**AFENMAI HERITAGE AND HER QUEST FOR A COMMON LANGUAGE**

**By**

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**INTRODUCTION**

**CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Cultural heritage refers to the cultural features that are inherited from the past, such as traditions, languages, art, and buildings, all of which hold historical significance for a particular society[[2]](#footnote-3). These elements are not only products of history but also carry intrinsic value that remains relevant in the present. Cultural heritage serves as a bridge between the past and the future. It is preserved and celebrated today because it holds meaning for the people or communities that claim it, ensuring that future generations can benefit from and appreciate the wisdom and identity embedded in these traditions.[[3]](#footnote-4)

The idea of cultural heritage has evolved over time, shaped by complex historical processes. It reflects shifting values across societies and generations, and is recognized by various groups in different contexts. As such, the concept of cultural heritage includes a wide range of categories, such as World Heritage and National Heritage, which help preserve and promote the diversity of cultures, languages, and traditions around the globe.

**LANGUAGE, THE HEARTBEAT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY**

Language, in its simplest form, is both a medium of communication and a reflection of identity[[4]](#footnote-5). It is through language that ideas, beliefs, culture, and traditions are expressed and passed down from one generation to the next. Language also shapes how individuals perceive and understand the world around them. It is an arbitrary system of sounds and symbols that is used by a community in a structured and conventional manner to convey meaning.

Language plays a fundamental role in uniting people, even when they are geographically dispersed. It binds a community together, distinguishing an ethnic group and allowing them to maintain a collective identity. For communities such as the Afenmai people, language is an integral part of what makes them unique, representing their shared history, worldview, and cultural practices.

**AFENMAI HERITAGE**

Afenmai heritage represents the rich cultural, linguistic, and historical fabric that binds the people of Afenmai in Edo North, Nigeria. It is a unique legacy that spans centuries, encompassing a diverse array of traditions, languages, customs, and beliefs that continue to shape the identity of Afenmai people today.

Afenmai heritage thrives in its rich social structures, traditional leadership, music, dance, and festivals that bind the people together. Deeply rooted in ancestral beliefs and practices, Afenmai is known for her vibrant ceremonial life, where language, music, dance, festivals and communal gatherings play an important role in passing down history and values. Family and kinship are the cornerstones of the social structure, with elders and traditional rulers guiding the community through rituals, decisions, and moral teachings.

**AFENMAI LANGUAGE DILEMMA**

The Afenmai region is home to a cluster of closely related dialects, which, despite their similarities, present a unique challenge in terms of language unification. The lack of a standardized orthography, consistent structure, and unified spelling system has hindered the effective teaching and learning of the Afenmai language. Additionally, different dialects use varying characters to represent the same sounds, further complicating efforts to standardize the language for educational and communicative purposes.

Many Afenmai dialects are considered endangered, largely due to the erosion of cultural and linguistic identity. The widespread adoption of global languages, such as English and Nigerian Pidgin, has further marginalized indigenous languages. The absence of a unified Afenmai identity, therefore, poses a significant risk to the preservation of its languages and traditions. A crucial step in addressing this challenge is the development of a common Afenmai language, one that embraces the linguistic diversity of the region while fostering a sense of unity and pride.

**ABSTRACT**

**A LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL EXPLORATION**

This lecture will delve into the **rich heritage of the Afenmai people**, exploring the historical, cultural, and linguistic elements that have shaped our identity over centuries. We will begin by tracing our **origins from the ancient Kingdom of Benin**, examining how the migration of our ancestors led to the establishment of Afenmai communities in the northern part of Edo State, Nigeria. By understanding this historical context, we can better appreciate the shared roots that bind us, even as we navigate the complexities of modern life.

Central to this exploration is the **linguistic diversity within Afenmai communities**. Afenmai is home to a cluster of closely related dialects, each with its own distinct variations. These dialects are spoken across various villages and towns, with certain communities using slightly different vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical structures. While these linguistic variations enrich the cultural fabric of the region, they also present significant challenges for **social cohesion**, **trade**, and **governance**. Communication barriers between these dialects can hinder collaboration, economic exchange, and even effective governance, as leaders must navigate the complexities of different linguistic groups within the same region.

