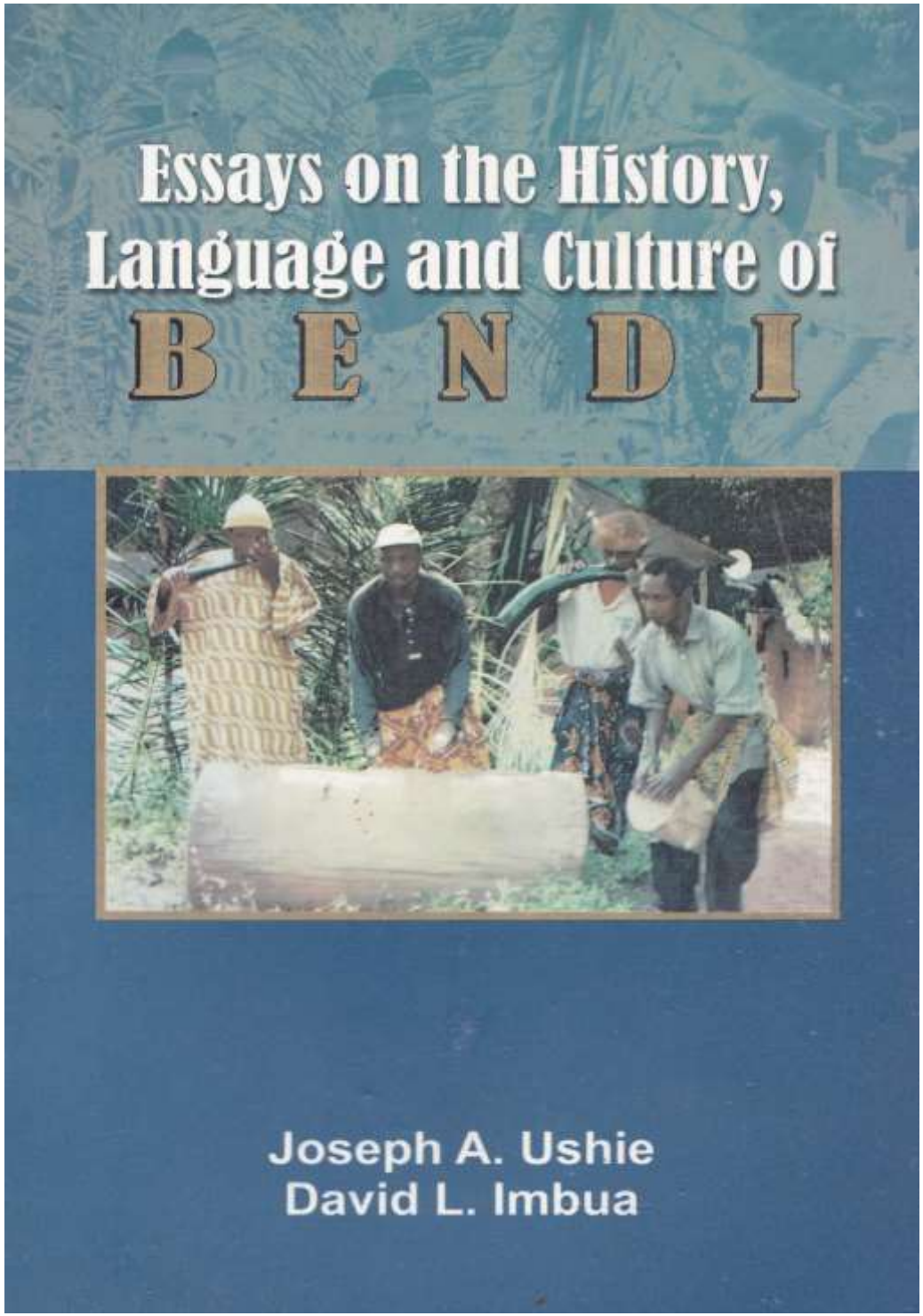

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Introduction

The population of Nigeria, as announced following the 2006 national census, is about 150 million. The exact number of the nation's ethno-linguistic groups is yet to be exhaustively established but existing estimates range from 250 to 513. Of these, three languages dominate. These are Hausa, which is the dominant language of the north, Igbo, which prevails in the southeastern flank of the country, and Yoruba, which is the major ethno-linguistic group of the southwestern part of the country. Next to these three in number of speakers in the country are Annang/Efik/Ibibio, Izon (also Ijaw), Fulfulde (Fulani), Nupe, Tiv, Kanuri, Egbira and Bini. Although these other ones are also within the brackets of the nation's ethnic minority groups, they are, at least, nationally acknowledged to be in existence as bonafide Nigerian indigenous languages. Within the Cross River State, where the community being studied here is located, the only languages which spread is relatively wide are Efik (which is spoken in up to five Local Government Areas of the State); Ejagham (spoken in two Local Government Areas); Ekoid (spoken in one Local Government Area); Bekwarra (spoken in one Local Government Area); Yala (spoken in one Local Government Area essentially but with a small extraction in Ikom Local Government Area); and Boki (spoken in Boki Local Government Area). The Bette-Bendi ethno-linguistic group, which is the thrust of this study, straddles both the Obudu and Obanliku Local Government Areas. In Obudu, Bette is a major language or dialect, but it is not a dominant language, numerically-speaking, since there are Utugwang, Elighe, Ubang, Ukpe and other speech forms in the Area. The Bendi segment is, however, a minority language or dialect within the Obanliku Local Government Area where it is spoken. All together, there is no known proto-name for

either the Bette-Bendi language or dialect as we would have in Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Annang/Efik/Ibibio, Ejagham or Kanuri.

Similarly, there is no known name for the ethnic group, and the demographic boundaries of the group are not yet determined. More precisely, it is uncertain whether the larger group often referred to as the "Descendants of Agba" should constitute a distinct ethnic group or whether such a group should over-reach this Agba-defined entity to embrace other neighbours. Yet, this is rather a small group of people whose language(s), histories, culture, worldviews and ways of life are yet uncharted but who do exist as a vibrant component of the Cross River State and of the Nigerian nation. This is the group in focus in this work. The book is, therefore, about a people who have ethnic consciousness but who have no known name of the ethnic group; who have a language but whose language has no known proto-name, let alone an orthographic convention; who have a polity but have no existing, documented accounts of their history or culture; and whose rich, beautiful language, culture, history and mores are threatened with obliteration by an uncritical, undiscriminating swallowing of the otherwise dispensable influences of western civilization and the culturally strangulating elements of Judai-Christianity. It is, indeed, a work on an "orphan" community which lies geographically between the laps of valleys, down the walls of a symmetrical range of hills in the vicinity of Nigeria's leading tourist centre, the famous Obudu Cattle Ranch of northern Cross River State. It is, hence, a heuristic, exploratory scholarly adventure, but which also holds the promise of unearthing new, unique and exciting vistas among the various strands of discourses that conduce to the defining of the African person and world of yesterday and today.

