

## **Agaba Idu: Historicizing Culture-Contact and Royalty among some Nigeria Peoples**

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### **Abstract**

The study attempts to reconstruct the binding factors in the history of some Nigerian groups through oral expressions of royalty. *Agaba Idu* is one of such expressions that traverse central and southern Nigeria. The paper queries the etymology of this expression and why it has found footing in most societies of Nigeria. It argues that it is one expression that makes for the unity of Nigerian history in an era that lays emphasis on those things that divide rather than unite Nigerian peoples. It further advocates that social and political coalitions in Nigeria have been made along state and ethnic lines, rather than on a more encompassing cultural line that cuts across states and ethnic boundaries. The study postulates that the expression appears to be one of those intangible heritages of the primordial language from where most Nigerian languages evolved.

**Key words:** Heritage, Kingship, *Agaba Idu*, Nigeria, Culture

### **Introduction**

The expression, *Agaba Idu*, is used in most communities in central and southern Nigeria. In most circumstances of its usage in these societies, it denotes strength, vigour, assertiveness, superiority, and resilience. All the denotations appear to be qualities of the privileged, the royalty. It is used as title, salutation, name or expression. *Agaba Idu* has been identified as one identical expression/title/phenomenon that traverses most societies from central to southern Nigeria. From Edo to the Igala kingdom and from Igboland to Idomaland, as well as among the Koto, Igbira, Guruku, Bassa, and many other

societies of central Nigeria, the expression attracts attention. As a royal greeting or as a masquerade, *Agaba Idu* connotes superiority of power, strength, and majesty. It is thus pertinent for examination of the universality of this expression among Nigerian peoples at a time that emphases have always been made on our differences rather than on our similarities. It is, however, anticipated that political and economic alliances among the peoples can be made along cultural lines devoid of ethnic, geographical, and religious divisions that has become the bane of Nigerian unity.

### Etymology of the word

An Igbo folklorist, Ozoemena Nsugbe sang a song, *Eze Nzuzu* (The foolish King) and part of the lyric is translated thus:

The town of Idu decided to crown a king, but crowned a foolish one. The king ordered that any child born on Afor day should be given to him. A certain man who had all his children born on Afor days also had his wife die on Afor day and he took her corpse also to the king.<sup>1</sup>

Moonlight tales in Igboland is replete with stories about the land of Idu. Most of the Idu stories appear more like fairy tales. Among the Enugu Ezike people of Igboland, the land of Idu is said to be a very far place, of seven hills and seven wildernesses,<sup>2</sup> perhaps outside human habitation. It is a land of opportunity, where almost everything is possible; the good, the bad, and the ugly. Often, it is used to explain an area outside human habitation - the other world. Anyone residing in this distant land must not be a weak person. He must be someone of great strength - an *Agaba*.

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<sup>1</sup> Chief AkunwAtta Ozoemena Nsugbe and his OliokAtta Singing Party, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> This is a metaphorical explanation of the farthest distance one can think of among most Northern Igbo communities.

Idu was also presented by Flora Nwapa in her work, *Idu*.<sup>3</sup> The work centres on a woman whose life is bound up with that of her husband to such an extent that when he died she continued to seek him out in the land of the dead - *Idu. Idu*, as presented in this fiction is the land of the dead. This land could not have been within human habitation. Among the Igbo, *Udu* is also a kind of musical instrument made of clay that helps to give rhythm to music. In a way, it could also refer to dumbness, *idu nkiti*.<sup>4</sup>

The name Idoma has been portrayed as short form of the word *Idu Oma* or *Oma Idu*, meaning the children of Idu.<sup>5</sup> Some Idoma elders believe that:

Idu was their putative founder and the "father" of the different groups in Idomaland. Indeed the royal genealogies of Adoka and Ugboju go back to a personage called either Idom or Idu. It is only logical that informants from these areas

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<sup>3</sup> Flora Nwapa, *Idu*, (Enugu: Tana Press, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps a place where everything ends; No talks; no speeches; no speculations; the end of the earth. Most often this place is represented in tales by the horizon.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Abdullahi, *The First Nigerian People*, (Anyigba: Winners Studio Nigeria Ltd, 2006), p. 63. The author used Igala language to interpret Idoma. *Idu Oma* is Igala expression for children of *Idu* or better still *Oma Idu* and not Idoma which could have been *Ai'Idu* in Idoma language.

should prefer a name associated with their own history rather than from non-related groups.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from Adoka and Ugboju, some other sections of the Idoma group also trace their descent to Idu through a genealogy. They believe that Idu was the father of the different groups including Adoka, Ugboju and Otuokpo as represented in the expression, "Idu the father of Idoma."<sup>2</sup> However, if the name Idoma found a fillip among the present Idoma ethnics, why did it wait until the 1950s before getting the acclamation of all members of the group? The origin or founder of the Idoma of modern Nigeria is not the core business of this paper despite its inquisition into the historicity of Idu. However, Idu has been described as a famous migratory leader who rose to prominence when the Apa homeland was breaking up after 1500.<sup>3</sup>