In addition, we will consider the **modern educational and communication initiatives** aimed at addressing these challenges. With the forces of **globalization** and **urbanization** affecting the way people interact, there is an increasing shift toward the use of **English** and **Nigerian Pidgin**, both of which are now dominant languages in urban and even rural areas. While these languages facilitate broader communication, they also pose a threat to the survival of **traditional Afenmai dialects**. Many younger generations, particularly those in urban areas, are more proficient in English or Pidgin, leading to a decline in the use of indigenous languages. As a result, preserving and promoting the Afenmai language becomes a crucial part of maintaining cultural identity and heritage. Through education programs, cultural revitalization efforts, and the standardization of the Afenmai language, we can mitigate the risk of language loss and ensure that future generations stay connected to their linguistic and cultural roots.

Ultimately, this lecture will provide a comprehensive look at the challenges and opportunities facing the Afenmai people as we work to preserve our heritage while adapting to the demands of an increasingly globalized world.

**CLARIFYING TERMINOLOGIES[[5]](#footnote-6)**

Before we proceed, it is important to clarify our approach to referring to indigenous groups. It is common to see terms like **“the Etsakos,” “the Binis,” “the Yorubas,” “the Igbos,”** and **“the Hausas**” used in the plural form. However, this presentation does not adhere to this grammatical convention. Instead, we adopt a perspective that honours the unity of these groups, considering them as collective singular entities. Thus, in this lecture, we will refer to them as “**the Etsako,” “the Bini,” “the Nupe,” “the Auchi,” “the Uzairue,” “the Weppa-Wanno,” “the Avhainwu,”** and **“the Ibie,**” recognizing the totality and unity of each respective nation, tribe, or ethnic group.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND[[6]](#footnote-7)**

One of the strongest challenges ever faced by any open-minded historian concerned with the origin and historical development of any group of people, is situating the starting point, i.e. telling exactly when, where and how it all started, that evolutionary process that brought about their present day. For the Afenami people, as the time of its earliest unfolding, there were no written records, and as such, there is no real authoritative source that can point to the most authentic fact of our whence.

All the bits and pieces of historical information about the origin of the Afenmai people as we have them today are derived from what was passed across orally through the centuries. One cannot deny the fact that in such a long

period of oral transmission of information spanning through generations of people, so much has been lost and much of the story has changed. As it were, the story now varies from one clan to another and from one village to another, each history teller giving a version that gives primacy or premiership to his own distant ancestry, clan or village. Consequently, there are divergent views about the origin of the Afenmai people and these views are as many as there are people concerned with telling or writing the origin cum history of the Afenmai people.

There are many myths and legends existing in Afenmai folklores that link the origin of the world with us. As there are creation myths amongst our people, so there are various oral stories that trace the origin of Afenmai to Benin and our consequent migration to our present abode.

However, there is a leeway, and that is the fact that in spite of the mythical origins as contained in the legends and folklores of Afenmai people, there is a general consensus amongst history writers which also corresponds to numerous oral traditions as related through the ages, that the Afenmai people came from the Bini nation (precisely from Benin), having migrated in stages during the reigns of **Oba Ewuare the Great** and **Oba Ozolua** in the **14th** and **15th Centuries** respectively.

As it were, the said migrations had their causes, the causes too had their effects, and the effects as well had their unique and final outcome – the establishment of Afenmai.

**THE AFENMAI MIGRATION – THE GREAT EXODUS**

Historical accounts suggest that the Afenmai people migrated from Benin during the oppressive reign of Oba Ewuare, one of the most legendary and formidable rulers in the history of the Benin Empire. The name **Ewuare** (also spelled **Oworuare**) ***means "everything is fine"*** or ***"the problem has ended,"*** signifying the end of conflict and the restoration of peace between warring factions in Benin between **1435-1440 AD**. Following this period of reconciliation, **Akalaka**, along with his two sons, **Ekpeye** and **Ogba (present Rivers state),** moved southeast, initially settling in **Ula-ubi**. Other groups later left Benin City and migrated northward. Recent research, however, has shown that the Afenmai people had been living in their land even before the migration from Benin City[[7]](#footnote-8). Agenebode or Igenebode is said to have arisen from the migration story.

**THE BENIN MIGRATION[[8]](#footnote-9)**

The Afenmai people trace their origins to the Benin Kingdom, which itself has a complex history of migration. The Bini people, originally believed to have come from Egypt, passed through the **Sudan** and **Ile-Ife** before settling in what is now Benin. The kingdom, initially ruled by the **Ogisos**, transitioned to Oba rule with the arrival of **Oranmiyan**, son of Oduduwa, around th**e 12th century**.

