

The Auchi Kingdom: A century of growth and innovations

1920 - 2020

by

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Abstract

The history of the Auchi Kingdom is one that has been given very little attention over the years despite the importance and significance of its robust and significant cultural heritage. The strategic location of the Kingdom was the reason why the British made it the headquarters of the former Kukuruku District by the British colonialist which later became defunct and renamed Afenmai in 1954. Despite the Kukuruku District became defunct, the Auchi Kingdom remained the Headquarters of Afenmai land. The Auchi Kingdom, as the Divisional Headquarters since 1920, attracted a lot of visitors and traders from far and wide who came for economic activities and also to witness the splendour of the ever growing and prosperous Kingdom. The Auchi Kingdom had experienced a lot of innovations, growth and development since the British established her rule over the Kingdom. Some notable innovations by the British colonialist includes new administrative policies, modern official staff building complex and quarters, new prison yard, Western Education, new network of roads, abolition of some bad cultural practices et.c. The end of British colonialism in 1960 did not put an end to the development in the Auchi Kingdom but surprisingly, it even increased till date. Auchi remains one of the fastest growing urban centers in Nigeria. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to celebrate a hundred years of a Kingdom as an administrative headquarters and to prove that the Kingdom had experienced progressive growth and innovations with physical evidence to show. This paper adopts a historical approach, with the use of primary and secondary sources, to arrive at its conclusion.

Introduction

The history of many communities in Nigeria are either distorted or completely forgotten. This is due to the fact that the reading and writing culture is gradually dying due to modern technology, unconcern and most especially, the attitude of the youth. The Auchi Kingdom is no exception to this backdrop. The history of the Auchi Kingdom before 1920 shows how through the contact with the Nupe and the British brought about new societal features, some of which have remained with the people till date. The history and expansion of a Kingdom is important in the organization of a political unit, especially in a country like Nigeria where the creation of states and local government areas is a recurring phenomenon. The Auchi Kingdom, in last one hundred years, experienced expansion and growth that is seen and appreciated by visitors over the years. Successive federal and state governments also contributed immensely to the development/construction of many roads and other infrastructural amenities which has singled out the Kingdom to be a mega Kingdom with a first class King (Otaru). The Auchi Kingdom has a wonderful strategic location making it a truly deserved choice location for an administrative headquarters. The paper aims to explain the circumstances and events that led to creation of the Kingdom as the District headquarters and the wonderful happenings within the Kingdom in the last one hundred years.

The origin of the Auchi Kingdom

There are different versions of the origin of the Auchi people. The professional historian believes that any important history must have different versions and that of the Auchi Kingdom is no exception. For the sake of consistence and originality, it is highly imperative that one focusses on the most popular version. The Auchi Kingdom is town located exclusively on latitude 70^{N} and longitude 6.250^{E} of the globe.¹ The town is bounded on the east by South Ibie, on the north-east by Jattu; on the north by Ayua, iyuku and Imeke; on the northwest by Ikpeshi and Ihievbe Ogben; on the south by Ivbiaro and Warrake and on the south by Era and Ayuele-Ugioli. The location of Auchi is hilly with pockets of valleys and flat plains. It is at a meeting-point between the rain forest and guinea savannah.²

The indigenous society of the Auchi Kingdom was founded between 1481 and 1500 by Uchi, the progenitor.³ Uchi was a warrior Benin prince who migrated from Udo in present day Ovia Local Government of Edo State. His migration was triggered by a dispute with his brother, the Oba of Benin, over the right to keep a leopard's skin. The leopard was then regarded a royal beast (political totem). It was customary at that time that anybody that killed a leopard was to surrender the skin of the animal to the Oba. Uchi killed a leopard and refused to surrender the skin to the Oba. He felt the law regarding the surrendering of leopard skins to the Oba did not apply to him because of he was a prince and that the rule was meant for only commoners. The Oba, very angry, relieved Uchi of his command of the western defenses of the Benin Kingdom. Relieved of this duties, Uchi was recalled to Benincity where he stayed at Ogbe quarters⁴

