purposes”. That was an honest perfect answer.

How I Represented the NFCS in Nairobi, Kenya

Sometime in June, a Catholic International body, IMCS (International Movement for Catholic Students) based in Rome invited the

Nigerian Catholic Students Association to an International Meeting of Catholic Students planned for late December 1977/early January, 1978, in Nairobi, Kenya. The National Chaplain and the National President were asked to represent Nigeria in that conference. An emergency National Executive meeting of the NFCS was summoned, which unanimously accepted the participation in the conference and approved the nomination of the National Chaplain and the National President, my humble self. All the travelling expenses and the conference fees were the responsibility of the international body. Between July and early December, the National Chaplain, Monisgnor Ezeanya and I shuttled between Nsukka, Enugu and Lagos a couple of times for our passports and other travelling documents.

Six days into December, I had a distress call from home. It was about another still birth but then of a male child delivered of my wife. I hurried back to Ehugbo and met Felly in the hospital and the remains of that son still lying in a secluded part of the hospital ward. We took the corpse home and buried him at Uhu Ikee, in Ezi Agwo. May his innocent soul rest in peace. The child, I was told, actually died on the delivery table as a result of excessive size/weight. Dr. D. Twomey confided in me she suspected diabetes in my wife with the two successive still births – November 1976 and December 1977. She cautioned us to take serious precautions in future.

A week before we traveled to Kenya, I presided over the NFCS 21st Annual Convention for the last time, which held from 17th to 20th December. The National Convention, of course, had to ratify our nomination for the International Conference irrespective of the fact that a new National Executive was being put in place but with the understanding that I was still a bonafide NFCS undergraduate up to June, 1978. Besides, the conference office in Nairobi, Kenya had already confirmed our participation based on the approved

nomination list. At that UNN Convention, the UNIJOS's NFCS branch president, Mr. Uwakwe M, was elected the National President for the 1978/79 – 1979/80 academic sessions.

The day after the Convention, I hurried home to see my family and bid them farewell. The three days I spent with them re-assured me that Felly had fully recovered from the December 6 shock.

By 7:30 a.m. on Tuesday, 27th December, we were already airborne from Enugu Airport. The forty-five minutes flight to Lagos was hitch-free. Within the next fifteen minutes after landing we checked off from the local wing of the Murtala Mohammed Airport, Lagos for the city. We had up to 9.00 p.m. to report back at the International Airpot wing for the journey abroad.

The National Chaplain and myself had to travel to the Central Bank of Nigeria, Lagos to procure traveller's cheques for the journey. At the bank I ran into a Banker, who politely asked me what we needed. I told him we needed traveller's cheques in pounds. He dashed in, came back in under five minutes to say the cheques available were for shillings adding that shillings were the main currency exchanges in Kenya where we were going. In another ten minutes he came back with the cheque books to the value of the money we gave.

As we said 'thank you' to him, he smiled broadly and asked me if I was not Mr. Agwo. Quite surprised, I answered yes then he gleefully said: "Sir, you were my teacher in Izzi County Secondary School, Abakaliki. I am a staff of this Bank. I'm very happy to see you sir. Safe journey sir." Yes, I received one of those teachers' rewards right here on earth that day.

For the rest of the day we called at the Catholic Secretariat for their official information. We also picked up a few things we were advised to take along for the journey.

At precisely 9 p.m. we were at the International Wing of the Murtala Mohammed Airport Lagos, for the checking in routine exercise. The aeroplane was a Nigerian Airways Boeing 707 aircraft meant to carry some two hundred passengers. By 9:45 p.m. we were seated in the aircraft, which was already steaming. Minutes later we were taxiing along the tarmac at a terrific speed before taking off. The normal aircraft official's instructions over, I relaxed, loosened the seat belt and peered at the reading materials stuffed in the back seat bags of those in the front row. Before long I dozed off. The next thing I knew was that we landed at the Kumba Airport, Cameroun. We were not allowed out for the over thirty minutes cooling there. Minutes later we were in the sky again. The next and last stop was at the Nairobi Airport, Kenya at precisely 6:15 a.m. A waiting van took us to the Conference Centre, Consolata Seminary where registration was already in progress.

The twelve-day Conference lasted from the 27th of December (Tuesday, Orie) 1977 to 7th January (Saturday, Nkwo) 1978 with a break on Saturday 31st December, 1977 and Sunday 1st Jan. 1978 for the New Year festival.

The fifty-five participants came from various parts of Africa and France. Nigeria was one of them in attendance. It was actually a Pan African training session for University Chaplains and Catholic students' leaders in the name of International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS) and Young Catholic Students (YCS). The participants were drawn from Ghana, Ivory Coast, Zaire, Zambia, Sudan, Senegal, and Nigeria with observers from France.

The time table was congested, every day's engagement was strenuous but very rewarding. I had a good peep at a monastery and the life of prayer therein. A pleasant surprise was that the monks cultivated large acres of farm and kept beautiful lawns within the "sky high" monastery walls.

As most of the participants were Rev. Fathers, the tendency was that every male person there was addressed as Rev. Father or just Father. To avoid further embarrassment, whenever I was so addressed, I retorted, “but I am a father with a small ‘f’”. For some thirty years after baptism in December, 1948 in the Catholic Church, I never had the experience of receiving the Holy Communion served on my right palm for me to place on my tongue. It was exciting.

1978

For the first time in my forty-five years on earth, I spent the New Year day outside Nigeria. It was on that Sunday, 1st January, 1978 that I had the privilege of visiting and admiring the famous Rift Valley of Kenya. In the 1940’s in my primary school, I had heard and read of that geographical feature. The five-hour excursion/tour took us round the official residence of the then reigning Kenya President, Jomo Kenyata and other interesting parts of Kenya. Kenya was a very neat and orderly country where civil and public servants served the people honestly and diligently. Back home the difference was very clear.

However, even the very beautiful city of Nairobi had her slums where almost “stone-age” natives lived under tents around perennial dust bins. And some of such areas were five to ten minutes drive from the city centre. C’est la vie’ (that’s life) the French would say. In the evening of Saturday, the 7th of January, we left Nairobi, Kenya for Nigeria. It was a straight flight, which took us about six hours to land at the International Wing of the Murtala Mohammed Airport. We boarded a taxicab, which took us to the nearest Catholic Church for the Sunday Mass. Later in the day we were back at the Airport for the last lap of our journey to Enugu where I parted with the Chaplain. I travelled to Ehugbo. One week later I was back at Nsukka.



Msgr. Ezeanya and I in Nairobi , Kenya in January 1978



**In Nairobi, Kenya
1978**

The some two weeks absence from the country and University was a real holiday, a cooling off from academic work, which built up the energy for the penultimate and final lap of the academic race. Serious studies involving swatting for the May/June Degree Examination was the main target. Nevertheless, within two weeks of my return, I squeezed out time to write a twelve-page report on the Nairobi Conference and handed over to the National Chaplain. I summoned an emergency national meeting to present and adopt the report.

Before the Easter break, our Thesis approved drafts were ready

for typing and binding. By the first week of June the three official copies of the project had been handed in. The time table for the defence had also been displayed. In alphabetical order, my group was in the first batch that successfully scaled through the barrage of questions fielded by the five-man Assessment Panel of Professors in the last week of June.

The theory part of the Degree examination was concluded within a fortnight. Most of the questions were within reach but I was not comfortable with the Statistical sections of the Education courses. In any case, I felt happy over my sincere efforts in the preparation for the exam, and in the exam hall. What I couldn't write was what I didn't know.

Life as a Corps Member

Some two weeks after the exams, the results were released. I had a supplementary exam in Statistics and Educational Measurement and Evaluation. Felly was very understanding as both of us absorbed the shock between us. Two months later, the seeming stigma was erased in good time for me to pick up the University clearance to proceed for the NYSC (5th Batch) programme - 7th August, 1978 to 7th August, 1979.



**During my NYSC
Orientation at
Awgwu, Enugu
State in August,
1978**



**Mixing concrete for a Community Culvert
in Abakaliki during my NYSC in 1979**

I was posted to the then Old Anambra State, which included Abakaliki Division. Afikpo was in the then Imo State hence my going to Anambra State very much against my wishes to serve anywhere in the far North or at least South-South Region of Nigeria. We did the one month orientation course at Awgu and my primary assignment was in Abakaliki. At the Enugu Headquarters, three of us - Mallam Ibrahim Bashir, Miss H. M. Kazaah (both from the north) and myself were posted to a Secondary School in Iboko.

By sheer chance, about three miles to our destination, the previous night's rain washed away a connecting wooden bridge to the School of our Primary Assignment. The official bus conveying us had to drop us at a nearby Girl's Secondary School, Sharon, late that Friday evening. For the whole of Saturday and Sunday we could not leave our place of sojourn – a school store. The following Monday, two of

us, men, traveled to Enugu and requested for reposting to the school we were hibernating. Our request was granted so we ‘stayed put’ in Sharon for the service year. Iboko’s loss was Sharon’s gain.

While the female “corper” was accommodated by a female staff, the two of us shared a 10x10 feet room. Our two six-spring Vono beds fitted into two opposite sides allowing for a tiny space to squeeze in two school lockers and the accompanying straight back chairs. Those served the dual purpose of writing desks and dining tables.

The week after settling down I cleared with the Principal, a Reverend Sister, and my room mate “Corper”, to bring in my ten year old son, Edward Agwo, then a Primary six pupil. He was admitted into the nearest Primary School. As I expected, he was very useful to us and turned out to have a pre-taste of NYSC experience while still in Primary School.

At the home front in Ehugbo, during the new yam festival period in the third week of August, 1978, I initiated the formation of Ozuzu Umudi Ezi Agwo. By December 31, 2016, when I ended the writing of these my memoirs, that Association was still waxing strong.

In the school I taught English Language and Literature to the final year students. I founded the School’s Press Club and re-invigorated the existing Debating Club. For me and the students, that service period fitted into the not-always-true-saying that “every disappointment is a blessing”. Some twenty-five years later, a few graduate grand mothers and top civil servants ran into me at intervals, accompanied by their grand children to remind me I was their English teacher in Sharon. The Muoneke’s identical twin girls of Abakaliki – were a wonderful pair who added warmth and colour to the school’s Press and Debating Clubs.



Inaugural meeting of Umu di Ezi Agwo I founded in 1978

At the 14th UNN Convocation Ceremony on Saturday, 16th December, 1978, at Nsukka I was conferred with the University's B.A. (Hons) Degree in Education/English. A real red letter day for me personally, then Felly, our children, friends and well-wishers in general. Our dear family friend, Mr. Elem Uche of Amaechara Agbo, gave Felly and myself a free pleasure ride from Afikpo to Nsukka and back. Augustine Otu Utom, my cousin (OAU Photos) covered the two-day ceremony in pictures. Felly traveled very heavy as we were expecting our next and fifth child in under a month, by the medical doctor's calculation.

On 24th December Felly went for Ante-natal check-up in Mater Hospital but was detained on Doctor Twomey's order. She said she did not want to take any chances. I recall her caution of 6th December, 1977. We celebrated the Christmas without Felly in the house. Of course, I spent quite sometime with her in the hospital where both of us shared the 'home branch' Christmas dish.

1979 and the Birth of My Youngest Child

Very early on Saturday, (Nkwo) 6th January, I was sorting out a few things I would take along with me back to Sharon, Abakaliki the following day when I was informed that Felly was in labour, and hurried to Mater Hospital. I remembered Dr. Twomey's expert advice last December that, except she was not at all in Afikpo when the pregnancy was mature for delivery, I must call her. Luckily, she was doing an unusual ward round in the hospital. On seeing me she excused herself from the nurses and asked me if my wife had come for delivery. I nodded a yes and both of us half-trotted to the maternity ward.

I was left at the corridor to saunter with increased heart-beat. I heard myself muttering prayers. Vividly I recalled the 1976 and 1977 consecutive losses of a female and a male child, respectively, in that very Ward and Hospital! Christian faith gave me the course to loudly say, with head bowed: "May thy will be done, O Lord. Jesus mercy, Mother Mary, help. A a..." Before I added amen, "ñaa-ñaa-ñaa!" the shrill cry of a new born baby filtered into my ears. I held my breath and listened again. It sounded real, but... But the two previous ones may have passed that stage before passing on "No, no, they didn't tell me so. I was not there, though!"

"Gabriel, Gabriel", called Dr. Twomey. "Congratulations Gabriel, it is a healthy live girl child". "Thanks be to God. My two hands and eyes skywards, I cried out Amen and Amen". My mouth and nostrils jointly released breath strong enough to put out a bright burning candle light. The Doctor held me by my left wrist and took me in to see Felly and our newest precious gift. Felly managed a broad smile and a weak, "Thank God O" as she stole looks at the little one in her cot. I held Felly briefly as I congratulated her, then delicately tapped the red-skinned child. The doctor and the midwife looked on in admiration, during that rare moment in a couple's

journey through life. I thanked both of them. I left as the doctor was issuing additional instructions to the sage-femme.

Back in the village, the good news went round like wild fire. There were ululations and *okokoriko*, dancing and of course, eating (nri okokoriko) and drinking for the women and men, respectively.

Early Monday morning I traveled to my school of assignment. I gave out the good news, quickly contacted the relevant authorities and obtained a week's "paternity leave." Before night fall I was back at home to coordinate activities. Conscious of the events of the recent past, Felly and child were under observation in the hospital for the next four days before being discharged.

We named the baby girl, "Uchenna" (God's wish). Its connotative meaning is "Uchennia" her father's (that's myself) wish. My wish because, I have always been in love with the number, 'five' for reasons explained elsewhere in this memoir. I begged God for five children: three boys and two girls. Uchenna's coming was thus a fulfillment of that prayerful wish. With her arrival, we bade farewell to child bearing hoping the good Lord would grant us the life and wherewithal to see them through their education and up to adult life and be grand parents to their children.

By Monday, 15th January, I resumed service at Sharon. I was neck-deep in the school work and conducted every school activity I was involved in as if it were a personal project. Periodically, we "corpers" undertook secondary assignment outside the primary location. We built a fifty-feet bridge across a motorable road at the outskirts of Kpirikpiri, off Mile 50 location. Thanks be to God it paid off handsomely as attested to by past students and colleagues, scores of years later.

The one major problem we had to contend with at Sharon was the

problem of water scarcity. We fetched every drop of potable water from the Water Works Pumping Station, Abakiliki, some fifteen miles from our school. After a lot of pressure from Youth Corpsers and the school authority, the Ministry's water tanker supplied water to us at the school, every other week. We paid token fees for fueling their vehicles. It was a big relief, anyway.

In a Youth Corper's Service year, he/she was entitled to a month's annual leave with pay but broken into two parts: two weeks Convocation holiday, usually around December as it coincided with Degree Awarding Convocations, which held in most Universities then. The second and last segment was two weeks to the passing out/discharge date.

On July 12, 1979, we all converged at Enugu, the then Anambra State capital for the discharge parade and receiving of the NYSC Discharge Certificate. By the statute establishing it in 1973, the NYSC Discharge Certificate remained the main qualification for gaining employment in any government establishment. In later years, exemption from service was introduced whereby those up to the age of thirty years and above were just issued Exemption Certificates without undergoing the service.

It is worthy to note that before we corpsers concluded our assignment at Sharon, we were treated to a very civic send-off party. Eating and drinking galour, drama displays – some mimicking us – and lots of group and individual gifts from the students and staff of the school characterized the send-off party. Of course, routine contact addresses changed hands. There were no short message service (SMS) and phone handsets then.

On July 15, 1979, I registered with WAEC as an Assistant Examiner at UNN. In July 20, 1979, the first pipe borne water line was connected at Ezi Agwo.

The first day of August, (Wednesday, Aho), 1979 saw me back in my village house after the WAEC marking exercise. A long anticipated mission was accomplished with a very clear vision on what next to do. For me that marked the beginning of a long break with regular residential studies. Higher Degrees may follow much later. Of course, reading wide and wild, as well as writing for tomorrow are my life-long commitments.

My Re-absorption After the Study Leave without Pay

In advance of the commencement of the school year in September/October, I did two things: I formally wrote to the Ministry of Education Owerri through the School Board, also at Owerri informing them of the completion of my Degree course and the end of the Study Leave without pay. I attached a photocopy of my NYSC discharge certificate. A paragraph in the letter requested for re-instatement. The second action was that on Monday, 6th August, I traveled to Owerri, our then Imo State Capital, to fill an official form requesting to be posted to Afikpo, specifically, Macgregor Teacher Training College at the School Board. I had the necessary and relevant experience and training to teach upcoming teachers.

The lady desk officer in charge of posting primary school teachers, read through the choice of station and asked me: “Please do you know Afikpo?” “Yes Madam, but why did you ask the question?” and she said: “Most people reject posting to Afikpo because of its remoteness and distance from the State Capital. Only those on punitive transfers and who had no option accepted it”. With a posture of finality, I summarized thus: “Madam, Afikpo is my home town. I am not sure you have been there. These are unfortunate statements from a Headquarters’ School Board staff. Please note that, if by any miscalculation I am not posted to Macgregor TTC, Afikpo – not even to any other Secondary School in Afikpo Division – I shall take it that the Board has refused to re-instate me after an officially

approved study leave without pay. You know what that means? Alternatively, I may decide to accept a teaching appointment with the nearest Catholic Mission Teacher Training College. That is my most suitable field. At least, two applications are already waiting for my attention. Thank you and goodbye. I'm off to Afikpo". I immediately left that office.



As Tutorial Staff at MacGregor Teacher's College, Afikpo in 1980

I collected the posting letter to Macgregor on Thursday (Aho), August 9. The re-instatement letter also bore the school of posting – Macgregor TTC, Afikpo. I was directed to report to the school by 1st September. Schools usually resumed for new academic year in the 1st week of September. Education and English subjects were assigned to me in the H/E (final year) classes. In addition, I was placed at the head of a Time Table Committee of four.

My resumption in Macgregor was very rough. Though I was qualified to have a staff quarters, the Principal appealed to me to

make the concession in preference to a non-indigenous senior staff. I made that sacrifice willingly. I had to go to school from my house in Amaizu. No allowance for it, just a “thank you”.

When the salary for the first term was paid in mid November for the months of September and October, my name was not on the list. I protested through the Principal who promised to remind the Head Office of it. In mid-December when the November salary was paid, again my name was not there. I had a strong feeling that my encounter with the lady desk officer at the SSMB, Owerri may not be unconnected with that dastardly treatment. However, no price is too great for me to pay for my avowed love of Ehugbo and her people. I had no regrets but raised a lot of dust on that issue. I had to literally drag the Principal to Owerri for that embarrassment. But for my wife’s irregularly paid salary, we could have starved. To drive my point home, I embarked on a one- man strike for a week. Everybody was in sympathy. A week to Christmas, I was paid the September and October salaries. That was how 1979 ended in MTTC.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FACE TO FACE WITH PUBLIC SERVICE AS A GRADUATE TEACHER AND COMMUNITY LEADER: 1980-1987

On January 20, 1980 I was forty-seven, quite into middle age, fairly educated, knowledgeable in Ehugbo cultural history and the white man's formal education. Put succinctly, my Ehugbo traditional background, my Christian up-bringing and the book knowledge I had acquired, gave me the confidence to say my mind on private and public issues, no matter whose ox is gored. Of course, as a human being, I must have had my own failures in thought and action. I regret them.

The rest of this autobiography is meant to be sketchy for two main reasons: one, as a well-known person in Ehugbo, people should assess me by what I say, what I do and what others say about me. So the verdict rests on the observer and the reader. The second reason is to fast-track this write-up, which, due to public commitments up to and even after my retirement from government service in March, 1987, I had postponed, to my personal disgust. I believe the eventual records will be better than waiting *ad infinitum*.



My wife and I with our five children (nuclear family) at Ezi Agwo, Amaizu in January, 1980

1980 was dominated by the issues connected with the Ezeogo stool of Ehugbo; building of Ehugbo Technical College; fight to locate a Federal Polytechnic in Afikpo; Electrification of Ehugbo town and my professional assignments within and outside Ehugbo. That I am highlighting them means I played very active roles in each one of them.

The Cabinet of Omaka-Ejali Ehugbo

On 1st January, I became one of the pioneer members of the Omaka-ejali Ehugbo's fourteen-man Cabinet. I was there as an ex-officio member in my capacity as ATWA Secretary-General as provided by the Afikpo Autonomous Community's Constitution. Otherwise, membership of that Cabinet was a preserve of men of Ekpuké Esaa age set. Each of the five village groups of the town: Nkpoghoró, Ugwuegu, Ohaisu, Itim and Ozizza were represented by an Esaa. They were Omezue Nnali Mbe Agada (Nkpoghoró); Esaa Aluu Ezeali (Ugwuegu); Deacon Joseph Ohia Mbrey (Ohaisu); Hon. Nnachi Enwo Snr (Itim); Esaa Azu Alum (Ozizza); and Mr. Nkama Okpani of Kpoghrikpo as special member. ATWA National President, Barrister Christopher Oko Okpani was also there as an ex-officio member. Esaa Emerson A. Uchay of Amaechara, doubled as the Cabinet Secretary and Secretary to the Esaa Council of Elders. The other five members appointed by the Omaka-ejali Ehugbo, Ezeogo Otuu Oyim, on their personal recognition and merit were Messrs M. S. C. Abani, Anthony Ogbonnia Ekoh, Ewa Udu and Samuel Ekoh Dike.

That Omaka-ejali's Cabinet was the de facto engine house and the guiding spirit of what was Ehugbo (Afikpo) then.

From January to June, the Nine Age Grades of Ehugbo (where I was the pioneer Secretary-General) held several meetings and consultations, which led to the Esaa Ehugbo giving consent to

the idea of building an indigenous Technical School to be known as and called Ehugbo Technical College, Afikpo, in the then Imo State. From 10th June when the then National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) officials started work on connecting private and public houses, to October 20 (Monday) when metering of houses commenced, we were neck-deep in making them feel at home. The test switch was on Friday (Aho), 7th November, 1980, at the former Multipurpose Hall directly opposite the Nigeria Police station. That day, Ehugbo had electricity power for the first time in her life history. In between, on 11th June, Felly was admitted in Mater Hospital for high blood pressure, the first in our sixteen years of married life and three years after Dr. Twomey's caution in 1977. She was there for a week before being discharged. It is a pity we didn't take enough precaution as later years' development revealed.

On 8/11/80, at her committee meeting, the Ehugbo Technical College (ETC) planning committee resolved to support in full the campaign to locate the proposed Federal Polytechnic at Afikpo. The implementation of that resolution was practicalized as from 12/11/80 when the Presidential Team came to Afikpo.

By the third week of November, we bulldozed an area near Amaozara for the proposed Ehugbo Technical College (ETC). The first and only public launching for funds for the College was on 26th December, 1980. The organization of that ceremony cost me a temporary loss of my position as an Assistant Examiner for WAEC.

The Fight for Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic

Late in December, I was a member of a four-man delegation to Lagos to see the Hon. Minister of Education in our campaign to ensure that Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic was located in Afikpo. The three others were Messrs Anthony Ekoh, Barrister Oko Okpani and Hon. Abel Oka.

It is worthy to mention at this juncture that I had three positions rolled into one: I was the Secretary-General of Afikpo Town Welfare Association (ATWA); Secretary-General of the Nine Ehugbo Age Grades Planning Committee; an ex-officio member of the Omak-ejali's Cabinet, where I served as the recorder for the Cabinet Secretary. So, I had no escape route from any Decision Making Committee that focused on the development and welfare of Ehugbo. Thank God, He made it possible for me not to disappoint my people throughout that hectic period.

As a professional graduate teacher, I did not neglect my classroom work and relevant extra curricula activities, which included Founder and Patron of MACO (Macgregor College) Press Club; an Assistant Examiner for WAEC in Oral English and Literature in English II. I took part in the exercise at least once a year for each of the Council's examinations. During that time, I came to understand that hard work itself does not kill, but it may weaken one and only needs one to be level-headed; ensure time budgeting, good feeding and periodic complete relaxation.

In our Ezi Agwo home, I effected some backyard extensions, which made room for an appreciable open space behind the main building. But for the kitchen and toilet ends, the eight rooms surrounding structures were made of mud walls and corrugated iron sheet roofs.

1981 – The Ehugbo Technical College Dream Became a Reality

On 1st January, my house was metred. On the same day, the then proposed Ebonyi State Movement rally was held at Ogo Okpoota. Dr. Akanu Ibiam prescribed unprintable actions that could be taken against non-followership. On 6th January, I bought my first ever TV set of the Sanyo brand for N561.00 with accessories to celebrate Uchenna's second birthday anniversary. The money was earned from the WAEC Nov/Dec 1980 marking exercise.

On the 28th of February (Saturday), 1981, Nzuko Umuada Ehugbo was inaugurated at Ngodo Amachi Primary School. Felly was the sixth of the 155 pioneer members on the day of inauguration.

Omezue A. O. Ekoh's EHUGBO HOUSE on the Afikpo-Amasiri Road was officially opened in a colourful ceremony on 3rd July, 1981.

Ehugbo Technical College and the then proposed Federal College of Technology, Afikpo (later Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic Unwana) taxed our brain. With all humility, I was among the handful of Ehugbo patriots who were religiously in the thick of the bloodless battle for their achievements.

Late in December, 1980, we were in Lagos on Federal Polytechnic issue. Early in January and twice in March that year, 1981, I was a member of the delegation, which was again in Lagos on the same issue. The last one, 18th to 20th March, Hon. Abel Oka and myself, did the journey by road. On Friday (Nkwo), 20th March, we discussed with the then Vice President, Dr. Alex Ekwueme at Dodan Barracks, Ikoyi, Lagos. The VP's final words: "No more arguments. Wherever it is in the Old Afikpo Division, it is Afikpo. A Polytechnic is nothing less than a University, period". Again with gratitude to God for His guidance and protection, the two educational institutions started in October, 1981. While the Ehugbo Technical College was enrolling her pioneer students in October, the pioneer Rector of Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Dr. O. B. Epelle, came into residence in a private building in Afikpo. That marked the official and effective take-off of the Institution known today as Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana, Afikpo. Thank God I was one of the founding fathers of the two schools.

For the rest of my sojourn on earth, whenever I remember Ehugbo Technical College, Afikpo, and Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic,

Unwana, I feel fulfilled. I was an integral part of those who mid-wifed them from inception through the cutting of their milk teeth and beyond.



**As Secretary General of the 9 Age Grades that built the
Ehugbo Technical College in December, 1981**

On the 5th of December, 1981, Dr. Sam O. Mbakwe, the then Governor of old Imo State paid a one day visit to Afikpo on the invitation of the Ehugbo Technical College Planning Committee. My first daughter, Ngozi Agwo (then nine years old) presented the governor the welcome bouquet of flowers. In appreciation of the marvelous work the Nine Age Grades had done, he promised a donation of a hundred thousand naira to the Committee. The social unrest that goodwill donation triggered off surfaced approximately two years later. On his way out of the Ehugbo Technical College, Dr. Mbakwe stopped briefly at Obikpe Aghaisu, Amaizu, where he laid a foundation stone for a Health Centre and promised a donation

of fifty thousand naira towards it. Some thirty-five years after when these memoirs were being concluded, no sign of the Health Centre was in place there.

That same day Saturday, 5th December, Governor Sam Mbakwe commissioned Imo Hotels, Afikpo Branch, thus opening the first ever government-owned hotel in the Old Afikpo Division. It was meant to boost tourism in the State. By the end of December, 2016, there was no development to write home about the hotel, which has changed name from Imo Hotels, Afikpo; Abia Hotels, Afikpo to its present name: Ebonyi Hotel, Afikpo. What a shame!

In 2014, some thirty-three years after the commissioning of Ehugbo Technical College, I authored a thirty-page Handbook on the College. It highlights parts of the history of “The College from Conception to Adulthood” (1979 – 2013). I honestly treasure my association with the College.

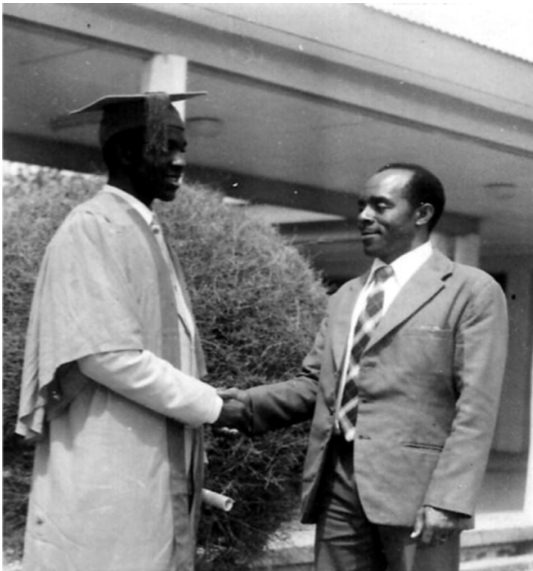
In late November 1981, our first son, Ogonnia Agwo, was offered an admission into the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, to read Mass Communication. We jubilated over it. They took up residence in the University about the first week of January of the following year. On 19th December, I paid in ten naira for the 1981 Agwo Prize for Drama in the Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri. That appeared to be the last as ten years later I regrettably discovered that I had not been paying it due to two main reasons: Not only did the College Authority fail to acknowledge any such payment but it never occurred to the person in charge to even inform the donor who could be anywhere in the world outside Owerri when the Prize Giving Ceremony would be due. That was unfortunate.

In 1975 when the prize was instituted, ten naira was quite a handsome amount. Besides, I was a self-supporting UNN undergraduate, married with four children. Frankly I’m not happy recalling the

lapse after just six years. I wish it were possible to revisit that issue and update the Prize because it was to remind me of my founding the Drama Crusade (Play House) in the then Advanced Teachers Training College (ATTC), which is today known as Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri.

