Book Preview

Stephen Temegha Olali, *Portrait of Excellence: The Biography of Professor Ayebaemi Ibuteme Spiff, OON* (The Bayelsa State Government through the Office of the Chief Historian and Archivist of Bayelsa State), x + 128 pages, N2,000.00.
By

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The book, *Portrait of Excellence: The Biography of Professor Ayebaemi Ibuteme Spiff, OON,* has been written in the best tradition of historical scholarship.[1] That is in as clear a manner as possible that even those with minimal exposure to Western education can understand its contents. Adopting the narrative approach and depending on oral and written data, the book consists of seven chapters each examining a phase or an aspect of the life of the biographee. Although the subject of the book – Professor Ayebaemi Spiff, was not yet an octogenarian when the book was written and eventually published in 2022, it is essentially an exposition of eighty years in seven chapters and more in the preliminary pages, where the foreword written by Emeritus Professor Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa sets the pace.

In the first chapter, entitled "Life on the Nun" the author attempts an explanation of the birth of the Scholar in the famous town of Kaiama, faraway from the ancient Kingdom of Okpoama, her place of origin, home of her travelling merchant and industrialist father, Mr. Jonathan Kieri Ombu. He narrates the story of how her mother, Mrs. Margaret Tuguemi Ombu, who was originally from Ukot Ukino Itam in Itu LGA of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, got married to her Dad with the consent of his first wife, Madam Esinte Esther Bob. The chapter concludes with the products of the marriage by a listing of Ayebaemi's siblings being, Mrs. Cecilia Doumokuma Sewell, Mrs. Clarice Appah, Lady Christabel Amiete Beredugo, Alabo Jigekuma Ombu Kieri, Messrs. Ogono and George Ombu, and Mrs. Elizabeth Allagoa, Madam Atonbara Ombu, Madam Obala Ombu and Mrs. Idibiye Osoh.

[1]The reviewer is a political and socio-cultural historian and specializes in the History of Nigeria and of the Niger Delta. He is a Life Member of the Historical Society of Nigeria, the Niger Delta Heritage Society and the Ijaw History Project.

The second chapter "Lecturing Around and Around" examines the educational pursuit of Ayebaemi whose father had been an astute advocate of the education of the girl-child, no less than he did the boy-child. Indeed, the chapter represents the essence of Ayebaemi as a young pupil in primary schools both in Nigeria and in the Cameroons. It narrates her days in the Archdeacon Crowther Memorial Girls School (ACMGS) Elelenwo in Rivers State, Nigeria, from 1957 to 1961. The chapter also tells of her admission to the University of Ibadan in 1964, where she studied Chemistry and graduated in 1968, with a Second Class Upper Division, with her oral defence and overall performance so impressive that she was admitted immediately after her graduation to proceed to the Doctor of Philosophy in Chemistry programme. She graduated in June, 1972, thus becoming the first woman in Eastern Nigeria, and the second in the entire country to possess an earned doctorate degree in Chemistry.

In the third chapter, "Lecturing Around and Abroad", the author narrates Ayebaemi's career as an academic, beginning from her short-lived fledgling days as a lecturer at the College of Science and Technology, Port Harcourt, through her long career as a university don at the University of Port Harcourt where she was a pioneer of the then School of Chemical Science, to her elevation to the rank of professor in 2006 and her retirement at the statutory age of seventy in 2013. The author reveals that Ayebaemi holds the record as the first person to isolate and characterise the chemical compound – *tridictaphylline*. He draws attention to the fact that Ayebaemi supervised and mentored innumerable boys and girls who are today leaders in different echelons of society within Nigeria and beyond.

A roll call of her students includes Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, GCFR, GCON, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Franklin Erepamo Osaisai, former Director General of the Nigerian Atomic Energy Agency, Senator Emmanuel Paulker, Professor Michael Horsfall Jnr., the first graduate of Environmental Chemistry in Nigeria, Professor Donbebe Wankasi, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academics), Niger Delta University, and Chemistry lecturer – Dr. Douye Parkinson Markmanuel.