Uchi feared for his life because he felt the plot by the Oba against him had thickened. He decided to flee the Benin Kingdom for safety. Udo and his followers hatched a plan to flee from the Benin Kingdom. The secret code amongst the people that agreed to flee with him was "UNA EGBIA, UNA LE" meaning "EARLY MORNING, IT IS RUNNING". Whenever Uchi's emissary entered a compound on the appointed day and called out "Una Egbia" people in the compound who were faithful to the escape plan responded "Una le". This is how Auchi got its good morning greeting "UNA GBBIA, UNA LE" and this has remained our early morning greeting till date.⁵

This emigration from Benin took place in the fifteenth century. After a very long trek and search for a suitable place to settle, Uchi and his followers settle at a place about 130 kilometers away from the Benin Kingdom on the top a hill just behind the present day Guarantee Trust Bank. A market developed in and around the location that Uchi and his followers settled. The market is known as "Aku-Uchi" (Uchi Market). The market is still in existence and remains the biggest market in Auchi. Over the years after the demise of Uchi, he was deified and a shrine was built on his original abode at Uchi Market. Worshipers of the Uchi deity went to the Uchi shrine with native chalk and salt and made requests believing strongly in the potency. The shrine was eventually destroyed and uprooted in an upsurge of the spread of the Islamic religion in 1913.⁶

The coming and innovations of the Nupe people to the Auchi Kingdom

The actual date that the Nupe began coming to the Auchi and other areas of Afenmai and eventual invasion of the Auchi Kingdom is very difficult to tell. However, available literature seemed to have all agreed on the second half of the 19th century, during the reign of the imperialistic Masaba (1859-1873) in Bida. Some of these literature have dated this period to 1860. Whatever date reached around this period, one important point that needs to be reiterated here is the fact that the period before this date was one that witnessed the continuous slave raiding in the Auchi Kingdom by the Nupe armies. Afenmai, which the Auchi Kingdom forms a part, was invaded for purely military reasons aimed at expanding the Nupe spheres of revenue.⁷ The initial coming of the Nupe people was for commercial activities where some of the articles of trade were talisman, charms, farming tools etc. This later changed when there was Kingship struggles between two brothers in Nupe land and there was a need to expand their armies in other for one of the two brothers to gain an upper hand to gain ascendancy to the throne after the demise of their father, the king. Thus, the operational techniques applied by the Nupe raiders was by attacking and taking their unsuspecting inhabitants by surprise. They sometimes succeeded in capturing hundreds of prisoners as well as livestock.⁸

The Nupe domination over the Auchi Kingdom was from 1860 to 1897. During the period of thirty seven years of domination, a lot of innovations was carried out in the Socio-political and cultural life of the Auchi people and Kingdom. There was the introduction of the position of the Otaru institution. In pursuance of this goal, a virile form of administration based under a man of high personality, wealth and ability among the people was needed as a local agent for the organization of the people and the collection of tax and tributes. The result was the appointment of Ikelebe from Otsudo Kindred of Utsogu village, who lost his mother in the Auchi-Nupe war as the first Otaru of Auchi. Ikelebe became designated with the title ORARU, a derivation of the Nupe word "TARU" which means, a gathering, meeting of people or an assembly. Technically therefore, Otaru means, "he in whose abode people gather". It is worthy of mention at this juncture that before assuming office, Ikelebe, the Otaru-elect, was made to take an oath of allegiance to the Nupe government in Bida on behalf of Auchi people.⁹

The Nupe conquerors suggested the 'Glorious Quran' as their genuine object of taking oath. Auchi delegates as led by Ikelebe presented an aketchi (albino) as their own object of inter-ethnic oath. The presented Quran was placed on the albino's head and a kolanut was broken into two pieces and were robbed with the blood extracted from the albino's body through a light cut that was made on him. Having done this the two pieces of kolanut were further broken into smaller pieces and shared among both delegates, the Nupe and Auchi representatives. The spot where the agreement was made was dug and the albino was buried alive with the Quran placed on his head. A tree was planted on the spot and the place became adopted as where all other Otarus-elect would sit or place their legs on, in agreement with the terms of the oath once dictated and agreed upon therein

between the people of Auchi and their Nupe over-lords. There was also the introduction of other titles such as Daudu, Yama, Azenis etc. These titled men assisted the Otaru in the collection of tax and the administration of the Kingdom.¹⁰ The above marked the introduction of the Otaruship (royal stool), and the beating of large royal drums after the Otaru was further entrenched to form one of the profound effects of the Nupe interruption of the people of Auchi indigenous administrative system.¹¹

