

BOOK REVIEW

HRM Benjamin Okumagba: Portrait of a Neo-Nationalist

By Abraham Ogbodo, Sunny Awhefeada, and Peter Omoko

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The book, *HRM Benjamin Okumagba: Portrait of a Neo-Nationalist*, celebrates the exploits and accomplishments of the Okumagba Family of the Okere-Urhobo people of Warri metropolis, Nigeria. It is an epic story, a saga of a family unit whose vision and struggles for autonomy, identity and justice transformed and redefined the socio-political space of Warri and its environment in the last century. The thematic focus of the story is Chief Benjamin Okumagba, a scion of the progenitor homestead of three brothers: Idama, Ohwotemu, and Sohworuvwe. They migrated from Okpare in Olomu district of Urhobo to establish Okere-Urhobo several centuries ago. The book is a tribute to the members of the original family for their titanic and heroic deeds that created the dynasty exemplified by the charismatic personality of Benjamin Okumagba. The saga relates how the Okere-Urhobo people rose gallantly from the smoke and wreckage of turbulence and conflicts to build one of the most stable, dynamic, and prosperous sub-urban estates in the metropolis of Warri.

It is an engaging and edifying story adroitly narrated by the three scholar-journalists – Abraham Ogbodo, Sunny Awhefeada, and Peter Omoko. The flow of the storyline is straight and direct; the language is simple, urbane and polished, animated by interludes of juicy anecdotes and dramatic scenes that stimulate the reader to visualize the heroic and sagacious figure epitomized by Benjamin Okumagba. The bold and elegant print adds to the aesthetic appeal of the book.

In 2014 Bernard Okumagba published a biography of his father with the title: *Footprints of a Statesman: The Life and Times of Chief Daniel Okumagba*. Daniel is the elder brother of Benjamin. The two books are now companion texts that testify to the grandeur of how a determined people can carve and secure a place of honour for themselves in the context of forbidding challenges and rivalries.

The Benjamin Okumagba biography is a significant contribution to recent historiographical studies on the Urhobo people. This tradition of writing on the Urhobo was initiated by the historian, Emeritus Professor Obaro Ikime in the mid-1970s with a biographical book, *The Member for Warri Province: The Life and Times of Mukoro Mowoe, 1890-1948*. That book set a pattern for other patriotic scholars. *The Urhobo People* by Professor Onigu Otitte had three editions by 2011. Under the auspices of the Urhobo Historical Society, Professor Peter Ekeh edited several seminal books – *Warri City & British Colonial Rule in the Western Niger Delta* (2004), *Studies in Urhobo Culture* (2005), *The History of Urhobo People of Niger Delta* (2006), and *T. E. A. Salubi: Witness to British Colonial Rule in Urhoboland & Nigeria* (2008). This series of authentic works helped to decolonize perspectives on Urhobo history and culture; they improved consciousness about the collective profile of the Urhobo as builders and managers of unique traditions of egalitarian governance and civilisations in Africa's rainforest regions.

The book on Benjamin Okumagba furnishes more evidence with which to examine how the audacious and indomitable national spirit of the Urhobo has been manifested in one family's resilient quest for equity, justice, and co-prosperity with neighbours.

Each one of the nineteen chapters of the book relates stories and experiences that illustrate and illuminate the self-governing and self-reliant philosophy of the Urhobo people. Consider the exodus of the three brothers from Okpare-Olomu in the dim historical past. They voyaged through the Okpare river, the Forcados tributary of the Niger, through the aquatic maze of creeks and rivulets and finally settled at what is now Okere-Urhobo. This hazardous journey is the stuff of adventure stories and migration epics. Each of these brave men who opened up reptile-infested wilds qualify to be called *ovedje*, the Urhobo expression for the barrier-breaker or frontier-opener. Studies by historians and anthropologists on Urhobo show that many Urhobo communities were founded by such hardy and adventurous voyagers.

The founding of new settlements required people with capacity for war and self-defence; *iphri* or *ivwri* is the militant, fighting spirit which ensures triumph in all life-threatening encounters. Anyone endowed with these gifts bears the title of *odephri* or *odivwri*. The leader or commander

of warriors is known as *oletu*. These were the personality attributes that defined the progenitors of the early settlements. The three voyager brothers brought these arsenals to the Okere-Urhobo community they established, tamed, and developed. These traits have been regenerated over the centuries. Idama's first son was Olodi who sired Okumagba Eboh from whose loins sprouted the Okumagbas of the 20th century. According to the biographers, Eboh's strength of arm "made him one of the most prosperous farmers...reputed to have owned the biggest rubber plantation then."

