

Aba and its Significance for Adventist History in Nigeria

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Background Information

Aba is a city in the southeast of Nigeria and a prime commercial center of Abia State. It is also referred to as the “Enyimba,” literally translated to denote the “Great Bull” city; confirming its status as the chief city of the Ngwa people. It covers a total area of 72 km², about 28 square miles, and has a population of 2, 534, 265.¹ Upon the creation of Abia State in 1991, Aba was divided into local government areas: Aba South and Aba North. Aba South is the main city center of Abia State. Aba is made up of many villages, such as Aba-Ukwu, Eziukwu-Aba, Obuda-Aba and Umuokpoji-Aba and other villages from Ohazu merged due to administrative convenience. Aba was established by the Ngwa clan of Igbo people of Nigeria as a market town, as such its development has expanded to Osisioma Ngwa, ObiNgwa and the Ugwunagbo local government areas. Consequently, all Ngwa people and a host of other Igbo people who migrated to this commercial center recognize Aba as the prime center and industrial hub of Abia State.

Historically, the origin of Aba city cannot be separated from the origin of the Igbo people who occupy the land. Therefore, to give an accurate account of the origin of Aba, two major issues must be established: firstly, its origin as an Igbo settlement, and secondly, the fact that it was founded by the Ngwa people, a sub-ethnic group of the Igbos. The Igbo speak a language which linguists designate as “Kwa,” a sub-group of the Niger-Congo group of Negro languages.² It is believed that the settlement started with the “nuclear” Igboland, and that waves of immigrant communities from the North and West planted themselves on the border of the nuclear Igboland as early as the 14th or the 15th Century.³ These core areas were further extended to Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu, Awgu, Udi, and Awka divisions and were determined to constitute “an Igbo heartland”⁴ From this earliest settlement, waves of migration set out to occupy the other portions of present-day Igboland, including to the Nsukka-Udi highlands in the east and south-eastwards into the present-day Eastern Isuama area. The people who moved south-south-east into Aba Division in search of farmlands formed the Ngwa group of tribes. The readily available food in their possession was yam, which some decided to boil and others decided to roast.

Those who preferred to roast their yams were called the “Ohuhun” (roasters) people, while those who preferred to boil their yams were called “Ngwa-Ngwa” meaning “quick or quickly,” supposedly quick boilers of their yams. That is the origin of the word “Ngwa,” translated as “fast people.” The three kinsmen and their entourage who gained access to the left bank of the river were Ukwu, Nwoha, and Avosi in order of age. A man by the name of Ngwa Ukwu settled at what is now the village of Umuolike, where he established his ancestral shrine, Aba Ngwa, in a small hut Okpu, which is today regarded as the capital of Ngwaland – called Okpualangwa. It is from this nucleus settlement by Ngwa Ukwu that today’s foundation of Aba was laid. The people were typically farmers and producing yams, cassava, cocoyam, maize, and other tropical farm products while their women folk equally joined their husbands in farming and at the same time engaging in trading and other crafts⁵

Importance of Aba

Aba remains one of the most important hubs of Abia State. Attaining this epochal height in Eastern Nigeria was a result of its marked development which goes back to its precolonial days when it was established by the Ngwa as a market town. Later in 1901, the British colonial administration commissioned a military post to be built there. This made it an important strategic military and administrative center and, as time went on, the city became a collecting point for agricultural products following the British railways which were constructed from 1915 running through it to Port Harcourt. The railway station became very important for the transportation of agricultural products, especially palm oil and palm kernel, for export to England and other European countries. The Aro expedition, which was part of a larger military plan to quell anti-colonial sentiments and importantly to crush the long juju oracle and the slave trading activities of the Aro confederacy, paved way for the planting of Christianity Igboland in the area of Aba between 1901 and 1902.

By the 1930s, Aba was gradually becoming a large urban community with an established industrial complex. This economic and commercial development has continued today with a convergence of several industrial outfits in the city. Aba is surrounded by oil wells that separate it from the city of Port Harcourt. A 30-kilometre (19 miles) pipeline powers Aba with gas from the Imo River natural gas repository. Its major economic contributions are textiles and palm oil along with pharmaceuticals, plastics, cement, and cosmetics. There are also various handicrafts industries--a glass company, sawmills, and textile industries within the city.

Significance of Aba City to the Seventh-day Adventist Church

The Adventist church life and evangelism in Aba City is overseen by the Aba East Conference, Aba North Conference, Aba South Conference, and the Aba West Mission, all of which are part of the Eastern Nigeria Union Conference.⁶ The designation of these conferences and mission signify that their geographical coverage pertains to the north, east, south, and west of Aba City. They are tasked with the goal-oriented mission of evangelizing the entirety of Ngwaland and beyond. The youngest of the four church administrative units in Aba, Aba West