Another important influence of the Nupe was the Islamic religion in the Auchi Kingdom. The religion was not directly introduced by the Nupe but was introduced after the departure of the Nupe. In 1912 a major event which had the character of a revolution took place in Auchi, in present day Edo state. This event was the adoption of Islam by the townspeople as their official religion, and the overthrow of the belief system initially upheld by the people. This ushered in a new era, and the quality and character of life now took on new, uplifting forms. It was Oba Momodu of nearby Agbede who first embraced Islam in the area, and Auchi followed quickly in the wake of his action. Already incarnated in Auchi was one who, blessed with a cosmopolitan outlook and a friendly, helping nature which welcomed new ideas and initiatives, was to play a powerful role in the Islamisation of Auchi. This was Momoh the first, a dynamic prince of the Kingdom, loved by the British and his people and their neighbours, who initiated the reforms years before he even became the Otaru or King of Auchi. Professor Oseni draws attention to the significance of the adoption of Islam by Auchi in 1912. His words 'It is the belief of Auchi people that adopting Islam like a state religion, within the Auchi Kingdom, was the greatest thing that happened to this community. It really disciplined the people, and made them cultured. Islam raised us higher than our neighbours, even in behaviour'.¹²

The creation of Auchi as the District Headquarters

The history behind the making of the Auchi Kingdom as the Headquarters of Afenma started during the reign of the Nupe. On Emir Abubakar's ascension to the throne as king of Bida in 1895, moderate administrative changes were effected and Auchi became the Headquarters of territories, around the Kukuruku area, where Bida had firm control over. As such, tributes collected from other areas like Uzairue, Avianwu, Okpekpe, Agenebode, Ibie, Warrake, Ivbiaro, Ihievbe among others were finally dispatched to Bida on the escort of some 28 Azenis and some carriers, and at least one Daudu of the Otaru. In return, the Emir of Bida usually sends gifts to the Otaru of Auchi.¹³

British penetration of Afennailand of which the Auchi Kingdom was located started in 1904; seven years after the defeat of the Emirate of Bida. This date marked the time British patrols imperialistically moved from their Idah station (then in southern provinces of Nigeria but now part of Kogi state) and entered the southern area of Etsaka and gradually advanced towards the Auchi Kingdom. This marked the creation of Kukuruku Division (as Afenmai was then known) with the seat of administration at Idah. This was done in order to bring all the Afenmai communities under one central authority.¹⁴ In order to bring administration closer to the people the administrative headquarters was moved to Ubiaja in Esan district. The British, still not satisfied with the location, the headquarters was moved to Iddo-Okpella in 1916. The administrative headquarters was further moved from Iddo-Okpella to Fugar in 1918. The death of the District Officer (OF) in 1919, which was questionable, made the district to begin their search for another site for the district new district headquarters. This was the same year that Chief Momoh Ideo was appointed as the sixth Otaru after the death of his uncle.

The Auchi Kingdom and Ayua were the two contentious places for the siting of the new district headquarters. Ayua was the first located that was visited but the white inspectors were not satisfied with the location. On arrival on the second location at the Auchi kingdom, the inspectors were very impressed with the site. There was a beautiful vegetation, fresh and warm spring water and the location was at the top of a hill in present day Aiboste. The white inspectors hurriedly recommended the location for the site as a suitable location for the establishment of a government station in 1920. Major C. M. Dunn moved the government station from Fugar to the Auchi Kingdom that same year when it was officially designated as the new administrative headquarters of the Kukuruku Division.¹⁵

Colonial rule and the innovations of the British up to 1960

As mentioned above one of the innovations of the British is making the Auchi Kingdom the administrative headquarters. It did not just stop there, a lot of other innovations followed. The secondly, there was the introduction of British colonial rule in Auchi which subsequently brought about the introduction of new administrative policies. One of such administrative policies was the Indirect Rule system of government. It was introduced to improve the inadequate availability of funds and British officials who had been scared by the West African hot weather and mosquitoes. It also reduced the cost of running the British colonial government.¹⁶

Thirdly, there was building of a modern official building complex, official staff quarters and a modern prison by Major C. M. Dunn. This was a novel event, first of its kind. Prior to that time there were no such

buildings in the whole of the Auchi Kingdom. All these were done during the time of Major C. M. Dunn, as District officer between 1920 and 1921. It may be interesting to note that most of these buildings are still standing till today. Some of them that are still in use have been modified to meet up with the recent standards while others are preserved as historical sites for tourist attraction.¹⁷