1982

I felt taller than my usual height when I took Austin Agwo to my alma mater, where I had graduated from just four years earlier, to register him to read Mass Communication. On Saturday, 6th February he matriculated, some three months to his 17th birthday anniversary due on 24th May.



**Congratulating Ogbonnia Agwo
on his Matriculation at UNN,
Nsukka, February, 1982**



**As Secretary
General
of Afikpo
Agricultural
Industry
Cooperative
Society and
members in
1972**

The Ehugbo Technical College and the Federal Polytechnic issues took the front burner in my engagements throughout the year. Afikpo Agricultural Industries Cooperative Society, which we formed in 1970 after the Nigeria/Biafra War, bounced back to life. The Chairman was Nze M. S. C. Abani while some other key members included Mr. O. A. Oti (a.k.a. Oti Macgregor) Vice Chairman, Nze Lawrence Oko, Esaa Obila Orie of Amankwo, Ogonnia Eloy, of Amangbala, Chukwu Oyim of Ozizza, Eluu Egwu of Ugwuegu, and Samuel Egwu of Ibii. I was the foundation Secretary and remained the Secretary to the date it unfortunately folded up in 1998, under the Ebonyi State Government.

For three days, February 12 to 15, Pope John Paul II, the Supreme Pontiff was in Nigeria. It was a great opportunity to see His Holiness at such a close quarter.

Barrister Christopher Oko Okpani (of Evuma), ATWA National President for six years, died on 15/4/82. I served under him as the Secretary-General of ATWA for some four years.

As an Assistant Examiner for WAEC in Oral English, I carried out a ten-day test on the final year Grade Two Teachers in the Women Teachers College (WTC) Umuahia. It was another rewarding experience. In August, I was appointed a Team Leader in English Language II by National Teachers Institute (NTI) Kaduna.

Following a distress call by the management of Mater Misericordiae Hospital, Afikpo, Ehugbo Community raised a total of thirty thousand naira and donated to the hospital on Thursday, 13th May, 1982. We did not find it easy to raise that amount then.

The greatest fun and a comic relief of the year came from the Imo State Education Ministry's purported laying off of all teachers in the State by the then Commissioner for Education, Mr. Josiah Ogbonna. That was on Monday, 28th June, 1982. What he gave as his reason for sacking all the government teachers was the teachers' demand of payment for overdue salaries of several months. Of course, he had to swallow his words after a few days as the National Union of Teachers and the teachers themselves called his bluff and held onto their position until their demands were met.

On the 10th of September, 1982, Uchenna Egele Agwo, at three years plus of age was enrolled in the Nursery Section of National Commercial Institute (N.C.I.), Afikpo.

Under the auspices of ATWA, on November 13, 1982, Saturday (Aho) the Ehugbo Council of Elders at Ogo Okpoota, took a stand on Tenement Rates being then introduced in Afikpo. We were mandated to ensure that every ancestral village (normally marked by the existence of an "egbo onu ogo") was not included

in the payment of those rates. However, any house therein used for commercial purposes should attract the rates. That notwithstanding, by June 1987, Nd' Ehugbo were still complaining on the non-implementation of that resolution.

On Monday (Eke), 15th November, the first ever Religious Traditionalists and Christian Religious clash occurred in Ehugbo. Arising from an assault by a Pentecostal Church member at Amachi on an okpaa masquerade, the Traditionalists reacted very violently. Every available okpaa masquerade – real and fake – invaded Amachi and demolished the house where the culprit lived. Omaka-ejali Ehugbo, Ezeogo Otuu Oyim, intervened in good time and arrested the spread of the violence within and outside Amachi.

On Saturday (Orie), 20th November, Felly and myself became 'God Parents' to Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Ezeali of Ezi Oka, Amaha Amaizu at their Church wedding in St. Mary's Catholic Church, Afikpo. They were our sixth God children after our own wedding in April 1964.

The Encroachment on Ezi Agwo Land

At our compound, Ezi Agwo, Amaha-Amaizu, Mr. Emmanuel Agha Chi of Ezi-Agbo Elu Amancho, re-opened his encroachment on our paternal piece of land (ali Umudi) at Uhu Ikee, on Ezi Agwo to Ugwuegu road (uzo Amagu). On 29th April, Saturday (Aho), he bulldozed part of our land. I cautiously re-acted at once. By Monday (Eke), 31/4/82, I had engaged masons and mobilized ready-made cement blocks to raise a fence on the road side. The work continued uninterrupted for three days running. In the night of the fourth day, he, Agha Chi pushed down part of the wall under construction. I reported the case to the Nigeria Police, Afikpo.

The Divisional Police Officer (DPO), a fellow Catholic to both of us,

referred the case to our Parish officials, who arbitrated and requested Emma to hands off that piece of land. He remained obdurate. On June 12, the Esaa Amaizu intervened and decided the dispute in our favour. Still he refused to accept the verdict. Later Esaa Ehugbo was invited. In a tone of finality, the Esaa clearly demarcated with palm fronds (irenkwu) the boundaries, awarding the disputed area to Ezi Agwo. That ended the dispute. The emergency cement block (dwarf) wall erected in April 1982, was still standing at the date of writing this account – over thirty years after.

That year ended on a gloomy note for me and my family. Six days to the Christmas day, Felly was admitted into Mater Hospital for serious malaria fever. She was there for eleven days – another Christmas celebration in the hospital. However, we were together at home to bid 1982, a sad farewell.

1983

For over three weeks in January, Felly's ill-health caused me so much distress. We traveled to as far as Owerri to seek medical attention. The illness was not in a hurry to leave her. In any case, I did everything humanly possible as a Christian, to keep her and the entire household cheerful. Uchenna's fourth birthday anniversary on 6/1/83 was very low keyed.

On Sunday (Nkwo), 9th January, Mr. & Mrs. M. S. C. Abani celebrated the silver jubilee of their marriage. Mr. Abani became my God father when I was baptized in the Catholic Church in December, 1948. In the toast I proposed at their Silver Jubilee celebration, I bluntly and honestly stated, inter alia, that "Dad is a very difficult husband to marry but God is kind to give him Daphne, the only woman I think who can comfortably keep him unalloyed company for over twenty five years". He and his wife described the speech as brilliant. I was happy. We joked about this statement

several times in later years.

My persistent interest in holding an office in the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT) led to my being elected on Saturday, 19th February, 1983, the Zonal Representative for Okigwe Zone in the Imo State Executive. I had, on 22nd January, lost gallantly to Mr. J. B. Oko, the post of LGA Chairman in Afikpo.

The Sam Mbakwe N100,000.00 Donation Saga

After over a year of persistent pressure, Governor Sam Mbakwe fully redeemed his pledge of one hundred thousand naira in support of Ehugbo Technical College. That third and last installment of the money was paid into the project account on Friday (Eke), 8th April, 1983. The eventual complete payment of that hundred thousand naira into the project account marked a serious turning point in my life's history. I was the Secretary-General of the Nine Age Grades that built the College. I was one of the three signatories who must sign the group's cheques before any money was withdrawn from the account. The two others were Messrs Inya Agha (Treasurer) and Joseph Alu Onya (Financial Secretary).

As the news went round that the money had been paid into our account, more than ninety-five percent of the Nine Age Grades demanded that the money be shared among the members to augment what they had contributed in building the College. A handful of us stoutly opposed the sharing idea.

Apart from the fact that the donation was specifically meant for further development of the College infrastructure, six of us in the core Central Planning Committee were professional teachers. They were Mr. Ewa Udu (Chairman), Messrs Lawrence E. Oko, M. O. Chukwu, Paul Idam Alu, Joseph Alu Onya and my humble self as Secretary. Mr. Inya Agha (Treasurer), was the one who moved for

the project, stood very firmly with us. Outside the Central Planning Committee, our staunch supporters included Ezeogo Otuu Oyim, Messrs M. S. C. Abani, Brendan Oko Otu, John Oko Item, Anthony Eko, Omezue Agada, J. O. Irem, Hon. Nnachi Enwo (Senior), Daniel A. Ugwu and Elem Uche. We held several nocturnal meetings in relation to how the explosive issue could be peacefully handled. We, of course, trusted in God and He did not disappoint us.

In the midst of the tension, I managed to find time to go to Oyo for a Material Writing Workshop for TC II Teachers organized by the National Teachers Institute (NTI) Kaduna. Over a month earlier, I had been invited to take part in the Workshop, which was by the grace of Ezeogo M. O. Chukwu, who was then the Deputy Director of the Institute. I left Afikpo on Sunday (Orie) 17th April, and returned on Friday (Orie), 29/4/83.

At the workshop, my association with the Coordinator, Prof. Pai Obanya of the Institute of Education, University of Ibadan was very rewarding many years after the workshop. From the 18th to the 28th when the workshop was in full session, the going was hectic. Most of the days we had to work for between 18 & 20 hours daily – the other four hours were taken up by meal times and naps. The volume of work was much and the deadline very tight. I lost a lot of weight but gained much knowledge and was never sick within that period, by God's grace.

During the almost two weeks of my absence from home, many unspeakable incidents took place in relation to the one hundred thousand naira donation to Ehugbo Technical College Project Committee by Governor Sam Mbakwe. Top on the list was a rumour that I had "carried away" the money to an unkwon destination. Some groups resolved to demolish my house at Ezi Agwo but were dissuaded by others as it was the money they needed. Based on the Ehugbo cultural belief that if public money or any money at all was

formally consecrated to a village deity (erusi) or ulogo Ehugbo, any person who used the money for gains must die or be buried alive (ikpa Okokwu). The ulogo Ehugbo option was finally agreed upon by the council of elders.

Every Village group in Ehugbo was directed to call down the ancestral spirits in all the ulogo Ehugbo (isetu ulogo) on Agwo for the public money he has refused to surrender for sharing. The operations were carried out between Wednesday (Eke), April 20 and Sunday (Eke), 24th April, 1983, at each of the twenty-seven ogo (play grounds) in Ehugbo. Though I had a premonition of it in far away Oyo (Labamba Hotel), I imagined the rude shock my wife, Felly, may have had in those horrible nights. Thanks be to God she did not break down in her bouts of ill-health. Of course, she knew the true position of the issue at stake. All the machinations were baseless and ineffective. My conscience was very clear and therefore I feared no false accusation.

My offence was that I honestly refused to let go of the project money to the Nine Age Grades for sharing as was demanded. I have no regret for doing so and if the situation repeats itself today, I would behave the same way.

On my return from Oyo, my wife tearfully briefed me on what transpired in my absence. On her knees and actively supported by my dear friend and colleague, Nze Lawrence Oko (Oko Ngodo) I gave a second thought to the issue of sharing the money.

From Sunday, 1st May (Nkwo), to Sunday, 8th May (Aho), I held several meetings with the caucus of the ETC Planning Committee, the Police (DPO) Afikpo and members of the enlarged committee. Quite under duress, we, the members of the Board of Trustees devised a means of sharing the money among the Nine Age Grades through the Bank. We decided against any physical cash transaction.

Each age grade was compelled to open a Bank account for that purpose. That ensured that any defaulting age grades had to collect their share through the Bank as cheques issued to them reflected the Bank's deductions.

On Monday, 9/5/83, I left Afikpo to Kaduna via Owerri for official engagements. Before leaving, I handed over all the signed cheques to Mr. Joe Alu Onya, the Financial Secretary for all the Nine Age Grades. That put paid to the money sharing palaver though in my heart of hearts I hoped the money would be recovered in due course as the College was barely three years old and needed money to put it in a good shape.



**Working in my room at Durbar Hotel, Kaduna on Distant Learning Drafts
(English Method) for Nigeria Teachers' Institute (NTI) in 1983**

I was in Dubar Hotel in Kaduna for a 'mop up' exercise on the Oyo Workshop (TC II Long Distance Materials). My schedule was on Modules for English Methods, specifically, Nouns, Pronouns and Determiners. The Kaduna workshop lasted for nine days. It was a wonderful experience for me and made me a better teacher of teachers.

From 1st July to 10th September (some eight weeks), Felly was away at Owerri for her NCE Sandwich Course. Alvan Ikoku College of Education was the UNN Study Centre. I acted the mother to our last three children (Ngozi, Okechukwu and Uchenna) then at home in addition to our two maids. Others were away on holidays.

Within the same period, specifically from 6th August to 3rd September, general elections were held throughout Nigeria to elect the President and members of the National and State Assemblies. The elections were nothing to write home about. Nevertheless, people were named as winners – head or tail.

In the second week of September I received the notification of my overdue promotion. I was promoted to the position of Vice Principal II/Principal III with notional effect from 1st October, 1982 but financial benefits from 1st October, 1983. In other words, for a whole year, I was in an official position and was NEVER paid for it. Take it or leave it. No option. It was sickening to recall that by the end of September of the same election year, most school teachers in Afikpo LGA and perhaps other LGAs in Imo State were yet to receive their salaries for the months of June, July, August and September – four months on empty stomach. Schools were kept open amidst the frustration of hungry teachers and unwilling pupils. A really pitiable situation!

As soon as I received the owed salaries for three months, I ploughed the money into the renovation of the kitchen and toilet ends of my family bungalow some thirteen years after the main building was erected. The soak-away was dug and built up and water reticulated to the systems in the kitchen, toilet and bathrooms. Everything was in place for the celebration of the forthcoming Christmas.

Across the country, tension was escalating by the day. Various

groups were agitating for the creation of their own States. I was a protagonist for the creation of Abia State in preference for Ebonyi State. However, I was among the eight-man Committee for the creation of Abia State, who met with Dr. Akanu Ibiam at his palace, Ganymede, Unwana on the case of Afikpo in the proposed Ebonyi State. The date was Sunday, (Aho) 23rd October, 1983. The group comprised Omezue N. M. Agada, Esaa (Hon) Nnachi Enwo Senior, Nze M. S. C. Abani, Messrs Ewa Udu and Elem Uche. Others were Hons Abel Oka and Elem Okoh and my humble self. The historic meeting of the minds lasted from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. At a follow-up formal meeting of the Ebonyi State Movement held at Unwana, I was not impressed by the general standard of the organization and decisions on the assembly. However, I resolved to abide by the majority decision.

My appointment as a Substantive School Principal

November 11, Friday (Orie), 1983, was another red letter day for me. Without prior notice or an inkling, I was handed over an official letter from the Zonal Education Board (ZEB) appointing me the Principal of Nguzu Edda Community Secondary School, Edda. It was a pleasant surprise. Up to that date, I had never been a Vice Principal nor attended any interview for appointment to the post of Principal of a Secondary School.

On Monday (Eke), 14th November, I reported at my new School, Nguzu Edda and met the outgoing Principal, Mr. D. O. Igwe. The following day, Tuesday (Orie), 15th November, I formally took over the running of the school as the substantive Principal – a milestone in my teaching career.

Within the first two weeks, I had set up guidelines and spelt out my policies for running of the School. I held separate meetings with the tutorial staff, non-tutorial staff, school functionaries (prefects),

Board of Governors and members of the PTA executives. Schedule of duty was circulated to every member of staff. Like other schools in the Zone, staff salaries were outstanding. At the end of November, August salaries were paid. I administered the school to the best of my knowledge as a professional teacher.

I went to school from Afikpo every working day of the week. I was in the school between 7 and 7:30 a.m. and left for home never earlier than 3 p.m. save for days I had to travel to either Okigwe or Owerri on official duties. I bore the traveling expenses from my lean resources.

The one month I worked at Nguzu is better imagined than described. I was very lucky to play safe in a political personality clash between the powers that were at Okigwe and Owerri.

My New and Last Post in Public Service before Retirement

On Thursday (Eke), 8/12/83, I was appointed a Senior Supervisor of Schools in Afikpo Area Office of the Zonal Education Board.

For the rest of December, I shuttled between Afikpo, Okigwe and Owerri – sometimes three times a week in pursuit of salary advance and the official interview as a School Principal. But for my wife's financial support, I could not have undertaken those journeys. On Friday (Aho), 30th December, I succeeded in collecting a month's salary advance of Seven Hundred and Twenty Naira.

The following day Saturday (Nkwo), December 31, 1983, there was a bloodless military coup in Nigeria. Shehu Shagari's government was ousted by General Muhammadu Buhari with his slogan of "change". There was a widespread jubilation in Nigeria as the civilian government had become a crooked bone in the people's throat. As stated earlier, the August/September general elections

were a sham. The change was a welcome relief even with a rather bleak future.

I moved into the New Year quite dazed having been roving for three weeks as Senior Supervisor in the newly created Area Office when the military struck. Two days into the New Year, I was asked to take over the position of the Chief Executive Officer as my predecessor, Mr. Michael Oyim Otuu, was relieved of the post. On Friday, 6th January, Owerri officially directed me to pilot the affairs of the Afikpo Area Office. That was a good gift in honour of the fifth birthday anniversary of our beloved last born, Uchenna Egele Agwo.



In my office as Superintendent of Post Primary School, Old Afikpo Division in 1984

I took over an empty office located in one of the classrooms at Macgregor College, Afikpo. The twenty-one staff strength I inherited idled away their time on borrowed school benches. I had to convert an adjoining school store into my own office. With the

military spirit pervading the nation then, I set them cleaning the surrounding area. To do my job, I borrowed some foolscap sheets and biro pens from the Macgregor College office to organize an Area Education Office to cater for some twenty-one Post Primary Schools with a population of over ten thousand students spread all over the Old Afikpo Division. I was not deterred at all by the poor situation of things, but resolved to succeed.

In addition to the Area Office job, I was also a Representative of the Education Department in a four-man Intelligence Committee of Afikpo LGA. The Committee met weekly every Monday to x-ray security matters in the LGA. Other members of the Committee were the Local Government Chairman, the DPO and the LGA State Security Service boss.

Recovery of the Shared One Hundred Thousand Naira Mbakwe Donation

The Ehugbo Technical College issue was still heavily on my shoulders. I had to ensure the recovery of the one hundred thousand naira donation to the Committee, which was shared very much against the will of those of us who wanted the money to be spent on further development of the College by the Nine Age Grades. The Project Committee had up to the end of April, 1984, to leave office. Mr. Udu (the Chairman) and myself, the Secretary-General, discussed the issue with the National Security Officer (NSO) Afikpo and the Ministry of Education, Owerri. The prevailing stand of the military then against the misuse of public funds, was a big advantage to us. We officially appealed to the government in power to help us recover the money. By September, 1984, more than the one hundred thousand naira was recovered and used for the building of the Automobile and Carpentry/Joinery Workshops in the College premises.

But for the military takeover of government, I could have lost all my traditional rights as an Ekpuké Eto Ehugbo man for not only refusing to share the money, but also making the Nine Age Grades to cough out more than they received. I escaped by the skin of my teeth, happy and proud. Proper accountability vindicated me. But I almost took a painful decision to suspend my interest in participating in Ehugbo public service. My inner self advised me against such a decision. On Saturday (Eke), 22/4/1984, I delivered my valedictory speech to the Nine Age Grades. The five-page document is preserved for the records. Glory be to God that on April 24, I was also inducted into Ekpuké Eto Ehugbo and officially took my seat at the ulo ubi (assembly house of) Ekpuké Eto Ehugbo at the Eke Ukwu Market two days later, Thursday (Eke), 26th April. Setting up and running the Afikpo Area Office in the first year was one of the biggest challenges I had as an educator and public servant. Apart from chains of complaints from Secondary School Principals, the days I was not physically present in the office at Macgregor College, I had to be at Okigwe and/or Owerri at least twice every working week. The Area Office itself had no official vehicle even though I had two paid professional drivers. I had to go cap-in-hand, requesting for the nearest College's buses, mainly Ibiam Girls' Secondary School and Government College Afikpo, whenever I had to move out. Save for the cordial relationship I had with those more elderly Principals, it could have been worse. Their co-operation made me more effective without compromising the required standards even in their own schools.

My second son, Eddy's ambition to be a Roman Catholic priest (Reverend Father) was aborted by the Whiteman Rector at Ezzamgbo. He dismissed a whole class of thirty aspirants, including Eddy, for reading late at nights and jumping out of the classroom low walls on his approach. Despite the fact that we had fully paid their dormitory boarding fees for the final term, all of them had to sit for the O/Level papers from outside at our extra cost. All our

(parental) appeals to him fell on deaf ears.

Edward Agwo sat for the General Certificate in Education as an internal candidate in Ezzamgbo Junior Seminary. He did very well but to prepare him for studies in a University, we sent him to Federal School of Arts and Science (Higher School) at Ogoja. He performed so well there that he received a prize as the best Geography student of their batch.

Across Nigeria, new naira notes of 20, 10, 5 and 1 denominations were introduced. People, including myself had to spend anything from four to six hours to deposit and/or change the old money being withdrawn.

How I Facilitated the Establishment of Ozizza Comprehensive School

Let it be on record that during the course of my duties as a Senior Supervisor of Schools in the Old Afikpo Division, I played a major role in establishing the Ozizza Comprehensive Secondary School located at the outskirts of Imama beyond St. Brigid's Catholic Church.

On Saturday, 1st September, 1984, at a meeting of Supervisors at Owerri the then Imo State Education Commissioner, Professor A. E. Afigbo, ordered me to close down Ohabuike Primary School, New Site, Afikpo with a population of 96 pupils and open a Secondary School within a month to absorb the "flow overs" in Ibiam Girls and Government Secondary Schools, Afikpo. The following day, I recalled that Ozizza Community had over two years earlier been stopped from building a Secondary School. I felt that was a chance to help. So on Sunday (Orie), 2nd September, I invited a colleague Mr. Brendan Oko Otu of Orrah Ozizza to my house at Ezi Agwo, Amaizu to ascertain from him how serious Ozizza people were

in their quest for a Secondary School. He said it was the State Government Decree that stopped it. I directed him to inform his people that I will help them out.

On Monday (Aho), 3/9/84, I called on the Ohabuike Primary School PTA chairman, Mr. Michael Eni Okpara of Ugwuegu to inform Ugwuegu people that the Primary School was to temporarily move to their Town Hall at Ugwuegu as the proposed Ozizza Community Secondary School would be taking off from the Ohabuike Primary School ground, New Site, Afikpo. Of course, I was aware of the implications of closing a school opened about 1935 as St. John's at Ngodo. I chose to disobey the Commissioner's fiat. It was a risk I took but I felt I did the correct thing. It turned out to be the better option.

By 7 a.m. on Tuesday (Nkwo), 4th September, I was at Ogo Imama to address Ozizza elders. They thought it was a big joke as their refusal to join the Ehugbo Technical College project was still fresh in their minds. I later had a separate session with some of their leaders in Mr. Cyril Ajuka Ugwu's residence to intimate them on the reality and urgency. They had an academic year to complete the buildings and provide enough school blocks to accommodate the intakes of the new Secondary School.

On Monday, 10/9/84, I dispatched some staff of my Area Office to New Site to register the pioneer students mainly from the excess JSS 1 students of Ibiam Girls and Government Secondary Schools. I made it co-educational. It was only then they appeared convinced of my sincerity to encourage their sons and daughters to register in the school.

For the next four months, I liaised with Okigwe and Owerri and briefed them on the daily/weekly progress in the brand new school. Posting and recruitment of the Acting Principal, one Mr. Onyeama then in Government Secondary School, Afikpo and other

members of staff was my sole responsibility. On Tuesday (Eke), 31st January, 1985, I took the Deputy Director of Schools (DDS); Mr. E. E. Chukwueke and the Deputy Chief Supervisor (DCS), Mr. D. Uzukwu round the temporary and permanent sites of Ohabuike Secondary School, Ozizza just five months old. We addressed the Ozizza Community at Ogo Imama. There at the play ground, my visiting bosses gave teeth to all that I had been doing from day one in the establishment of that Secondary School. In all humility, they told the community that but for me, the school would not be there, at least at that time. With that public announcement in addition to their commendation, I felt fulfilled. I was motivated to even work harder.

Nevertheless, after some two academic sessions which was in 1986, the permanent site was ready. The Ozizza women in particular and most of their men showed great enthusiasm in providing first basic furniture and other needs of the school. On packing over, the school dropped the name Ohabuike and took up Ozizza Community Comprehensive Secondary School. Spearheaded by Mr. Joseph Oko Egwu, the school badge and logo were prepared with humble suggestions from me. That facilitated the approval of the school.

That was my humble contribution to the realization of Ozizza people's dream to build their first ever Post Primary School in their community. Messrs Brendan Oko Otu (Orrah), Elem Ihie (Amikpo) and Joseph Otu Egwu (Imama) were living and very active witnesses to testify. If there exists any record on the history of that school without a mention of what I have outlined above, that would be unfair, incorrect and unfortunate. I hope not. Glory be to God.

The year 1984 was not all work, work, meetings, meetings and no play. Early in the year I was inducted into LIONS CLUB International District 404 Afikpo. The Charter Day was 24th February, 1984.

Within one week, Felly and I were God Parents to two couples: Mr. and Mrs Gabriel Anwara of Ubam, Ugwuegwu on 24th November, 1984, at St. Mary's New Site Afikpo and Mr. and Mrs. Francis Anigo Agwo of Ezi Agwo Amaizu on the 1st of December, 1984, at Gombe Bauchi State. As Felly could not make it, I represented both of us there. The avoidable incidents which took place during and after the Gombe wedding was nothing to write home about. I shudder to recall them. Thanks be to God the face-off "vanished" after a few days.

1985

Our doyen Traditional Ruler, Ezeogo Otuu Oyim, Omaka-ejali Ehugbo, died on Thursday (Eke), 25/4/85, and was buried on Sunday (Orie), 12th May, 1985, at his palace premises, Amamgbala. Madam Ogeri Alu, the last of my father's five wives, died on Sunday (Aho), 5th May, and was buried the same day. She is survived (on my father's side) by Mr. Lawrence Anigo Agwo and Mrs. Julia Ugwome Otu (nee Agwo).

A remarkable day of joy that year was the Convocation of my wife, Felicia Anwara Agwo, at the University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN). Her A.C.E Certificate was handed over to her. In May/June our first son, Augustine Ogbonnia Agwo, sat for and passed his First Degree Examination in Mass Communication, UNN at his 20th Birthday Anniversary bracket. He was born on 24th May, 1965.

The official visit to Afikpo, and specifically Ehugbo Technical College, of the then Military Governor of Imo State, Brigadier Ike Nwachukwu added another feather to our cap. After he had inspected the school, he recalled the one hundred thousand naira saga and was full of praises for our "using government money the way it should be used". Hypocritically, even those who demanded my head for daring to utilize the donation judiciously cheered on

the Governor for his encouraging remarks.

On Saturday (Orie), 26th June, 1985, retired Headmaster, Mr. Igariwe Nnachi Enwo of Mgbom village was elected (at Ogo Amamgbala) to be the successor to the throne of late Ezeogo Otuu Oyim. It was a pleasant surprise because the Amadi and non-Amadi squabble in Ehugbo was still raging on. Both Messrs Agada and Chukwu were of the Amadi extraction but they had renounced their membership and had aligned themselves with the non-Amadi exponents in prosecuting the Amadi case. His coronation was on Saturday (Eke), 28/10/85, at Ogo Amachi.

On Wednesday (Eke), 10th July, 1985, Mr. D. Oko Alu, (Nnade Madujibe) of Ezi Ukaka, Amaha, Amaizu died and was buried the same day as a Moslem adherent. I missed him badly because he was the person who actually guided me to assume my date of birth. He was my late father's age mate and close friend. His first son, Dr. Madujibe Oko Alu was my own age mate.

Sunday (Eke), 11th August, 1985, was a memorable day for me for two reasons. That was the day our first son, Augustine Agwo left home for Awgu to begin the NYSC Orientation. It was a great relief and a measure of personal achievement and satisfaction. That same day, the then Baby Eagles of Nigeria beat Western Germany 2-0 in China to lift the KODAK WORLD CUP for under seventeen years old. Three days later, the then Military Head of State, General Muhammadu Buhari, when receiving the victorious team renamed them Golden Eaglets, a name the Nigerian under 17 team still bears up till today.

On 27th August, 1985, (Eke), Major General Babangida overthrew General Buhari as Military Head of State of Nigeria. That was approximately twenty months that he (Buhari) toppled the civilian government of Alhaji Shehu Shagari. Babangida proclaimed

himself Military President. He formed the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) as the highest authority of government in Nigeria. On Friday, 30th August, Group Commander Alison Madueke was appointed the Military Governor of Imo, our own state then.

My first contact with the School of Nursing Mater Misericordiae Hospital, Afikpo, was in October, 1985, when I offered to help the school out, free of charge, with the teaching of English Language in the PTS class.

1986

January, 1986, was the beginning of my third year in office as the Chief Executive of Afikpo Area Office of the Okigwe Zonal Education Board, Imo State Secondary Education Board. The organigram I had set up in 1984 and the adjustments thereto resulting in near-efficient returns, gave me real job satisfaction and added confidence. Okigwe and Owerri offices relied very much on me for up to date and factual reports.

The Ohabuike Secondary School (later Ozizza Comprehensive Secondary School) students I had the privilege to mid-wife from day one, continued to give me special delight. Within the academic session the school moved over to her permanent site at Imama Ozizza – some two kilometers from the temporary site. I had another satisfaction of genuine fulfillment as Ohabuike Primary School eventually returned from its “exile” at Ugwuegu Community Hall to continue her existence at her original place of birth at New Site Afikpo. Thus, my refusal to heed the directive of winding down Ohabuike Primary School paid off handsomely.

