



## UBANG- A PLACE IN NIGERIA WHERE MEN AND WOMEN SPEAK DIFFERENCE LANGUAGES

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*I am of the opinion that, if one desires to be more knowledgeable than the others then travel.*

Language has been described as the organized system of speech used by human beings as a means of communication among themselves. This makes language a unifying factor of the human race and enhances the tradition and culture of the people. But when in a community where people of different genders who are not mutually intelligent, speak different languages yet live harmoniously, hence they can be classified as one of the eight wonders of the world.

This may sound untrue, absurd and strange, but when Bob-Ray Angioha, a reporter, who hails from Obudu in Cross River State, Nigeria, told me the story of the Ubang community, on my visit to Lagos in October, 2000. Frankly I did not take him seriously for obvious reasons. First it is (as I believed it then) practically impossible for a community to exist when the two genders speak different languages. Secondly, if ever such a place exists, I felt it cannot be in Nigeria, may be in Central Africa, Asia or Australia. But with the conviction with which Bob-Ray argued his case left me with no option but to visit UBANG.

I had to go to Colabar from Lagos, a Cross River State capital, for onward journey to Ubang. On my arrival there I made all efforts to be equipped with more information about my destination.

Colabar Municipal limit and there I got every information needed for my onward journey to Ubang.

Ubang, I was informed is in the most remote area of Obudu, in Obudu local government of Cross River State, sandwiched by Benue State to the north, Ogola local government to the west, Obanlikwn to the east and Baki to the south, with an area of about 2,000 square kilometers. About 20 minutes drive from the Obudu town is Ukpe Alege ward and at the western most part of Ukpe is Ubang. There is no direct vehicle route to Ubang from Colabar, except to Obudu.

My journey to Obudu from Colabar began by bus. The ticket was for about N 350, the distance 400 kilometers and the journey lasted for about 8 hours. It is a rather patience journey that takes you through hills of rainforest and beautiful scenery of other adjoining towns before getting to Obudu, known as the tourist haven of cross River State. On way to Obudu, we leave Crossline Park through Murtala Mohammed way heading towards Colabar gate. The vehicle passes through rubber and palm plantations of Odukpani, near the Awi settlement, a beautiful sight.

As you move through Obudu road, these settlements thin out in a dense thick dark forest which houses the largest remaining of the African rainforest with species of apes,



elephants, chetas, snakes, deer, birds and insects. As I advanced northwards towards Obudu, the forest beginning to thin out giving way to desert areas. Between the hills and the valley as Obudu town. On my arrival to Obudu, I hired a bicycle to Begiaba village in Obudu district. After a rough ride of about 45 minutes I reached the house of Chief Sam Ogai, who was waiting for me as he had prior information of my arrival. Chief Sam Ogai was my host for the night.

The next day I took off to Ubang by bicycle. Ubang town is about 2 hours bicycle ride from Begiaba, through a dusty and stony cycle road. The town is bounded by Boyobri village in the east, flanked by the Ubang hills to the south, and west and to the north by the plains of Alege. The Ubang community is situated in a densely forested area away from the civilization. The hills surrounding it are beautiful, there were a good number of modern buildings. Tree crops like pear, banana, cashew and coconuts are common sights in most of the compounds. The occupation of the people is chiefly farming and their major crops are cocoa, rich, yam and groundnut. The men till and cultivate the fields, the women help them marketing the products. Hunting is also very popular with men owing to the abundance of wildlife in the forests.