Fourthly, there was also the introduction of Western Education in the Auchi Kingdom. After the exit of Major C. M. Dunn in 1921 as District officer, his replacement was an Oxford University trained Lawyer called Barrister Archer. It was Archer's challenge to develop his District educationally and otherwise. The District office was in need of clerks, interpreters and tax collectors and there was no one in Auchi to carry out these roles. He resulted to looking for people at Agbede, Okpella and other towns for urgent recruitment. He, accordingly, proceeded to the establishment of the popular Government School in the Auchi Kingdom in 1922. This was the first school to be established in the Auchi kingdom which marked the beginning of Western Education in the Auchi kingdom then other schools both Primary and Secondary were established in later years.¹⁸ The Auchi Kingdom witnessed the establishment of a technical College in 1964, later transformed to a state polytechnic in 1974 and further upgraded to a Federal polytechnic in 1993.¹⁹

Again, network of roads to link up other towns and villages within the District headquarters in Auchi Kingdom were constructed. The Auchi-Ikpeshi road that was started by, D. H. Momoh, the then Oturu of Auchi, in 1919 was taken over by Barrister Archer and extended to Igarra, a town located towards the boundary of the Afemai land in 1923. Archer also embarked on the construction of a road to Agenebode through South Ibie, Ekperi. Another road was constructed to link Sabongida Ora through Warrake, Ihievbe and Afuze-Emai. Some of these roads are still used till date.²⁰

Furthermore, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was abolished in the early nineteenth century but domestic slavery continued. Before the arrival of the European the Nupe that had established a hegemony over the Auchi kingdom continued with the practice of slavery and slave trade but the British put an end to this practice when they arrived. In 1900, the colonial administration, ended the practice of slavery and slave trade within the Auchi Kingdom and beyond because they believed it was an evil practice and had outlived its essence. This was indeed one of the greatest and most enduring legacy of the British in the Auchi Kingdom and Etsako land.²¹

It should also be noted that in 1921 the British colonial administration abolished the practice of trial by ordeal. Archer, the then District officer was faced the problem of people being accused of witchcraft because at that time the people of the Auchi kingdom had a strong believe in witchcraft and sorcery and this beclouded their sense of reasoning. It arose from the ignorance and superstition of the people and it thrived on their poverty. People that were accused of witchcraft were forcefully brought before a shrine where the juju priest administers and forces the person to drink a concoction known as "Osaki" which was a poisonous mixture extracted from the bark of trees. This was boiled with other fetish items and herbs for several days in a clay pot. The poisonous concoction is then administered on the helpless victim. A victim who had a strong immune system survived it and was declared not to be a witch but a victim with a weak immune system who died of the poison was declared a witch. The family of the deceased mourned their loss and continued to live in shame because one of their family members was tagged a witch.²²

Also, in order to achieve justice and fairness, native courts were set up all over the District. These native courts were manned by chiefs whom were believed to be men of integrity. The native courts were not given the jurisdiction to hear and determine serious and criminal offences like arson and murder. Essentially, their civil jurisdiction was restricted to cases related to marital issues, inheritance and minor chieftaincy issues. Serious criminal cases like murder, for example, could only be tried by the superior court based at Idah. The administration of justice in colonial days was short and swift. There was little or no room for tedious legal technicalities. As soon as the facts were carefully and honestly ascertained, the law in its raw form was coldly applied.²³

In 1951 there was the introduction of Party politics in the Auchi Kingdom when Prince Kessington Momoh and Chief M. J. Momoh introduced the Action Group political party (AG) to the Auchi kingdom. Prince Kiessington Momoh was elected was the first Etsako person to be Member of Parliament (MP) in 1951. He won the elections under the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons Party (NCNC). After a meeting with his friend Anthony Enahoro where he was told that the Action Group Party had more programmes for the development of the Auchi Kingdom, he defected to the Action Group Party. And in turn, a lot of people in the Auchi Kingdom registered in the Action Group Party marking the beginning of party politics in the Auchi Kingdom. Chief M.J. Momoh, Oturu of Auchi was subsequently elected to the Western House of Chiefs further making politics more popular in the Auchi kingdom.²⁴