Plying the Afikpo-Okigwe-Owerri-Afikpo route, at least twice a week, was a routine and an experience I would hesitate to recommend to anybody, especially to a couple that are still in their

child bearing age. Perhaps, what did the trick for me was that our last child, Uchenna, was already five years old when I took up that “traveling job” coupled with the fact that Felly’s “mothering” was proverbial. She was my affectionate wife, fantastic female friend who was the mother of all my five biological children.

At the heat of the Amadi and non-Amadi dispute, I spent at least two days every other week in July, 1986, at the National Archives, Enugu to dig out some materials on Ehugbo traditional set-up from around 1880 to 1960 when Nigeria gained political independence from the British Government. Those materials were vital to Nd’Ehugbo. The search for Afikpo documents at the National Archives, Enugu immensely enriched my knowledge of Nd’Ehugbo. It enabled me to know things that happened in the town more than fifty years before I was born. They remain invaluable to me to date.

A landmark High Court decision on Ehugbo Omaka-ejali Traditional Stool dispute was made on Wednesday, 17/7/86. One hundred and fifty naira cost was awarded to us – non-Amadi. It was the second cost in two months awarded to us. The first was on Thursday, 3rd July, when one hundred naira was awarded. It was a big boost to the non-Amadi group, where, of course, I belonged.

On Saturday, 19th July, 1986, Augustine Agwo was officially discharged from the NYSC and was thus pushed into the labour market.

I was part of the Afikpo Zonal delegation to Umuahia for the official launching of the IMO AIRPORT. Contributions towards that project were mandatory to all adult indigenes and non-indigenes resident of Imo State. Sectional and Community launchings were organized on the directive of the State Government. So, Nd’Ehugbo as a people, have a stake at the Airport now known as Owerri Airport.

At the IMO PEOPLES DAY, Umuahia Zone (where we belonged then) it was muted that Teacher Training Colleges were to be phased out. Nd'Ehugbo were agitated on the fate of Macgregor TTC and Women Training College, both in Afikpo. As the then Secretary-General of ATWA, the National Executive was galvanized to ensure that the two Colleges were never closed as Institutions of formal learning. And so, under the aegis of ATWA, Macgregor TTC and WTC were renamed Secondary Schools and so saved from total closure.



As Chairman B.O.G., W.T.C., and flanked by members in 1986

Mr. Item Idume, Felly Agwo and I successfully warded off Oniikara Ekuma Alu of Ezi Ukwu Amaizu from seriously encroaching on Ezi Agwo (Uhu Ikee) piece of land. That was on Saturday (Nkwo), 6th September, 1986. Item Idume and myself were the only two men resident at Ezi Agwo at that time.

I recall that it was on Monday, the 8th of September, 1986, that Afikpo Customary Court was inaugurated at the Local Government Hall with Nze M. S. C. Abani as the first Chairman.

On Monday, 29th September, 1986, the penultimate day to the 26th Independence Anniversary of Nigeria, the acronym SFEM (Second Tier Foreign Exchange Market) came into operation.

In my Church affairs, I was on Sunday, 19th October, 1986, elected Chairman, Laity Council of St. Mary's Parish, Afikpo. I succeeded Mr. D. O. Amechi from Nnewi. In that position I had to lead delegates to attend Regional and National Laity Council meetings and Seminars across the then Eastern Region of Nigeria which included Enugu, Onitsha and Port Harcourt.

On Saturday, 27th December, 1986, a member of the Riches of Christ Church, broke Ehugbo protocol and ventured into Ogo Amamgbala during initiation and "released" one of their members who was undergoing the initiation rites. Following police intervention, the people's anger appeared to have simmered down, but only to erupt five days later.

1987 – UBAM Village Mayhem

The dawn of the New Year found every member of my family healthy and happy, but late morning events around my compound, Ezi Agwo, spoilt the rest of the day for us.

The anger of the Ehugbo Traditional Religionists erupted over the way a member of the Riches of Christ Church, five days earlier, invaded Ogo Amamgbala and did the unthinkable by taking away a boy who was undergoing initiation. On that New Year day, 1st January, Thursday (Eke), there was mayhem. The scene of the reaction was at our neighbour's village - Ubam just some poles away from our Ezi Agwo compound (one of their Church leaders was from Ubam). Ogo Ehugbo masquerades comprising mainly okpaa and oteru swarmed into Ubam through our village's track roads. Item Idume and I, had herculian tasks warding off the invading masquerades in their hundreds for several hours. We

knew and spoke “their language” hence we succeeded in saving our compound from vandalism.

At Udam three living houses were completely demolished to foundation levels. The corrugated iron sheets, wood and other building materials used in roofing the demolished houses were carted away. Household property – furniture, domestic animals, food stuffs, fruiting plants were not spared. Despite our effort to placate them, Ezi Agwo lost at least four livestock to the invaders. Luckily, no life was lost nor did Ezi Agwo people sustain any bodily injury. Regrettably, many of the masquerades and their cohorts were “Christians”. All the same, it was an experience one should pray never to have.

Under the chairmanship of Mr. Daniel Abani Ugwu (Ezi-Oka-Amaha), the then Amaizu Family Union (later Amaizu Progressive Union) commenced the development of our former yam barn (Oba Amaizu) into a Housing Estate.

An historic visit to Afikpo of Rev. Father E. Edeh, (CSSP), a Catholic priest based at Elele, Port Harcourt was on Sunday (Nkwo), 1st March, 1987. Thousands of people – Christians and non-Christians – from within and around Afikpo Division trooped to St. Mary’s Catholic Church Parish to get relieved of their personal charms and talisman. A mountain of those personal gods was set on fire and got consumed as the converts happily thanked God for that wonderful opportunity. My physical presence there further strengthened my faith in the efficacy of sincere prayers.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ENGAGEMENT AFTER FORMAL RETIREMENT FROM PUBLIC SERVICE: CONTRACT TEACHING, EXCURSION INTO PARTY POLITICS AND VOLUNTARY COMMUNITY SERVICE: 1988-2016

Tuesday (Orie), 31st March, 1987, was the official day I retired from public service (Oru Bekee) after some thirty-six years service. I was aged, fifty- four. However, it was on Friday (Nkwo), the 10th of April, that I actually received the official letter through the Acting Deputy Director of School, Okigwe Zone, Mr. D. Uzuoku. While I thanked Almighty God for keeping me healthy and satisfied in those number of service years, it dawned on me that I had to really adjust and face retirement life confidently.

Nine days after I received my retirement letter, Easter Sunday, 19th April, Uchenna Egele Agwo, at eight years and three months, received her first Holy Communion in the Catholic Church.

I had April, May and June as a period of retirement leave. Within those three months, I compiled my Handover Notes and made numerous trips to Owerri for my retirement papers and benefits. I handed over the first major documents to Mr. A. E. Ekwu from Akpoha on 8th May, 1987. It was not easy, though not unexpected, so I braced myself for that tortuous period. I formally handed over the Afikpo Area Office at the end of June, to Mr. Augustine Ebi Ekwu, my Deputy from Akpoha.

The three months transition period was full of surprises for me, within and outside my office. I will ever remain grateful to God and my wife for helping me maintain a level head all through. Months and years later, there were series of apologies from some of my colleagues for the unwarranted misrepresentations and misinterpretations of my engagements during the retirement leave period. I have always lived up to and believed that a clear conscience

fears no accusations.

In the first week of June, I received a belated promotion slip promoting me from salary grade level 12 to 13, meaning N723.50 per month or N8,632.00 per annum with effect from 1983. As a result, I had to refill my retirement papers to reflect the new salary level. In any case, I NEVER received a kobo as a financial reward on the said promotion. It was purely notional. The only reward was that the last salary level was used in computing my retirement benefits.

On Wednesday and Thursday, 17th and 18th of June respectively, I was one of the seven Ehugbo indigenes who were invited by the Nigeria Police Afikpo, for a chat on purported allegation of attempting to cause disorder in the town. It was in connection with the introduction of Tenement Rates in Afikpo. The others were Messrs Law E. Oko (Ngodo), S. A. Oko (Uhu Ohuu Amamgbala), Michael Oko Okpara – a.k.a. M.O. Green (Amachi), Joseph Okpara Irem (Mgbom), Emmanuel Ama Nwachi (Mgbom), Ehihia Oye (Ukpa). Messrs Hyacinth Ekuma Ikpor (Amamgbala) and Isaac Okoro-Uka (Ugwuegu) were conspicuously absent even though they were formally invited.

We discussed for over two hours with the Divisional Police Officer (DPO), State Security Service (SSS) and the Divisional Crime Officer (DCO) Afikpo on issues affecting Tenement Rates and Environmental Sanitation in Afikpo Town. At a stage, the DPO threatened me that I may not get my pending pension benefits because of my role in agitating that the correct thing be done by the Local Administration. I politely informed him that the benefits were on what I had already accomplished and wished he worked hard for his while in service. His frowning was useless. Truth, of course is often bitter.

All said and done, there was a massive and successful demonstration throughout the main Eke market area expressing the people's reaction over the shoddy way the Local Government authority was treating the otherwise good intentions of the formulators of the system.

Then the Sole Administrator of Afikpo Local Government did not help matters. He arrogantly used uncouth utterances against us. Of course, we laughed at him and forgave him for the insult but warned him to fly low especially in his own home town. We allowed him to “grow up” in his public service. The Law enforcement agents later understood our positions and mode of approach and advised us to mend our fences.

From Friday 3rd July to Sunday 5th July, 1987, I was at Ogoja, precisely at St. Thomas' Teacher Training College (my Alma Mater), where I trained as a certificated teacher from 1953 to 1956. The occasion was to celebrate the Golden Jubilee Anniversary of the College, which was established in 1937. The three-day reunion reminded me of at least three historical facts about my Alma Mater. When I was in there for four years for the Teachers' Grades III (Elementary) and II (Higher Elementary), it was a single-sex school (boys only). From 1962 to 1964 when I was a “tutor” there, it was still a single-sex school and the ex-students Association was known as St. Thomas Ogoja Old Boys Association (STOOBA). But by 1970 after the Nigerian Civil War, the school became a co-educational school. The STOOBA acronym changed to STOOSA (St. Thomas Ogoja Old Students Association). Interestingly, the Principal of the College in the Golden Jubilee year, Mr. John Abang, was one of the students I taught in that College during his Higher Elementary Course from 1963 to 1964. It was a very heart-warming event.

I recalled with nostalgia our student days in the College when it was a punishable offence, except with permission, to talk to girls

even after Holy Mass in the Parish Church of St. Benedict. Save the female cooks and female children of the staff of the College and Rev. Sisters, no females were allowed to attend Mass in the College Chapel. Male staff who were bachelors were not free to live even with their own sisters. It was an anathema to the then Missionary authorities.

Thus, being in St. Thomas' College compound during the Golden Jubilee celebration to find females not only mixing freely with their male counterparts in classrooms and churches but had their dormitories in the College compound, was a healthy development. St. Thomas, my Alma Mater, thank you.

Exactly a week, 12/7/87, after my return from the Golden Jubilee Celebration at Ogoja, our second Traditional Ruler, Ezeogo Nnachi Igariwe Enwo, died in Mater Hospital. He was buried on Saturday (Orie), 22nd August, 1987 – the eve of Ozizza new yam festival after some two years reign.

On Wednesday, 9th September 1987, that was some six months after my retirement from public service, I collected the Authorization paper for the payment of my pension benefits. As a retiree at level 13, the State and Federal governments' annual pensions were N6,322.40, averaging N526.86 a month. What a slave pension! The gratuity was computed as follows: State share - N8,279.33 and the Federal share N18,816.67 totaling N27,096.00 only. That was a once and for all payment for a University graduate after thirty-six years in service! Wao!!

An analysis of the retirement benefits after thirty-six solid years of my youthful life and as a School Principal II on grade level 13 is as follows:

- a) Once and for all Gratuity (thank you gift) N27,096.00

b) Monthly Pension of N526.86 for the life's time

Think of what that meant for a fifty-five year old married man with five children, four close relatives, hangers-on and the expenses involved in maintaining the family house and its environs. Though the odds appeared insurmountable, I faced the future with happiness and confidence. Luckily God granted me the good health I had prayed for.

Yes, the Lord did it for me. Some thirty years later when these memoirs were concluded, my monthly pension from the federal and state shares stood at an average of forty thousand naira a month. This was as a result of periodic review and adjustments over the years. *Onye ndu di nwuru mini ha ka uso.* (he that is alive will drink water that is as great as the flood water).

Austin was already a year old University graduate; Eddy was going in for degree course; Ngozi was in her final year in Secondary School; Okechukwu was in the Junior Secondary School while Uchenna was in Primary School at the age of nine. Quite a great task ahead! The Good Lord did it for me.

Mid-September, 1987 my very dear friend Nze L. E Oko (Okongodo), lost his beloved wife Eliza to death. She was from Umuahia suburb. Divergence in burial customs at Afikpo and her home town generated a lot of conflict and it was by sheer force of arms that her corpse was brought to Afikpo and given a befitting burial in Law's compound Ngodo on Saturday (Eke), 26th September, 1987.

On Nigeria's 27th Anniversary of Independence, 1st October, 1987 I decided to take an excursion into party politics. I intimated a few close friends of my intention to run for the post of Afikpo Local Government Chairman. That was on zero party basis. In December that hope appeared to have fizzled out because one contender falsely

petitioned the electoral board that I was being sponsored by ex-politicians, which was then an electoral offence. I was disqualified on that basis. He too was equally disqualified. Nevertheless, I just put that political ambition in the cooler.

On 26th October, Edward Otu Agwo registered as an undergraduate of the Federal University of Technology (FUTO), Owerri in the Department of Engineering – Electrical/Electronics.

Soon after signing off from the Afikpo Area Office, I applied to the Marist Brothers at Uturu for a teaching appointment. On 18th December, I attended an interview, written and oral. As a result I was offered an appointment to start from 1st January, 1988.

So, 1987 after all, ended on a very happy note with a promise for a possible brighter future. Promise for a brighter future because as from January, I hoped to be collecting monthly stipends (no matter how small) and was confident early in the New Year I would receive the approved gratuity and also placed on a monthly pension. I budgeted on those.

1988

On Tuesday (Eke), 12th January, I reported formally at the Marist Comprehensive Academy (MCA), Uturu, to take up the teaching appointment. I took our third son, Okechukwu Abani Agwo with me. I withdrew him from Ehugbo Technical College Afikpo, to do Junior Secondary School (JSS) at Uturu. That post-retirement appointment was at an annual salary of N3, 600.00 i.e. N300.00 per month! Yes, N300.00 only as monthly pay you may ask!! The cost of living then was very low. Nigerian economy then was very different from what we have today. And so N300.00 per month was manageable especially as that appeared to be a better option.

By that January, 1988, I had not received a kobo of either the pension or the gratuity even though I had received the authorization in September, 1987. But I lived on hope that one day, I will receive them. Ehugbo people say that: “Egu nwo nchekwube anaghi egbu egbu” (A hungry man who is hopeful to eat before long will never die of hunger)

In Marist, I was deployed as an English and Literature teacher as well as a Form Master. However, by the end of June I dropped Form Mastership for the Dean’s Office in charge of School Records/Diaries. On Saturday (Nkwo), 23rd January, 1988, our second child and son, Edward Otu Agwo matriculated in the Federal University of Technology, Owerri.

By the end of February, I was payrolled at the Afikpo Sub-Treasury for monthly pension. The gratuity was yet to come. In preparation for the gratuity, I, in March, decided to construct a concrete Fish Pond behind my house. A bag of cement then cost between N23 and N25 only. I loved fish farming as an addition to crops planting. The fish pond set up with the help of the Fisheries Personnel, Afikpo, measured 36x16 feet and 6 feet deep. I engaged local labour and the fish pond was ready by the third week of August. It was stocked on 13th September with some five hundred fingerlings and juveniles, (tilapia and claria) 400 and 100, respectively.

While waiting for the gratuity, I received a loan of N4,600.00 from the Nigerian Agricultural and Commerce Bank Ltd (NACB) on 13/6/88, to plant yams and cassava. It was on 12th July, 1988, that I received the cheque for my gratuity – fourteen months after my retirement!

On Holy Saturday, 2nd April, 1988, I had to step down as ATWA National Secretary-General after ten years (1978-1988). Ordinarily an officer ought to serve for a period of two years with a possible

second tenure of another two years. But due to the apathy of those who were eligible to take over, that provision was waived so, I was compelled to do five tenures. In desperation I seriously lobbied people to please relieve me of the post. Eventually they caved in. I bowed out with my head raised high! I thank God that I had the opportunity to serve my people – Nd'Ehugbo, in that capacity

August 1, (Aho), Nitel installed my first analogue telephone in my house at Ezi Agwo, No. 088-521776, but it became functional on 03/08/88, with my first call to Nze M. S. C. Abani at Ezi Idume.

Secretary General, ATWA, 1979 - 1988



On Monday (Orie), the 8th of August, 8/8/88, I made out an outline of my Will for my survivours. It is contained in a five by three inches (5"x3") small black cover note book with encased spiral-bound ruled thick sheets of paper. Perhaps by the time I complete these memoirs, it may be necessary to update it as some of the contents have been overtaken by events of death and change of fortunes in the Agwo family. Full Catholic Christian Burial for me

has to remain basic. May the Almighty God bless my wish!

Late August, as Austin Agwo was rounding off from his emergency teaching appointment at Awka to prepare to work with the Public Complaints Commission (PCC), Owerri, Felly was registering in the Department of Education UNN for her B.Ed. Sandwich Course. Meanwhile, Eddy was concluding his first Academic Session in FUTO. I was at the centre of it all.

It amuses me to recall that on Saturday, 3rd September, that year I took delivery, from an Enugu based private upholstery company, of my very first set of cushion chairs – one settee; four single ones; side stools and one centre table. All these cost me N1,500.00 plus N200.00 delivery charges thus totaling N1,700.00! That was one of my retirement gratuity dividends!! That set of furniture, over twenty-eight (28) years old by December, 2016, still competes favourably with any good twenty-first century furniture.

On Sunday (Aho), 16th October, 1988, Eze Michael Oko Akpu Chukwu of Amaizu was coronated as the third Omaka-ejali Ehugbo. The two earlier ones were Ezeogo Otuu Oyim 1979-1985; Ezeogo Igariwe Nnachi Enwo 1985-1987.

From 1987 when the Ezeogo Stool tussle actually came to the open with litigations in court, it happened that the non-Amadi group named me as one of the five defendants. And so in all the court proceedings, I was the chief witness for the non-Amadi. In that position and as an inner caucus member of each of the three Traditional Rulers who had reigned, I had, by God's special grace, extra advantage over the other defendants in the legal tussle.

Conversely, I was vulnerable to any evil designs of the opposite camp. And all of us lived together in houses, compounds and villages. Those who had an idea of or actually knew what the Amadi/Otosi/Obu Eno stood for would appreciate what it meant

to be their target for some twenty-five years 1976-2001. Beyond reasonable doubt, this is a clear proof of the saying that “one with God is a majority”. I am happy to note that scores of years after taking such a patriotic risk, I am alive to write about it.

1989

Barely a year I took up appointment with the Marist Brothers at Uturu, I was appointed the Dean of Studies of that unique Secondary School. The date was Friday, 6th January, 1989, and co-incided with the 10th Birthday Anniversary of Uchenna Agwo. It was a pleasant surprise to me because there were other retired Graduate Teachers, who had been on the staff of the school for upwards of three years before I joined the school.



At Marist Comprehensive Academy, Uturu in my post retirement engagement from January 1988 - August 2002

The sticky aspect of the appointment was that the Rev. Brother, Brother Among who was the erstwhile Dean of Studies had left for an overseas course during the Christmas holidays without any sort of handover, even to the Principal. The Principal, Rev. Brother Thomas Ezeaku, just told me to take over as the School

Management had unanimously decided I was the one to do the job. My duty post was: Dean of Studies, Vice Principal, Academics. Another challenge on my service career! I earnestly prayed to God to please continue guiding me. On accepting the job, I relied on my residual experience as a Dean of Studies in such other Secondary Schools as Izzi County Secondary School, Isieke – Abakaliki (1970-72), Ezzikwo High School, Onueke (1972-74), Macgregor Teacher Training College, Afikpo (1980-83) and of course, my close observation of the School Academic Calendar for the past year.

By Monday, 16th January, when normal classes began, I had in place a working paper on the running of the Dean of Studies Office. The first term of the session which ended in the third week of March was a good “warm up” for me. The Principal’s end of term comment greatly encouraged me. I didn’t disappoint him.

On the eve of our 25th Wedding Anniversary (Silver Jubilee), we had a test-harvesting of fish from my Ezi Agwo backyard concrete fish pond.

April 26, 1989 was exactly twenty-five years from 26th April, 1964 when Felly and I wedded in St Mary's Catholic Church, Afikpo. The Silver Jubilee Celebration was on Saturday (Orie), 29th April, starting with a Holy Mass presided over by His Lordship, Rt. Rev. Dr. Michael Nnachi Okoro, the Catholic Bishop of Abakaliki Diocese. Almost hundred percent of Marist Academy staff, Uturu was at Afikpo for the event. It turned out to be a civic reception at our Ezi Agwo home. Our over twelve “God (Christian) Children” and our five biological children were at hand to serve all our guests. The diverse calibre of our guests and their numbers flattered us. It was a day to remember.

From Friday, June 2, to Sunday, June 4, inclusive, I travelled to

Gombe, Bauchi State and back home to confer with my two “step-brothers”, Lawrence Agwo and Francis Agwo. Their stay there was becoming unpleasant and as their surviving “father,” I had a duty to call them to order. The journey was partially successful as Law Agwo preferred his religious crusade at Bauchi to waiting to discuss with me. I just discussed with Francis and Law’s Sister, Mrs. Julia Otu who was habouring them (Law and Francis). Profusely Julia wept for Law’s behaviour.

Thank God that following our discussion, Francis returned to the East by the end of that June, 1989. On the other hand, Law lingered around in Gombe. He wrote a rather belated apology, which even made matters worse. I regarded his attitude as an unfortunate development especially in his own nuclear family.

Early August, I registered as a member of the then Nigeria Labour Party, Afikpo Chapter, even though I was at Uturu most of the time. By the end of August when MCA reopened for the third and last term of the session, the Principal, Rev. Brother T. Ezeakku permitted me to register Ngozi Agwo as a temporary student in the final year class to take tuition only in the school. That concession had been granted a few others before me. Such students paid the term’s school fees, wore the school uniform, sat for all class tests and subjected to every other school rule and regulation. The only difference was that they were not registered as school candidates for the West African Examinations School Certificate exams. She (Ngozi), had done that in her Alma Mater, Sir Francis Ibiam Girls Sec. Sch. and was just being prepared for the General Certificate in Education GCE (O/Level).

Following an unusual disagreement between the Ekpuke Esaa key officers and the Omezue title holders, an Assembly of Ehugbo men at Ogo Okpoota (sacred ground) set an historic precedence on Sunday (Eke), 1st October, 1989 – the 29th Anniversary of

Nigeria's Independence. From that date ALL Omezue title holders of Esaa Age set ceased to participate as adjudicators in land cases till further notice. But they were free to sit with their age mates in the Esaa chamber and take part in the normal deliberations. Some fifteen members of Ekpuké Eto and Ekpuké Esaa age sets were fined from N600.00 to N800.00 each, for their dishonest roles in the case of some individuals encroaching on the Ehugbo Technical College land. We (of the ETC Project Committee) made the report to the Esaa.

The above decision was the final nail on the claims of the buying and owning portions of land by individuals, in the area where the College Premises extends. That was a landmark victory for the Committee I was serving as its Secretary-General.

The Amadi and non-Amadi case in Afikpo High Court continued to bite hard on the usual peaceful co-existence of Ehugbo people. On Sunday, 8th October (Nkwo), Concerned Ehugbo Youths met at the Amuro/Mgbom Primary School and resolved to urge the warring groups to withdraw the case from court. That was a gallant move even though most elders thought it was a big joke. Majority of the non-Amadi group would not hear anything less than the complete/total surrender of the Amadi/Otosi idea of any colour.

Nevertheless, on Sunday (Eke), 29th October, in a General Assembly at Ogo Okpoota, a twenty-man reconciliation Committee was appointed. Ten persons from each of the Amadi and non-Amadi groups were appointed to work on the terms of agreement. I happened to be one of the representatives of the non-Amadi group.

On the 1st of November, the feast of All Saints, the idea of my taking part in active politics, reared its ugly head again and I put it down in my diary for future consideration.

About mid-December, precisely 17th, at the St. Mary's Laity

Council meeting, under my chairmanship, we presented a draft of our “Findings and Recommendations on Ogo Institutions and Title-Taking in Ehugbo”. That draft marked a break-through because since 1972 when the idea was first mooted, committees had succeeded committees without positive results. However, the end of the exercise was not yet in sight.

On Saturday, 23rd December, I had a rare privilege of “Standing Proxy” for Mr. John Oko Item in a Church wedding at St. Mary’s, where he and his wife Elizabeth were to be “God Parents” of Mr. Vincent Ogbonnia of Ukpá and then Miss Fidelia Abani.

Felly returned from Nsukka after the December contact in her B.Ed. Sandwich Programme in good time for the Christmas period and to host Ozuzu Umudi Ezi Agwo at her 11th Annual Meeting, on the 31st of December, 1989.

1990

That was another year of adventures and breaking of new grounds in my life history. I entered the new year with my mind fully made up to go into active Party Politics and that meant I must withdraw my services from The Marist Brothers at M.C.A. Uturu. At the end of January, I gave the School Management a month’s formal notice to that effect.

On Saturday (Eke), 13th January, at a broadbased meeting of Ehugbo Leaders of Thought in Ezeogo M. O. Chukwu’s palace, I was unanimously urged to continue leading the Defendants’ Evidence Team in Afikpo High Court on the Amadi vs non-Amadi dispute as principal witness four (PW4). I had no option.

As Otu Ekuma was leaving home, on Sunday, 11/2/90 (Orie), for his National Directorate of Employment (NDE) programme, news

came through that Nelson Mandela (ANC Leader) of South Africa was released from prison after twenty-seven years for challenging the apartheid system in South Africa. That piece of news evoked the jubilation of all the black Africans the world over. On Wednesday (Eke), 14th February, the Federal Government of Nigeria declared a free half day work to enable Nigerians attend rallies organized in honour of the release of Nelson Mandela of South Africa.

On Ash Wednesday, 28/2/90, my teaching contract ended with MCA after two years and two months of very interesting association. I left Okechukwu Agwo in the Boarding House to complete the JSS education due to end in October, 1990.

About a month from the above date, I registered in the Social Democratic Party (SDP) as a card-carrying member. That was the effective beginning of my excursion into party politics. Though Felly did not quite buy the idea, she did not do anything to stop me from plunging into party politics. Of course, she was a very understanding wife and friend. I couldn't have had a better companion.

For the rest of the year, political meetings/campaigns, Laity Council activities, Amadi and non-Amadi court case and Afikpo Agricultural Industries Co-Operative Society matters engaged my attention in that order.

On Saturday (Eke), 5/5/90, Ozizza group of villages formally announced her cessation from the rest of Ehugbo on Omume title matters.

Austin Ogbonnia Agwo's 25th Birthday Anniversary fell on Ascension Thursday, 24th of May, 1990. That was also the ninth day of hearing of the Amadi/non-Amadi case. As the principal witness 4 (PW4) for the non-Amadi group, I was in the Afikpo

High Court dock for four hours – 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. under cross examination by the plaintiff's counsel, Barrister Mogbo (SAN). I was surprised at myself but thank God I satisfied myself and the audience as expressed in their unusual applause at the end of that marathon performance.

My Foray Into Politics

Two and half weeks later, 11/6/90, at the 10th session of the High Court proceedings, I was again in the witness box for some three hours, still with the plaintiff's Lead Counsel, Mogbo (SAN), cross-examining. On-lookers on the defendant's side nodded all along with satisfaction while the irrelevant questions encouraged me a lot. Thanks be to God that the death-blow was thus dealt on the Amadi monster.

At the Local Government Area Congress of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), I was elected first of the five National delegates to go to Abuja for the National Convention. That was on Saturday (Aho), 16th June, 1990. The National Convention was held on Wednesday, 25/7/90, at Abuja. However, most of the nearly 3,000 SDP delegates were quartered in different hotels in Kaduna. They had to travel from there to Abuja on that Convention Day. It was hectic but rewarding. Amb. Baba Gana Kingibe of Borno State and Professor Ebere Osieke of Imo State were elected Chairman and Secretary, respectively. The Convention period actually lasted from the 22nd to the 26th of July.

On the 7th of August, 1990, an access road/ferry service at Otu-Eke (Ndibe Beach) was commissioned by the Imo State Commissioner for Works and Transport at the instance of an Onitsha-based business man, Nze Charles Ogbonnia Oko Omaka of Amaobolobo, Village, Afikpo. The same day, St. Brigid's Catholic Church, Ozizza, launched her N2.8m building fund. It was preceded by a

Holy Mass said by the Catholic Bishop of Abakaliki Diocese, Dr. M. N. Okoro.

The Afikpo Secretariat of the SDP was formally opened on Monday, 17th September, 1990 located between the LGA headquarters and the then Imo Hotels, Afikpo. The National Republican Convention (NRC) Secretariat was located a little after Akanu Ibiam Girls' Secondary School, Afikpo, on the Ehugbo-Unwana road.

In the afternoon on Sunday, 23rd September, 1990, Mr. Daniel Abani Ugwu called me on the telephone and told me that I had been unanimously nominated as the running mate to the party's chairmanship candidate in the then Council up-coming general elections. I couldn't believe him as I had never indicated any such interest then. He made me understand that at the LGA Executive Meeting of the SDP over the weekend, it was decided that as the Edda axis of the old Afikpo LGA was to produce the Chairman, the Ehugbo area had the post of the Vice Chairman. And I was their first choice. That was how I came to be the Vice Chairman candidate of SDP, Afikpo. Formal adoption was on the 1st of October, the 30th Independence Anniversary of Nigeria.