Over time, internal conflicts, such as the deaths of Oba Ewuare’s sons due to jealousy, led to harsh laws and a mass migration of people seeking freedom. The name of the kingdom was initially changed from "Benin" to "Edo" in honour of a slave who saved Oba Ewuare’s life. However, European explorers continued to call it "Benin."

Under **Oba Ozolua**, the kingdom faced conflicts and unrest, prompting further migrations. The Afenmai people likely began their migration between the **14th** and **15th** centuries, initially settling in **Aviele** (small quarters, Mhayere) before moving northward due to tensions with locals. Over time, they established settlements in areas such as Auchi, Uzairue, and Ugioli. The Afenmai’s migration was part of a broader pattern of movements from Benin **driven by political strife** and a desire for **autonomy**.

Later, peaceful expansion followed and the people grew in number to form different clans/communities, which today are geopolitically divided into three Local Government Areas: **Etsako West Local Government, Etsako East Local government and Etsako Central Local Government**. The three Local Government Areas are bordered in the south by **Esan Central Local Government Area**, in the north by **Okene Local Government Area of Kogi State**, in the west by **Owan Local Government Area** and to the east by River Niger. Amongst others, **the Etsako West Local Government Area** comprises **Auchi, Uzairue, Agbede, Anwain, South-Ibie, Afashio, Aviele/ Ugioli; the Etsako East Local Government Area** comprises **Agenebode, Oshiolo, Iviagbepue, Imiiakebu, Imiegba, Okpekpe, itsukwi, Iviukwe, Igiode, Emokweme, Ivioghe, Ekwotso, Iviukhua, Ivianokpodi, Okpella, Iviebua, Weppa, Agiere, Othame, Ovao, Iviari, Ivioghomhe, Iviogho Emokweme, Egori; and the Etsako Central Local Government Area** comprises **Fugar, Anegbette, Udochi** and **Ogbona[[9]](#footnote-10), Iralokhor, Ugbekpe, Osimhegbe, Udaba, Azukhala, Ivianake, etc.**

The migration of the Afenmai people from Benin played a key role in **shaping our cultural and linguistic identity**. This migration was driven **by internal strife**, oppressive policies, and conflicts under **rulers like Oba Ewuare**. The strict laws led to mass emigrations, creating cultural and political ruptures that helped us develop new identities in different regions. As we established communities independent of Benin, we strengthened our cultural autonomy, social structures, religious practices, and systems of governance, while also adopting new customs from interactions with other communities.

**LINGUISTIC EFFECTS OF THE MIGRATION**

The migration of the Afenmai people had profound linguistic effects, contributing to the spread and diversification of the **Etsako language**, which is a part of the larger **Edoid** language family. While the Afenmai people retain deep linguistic ties to the **Bini (Edo)** language, the physical separation and distinct experiences along their migration routes led to the development of subtle variations in dialects and speech patterns. These differences reflect the unique circumstances each group encountered in their new environments.

In addition to regional influences, the Afenmai people’s interaction with other ethnic groups during their migration further enriched the language, resulting in the complex tapestry of dialects we see today. This **linguistic diversity** not only marks our adaptability but also

highlights the blending of cultural influences over generations.

The migration also played a crucial role in fostering a strong sense of **community cohesion**. As we settled in new areas and faced the challenges of unfamiliar territories, we overcame these obstacles together, reinforcing their shared history and collective identity. The enduring legacy of this migration continues to shape our cultural practices, social structures and communal rituals, anchoring them to their past while reinforcing their distinct cultural expressions.

Today, the linguistic and cultural diversity within Afenmai communities serves as a living testament to their migration history. Understanding the roots of this migration provides valuable insights into our present-day identity—both as descendants of the **Benin Kingdom** and as distinct groups with our own unique **linguistic traits** and cultural traditions

**SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE MIGRATION**

Socially, the migration enabled us to establish new communities independent of the strict control and oppressive systems of the Benin Kingdom. As we moved into regions like **Aviele**, **Auchi**, **Uzairue**, and **Ugioli**, wewere able to escape the burdensome governance of Benin, which included harsh **mourning laws**, excessive taxation, and a general atmosphere of misrule. In these new settlements, our ancestors were no longer under the sway of the Benin monarchy, allowing them the freedom to forge their own **social structures** and governance systems, suited to their unique needs and circumstances.