The word, *Idu*, in Igalala, means lion.<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the lion and the leopard (*eje*), although

different animals of the same bigger cat family, may be seen as the same animal. All over Igalaland, the lion and leopard are national totems and are held sacred by both the royal and non-royal clans. This probably emanates from the Igalala myth that traces the origins of the royal clans to an anthropomorphic leopard. In hunting, the leopards name must not be mentioned as it could render inactive the hunting charms. If a leopard is killed, its death would be mourned much in the same way as a member of the royal clan. Before the end of the mourning period, a noble from Atta's palace would come to collect the pelts for the Atta and also supervised the ritual disposal of the carcass. The leopard is revered in Igalaland and this helped to strengthen the unity between the various branches of the royal clan and by giving certain prerogatives to the Attah, it aided the reinforcement of the latter's spiritual authority.<sup>5</sup> The leopards pelt is said to be poisonous and had to be collected by the king for safe keeps. As the king, he was the only one sane enough and qualified to have that weapon of mass destruction (the pelts) and not the hunter.

Among the Enugu Ezike people of Igboland, the *Agu of Enugu Ezike*<sup>6</sup> must

<sup>1</sup> E.O. Erim, *The Idoma Nationality, 1600 – 1900: Problems of Studying the Origin and Developments of Ethnicity*. (Enugu: Fourth Dimensions Publishers, 1981), p. 8. See also Ugboju Historical Text (UHT), no. 8, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> E. O. Erim, "Yala Migrations and Settlement", MA Thesis, University of Ibadan, 1974, p. 52. Here, a genealogy of the Idoma was recast in such a way that all has a stake in Idu, the putative founder.

<sup>3</sup> Erim, *The Idoma Nationality...* p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Erim, *The Idoma Nationality...* p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> Musa M. Yakub, "Idah – Ankpa Relations, 1919 – 1976: The problem of Political Unity in Igalaland", Unpublished BA Project, Bayero University, Kano, June 1987, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> The *Agu* is the title of the patriarch (*Onyishi*) of Enugu Ezike. He is the only one that bestows the *Ogbuagu* title

collect the pelts of a leopard before bestowing on the hunter, the *Ogbuagu*<sup>1</sup> (leopard killer) title. The pelts of big cats like leopard and lion are poisonous and could wipe out a community if it gets into the hands of a wicked person. It is believed that the pelts of big cats could poison any food item and make them dangerous for human consumption. If a hunter did not present the pelts of such animals, he will not become an *Ogbuagu*, a title which every one of them cherished because of the honour that went with it. If a hunter was suspected of having such a biological weapon, he was sanctioned by the community. To prevent one from having such *biological weapon* advantage over others, the pelts were usually collected by the *Agu*, who destroyed same publicly during the *Ogbuagu* ceremony. The word, *edu* means wilderness or bush, among the Ikem and Eha Amufu dialects of the Igbo, but in the general Igbo context, it also means 'to lead'. Could it have been a corruption of *Idu*? This is because even *Idu*, could mean 'to lead' in the general Igbo context.

*Agaba* is a popular Igbo masquerade that connotes strength. If one is referred to as *Agaba*, there is no need emphasizing ones strength as that

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to anyone who killed a leopard or a lion.

<sup>1</sup> Ali Nwaeke, c.80 years, hunter, Umuagama, Enugu Ezike, 3/4/1998. He said that the pelts are very poisonous and if not collected and destroyed, it could be used to wipe away and entire community. There is no leopard without pelts.

is already implied. Perhaps based on this, Tom Miachi opines that it was borrowed from the Igala because of their purported political domination of the northern Igbo communities before European colonialism. He went further to give an etymological meaning: *Agaba* (tiger) and *Idu* (lion) as denoting the superiority of power and majesty of the Atta over all other human beings.<sup>2</sup> However, *Agaba* could not have been tiger since there was none in this part of the world. He could not have mistaken tiger for leopard (*Eje*) either. Why he saw the spread of the word from the perspective of Igala political domination of her neighbours, rather than from the perspective of cultural diffusion, is yet to be understood. There is no rationale that a people could have a name for a thing they do not know, for instance, tiger.

An Idoma friend who has *Agaba* as one of his names told the researchers that *Agaba* means lion. If *Agaba* means lion among the Idoma, then it has everything to do with the meaning in Igboland. A lion or leopard is strong and powerful and commands respect among the wildlife and beyond. However, the Igbo name for lion is *odum* and leopard, *agu*.