Monday (Aho), 24th September, 1990 was a red letter day in Ehugbo (Afikpo). Verdict was given in favour of us, the non-Amadi group, in the three-year court litigation in the Ezeogo stool tussle. There were great jubilations all over town. However, three weeks later (16/10/90), the Amadi group appealed against the judgment, which was yet to be heard as it was aborted mid-way.

On Wednesday (Orie), 17th October, 1990 I took a great risk over the court litigation case. In the company of Ezeogo M. O. Chukwu we left Afikpo after 5 p.m. to Owerri to submit some vital documents to our legal advisers on the Ezeogo tussle. We returned to Afikpo around 12:30 a.m. About a week later, we repeated the journey to

Owerri but that was in the day time when we had to submit a letter to the Secretary to the State Government (SSG) and confer with relevant officers.

All these moves were to forestall the Amadi group's attempt to restrain the Governor from handing over the Staff Of Office to Ezeogo Michael Chukwu as the recognized Ezeogo of Ehugbo (Afikpo). It eventually paid off early in the New Year, 1991.

On Saturday (Orie), the 8th of December, 1990, Chief Sonny Ogbuoji of Edda and I were elected the Chairman and Vice Chairman, respectively, in the Afikpo LGA election. We, the SDP, beat our opponent of the NRC with 20,524 to 17,532 valid votes. Thus the over eight months expensive, intensive and extensive political campaigns were handsomely rewarded. The appellation Honourable (Hon), therefore prefixed my name as a matter of course though I never got used to writing it in my official documents nor personally mentioned it in any forum.

Worthy of note is that earlier in the year, Mr. Emmanuel Agha Mbey of Amaebo, Ugwuegu, a printer, based in Lagos, approached me and intimated me about a Community Magazine he was starting with the name Afikpo Today. That was a teaser for me. As far back as late 1960s, I had developed interest in jotting down titbits about Ehugbo with the intention of collating them sometime in future. From early 1970s forward, I formed Press Clubs in all the Secondary Schools I taught and we produced school magazines. So, Mr. Emmanuel Mbey's venture into Community Magazine tickled my fancy.

From that very first issue of Afikpo Today in April 1990, till the last issue in 2012 (some twenty two years period), I remained a correspondent and later a senior correspondent and columnist on "Reflections on the Ways of Nd'Ehugbo." The Good Lord gave me the life and presence of mind to be part of the team that made

Afikpo Today Magazine very popular during her 22 years life span. The contents of the magazine will surely remain archival materials on Ehugbo and her people for many generations to come.

1991

Some three weeks earlier, I had become the Vice Chairman-Elect of Afikpo Local Government Council, Imo State of Nigeria. On Friday (Eke), January 4, 1991, I was sworn in as the Vice Chairman, Afikpo Local Government Council by the then Imo State Military Governor Anthony Ogugua in Owerri. The Chairman was Mr. Sunday Ogbuoji of Ebunwana, Edda, Afikpo.



Being sworn in as Vice Chairman, Afikpo Local Government on 4th January, 1991

At the Afikpo Local Government Area Council Headquarters, I doubled as the Supervisory Councilor in charge of Education to the annoyance of even the people I thought were my close friends. I had the option to choose Finance, Works, Agriculture/Health or Education. My supposed “friends” advised me to choose Finance or Works where I would net in plenty of money. Of course, I chose

Education the field I was very familiar with. Up to the day of writing this part of these memoirs, I had not and will never regret that choice. I derived real job satisfaction serving as Supervisory Councilor for Education.

It is worthy to recall here that as a School Principal II, I was on a salary grade level thirteen 13, earning a gross monthly salary of N723.50. After the relevant deductions, my take home pay was N669.00 only. And as the Vice Chairman and Supervisory Councilor for Education, my monthly salary averaged N900.00. No matter what extensive official duties I undertook, the additional monthly allowances NEVER exceeded N2,500.00. So, those my cupboard friends wanted me to be in a ministry where contractors would pay handsomely. But I said capital NO to that. My vision and mission in accepting a political office was to use government funds to provide the people's needs. Period! Thank God, He gave me the special grace to accomplish my target.

On Tuesday, (Eke) 8th January, 1991, little Uchenna Agwo, my last child and daughter at exactly twelve years and two days old, left home to Marist Comprehensive Academy, Uturu (M.C.A.) to begin her Secondary School education.

On Thursday, the 10th of January, Mr. Sonny Oji Ogbuoji and myself formally took over the administration of the then Afikpo Local Government Council as the Chairman and Vice Chairman, respectively. Thanks be to God Almighty.

While I talked and played party politics throughout 1991, I was also deeply involved in the Ezeogo stool struggle with the Amadi group. On Sunday (Eke) 17th February, a peace pact was signed between the two parties to maintain the peace but the tussle still continued. On Tuesday (Aho), 9th July, Austin Agwo, our first child revealed to Felly and I of his planned journey to the United Kingdom. We

prayed and wished it came true. It did about seven months later.

My Performance as Vice Chairman of Afikpo Local Govt. Area

I must state here without equivocation and in all humility, that I thoroughly enjoyed the eleven solid months I worked as the Vice Chairman and Supervisory Councilor for Education in Afikpo Local Government. It was a period of very peaceful politicking, honest job, transparency in all facets of the administration and a display of a rare statesmanship. By God's special grace, I dare any person or persons who were active participants in the affairs of the Local Government Council or close observers to contradict the above assertion. I certainly kept to my oath of office barring inevitable human mistakes.



**As Vice Chairman and Supervisory Councilor of Education,
Afikpo L.G. in 1991-1992**

In under one year in that duty post, I proudly left on the scoreboard, the following among others:

- (a) Regular payment of Primary School teachers, which was on the day and time Council workers were paid. Previously, it

was anything but regular.

- (b) Effective organization of seminars and workshops to update the teachers work knowledge.
- (c) Effective monitoring of teachers truancy, lateness to school, records of work and unnecessary trooping up and down the Local Government Education Authority (LGEA) office for very flimsy reasons.
- (d) Prompt supply of teaching aids to schools before or immediately schools reopened for any new term.
- (e) Printing and distribution of free exercise books to pupils in the entire LGA, which comprised the Old Afikpo Division that metamorphosed into Ebonyi South Senatorial Zone.
- (f) Constitution of a Handiwork Monitoring Committee to ensure that all pupils personally produced and handed in crafts, NOT money in lieu of handiwork.
- (g) Got the Chairman to approve my proposal for deployment of hundreds of indolent staff of the Works Department to work on the LG roads in the entire area. It was a sort of PWD method on roads maintenance in the workers vicinity. All the roads in the LG were thus well-maintained throughout our tenure.
- (h) Co-ordinated the effective checking of truancy and lateness to work of the entire Council staff.
- (i) Periodically checked the Works Department staff deployed in their village areas and enforced the non-or pro rata-payment of erring staff.
- (j) Achievement of very high degree of staff discipline and taking every body along in every aspect of my administration. Peace and tranquility reigned.

Of course, many of my supposed friends were badly disappointed in me because I had zero tolerance for dishonesty and corrupt practices. In sum, my biggest achievement was that I had the job satisfaction I always prayed for.

On Monday (Aho), 23rd September, 1991, Abia State was carved out of Imo State and in the same vein, Afikpo South (Edda) was created out of Afikpo Local Government Area. That development made it imperative that bye elections be held in the affected LGAs. Afikpo was one of the affected areas.

I contested for the post of Chairman on the platform of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Mr. A. U. Akaa of the Nigerian Republican Convention (NRC) was my opponent. After the polls on Saturday (Nkwo) November 23, I lost mainly because of the “AKPUERI” (Peripheral Communities) conspiracy. My party (SDP) could not match the superior money power of our opponent the NRC. However, I reluctantly accepted the party’s wish to regain the seat through litigation in the election tribunal. We went to court on Saturday (Eke), 14th December, 1991 at Umuahia.

I managed to carry my head high as I felt internally happy I did my honest best. Any impartial participant and/or observer stated categorically I won the election at the polls, but the official figures expressed a contrary stand. A few years later, my closest compound neighbour, a business man, openly confessed he was the kingpin that caused my loss in the election. That was too late and arrant nonsense. I prayed to God to forgive him. I was disappointed but not dismayed. That was a phase in my life’s history.

With that apparent twist in my adventure into party politics, I began to question myself very seriously and sincerely the rationale for continuing. In that mood, I trudged into the New Year, 1992.

1992

From the New Year day to the 4th of March (Wednesday), 1992, when the Election Tribunal sitting in Umuahia ruled against our party, the SDP, I was on the road between Afikpo and Umuahia, on the average of every other day. As the party’s flag bearer in the

election, I knew what an all-round loss that result meant for my family and myself. The horse trading that dominated the entire exercise is unprintable. In the midst of the election “palaver,” our first son, Augustine Ogbonnia Agwo, left for the United Kingdom (London) in February, mainly to utilize his delayed travelling documents for the wedding of Charles Abani whose Best Man he was to have been the previous year. It turned out to be the channel for the fulfillment (in 2001) of my personal dream some forty-two years earlier (1950). He went on a goodwill mission, and God guided him aright. His going was not without serious stress on his and the family purse.

Though my party resolved that there was enough ground to win at the Appeal Court, I saw the pursuit from a different perspective. I made up my mind to call it quits and end the unnecessary senseless waste. I informed my wife accordingly. She couldn’t agree less with me. We prayed together for God to give the light for that dark moment.

About a week to the day the appeal was billed to be heard at the Afikpo High Court, Rev. Fr. (Dr.) Innocent Ekumauche Oko (of the blessed memory), then the Administrator of Mater Hospital, Afikpo personally invited me to a peaceful resolution of the impasse. I took along with me my friend Nze Nwachi Egwu (of the blessed memory), of Ezi Ukwu, Amaizu. The Reverend gentleman wanted to feel my pulse on the goings-on. I had a ready answer. I was no longer interested in the continued political struggles and wastage. I had, a few days earlier, prayerfully asked myself the following questions:

- (a) Why do we continue to waste resources from our LG funds in paying the non-indigenous lawyers of the two different political parties engaged?
- (b) Since one of us must eventually win at the expense of the

Local Government fund, why not call it quits and stop further commitment of yet-to-be-received LG grants to avoidable chairmanship seat tussle?

- (c) Am I not mortgaging my conscience for a transient political office for conscience is an open wound, which only truth can cure?

I then told Rev. Fr. Innocent Oko that the summary of my answers to these three questions and more was: “Enough is Enough”. But the monster staring me straight in the face was to clear my lawyer’s outstanding legal fees of well over a hundred thousand naira! And I had already resolved on a face-off with my party. If I were goaded into continuing with the election expenses, then I would be forced to divert Council funds to pay back to the party. That was unacceptable. I surrendered the future to God.

The Rev. Gentleman, looking straight into my face said: “Sir, it appears our minds were working together on most of the points you have raised. It is not easy to take the stand you are now taking. There is a way out! Pause ... Yes, there is a way out. Supposing your embattled colleague, Mr. Akaa offers to defray the outstanding cost of your lawyer’s fees, what would you say?” Mmm! I si ngini, (What have you said?) “I am sure he will be ready to help as soon as you wish,” he added.

I stole a look at Nze Nwachi Egwu’s face and then focused on nothing in particular at one end of the sitting room where we were. In a swift recollection, my mind went back to two events within the three weeks after the election in November, 1991: Dr. Akanu Ibiam first invited Mr. Akaa and myself to his residence at Unwana and said I should allow Akaa go irrespective of the seemingly good reasons I had. Nze Nwachi Egwu was also at Unwana with me. My party turned down that order. Some two weeks later, the

then Governor of Abia State, Dr. Ogbonnaya Onu of NRC, sent Mr. Cletus Ekuma of Amankwo, Afikpo, who was then his Chief of Staff in Umuahia, to meet me in my house, Ezi Agwo, Amaizu and persuade me to withdraw the case, but I rejected his plea on the ground that my party the SDP, and not me as a person, took the case to court. Mr. Ekuma went back and reported to the Governor who felt disappointed. Dr. Onu was one of my students in the then Izzi County Secondary School, Abakaliki immediately after the Biafran War in 1970. “Is this what is called politics”, I asked myself. Even in the face of a day light robbery one is asked not to see nor tell the truth?”

Raising my head about a minute later, I heard myself saying, “Na m eje aria ya. O bu n’obugu taa” (Let me go and think about it but, it is not today).”

“All right, all right, sir. N’ayi hunu echi na mgbe enyasi (Let us see tomorrow evening)” Rev. Fr. Oko volunteered to take us back to Amaizu in his car. During the ten or so minutes drive to my compound there was no discussion at all. As Nze Nwachi and I alighted, he, Rev. Fr, said: “Mgbe oruzu nuru echi obu” (Until that tomorrow)”. Bye bye.

For some thirty minutes in my house, Nze Nwachi Egwu and myself asked each other a number of rhetoric questions bordering on the issue at stake. Of course, I strongly warned Nze Nwachi Egwu not to say a word of our journey to New Site to anybody. He promised. And he kept the promise.

At home and late in the night, I told Felly every bit of our discussions with Father Okoh and informed her of the proposed meeting the following evening. Mr. Akaa in the company of two others was expected at the next day’s discussions. She, of course, was well aware I had made up my mind to discontinue the case, no matter

whose ox was gored. I felt that Fr. Innocent's intervention was God sent.

In the Rev. Father's sitting room on the following day, we went into the resolution of the impasse. Present at the meeting were himself, Rev. Fr. (Dr.) Innocent Ekumauche Oko, Mr. A. U. Akaa, Nze Nwachi Egwu and myself. In theory and in writing, we agreed that Mr. A. U. Akaa, the "successful" Chairman was to defray the outstanding legal fees of my lawyer; arrange for me and one of his aides to go to Umuahia and pay the fees and formally ask my lawyer to withdraw the case. Purely on humanitarian grounds he, Mr. Akaa was to rehabilitate me by defraying my personal political debts. No specific sum of money was mentioned. He never rehabilitated me even with a kobo nor gave any reason at all why he had to renege on the deal. By God's grace, that chapter is permanently closed.

The weekend before the scheduled date for hearing of the appeal, we traveled to Umuahia to see my lawyer. On Monday, March 4, the case was formally withdrawn from the court. I anticipated the reaction of my party men and women. Apart from my wife and Nwachi Egwu, it was only Mr. D. A. Ugwu that I told of my intention the night before the court session. These two were my closest and most supportive members of our political party.

Minutes after the pronouncement in the Afikpo High Court through my advocate, the then State Chairman of our party, Mr. Hyacinth E. Ikpor zoomed into my residence at Ezi Agwo. I calmly thanked him for his personal and official support for almost two years and regretted I could no longer help taking the action I had taken because my conscience told me that the game was no longer worth the candle. I refused to tell him of my intended action as I would not like any person to convince me against my prayerfully considered stand. I allowed him abuse and insult me on my action.

All his genuine utterances and vituperations did not annoy me. I gave no hoot. I expected worse reaction but the effects were just skin deep. I looked beyond being a Local Government Chairman at all costs and in the long run loot the people's money to satisfy a political party. My final statement with the finality I meant it to be was: "HE" my usual way of saying his name (H. E. Ikpor), "Am I not entitled to my own opinion, party or no party? You may now replace me for that post. I have no regrets please, especially as my family is at the brink of getting into pieces in the name of gunning for a party office". He left without another word.

From that day, my general attitude towards party politics changed, though I continued to be friends with such benevolent ones like Chief Ezeogo Aja a.k.a. Zentus, Mr. D. A. Ugwu and Nze Nwachi Egwu. These gentlemen appreciated my stand and occasionally helped me financially. However, I still attended party meetings as the former flag bearer of the party at the LGA level. I have, for a very long time now, concluded and still maintain the view that "good" politicians speak the truth by mistake – never deliberately or as a matter of course.

1992 was Ehugbo age grades movements to the next levels. Each age grade/set had to move up a step higher. These upward movements take place every eight calendar years. The previous one was in April/May 1984. On Friday (Aho), 8th May, 1992, my age set moved up from Ekpuke Eto to Ekpuke Esaa Ehugbo – the heartbeat of Ehugbo Council of Elders. On that day I was among the scores of men, Ehugbo-wide, who received by proxy, their staff of office at Ogo Amaelu in Ugwuegu. The first official sitting in Ulubi Esaa was on Thursday (Eke), 14/5/95. The next change would be in April, 2000.

On Friday (Orie), 12th June, 1992, Charles Abani brought to us a souvenir (gift) from Ogonnia Agwo in London. That was mainly

to confirm he was getting acquainted with the place he arrived some four months earlier. It was a very welcome piece of news.

I formally took up appointment with the Institute of Ecumenical Education, Enugu, WTC Afikpo Centre. I taught English Language/Literature and Education to the B.Ed and NCE students. After some six weeks of thirty lecture hours, we were paid a slave salary of three hundred naira, that is, ten naira per hour! However, I accepted to do the job in the first instance because it was to facilitate the establishment of the centre at Afikpo.

The then military dictator, President Ibrahim Babangida visited Afikpo on Wednesday (Nkwo), 2nd September, 1992 and gave the impression that a bridge would be constructed across the Cross River at the Otu Eke beach to link the people of Ehugbo with their Cross River State neighbours. But some twenty-four years after (by 2016), work is yet to be started there. That goes for politics.

Sometime in 1991, Mr Vincent Oka passionately requested Nde Ezi Agwo to allot a piece of land to his son, Godwin Oko Oka to build a house. On Wednesday (Orie) September 23, 1992, Umudi Ezi Agwo unanimously allotted a parcel of their land near Ubam to Mr Godwin Oko Oka for his residential house. That was over five years before he, Godwin Oka, proposed marriage to my first daughter, Ngozi Agwo. They wedded on 8th November, 1997.

On Saturday (Eke), 17th October, 1992, I was one of the twenty-six recipients of chieftaincy titles from our Traditional Ruler, Ezeogo M. O. Chukwu, Omaka-ejali Ehugbo. I was given the title of Onyochiri Oha Ehugbo (the one who works for the rest of Nd'Ehugbo). Prof. S. Ottenberg (Mbekee Ibe Okwu – my own matrilineal kindred adopted relative) received the title of Enyo Mba (the mirror through which the world sees Ehugbo). Emmanuel Agha Mbey, the Publisher of Afikpo Today Magazine was given

the chieftaincy title of Enyo Ehugbo (the mirror by which Afikpo people see themselves). My close friend Nze L. E. Oko (Okongodo) was given Okwuchiri Ehugbo (the one who speaks for Nd'Ehugbo). I, as the co-ordinator, was neck-deep in that Omaka-ejika's fourth coronation anniversary where the chieftaincy titles were conferred. On Friday (Orie), 30th October, Edward Otu Agwo came in from FUTO Owerri with the posting letter for the NYSC. He was to serve in Damaturu, Yobe State. The result of his B.Sc. Engineering Degree exam was released to him at FUTO. He made 2.2, i.e. Second Class Lower Division. Thanks be to God.

Ehugbo (Afikpo) Community Bank was officially opened on Saturday (Orie), 5th December, 1992.

That year, 1992 was very memorable in a number of things. It was a very busy and unhappy one due to threat of financial strangulation. Even the Chieftaincy title award hardly made me happy. Party politics, my childrens educational needs, almost incessant ill-health of my wife, how to make ends meet generally plunged me into an unprecedented debt burden of up to several thousands of naira. Thanks be to God He gave me good health and calm composure to appear externally unruffled. Of course, the year passed.

1993

Most of that year, 1993 saw me in party politics – Social Democratic Party (SDP) activities or related matters. The outstanding ones included: Registration of members in the Babangida-decreed two political parties – SDP and NRC. I re-registered in the SDP – a seven day exercise – 4th to 10th January. At the National Convention of the SDP in Abuja, I represented Afikpo LGA.

The anxiety of how to bear my debt burden and keep four people: my wife, UNN; Ngozi, AIFPU; Okey, GSS Afikpo and Uchenna,

MCA Uturu, in school and the accompanying financial involvement, dampened my spirit as we moved into the New Year. But, for sure, I never lost any hope the sun would rise one day. I relied solely on God and what I could make from my farms and the domestic animals. And my trust was not in vain.

Within the first three days of the year, Oyim Otu almost upset me with his false claims of what he never knew about Ezi Agwo in relation to okpulo (ancestral building spot). However, Oyim Obioh (Senior), Joe Iduma (Nwata Iduma) – both older than him and I, brought him to his size. We reprimanded him very seriously especially as he was our most immediate younger ‘brother’.

On Monday (Nkwo), 4th January, Ezeogo M. O. Chukwu, Omaka-ejali Ehugbo appointed me his Palace Secretary in succession to Esaa Ulu Ewa of Ukpa Village.

That month of May, 1993, turned out to be a month I should not forget in a hurry in my life’s history. On May 21, my first daughter’s 21st birthday anniversary, my second daughter, Uchenna, then a Junior Secondary School (JSS) III final year student at the age of fourteen in Marist Comprehensive Academy, Uturu addressed a letter to me stating inter alia: “Papa, after my Senior Secondary Education, I would like to be a Reverend Sister of the Catholic Church and I will also like to be a Medical Doctor”. I discussed it with Felly and both of us agreed to help her in every honest way to enable her realize her dream. We promised to keep on praying to God to bless her wishes. Sixteen years later (2009), 4th June, Uchenna took the Hippocratic Oath as a Medical Doctor – two months less four years after Felly’s death. She couldn’t make that of Rev. Sister.

On the last day of the same month, May 31, my photographer cousin, Augustine Otu Utom (a.k.a OAU) requested that I help him get a boy he would live with at Onitsha where he was then based. I approached my younger sister Ugwome Oko (nee Agwo) living at

Ezi Akani Ukpa. We briefly discussed the request with her husband, Ogbonnia Oko. Their third son and last child Emmanuel Idam Oko, then barely seven years old was released to me for OAU.

The Historic June 12 Presidential Election of M.K.O. Abiola of the SDP was unilaterally annulled by the Military President, I. B. Babangida against all reasonable appeals and advice. M. K. O. of the SDP scored 4.3 million votes while Alhaji Tofa of the NRC had 2.3 million votes. Babangida's choice date of handing over to a democratically elected civilian President was botched by himself. He had to step aside on 27th August and Chief Ernest Shonekan was sworn in as the New Head of the Interim Government.

On Wednesday (Eke), 17th November, 1993, General Sani Abacha staged a palace coup and unsat Shonekan, who was in office for less than three months, precisely eighty-three days. At 10:30 p.m. on 18/11/93, Abacha made his maiden broadcast as the new Head of State of Nigeria. Engulfed in political uncertainty, the Nigerian State's ship tottered on to the end of 1993.

1994

That was another turning point in my life's career. My wife and my five children were getting on well in their academic pursuits and occupations in life, but my financial problems were on the increase. However, my unshakable belief "that achieving goals by God's grace never comes easily. Most of the time it was a bitter-sweet affair, which is the main lesson of our Lord's death on the cross".

On the 15th birthday anniversary of our last child, Uchenna Agwo, 6th of January, my wife Felly returned from Nsukka on the completion of her Sandwich Programme for the Bachelor's Degree in Education (B.Ed).

In the last week of January, I managed to piece together a write-up for *Afikpo Today* to refute the allegation made by the Okumkpo masquerade of Ozizza on the one hundred thousand naira donated by Governor Sam Mbakwe for the development of Ehugbo Technical College saga. The rebuttal was published in *Afikpo Today Magazine*, 1994, Vol. 1, N0 5, pages 9 & 10 in the Rejoinders column entitled: “Let The Truth Be Known”.

On Tuesday (Nkwo), 27th January, 1994 I had the privilege of being one of the three-man delegation from Afikpo Autonomous Community to discuss the problems of Ehugbo with the Military Administrator who visited the town some nine days earlier. Our Traditional Ruler, Ezeogo Michael Chukwu, the Omaka-ejali Ehugbo led the delegation accompanied by Omezue Anthony Ekoh and myself. I learnt a lot from that unique delegation.

My Return to MCA, Uturu

On 18th February, I received a letter from the Principal of Marist Comprehensive Academy, Uturu, requesting me to come back and help out in the school in the English Language Department.

I wish to recall that in January, 1988, I took an appointment there as a teacher after my retirement from the public service. On 28th February, 1990 my teaching contract ended with MCA after some two years. From then I retired to Afikpo and was headlong in party politics until that invitation for a second “missionary journey”.

By then our last child and second daughter, Uchenna Agwo, was an SS I student in that school. Three things in the following order motivated me to accept the invitation. One, it was an acknowledgement of the confidence the school authority reposed in me in the first two years I spent with her to have considered me good to return and help out. Two, my daughter was in the Senior

Secondary School (SSS) class and it was their batch that badly needed an experienced English Language Teacher – an area any good school cannot afford to toy with. My presence there would enhance her batch's performance in the WASC examination. Thirdly, in the Principal's letter, he said among other things that, "the condition of service had improved tremendously and was almost at par with that of the public schools". In 1990, I left the school at an annual salary of N3,600.00 i.e. N300.00 a month for a graduate teacher of English Language. By that 1994, the monthly salary stood at over N10,000.00. It was a very encouraging increase. That did not include children/dependants and other welfare packages.

Everything considered, it was a windfall from God especially as I had to maintain a certain standard of living as an erstwhile Vice Chairman of Afikpo Local Government Area. I had two sittings with the Principal and was satisfied that by God's grace, the prospects would be very encouraging. I accepted to re-join the academic staff with effect from the third week in April, when the school would reopen for the final term of that school year. I was also allowed to withdraw Uchenna from the dormitory to stay with me as a special day student.

For the rest of February, the whole of March and two weeks in April, I was a staff of MCA in waiting. However, I spent part of that waiting period with Chief Emmanuel Mbey in Lagos to help in the production of the 1994 edition of Afikpo Today Magazine.

On Monday (Nkwo), 25th April, 1994 I reported at Uturu for deployment. I checked into the Hopeville Guest House – until that date, a special preserve of the senior cadre of visiting Reverend Brothers of the Marist Congregation. I actually received a VIP treatment. Thanks be to God He granted me the humility not to disappoint the school authority.

Tuesday, April 26, was the 30th anniversary of our church wedding. In the privacy of my Hopeville Guest House room I thanked God immensely for His blessings on the family in those thirty years of happy married life.

I was assigned to teach English Language to the two streams of the SS 2 class of some 105 students – males and females. It was a very challenging duty with the penultimate/final year students till mid-July when the school went on long vacation.

Most weekends I was at Afikpo to attend Agricultural Co-operative meetings and to play the role expected of the Traditional Ruler's kitchen cabinet member. The welfare of Ezi Agwo was another area I could not afford to neglect no matter the odds.

On Saturday (Aho), May 14, Felly and I had the pleasure of witnessing our second son, Edward Otu Agwo's Convocation at the Federal University of Technology Owerri (FUTO) at their permanent site. He formally received the scroll of his B.Sc. Engineering, Electrical/Electronics. Thanks be to God.

For four good days running, May 28 to 31 Uchenna Agwo was seriously down with acute tooth pain, which kept me on my toes twenty-four hours each day. Terrible pain, crying almost incessantly, no food, no sleep, swollen face that disfigured her. I was alone with this fifteen year old daughter of mine. Felly my wife, was at Afikpo ignorant of what was happening at Uturu. I spared her that agony. On the fourth day I obtained permission and took her to Okigwe General Hospital where the troublesome tooth was extracted. The after effect pain lingered on for another twenty hours before receding. Ah! I saw hell. However, I pray never to have such an experience.

Saturday and Sunday, 9th & 10th July, 1994, were red letter days

at Afikpo when Rev. Edward Steve Nwachi of Nkpoghoru, Afikpo, was ordained a Catholic priest at Abakaliki on Saturday, 9th July. He said his first Holy Mass in St. Mary's Parish Church Afikpo, the following day, Sunday 10th July, 1994.

On Saturday (Eke), 23rd July, 1994, I succeeded in recording the Iriji Eleri Enohia Nkalu (Eleri New Yam Festival) for the first time in the history of that traditionally revered institution on video tape TV viewing. Until the ancient dance and cultural song went extinct in 2007, no other such recording was done. By God's special grace, I have the patent of the recording which is still going round.

As the President of the Afikpo Community Agricultural Development (ACAD) 'Self-Help' project, I attended a week-long National Workshop for Community Development Associations in Nigeria. The venue was LAPO Main Hotel, 140 New Lagos Road, Benin City. It was a worthwhile training for Chief Executives of Community Development Associations and Co-operative Societies. Not only was that an invaluable refresher course for me, it greatly facilitated more effective inputs I made in community development projects and my personal agricultural undertakings.

In the political scene, General Sani Abacha, who seized power on 17th November, the previous year made his maiden budget speech at 7 p.m. on 10th January, 1994. So the political cloud as dictated by the military was quite dark and misty. Uncertainty was the mood of the nation even in Ehugbo in the then Abia State. Col. Chinyere Ike Nwosu was Abia State's military Administrator then.

The political tension in Nigeria notwithstanding, the year ended on a fairly happy note for the Agwo family. We cleaned up my backyard concrete fish pond and harvested the remaining fish for the Christmas and New Year celebrations. That was how my first attempt to own and run a backyard concrete pond fish farming was

packed up after six years as a result of seepage.

