

## HISTORICAL PROMENADE ON URATTA

By Professor Felix K. Ekechi

Uratta is a town with a proud history and heritage. At present, Uratta is the capital of Owerri North Local Government Area. Formerly, too, Uratta was the capital (headquarters) of the Oratta Clan, made up of 26 towns or communities in the old Owerri Division. The Oratta Clan, with a population of c. 35,000, in 1937, included Uratta, Owerri (capital of Imo State), Agbala, Egbu, Emekuku, Emii, Naze, Ihite, Awaka, Ngor Okpala, Ihiagwa, and so many other towns and communities that shared a sense of kinship and similarity of cultural values and practices. Under the old British Native Court system, Uratta was also the seat of the Uratta Court, situated in the village of Owellu.

Uratta is made up of ten villages known alphabetically as Akwakuma, Amakohia, Okwu, Orji, Owalla, Owellu, Umualum, Umunahu, Umuobaa, and Umuorii. In order of seniority, however, Umualum is regarded as the first son of Uratta, and thus serves as the spiritual headquarters of Uratta. Therefore, special recognition is given to Umualum, despite its relatively small population, during religious and social/cultural ceremonies, such as Onwa Oru,

It is worth noting, however, that originally, Uratta was made up of eight (8) villages, and hence the popular reference to Uratta as **Uratta Ofo Asato**. But oral tradition, however, states that Akwakuma and Amakohia were later incorporated into Uratta. and hence, the nomenclature of Uratta Ofo Iri. True or false, the legend is that Akwakuma, and Amakohia migrated from Umunahu and Owellu, respectively. In time, both Akwakuma and Amakohia became integral parts of Uratta, and hence the nomenclature, **Uratta Ofo Iri**.

Furthermore, Uratta is subdivided into two sections: **OBIBI** and **IHITA OHA**. The villages in Obibi are: Umualum, Umuorii, Umuobaa, and Okwu. Ihitaoha, on the other hand, is made up of Owalla, Owaellu, Umunahu, Orji, Akwakuma, and Amakohia. Today, both Obibi and Ihitaoha have their traditional leaders—Nde Eze. Interestingly, Orji is the youngest of the Uratta villages, but it is nonetheless the most populous.

## THE HISTORICAL QUESTION

Like their counterparts elsewhere, the educated Uratta elite seem overly preoccupied with the historical question “Where did we come from?” As a matter of fact, a respectable Uratta man recently confronted me with that question, and strongly urged me to undertake the study of the history (origin) of Uratta. Since it appears that the problem of origin has become the marker of identity, I promised to oblige.

But it should be emphasized at this juncture that I had earlier attempted to do research on the history of Uratta. Unfortunately, my effort to collect the oral history of Uratta, that would have enabled me to attempt the reconstruction of the precolonial history of Uratta, was frustrated by the mindless roadblocks from some members of the Oha Uratta! Lack of cooperation from Uratta, therefore, led me to focus attention on Owerri, where the elders (Oha Owerri Nchi Ise) gave me a hero’s welcome. The result was the production of my book **Tradition and Transformation in Eastern Nigeria: A Sociopolitical History of Owerri and Its Hinterland, 1902-1947**.

At present, however, the available history of Uratta (a small pamphlet) is that written by an amateur local historian, the late P. D. Okoro, titled **A Short History of Uratta**. In practical terms, a scholarly history of Uratta, based on thorough historical investigation, remains in the doldrums! However, as already noted, the history of Uratta is promised, and might eventually materialize.

## THE URATTA LEGACY

Uratta prides itself of noble and virtuous qualities or characteristics. These include:

- (1) Fearlessness or boldness
- (2) Straightforwardness
- (3) Kindness
- (4) Generosity
- (5) Honesty
- (6) Decency

Although the above cultural values are some basic facts that about should be known Nde Uratta, we need not, however, go in detail into these virtues

now. But two quotations below could perhaps illuminate our understanding of the evidently sterling qualities of Nde Uratta:

(1) “Those who have come in contact with any man, or woman, boy or girl, bred at Uratta will testify that the people of Uratta are very open.”

