

THE BIRTH OF A LIGHTENING ROD: AZUMINI WELFARE ASSOCIATION

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(Editorial comments provided by Edward E. Eule)

INTRODUCTION:

First, the publication of this article/essay this year (2008) coincides with the fiftieth anniversary period of what today we have come to know as the Azumini Welfare Association (**AWA**). Further, the remaining gentlemen who sowed the seeds of **AWA** are steadily getting up there in age. Incidentally, one of the original founders of **AWA** (Sir Willie Uchegbu), is now demised. Perhaps, in a small way, this exposition could be this writer's way of saying "thank you" to these men - - the visionary founders of **AWA** - - whose names would soon be revealed to the reader, and to whom due credit must be given while they are still here with us. This article is essentially about the genesis and history of Azumini Welfare Association, which the writer has dubbed as "**The Birth of a Lightning Rod**". Some caveats or cautionary notes seem necessary. The information contained herein are based on the following: (1) personal recollections of prior readings from memorized notes of the town clerk in my late father's (Eze Waubani) royal court during his period of reign, and (2) stated oral and confirmed accounts of the principal participants in the founding of **AWA**. These principal participants are: Sir Willie Uchegbu, Chief David S. Banigo and late Chief Sunny Uchegbu (Chief minister during the reign of Eze Waboso).

AUDIENCE WITH THE EYEWEALI:

Sir Willie Uchegbu, the son of late Chief Raymond Obisie Uchegbu, who was Eze Waubani's nephew (he was popularly known as Wakanna) was employed at the local county council at Akwete, one of

our Ndoki towns, right after his high school education. While he was at his station in Akwete, he observed that both Akwete and Obohia had civic associations known as welfare associations. Sir Willie was so enamored with the impact and actions of these association in the socio-cultural and economic developments or initiatives on their communities that he could not contain himself, and after so much thought rushed to Aba-Ngwa to confer with his older brother, late Chief Sunny Uchegbu (who was fondly known as "Ocheberii-ali) and then Mr. David Banigo now (Chief David Banigo, fondly known by his nchueze-age grade peers as "Zik"). He knew that these other men were equally patriotic young citizens of Azumini of the first order, and had no doubt that they would offer him guidance as to whether the Eze and his ruling council of Chiefs and Uhu-Obu na Oha Ali Azumini would buy into an idea of having a similar organization in the Azumini community, indeed the Ikuorator kingdom of Ndoki.

Right around the new yam festival period in Azumini in 1958, Chiefs Banigo and Uchegbu set out to Azumini from Aba to broach the idea to Eze Waubani (Chief Ben as he was fondly called by his peers -- Chiefs Okere Imuchey, Archibald Dennar, Feyi Waboso, Okere Mgboroigbo Ogwe, Belle Wekpe and Obanyi Wankpa). The reader would observe that I did not mention Chiefs Steven Wabara Waeke, Harry Owuchey, Raymond Obisie Uchegbu (Wakanna) and Agomo Dents, as these were younger men and amongst these later mentioned, only Chief Steven was a proper village chief (Ohuku #2) and member of Eze Waubani's council of Chiefs. Harry, Obisie and Agomo, were associate members, so recognized for their remarkable services. On a Saturday evening in March 1958, then Mr. Banigo (now Chief Banigo) set out to the Eze's Royal Court in Uhunta Village to inform Eze of the brilliant idea Mr. Willie Uchegbu (now Sir Willie, the Eze's wanwa i.e. grandnephew) had gained from his station at Akwete that could also work for Azumini. The Eyeweali (Eze Waubani)

asked Banigo who was later joined at the Royal court by Sunny Uchegbu, whether Willie would be willing to stand before the council of chiefs and later Uhu-obu na Oha Ali Azumini to state his idea to them. They both retorted in unison that Willie will do so without hesitation. Then the Eze told them to go and come back with Willie around Easter or early April or so (nde a-ma achu oborji).

Before the appointed date, The Eyeweali had consulted his council on the young men's idea and they authorized him to summon them before the council to tell their story. The then young men left the Eze's court with a sense of euphoria and off they went to Akwete to tell Sir Willie Uchegbu what transpired. They informed him that The Eyeweali wanted all three to come back in 14 days time to stand before the him, his council of chiefs and uhu-obu na oha ali Azumini and restate their idea. Sir Willie was so pleased, such that left his job location in the middle of week to Aba to be with his brother (Chief Uchegbu) and Chief Banigo (Sunday Banigo) for a couple days before they were to head out to Azumini for the appointment with The Eyeweali and others. You can imagine the euphoria and anxiety these young men were going through since in those days the aura of these men and the institutions they represented were both mystical and disarming to anyone, much less to even come and stand in and before them. Believe me, I know, I grew up in the royal court and over the years as a child watched grown men shiver in their pants/shoes at the thought of standing in front of these chiefs.