Mission, was organized in 2017 as it was formerly part of the constituted Aba South Conference, all aiming at attaining expanded outreach to the nooks and crannies of the region. Its coverage includes the local government areas of Ugwunasho, Ukwa East, and Ukwa West in Abia State. It has Okechukwu Humphery Ekeke as its president, and Henry Chibueze Anyamele as the Mission secretary. Other key officers of the Aba Conferences are President Henry Emeka Nwankwo, head of the Aba North Conference, and the Secretary Theophilus Ahuchaogu with over 87 churches under their supervision; President Thomas Onyebuchi Opara and Secretary Dr. Wisdom Adiele of the Aba East Conference, with over 101 churches under their supervision; and the Aba South Conference president, Pastor Josiah C. Nwanrungwa, President and Pastor Nwokedi N. Onwutuebe, secretary, as well as other officers in these conferences.⁷ The territorial coverages of these conferences are as follows: Aba East Conference – Aba North, Northern Section of Aba South and Obingwa local governments; Aba North Conference – Isiala Ngwa North, and Isiala Ngwa South local government of Abia State; Aba South which now mainly encompasses Aba South, Osisioma Ngwa since the creation of Aba West mission from the South. The Seventh-day Adventist membership population for each of the conferences are as follows: In Aba North Conference, there are 87 churches with a membership figure 29,985 out of the entire population of the Aba North Conference area. In Aba South Conference, there are 64 churches with membership figuring 20,324 out of the entire population of the Aba South Conference area. In Aba East Conference, there are 101 churches with membership of 32,996 out of the entire population of the Aba East conference. In Aba West Mission, there are 29 churches with a membership figure of 6,672 out of the entire population of the Aba West Mission area. In all, the population figures of these three conferences and one mission together amounts to 89,977 people.⁸ The entire population of these four regions in totality is 7,331,841.⁹ The ratio of the total membership of Seventh-day Adventists in Aba to the population of Aba City and its environs is c. 1:81.

Aba City continues to be a significant mission field for the Seventh day Adventist faith since the beginnings of the Church in 1923. Apart from Aba North and Aba South local governments, other adjacent suburban areas of Aba include the other local governments of the Ngwa people-- Obingwa, Osisioma, Isiala Ngwa North, and Isiala Ngwa South, all of which have a network of not only commercial activities with Aba town, but also possess social-cultural links since inhabitants of the Aba people metropolis itself are populated by people of Ngwa descent. The town has attracted people from other Eastern Nigerian states and even beyond to Aba for business/trading and education.

Plans and Programs for Evangelizing Aba

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, with its many branches in Aba, has done a lot to promote evangelism in the past as it continues to develop new programs. The Public Evangelism programs are organized every month in different areas of Aba and its environs. The campmeetings of the various local churches prioritize welfare programs and prayer ministrations to the poor, sickly and the afflicted.¹⁰ The various church ministries and conference departments include the Adventist Chaplaincy, Ministries Education, Family Ministries, Health

Ministries, Ministerial Association, Planned Giving and Trust Services. Sabbath School and Personal Ministries, Stewardship Ministries, Public Affairs, Religion Liberty, Publishing Ministries, The Women's Ministries, and the Adventist Men's Organization. Particularly, the Adventist Possibility Ministries, Empowerment and Strategic Development, the Global Mission, the Spirit of Prophecy, and the Voice of Prophecy have contributed to massive evangelistic programs.¹¹ Further, both lay workers and the clergy have been involved in mapping out strategies for the outreach to the various companies, artisans, especially to the Ariaria International Market, the second largest market in Nigeria, where many souls have been won to the fold in recent times.

Evangelism is also conducted by educational institutions in Aba, Ohafia Adventist Technical Secondary School (ATESS) and Owerrinta Adventist Secondary Technical College (ASTEC), where students have formed Adventist Youth Society branches that are conducting regular church services and prayer meetings. The Seventh-day Adventist campmeetings are well attended by Adventists and non-Adventists as well. These camps are ignited with spiritual sermons programs, film shows, and drama sessions that attract people from the neighborhoods where these camps are held. Such campmeetings are often held between November and December!¹²

The major challenges to evangelism in Aba city include logistics problems to reach out to the vast new local government areas. The newly made areas have been created by the two major local governments (Aba North and South) to decentralize existing urban concentrations and redirect the flow of people to less-densely inhabited areas in the neighborhood. These new adjoining towns and villages have become new grounds for evangelism. Reaching these new areas requires that the Church obtain new buses and more staff. Additionally, finances are also needed to conduct more empowerment programs, such as training for various crafts and trades including baking, teaching, building technology, and catering services. This is because unemployment is equally high in the city. Another challenge stems from the health facilities of the Seventh-day Church headquarters in Aba, which is becoming overstretched because of the nature of facilities that require modern laboratory equipment, ambulances, and recruitment of health workers and caregivers who would help to maintain the Church's reputation for quality medical delivery care in Aba and its vicinity. The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Aba continues to embrace the opportunities for evangelism and shares the gospel message through its outreach programs in the city.

SOURCES

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Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook, various years, <https://www.adventistyearbook.org/>.

NOTES

1. "Abia (state, Nigeria) – Population." *Citypopulation.de*. Retrieved October 13, 2023.
2. A. E. Afigbo, *An Outline of Igbo History Owerri* (Rada Publishing Company, 1986).
3. Victor Chukezie Uchendu, *The Igbo of the South East Nigeria* (New York: Holt and Winston, 1966), 63.
4. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan, 1976).
5. John N. Orji, *Ngwa History: A Study of Social and Economic Changes in Igbo Mini States in Time Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).
6. See, for example, Obioma Agharanya, "Aba East Conference," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=AH1H&highlight=Aba|Conference>.
7. Aba is the headquarters of the Ngwa people, even though with their various towns and villages further inwards into the Ngwa hinterland, still regard the Aba as their main town.
8. Please see the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook's* information on Aba South Conference, Aba North Conference, Aba East Conference, and Aba West Mission, <https://adventistyearbook.org/search-results?term=Aba+>.
9. Ibid.
10. 2023 Secretariat Report by Dr. Wisdom Chukwuemeka Adiele, secretary of the Aba East Conference, Aba East Conference records, Aba, Abia State, Nigeria.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.

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