This migration fostered the development of a more **autonomous social order**. As our ancestors dispersed across various regions, they began to form distinct **social customs**, norms, and practices that reflected their evolving identity as a people independent from the Bini. These new practices not only helped solidify their sense of belonging but also reinforced their distinctiveness from their Benin origins. Although we retained certain cultural elements from their time in Benin, our new environments allowed for the flourishing of local traditions, which helped shape their evolving identity.

Moreover, the migration nurtured a collective **spirit of independence, unity** and **resilience,** which we possess till today. In facing the challenges of settling in unfamiliar territories, we developed a strong sense of solidarity and cooperation.

**POLITICAL EFFECTS OF THE MIGRATION**

The migration marked a crucial shift toward **self-governance** and autonomy. The oppressive leadership and mismanagement of the Benin Empire, particularly during the reign of **Oba Ewuare**, prompted many to seek greater control over their own affairs. Fleeing from a system that stifled their political freedoms, the Afenmai people settled in new regions where they could create and manage their own **governance structures**, distinct from the centralized monarchy of Benin.

In the regions between **Auchi** and **Uzairue**, the Afenmai began to organize themselves into various **clans** and **local governments**. This process led to the formation of political divisions such as **Etsako West**, **Etsako East**, and **Etsako Central Local Government Areas**, which represent the our decentralized approach to governance. Unlike the highly centralized system of the Benin monarchy, the Afenmai political structure emphasized localized decision-making and greater participation from the community. This decentralized model allowed for more direct control by local leaders, fostering a system where governance was more responsive to the specific needs and dynamics of each community.

The experience of migration also played a key role in strengthening the Afenmai people's **sense of self-governance**. The challenges of exile and the necessity of establishing themselves in new lands reinforced our desire for **political autonomy**. We were able to build political systems that better reflected their cultural values and practical realities, free from the constraints imposed by the Benin Empire. This migration was a pivotal moment in the political evolution of the Afenmai people, catalyzing the creation of more **independent and localized systems of governance** that continue to define our political landscape today.

**CULTURAL EFFECTS OF THE MIGRATION**

**Severed from the Benin Kingdom**, our ancestors were able to cultivate a **distinct cultural identity**, one that balanced both their deep-rooted heritage and the influences of their new environments. While they carried with them significant aspects of **Benin culture**, including their language, religious beliefs, and social practices, their migration also presented an opportunity for cultural transformation and adaptation.

As the Afenmai people established themselves in new territories, they began to interact with a range of **ethnic groups** and communities, each with their own customs, languages, and traditions. This exposure to different cultural influences led to the adoption and adaptation of new **rituals**, **customs**, and practices. Over time, the Afenmai culture became an intricate blend of **traditional Benin** elements, **nok** culture, **Hausa, Yoruba, English, Niger-Congo** relations and **local innovations**, shaped by their diverse experiences across various regions.

For example, while the Afenmai continued to practice elements of **Benin religion**, the structure of their ceremonies and religious practices evolved to reflect the dynamics of their new environments. Similarly, their **art**, **music**, and **traditional attire** began to incorporate regional influences, islam, Christianity, creating a fusion that is uniquely Afenmai.

Beyond just physical movement, the Afenmai migration represents a journey of **cultural resilience**—a testament to the community’s ability to preserve its core identity while embracing change. The migration wasn’t merely a relocation; it was an **act of adaptation** that allowed the Afenmai people to thrive in the face of new challenges. Their culture emerged as a dynamic synthesis, evolving through **interactions with neighboring groups**, the need for **survival**, and the desire to maintain a sense of **unity** and **belonging** in unfamiliar lands.

**CULTURAL HERITAGE AND COMMON IDENTITY**

Afenmai people share a rich and diverse cultural heritage that serves as a unifying force despite our linguistic and geographical differences. Cultural practices, traditional ceremonies, festivals, and oral traditions all play crucial roles in maintaining a sense of community and identity across the region. These cultural elements, which include marriage and death ceremonies, traditional festivals, and rites of passage, transcend language barriers, fostering unity and continuity.

**SHARED CULTURAL PRACTICES AND TRADITIONS[[10]](#footnote-11)**

**Marriage and Family Structures**

Marriage customs (**Isomi**) among the Afenmai people exhibit some variation depending on the local customs of different tribes, but several key practices are common across the region. These include the use of marriage payments **(bride price)** and various forms of union, including the **Amoya**, **Adegbe**and **Enzbo** marriages. The Amoya marriage, in particular, is characterized by a larger bride price, which signifies full rights over the woman and her children, who are then affiliated with the husband's descent group. On the other hand, **Adegbe** marriages involve smaller payments, and children born from this union may belong to either the father's or the mother's descent group, depending on specific circumstances.