IDEA PRESENTATION TO ALL OF AZUMINI:

As was observed from my prior readings of records of events memorized by then town clerk, Mr. Frank Emuchay and restated and confirmed by witness account of still living participants, the young men with Sir Willie in front, then stood up and stated the idea and humbly implored the Eze and his council to consider establishing a civic association such as he witnessed at the place/town of his

employment. They individually stated that the association would complement not compete nor usurp any powers or authorities of the established traditional institutions of Azumini. Further, the association would spearhead development efforts, would be a source of resource for our community in warding off vagabonds both inside and outside of Azumini, that the association would even be an instrument in external public relations efforts and serve as another lobbying group of governmental officials to bring goodies to our Azumini. Before they were to be dismissed from the presence of The Eyeweali and his council of chiefs, our noble Eze asked the young men ever so gently "owu keke ama kpor nhe onu baa kpani ayii" (i.e. what name shall this thing that you told us be called?). Sir Willie retorted with humility that it should be called Welfare Association just like those other people from where he got the idea called theirs. The young men were both persuasive and convincing in their presentation and needless to say The Eyeweali and his Council of Chiefs were very impressed, and those present from that moment knew that the young men's idea would be accepted by the citizens of Azumini.

The Eyeweali after consultation with his ruling council summoned the entire Azumini community to an all important national meeting around eru owa period, failure to report carried with it untold penalty/ies. The town criers (a function of the Ekpe Society, previously mentioned in my other writing, The Historic/Significant Sites of Azumini) led by selfless sons in service of Azumini, namely late Messrs Nnah Wulu (a gentleman of quiet dignity), Ekenta Wulu-Ama (a very tall joyful and playful man) and Wabara Ekpe (a gentleman in his time whom you could have matched with any of the so-called comedians in USA and he would have come out heads and shoulders above them all) were instructed to rally (kuo nkwa) the people of the impending all important national meeting of the Azumini community.

On the appointed day, Azumini citizens from all over Nigeria were there. That gathering is still considered one of the epic gatherings of the Azumini community in the 20th century. The Eyeweali rose while the citizens were on their feet and related the forward-looking idea of the three young men to the citizens. Then, he asked if the community of Azumini wanted anything of the sort. Eyewitnesses, said it was like a chorus from the heavens, how the citizens responded with one single voice of "eenn Eyeweali na Eze Ikuoriorator, nde weali ayii, ayi kwele nuooo" (i.e. "Yes" to The Eyeweali's question). Further, The Eyeweali (Eze) informed the citizens that a name had been suggested as "Azumini Welfare Association" for the organization, he asked the community whether this was acceptable to them and again in unison the people retorted "eenn Eyeweali ayii na Eze Ikuoriorator ayi kwele na aha kara" (i.e. "Yes"). On this evening/early night about 7:00PM it became clear that something momentous had happened that will for a long time remain in the annals of history of Azumini. The Eyeweali then authorized that the official lunching and inauguration of the association for December 1958.

THE BIRTH:

So, on 30th day of December, 1958, was born unto Azumini, Ndoki, in the Niger Delta Diocese, a Lightning Rod, called The Azumini Welfare Association. At this inaugural lunching, The Eyeweali decreed that branches should be formed in all the towns and cities where Azumini citizens reside and pursue their earnings/daily living. At the first inaugural on that December 30, 1958, our first Western educated medical doctor, Dick Emuchay was unanimously elected the national chairman. He held this position until early 1970 when he was voted out unanimously and replaced with Dr. Marcus Feyi Waboso, who later became The Eyeweali upon the demise of Eze Benjamin Waubani Ekueme.

FORMATIVE PERIOD:

Like any organization, the AWA was not immune to acrimony of the time, which was the case towards the later part of Emuchay's administration in the early 1970s. In fact, stories have it that his insistence on keeping Azumini, indeed Ndoki, in the political relationship with the Igbos whom we share little or no common bearings with, led to his removal from office. In fact, the issue of moving us to our proper geographic, historical, cultural and political state of the Rivers State has severely damaged our intra-citizen's relationships. Most potent arguments at the time were that we share a lot in common with our Bonny and Opobo brethren. Our mannerisms, culture, entire ways of life differ from that of Ibos, and are same without question with that of Opobo and Bonny. Incidentally the Opobo and Bonny communities were established long after Azumini was already settled by our earlier Ijo (Ijaw) for bearers from the central Ijo region of Niger Delta. The history of these communities --our kin communities-- never fails to mention this fact (see History of Okolo-Ama at www.igbaniawo.org and www.azumini.org; historical/significant sites of Azumini).

LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION , 1958-2000:

Thus at the annual national convention in early/mid 1970s, late Mr. Geoffrey Ukatta moved a motion to remove Emuchay from office and immediately nominated Waboso for chairman instead. His motion carried and Waboso was overwhelmingly elected the new chairman.