1995

From the New Year Day, 1st January, 1995 to the 5th day, we, Felly and myself and the entire Ezi Agwo family played host to Rebecca Oyim's fiancé – Mr. Paul Eni of Orrah, Ozizza. Rebecca's traditional marriage rites were officially on during those five days. We did everything her biological parents would have done, were they alive and able. Rebecca deserved it. She was a faithful daughter.

On Saturday the 7th of January, 1995, an inaugural meeting of Eke Ukwu Market Lock-Up Store Owners was held at Central Hotel, Eke Market. There was a spirited attempt to form an association that would regulate and protect the interest of those who built and own lock-up stores in the market area between 1964 and 1966. I was appointed the protem Chairman while Mr. John Obeni Ekuma of Amebo Ugwuogu, the protem secretary. Within the next one year, several attempts to rally round the shop owners were made, but it was an uphill task. Most of those who owned the lock-up stores and resident at home or administered them by proxy were very apathetic. The idea was dumped until fifteen years later.

In this second year of my second missionary journey to the Marist Brothers Comprehensive Academy (MCA) Uturu, I was assigned more painstaking duties. They included: Vice Principal Academic/Dean of Studies; Founding member of Marist Schools Examinations Council (MASEC); Coordinator of the MASEC operations in the Marist Brothers zones nationwide. At my base in MCA Uturu, I had in addition sixteen teaching periods a week in English Language and Literature mainly for the SSS III students. Thanks be to God He granted me the wisdom and the strength of body and mind to successfully carry out those duties.

By September, Uchenna was in her penultimate year – SS II. Both of us had moved over to a one-room (12x10) accommodation having a shared kitchen with a Hopeville Medical Centre staff. The apartment was sandwiched between the Hopeville Assembly Hall to the north and the female tutorial staff quarters/female hostels to the south. Uniquely, as an insider in the MCA school administration, the position of the quarters I squeezed into imposed on me an over-view function of checking unauthorized movements of students to and from their dormitories.

Back in Afikpo, I was a member of the Board of Governors (BOG) in both Holy Child Girls' Secondary School, and Ehugbo Technical College, Afikpo.

On Boxing day, 26/12/95, I received a letter from Osondu Otu Agwo (Eddy) in Lagos. He enclosed in it, one thousand naira being part of his first salary as an Electrical/Electronics Engineer, sixteen months after his NYSC. What a welcome development!

1996

When schools reopened in January, 1996, I was given more administrative roles in the school. The MCA had a unique Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Acting for the Principal who was the official secretary, I was responsible for recording and developing the minutes of the termly meetings.

The uniqueness of the MCA PTA operation lay in the fact that it was organized at zonal levels. They met at least once every month while the termly meetings were held at the School Assembly Hall at Uturu. Each zone sent at least five delegates, which had to include the Chairman and Secretary or their accredited representatives. There were penalties for any zones that failed to send delegates. The zones, which were officially inaugurated, included those in Lagos,

Port Harcourt, Warri, Sapele, Umuahia, Aba, Onitsha, Nnewi, Nsukka, Enugu, Afikpo, Ohaozara, Abakaliki, Makurdi, Jos, Abuja and Kano. Simply put, these constituted the catchment areas of the school population. At any given year during my stay in MCA, about a third of the usual average of a thousand students came from the Lagos Zone. Port Harcourt, Aba, Owerri and Onitsha Zones, most of the time, each sent in a minimum of a luxury bus load of students whose parents lived and worked mainly in the Americas. They always formed part of the yearly intakes. During vacations, they joined their parents overseas.

I had the privilege of leading some members of the MCA staff to inaugurate such zones as Port Harcourt, Warri, Nsukka and Afikpo. So, my involvement in the coordination of the PTA activities and management of her academic excellence prizes, the duties of Vice Principal Academic/Dean of Studies plus classroom teaching, made a big bite that required a clever munching.

On the social aspect, the MCA staff elected me the Patron of Obinwanne Welfare Association (OWA), which effectively absorbed most of the financial problems of its registered members. In the May/June SSCE, Uchenna Egele Agwo's batch of 117 students made an all time good result of a hundred percent pass. She (Uchenna Egele) as an individual, made me proud with the following scores: Chemistry A2; Biology A3; Economics A3; Agric. Science A3; Igbo Language A3; English Language C4; Lit in English C4; Mathematics C4; Physics C6. Briefly put, she made 5As and 4Cs. Some thirteen years later, she qualified as a Medical Doctor.

A few months after her SSCE, Uchenna had to pack back home to join Felly while I stayed alone at Uturu. Even while Uchenna was staying with me in the school, I made sure she kept as strictly as possible to the school rules and regulations as if she were a full

boarder in the hostel. That means I did quite a lot of the house chores myself. So, her return to Afikpo was not an unexpected problem. Besides, all the other four biological children of ours were no longer resident at home. Almost as a rule, we always had two to three close relatives living with us even if our own children were around. We delighted in helping to take care of the less privileged.

1997

By 12:01 a.m. that first day of January, Felly, my wife was already writhing in agony due to running stomach and acute headache. Our Christian daughter-in-law and nurse, Mrs. Elizabeth Anwara was on hand and stayed for over an hour to attend to her. She responded immediately to the treatment. So Felly was fit enough before dawn for us to talk over family affairs.

As we took stock of the past year in our family, Felly and I discovered that our last daughter, Uchenna, had got very deeply involved in pious societies in our Catholic Church! She was a full member of six pious societies and warming up to register in more where she also attended their meetings and carried out occasional activities with them. We had to call her attention to the possible outcome of chasing too many goals at a time. It came to light too that Uchenna's interest in becoming a Catholic nun with the Medical Missionary of Mary (MMM) congregation was developing fast. As a result she spent most of her time outside our home in the Convent or in the company of Rev. Sisters and postulants. It took us some time to persuade her to prepare and sit for the JAMB exam, which would enable her gain admission into University. She just obeyed us and agreed to fill the JAMB form. Her focus then (1997), was to plunge into Rev. Sisterhood.

Despite her brilliant performance in SSCE a few months ago, Uche managed to score only 187 in JAMB exam – a score that could not

earn her admission in any medical school in Nigeria. I could not help recalling her letter to me some four years ago informing me of her desire to become a Medical Doctor and a Reverend Sister, which my wife and I did not object.

While we did not oppose her aspirations, we wanted her to re-order her priorities so that she would enter the religious profession at a point she would be more stabilized and secured. We strongly suggested she first obtain a University degree, become more mature and then go in for the religious vow to serve God and humanity as a Rev. Sister (Dr.) Uchenna, so that she would have real job satisfaction.

During the course of the year Egele attended seminars and interviews at Uyo, Calabar and Afikpo. She was to attend a recruitment interview at Asaba if we approved of her wishes. A representative of the MMM Sisters from Asaba had to travel to Afikpo to see us, her parents. As a result of my job at Uturu, I was not at home when the Rev. Sister visited Afikpo. Of course, Felly told the Rev. Sister our stand but certainly not opposed to her becoming one of them as soon as possible. It was after that visit and the Rev. Sister's advice to Uchenna that she made up her mind to honestly prepare for JAMB exam the following year.

From the first week of May to early November, preparations for the wedding of our first daughter, Ngozi Oriema (Orie Otu) Agwo was the main pre-occupation of the family. On Thursday (Aho), 6th November, we had nkwanwite (send-forth) ceremony for our beloved Ada (first daughter). The church wedding between Ngozi and Goddy O. Oka took place on Saturday (Eke), 8th November, at WTC Chapel, Mater Misericordiae Parish Afikpo. It was an outstanding milestone in my life and that of the entire family.

A tragedy struck in my family in the last week of November, 1997.

Approximately three weeks after the wedding of our first daughter. On Thursday, 27th November, my wife's elder brother from another mother, Matthew Oyim Obioh, who had lived and worked at Lafia, Nasarawa State for some forty years was brought back home in a very deep comma. At precisely 2:45 a.m. the following morning, 28/11/97, he passed on to greater glory. In less than twelve hours after he had been confirmed dead, his remains were interred.



Ngozi and Goddy Oka's wedding on November 8, 1997

The scar his exit left on the entire family, particularly on Felly and me, was great. Though apparently painless, it grieved the heart anytime I saw the site he cleared and the blocks he moulded in readiness for the house that never was.

My connection with the Obioh family is as old as myself. He was my paternal elder brother (nwadi m). His own maternal elder brother, Ibe Ugo, was my father's journeyman in their Cross River trade by canoe. The difference in age between Matthew and myself was about two years. In 1950, when I gained admission to a one

year Preparatory Training Class for Probationary Teachers, he loaned to me a pair of white shorts while he was still in standard III. From about 1953 to 1956 he underwent apprenticeship as a motor Mechanic at Aba. By 1958 he was already an established master Mechanic at Lafia in the defunct Benue Plateau State.

In fact, Matthew Obioh was the defacto guardian to Felly – her sister from a different mother but the same biological father. Until he died, he was my father-in-law in practical terms. His demise, therefore, left a heavy burden on my own family.

In the course of the year, our first son Ogbonnia Agwo, who had been in the United Kingdom, precisely London, since February 1992, requested us to please travel to Port Harcourt to confer with his prospective parents-in-law. Ealier we had given our consent to his getting married to Miss Ibifuro Paula Ada George, who he met in the UK and proposed to her. We were delighted that he never took us for granted in his plans to get married to his heart throb.

For the next five months or so, we, (Felly and I), Furo's parents, their Excellencies, Chief and Mrs. Ada George were in constant contact by telephone. Though we never met one on one, we agreed in principle to facilitate their getting married. Just before Christmas, Furo's mother paid us a goodwill visit from Port Harcourt to Afikpo through Abakaliki – a real detour – to know where her daughter would spend the rest of her life as a wife to our first son.

1998

Some three weeks after the Marist Comprehensive Academy reopened, I was in Port Harcourt to inaugurate that zone's PTA. I led a three-staff team for the exercise.

During the Easter period and under the auspices of Afikpo Town Welfare Association (ATWA), a one-week programme tagged

Home Coming was organized by the Association especially for those indigenes living outside Ehugbo. The theme was OKE NWA EHUGBO (ONE). At the Ehugbo Colloquim on Easter Monday (Eke), 11th April, 1998, I delivered a paper on CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT in Ehugbo. It was a great day for Nd' Ehugbo and my small self.

Two days later, on Wednesday, 13th April, 1998, at our instance, my family of five persons and seven other friends and well-wishers went on a pilot visit to the Ada Georges at 11/13 Bonny Close, Port Harcourt. It was to commence the traditional marriage rites of our would-be daughter-in-law, Furo. Both parties were satisfied and enjoyed the rare friendly pleasantries.

Sunday (Aho), 19th April, 1998, was a very SPECIAL DAY in the history of Ezi Agwo. That day, Oniikara Ogbonnia Egwu (a.k.a. Egwu Ogeri) said point blank that the ochie ohoro Ogo land area was the bonifide property of Ezi Agwo. So, after some fifty years (1948 - 1998), the case was laid to rest in favour of Ezi Agwo championed by me almost single handedly.

On Friday (Aho), 29th May, I lost a very close friend and Master, Mr. John Oko Item of Ndibe. Both of us were staff of Marist Brothers Schools at Uturu – he at the Juniorate and I at the Comprehensive Academy. My memories of him may never fade for the rest of my life.

Felly, myself and a few friends and well-wishers on Saturday (Nkwo), 22/8/98, were at Port Harcourt again and later Okirika on an appointment with Austin's parents-in-law for final preparations for the church wedding in the United Kingdom.



Austin Agwo and his wife receiving their marriage certificate Sept 5, 1998

September 5, 1998, was our first son's church wedding in London. We, (Felly and I) were there in spirit as we couldn't be there in person. A little over a week after their wedding, Austin wrote inter alia, "We are also hoping that in the next couple of years, we can finance a trip for you both to visit and take a long overdue holiday". That hope came to fruition three years later – December, 2001.



Admiring my first grandchild by my daughter Ngozi in 1998

Friday, 25th September, 1998, our FIRST GRAND CHILD, Vincent Chidubem Oka, was born by our first daughter, Mrs. Ngozi Orie Otu Oka (nee Agwo). It was another milestone in my life's history. May God be praised!

On 1st November, 1998, Rev. Fr. (Dr.) Innocent Ekumauche Okoh, the Administrator of Mater Hospital, Afikpo inaugurated a seventeen-man AFIKPO INCULTURATION COMMITTEE. I was a member of the committee. The mandate was: “To work conscientiously to produce a document, which will guide the Church in making recommendations to higher quarters as to what aspects of our culture that can be Christianised”. Chief Law E. Oko was the Chairman and Chief Brendan Otu was the Secretary. I headed the sub-committee on Title Taking.

Saturday (Aho), 21/11/98, stone laying ceremony of the PTA Hall of the MCA, Uturu was done with great funfair. I was neck-deep in the activities.

The rest of 1998 was dominated by party politics and campaigns for elective offices in preparations for the return to civil rule in Nigeria.

1999

From the first month of that year, 1999 the countdown began worldwide in anticipation of the forthcoming new millennium the following year, 2000. Some five to ten years earlier, development plans in Nigeria had year 2000 as their base year for maturation or completion. There were slogans on “Education, Health, Water, Electricity, etc. for all in year 2000.” It thus appeared the year would mean the end of all sorts of suffering, giving room to paradise here on earth. But that dream never came true.

The slogans in the print and electronic media were so strong and regular that everyone prayed and hoped for the arrival of the magic year. There were however, speculations and apprehensions of what the new millennium would bring. They included the computerized time keeping in many electronic devices like aeroplanes, computers, etc. Many people feared that there would be crashes and collisions

of aircraft at twelve midnight of 31st December, 1999 if the time in them failed to change to 2000. What a global madness!

Amidst these speculations and apprehensions about the coming year, on 7th May, 1999 a very dear family friend, Mr. Elem Uche of Amechara Agbo died in Enugu where he had lived for over thirty years. He was committed to mother earth on 5th June, 1999, at his residence along Amechara-Afikpo LGA road. It was a great loss of a very priceless friend after some thirty years of close association – 1969 to 1999.

In-mid year, an English Language text book, *The English User's Aid*, I co-authored, was published. The other two authors were Mr. K. U. Ukwa and Mrs. F. U. Ngoka both English Teachers in the International Secondary School, Uturu, Abia State.

On Sunday, 10th October, 1999, we, the members of the Afikpo Inculturation Committee submitted our report to Rev. Fr. (Dr.) Innocent Ekumauche Okoh, three weeks less one year after inauguration. I was happy to be part of that historic Committee in the religious life of Catholic Christians in Afikpo and Abakaliki Diocese. Two copies of that work are in my personal library for reference.

Anxiety for the approaching millennium year, 2000, increased by the day. The atmosphere was that of approach/avoidance complex. To be or not to be stupefied most people. The Yuletide was looked on as a Universal 'pass-over' showed in hopeless hope. The sure thing was uncertainty of what may follow the 31st day of December, 1999. "A dooms day or a continuation of the routine phenomena."

The Year 2000 AD – The New Millennium

I was one of those at Ezi Agwọ who kept vigil past the midnight

of 31st December, 1999, till full day break, 1st January, 2000. My generating set was on throughout the night and I focused my attention on programmes available on television stations worldwide. I switched from BBC, CNN to South African radio stations and elsewhere.

I must state here that I gathered a lot of information about what MILLENNIUM is, in relation to calculation of dates generally. I did not notice as previously speculated, any atmospheric and abrupt changes in the physical world. Events and government policies in the preceding years and months gave me no clear picture of the “paradise Nigeria” in year 2000 AD as we were made to believe. The rest of January rolled by with hardly any significant event.

On the 2nd of February, 2000, the people of Afikpo were jolted by the blood-chilling news of the sudden death of Reverend Father (Dr.) Innocent Ekumauche Okoh. He had his usual breakfast after the morning Mass, took a walk round Mater Hospital premises as the Administrator of the Hospital. At a point between the students’ dormitories and Father’s House, he just slumped and died. All efforts to revive him by a team of Medical Doctors and Nurses yielded no positive result. A horrible piece of news! At 45, he had already become a household name in Ehugbo and the entire Catholic Diocese of Abakaliki. It was one death that sent cold shivers down people’s spines.

On the last Eke of April, 2000, when there was the usual eighth-year age grades movement in Ehugbo, I attained the respected Nd’Ichie Ehugbo (senior Esaa) age set. In other words, I became a senior member of the legislative and adjudicative arm of Ehugbo council of elders in their last lap to ONIKARA. Most of the remaining months of the year were quite uneventful as we had to take stock of the existing laws of the people. We took time to fully come to terms with Ehugbo traditions and customs in the 21st Century.

It is worthy to note that Nd'Ichie Ehugbo have the last say in the interpretation of all aspects of Ehugbo traditional laws, mores and customs. To arrive at this stage, the Nd'Ichie must have spent sixteen (16) Western years or eighteen (18) lunar years (8/9 years in Ekpuke Eto and 8/9 years in Junior Esaa). Thus, the Nd'Ichie as a group, in the last lap of their 8/9 years to make 24/27 years in all, in the Traditional Governance, forms the repository of Ehugbo judiciary system.

Although I was still fully in charge in the Marist Comprehensive Academy as the Dean of Studies, Vice Principal Academics and Special Adviser to the Principal, I occasionally showed up at the ulo ubi (council chamber of) Esaa Ehugbo. That kept me abreast of what was happening at home. I must say that I always enjoyed the confidence of my colleagues during deliberations whenever I was around. Eight months after we took over as Nd'Ichie, we were fairly in control by December 31, 2000.





**Being interviewed by the publisher Chief Emmanuel Mbey and Chief L.E Oke,
Senior Correspondent of *Afikpo Today* Magazine on March 25, 2001**

2001

On the 20th of January, I celebrated my 68th birthday anniversary on a very low key, beginning with Holy Mass in our Church. As usual, I got engrossed in the school work at MCA with periodic visits to Ehugbo at spaced weekends and public holidays.

Our Visit to London

In the first week of April, 2001, I received a letter of invitation from my son, Austin to visit England in the United Kingdom. The letter was initiated by Augustine Ogbonnia Agwo, but it was actually endorsed by our English in-law, Mr Eamonn Madden. Of course, the invitation was for Felly and me and it was a very pleasant piece of news as it fulfilled his promise of some three years earlier, to invite us for a visit to England.

Almost immediately after the receipt of that heart-warming letter, we set off getting ready for the journey. In June, we applied for the UK visa having obtained our international passports on the 19th of April, 2001. That done, we calculated we could depart Lagos for the

UK on 12th July, but it never was as a number of events combined to put our departure date to late December. First, the process of obtaining the visa was pushed forward: We paid for and got it at Abuja. The valid date for the visa was 14th of September, 2001 till 14th of March, 2002 (6 months). But as we were getting ready for the journey, Nze M.S.C. Abani, my God father and mentor died on 10th August, and was buried on 29th September, 2001. To cap it all, we had to tailor our movement to fit into Christmas holidays (mainly for my sake). So my wife and I finally flew out of Lagos a little after 10 p.m. on Monday (Orie), 17th December, 2001.

The week preceding our departure from Ehugbo was choked up with preparations for the long journey to a place we had not been before. We had to assemble some gifts for our beloved children, Austin and Furo his wife. The gifts were in two categories - souvenir and food items. We landed at the Heathrow International Airport, London in a chilly winter forenoon on the 18th. With a sign of the cross, I said to myself "LONDON AT LAST". We picked up our luggage from the conveyor belt-top in the luggage room and pulled same along the body-temperated massive gangway some 100 metres to the arrival lounge where Austin and Mrs Madden were waiting for us. Both alternated very warm welcomes embrace between Felly and me. Soon after, they handed over to us warm winter clothes, which we immediately put on before we were ushered into Austin's waiting car. The below freezing point winter blizzard hit the uncovered parts of our body to welcome us to our first time snowy winter. I at once recalled the Jos Plateau cold weather in January, 1961 - some forty years back, which was a child's play compared to the London winter cold.

As Austin sped away on the busy London streets, I was virtually lost in admiring the wonderful buildings and the smooth macadamised road network. I told myself "here is an ordered society where people live, while at home, we are just managing to exist".

After about an hour's drive from Heathrow Airport, Austin drove into the London residence of their Nigerian family friend Mr and Mrs Onerhime, from Delta State, Nigeria. As Austin had an official appointment up North London, late in the evening that day, and his own residence was farther away the other side of England, he had arranged with the family to harbour us for the night that day. Mr Onerhime was away in Nigeria while Rae, his wife, was nursing a few months old baby girl. Austin left us at their residence, Osterly, 8 Somerset Way, TH59 HG a couple of minutes after introducing us to Mrs Onerhime

She gave us a red carpet reception and literarally "spoilt" us with her care and kindness. Our supper on the 18th, breakfast and lunch on the 19th were queenly. Every detail was excellently taken care of for our comfort in the bed-room and other conveniences. The roughly twenty-four hours we spent in great comfort at the Onerhimes will forever remain green in our memory.

Early afternoon on Wednesday, 19th December, Austin picked us up from the Onerhimes' residence to his own at Essex, England. It was over two hours drive on the beautiful London road. We arrived to a very warm embrace of Furo, who was some eight months pregnant with their first child. As the door closed behind us we had to put off our warm clothes and hung them on waiting hangers on the wall close to the door inside. We were ushered into the parlour with glowing fire place to ward off the winter cold. For some thirty minutes or thereabouts, we rambled in questions and answers about Ehugbo, Nigeria and the United Kingdom.

Felly and I were checked into a very delicately furnished one-room apartment upstairs with kingly twin toilet/bathroom next door. While we unpacked, Furo and Austin were downstairs getting the supper/dinner ready. Not long after, we had our warm shower bath before going downstairs for the night meal. We took our gifts for

them with us. As we went down for the dinner, Austin brought along what looked like a table fan which we later found out was a mobile heater. It was plugged at one end of the dining room to warm our legs. And we said in unison: nde Bekee (white people)!

Before we took our seats on the dining table we handed over our gifts to them. They included a 2x4 feet canvass painting of Austin and Furo wedding photograph by Scarry Ogbo Oko of Ukpa, free size clothes/dress of white brocade. We also had parcels of dried fish, crayfish, lobsters, oysters, dried melon (egusi), dried bitter leaves, spicy leaves (uzuguza, uda, and utazi), ground pepper and seeds of bush mango (ogbono). We were happy they well appreciated all our gifts.

During the three-course meal we learnt first-hand, more about our daughter-in-law, Ibifuro Ada George, who we never met in person till a few hours ago. With Ogbonnia Agwọ, we recalled memories of his work experiences as a school teacher, a reporter with the Public Complaints Commission, Nigeria and his nearly ten years' stay in the United Kingdom. We felt like talking on and on but our body system reminded us that we have been in motion for the past four days. Besides, Furo needed the desired rest for her state then.

In spite of the cosy bed and the comfort in the room, Felly and I were awake by our accustomed 4.30-5.00 a.m. rising time. By 6 a.m. we were through with our morning prayers just in time to respond to Agwọ's greeting: "unu nnaa wo (good morning), papa, mama." To which we responded: "Nnai chaa nwayi (good morning our child)."

We observed with pride that despite Austin's nearly ten years sojourn in the UK and getting married to a non-Igbo speaking wife, he spoke okwu Ehugbo Language fluently and correctly. We discussed in impeccable okwu Ehugbo.

That early morning, I told him I had exactly thirty days to be in England as I had to be back in Nigeria by the 18th of January. Felly would be leaving about a month later. I therefore requested him to please make room for our tour of important and historic places in England before my return to Nigeria. He politely assured me he had applied for some days off to facilitate our tours. Good news! We agreed to discuss the details later in the day.

Furo trudged up to our room to inquire about us and how we were adapting to the weather. We shared jokes hilariously before she invited us to breakfast downstairs. At the breakfast table, I informed Austin of the places I would like to visit in England. They included: The Tower of London, The Big Ben, Houses of Parliament, No 10 Downing Street, the Prime Minister's official residence, Buckingham Palace; The London Bridge, Trafalgar Square, Cambridge and Oxford Universities, Slough (Mrs Abani's home), and Liverpool to see the Ukas of Nguzu Edda. Friends and relatives slated down for visits included the Abanis, Grace Ama, and Austin's friends.

Of course, provision was made for medical check-up for Felly. We were earlier included in the Austin Agwo family list for Health Care Insurance Scheme in the UK. Later that day, Austin took Felly and me to the Catholic Church Parish less than a kilometre away.

From birth in January, 1933 to that December 2001, I had never celebrated Christmas outside Nigeria, so the yuletide 2001 was special in many ways. They included: the sight of fantastic and wonderful street decorations 'routinely' twinkling and variously coloured tiny bulbs; snowy and chilling cold. Besides, Christmas is celebrated indoors, unlike what obtains in Nigeria.

December 21 to 24 saw us regularly on the London roads and departmental stores to visit places, see friends and do some

shopping. It was a very big contrast with what we have back home at the Christmas period. Prices of goods were reduced by about 10%.

But for the morning Mass at the Catholic Parish of the Holy Cross less than a kilometre away, which was over by 8.00 a.m., we spent the whole Christmas day indoors feasting and sharing long accumulated family stories. That was around the central heating fire place in the parlour at the ground floor. It was a wonderful experience. From the Boxing Day, December 26, till 31st December, we exchanged visits with Austin's friends around Humber Avenue, Olkandon, Essex, generally. We also attended Government and recognised Private Hospitals for Felly's medical attention.

On Monday, December 31, 2001 we sat up most of the night watching television to behold the old year glide into 2002.

2002

For the second time in my life's history, I spent the first day in January outside the shores of Nigeria. The first one was January 1978 when I was in Nairobi, Kenya attending an International Conference under the aegis of the Nigeria Federation of Catholic Students (NFCS).

For the next two weeks we had several appointments with renowned medical personnel around England in search of appropriate examinations and prescriptions for Felly's worsening twenty-six year old diabetic condition. A sum total of the results of the consultations was that constant medical check-ups and regular balanced diet were sine qua non to the effective management of diabetes.



My wife and I during our holiday in London in December 2001 to January 2002

We also toured around England. The highlights were Monday 7th, tour of London with visits to the London Bridge; Tower of London and its Big Ben clock; the Houses of British Parliament - Houses of Lords and Commons; No 10 Downing Street, the Prime Minister's residence; Buckingham Palace – the Queen's residence, of course from a distance, National monuments, Trafalgar Square. We visited many shopping centres around Blue Lake.

Tuesday, 8th January, we travelled to Cambridge to see firsthand the famous Cambridge University, which we in the early forties in Nigeria associated with CANTAB. What I saw in infrastructure and location was not what I ever imagined. They were shockingly very poor. A world of difference!

Wednesday, in the evening/night of the 9th, we journeyed mainly by underground train to Liverpool. Senator Uka's son of Edda invited us to his Liverpool residence. I observed the best of a journey by train. A fifteen-minute delay from our departure time was profusely apologised

for. Our hosts Mr and Mrs Uka were simply fantastic. It gave me a great joy meeting Mr and Mrs Dennis Nnachi of Amaobolobo. His wife was a maternal relation of mine whose mother was Chi Ota of Ezi Akani Ukpa. We had a lavish dinner with that family of five.

We returned to Essex in the evening of the 10th and had a good rest. In the afternoon of Friday, 11th January, Austin dropped us at Slough - the home residence of Mrs Daphne May Abani (nee Hunt). It was some two hours drive on a very good road. We were there for a lovely weekend. Felly needed extra rest for her health so she was not part of the Saturday drive round to see Mrs Abani's place of birth. Her parents grave yard was very close to their home Anglican Church. However, in the evening, Felly and myself attended a Saturday Holy Mass for Sunday as we had to travel back to London the next morning, 13/01/02.

In between the tour around England and watching of TV programmes at home, I was able to "knock up" a twenty-four page write-up titled "LONDON AT LAST/HONEY MOON AFTER NEARLY FORTY YEARS". The article captures some fifty years experience from two years after my primary school career (1950) to the fulfilment (in 2001) of an ardent desire to be in London - the headquarters of our then colonial masters - the British.



My wife and I with the family of Mr Nnachi in Liverpool, England

I must confess that our thirty-one full days stay in the UK was very rewarding - spiritually, socially, educationally and physically. There was no dull moment.

The write-up mentioned above, contains in some detail how, while I was in the senior classes in primary school, I could not imagine the possibility of my ever going beyond Standard VI and having only a First School Leaving Certificate. After my father's death in August, 1945, my mother managed to cater for three of us then. In 1948 when I was in Standard VI, I could not even dream of going beyond that level of education or travelling outside Nigeria. By a divine intervention in January, 1950, I gained admission into the Preparatory Teachers' College, Afikpo. While there, by some inexplicable mental wave, I wrote under the cover of my locker, WAY TO LONDON. Precisely half a century and a year later, I arrived in that London of my dream. Besides, I was already a University Graduate for twenty years before going to London. Thank you Father.

From Monday 14th to Thursday afternoon, 17th January, 2002, Austin, Felly and I spent appreciable lengths of time discussing our family affairs. It ranged from his nearly ten years stay in the UK, my proposed complete withdrawal of service from MCA, Uturu later that year 2002, and contingency arrangements for the management of Felly's ill health. Of course, we did not forget issues concerning our four other children - Eddy, Ngozi, Okechukwu and Uchenna.

Later in the day that Thursday (Nkwo), 17th January, I said goodbye to Felly. Ogbonnia had to drop me at the Heathrow Airport via Mr and Mrs Madden's residence at Norwood. My few hours stay with the Maddens was a banquet period and 'spray' of gifts. I had to watch my luggage. At precisely 10 p.m. Greenwich Time, I was airborne.