The production of each of the thirteen essays in this book was prompted by different circumstances, and each was

prepared at a different time, for a specific purpose and audience and, hence, with different modes of delivery in the mind of its author. One consequence of this is that since all the contributors come from the same geo-political environment, work in neighbouring institutions, share the same pool of scarce written sources, often tap from the same cache of memories for their primary information, and do regularly share with one another the outcomes of their research endeavours, their works, though produced individually and each with its own originality, have often been inevitably cross-pollinated. A net result of this is that some bits of the material in the present omnibus work would tend to be replicated in two or more chapters. This tendency does not, however, conduce to any of the contributions losing its uniqueness since each was conceptualized to pursue a different quarry.

Further, some of the chapters here were originally prepared for presentation to the public either as written scholarly submissions or for oral delivery to specific audiences. These two different modes of delivery have certain stylistic implications for the contributions. Where, for instance, elements of oral presentation have been found in the texts, we have merely reduced these from the present coherent publication in some of such chapters rather than eliminate them completely since we believe a residue of these elements in some of the chapters would add the special flavour of variety to the work.

It is necessary to stress that although the book is entitled, *Essays on the History, Language, and Culture of Bendi*, it is not by any means an inclusively Bendi book. It is, indeed, an African book from the perspective of the group referred to as "The Descendants of Agba" by Simon Ogar in his seminal publication, *The Fading Legacies of the Descendants of Agba* (2006). Tentatively, these descendants either include only the Elighe (Alege), Bette, Bendi, Bekwarra and Igedde, or

can have added to them their brothers and neighbours who include Basang, Bebi, Bisu, Bishiri, Busi (in the Obanliku Local Government Area); Obang, Okorotung, Okorogung, Ukpe, Utugwang (in Obudu Local Government Area); East Mbube (in Ogoja Local Government Area) and the whole of Boki. From an ethno-linguistic perspective, all the dialects or languages in these areas are categorized as one sub-family of Cross River Languages known as Bendi. The membership of the group includes Bekwarra, Bette, Bendi, Basang, Busi, Bisu, Ukpe, Bayobiri, Ubang, Elighe (Alege), Utugwang, Okorogung, Okorotung, East Mbube, Afrike, Bumaji and Bokyi (Faraclas, 1989: p.381; see also Crozier and Blench, 1992). This, and possibly even more other entities, constitutes the group which this book represents. But within this group there have been minor variations in their historical narratives, in their cultural nuances, and in their dialects even as the entire group shares much of all of these attributes. Perhaps the most complex and complicated aspect is the language. It is yet far from certain whether all the speech of the communities should be categorized as different dialects of one language or as distinct languages.