### Culture Diffusion

Tradition variously has it that either the Onitsha people came from Benin (which they refer to as *Obodo Idu*) or

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas A. Miachi, "The Political Process in Igala Kingdom" in B.W. Andah & A.I. Okpoko, *Some Nigerian Peoples*, (Ibadan: WAJA, 1988), 169.

that they were stranger elements resident in Benin territory, and later were forced to leave Benin because of disagreement with their host, Oba Esigie or Oba Ozolua, to find about nine communities in the West Niger Igbo area who share the Eze Chima legend.<sup>1</sup> Baikie, in his narratives, recognized Ado as Benin when he reported some of his Igala informants' claim that "the first kings of Benin, Igala and Aboh had all sprung from Ado, the country lying westward across the Niger from the capital at Idah."<sup>2</sup> If the kings sprung from Ado, then Benin could not have been Ado as he tends to make us believe. The name Ado appears to be applied to people living west of Idah, perhaps in the northern Benin area. It was this area that was the probable battlefield where the Benin defeated the Igala in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

For Henderson, "Onitsha people lived originally in a community called 'Ado and Idu', Idu referring to Benin

<sup>1</sup> R.N. Henderson, *The King in Every Man. Evolutionary Trends in Onitsha Ibo Society and Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 45. See also, M.E. Odukwe, *An Igbo Culture History: The Okpala Institution in Onitsha, 1900-1999*, (Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers Ltd, 2009), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> W.B. Baikie, *Narratives of an Exploring Voyage up the Rivers Kworra and Binue*. (London, 1856), 286-87

<sup>3</sup> J. S. Boston, "Notes on the Origin of Igala Kingship", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 2 No. 3, Dec., (1962:370-81)

City and Ado referring to the general country of Edo-speaking peoples bordering Western Ibo country,"<sup>4</sup> Ado n'Idu for the Onitsha Igbo was the historical place of birth; a place where they came from. This historical tradition in Onitsha looks across the river Niger for their homeland, probably Benin. They believed that their eponymous ancestor, Eze Chima, migrated from Benin Kingdom to their present abode - *Onitsha Ado n'Idu*. Here, rather than finding *Idu* as the name of a thing, it is a place of origin. If *Idu* is a place, then *Agaba* must belong to it - *Agaba Idu*.

To the above tradition, Uchendu affirms that:

There are traditions confirmed by intrusive culture traits, of peoples who entered Igbo territory in about the fourteenth or the fifteenth century. Of these, there are the Nri in whom Igala influence is marked; and the Nzam and Anam, who combine Bini and Igala traits. Onitsha, Oguta, and the Ezechima group of villages in Western Igbo claim affinity with Bini and have the kingship institution to show "as evidence of descent". Their eponymous ancestor Chima-an Igbo name conclusively demonstrates that these Ezechima people were not Bini but Igbo speaking people once under the political domination

<sup>4</sup> Henderson, *The King in Every Man...*, 78.

of Benin Kingdom. The distinguishing characteristics of these "late comers" include their geographical marginality, kingship institution, hierarchical title system, and *amosu* (witchcraft) tradition.<sup>1</sup>

The categorization of Igbo groups living on both banks of the Niger as late comers is interesting. However, it was not disclosed where they came from to settle on the frontiers of Igboland as evidence portray them more as Igbo than any other group. It is, however, important to note that their being branded late comers do not mean they were not of Igbo stock. Perhaps, in the course of their territorial expansion, they met a stronger group who pushed them back to Igboland; where they have, perhaps, nearly been assimilated by the other groups. They may have fled with the already imbibed culture and because of the antiquity of the relationship, began to claim ancestry from the area, probably, Benin. The Igbo of the hinterland needed more land for agriculture as a result of increase in population and may have decided to migrate outside Igboland to achieve this. Territorial expansion was not only prone to the Igbo; they must have been influenced by their neighbours' expansion and that may have caused their recoil. This recoil appears to have been the reason for the various Igbo

<sup>1</sup> V.C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 3.

groups on the borders to assert their origin from outside Igboland.

Henderson pointed out that Igala influence on Onitsha kingship seems to have been evident during the reign of Obi Omozele, the son of Aroli. It is said that Idoko, Omozele's nephew and son of Usse, who was married to Onoja Oboli's sister, criticized his uncle's practice of putting loin cloth during the Ofala (the festival for celebrating the annual appearance of the Obi). Omozele had then sent Idoko to Idah to obtain another traditional dress for him, and he came back bringing a type of Igala cloth, with black spots representing the royal leopard which has been worn by the Obi during the Ofala ever since.<sup>2</sup>

This cloth is called *osikiji* among the Enugu Ezike people and worn by the noble and used for their burial. However, the colour of this cloth and its semblance to the leopard skin can be understood because of the attachments between royalty and the leopard. In Enugu Ezike, only the Agu of Enugu Ezike, the traditional head (Onyishi), sits on a leopard skin. Hunters who killed a leopard surrendered its pelts and skin to the Agu before receiving the attendant honours. What was more, the royal greeting to the Onyishi of Enugu Ezike is *Agu*, meaning leopard. He is regarded as a leopard as he is both the custodian of the political and spiritual interests of the people - a link between

<sup>2</sup> Henderson, *The King in Every Man...* , 87.

the people and the ontological beings in their polity.