When late Dr. Waboso became the Eze, the late Mr. Willie Wabara was elected chairman in 1978/79. After Mr. Wabara, then Mr. Ishmael Obiayi (late Chief Obiayi) was elected chairman and served into late 80s early 90s. His era was known for extra-conservative fiscal decisions. After him, was Mr. Wachuku Adindu, now The Eyeweali of Azumini, followed by Mr. Israel Egege (now

Chief Egege, the head chief of Ohuku #2 village of Azumini, Ndoki), and after Egege, late Mr. Chidike Okere (aka Ohuchey) was elected chairman in the late 1990s until the turn of the 21st century.

THE BRANCHES:

Aba Branch of Azumini Welfare Association (1959): This was the first branch of the association formed outside of Azumini. Aba's proximity had nothing to do with it, so let us just dispel this notion. In fact, unsubstantiated or unconfirmed legend has it that before nde-igbo became socially dominant in Aba, Azumini sons used to be very influential in that the town.

Besides we also had a large population of our people in Aba due to employment opportunities there at the time but this shifted like wildfire to the Rivers state—particularly Port Harcourt after Nigeria's independence in early 1960s to present. The first elected chairman of this branch was late Wankwo Wanne and Edwin Wabara of Umogo village was deputy Chaiman. Before the establishment of AWA at Aba, there was an umbrella organization for all citizens of Ikuorator kingdom of which Azumini was the head community. The organization was known as Ikuorator Improvement Association (IIA), however, the formation of AWA meant the demise of IIA, so all members of IIA joined AWA, irrespective of wherefrom in Ikuorator. It has been further stated that because of the influence of Azumini citizens in Aba at the time, other Ndoki kins identified themselves as citizens of Azumini when asked and especially if they were in trouble, knowing that by saying they were from Azumini they would be spared of most difficulties.

The Port Harcourt Branch of AWA (1960):

This was the second branch formed after our national headquarters was established in Azumini in 1958. Late Mr. Aaron Ayawoke, a first cousin of late Eze Waubani, was the first elected chairman

of this branch in 1960, with Late Messrs Richard Ukatta Halliday as the treasurer and Friday Dandison Dinney as secretary.

Onitsha, was the third branch established with late Mr. Waibali as its first chairman in 1962 and late Benji Onunta as its treasurer.

Other Branches

During one of the national meetings at Azumini in the last quarter of 1961, Mr. Joseph Elendu was sent to **Enugu** and advised to have our citizens form a branch as quickly as possible. The branch was formally established with late Mr. Sunday Wabara as its first chairman in 1962.

Then came the establishment of the **Lagos branch** with Chief Nnah Emuchay as its first chairman in 1963.

OTHER FACTS:

Other branches were to be established in various parts of Nigeria but did not flourish due to the civil war between Nigeria and the defunct Biafra.

SERVING AS A LIGHTENING ROD:

Azumini Welfare Association over the years has become an institution in itself in the affairs of Azumini.

I remember as a child when all the branch heads met at Eyeweali's royal court, their main concern as they used to express so powerfully, was that Azumini must be protected at all cost from the evil machinations or any act that would detract Azumini from its socio-cultural and economic advancement. They readily tasked their branches for resources to support The Eyeweali and his Council of Chiefs in their fight against Azumini's detractors. They vowed never to allow an inch of Azumini's soil to be taken by anyone. The creation of the Association, and invariably the various

branches ushered a healthy competition amongst the people both in their personal lives and community lives in the progress of Azumini. People were more involved, people were ready to serve, creative ideas were unleashed even amongst age grades, as was evident in the healthy competition amongst the age grades in determining which will be the first to erect a building for rental or other purposes. We saw Uke-Ugborgu emerge as the first to construct rental quarters along college road, followed by Uke-Akasi and so on. The Eyeweali and his council made available land for these developments. We saw the women's organization—Oganihu Umueyere Azumini construct a post office for the town. Today, however, that building is either collapsed or in total state of disrepair. The association also played a great role in assisting with the establishment of the present high school. Recently, words have reached every corner of the globe that **AWA** is steadfast in holding Azumini together along with the chiefs in the face of very difficult challenges confronting the community in this modern times. As an eternal optimist, I believe that though our land -Azumini- is sometimes pricked by detractors, Azumini shall overcome and still be there to the chagrin and disappointment of her detractors.

CONCLUSION AND CHARITY:

It seems reasonable to express pleasure with the establishment of **AWA** in 1958, its endurance to date and the tremendous contributions the world-wide association has made to our community. We hope and pray that those called to serve in any capacity in the association no matter which branch would see it as a patriotic and noble call/cause.

PS/ Thanks for reading this material. Your suggestions or constructive criticisms would be most welcomed.