Generally, while the idea of a language would assume mutual intelligibility among the speakers of the constituent dialects, the definition of dialect is not usually so straightforward. In Sociolinguistics, the term "Dialect" is usually looked at from three perspectives. The first interpretation of the term refers to any speech considered "non-standard" as opposed to "standard" language. This prestige-based understanding of the word has not been accepted by linguists, especially sociolinguists, who maintain that every language is adequate for the needs of its speakers, hence the terms "standard" and "non-standard" are markers of social class rather than of the needs and actual status of human languages. From a technical, professional point of view, a dialect describes two or more forms of speech which

share a set of partial similarities within a framework of partial dissimilarities provided that the set of partial dissimilarities is not such as to impede mutual intelligibility. What this means is that if speakers of A and B can understand one another irrespective of certain differences in their speech, then the two forms are, technically or professionally speaking, two dialects of the same language. But where the two forms are related but there is no mutual intelligibility, the two would be seen as two distinct but (closely) related languages. From the political perspective, however, this sense of the word fails because of some countries' desire to either express their unity or show their distinctness through language. In China, for example, there are the speech forms Mandarin, Cantonese and Pekingese. The written forms of these "dialects" are mutually intelligible among the speech communities, since they use the same set of the symbolic alphabet, but the spoken forms are not mutually intelligible. Yet, China recognizes all three as mere dialects of one language rather than as distinct languages. On the contrary, Swedes, Norwegians and Danes do, generally, understand one another but because of their cultures, histories and literatures and of belonging within different political entities, each of the groups considers its own "dialect" a distinct language.

In this book, there is no motivation to adopt neither the standard – non-standard nor the political definition of the term "Dialect". What we have adopted here is, hence the professional, technical sense which sees the terms "dialect" and "language" in terms of mutual intelligibility and unintelligibility. However, applying this sense of the word in determing which of the speech forms under the Bendi cluster of Cross River Languages should be seen as dialects or distinct languages would require more rigorous effort, time and resources than the circumstances of this book can afford. Yet, we cannot pretend to be speaking for the entire group in its finitical detail when we have not mastered these other

speech forms thoroughly. This is one reason why we chose to place our focus on a small unit of the whole, which we are quite at ease with. It is our hope that this small unit of the whole would serve as a single case generalization, which is like one drop out of a bucket of water, which represents the rest of the water in the container. Therefore, although the book has Bendi in its focus, it is in reality of an African work perceived from the lenses of the large group that spans communities in Bekwarra, Boki, Obanliku, Obudu, Yala (all in Cross River State) and the Igedde of neighbouring Benue State. It is in this spirit that we have Chapter 12 of the book, which is a contribution by Dr Udida Undiyaundeye, a professional historian and son of Bedia in Obudu Local Government Area. It is our hope and conviction that this chapter would serve as the bridge between this humble effort and subsequent similar efforts that would embrace the entire group that comes under the Bendi cluster of the Cross River languages, all in the bid to establish a more holistic picture of the history, languages, culture and other pre-colonial aspects of these Bantu-speaking communities.

One problem we have encountered in the bid to represent the people's speech results from the absence of orthography for any of the languages or dialects. This is especially troublesome in this situation in which the dialects diverge continually without any one of them having been standardized for common use. Interestingly, these dialectal peculiarities have emerged even within the Bendi dialect itself of the Bendi cluster such that not all the spelling reflected would represent the speech of all the Bendi villages of today even as all the people would know what each word or spelling stands for.

Although each chapter of the book is unique, there are a few terms in Bendi and, indeed, in almost all of these languages or dialects, which have been violated in the attempt to make them represent the new realities of the

people under the period of western civilization and Judai-Christian influence. Perhaps the most semantically mutilated and mangled is "Bewhutang", which has been mistranslated into "devils". In the pantheon of the descendants of Agba as an agrarian people, two festivals had been central to their lives. These had been "ikwuom/ekwang/ekwha/ekwuom" and "Bewhutang". The former marked the onset of the planting season while the latter was a kind of "Thanksgiving" event to the departed ancestors who were believed to be supportive of the effort of the living. These ancestors were those who had gone to "bewhu", which was the people's word for the chthonic region. The element "-tang" in "Bewhutang" was the contracted form of "itang" (earth) so that the whole word would give us the meaning, "Our ancestors who have gone into the earth, or who [now] dwell within the earth". This phenomenon illustrated the people's belief in life after the present realm of existence and in re-incarnation since it was from this region that our ancestors often returned to complete their missions or correct their mistakes in their earlier existence. The "Bewhutang Festival" was therefore an event that was very important in the lives of the people as it articulated their absolute faith in the unseen beings, encouraged their agrarian activities and offered them a moment of relaxation and reflection on the tedious farm activities of the preceding moons. It is, hence, an intolerable aberration to have this word mistranslated as "devils" in today's Bette-Bendi language, at least.