There is a Benin tradition which appears to explain the origin of the Atta dynasty in Igala. Egharevba suggests that "the first Atta (king) of Idah was a Bini prince who had been sent out to Idah as a chief by the Oba."<sup>1</sup> Also, Baikie reported in 1854 of the founding of the Atta dynasty:

When a (certain) stranger arrived from Ado he lived as a hunter, and sent most of the fruits of the chase to Igara. But after a time followers from Ado joined him, growing powerful, he refused to acknowledge Igara, or give him any share of his spoils; this led to a quarrel, which ended by Igara being driven into the interior, leaving only his name on which the first Atta ascended the throne...<sup>2</sup>

Here, the Ado hunter came to Igara and was subordinated by the people until he staged a coup and assumed leadership of them. This may have been an attempt to explain the purported Bini origin of the Igala kingship, deriving the Igala kingship from Bini. There are many other traditions among the peoples of Nigeria that replicate this situation. One is the Yoruba tradition of origin of

the present Bini monarchy, founded by Oranmiyan, a son of Oduduwa. Another was an Igala tradition of founding Nupe monarchy through Tsoede. Others were the Kwararafa hypothesis of founding the present Igala monarchy; the Nri tradition of Eri being the father of the first Atta of Igala, and many others. However, one may ask: why is it that the kingships were founded and not the people? All the groups were presented as docile until an invading group arrived to give them direction on leadership! The arrival of a sagacious hunter who was able to buy the indigenous peoples' confidence by giving them games - games, at a time every adult male was a hunter! Be that as it may, it appears to be a prolegomenon to *indigenous people - settler hypothesis*, which portrays the indigenous peoples as docile, timid, primitive and without courage. This is against the idea that the settlers were adventurous, courageous, sagacious in the art of warfare, statecraft, etc. Perhaps based on this view on relationships, earlier European studies on this area were more interested in kings and centralized authorities than in the people. With the antiquity of relationships among these groups, evidenced from traditions and myths of origin, *agaba idu* title and expression could have been widely used among them.

Erim observed that in some traditions, Baikie was informed that Ado was a corruption of the word Edo, the language of the Bini Kingdom and that the Bini dynasty introduced its

<sup>1</sup> Jacob Egharevba, *A Short History of Benin*, (Ibadan, 1960), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> W.B. Baikie, *Narratives of an Exploring Voyage up the Rivers Kworra and Binue*. (London, 1856), pp. 286-287.

royal totem, leopard, in Igala kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Could Ado, Edo and Idu have been a similar object, place or phenomenon? However, this tends to illuminate the claim by the Onitsha people of Edo origin and their acceptance of the leopard as a royal totem. The Obi represents the leopard in Onitsha tradition and is the Agabaidu. Be that as it may, the ascription of the origin of material cultures among Nigerian peoples has been lopsided. Most often, it has been credited to more centralized societies as they had been viewed as centres of civilization dispersal.<sup>2</sup>

Another argument for the Bini origin of Igala kingship was that advanced by G.T. Mott, a British colonial officer. He based his argument on the evidence of the existence of Bini cult objects in Idah; the probable Bini origin of Atta's mask bead (*Ejubejailo*) and the common tradition of wearing beads on necks and wrists.<sup>3</sup> There was no guarantee of the direction of flow of culture objects; who got it first, second or third? Who introduced what and where? In Igboland, the Eze of Oraeri wears a similar mask bead. Culture objects moved around through trade and exchange of royal personnel. The

<sup>1</sup> Erim, *The Idoma Nationality...*, p. 53 and fn84.

<sup>2</sup> Apex A. Apeh, *Idoma, Igala, Igbo Relations: Studies in a Frontier Igbo Society*, (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishers, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> G.T. Mott, "The connections of the Atta of Igala with the Obas of Benin", National Archives Kaduna (NAK)SNP. 17K.2445, p. 2-7.

later, has been identified to have flourished between the Bini and the Igala. If the Bini were to be seen as harbingers of culture, why did they not export the culture of primogeniture to Igala?

On the relationship between Bini and their Igala neighbours, Boston reveals that:

In the past, the Bini used to send eight slaves to Idah to be made eunuchs whenever a new Oba was appointed, and the Atta used to keep four of these eunuchs and send the other four back to the Oba.<sup>4</sup>

These eunuchs, as human beings, were conveyors of culture - tangible and intangible. This exchange between the Atta and a new Oba was done through messengers who could be carriers of cultural traits, new ideas and rituals. The time spent by a slave from Bini at Idah before he was made eunuch, would have been enough for him to become acquainted with a few things and practices in his place of sojourn - Igala. Such new ideas and culture could easily have been carried along back to the court of the Oba in Benin where the eunuchs remained for the rest of their lives.<sup>5</sup> Also, the remaining

<sup>4</sup> Boston, "Notes on the Origin of Igala Kingship", p. 370-381.

<sup>5</sup> J.N. Ukwedeh, "The History of Igala to c. 1830 A.D. with Special reference to the Rise of the Attah Kingship" Ph.D Thesis, Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1987, p. 250.



four eunuchs that were retained by the Attah for the rest of their lives could as well exhibit Bini culture in Igalaland.