Before 6 a.m. on Friday, the 18th of January, Eddy Agwo accompanied by Law Agwo and Oko Ogbo were at the Murtala Mohammed International Airport, Lagos to pick me up. The rest of the day at Eddy's residence was a beehive of activities with friends and relations in Lagos coming to welcome me back.

The following day, January 19, after Holy Mass, I paid a flying visit to Chief E. Mbey, the Publisher of *Afikpo Today* Magazine in his Okota residence. That same day, I did a night journey by road to Abakaliki arriving about 5.00 a.m. on the 20th, which was my 69th birthday anniversary. I had a brief stay with my daughter Ngozi and her husband, Godwin Oka, before travelling to Afikpo in time to attend Stella Otu's Nkwanwite at Amangwu Nkpoghor.

I went to bed very late that night due to the number of people who came to welcome me back after precisely a month's absence from home. In the wee hours, I managed to assemble what I could for my return to Marist Comprehensive Academy, Uturu.

By 8 a.m. on Monday, January 21, I was in my office as the Dean of Studies. From the mood and expressions of the people I met all the way from Lagos through Enugu, Abakaliki, Afikpo and Uturu, it appeared my one month's absence was public knowledge. Thanks be to God.

For the rest of the month and up to Friday, 15th February, I was lost in school job. On Saturday, 16th February, I had to travel to Abakaliki to receive Felly, who arrived Nigeria two days earlier. She finally got into Abakaliki after 9.00 p.m. even though she left Lagos by road before 6.00 a.m. that day.

Exactly three weeks I left the UK, Austin's wife, Furo, was delivered of their first child and son ogbo m (my name sake) in a United States of America hospital. Glory be to God. I learnt of

it only when Felly returned as our analogue telephones in Afikpo were mere decorations.

Felly and I returned to Afikpo on Sunday, 17th February, exactly two months she left Nigeria with me. By Monday, 18/2/02, I was back at MCA Uturu. For the next one week Felly hosted unbroken chains of well-wishers and friends who besieged our home to say “welcome back”.

Normally, the academic session in MCA ended in August and those on contract usually renewed their contracts between June and July in due years. Mine was due in August 2002. I had, the previous year, decided not to renew the contract. As a teacher in the Catholic Mission and State Government Schools, I worked for thirty-six years and retired. I had done fourteen years contract teaching with the Marist Brothers Academy. At the expiration of the deadline for the renewal, the Superior General at the Enugu Headquarters personally invited me to know why I had not submitted the renewal form. I told him it was my considered decision to stop regular school work after fifty years of romance with the chalk. He promised me various mouth-watering incentives, which I politely turned down. My mind was totally made up, period. He finally showed his appreciation of my dedicated service with an unusual gift of N10,000.00 for which I thanked him very much. To seal it, the Principal allowed me up to the end of the 2002/2003 first term about second week of December, 2002, to gradually pack out of the staff quarters for good.

For yet unknown reasons to me, Felly was not quite in support of the withdrawal of my services from MCA. That was one of the very few times in our 38 years of marriage I refused to accept her advice. Her ill-health and that of my sister, Ogbulu Ugwome Oko (nee Agwo), constituted serious concern for me. As the two of them, about the same age, were my two most valued friends and confidants, staying close to them without the constraints of

routine school work was uppermost in my mind. I earnestly prayed for God's blessings and guidance so as to comfortably satisfy their needs. That was the picture as we ended 2002. Later years justified my intuitive decision.

2003 – Death of My Sister, Ugwome and Felly's Continuous Failing Health

We moved into 2003 with Felly most of the time in sick bed. We spent most of the year either in a hospital or confined to the house with food supplement from Benin, Abeokuta and Afikpo. Sincere prayers and absolute faith in God kept us going.

On my 70th birthday Anniversary, January 20, it became imperative for me to move my sick sister, Mrs Ugwome Oko (nee Agwo) from Mater Hospital Afikpo to Ebonyi State University Teaching Hospital, Abakaliki for specialists' attention. It was not an easy decision for me to take as my wife Felly was also under intensive health care at Ehugbo.

In the same month, 16th April, a great son-in-law Chief John Ogonnia Otu, of Amangwu Nkphogoro and husband of my younger sister from another mother, Julia Ugwome Otu (nee Agwo) died. He was buried on Saturday, the 5th of July, at the age of 71 years.

As if that was not enough problem for me, that my only sister on earth, Ogbulu Ugwome Oko (nee Agwo) died at EBSUTH, Abakaliki on April 20 (Easter Sunday) exactly three months she was admitted in the hospital. She died at the age of 60 and she was buried on May 15, 2003, at Amancho-Amaizu, her first matrimonial home where she had Otu Ekuma, her first son. That is Ehugbo culture: a woman is buried where she had her first son.

On an encouraging note, Emma Idam Oko completed his Secondary School education in Government Secondary School, Afikpo having concluded his WASC exams in May, 2003.

On 23rd June (Orie), Felly's health condition worsened. I prayerfully had strong faith in God. We prayed and patiently bore whatever pains that came with the sickness to the end of that year.

In August, 2003, Okechukwu Abani Agwo started his National Service (NYSC) in Lokoja, Kogi State.

2004

We were just concluding the New Year festivities when the sad news of the death of Lawrence Agwo's wife, Eunice Ehihia Agwo (nee Oko), hit us like a thunderbolt. She died on the 4th of January, in a Lagos hospital. Her corpse was brought home on Tuesday 13/01/04 and buried the following day, Wednesday (Aho), 14/01/04, in her husband's building site. She was aged 56, survived by her husband and six children - three males and three females.

In between the date of her demise - 04/01/04 and that of her interment, 14/01/04, I achieved my childhood dream of knowing Ameta (Agba) Ozizza. At seventy-one (71), I was at Ameta, for the first time, on Saturday, 8th January, 2004. It was one part of Afikpo I had not been to, until then.

My journey there on a motor cycle made me to come face to face with the very difficult terrain where nature placed fellow Ehugbo indigenes. I certainly learnt to appreciate their position there much better. The place is accessible to motor cycles, bicycles and 'healthy' cars and trucks mainly at the peak of dry season - December to March/April. Otherwise, trekking and/or ferrying by canoe are the main means of transport to and fro the rest of the year.



In a pose with Dr Ogbonnaya Onu after interviewing him for *Afikpo Today* Magazine with Senior Correspondents: Late Chief Lawrence Oko and Barr. Mike Njoku (2004)

Felly's ill-health continued as a recurring decimal in the family. Prayerfully and with any available medical care, we plodded on. She was in and out of Mater Hospital, Afikpo; Federal Medical Centre (FMC) and Ebonyi State University Teaching Hospital, Abakaliki. About the third week in January it became necessary to move Felly to Abakaliki to facilitate medical attention and change of environment.

At Abakaliki, my son-in-law, Godwin Oka and his wife, our first daughter, Ngozi sacrificed everything to ease our tension. Their three-room apartment at No 3 Oghe Street became a stop-over "infirmary" for Felly. The congestion notwithstanding, they happily bore our problems. It was a wonderful cordial relationship to beat among in-laws, in living memory.

On my own part, it was a huge relief. I visited them just once or twice a week. Thus, I also had the time and composure to engage on other activities. I recall that as far back as late 2002, I had registered with African Institute for Critical Creative and Caring Community of Inquiry (AICCACCOI) Nigeria, Enugu Outreach for the M.Phil. Programme, that is, Master of Philosophy in Education.

The Outreach lecture centres then were at Enugu and Abakaliki. So, I could comfortably combine seeing my sick wife fairly often at Abakaliki with the periodic academic programme. I cannot thank Mr. Godwin Oka, my son-in-law and his family enough. God will repay them abundantly.

On 30th January, tarring work was started at the Ogo Oniikara at Amaha Round About. In February, I had the privilege of writing a FOREWORD to a book titled “Afikpo: A MATTER OF IDENTITY” written by then Miss Florence Uchenna Egwini of Amangballa. The book was launched at Amuro Town Hall on Sunday Orie, 22nd February, 2004.

By 11th March, 2004 the Ogo Oniikara Round About tarring work was completed after forty days work. An effigy of an Ehugbo Oniikara and a decorative concrete fence were all in place by that date. Historic!

During a little breathing space when Felly’s health appeared stable (of course at Abakaliki), I took two weeks off to Lagos for a working holiday to help in the production of *Afikpo Today* Magazine and a look around Lagos and its environs. On Sunday, 21st March, I accompanied Chief Emmanuel Agha Mbey (Enyo Ehugbo) the publisher of the magazine to visit Badagry town, one of Nigeria’s border towns. I started hearing about that town since my primary school days in the early forties during our Nigerian History lessons. The visit was a very practical lesson and I particularly enjoyed spending a few hours in the French Language College.

Tuesday (Orie), the 6th of April, 2004, became an outstanding beacon in the growth of the Catholic Church in Abakaliki Diocese, Ebonyi State. That was the day the Catholic Bishop of Abakaliki Diocese, Rt. Rev. Dr. Michael Nnachi Okoro, for the first time

ever after thirty-one years he became the Bishop, celebrated the CHRISM MASS at St. Mary's Parish, Afikpo outside the diocesan headquarters, Abakaliki. It was a very welcome innovation, which brought that vital annual Easter ceremony down to the grassroots. Abakaliki Diocese was carved out of Ogoja Diocese in 1973. Bishop McGettrick, the pioneer Bishop, retired in June, 1983 and Bishop Michael Okoro was installed on November, 27 the same year as the resident Bishop of Abakaliki Diocese.

On Holy Saturday (Orie), 10th April, 2004, I was astonished by the unfortunate behaviour of Oyim Otu (a.k.a. Oyim Orie Udu). The evening before, that was Good Friday, we had agreed to meet with Nde Omezue Enya Inya and Anthony Ogonnia Ekoh both of Amancho, to help us demarcate our Ezi Agwo reconciliatory boundary with Madujibe Nwachi also of Amancho. I sent Oyim Otu to remind the three people of our agreed meeting at Uhu Ikee. He reported back to inform me that he had told them. On the agreed morning, I went to the site at Uhu Ikee and was joined by the trio but Oyim Otu WAS NOT there! I sent for him just to be told by his wife that she did not know where he was.

He was the next in command in Ezi Agwo then. I was nonplussed. Oyim cleverly absconded and abandoned me. I viewed it as sabotage. Francis Agwo and Oko Eni who happened to know about the meeting were hanging around but had no contributions to make. As a result of that, we lost a strip of the land, some 100x50 feet, which is a plot of land. It hurt me to the marrow. However, the Ezi Agwo Project had to go on.

For about two years, ATWA National Executive was in an unheard-of impasse. There existed two parallel National Presidents curiously served by a single Secretary-General. They were Prof. Arua Okereke from Ukpa, the incumbent President and Chief Cyril Otu (Otuson)

from Ugwuegu, the erstwhile National President. Sir Joseph Oko from Ozizza was the Secretary-General.

Chief Cyril Otu sued Dr. Okereke in the High Court to stop parading himself as the ATWA National President. An enlarged National Executive meeting of ATWA was summoned. At that meeting it was unanimously resolved to appoint an ad hoc three-man Peace Committee drawn from former National Officers to broker peace. Chiefs Lawrence Enya Oko, Anthony Ogbonnia Ekoh and Gabriel Anigo Agwo were nominated to serve the purpose.

After over six months of intensive consultations and interviews within and outside Ehugbo, the ad hoc committee succeeded in ushering in the required peace. On the 10th of April, 2004, during the ATWA's Annual Convention, the two embattled Presidents and the Secretary-General were told to step down following the recommendations of the ad hoc committee. A new Executive was put in place with a former Secretary-General, Sir Ralph Okole, as the new National President. It was a rare privilege to have been one of the three-man Committee that God used to bring back peace in the Association. Glory be to God.

Felly's ill-health continued to fluctuate with very disturbing moments. In fact, on Wednesday, 28th April, we welcomed with mixed feelings, the news of our daughter's (Ngozi) delivery of a baby girl, to be named Felly, her namesake. To God be the Glory. That supposedly joyous period was cut short on the 23rd and 30th June respectively at the same Federal Medical Centre, Abakaliki, when my wife, Felly, passed on for short periods but was revived by the use of oxygen. That of the 30th June took place right in my presence.

It is on record that Emmanuel Idam Oko, Uchenna Agwo, Okechukwu Agwo and Rebecca Oti Eni (nee Oyim) occasionally

abandoned their University studies and/or normal engagements outside Ebonyi State to take turns to look after Felly in the hospital. They were very trying and anxious periods for all of us. I was the number one “non-sick sufferer”. Again thanks be to God for granting us the special grace to keep hoping for the best.

After Okechukwu Abani Agwo’s Youth Service in July, he travelled to Abuja to join the labour market. He came down to see us every other month.

Early in July that year, an historic event took place. Some of the smallholder churches around town, specifically at Enohia Nkalu had conflicts with the community on venues and modes of conducting their crusades. The Nigeria Police had to intervene. They arrested and detained some people including Eleri, the chief priest of Elom Ji (the yam god shrine).

As a result, he could not perform his official duties and that sort of disrupted the Ehugbo traditional calendar, which begins with the harvesting and eating of new yam by the Eleri. That was the first time in living history in Ehugbo that would happen. Nevertheless, some stages of the ceremonies were skipped and the Ehugbo New Yam festival took place in the last week of August.

Worthy of note is that despite the fact that we continued to battle with Felly’s ill-health, I still managed to find time to initiate a land mark assignment. I collated the Traditional Marriage Rites in Ehugbo. After intensive lobbying of Esaa Ehugbo (council of elders), the Oniikara and Nde Ezeogo (Traditional Rulers) of Ehugbo, I successfully co-ordinated the codification and eventual signing of the 10-page document by the Esaa Ehugbo on Traditional Marriage rites in Ehugbo. It was the first time in the history of Ehugbo the marriage rites were harmonized and documented. The signing of the document took place on the 19th day of August (Eke), 2004.

It took effect as an official marriage document in Ehugbo from the 27th day of August, 2004. The then reigning Nde Ezeogo in Ehugbo were:

1. HRH Ezeogo Cletus O. Ekuma - Nkphogoro Autonomous Community
2. HRH Ezeogo John Obeni Ekuma - Afikpo Autonomous Community
3. HRH Ezeogo Arch./Engr. Ewa Elechi - Ohaisu Autonomous Community
4. HRH Ezeogo Irem Oko Irem - Itim Autonomous Community
5. As at then, Ibii/Ozizza Autonomous Community had no Ezeogo as it was embroiled in conflict over who should occupy the coveted Echara Icha stool. However an Esaa Ehugbo from there signed for the Community.

In the gloomy state of the very disturbing sickness in the family, our first daughter, Ngozi was employed as Confidential Secretary in Ebonyi State University (EBSU), Abakaliki. She was posted to the Department of Ophthalmology under the Faculty of Clinical Medicine of Ebonyi State University Teaching Hospital (EBSUTH) with effect from 4th November, 2004. We owe that employment to Professor Selina Oko of Ngodo, who was at that time a Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University. She saw Ngozi through the very highly competitive employment process. Before then Ngozi was a Secondary School teacher for almost five years. Thanks be to God.

Late in November, precisely 18/11/04, Engr. Joseph Ogbonnia Idume (Junior) wedded former Miss Ijeoma Udu Isu (Oji) in Port Harcourt at Mater Misericordiae Catholic Church Rumuomasi.

On that same day, I had my first ever GSM phone - a gift from our second son, Engineer Edward Otu Agwo. He also gave one to Felly through me. Unfortunately, she hardly touched the phone not to

talk of using it till her demise some nine months later.

In December, Eddy Agwọ officially presented fantastic bridal gifts - *nvmvu* - to his heart throb Osi Aja Ewa at Mgbom. The expectation of the coming of our second daughter-in-law in under six months brought a lot of warmth into the family.

In the last week of November, and the first week of December, 2004, a three-man team of Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) personnel from Abuja, were in Ehugbo for a coverage of our cultural practices and festivals. Mrs Angela Ugo Uya (nee Agada) led the team. I was co-opted to join the team for a rather extensive and intensive tour of every nook and cranny of the five village groups that make up Ehugbo. It was a very wearying but interesting exercise.

I can say with humility that my being the local guide and pilot greatly enhanced a more factual documentation of the people's culture especially the masquerades and other aspects of Ogo Ehugbo that are for public consumption. The exercise lasted from December 4 to 14. The documentation is what one would love to view and keep. By the time this memoir was concluded on 31st December, 2016, I was still expecting it.

I thoroughly enjoyed the merry-go-round especially as it was a very welcome relief. I even organised a squash party in my compound for the team. That gave my ailing wife a rare opportunity to interact with them. That get-together actually let in some rays of the sun into our murky and droopy home occasioned by Felly's ill health.

2005 – The Death and Burial of Felly My Dear Wife

From late February the previous year, Felly virtually lived at Abakaliki with our first daughter's family, from where she could easily be rushed to the FMC or EBSUTH any time of the day or

night. We prayerfully reckoned her survival by the day. Her biting pains caused serious discomfort to me as the other part of her.

Early in March, 2005, she requested to be brought back to Ehugbo so as to be part of the preparations for Eddy, our second son's Church wedding scheduled for 28th March, 2005, Easter Monday. The Easter Sunday celebrations went on very well and everybody was happy. Within the month, I received the statement of result of my M.Phil P4C Degree course work. It was positive. Thanks be to God.



My wife and I with our second son Edward Agwo and his wife during their wedding

On the wedding day, Felly and the rest of us joyfully took part in all ceremonies in St. Mary's Catholic Church, Afikpo - including posing for photographs after the Nuptial Mass. She managed to cheerfully sit through the reception of guests at Ebonyi Hotels, Afikpo where the feasting took place. At home and with some of the guests around, she exchanged pleasantries. Some hours later in the night she said to me: "I am not comfortable." I got the message and assembled her medicaments, which she took with a sigh. Her biting pains caused serious discomfort to me, but I concealed my feeling from her.

The rest of the week the signs of her relapse built up. She resisted going back to the hospital for admission but accepted periodic check ups. For the next four months - April, May, June, July we were off and on in Mater Hospital Afikpo. A few times she was on admission in Mater Hospital for two or three days. In the last admission, we were given a referral letter to Ebonyi State University Teaching Hospital (EBSUTH), which we never used. She was very emphatic on not going for any further admission either in Mater, FMC or EBSUTH hospitals. Austin Agwo and the rest of our children were warming up for a medical treatment in the UK.

As we prayed and hoped for the best, Mrs Elizabeth Duru, a family friend came in on Sunday, 31st July to see Felly. They discussed the type of sickness Felly was going through. Mrs Duru at once recommended a private hospital at Onitsha said to specialize in the treatment of diabetes. Felly at once fell for the recommendation and would not listen to any other suggestion than that. Later that night we had a family meeting on that issue. Since Felly was the sick person and knew where the shoe pinched, we agreed to do her bidding. Wednesday, 3rd August, we were set for the journey.

Early on 1st August, I contacted Paul Eni, Rebecca's husband, resident at Onitsha to make enquiries about the said hospital. Later that morning he called back to confirm the existence of such a hospital.

By 11a.m. on Wednesday, 3rd August, Felly and I in the company of Mrs Alu Oyim Obio and Paul Eni were already in that hospital discussing with the female Medical Doctor. She fixed her fees at N250,000.00 for not more than a fortnight when she expected Felly would be all right. We paid her the first instalment of N30,000.00. She carried out some medical examinations and administered some injections on her at intervals. She had appreciable relief at night with very minor disturbances.

On the second day 4/8/2005, she was better. Eddy Agwo and Scarry on their way from Lagos to Abakaliki, visited briefly with some gifts and took us to see the doctor at the hospital where we had a brief chat with her. In the evening, after passing watery stool, Felly expressed body weakness and tiredness.

Strange enough, she and I had a very delicious supper of yam pottage with boiled vegetable and fish. She even asked for more to my astonishment as that had never happened for over two years of lingering debilitating diabetes. I was highly elated for a couple of hours as we discussed happily and intimately, least imagining that that was our parting ceremony.

At precisely 11.30 p.m., Okechukwu Abani Agwo phoned from Abuja to ask about us. After just about five minutes we hung up and said goodnight to each other, he called again. "What is it?" I asked him: "I want to talk to mom and say goodnight to her". He did precisely that and hung up. I dozed off and wallowed in dreams.

Exactly five o'clock in the morning of 5/8/2005, I was woken up by Felly's writhing movement. "Felly, what is it?" I heard myself asking. I noticed strange expressions on her sallow face. Her eyes were dilating. I reached for water and her drugs, called out at Nne Otu Oyim (Alu), Paul Eni and Rebecca sleeping in the next room. They rushed in and all of us struggled to force her clinched teeth open with a spoon for her drug. In the process a pair of my left hand fingers received an incised bite, which I discovered minutes later. As the snake's movement continued I could no longer hold her to myself, I dropped her on the bed and tried to hold her down from a kneeling position beside the bed. With a sharp loud groan, Felly went limp. No more movement. I could not believe Felly had thus, in my "very before", passed on. I stared at the wall clock, it was 5.25 a.m.

In a sort of frenzy, I smacked her a couple of times and gave her

several pushes, but she remained motionless. I refused to think she was lifeless. The other three screamed, yelled and shrilled. I gave in to moaning with warm tears streaming down my cheeks and my head buried between my palms. Some fifteen minutes later, watching her false smiling face, it dawned on me it was all over.

Her death was the second closest one I had experienced at the last breath. In fact, Felly breathed her last right in my arms. The first was that of my father, which I saw at less than a yard away on his mud bed in the forenoon. That was in August, 1945, some sixty years earlier.

By 6.30 a.m. I started phoning our children: Austin in the UK, Eddy who was at Enugu en route to Abakaliki and Okey in Abuja. Before 10 a.m. Eddy had joined me at Onitsha. I cannot explain how our daughters, Ngozi and Uchenna got the very sad news!

Paul Eni ran around and made arrangement for a bus to convey her corpse and five of us - Paul, Eddy, Alu Oyim, Rebecca and me - to Afikpo. At approximately 3.10 p.m., we were at the Mater Hospital Mortuary for the preservation processes. That was concluded before 5 p.m. We arrived Ezi Agwọ to meet uncontrollable groups of wailing mourners. I did everything humanly possible to play down the seriousness of the irreplaceable loss of the tangible half of me after forty one years of a very happy married life!! Within me, I thanked God for granting me the special grace to live up to my promise on our wedding day, to love her through thick and thin until death do us part. Inside me, I had a deep feeling of satisfaction that even at the peak of the anxiety usually associated with terminally diseased patients, God gave me the required grace to humour her all through. Until her demise, she remained my confidant, wife, a trusted friend, amiable mother, a loving sister and an indisputable and invaluable mother of our five children.

For some thirty years, 1975 to 2005, she had struggled with diabetes and high blood pressure. Thank God I was able to effectively help her manage the situation that length of time. In the last six months of her life on earth, she often asked me the tortuous rhetorical question: “Is this thing I am living called life? Please God relieve me of this suffering.” At such moments, I always reminded her of some of our close acquaintances who had been in the sick bed and in worse conditions for double or triple the period she was bed-ridden.

A few weeks before her exit and during one of the visits of Mrs Julia Ugwome Otu (nee Agwo) her age mate sort of, she called me, for the first time in my presence, “Anigo Orie”. Often times, I had called her Anwara Oti, her maiden name on her mother’s side which she cherished much. I am not sure I can ever forget recalling what I lost by her change of nature. Thank God I refuse to let the memory weigh me down. That’s that for now.

She was interred on Thursday (Aho), the 29th of September, 2005 - two months less a week, she died. She was given a befitting Christian burial in my compound Ezi Agwo. Our first son Austin couldn’t, for very good reasons, attend her burial, but he was ably represented by his wife Furo, who came in from the UK. May her gentle soul rest in perfect peace.

Among the dignitaries who attended the burial ceremony were their Excellencies, Chief and Mrs Ada George, former Governor of the defunct Rivers State. Mrs Rae Orahime from Lagos, Dr Ogonnaya Onu was represented, Prof Otunta (UNIBEN), Prof Austin Chukwu (EBSU), Prof. Christian O. Chukwu (EBSUTH) were also there.

The death and burial of my wife in 2005





Of special note is the personal interest Prof. Christian O. Chukwu had in my wife's ill-health. He was then the Chief Medical Director (CMD) of Ebonyi State University Teaching Hospital, Abakaliki.

Whenever Felly was on admission, he made sure he attended to her

personally. At least twice, he drove his car from Abakaliki to Ezi Agwo to give Felly medical attention. The day he heard about her death, he came in person to condole with the family. We owe him a million thanks. The Good Lord will reward him.

For the rest of the year, the Agwo family in particular and Ezi Agwo generally was in deep mourning for Felly. In the interim, I played host to people from all walks of life from within and outside the state. To God be the glory.

After her death and burial, I had to learn to live without her. I had to re-organise my way of life generally, settle outstanding medical bills and pay small debts to the very few who accepted it. Most people even made extra donations towards reducing the financial burden on the family. Again, thanks be to God for everything.

My late wife's niece, Roseline Eleje Oko, who attended her burial from Benin died suddenly on the 26th of October, 2005. She was buried at Ezi Ukaka-Amaha on 2nd November, 2005, All Souls Day! Afikpo people say that "Ozu ayigi nnani (a corpse does not go alone)."

But for Edward Otu Agwo's wedding in March and the M.Phil (P4C) Statement of Result I received the same March, the year 2005 should be tagged: "a year of sorrow and suffering" in the Agwo family. I would have loved to hate the entire year, but that is not possible, with Felly at the centre of the events of the year. Nyee Nnia, Felicia Anwara Obioh, I believe, was created for me and through my beloved mother Orie Otu reached me for keeps. Alive or dead GabFelly is inseparable!

At the risk of repetition, I hereby put it on record that I can never thank my five children enough for their individual and collective understanding and support throughout Felly's long period of ill-

health and eventual befitting burial. The roles they played before, during and after the burial of my wife and their mother cannot be evaluated. Thank you Lord for giving me such wonderful children in this 21st Century. I am bereft of words to thank Godwin Oka Oka my '1st son' cum very dependable son-in-law for everything he has been in my family from the early eighties. Emmanuel Idam Oka, my precious nephew who was always handy at the peak of Felly's confinement to sick bed. God will immensely reward each one of you. I sincerely pray and hope He will protect and preserve you to survive me creditably. Professor Ogbonnia Otunta from his base in the University of Benin (UNIBEN) gave an uncommon financial and physical support towards the burial of my dear wife. He will remain blessed in Jesus' Name.

2006

From January to March, I tried to pick up the pieces of my life and fashion the way forward. On Tuesday, April, 18, I was appointed a Part-Time Executive Director, Board of Trustees of Participatory Development Alternative (PDA) an NGO founded by Mr. Charles Abani. The service was free. Occasionally, I attended seminars and workshops at Abuja and other parts of Nigeria.

In June, Professor Francis Ogbonnia Otunta was appointed the 4th Rector of Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana. He was the very first indigenous Rector of the Polytechnic in the 25th year of its establishment in 1981.

On 4th August, 2006, the first ever open sacrilege took place at the Rev. Father's Residence, St. Mary's Catholic Mission Afikpo. A young Rev. Fr., Francis Chidi Okoye was murdered in cold blood in the early hours of that day. The murderers escaped and were never found. The ripples and the very bad image the incident created for Nd'Ehugbo is yet to be equalled. Very Satanic!

On 5th August, Felly's grave was tiled at the top only, blessed and dedicated to God.

On 4th October, Engr. Edward Agwo's son, Ebubechukwu was born in Lagos. He became my 8th grandchild.



In a pose with Prof. Francis Otunta after Interviewing him for *Afikpo Today* Magazine (2006) with Senior Correspondents: Chief Lawrence Oko, Barr. Mike Njoku and Sower E. Inya

Afikpo Town Welfare Association (ATWA) National had Ehugbo Day Celebration on the 28th day of October, to show-case various aspects of Ehugbo culture and tradition. The high point of the celebration was the admission of some past National Officers into the ATWA HALL of FAME. As the longest serving (ten years) Secretary-General of the Association, I was also admitted into ATWA HALL OF FAME that 28th day of October, 2006.

From November 27 to 29, Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana celebrated her Silver Jubilee. As a representative of the Founding Fathers of the Institution, I delivered one of the three lectures during the celebration. My lecture was titled: "Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic at Twenty Five and Concatenation of

Events - Recollections". The ovation of the mammoth audience in the Multipurpose Hall assured me they were greatly impressed. Individual congratulatory messages flowed in many weeks after. I felt satisfied and fulfilled as a leading member of the Founding Fathers of the Polytechnic.



Meritorious Award and Admission into ATWA Hall of Fame, 26th October, 2006

2007

I made my first journey of the year to Lagos to visit Edward Osondu Otu Agwo's family. They had their first son on 4th October the previous year. I was with them from the 13th to the 18th of January. I am in the habit of feeling happy to pick up and cuddle my newly born grandchild within the first week of delivery especially those in Nigeria. So, to have waited for three months before seeing Eddy's first son was suffocating. That duty done, I was internally released and set for the New Year.

**Delivering my address as Guest Lecturer, during the Silver Jubilee
Celebration of Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic
Unwana on November 11, 2006**



On 7th February, the Afikpo Customary Court delivered judgement in favour of our Ikwu Nde Eluu Idam of Okwu maternal lineage in a land case between us and the people of Ezi Nnali Nkpoghororo. The piece of land is located at Akpuguru, in Afikpo South LGA. The

dispute came to the open early in 2003 and went through various stages of arbitration at the Esaa Ehugbo chambers; out of court settlement between us and Nde Ezi Nnali – in five sittings, two at Ezeogo Cletus Ekuma’s Palace, Amankwo, two at Ezi Agwo Amaizu and one at Ezi Nnali, Nkpoghoru. At each sitting, the Ezi Nnali group led by Oko Utom refused to accept the truth nor adduce convincing evidence as the donees. They dragged Nde Eluu Idam to the Afikpo Customary Court where the case was still in our favour after over four years.