The fourth chapter entitled "Love and Lifestyle" tells of the love life of Professor Ayebaemi Spiff. The author articulates how she met her husband, the agricultural expert, Dr. Edward Dandeson Spiff and how their love for each other blossomed into a fruitful marriage. The chapter speaks of the family in the most concise but incisive of forms, giving details of the wedding of Ayebaemi to her husband, and the names of the children, both biological and foster – Dr. Inabiriyai Ayebadiebara Spiff; Mrs. Eneni Ebifanimi Sowande, Mr. Erenate Diepreye Spiff, Mr. Ebibiolayefa Dayai Spiff, and of course Mrs. Sarah Atonye Fetepigi their niece, who is generally given due regards as a daughter and older sister in the

household, giving that she had been living with Ayebaemi and her husband before their children were born. The chapter chronicles the various homes that the family lived in, the pastimes, hobbies and describes a typical day in Professor Ayebaemi's life.

The fifth chapter, "Living by Grace" speaks of Professor Ayebaemi's Christian life, her commitment to God in various churches, and her roles as a member of the Parochial Church Councils (PCCs) and the various choirs, as well as her efforts towards improving and maintaining the aesthetic and infrastructure of the churches. Amongst the various churches she has worshipped and served the Lord in, the author narrates, are the Chapel of Resurrection of the University of Ibadan, St. Cyprian's Anglican Church and Christ Church (Interdenominational) Port Harcourt, Our Saviour's Chapel, University of Port Harcourt, St. Nicholas Anglican Church Aluu, and St. Marks Anglican Church, Yenagoa.

In the sixth chapter, the author speaks of the legacies of Professor Ayebaemi Spiff as a wife, mother, grandmother, scholar, Professor of Chemistry, Christian, philanthropist, lover of flowers, the environment, good food and a mentor to innumerable many. Here, we hear the views of Professors Youpele Beredugo Orukalama, Obaro Ikime, Bamidele Sanni and Michael Horsfall about their relative, colleague and friend, Professor Ayebaemi Spiff.

The seventh chapter entitled "Lest we Forget" offers a concise summary of the entire book. It also contains the perception of Dame Ella Douglas, first Director of Library Services and retired Permanent Secretary, Bayelsa State Government, about the subject of the book.

In essence, the book *Portrait of Excellence: The Biography of Professor Ayebaemi Ibuteme Spiff*, offers to the reading public, a narrative of one woman's pursuit of excellence against all odds through determination and enterprise. But while it tells the story of what is possible for the determined girl-child and woman, it goes beyond that to reveal to the reading world what Nigeria was in her childhood and youth. It was a country in which there were exceptional people like Mr. Jonathan Kieri Ombu (1902 - 1971), Ayebaemi's father, whose mantra was that education was the greatest legacy he would live for his children, and as such, did not discriminate against any of his children whether they were males or females in a day when sending a girl-child to school was alien to many families and marrying them out early was the norm. The book also lets us see a Nigeria long gone, that was safe to travel by river, road and air, where people related peacefully in spite of tribal and ethnic differences. It was a country in which people strove for the best in their private lives and in public service, as Ayebaemi and others of her generation and ilk exemplified.

Although, the book is scholarly and unique, it hasn't exhausted the entire story of the life of Professor Ayebaemi Spiff. And since research is inexhaustible, the book leaves room for further research into the personality, life and times of the subject. Besides, a few additional qualities are desired. Its photographic illustrations could be brighter with modern digital technology, without affecting the originality of the photographs since some of them are old. Also the book could be reissued in hardback for more elegance fitting of the person of whom it is written.

In a summary, the book shall evidently serve as a significant resource material not only in social history, but in political, economic and culture history as well. It is a classic in the annals of the study of intergroup relations and a veritable representation of art history.