However, Ukwedeh suggests that:

The culture that came to be associated with the Attah might have drawn its sustenance from various sources such as Ife, Benin, Aboh, Nupe and Opanda... The strategic position of the Igala at the crossroads of many cultures has exposed her to the cultures and ideas of many Nigerian peoples such as the Yoruba, Edo, Nupe, Idoma, Igbirra, Igbo etc.<sup>1</sup>

Afigbo also observed of Igbo culture and history that:

Of all their neighbours, the Edo kingdom of Benin and the Igala state at Idah would appear to have had the most far-reaching impact on the evolution of Igbo culture. The influence of Benin was most felt in the West Igbo areas, the riverine region around Aboh and Onitsha. Benin influence was largely political and could be seen in the institution of village monarchies which exist all through this area. It is also seen in the character of the title system as in the names of some of the titles... Idah's influence is a little more difficult to pin down, though it would appear

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<sup>1</sup> Ukwedeh, *The history of Igala...*, p. 246 & 264.

to have been pushed at the point of the sword like that of Benin.<sup>2</sup>

Material cultures have no boundary. There was no Berlin-wall demarcating the various Nigerian peoples as boundaries were imaginary. There had been goings and comings among the people centuries back. However, some Nigerian people were able to galvanize themselves into big polities while others did not. The result was that at the dawn of colonization, the Europeans put them above other 'fragmented' societies, perhaps because they were instrumental in establishing colonial administration. Put differently, the centralized societies facilitated the colonization of Nigeria and thus, were admired and commended by the European masters.

Edo and Igala kingdoms were the only centralized societies bordering the Igbo and as such were the ones to have had either negative or positive influences on them. It is, however, misleading to ascribe relations between the various Nigerian peoples as emanating from 'the point of the sword'. It is unfortunate that inter-group relations among Nigerian peoples over the years have been ascribed to conflict. The result is that

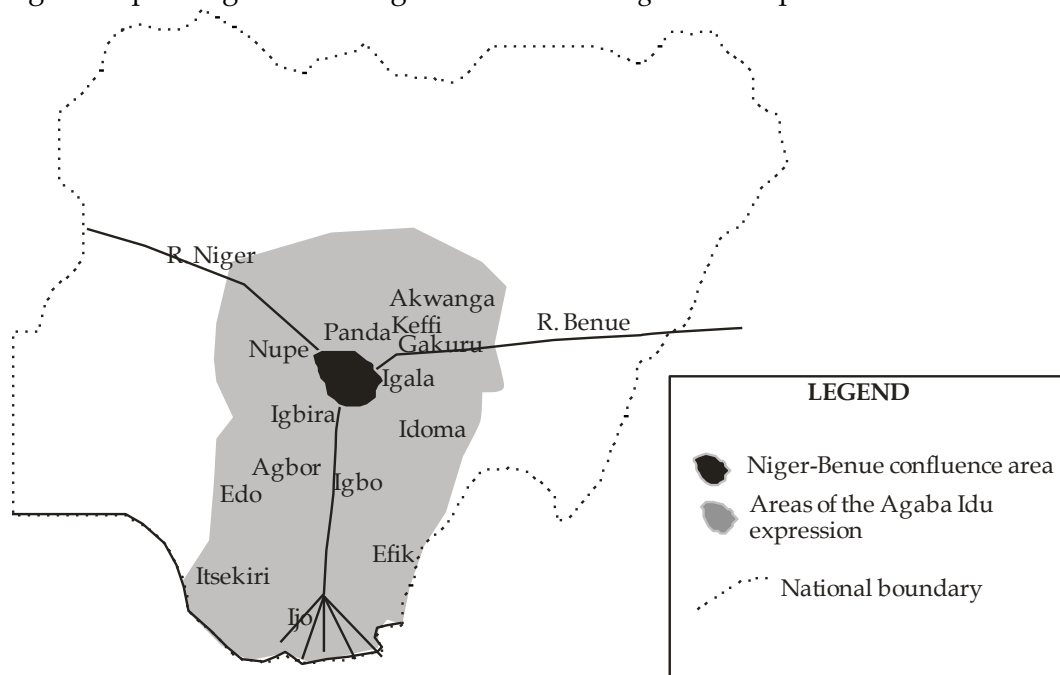
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<sup>2</sup> A.E. Afigbo, "Prolegomena to the study of the Culture History of the Igbo speaking peoples" in F.C. Ogbalu and E.N. Emenanjo (eds.) *Igbo Heritage and Culture* (Ibadan, 1975), p. 39.

the various groups became nationalistically conscious in reconstructing their histories, 'cosmetically' though, so as not to be seen as underdogs in the scheme of things. The injection of nationalism into historical reconstruction advances the dicta: my ancestors were superior to your ancestors; your ancestors were slaves to my ancestors; my ancestors were winners while yours were losers; etc. These were some of the shortcomings of history as a discipline, especially in preliterate societies. It forgives but does not forget. So long as

the scar is evident, it cannot be forgotten. It is, however, advisable that scholars of inter group relations foster peace by turning to the sunny side of their relationships. They should encourage those things that unite the different groups rather than those that emphasize the differences. That does not mean that scholars should obliterate unsavory relations among Nigerian peoples. Discussions about such relations should be handled with caution so as not to ignite further acrimonies.