In July, I donated a set of table tennis board and bats to the Chief Gabriel Anigò Agwọ House in Ehugbo Technical College, Afikpo. The school authorities had earlier in the year named one of the five houses in the school after me. According to them, “It is in recognition of his unflinching interest in and support for the College since its inception in 1981.”

I took up a Part-Time Lecturer job with the Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic Unwana in the Department of Continuing Education with effect from June, 2007. I was assigned to teach Communication in English.

My Involvement in the Ehugbo Bible Project

Late November, one Rev. Jasman Enyi of Mgbom but based at Abakaliki came to my house in the company of Hyacinth Otu of Amangwu Nkpoghoru. They came to tell me about Ehugbo Literacy and Bible Translation Project (ELBTP). It was a project that would produce Ehugbo Language Orthography that would be subsequently used to translate the Holy Bible into Ehugbo dialect of the Igbo Language. That sounded like a fairy tale. I asked him to repeat what he had said to make sure I understood him. He did and I fell in for it. I have a very soft spot for any reasonable proposal to enhance the enculturation of Ehugbo culture and tradition. He,

Rev. Enyi invited me to an inaugural meeting scheduled to take place at the Ukpa/Amaechara Presbyterian Church Premises two days from that day.

At the meeting, I met about a dozen other Ehugbo indigenes - mostly Revs, Pastors, Elders and the like. There, Rev. Enyi gave a rundown of how he encountered the Bible Translation Project some ten years earlier. He then narrated how he got approval from the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust (NBTT) Jos, for opening an office in Ehugbo for it. There was no dissenting voice.

That is the genesis of my involvement in the Bible Translation Project. For the rest of the year we had meetings two other times. We got the Rev. in charge of Ukpa/Amaechara Prebyterian Church, Rev. Ukeni of Unwana involved without much ado. He allowed us free access into the church premises and facilities.

2008

At the meeting of the Project members on January 8, 2008, a Representative of the NBTT, Jos, Rev. Selbut and one white lady were in our midst. He came with forms for the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). After a fairly detailed address on the Mission and Vision of the NBTT and the part we are to play in the Project, he called on us to nominate one of us to sign on behalf of the Ehugbo Bible Project. Without hesitation, I nominated Engr. Rev. Enyi who brought the Project to us as the obvious Chairman to sign for us. Surprisingly, Rev. Enyi said instead, that I should sign on behalf of Ehugbo. Every other person present supported his proposal with prolonged applause. Sincerely, I objected on the grounds that the whole idea was alien to me and it would amount to groping in the dark if I accepted it. But they all insisted that I should sign. I obeyed.

As soon as the signing process was concluded, the house resolved that thenceforth, I was the Chairman of the Project, Rev. Enyi was the Co-ordinator while Mr Martins O. Ewa was elected the Project Management Committee Secretary. All other offices were to be filled at subsequent meetings.

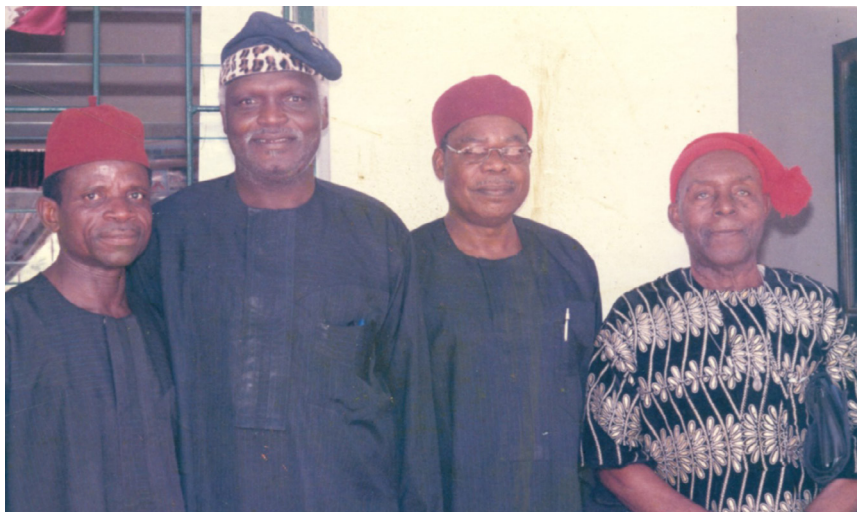
A few days later, we met and made out a time table for organising enlightenment campaigns for the progress of the Project. Before long we agreed with Jos that a one-month workshop on PROW should be held at Afikpo to formulate the Ehugbo orthography - the first ever in the history of Ehugbo. "PROW" is an acronym for Participatory Rapid Orthography-Development Workshop meant for communities that are interested in language development for literacy and/or Bible translation. The workshop eventually took place in Government Secondary School Afikpo from the 5th to the 25th of October with the co-operation of the then LGEA Secretary, Mr Iheanyi Isu. Some 128 Igbo Teachers in Afikpo LGA attended the three-week workshop. We produced the orthography under the leadership of Pastor Akila and locally supported by Rev. Ituma from Abakaliki and Pastor V. Nnali from Afikpo.

The 2008 Age Sets Upward Movement in Ehugbo

Monday (Eke), 28th April, 2008, was another Ehugbo Age Sets upward movements. As is customary, on that day those who were Isi Elia moved into the Ekpuké Eto Chamber while the old Ekpuké Eto age set moved up to become Junior Esaa. The Junior Ekpuké Esaa moved up to become Nd'Ichie (Senior Esaa). The erstwhile Nd'Ichie (Senior Esaa), where I belonged, moved up to become Onikara. Those who were Onikara moved up to become Nde Horii; while the surviving Horii moved up to become Rikweri – the very last age set in Ehugbo Age Grade System.

I attained the Onikara age set - an age set for those not usually

less than seventy-five years of age on that day. The Onikara (a.k.a. Obobo) are highly revered in Ehugbo. Men within this age bracket are expected to be points of reference for honest advice and exemplary life. I thank God for enabling me to attain the age in good health of body and mind. My only regret was that Felly was not there to celebrate the occasion with me. However, Glory be to God for everything.



Chief Agwo in Jos with Rev. Enyi to discuss with the NBTT Exco the Ehugbo Bible Project take off in 2008



TSC Rep. Dr. B. Laty visits Ehugbo for the Bible Translation Project, 2009

On Monday, 14th July (Orie), by 11.40 a.m., Patrick Ogbo Eluu died and was buried on Saturday (Orie), 30th July. To help in reducing the burden his departure left on his bereaved family, I had to “inherit” his only son, Ogbo Eluu, born to him by his Okposi wife. In keeping with Ehugbo culture, Patrick’s son Ogbonnia, born by an Okposi woman where the people are paternal instead of maternal like Ehugbo people, became a member of his father’s Okwu maternal lineage – Ibe Okwu in Ehugbo, which incidentally is my own lineage. The reason being that his Okposi mother, had no maternal relations in Ehugbo where he could have belonged.



In a pose on the attainment of Onikara Ehugbo Age Set in April, 2008

2009

Immediately after the 2008 upward movements of age grades, many families started celebrating their parents and relations, who became Onikara. One would say that children and well-wishers of the new Onikara saw the attainment of that revered age as an event

to celebrate their parents while they were still alive. Like wild fire, it caught up with every family that had new Onikara or a new Horii. With no standards or laid down process, families tumbled over one another to thank God. Most Christian churches had no objection to celebrating special Thanksgiving Services for their members who asked for them. Almost on a weekly or monthly basis for over a year, the Onikara celebration became a major event in Ehugbo.

My own children did not want to be left out. And so, on Sunday (Orie), 12th April, 2009, they decided to celebrate me, their father, as Onikara Ehugbo. They did it without invitation cards, but nonetheless, the celebration was grand. Coincidentally, the family of Omezue Anthony Ogonnia Ekoh also celebrated their own father that same day. The celebration kicked off at St. Mary's Catholic Church, Afikpo with a High Mass celebrated by His Lordship Rt. Rev. Dr. Michael Nnachi Okoro, the Catholic Bishop of Abakaliki.

After the Mass, Omezue Ekoh and I left for our individual reception venues to entertain our guests. Quite a number of them came from outside Ebonyi State. Omezue had his at Amaizu/Amamgbala Primary School field while mine was in my Ezi Agwo premises. The number and calibre of guests who graced the occasion were beyond my imagination.

At the reception, I was totally overwhelmed and astonished at the closely guarded buffet lunch and personal gifts from my children, friends, relations and well-wishers. At 76, I danced like a youth out of happiness. I was completely bereft of words to thank those wonderful guests. I used the occasion to introduce to the public my first volume of EHUGBO CULTURAL CALENDAR AND DIARY for 2008-2009. It formed part of my souvenir to my guests.

At the end of the day, I was again very proud of my children - biological and foster. I earnestly wished that Felly, the mother of

my children was there. Every other thing considered, it was a red letter day.

Some two months after that historic event, our thirty-year old second daughter and last child, Uchenna Egele Agwo, was one of the batch of thirty graduands as Medical Doctors of the Ebonyi State University. That was on Thursday (Aho), 4th June, 2009. She was the first Medical Doctor in the Nwata Agwo family of Ezi Agwo. To God be the Glory!



**In a pose with my younger daughter and last child, Uchenna Agwo
on her graduation as a licensed Medical Doctor in 2009**

The Revised Edition of The English User's Aid, which I co-authored came into circulation. That was ten years after the maiden publication in 1999.

On Friday (Orie), 17th July, 2009, I was invited by the NYSC Orientation Camp Management Afikpo through the then Chairman of Afikpo North Local Government, Mr. Gerald Obinna Agha, to start delivering TRADITIONAL LECTURES to Youth Corps members during their usual three-week Orientation course. The

lecture is meant to familiarise the Youth Service Corps members from all over Nigeria posted to Ebonyi State, with the culture and tradition of their host State. The lecture takes place at least twice a year, depending on the number of batches in a year. The Corps members and staff normally number some two thousand in a batch. A mysterious fire disaster occurred at the Eke Ukwu market on the Ikeji (new yam) festival day, 25th August. Around nine o'clock in the morning, the entire northern side of the market which is normally under lock and key, went up in flames. It took about two hours to bring the fire under control through multi-faceted methods by the local people, mostly traders and their sympathizers. Hours after the market had been reduced to rubbles and the victims helped to their homes, Ebonyi State Fire Service straggled in to the disgust of the people who were still around. They were lucky to escape unhurt from the angry youths.

Consequent upon that fire disaster, the lock-up store/shop owners re-grouped. By the end of October they had formed themselves into the Eke-Ukwu Market Store Owners Association, Afikpo (EMSOAA). At her inaugural meeting on Saturday (Aho), 7th November, 2009, I was elected, unopposed, as the Chairman of the Association.

Meanwhile, the Afikpo Market Traders' Association (AMATA) in collaboration with Afikpo North Local Government and the Lockup Stores owners, agreed on the most painless way of reconstructing and modernising the entire market - including the sections not affected by the fire disaster. For almost two years the reconstruction work continued though skeletal selling and buying took place at the unaffected sections.

Within the year, the deaths and burial of two close relations, Aloysius Nwachi Akpu of Enohia Itim and Paul Ogbonnia Eni of Orra Ozizza in May and October respectively, were very badly felt in my family. Nwachi was one of my confidants in our Nde

Eluu Idam maternal family lands while Paul was Rebecca Oyim's husband. Rebecca nursed ALL my five children and remained part of the Agwo family from 1965 to March, 2013 when she died.

After over three months search all over the country for a place, from September, Dr. Uchenna Egele Agwo started her HOUSEMANSHIP at the Federal Medical Centre, Umuahia. She was given a free accommodation by Mrs Ndubuka – Dr. Mark Abani's mother-in-law and was treated as a beloved daughter of the family. Mrs Ndubuka fondly referred to Uche as "My Doctor". Thanks be to God for their kindness.

That September, our Good God guided me and the rest of Nde Ezi Agwo to maturely handle a would-have-been kindred feud occasioned by the behaviour of Gabriel Anigo Eni. He left a 100x50 feet parcel of land allocated to him and blocked a link road meant to connect every part of Ezi Agwo with the Amaha-Ugwuegu major road. Save one of his paternal brothers, the rest of umudi (kindred) Ezi Agwo were poised to tear him into pieces for his obduracy. I had Joseph Iduma (Nwata Iduma) my elder, on my side, to tow a middle course in the palaver. We conferred with the younger ones and they reluctantly obeyed us. A portion of the Ezi Agwo end of Gab Eni's plot of land was used for the diversion of the original link road thus cutting him off to the Ugwuegu end of Ezi Agwo.

In the name of peace and possible misinterpretation by outsiders and even his own children, we cancelled all plans to drag him to Amaha, Amaizu and Esaa Ehugbo. By that re-consideration, we saved our image as paternal brothers but the disfiguring of the nearly forty years master plan of Ezi Agwo remains a sore foot on me. I had forgiven him long ago. "Ugwo ezi a di gi akwu, etu tua ala ala".

November and December that year brought along the burial of Dr. Emmanuel Oko Isu, the first Deputy Governor of Ebonyi State and the burial of Mrs Eggonnia Abani Ugwu (nee Abani) on 31st December. Ego was the wife of Chief Daniel Abani Ugwu, a Petrol Dealer and an outstanding Ehugbo philanthropist. 2009 ended on a very sad note.

2010 – Dr. Egele Agwo’s Marriage

Barely four months into her Housemanship, Uchenna informed me she had met her would-be life partner, one Engr. Dike Nnadi of Ekwegbe, Nsukka, Enugu State. Sunday (Eke), 24th January, she brought the young man to Afikpo and introduced him as her would-be husband. It was a befitting 31st birthday gift to her. In about three sittings, I subjected her to a number of investigative questions on the man and the issue of marriage. She appeared decided. Separately, I discussed it with Ngozi, my first daughter who doubled as her elder sister and mother. Prayerfully, I thought about the whole idea of her deciding to get married at thirty-one; some five years after Felly’s death! The financial involvement and just after the expensive seven-year University course in Medicine gave me a great concern! At a point I almost refused to give my consent especially based on the wedding being slated for July. All my necessary counselling done and taking everything into consideration, I blessed her wish and appealed to the other children for their usual support to make our last child and daughter happy while moving into her matrimonial home.

Saturday (Eke), 10th April, first marriage rite, Atogbo nku, Amari ulo and Ahia ozi on Uchenna Agwo. Saturday (Aho), 24th April, payment of bride price/nvumvu – We had a waiver in our marriage rite because two of them are normally done on two separate days.

On Saturday (Eke), 3rd July, we had Nkwanwite (Send Forth)

ceremony for Dr. Uchenna Egele Agwọ. Exactly two weeks later, Saturday (Ahọ), 17th July, the Church Wedding took place at the Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Enugu.



Me and my first daughter at the wedding of my last daughter on 17th July, 2010

Professor Ottenberg's Last Visit to Ehugbo

In the last week of September, Professor Simon Ottenberg (Bekee IBE OKWU) visited Nigeria for the 8th time since 1952 when he made his debut in Afikpo. At almost ninety years of age and having some hearing impairment, he still managed short distance treks and repeated statements during conversations. My very dear friend and colleague, Onikara Lawrence Okongodo and I accompanied him most of the time to the places he visited from the 1st to the 4th of October, 2010. We accepted to accompany him to the following engagements: March past by School Children at the Government Secondary School, Afikpo on Friday (Aho), 1st October, in commemoration of Nigeria's 50th Independence Anniversary; Saturday (Nkwo), 2nd October, search for and discovery of James

Harold Dyer's grave around the Government Station. Dyer was the first colonial District Officer (DO) to administer Afikpo Division from 1902-1909 when he died on 11th April.

In the forties when we were Primary School pupils, we used to see from a distance, a chained grave of a white man whose ghost was said to have terrorised the inhabitants hence the chain. The whole area had been overgrown by thick bushes so, it took us over an hour to locate the grave. On 3rd October, Sunday (Eke), he paid an historic visit to the three chambers of Ehugbo Council of Elders, namely, Ekpukwe Eto, Ekpukwe Esaa and Onikara. It was a very exciting and memorable period for him and the elders, who had heard quite a lot about him but never met Simon Ottenberg (Bekee IBE OKWU) in person.



Reception of Prof. Simon Ottenberg (Bekee Ibe Okwu) at the Ulo ubi Oniikara on 3rd October, 2010

Monday (Orie), 4th October, we interviewed Prof. Ottenberg for the Afikpo Today Magazine. The interview took place at his Ameke Mgbom residence. Before the interview we took him to Amaechara Elu on a courtesy visit to Horii Oko Unya Efo. During the discussion it was discovered that Prof. Ottenberg was in fact, an

Horri then not Onikara as earlier classified.

On Tuesday (Ahọ), the 5th of October, he had a family meeting with Ibe Okwu maternal lineage. The meeting was in my compound at Ezi Agwo, Amaha-Amaizu and attended by unprecedented number of Ibe Okwu men and women from all over Ehugbo. Again, most of the people were extremely delighted to see, touch and pose for photographs with their proverbial Bekee Ibe Okwu.

At dawn on Wednesday (Nkwo), the 6th of October, Prof Ottenberg left Ehugbo (probably for good) by road to Enugu where he boarded a Lagos-bound airplane en route Seattle, United States of America.

On Sunday (Nkwo), 10th October (10/10/10), droves of Ibe Okwu persons swarmed Ezi Agwo looking for Bekee Ibe Okwu and the photographs they posed with him. Those who couldn't come on Tuesday, 5/10/10, came on Sunday 10/10/10 thinking he was still at Ezi Agwo.

On 2nd November, I was in Lagos to receive a FELLOWSHIP AWARD from Amaizu Progressive Union, Lagos Branch.

For the rest of the year stories about Horii Prof. Simon Ottenberg (Prof Emeritus) and how he had written the name of Ehugbo in gold on the world map, were household discussions. Afikpo Today Magazine carried his Reflections on Ehugbo in over sixty years into the first half of 2010. See the January - June, 2011 Edition of Afikpo Today Magazine for details.

2011

The first major event in 2011 in my life's history came to light on Palm Sunday, 17th April. A pleasant surprise it was. At about 5.30 p.m. as I was watching an interesting programme on the TV, I heard the sound of a motor vehicle pull up at the front door of my house. I

didn't bother who it was as it was a common occurrence most days and even nights. The voice of Engr. Edward Agwọ, living in Lagos, and Okechukwu Abani Agwọ then working at Abuja and that of Eddy's brother-in-law Oko Aja Ewa, also living in Lagos attracted my attention. In the next minute the three walked into the parlour where I was. They greeted and kept standing. Eddy then placed on the table a bottle of St. Remy Brandy and said: "Papa, Austin Agwo in the UK has sent us to deliver this message to you. Take this." "What's this," I asked. "These are the keys and particulars of that motor outside. They are yours, come outside and take possession of it." "I si nọ bu ngini, (what do you say is going on) Eddy?" "Papa, obu Austin si ayi bia ba nighi motoue. I hu a" (it is Austin who told us to give you this car. This is it)" pointing at it. Almost in disbelief, I got up from my seat, adjusted the loin cloth I had on my waist and moved outside behind them.

Very close to the hedges outside stood the ash colour Toyota Sienna car with registration number EH 771 FST. Eddy opened the door to the driver's seat, showed me in and asked me to ignite the engine. I did so and as it was steaming, he showed me all the available gadgets in the vehicle. As I stepped out to admire the body work, Okey Abani Agwọ cut in, "Austin, gia nna kwue, ayi eziwo ozi I duyeri ayi (talk with our father, we have delivered the message you sent us)".

Usually, when I talk to or discuss with my children and my household I speak in impeccable okwu Ehugbo. Put simply, I said to him: "This is another pleasant surprise from you and your wife Furo. The one before this was the holiday trip of your mother and myself to the UK in 2001. You and your brothers pleasantly conspired to keep me in total darkness about this car gift. Thank you and thanks be to God for helping me realise one of my life's ambition - to own a personal car. This couldn't have come at a better time. I turned 78 last January. Again thank you. Give my best regards to your

dear and supportive, wife, Furo.

I then requested to speak with Furo, which I did in a few words. In his brief reply Austin said: “Papa, this ought to have got to you much earlier. I am happy I have been able to do it now. Please papa, I know you can drive, but it is our wish you do not drive now. Engage a driver to take you around for obvious reasons. We’ll do our best to help you keep the driver and maintain the car” he concluded.

I sent for a few of our umudi (kindred), who came and shared the joy with me. When they left, late in the night, I carefully went through all the relevant documents pertaining to the motor vehicle. It was a dream come true at a most unexpected time. Unexpected time because, I put in thirty-six years of service as a teacher in public schools in Nigeria, but mainly in the Eastern States of the country, and on retirement had about two years excursion into politics as a Vice Chairman of Afikpo Local Government Council. I put in some fourteen years in a Catholic Mission Secondary School, but could not afford a car.

In those fifty odd years, it was impossible for me to put together, money to buy even a tyre of a car. That was so because throughout my working years, I never earned up to one thousand naira a month as salary, even as a level thirteen officer and Vice Chairman of a Local Government Council. As a Vice Chairman of the Council, I was chauffeur-driven but found time to drive myself around at weekends. And so, to have a personal car and a driver some twenty four years after retirement from service was one of the best things that have happened to me in my old age. It was for me in Ehugbo parlance, “olili ndu (being celebrated while alive),” instead of at death. As the Igbo would say: “Uwa mgbede ka mma”. Glory be to God. What a pity this came some six years after Felly’s death!

Exactly two days after the car gift, our last daughter and child, Dr. Uchenna Dike Nnadi (nee Agwọ), was delivered of a male child at Enugu. A week later, in the company of my firm friend, Chief Nze Lawrence Okongodo, we travelled to Enugu to see my newest grandchild and present our traditional gifts to the mother and the child. Thanks be to God.

Some three weeks after our visit to Enugu, my dear friend Okongodo, fell sick and died a week later, 24th May at the Federal Medical Centre, Abakaliki. That was one of the worst shocks I ever had throughout my recorded life history. I could not believe it and wished it were a fairy tale. I had to come to terms with the truth on Friday, July 15, when his remains were interred in his Ngodo compound. May his soul rest in peace!

On Sunday (Nkwọ), 4th August, I badly missed oke enyi m (my great friend) Okongodo at the Thanksgiving Mass in honour of Uchenna's first son - Peter Dike Nnadi, going to Church in the Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Enugu. He and I attended Uchenna's wedding in the same Church on 17th July, 2010. That's life, 'Ces't la vie'

On Friday (Ahọ), and Tuesday (Ahọ), 2nd and 6th September, respectively our last son, Okechukwu Abani Agwọ performed the traditional marriage rites Atogbo nku, Amari ulo, Ahia ozi and Eju mia on his intended wife, Uche Anwara.

2012

The first three months (January to March), of the year were fairly turbulent in the Ehugbo Literacy and Bible Translation Project (ELBTP) administration. Unfortunate communication gaps reared their ugly heads between the Project Chairman and the Co-ordinator, Rev. Friday Inya on one hand, and between the rest of the team.

But by the special grace of God, the Headquarters office in Jos came to our rescue. On Saturday, 3rd March, a four-man team led by the Executive Director himself arrived in Afikpo. Others in the team were the Director of Technical Services, the Finance Officer and the Co-ordinator, Literacy Department. We discussed frankly up to late in the night and succeeded in mending most parts of our broken fence. The concluding session was proposed to hold in Jos on a date to be fixed by the Executive Director. We had to plod on, nevertheless.



Okey Abani Agwo's wedding on April 14, 2012

Okechukwu Abani Agwo's Traditional and Church wedding on the 12th and 14th April respectively, was a great opportunity for the entire Agwo's Family to be together at home since 1992 – twenty years ago. An unprecedented long and heavy rainfall almost marred the Nkwanwite Ceremony of 12th April. Austin and family from the U.K.; Eddy and his family from Lagos; Ngozi and her family from Abakaliki, Okey and his hopeful wife from Abuja, Dr. Uchennna Agwo from Enugu where she lives with her husband, converged at Ezi Agwo to meet with me, their father. It was a happy family reunion. The only pain was Felly's absence.

We all gathered and posed for a group family photograph on 12/4/12. Early in the morning the next day 13/4/2012, I had a closed door meeting with my three sons: Ogbonnia, Otu and Abani Agwo. By 9 a.m. Saturday (Nkwo), 14/04/12, Okechukwu's Church wedding day, Austin Agwo and his family were on their way to the U.K. via Port Harcourt.

And so with Okey's wedding, ALL my five children had become married: Ngozi, November 8, 1997; Austin, 5/9/1998; Eddy, 28/3/2005; Uchenna, 17/7/2010; and Okey, 14/4/ 2012. By God's grace each of them and their spouses are all graduates. Thanks be to God. They are all very happily married and gainfully employed.

That meeting with my sons could well be regarded as an open revelation of my Will now and in future. The high points of the issues discussed are contained in a separate document available to each one of them.

As a result of the Ehugbo Project misunderstanding, I headed a three-man delegation to Jos on Wednesday, 6th May. The other two were Pastor Victor Nnali Elem and Mr Martins O. Ewa. For most part of the following day Thursday, 7th May, we were at a round table conference to dialogue on the Project's headache. Our grouse was with Rev. Friday Inya of Amuro, Ehugbo, our then Co-ordinator/Facilitator. The arbitrating team comprised the Executive Director, the DTS, the Literary Co-ordinator and the Seed Company Representative, Dr. Ketty. After some three hours frank discussion, we arrived at a truce with Rev. F. Inya and jointly signed a communiqué addressed to the NBTT Management.

On Saturday (Nkwo), 7th July, Charles Idume Okpara at Ezi Idume, Amaha Amaizu, was ordained a Catholic Church Priest at St. Theresa's Cathedral, Abakaliki. He said his FIRST HOLY MASS at St. Mary's Pro- Cathedral Church, Afikpo on Sunday (Eke), 8/7/12.

After about seven years of seeking public service job, Okey was offered TWO good jobs by two Federal Government Establishments - Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana, ICT Department and Federal Inland Revenue Services (FIRS) Abuja. That was in July/August, 2012. Okey and myself discussed both offers and agreed the FIRS was better all-round.

Despite the misunderstanding that reared its ugly head, Pastor Victor Nnali Elem and myself put in extra time and co-authored the book, *Aka Ehugbo* - a fifty-six page collection of five hundred and six Ehugbo proverbs with English key notes. It was done under the aegis of the Ehugbo Literacy and Bible Translation Project to promote the reading and writing of Ehugbo Language. By the end of October, 2012, the printed copies were ready. For obvious reasons, the first presentation was in Lagos on November 2, at an ATWA Lagos Branch Civic ceremony. The outing was not as successful as we had thought, but a good mark was made.

2013

The New Year began with the putting up of the demarcation wall between Oyim Otu/Otu Oyim's side of the compound and the Ochie Ohoro Ogo building area. The funny behaviour of the duo was not unexpected so, I treated their action as one of those many sacrifices I had to make to realise the Ezi Agwo dream of PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE and good neighbourliness.

On Saturday (Orie), 12th January, 2013, I cleared the area at the new building site in readiness for construction work. I did it personally after the pegging off of the wall line. A week later on the 19th, Saturday (Nkwo), I ceremoniously laid the foundation stone of my new house in memory of my 80th birthday anniversary, the following day 20th January. It was a fitting 80th birthday anniversary GIFT. Thanks be to God for helping me through my children to achieve

my childhood dream of owning a befitting house in my Ezi Agwo village, another dream come true.

On Sunday (Nkwo), 27th January, Rebecca Oyim, the maid who nursed all my five children returned from Onitsha to Ehugbo very sick. After some eight weeks of agonizing ill-health in Mater Hospital, Afikpo, she died on Wednesday, 27th March. In close association with her late husband's family members, we gave her a befitting burial on Friday (Aho), 12th April. In appreciation of her faithful and honest service to the Agwo family especially during our child bearing period of over sixteen years, the family resolved to accept full responsibility of school education of her two children, Chidimma and Anayo Eni, to the best of our ability and based on their disposition to the offer. We pray and believe the Good Lord will help us show gratitude to a faithful maid.



**The laying of the
foundaton block of
my new house in
January, 2013**

From January to December and under the aegis of Ehugbo Literacy and Bible Translation Project (ELBTP), I, the Chairman, led the team that eventually produced the “Ogbaragwu Akpuru Okwu

Ehugbo” (Pictorial Chart and Calendar 2013 to December 2014). Earlier, between October 2008 and December 2012, the Ehugbo Language Orthography (ABCD - Zed and its grammar) had been put in place by the Rev. Enyi group in collaboration with our NBT Headquarters at Jos.

The Calendar was eventually unveiled on 30th December - Ehugbo Day Celebration. Though the proceeds were abysmally poor due to poor patronage, we made an indelible mark on the history of the development of Ehugbo Language. We hold the patent of it. Thanks be to God for the breakthrough.

At Ehugbo level, and even as an Onikara Ehugbo, I was the Chairman of the Committee that collated a thirty-five page document titled: “CUSTOMARY LAWS AND TRADITIONS OF ND’EHUGBO IN AFIKPO NORTH LGA OF EBONYI STATE”. The document was signed on 13/10/13, by the then four reigning Nde Ezeogos. Their Highnesses, Ezeogo C. Ekuma (Nkpogoro); John Ekuma (Afikpo); Arc/Engr. Ewa Elechi (Ohaisu) and B.O.Oti (Itim) and Nine of us. It remains a treasured property of Nd’Ehugbo.