Marriage rites are an important social institution, and in many communities, the bride must undergo certain rituals before becoming a full member of her husband's family. For example, at **Fuga (Avianwu),** a young girl may be taken from her family at an early age, and after some years, she will be formally married to her husband in a ceremony that involves both families exchanging gifts and services.

**Death and Funeral Rites**

Death rituals in Afenmai communities, while diverse, share a common pattern. Upon the death of a community member, certain rites must be performed to ensure the safe passage of the soul. Mourning practices often involve the shaving of the head, with different styles signifying the mourner’s relationship to the deceased. In some communities, specific animals are slaughtered for various parts of the deceased’s body, a practice that reflects a deep spiritual connection to the world of the ancestors.

Funerary practices are community-oriented, with people coming together to support the family of the deceased. The Afenmai people also have beliefs in the power of witchcraft, which has historically been tied to death and misfortune. In the past, witch-finding rituals were prevalent, and people, often children, accused of witchcraft were subjected to trials and exorcisms, though these practices were eventually suppressed by the authorities.

**Festivals: Celebrating Unity and Identity**

Festivals are central to Afenmai life, providing both a means of celebrating cultural heritage and a way to foster communal unity. These festivals vary across the region, with each community hosting its own set of annual celebrations. Despite the linguistic and cultural differences among the Afenmai people, these festivals are a shared experience that bring people together to celebrate their identity, history, and cultural creativity.

In **Akoko-Edo**, one of the largest local government areas in the region, there are over **54 communities**, each with its own set of festivals. For example, the **Irepa Festival**is celebrated among the **Igarra Etuno** people. Similarly, the **Ukpe-Oza Festival**(festival of maidens) among the **Ojahpeople** and the **Ughere Festival** among the **Uneme people** are key cultural events that provide opportunities for the people to express their artistic and cultural values. The same cultural dynamism is seen in the **Irauh Festival (Manhood Initiation festival)** among the Auchi people in the Etsako Federal Constituency and the **Egherle Festival** among the **Ora people**.

In total, there are hundreds of festivals spread across the local government areas of Afenmai. The vast number of festivals, from the **Ohe** and **Oke festivals** of the **Otuopeople** to the **Emai Festival** celebrated by the **Emai people**, underscores the commitment of our ancestors to preserving and celebrating our cultural identity through dramatic arts, performance, and social cohesion. These festivals not only provide entertainment and joy to the community but also engage people in creative arts, music, dance, and drama, further strengthening the bonds between generations.

**The Life Cycle: Birth, Childhood, and Youth**

Afenmai people place significant importance on rituals marking various stages of the human life cycle. From birth to adulthood, these customs help structure social roles and reinforce community values.

**Birth**: In **Agbede**, for example, childbirth is a highly ritualized event. A woman giving birth is assisted by another woman who must not be pregnant herself. The placenta is buried under the eaves of the house, while the umbilical cord is treated with special care—sometimes tied to a palm tree, symbolizing the child’s ownership of the tree. The child is introduced to the community through a series of rituals, including special food and ceremonies, marking the beginning of their life within the social fabric.

**Circumcision**: Male children in **Agbede** undergo circumcision shortly after birth, symbolizing their transition into the male gender and preparing them for adulthood. This practice is an important rite of passage that is closely tied to the community’s values surrounding masculinity and identity.

**Youth**: A young man in the Afenmai region is expected to work alongside his father until he is given the means to establish his own home and farm. At this stage, he receives a wife, and the relationship between father and son continues to be characterized by respect and duty. Annual contributions of yams from son to father serve as a way of maintaining this bond and ensuring the son’s place within the larger family structure.

**Religion, Magic and Witchcraft**

Religion and spiritual beliefs also play an integral role in the cultural identity of the Afenmai people. Our ancestors are revered and deified, with founders of wards, villages, and tribes worshipped by the community. Magic, witchcraft, and divination practices are embedded within the spiritual life of the people. Witchcraft, in particular, has historically been an important part of Afenmai folklore, with accusations of witchcraft sometimes resulting in trials or exorcisms, as seen in the witch-finding movement that emerged in the **1940s**.

**LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY WITHIN AFENMAI COMMUNITIES**

Afenmai people historically lacked a central, unified language. Instead, we speak several different dialects, many of which are not mutually intelligible. This linguistic fragmentation has posed challenges to communication and cultural cohesion within the region.