Fig. 1: Map of Nigeria showing the areas of the *Agaba Idu* expression.



### The Agaba Idu Concept

The title, salutation, insignia, name or expression, *Agaba Idu*, has been identified as one identical phenomenon

that traverses most societies from central to southern Nigeria. As earlier stated, the name has to do with assertiveness and superiority, and also

connotes royalty. Wherever the expression is heard, it attracts attention. Having earlier hob-nobbed the words, *Agaba* and *Idu*, it is time to attempt an explication of the concept. For the Igbo, the concept of *Idu* appears to be a place under the government of one man, where anything can happen. This could have been a centralized society – a kingdom, like Igala or Benin where the kings are semi-divine and the subjects look upon them as gods’ representatives on earth. This could not have been associated with the Igbo or the Idoma who were republican. Among the Igala and Benin, the powers of their kings were above any other thing God created, he became an *Agaba*, whose powers were *ultra vires* and unimaginable.

The universality of the use of the term *Agabaidu* is evident in central and southeastern Nigeria politics. Between Keffi and Akwanga, at Gakuru town, is the *Abaga’s*<sup>1</sup> palace. In the Idoma city of Oturkpo is the palace of the *Och’Idoma*, *Agaba Idu* Elias Obekpa. In Igalaland, the *Atta* is the only one that is referred to as the *Agaba Idu*. At Alor Agu and Alor Uno communities in Enugu State after the 1976 Local Government Decree, and the recognition of autonomous communities, the *Igwe* of the two towns adopted the title *Agaba Idu* of Alor Agu and Alor Uno respectively. The *Igwe* of Ezzangbo in Ebonyi State goes by the title *Agabaidu*. Also, *Igwe Sunday Iyida* of *Umuitodo*

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<sup>1</sup> *Abaga* appears to be a corruption of the term *Agaba*.

Community, Enugu Ezike adopted the title *Agaba Ogu* at coronation. The traditional ruler of Ozzi Edem, *Igwe Hyacinth Ezema* is addressed as the *Agaba Idu*, among many other Igbo societies. The *Bini* and the *Eze Chima* group of communities, address their kings as the *Agaba Idu*. The *Obi* of *Onitsha* is addressed as the *Agaba Idu*. Also in *Nupe*, *Panda*, *Igbira* and *Gwari* of central Nigeria, similar expressions manifest. *Agaba Idu*, thus, may be likened to an expression of nostalgia about the powers of the kings of the old by modern traditional rulers. It was an expression that began when might was right and kings were divine. Their words were law and their commands were obeyed without further appeal.

Then the question: how come this expression receives acclamation among the various peoples? As noted earlier, *Agaba Idu* has to do with the bigger cat family, especially the lion and the leopard or any other stronger cat. Incidentally, this cat family happens to enjoy wide recognition as a royal totem among kingships. This may, perhaps, be so, because of its strength and swift action, which must have been why kings chose to associate with them. G.M. Clifford, a British colonial officer in Nigeria, wrote of the *Atta* with reference to an ancient rhyme establishing the awe surrounding the *Igala* kingship:

*Idu kena loja Suja gama!*

(Should you meet the lion (the *Atta*) on the path, flee his presence!).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> G. M. Clifford, “The *Igala* Chiefdom” NAK CSO 26, File 29301, p. 29.

Anybody that meets a lion on the road should run for his/her dear life. Atta, here, is represented as a lion apart from his other divine attributes ...” “God made me after his image; I am all the same as God and he appointed me a King.”<sup>1</sup> After the first stage of the initiation ritual of the Adukainya (Atta designate), the Achadu publicly proclaims him Atta-elect. From then on, the people salute him as ‘Agabaidu’ – meaning, lion among leopards. The charges by the Achadu to the Adukainya while performing some of the initiation ceremonies included flogging, piercing his ear as a woman<sup>2</sup> with the injunction: “Atta, today I beat you! The Atta has no son! You are now Atta, you have power over life and death. Kill anyone who says he does not fear you.”<sup>3</sup> This can be likened to the Western symbol of justice depicting a blindfolded woman who does not care who was brought before her for justice. The blindfold represents impartiality, the ideal that justice should be applied without regard to affinity, wealth, power, or other statuses. This was expected of an Atta.

These injunctions are given to the Atta probably to ensure fair play and justice during his reign. Since he is depicted as having no son, he will not

<sup>1</sup> Clifford, p. 30. Citing Atta Amocheje’s explanation to members of the Niger Mission in 1841.