Eboh, born in 1853, rose to become a Warrant Chief in the British colonial system. He recognised education as the weapon of power in the new dispensation. Daniel, his son, graduated from St. Thomas's Teachers College, Ibusa, and became a tutor in Urhobo College, Effurun, set up in 1948 by the Urhobo Progress Union (U.P.U.). Benji Okumagba, the subject of this biography, was a pioneer student of the College. Eboh planned to send Benji to the United Kingdom to study Law as was the vogue then. Benji was fired to work harder at school in anticipation of this plan. Eboh called a meeting of his children, excluding Benji, to deliberate on the matter, but he was roundly opposed: Benji will not go to England. Sibling rivalry had set in, Eboh had eight wives and twenty-four children. In frustration Benji left college after the fourth year and chose to "paddle his own canoe" of life the way his forebears did centuries before. About fourteen of the chapters narrate how he turned this handicap into a success story of epic scale. Starting off like the biblical prodigal son, Benji sojourned to Benin, Ibadan, Lagos, and Port Harcourt and by the mid-1970s he had become senior regional manager in a German firm. In the 1970s he resigned from his sinecure job to venture into business. The progress he made and the hard lessons he learned are part of the rewards every reader will get from the book. Yet the hurdles he had in the unpredictable Nigerian business environment toughened Okumagba ahead of the political struggles that followed.

The narrative gear of the story is accelerated in the chapters dealing with the court cases over threats to sections of Okere territory. In the 1950s the Okumagba family had leased land to a group of Itsekiri educationists to establish Hussey College. The buyers later claimed ownership of the land and litigation went all the way to the Supreme Court. It was the final determination of the dispute in favour of the Okumagbas in 1976 that

transformed the family into a legend in Urhobo nationalism. The handling of the court matters united Daniel and Benjamin into fighting twins, a fusion of energy that has become a model for other Urhobo people. The struggle to redeem the land inspired the family to develop it into what is now Okumagba Layout, the largest property estate in the Warri metropolis. Although the biographers do not discuss it in this respect, the Okumagba Layout offered an investment channel for thousands of Urhobo business elite in the post-civil war years of the 1970s. With prudent husbanding of revenues from the estate, the family was able to set up an insurance scheme for the elderly as well as an education trust fund. These innovative measures were probably unprecedented in the annals of indigenous enterprises in the Urhobo area.

The plumage of victory the Okumagbas earned from the land cases was nearly incinerated by tri-ethnic conflicts that engulfed Warri in the late 1990s. At the different times the nations of Urhobo, Ijaw and Itsekiri fought one another over issues of inequity in the allocation and control of political power and influence. Like volcanic eruptions the wars spread from the mainland into the waterways and mangrove swamps that host oil and gas facilities. Property and human beings perished in the process. Soon the national media scandalized the conflicts as the “Warri Crisis”. And two decades on, the toll on the area has been heavy, including the flight of strategic businesses.

Yet the lustre of Benjamin's ascendancy to pre-eminence was not dimmed. Chapters Sixteen and Seventy examine how he became *Otota* (prime minister) and *Orosuen* (monarch) of the Okere-Urhobo people. The zenith of his accomplishments was his election as the President-General of the U.P.U. founded in 1931 when Benjamin was just three years old. Only a synoptic account of the dynamic years is attempted in Chapter Eighteen. Under him the body that was comatose for years assumed fresh vivacity and relevance. One legacy project of his executive committee was the mobilisation of donor funds for the building of the Urhobo Cultural Centre, Uvwiamuge, an edifice that emblematises the dignity and grandeur of the Urhobo nation as a premier player in contemporary politics and culture.

The biographers duly acknowledge the unstinting support Okumagba received from Governor Onanefe Ibori whose charismatic reach connected the U.P.U. to national and global networks of goodwill and generosity. In the words of the authors, “Chief Benjamin Okumagba's vision was to bring back the halcyon days of Chief Mukoro Mowoe's UPU and he did a make a success of his dream. He instilled a sense of patriotism in Urhobo people and revived Urhobo nationalism. He worked for Urhobo unity and actually engendered a renaissance.” Yet there another historic achievement not mentioned in the litany. President Olusegun Obasanjo made attempts to resolve the “Warri Crisis”. He set up the General T.Y. Danjuma peace committee; not much resulted from it. Governor Ibori encouraged Obasanjo to invest more in peace building. The governor enabled the Okumagba-led UPU to request Obasanjo to establish a university of technology in Urhobo area. Chief Okumagba and Chief Victor Otomiewo (UPU Secretary) prepared the memos and visited Abuja many times to engage the President. Eventually the ban on setting up new federal universities was lifted for “this special case of long neglect”. Thus, the Federal University of Petroleum Resources, Effurun (FUPRE) was born.