Also, it appears inappropriate to equate our pre-colonial world's sense of "Unim" (singular for "Godhead", plural, "Inim") with the God of the Jewish religion. In the Bette-Bendi world, and of course in much of all the dialects or languages spoken by the "Descendants of Agba", there was the idea of "Unim" as one Supreme Being, and then of "inim" as His representatives or agents that often emerge to intervene in a particular activity, event, matter, act or life of

an individual or of a community. The "inim" were a sort of Beings who checked men's excesses, blessed those who displayed special acts of kindness, punished those who showed wickedness to orphans and strangers, and often protected the weak in the society. While the concept of "Unim" and "Inim" in the Bendi religious pantheon would require a full study of its own, it is important that we mention it here even tangentially so that our readers would at least know that it is inappropriate to see "Unim" or "Inim" in the two worlds of pre-colonial Bendi and western civilization and Christianity as referring to the same phenomenon except if we see this in the context of the "Inim" that often spoke with Abraham and Jacob of the Old Testament, for examples.

The book is organised into three sections. Preceded by a general introduction which clarifies some of the issues in the book, Section One is devoted to contributions that focus on the history of the Bendi people while Section Two is preoccupied with submissions on the Bette-Bendi language. The thrust of the final Section Three is on the culture of the people. It needs be stressed here that in spite of the split of the book into sections, the content of some of the contributions tend to overlap. For instance, while David Imbua and Udida Undiyaundeye are professional historians, Joseph Ushie is essentially a linguist and literary person whose contributions often radiate into history from these two other primary areas of specialization of his. Some of his essays would, therefore, fit into moulds other than where they are at present classified. This does not in anyway detract from the quality of the work as historians have increasingly come to regard interdisciplinarity in historical reconstruction as a necessity rather a chioce

As an essentially exploratory work on a yet uncharted scholarly field, our goal and expectations in this work are quite modest. Indeed, we would be quite satisfied if the work can ignite a robust discussion of the issues raised in it, as

this would galvanize further investigations into this virgin area of multi-layered scholarly interests.

Joseph A. USHIE
David L. IMBUA

Joseph Akawu **USHIE** was born at Akorshi, Bendi, in the present Obanliku Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria, and lectures at the Department of English, University of Uyo, Nigeria. He holds the B. A. in English and Literary Studies of the University of Calabar, and the Ph.D. (English) of the University of Ibadan. He is into stylistics, sociolinguistics, a literary scholar-critic, poet and author of *A Reign of Locusts, Hill Songs, Eclipse in Rwanda, Lambs at the Shrine, Popular Stand*, and the editor and contributor to a sixth poetry volume, *Tsunami Blues and Other Poems*. He is a Fellow of the 2002 Fulbright Programme in New York, and currently a foreign examiner to some universities in India. Dr Ushie has been a Visiting Lecturer to the Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island, Bayelsa State, Nigeria, the Omar Bongo University, Libreville, Gabon, and a presenter or plenary speaker at international academic and literary conferences in Malaysia, the Philippines, Ghana and Cameroon. He is a year 2000 recipient of the Cross River State Honours Award for his outstanding contributions to the promotion of African literature and culture; a 2010 recipient of the Distinguished ELSALITE Award of the Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar; and a 2010/2011 Academia Awards "**Education Ambassador**" of Akwa Ibom State. He has also been a judge of the annual national literary competitions organized by the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) as well as the Chairman of the Akwa Ibom State Chapter of the Association.

Dr Ushie is an editorial consultant to many journals and magazines, and co-editor of the 2009 ANA publication, *Themes Fall Apart But the Centre Holds*. His poetry has been widely studied both in the country and around the world, and has been translated into Italian.

Essays on the History, Language and Culture of Bendi is a painstaking anthropological survey poised to hoist the Bette-Bendi people of Cross River State of Nigeria as an existing ethno-linguistic group among the comity of nations/tribes with identity. Although the focus is on Bendi, it incorporates other clusters of the Cross River languages to resolve the discrepancies in order to establish a more holistic picture of the history, language, culture and other precolonial aspects of these Bantu-speaking communities.

This three-section book is set to ignite robust discussions of the issues raised in it; galavnize further investgations and as a result, propel volumes on this virgin area.

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