<sup>2</sup> Ritually, the Atta of Igala is a woman, having descended from Ebelejonu, the female Atta.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford, p. 53-54.

bend the rules. It is only the lion among the leopards that will wield such open-ended powers among his people and still command respect and influence. The Atta wears the mask, *ejubejailo*, which literally means “the eye which brings fear to other eyes.”<sup>4</sup> This attribute also depicts him as a lion with royalty and power.

Leopards as kingship totems are found in most places in Idomaland. Erim suggests about totems among the Idoma:

The people came under pressure to adopt the leopard totem, thus declaring their loyalty to the Bini dynasty of Idah ... by adopting the leopard and thereby declaring their allegiance to the Bini dynasty, the snail-leopards kindreds had no option but to leave when the dynasty fell from power. Of the 17 groups which migrated away from Idah in this first phase, 14 held to the leopard as their political totem. In fact, of the 56 kindreds which left Idah over the whole period c. 1625 - 1775, 44 revered the leopard indicating how significant was the change of dynasty in Idah for this extensive displacement of population.<sup>5</sup>

From the above suggestion, it appears that the precursor of the leopard totem was the Bini dynasty of Idah. This

<sup>4</sup> Philip Oguche, c. 70, retired teacher, Ofante, 27/12/2009.

<sup>5</sup> Erim, *The Idoma Nationality...*, p. 60.

dynasty was the pre-Atta dynasty at Idah, who came before the arrival of the Jukun which saw the eclipse of the Bini power. With the fall of the dynasty, her supporters fled from the invading Jukun soldiers who began to occupy Igalaland establishing their government - the present Atta dynasty. It, thus, appears that the fleeing members of the erstwhile Bini dynasty, perhaps, brought the spread of the leopard totem into central and southern parts of modern Nigeria.



Fig. 2: The mask of Queen Idia of Benin Kingdom. This mask is worn by the Oba of Benin, Atta of Igala (*ejubejailo*) and the Eze of Oraeri in Igboland.<sup>1</sup>

If the pre-dynastic Atta at Idah from Bini introduced the leopard totem, and her subjects fled at her fall, why did the invading Jukun adopt this totem? The Abutu Eje tradition in Igala tends to

<sup>1</sup>Could this have been the Agabaidu symbol of the Kings? <https://www.google.com.ng/search?q=festac+77>. The uniformity of the use of the mask may have informed the choice of it as the FESTAC '77 symbol in Nigeria.

lend credence to this. This tradition states that the first ruler of Igala had a daughter that used to go into the bush to collect firewood. One day, she was accosted by a leopard that took the form of a man and proposed marriage to her. She agreed and he began to give her gifts that made her parents curious about their strange in-law. They insisted they wanted to see their son-in-law and when the girl told the man-leopard it agreed. When he came out as a leopard on a fixed date and time, the parents ran away in fear. Meanwhile the girl was pregnant. When she gave birth to a baby boy, he was named Abutu Eje, meaning Abutu son of a leopard. When Abutu Eje led the Jukun against the dynasty at Ida and conquered, it could not have been out of place for a man of qualities associated with the leopard to be called *Eje* without being of the leopard totem.<sup>2</sup> What this means was that Eje (leopard) belongs to the bigger cat family and is a personal name among the Igala, Idoma, and some northern Igbo groups.

In as much as the above tradition may not stand the test of time, Abutu might have been the son of a man who believed in the leopard totem or whose father answered Eje because of the belief in the totem. Be that as it may, Abutu Eje emerged as the forbear of a new dynasty at Idah and in the course of consolidating his position, acceded

<sup>2</sup> Haruna Ogala, c. 70, community leader, Igga, 28/12/2009. See also E.O. Erim, *The Idoma Nationality...*, p. 65.

to the leopard totem and perhaps the greeting, Agaba Idu.

According to Mockler Ferryman, when Ayegba Om' Idoko another Atta of the Jukun dynasty arrived Ida, he took upon himself the duties of arbiter, rebuking one and commanding the other. So astonished were the people who had during the incident crowded around him that they immediately proclaimed him their king, and refused to permit him to leave the town. This was the first Atta...<sup>1</sup>

Ayegba was portrayed as an influential man who asserted authority by pacifying the diverse groups of people (the Akpoto) in the confluence area and making himself indispensable. As one belonging to the leopard totem, he had the audacity and the effrontery to rebuke and calm the cantankerous indigenous people of the area and curried their support for his ascendancy to the throne. This suggestion by Mockler-Ferryman may not be unconnected with the erstwhile idea that state formation in Black Africa was orchestrated by invading Hamites from outside of it. If not, how could all interested parties to the throne at Ida relax and have Ayegba share royal positions to them? Could Ayegba have brought the politically important leopard totem to Ida from Jukun? Erim suggests that the leopard was a totem to 41 of the 56 kindreds

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<sup>1</sup> A.F. Mockler-Ferryman, *Up the Niger*, (London, 1892), pp. 308-309.

involved in the migration from the Idah-Ankpa region into Idomaland. Of those 41, the leopard was the only and presumably kingship totem to 20. The leopard totem was the royal symbol denoting Bini origin just as the Igalamela were associated with the civet cat totem<sup>2</sup>.