On Friday (Aho), November, 22, a long drawn land litigation over UHU IKEE, EZI AGWO, occasioned by Ibe Ogbagi lineage (ikwu) over its ownership was put to rest. Nde Esaa Ehugbo overwhelmingly awarded the parcel of land to the people of Ezi Agwo for it is our ancestral home. Disputes over parts of that parcel of land had engaged Nde Ezi Agwo for over thirty years - specifically from 1982. We had at least five open ones with individuals and groups mainly from Amancho. We dedicate the victory to our ancestors. I personally thank God that He effectively used me to lead Nde Ezi Agwo all those years until the final battle of November, 22, 2013. We made a great history.

On Saturday (Orie), 7th December, 2013, I was in Lagos on the

invitation of the Amaizu Progressive Union, Lagos Branch for a FELLOWSHIP AWARD by the Union. The wordings on the plaque runs thus: ONIKARA GABRIEL A. AGWO - "In Recognition of your Uncommon Effort, Selfless and Meritorious Services to ensure all round Development of Amaizu in particular and Afikpo in General." I was, and am still, thrilled and greatly humbled by that recognition of what I did normally as a citizen of Amaizu, Ehugbo and humanity. That gesture was most unexpected. Thank you my Redeemer.

2014

As I grind cautiously towards my target date of December 2016 (by the grace of God), to conclude this autobiography project, I have decided to just put down monthly highlights from this year. Earlier in this write up, I had implied that from about the year 2000, when my last child Uchenna Egele Agwo, was already twenty years plus, all my five children the oldest Ogbonnia Agwo some 35 years old, they ought to have known and seen enough of me in all spheres of my private and public life to draw their individual conclusions about me. Thus, as there were hardly any outstanding pieces of information they would not be at home with, catalogue recordings would do.

Therefore, for the next two years or thereabouts, let my children - the first and main consumers of this work and others it might interest, fill the gaps I might have inadvertently glossed over.

I clocked eighty one on 20th January, and had, at my wish, a very low key household celebration. On 14th March, the management of an Abakaliki-based newspaper, The Peoples' Conscience, appointed me a member of the Editorial Board. The appointment letter came to me as a surprise. After a brief phone chat with the Editor-in-Chief, Charles Otu of Amuro Village, Ehugbo, I accepted the offer.

A few weeks later I chose a column in the periodic newspaper, titled: “IHE HI N’UKOGE” – (something from an oblong basket hung over the fire place in the yesteryears where dried meat or fish were preserved, i.e. a store for dried choice delicacies). Whenever the newspaper was published, the column peeped into the vanishing cultural and zero party traditional history and governance of our people. From reports I got from the management, the column was an asset to the newspaper.

The Ehugbo Literacy and Bible Translation Project (ELBTP) under my chairmanship launched the Ehugbo Language version of St. Luke’s Gospel of the Holy Bible. The Catholic Bishop of Abakaliki Diocese, His Lordship, Most Rev. Dr. Michael Nnachi Okoro through a proxy performed the unveiling ceremony.

By the second week of April, Professor Francis Ogbonnia Otunta signed off as the Rector of Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana, Afikpo after completing his second tenure. His eight years as a Rector in the Polytechnic brought about tremendous development to the Tertiary Institution. He set very high standards in every aspect of the Polytechnic’s administration. His departure was literally mourned by even his detractors, who were certainly very insignificant. I had every reason to be proud of him throughout his tenure.

Monday (Eke), 26th April, marked our Golden Jubilee Wedding Anniversary that NEVER WAS without Felly. We wedded on Sunday, 26th April, 1964 in the then St. Mary’s Catholic Chapel, New Site - now Mater Misericordiae Parish, Afikpo.

From May to July, I had a rare gift of six grand children from Mrs Ehihia Ekuma, Christopher Otu Ekuma’s wife, a male child; Uche Okechukwu Abani Agwo (8th May) twins – a boy and a girl, Dr. Uchenna Egele Nnadi (nee Agwo) my last daughter – triplets – two

boys and one girl. Thank you, God.

On 29th August, 2014, I received a plaque with the following inscription: “A MERITORIOUS AWARD presented to MR GABRIEL ANIGO AGWO As a special friend of MATER MISERICORDIAE HOSPITAL, AFIKPO, For your support and contributions to the growth and development of the Institution.”

I was in Abuja on 13th September, on the invitation of the Abuja Branch of Afikpo Town Welfare Association for the launching of their ATWA House. Dr. Mark Abani was the Chairman of the Planning Committee while Professor C. O. O. Chukwu, the then Nigerian Minister of Health and Ebola destroyer – was the Special Guest of Honour.

October, 2014, was a month of another breakthrough in my life’s history. By God’s grace, after about a year’s hardwork, I was able to place on the book stand “EHUGBO TECHNICAL COLLEGE HANDBOOK” – an abridged history of the Ehugbo Technical College, Afikpo – some thirty-four years after its founding in 1979.

On the 8th of October, I delivered to the school principal, the first batch of two thousand copies. Both past and current students of the College need a copy of the handbook to have first-hand information of how the College came to be through communal labour and the relevance of the age grade system in Ehugbo.

As a fall-out of Professor Christian O. Chukwu’s induced interest in the Governorship seat of Ebonyi State, Austin Agwo, my first son resident then in London was at home. He, Austin, came to offer his services as a Mass Communication graduate and computer expert. His unbroken stay of two solid weeks at home was very significant indeed. Since February 1992, he left the shores of Nigeria to live in London, he had never spent up to a week at a stretch in Ezi Agwo. Besides, I had a very valued time – one on one, father/son

interaction with him most of the two weeks he was in the family house. In fact, we touched virtually every issue under the sun about the family – two great friends discussing family affairs and implementing those possible.

Based on what I had on the drawing board about opening a business centre, he left behind for me a three-in-one printer/photocopier/scanning machine in addition to a lamination machine with its accessories.

The year ended on a rather sad note as Professor Chukwu's bid for the State's governorship seat came to an abrupt end. Political mischief makers at the PDP national headquarters thwarted everything. He was deceived and misguided, so he called it quits. It is better to imagine the effect on the psyche of Prof, Amaizu village and Ehugbo people in general. Very sad! For months and years later the shock lingered in my family because he is our special friend.

However, by the end of the year, I had made deliberate attempts to assemble my articles, which were published in the Reflections Column of Afikpo Today Magazine for over twenty years. My intention is to compile them into a book in later years, so help me God.

2015

The Nigerian general election fever was all over the place as we got into this year. For no clear reasons, I was in very low spirit about almost everything around me.

A little respite for me: On Thursday, 12th February, I was a Resource Person in the 101.5 Unity F.M. Radio Nigeria, Abakaliki phone-in programme. It was a thirty-minute programme on "CORRUPTION,

A COMMON ENEMY” with emphasis on: values and family name; its influence on corruption under the values and ethics series. It was very exciting and good outing.

At the end of the presidential election, Goodluck Jonathan of the People’s Democratic Party conceded defeat to Muhammadu Buhari of the opposition All Progressives Congress, and thus ended the PDP’s sixteen-year (1999-2015) rule. Historic!

In Ebonyi State, Engineer David Nweze Umuahi of the PDP was elected Governor of the State. He succeeded Chief Martin Nwancho Elechi of the same party who served the State for eight years.

By the end of June, block work on three out of four Ezi Agwo shops close to our **ọnụ ọgọ** had been built to lintel level at most parts.

In the last week of September, it became imperative I needed a holiday. Almost at the peak of serious preparations for the Jesus Film launching, I had to travel out to Emene-Enugu. From Saturday 26th September to Saturday 3rd October, I was in Okechukwu Abani Agwo’s residence very close to Dr. Uchenna’s matrimonial home. It was a welcome relief especially with six grandchildren around me – two from Okey and four from Uchenna. I had a real retreat, which greatly improved my mood.

For nearly four months – August to November, I was neck-deep in preparations for, and the launching of JESUS FILM – (Jisos na asu okwu Ehugbo) a product of the Ehugbo Literacy and Bible Translation Project (ELBTP). The ceremony came off successfully on Saturday (Ahọ), 21st November.

Some indigenous Pastors and Church elders were very helpful. Special mention must be made of Nzuko Inyom Ehugbo under the leadership of Hon. Mrs Felicia Egwu (Nne Carton). They

contributed more than fifty percent of the total money used for the ceremony. Only God can adequately compensate them.

But on the whole, the income was a far cry from what we anticipated. Nevertheless, the Great Commission Movement of Nigeria (GCMN) based in Jos, who collaborated with us to achieve that feat were impressed, and we of the ELBTP were satisfied we made that everlasting mark on the sand of evangelization through Ehugbo dialect of the Igbo Language.

I, as an Onikara Ehugbo, at almost eighty-three years old, felt quite happy that I was one of the voice actors in that epoch-making documentation. After over two months of intensive practice, I had the privilege of being the Chairman of the group that produced the JESUS film. Watching and hearing JESUS SPEAK to Nd'Ehugbo in impeccable Okwu EHUGBO is most interesting. I feel fulfilled in this singular participation. No reward for me can surpass this.

Besides, I headed this group of umu ali (children of) Ehugbo, who pioneered the reading and writing of Okwu Ehugbo (dialect) whose axial function culminated in the production of the JESUS FILM. Not only that, the development of Ehugbo Language and the translation of the Holy Bible into our native dialect, remain the main target of the Ehugbo Project.

Meanwhile, the Ehugbo Literacy and Bible Translation Project (ELBTP) has to her credit the orthography (A-Z) of Ehugbo; collation of some 506 Ehugbo Proverbs (aka EHUGBO); a pictorial calendar illustrating the thirty eight letters of the Ehugbo alphabet (ogbaragwu akpuru okwu Ehugbo) and Ozioma Dika Luk Derie na Okwu Ehugbo (the Gospel according to Luke in Ehugbo dialect). The other books and teachings of the New and Old Testaments are in progress. The few translators and the Management Committee are able, willing and working very hard to realise the goal but the

finances to offset the various bills and production costs are not forthcoming. This may delay the final result. Nevertheless, the team remains resolute. One day it will come to pass by God's special grace.

Above all, my being a leading member of the Ehugbo Project team gives me the joy no human being can ever imagine. Chineke kaa (God, thank you)!

2016

Wednesday (Nkwo), 20th January, was my 83rd birthday anniversary. I attended an early morning Holy Mass and had a late evening family get-together to remember the journey so far.



Me cutting my 83rd Birthday Cake on January 20, 2016

A few days later after the incidence in my premises, precisely on Thursday (Eke), 21/01/16, at an assembly of men sitting at Ezi Ukaka, the culprit and his collaborator were fined ten thousand naira each and seriously admonished for their scandalous behavior. Yes, that is one of those problems of living together even among “brothers”.

On Sunday (Nkwo), 24th January, the wife, her brother and one of her children (Ogbo Idam) of my late maternal brother, Gabriel Idam Egwu of Amangwu Nkpogoro, paid me an unusual and embarrassing visit. They made very odd request: That I should lease to them part of my own piece of Nde Eluu Idam land (which I bought) to add to the over three plots they occupied by force without paying a kobo to us – Nd’Eluu Idam, the group that I am legitimately and traditionally heading up till now. Thanks be to God I managed to restrain myself from getting annoyed. I pretended not to understand what the request was and the woman repeated it. I politely told them to leave my house. Some fifteen months after the incident, I have neither seen nor heard from them. I continue to wonder what was at the back of their mind for making such a request. I hope they got the message and would allow a sleeping dog lie.

Thursday (Nkwo), 28th January, carpenters completed the roofing of my new house with aluminium roofing sheets (ash colour). I thank God and my children, through Okechukwu Abani Agwo, for the broad smile that achievement has placed on my face.

Easter Monday, 28th March, 2016, my nephew, Emmanuel Idam Oko got wedded to former Miss Patricia Orie Oluchi Oko at St Mary’s Catholic Church, Afikpo. Mr and Mrs Godwin Oko Oka were their sponsors. It was a very memorable event in my family. Apart from Austin Agwo and his family in the U.K., every other Agwo Anigo family member was present. Edward Otu Agwo and family (Lagos – 4); Mrs Ngozi Orietutu Oka (nee Agwo), spouse and family (8); Okechukwu Abani Agwo and family (4); Dr. (Mrs) Uchenna Nnadi (nee Agwo) represented her spouse and children (6); Otu Ekuma (Idam’s eldest brother) and his family (5) were all part of the wedding ceremony. It was an historic family re-union – a near-full house to rejoice with a lovable member of the family.

By a strange coincidence, on Tuesday (Orie), 19th April, 2016, I stumbled on one of the several random jottings I made where I put down: “Friday (Orie), 19th April, 1968 as the day Afikpo fell to the invading Nigerian soldiers during the Nigeria/Biafra Civil War. That 19th April, 2016, was exactly forty-eight years, the Nigerian Army from across the Cross River invaded and took-over Ehugbo (Afikpo town) without resistance. In my mind’s eyes, I recollected what happened that day – forty-eight years ago (Ref. 19th April, 1968 in this memoir)



**On my attainment of Horii
Ehugbo Age Set on 30th
April, 2016**

On Tuesday (Eke), April 26, I attended the VERY LAST official meeting of the Onikara Ehugbo in their chamber at the Eke Ukwu Market from 10.30 a.m. to 11.00 a.m. as an Onikara Ehugbo. The following Eke day, Saturday, 30th April, was another upward movement of the age grades in Ehugbo. The three age grades that made up Isi Elia moved up to become Ekpukue Eto; the three age

grades that formed the Ekpuke Eto moved up to become junior Ekpuke Esaa; the three age grades that made up the senior Esaa moved up to become Onikara; while those of us that were the Onikara moved up to become Horii; and those who were Horii also moved up to become Rikweri – the most elderly in Ehugbo. But only very few live up to that age.

Days earlier, I got the key officers of the Esaa to sponsor a video and photograph coverage of the event. They accepted the plan as I told them it was for future record purposes. Since about 1896 when we were informed that the Eke Ukwu Market of Ehugbo came to be at its present location and the eight-calendar year upward movement came to be at about 1920, there has never been such official electronic coverage of the event.

In the same vein and to further stabilize the head dress code system in Ehugbo, I addressed the Essa and Onikara in their ‘Ulubi’ at different sittings. I convinced them to legalize the colours of the locally woven cap that should be worn by all the age sets in Ehugbo as follows: (i) the Ekpuke Eto to wear the variegated white and black colour woven; (ii) the Esaa to wear the combination of red, black and white woven; (iii) the Onikara to wear the pure red woven; (iv) the Horii to wear the yellow woven; and (v) the Rikweri to wear the black woven. This my brain child was overwhelmingly accepted and approved by the elders council. The corresponding tassels at the tapered end of all the colours remain as usual. This is another mile post I happen to have spearheaded in my beloved Ehugbo.

My children, at home and abroad, gave me one of their routine surprises: Buffet Dinner on my behalf for streams of relatives, friends, well-wishers, and anybody who cared to pop in to say “congratulations on your attainment of the HORII (ORII) age set. “Obasi no nelu, goziji m wo (God in heaven, continue to bless them for me).”

A few weeks to the 30th of April age grade movement, there emerged obvious signs that the Itim and the Ozizza groups of villages were not happy with the structure of leadership at the Ulubi Esaa and were strongly going to challenge the about 120-year old convention, with regard to the position of Okabue/Chief Speaker/Chairman of the Esaa (Ehugbo council of elders). Since inception in about 1920, the position had alternated between Ohaisu and Ugwuegu groups of villages for reasons which are outside the scope of this memoir. However, as over the years, I found myself a rallying point in a number of issues involving Ehugbo culture and tradition, there was no reasonable way I could not be a significant part of those anxious to broker the peace in the Ehugbo Omaka-ejali impasse.



The Reception of the new oniikara and Horii by members of the C.M.O. of St Monica's Ward on 28th of May, 2016

Among the roles I played included separate meetings with representatives of: (a) Nde Esaa (b) Nde Onikara and Horii age sets of Nkpoghoru, Ugwuegu, Ohaisu, Itim and Ozizza groups of villages. On Friday (Aho), 21/10/16 and Tuesday (Aho), 25/10/16 respectively, I met with the four Ezeogo (Traditional Rulers) of Itim, Ozizza, Ohaisu and Afikpo (Ugwuegu) Autonomous Communities in my house. The stool of the Ezeogo of Nkpoghoru Autonomous Community was vacant then due to the death of their Ezeogo. I

also contacted some Ehugbo elite around Ebonyi State – legal and civil persons. Some, in other parts of Nigeria and in diaspora, I contacted on phone. Each of the groups and individuals were firmly in support of giving peace a chance in Ehugbo Omaka-ejali.

Apart from those I discussed with over the telephone, all the meetings were in my house at Ezi Agwo, Amaizu.

Along the line, the Itim and Ozizza groups took the matter to the officials of Ebonyi State Government. In reaction to that, the Ugwuegu and Ohaisu groups headed to the High Court in Afikpo to restrain the other group. Nkpoghoru group on her own took a stand and aligned herself with the Ohaisu/Ugwuegu group, which the Itim and Ozizza groups didn't like. With the Nkpoghoru stand, a stalemate arose and was still on by the time I concluded these my memoirs on 31st December, 2016.

In the confused state that arose, I advised myself to remain neutral irrespective of my own village group's stand. And I did.

Nevertheless, I sincerely pray and hope that a lasting out-of-court settlement would be found so that we will continue to enjoy peace in our beloved town – Ehugbo. May the Good Lord help us. Amen. Sunday (Eke), 31st July, 2016, is the day I can never forget in a hurry. At precisely 11 a.m. the ONLY person older than myself in Ezi Agwo, Horii Joseph Ogbonnia Idume, peacefully passed on to eternity at the grand age of eighty-six (86) years. He was buried on Friday (Nkwo) 25th November, 2016. Engr. Joseph Ogbonnia Idume leading his siblings and Nd'Ezi Agwo as a people, gave him a very befitting burial.

By his exit, I was left, at 84, as the oldest person in Ezi Agwo. I firmly trust the Almighty God will guide me with His grace to continue piloting the affairs of our people until His appointed time

when He will hand over Ezi Agwo to a worthy successor. So help us God.

RECAP/CONCLUSION

This December marked the last month of my Authobiography which covered eighty-three years of my life history on earth – 1933 to 2016 and some sixty (60) years of “continuous” writing – 1956 (as a final year Teacher Training Student at Ogoja to December 2016 as an Horri Ehugbo).

I chose to end it in December, 2016, the year I, by God’s special grace, attained the Horii age grade in Ehugbo. This is the second to the very last age set ANY BODY can attain in life in Ehugbo. An average age of 83 years qualifies one for it. The last, RIKWERI, is for those who survive up to an average age of ninety-one (91) years and above. Even if the survivor lives up to a thousand years or more, RIKWERI is the mark-time status.

Age and memory are no longer very friendly, I chose to stop when I can clearly account for what I have committed to writing.

Usually December has become a month of various ceremonies and festivals – each competing for people’s time and avoidable expenses. I did my best to maintain a fairly low key on the average. However, the 16th Coronation Anniversary of our Traditional Ruler, Onikara Ezeogo John Obeni Ekuma is the one I could not avoid. I was the Father of the Day and the Anniversary Lecturer at the W.T.C. Primary School field to a mammoth crowd at the Civic Reception on Saturday (Aho), 24th December, 2016. The topic was: “Traditional Rulership in Ehugbo,” from its inception in 1976 to 2016. The verbal and body language of the audience confirmed it was a good outing. Thanks be to God.

As from Wednesday, 28th to Friday, 30th December the Amaizu Progressive Union, Lagos Branch had her third Edition of FREE Medical Outreach in Amaizu Town Hall. Engineer Edward Osondu Otu Agwo who then was the Branch Chairman, led the team. It therefore afforded me an opportunity to have value time with him and his siblings at home.

The 31st of December, (Saturday Orié) 2016, will remain an evergreen day in my life's journey on earth. The event was right in my Ezi Agwo ancestral home at the family house backyard quadrangle. The place was delicately lit. The low voltage energy bulbs hanging from the orange/lemon tree branches gave the sit-out a near natural moonlight effect. The mid-night breeze rustling the overshadowing leaves provided very soothing atmosphere.

When I was invited to be part of this serene setting a few minutes to mid-night, I met Eddy representing the Agwo family in Lagos, Ngozi Oka (nee Agwo) and her spouse, Goddy Oka representing our grand children at Abakaliki, Abani Agwo and his wife, representing their children who were sleeping some few steps away from where we were. A few minutes earlier, Egele Nnadi (nee Agwo), I was informed, had phoned in showing solidarity of her husband and their four children at the Enugu/Nsukka zone; Austin and Furo with goodwill message on behalf of the U.K. family were on the air waves sharing in spirit, with the Agwo family at Ezi Agwo. That made the circle complete. As the last seconds of 2016 rolled by ushering in the first seconds of 2017, we exchanged spectacular warm embraces with one another. Real hilarious "Happy New Year" rented the air.

Yes, that was a very fitting closing ceremony to mark the final fullstop to my Autobiography, and without their knowing it, witnessed by my biological children in person or by proxy in the presence of my beloved nephews Otu Ekuma and Idam Oko and

their spouses and family.

Yes, this is ME, Anigo Agwo, inside out, as captured by me from January 1933 to December, 2016.

Whatever you must have observed as my personal failings, do prayerfully avoid them. Forgive me if ever I scandalized you in any way. There must have been mistakes of the head, NOT of the heart. Earnestly, I love each one of you very dearly. Never imitate anything bad about me.

Remain blessed in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen!

Thank you God Almighty, The Holy Trinity and our Mother Mary for EVERYTHING and for the marvelous work you have done with me. I am yours forever.

Please forgive me for my misdeeds and grant me the grace to make me worthy to be with you forever in heaven at your appointed time. Amen.



Me addressing the Onikara and Horii at St Monica's Ward, Amaizu in May, 2016

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MY FAMILY TREE

My great great grand mother, Mgbo Una of Ibe Okwu maternal Family was born at Ezi Agbo Amancho in Amaizu Village, Ehugbo (Afikpo). She got married to Urom Uro of Amangwu Nkpoghor. They had four children, namely:

- (1) Idume Urom (Male)
- (2) Orum Urom (Female)
- (3) Osi Urom (Female)
- (4) Oko Urom (Male).

At a very early age Oko Urom, the youngest male, was taken to Asaba, then Western Nigeria by a distant relative and he never returned.

Idume Mgbo (a.k.a. Idume Urom), the eldest child and the only surviving male settled at Amangwu Nkpoghor.

Orum Urom, who later became my grandmother got married to Otu Uzo of Ezi Ukwu, Amaizu Village.

SPECIAL NOTE

Her sister Ogwu Eni got married at Amangwu Nkpoghor and bore Mgbo Eni who got married to Oko Elem Mma at Ukpa. They later bore Eyi Oko, Hon. Elem Oko and Eni Oko of Ezi Oti, Ukpa.

From my grand mother's marriage she had SEVEN children – all Females

They were, from the elder-most:

- (1) Uzo Otu married at Amangwu Nkpoghor
- (2) Mgbo Otu married at Mgbom and later Amaechara Agbo
- (3) Orie Otu married at Ezi Agwo, Amaha-Amaizu

- (4) Alu Otu married at Ezi Agbo, Amancho, Amaizu
- (5) Ugo Otu married at Amaelu Amaizu
- (6) Orum Otu married at Ndibe, Ozizza and back to Ndibe
- (7) Ogeri Otu married at Amauzu, Nkpogho later Ukpa.

These seven female folks bore the following children;

- (1) Uzo Otu (i) Okpara Uzo (M) Agbogo Nkpogho
(ii) Otu Uzo (M) Agbogo Nkpogho
(iii) Ogeri Uzo (F) Agbogo Nkpogho
- (2) Mgbo Otu (i) Irem Oko Ola (M) (Mgbom)
(ii) Ewa Isu (M) Amaechara Agbo
- (3) Orie Otu: (My own mother) got married to Agwo Anigo at Ezi Agwo, Amaha Amaizu. She bore:
(i) Anigo Agwo (M)
(ii) Ugwome Agwo (F) (a.k.a. Ogbulu) first married at Amancho, Amaizu then at Ezi Akani Ukpa.
(iii) Otu Agwo (M)
- (4) Alu Otu bore (i) Elum Alu (F) married at Ezi Agbo, Amancho
(ii) Orum Alu (F) married at Ezi Akani Ukpa
(iii) Orie Alu (F) married at Amancho
(iv) Uche Alu (M)
(v) Otu Alu (M)
(vi) Ogwu Alu (F) married at Ezi Ukwu, Amaizu
- (5) Ugo Otu bore (i) Ugo Oko (F) married at Agboride, Amaizu
(ii) Ehihia Oko (F) married at Amancho
(iii) Ogwu Oko (F) married at Ezi Ukwu, Amaizu
(iv) Ogbo Oko (M) first son
(v) Edward Otu Oko (M) second son
(vi) Orum Oko (F) married at Ezi Agbi Ukpa
(vii) Mgbo Oko (F) married at Amancho

- (6) Orum Otu bore (i) Egwu Utom (M) at Ndibe
(ii) Ogeri Utom (F) married at Ndibe
(iii) Oti Elechi (M) born at Orra Ozizza
(iv) Otu Utom (M) born at Ndibe
(v) Nwachi Utom (M) born at Ndibe
- (7) Ogeri Otu bore (i) Oti Irem (M) at Ukpa
(ii) Ogwu Irem (F) married at Enohia Itim
(iii) Orum Irem (F) born at Ukpa

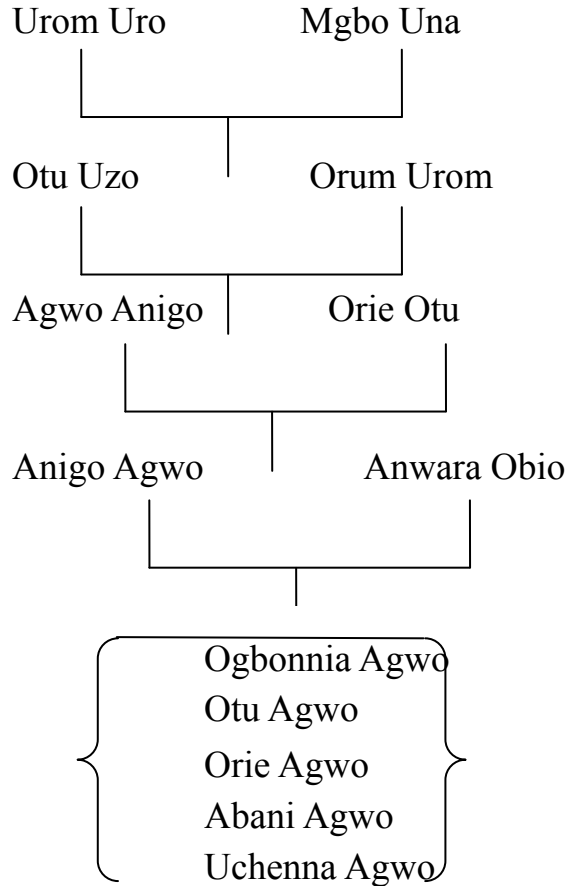
A further breakdown of the off-shoots from my mother's children is as follows:

- (1) Anigo Agwo got married to Anwara Obio Otu and begot Ogonnia Agwo (M), Otu Osondu Agwo (M), Ngozi Orie-Otu Agwo (F), Okechukwu Abani Agwo (M) and Uchenna Egele Agwo (F).
- (2) Ugwome Agwo bore Otu Ekuma (M) at Amancho, Oko-Ogbo (M), Agwo Oko-Ogbo (M), Ikpeghe Egonnia Oko-Ogbo (F) and Idam Oko-Ogbo (M) all at Ukpa.

From my five biological children I had as at 31st December, 2016 Eighteen grand children (nine males and nine females). viz:

- Ogonnia Agwo has one male and two females (3)
- Otu Osondu Agwo has two males (2)
- Ngozi Orie-Otu Agwo has two males and four females (6)
- Okechukwu Abani Agwo has one male and two females (3)
- Uchenna Egele Agwo has one female and three males (4)

MY FAMILY TREE IN BRIEF



From these I had eighteen grand children (nine males & nine females) as on 31st December, 2016.

My biological grand children as at 31st December, 2016

	My Children		Their Children	Date of Birth	Sex
1.	Ogbonnia Agwo Austin	1. 2. 3.	Ugonna Zaid Alex Amarachukwu Aimee Ibiso Anwara Chiamaka Obiajulu Deinabo	7/2/2002 28/3/2003 2/7/2007	M F F
2.	Otu Agwo Eddy Osondu	1. 2.	Jose Maria Oluebube Chukwu Valentine Kamtochukwu	4/10/2006 4/12/2008	M M
3.	Orie-Otu Agwo Ngozi Juliet	1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6.	Vincent Chidubem Oka Gabriel Ogonna Oka Eunice Chinwendu Enyoto Oka Felicia Chinonyerem Anwara Oka Mary Ann Chikodiri Oka Perpetua Ngozika Orieoma Oka	25/09/1998 24/04/2000 27/04/2001 28/04/2004 20/07/2006 21/11/2011	M M F F F F
4.	Abani Agwo Okechukwu	1. 2. 3.	Kelechi Gabriel Anigo Amarachi Felicitas Anwara Chienye Simone	8/5/2014 8/5/2014 17/10/2016	M F F
5.	Uchennia Agwo Egele	1. 2. 3. 4.	Dike Peter Nnadi Mary Uchenna Nnadi Emmanuel Kelenna Nnadi Anthony Ogonna Nnadi	19/04/2011 25/07/2014 25/07/2014 25/07/2014	M F M M