(2) “In the days of yore, the average Uratta person was open minded, but brutally frank, as he would always say things as they are. The Uratta person is proud. The Uratta woman [for example] is generally beautiful and proud and would not tolerate nonsense. But she was not arrogant. She was simply proud to be Uratta, and hence would prefer to marry in Uratta.”

Additionally, honesty and decency were the hallmarks of the Uratta person. Hence, in the olden days, every Uratta person carefully avoided whatsoever would land him into trouble, such as stealing, and thus bring him and his family shame and/or opprobrium. In short, misbehavior that tarnished the image of the doer and/or his family, just for money, was taboo. Local minstrels still extol the virtue of honesty and decency in the saying, “The anyi aso nso, nde mba ozo je ejiya abaa,” meaning that what the Uratta people forbid and detest is embraced by others (today) to make money.

There is no question that generosity, or hospitality, is the hallmark of the Igbo generally. But Uratta people, I must submit, seem to be the most hospitable, a characteristic that pioneer missionaries, who lived in Uratta, in those missionary days, duly acknowledged (see Ekechi, **Missionary Enterprise & Rivalry in Igboland**, 1972). Let me narrate a personal experience to illustrate an aspect of our people’s extraordinary hospitality towards guests cum strangers/travelers.

When I was a schoolboy, I came home one day from school. Naturally hungry, I expected my ready-made food—utara ji na ofe owerri. To my surprise and frustration, my mother (of blessed memory) had offered my food to a stranger/traveler that appeared obviously hungry and famished. When I protested, she cajoled me into accepting the grounds for her action: that a visitor/stranger should be treated with kindness and empathy. With motherly exhortation she added: “Kamalu, you have to wait; another food is being prepared for you.” Oh! What a coincidence: we had read, in school, the story of John Ploughman (sic.), which offered a moral lesson!

## **THE ONWA ORU (ONWAORU) URATTA ANNUAL FESTIVAL**

For those unfamiliar with Uratta, it is well to introduce you to the Thanksgiving Celebration known as **ONWA ORU** Uratta. It is the most

festive, annual festival in Uratta. Onwa Oru, known also as **ONWA IRIRI**, means the occasion for eating, drinking, and making merry. It marks the end of the harvest season, and hence the period of plenty, which often falls around February. “After working for the year, our people relaxed to congratulate themselves on their achievements for the year.... They feasted and dined on [yams], fish and meat [notably goat meat], and sumptuous meals and forgot their cares and worries.” Guests are lavishly entertained.

Social and cultural activities, performed at the Orié Uratta central market embellish the celebration. These include singing and dancing, which are analogous to the *Madi Gras* in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA.

One of the momentous events is the presentation of first born daughters (Ada) of Uratta at the **OBU OZUZU**, i. e. the Uratta national flag or agnatic tree at the center of Orié Uratta market. This ceremony/ritual is called Mgboto Uratta ibi ukwu obu, which symbolizes the conferment of special honor, status, and dignity to nwa mboto Uratta (Uratta daughters). Another striking feature is this: In the olden days, women who went to Orié Uratta market without money could dip into the pot (ite/oku) in which individuals had dropped monies (cowries), and take money to buy items in the market. Orié Uratta market, in the period of Onwa Oru, therefore, was popularly known as Orié agbaraka azuo ahia, meaning one without money could still afford to purchase foodstuffs/commodities at the market. Significance? (1) Money in the pot(s) reflects Uratta people’s generosity; the spirit of; (2) encapsulates Uratta cultural and social ethos of sharing and hospitality.

Finally, Onwa Oru is the period of peace—no quarreling, and no fighting. Nobody would even demand any debt from any debtor. It was a period when “every citizen enjoyed absolute freedom.”