This kingship totem (leopard) is a revered political totem of Bini ancestry which came into contact with the indigenous civet cat totem of the Igalamela. The argument that Bini subdued the Igala north of them and introduced kingship, appears to be a stereotype advanced by European writers perhaps, because of the antiquity of Bini relations with Europe. Some of the autochthonous groups adopted the leopard totem alongside the civet cat totems as a way of showing loyalty to the new regime. Whether the leopard totem was introduced by the Bini or the Jukun, one thing was clear; Ida appeared to be a dispersal area of this royalty totem and it has continued to be an expression and value justifying the antiquity of their relationships. The location of the Igala Kingdom on the confluence area made it a market of cultures and traditions along the rivers Niger and Benue and their tributaries.

Linguistically, these ethnic groups among many others belong to the Kwa sub group of the Niger-Congo group of African languages, believed to have had their cradleland around the Niger-Benue confluence area of modern Nigeria. From this area, arose a

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<sup>2</sup> Erim, *Idoma Nationality...*, p. 80.

hypothesis that all members of the Kwa sub-family of the Niger-Congo group of African languages have the Niger-Benue confluence area as their cradleland. This hypothesis might have gained prominence after the Nok finds and other discoveries in that area. It appears to have settled the controversies about the origin of some Nigerian peoples as Adiele Afigbo admitted. According to him:

the Igbo, like their immediate neighbouring Kwa-speaking groups, probably started off from around the region of the Niger/Benue confluence.<sup>1</sup>

The attribution of the origins of the Igbo, Igala, Idoma, Edo as well as that of many other Kwa-speakers to the Niger/Benue confluence area is based mainly on J.H. Greenberg's classification of African languages.<sup>2</sup> The study contends that groups of people might speak the same language at one period, but with the passage of time and their drifting apart, they might lose contact with each other, develop different dialects of the same language and finally acquire different

languages. The Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo language family consisting of 45 languages is spoken by approximately 20 million people in the southern areas of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin and in the extreme southwestern corner of Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> It is also spoken by the Igbo, Igala, Idoma, Ijo, Igbira, Panda, Yoruba, and Edo in Southern Nigeria. It has been claimed that all speakers of the languages of the Kwa sub-family must have lived initially in the Niger/Benue confluence area, from where they dispersed to their present locations all over parts of West Africa. But we are not told why the confluence area must be regarded as the special cradleland of the Kwa family of languages.<sup>4</sup> The Kwa speakers could and may have dispersed from anywhere other than the confluence area. Given the wildlife variety and the enormity of animals of the big cat family in the area, royalty came to be associated with overpowering any of the cat species, especially the lion and leopard and the veneration and fear of their uses in traditional medical practice, rituals, politics and social institutions such as the masquerade institutions. From this, one can infer that Agabaidu can also

<sup>1</sup> A.E. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*, (Ibadan: University Press, 1981), p. 16. See also Y. Karmon, *A Geography of Settlement in Eastern Nigeria* (Jerusalem, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> J.H. Greenberg, "Studies in African Linguistic Classification: the Niger-Congo Family", *South-western Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 5 No.2, (1949), pp. 79-100.

<sup>3</sup> John T. Bendor-Samuel, "Kwa languages." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Student and Home Edition.* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> J. Okoro Ijoma, *Igbo origins and Migrations*, (Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers Ltd, 2010), p. 6.

denote dictatorship even if the benevolent type.

### Conclusion

The Agaba Idu phenomenon or expression has become prominent in most Nigerian communities who have established it as a royal expression or greeting. The study examines the dynamics in the usage of the term and the contestations as to its origin, especially as it concerns kinship institutions. Kingship is not a position for the weak or the feeble minded. It is for the strong in heart and girth. As Agaba Idu appears to be a creature stronger than the lion and the leopard, the power of that creature is only fit to be associated with kingship. One wonders how the word found place among the Igala, Idoma, Igbo, Panda, and Edo (Idu), etc. However, while the confluence area hypothesis continues to hold sway, one may be tempted to admit that the word, Agaba Idu, is a remnant of the royal expression of members of the Kwa language group, given the near universality of the expression among the speakers. The attribution of Agaba Idu to the men of underworld in Igboland could be associated with the fact that armed robbers dictate what their victims do without question - the same way the words of kings of the old were obeyed because they were seen as semi divine. If the unity of Nigeria should be expressed along cultural lines, Agaba Idu Foundation should provide a rallying point. The continuous balkanization of the country into states and local councils for administrative

convenience has been misconstrued as diversity rather than unity in diversity. The result has been the acrimonious relationships that hold sway among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. If social and political coalitions are created along cultural lines that cut across state and ethnic boundaries in Nigeria; to a large extent, it will lessen the level of acrimony in the society. There is need for Nigeria to harvest the products of their diversity which would be a veritable tool for national integration.

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