Oliver Ibang, Chief of the village was my host. After the initial greetings and some rest, I was revealed the marvels of Ubang by the Chief and his fellow headmen. There were two primary schools and a secondary school and I was surprised to find people well read. Religion, however seem to play a dominant role in the society. As the

larger community are mostly Catholic, while New Jerusalem village, in the west is dominated by the Assemblies of God church. Ubang is made up of four villages, Okwurusang, New Jerusalem, Ofambe and Okiro village. The total population of Ubang is about 3500 people. I was told by Chief Oliver Ibang that the people of Ubang area strong believers of some traditional superstitious tales. For instance, it is assumed that it was in Ubang that God first came down to create the universe, the evidence is the foot print called "Foot of God" found 400 years ago on the rock of Abgentang Hills where the Ubang community were said to have migrated from. There are five human like feet imprinted on this rock. Then there is another dreadful village deity called IKWONG they claim it protects them and cures them from sickness.

But the most important culture of the people is that when a child is born, it is the visitor and not the parents that give the name to the new born child. According to Chief Oliver Ibang, "if the child is born, the first visitor that happens to be present during the birth or after, gives the child his or her name. If that visitor is a women and the new born child is a male the woman has the right to give the child her husband's name and vice versa." During my visit I was told by the Chief that a female child is born and I am the first visitor, and as per traditions I have to name the child. I named her Wasia, my wife's name. She should be fifteen years old by now.

The other culture among the Ubang is the disparity in the language. The male and female of the community speak different language. According to



Chief Oliver it is assumed in Ubang that when God first created the Ubang people, he gave them two languages and when God discovered that the language could not go round he decided to give the rest of the world on language. As I was not convinced with this, I asked the village elder about it and according to him, the language disparity is a mystery which nobody including himself knew how and when it started. According to him, "Ubang people were born into it and there is not legacy from their forefathers in this regards." The mystery that is behind the language disparity is such, that when a male child is born he grows up automatically to speak his father's language and equally understands his mother's language. The same is the case with the female child. According to people the women language is very simple to understand. When I listened to the conversation between male and female children, with the help of an interpreter, I noticed that they maintained their gender differences in words. Even in Church, when women sing chorus in women language, the men reply in male language. It is said that male language is difficult to understand as it is drawn from the village idioms, which they claim no stranger can acquire mastery even if they reside there forever.

I was so fascinated by this language disparity that the big question kept coming into my mind, how do these Ubang people communicate? I could see both male and female communicate with each other effectively. They both understand each other when they speak. The difference is that both male and female speak different languages. For

example the word CUP in female dialect is called UGBALA while in male dialect is called ENKOR. There are very few words which are same in male and female dialect. For example for FARM - both will say TSANG, for ORANGE - both will say ORUM, for FISH - both will say IKWE.

Below are some examples of different dialects which I had noted down:

English	Male dialect	Female dialect
Yam	Kitong	Kirewi
Man	Oniche	Onise
My yams are missing	Kiton yi birem	Kirawe Birim
Good morning	Amuri	Amure
I am going to the farm	Nirue Tsang	Nruo Tsang
Where are you going?	Arue Kong?	Aruo Kuna?
Give me water to drink	Kem Amue	Kema Mi
Hen	Okweye	Akwo
Dog	Kabu	Okwakeye
Coco yam	Koshang	Koshan
Spoon	Nsong	Ukuah

When I asked the Chief, what happens when the men folk speaks the female dialect? To this he said nothing happens, it is just abnormal for a male to speak the women dialect, and the children will laugh at you. With the help of an interpreter I asked a lady, does this language in any way promote gender inequality? She disagreed with this, saying that since the male likewise the female have their respective dialects, the issue of gender inequality does not

arise. She also added that the people of Ubang are proud of their inheritance saying that the language disparity is part of their identity.

One thing which I noticed was, Ubang was lacking in basic infrastructure from Government. There was no road connecting Ubang to any big town, no pipe borne water, no health centers and no electricity. According to Chief, Ubang has enormous natural resources and is also known as the food basket of Obudu, but still it is neglected

by the government. It is the women who bear the brunt of the problems. According to him the government is trying to harness the tourism potential of Ubang language disparity to promote rural tourism.

I must admit that my stay in Ubang was one of my most memorable one and I consider myself very lucky to have got a chance to see and stay in this wonderful village.



Ubang villages