With the inclusion of the Owan communities to the Kukuru District, the name Kukuru Division was changed to Afemai Division in December, 1954. The root cause of this was that the educated elites from the

former Owan District found the name “Kukuruku” to be offensive and derogatory. They began to agitate for a change of name. A delegate’s conference was held in Lagos in 1942. The conference adopted a resolution calling for a change of name of the Kukuruku District. They further made representation to the Secretary to the Federal Government to authorize the change of name. The adoption of a new name for the Division was a very difficult one but the “Afenmai Division” was later adopted by the people of the Division and subsequently approved by the British Colonial Government in December, 1954.²⁵

The Auchi Kingdom witnessed the opening of the first Health Care Centre and Post Office built by Public Works Department (P. W. D) of Nigeria in 1949. It was later discovered that the Health Care Centre could not cater for the health care needs of the people of the Auchi Kingdom and this resulted to the opening of a General hospital in Auchi to provide essential health care services in 1955. There was also the completion of the Benin-Auchi-Igarra road by Oni and Sons Construction Company in 1957. This aided and facilitated the movement of people and goods across districts. There was also the introduction of Universal Free Primary Education in 1955 and this made a lot of people in the Auchi kingdom to have access to free Primary Education.²⁶

Further growth and innovations in the Auchi Kingdom since 1960

Since the Independence of Nigeria in 1960 the Auchi kingdom further experienced series of growth and innovations that transformed the Kingdom into a mega Kingdom. Due to the voluminous nature of the development and innovations that span over a period of sixty years, the key issues will just be itemized to conserve space and to enable readers of the paper to know the development and innovations that had taken place at a glance. These will be mentioned one after the other. These are as follows below-

1. The famous Our Lady of Fatima College, the first Secondary School in Etsako land, was opened by the Christian Mission in 1962.
2. Mid-West Technical College was opened in Auchi in 1964.
3. Auchi-Agenegbode road got tarred in 1965.
4. A branch of Barclay’s Bank (now Union Bank) was opened in Auchi in 1965.
5. Auchi (Ughele) Market built by the Etsako District Council and formally opened by Major Odiwo in 1967.
6. Auchi Motor Park was built in 1968.
7. The Bailey bridge was constructed across River Orle along Auchi-Warrake road by army military engineers led by Major Sufuyanu Musa in 1969.
8. Public Radio System commenced transmission in the Auchi Kingdom in 1971.
9. Auchi was connected to the National Grid for electricity supply by ECN in 1972.
10. A branch of New Nigeria Bank was opened in Auchi in 1972.
11. The Auchi-Afuze-Sabongida Ora road was tarred in 1973.
12. Midwest Technical College Auchi was upgraded to the status of a Polytechnic in 1974.
13. Auchi Polytechnic was upgraded to the status of a Federal Polytechnic by General Ibrahim Babangida in 1993.
14. Catholic Diocese of Auchi was created in 2002.
15. Arafat Mosque, the first Arafat Mosque in the muslim world outside Saudi Arabia was opened in Auchi in 2002.
16. The first pedestrian bridge, in Afenmai land was constructed across the Benin-Auchi road in at the Auchi Polytechnic Junction in 2014.
17. A 60,000 Metric tonnes capacity fertilizer Plant, Auchi was commissioned by the Vice President, Professor Yemi Osinbanjo.
18. During the reign of Commrade Adams Oshiomole between 2008 and 2015, the Auchi kingdom experienced a lot of road construction, maintenance and a host of other innovations. The issue of the gully created by erosion was also tackled giving the Kingdom a wonderful sight to behold.²⁷

Conclusion

The main motive of this paper is to explain the growth, development and innovations that had taken place in the ever growing Auchi Kingdom in the past one hundred year after the British colonialist made the kingdom the District headquarters of the defunct Kukuruku District. The paper has shown how the Kingdom grew and was transformed into a mega Kingdom. It must also be said that the British Colonial government played a great role in the development of the Auchi Kingdom despite their exploitative intentions. After the exist of the British in 1960, Nigeria experienced both Military and Civilian Administrations, however, both impacted positively on the Kingdom in terms of Infrastructure and the visible evidence is there to show and can even speak for itself. It must be said at this point that the best is yet to come. Under the able leadership of General Muhammadu Buhari the

People of the Auchi Kingdom strongly believe that he would do more wonderful things in the Kingdom making it a force to be reckoned with in Edo State and Nigeria as a whole.

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