**MAJOR LANGUAGES AND DIALECTS OF THE AFENMAI PEOPLE**

The languages spoken in the Afenmai region fall into several distinct linguistic groups, each with its own internal variations. Among the most prominent languages are **:**

1. **Etsako Language (15 Dialects)**

The Etsako language is the largest and most widely spoken within the Afenmai region, though it exists in multiple dialects that vary significantly. These dialects include:

* **Weppa Uwanno**
* **Auchi**
* **Ekperi**
* **South Ibie**
* **Avhianwu**
* **Uzairue**
* **Agbede**
* **Ivbiaro**
* **Warrake**
* **Ihievbe**
* **Jagbe**
* **Uneme Anegbette**
* **South Uneme**

These dialects, though sharing a common linguistic origin, differ greatly in vocabulary, pronunciation, and structure. As a result, communication between speakers of different Etsako dialects can be challenging.

1. **Agbelo Language (4 Dialects)**

The Agbelo language, spoken primarily in the southern parts of Afenmai region, has four main dialects:

* **Okpella**
* **North Ibie**
* **Ososo**
* **Dagbala**

Like Etsako, the Agbelo language is internally diverse, and speakers from different dialect groups often have difficulty understanding each other fully.

1. **Ora (Emai) Language (5 Dialects)**

The Ora language, also known as Emai, is spoken in the southern part of the Afenmai region. It includes five distinct dialects:

* **Emai (Afuze)**
* **Otuo**
* **Uokha**
* **Igue**
* **Luleha**

These dialects exhibit distinct phonetic and lexical differences, reflecting the diverse cultural subgroups within the Ora-speaking population.

1. **Etuno Language**

The Etuno language, in contrast to the other languages in the region, has no significant dialectal variation. It is spoken uniformly across its communities, making it one of the more linguistically homogeneous languages in the Afenmai region.

1. **Uneme/Enwa Language (6 Dialects)**

The Uneme/Enwa language is another important language in the Afenmai region. It is divided into six dialects:

* **Enwa**
* **Uneme Erhurhu**
* **Uneme Akiosu**
* **Uneme Ekpedo**
* **Uneme Akpama**
* **Uneme Nokhua**

Each dialect has its own unique characteristics, but they are generally mutually intelligible within the Uneme-speaking communities.

**LINGUISTIC FRAGMENTATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS**

Despite the rich diversity of dialects, Afenmai has not historically had a common language that unites its people. Four of the six local government areas of the Edo North Senatorial District primarily speak various dialects of Etsako, yet no one dialect can be considered the “**original**”or “**central Etsako language”**. The **15 dialects** of Etsako are fragments of a once-unified language spoken by the Afenmai people in the Benin Kingdom before they migrated to the present geographical area of the Afenmai region.

The question of which dialect represents the "**true**" Etsako language has been a subject of debate. While some individuals may claim that their dialect is the original, this claim overlooks the fact that all the dialects have evolved over time, and the original form of Etsako is no longer accessible to contemporary speakers. This linguistic fragmentation has resulted in a situation where mutual intelligibility among dialects is often limited.

Additionally, the Afenmai people face challenges in communication across different ethnic groups. For instance, speakers of **Agbelo** dialects cannot always understand speakers of **Yekhee** dialects and speakers of **Uneme** or **Etuno** dialects may struggle to communicate with those who speak Etsako. As such, the lack of a unifying language has hindered both social cohesion and effective communication within the Afenmai region.

**TOWARDS A UNIFIED AFENMAI LANGUAGE**

The development of a unified language for the people of Afenmai has become an important goal in recent years. While the name “Afenmai” refers to the people of the region and not to a specific language, the need for a common language is becoming increasingly evident. To address this, there have been efforts to standardize the most widely spoken dialects, particularly those of the Etsako language, into a new Afemai language.

The adoption of Etsako as the foundation for this unified language is logical, given that it is the most widely spoken and understood across the Afenmai region. However, this does not mean that Etsako should be the sole focus. In order to create an inclusive Afemai language that truly represents the entire region, it is essential to draw upon elements from all the dialects, ensuring that no group feels excluded from the process.

This effort requires the collaboration of all linguistic groups within the Afenmai regionto create a language that reflects the diversity and unity of the people. Such an undertaking must be community-driven and culturally sensitive, incorporating the unique linguistic features of each group while striving for mutual intelligibility across the region.

**QUEST FOR A COMMON LANGUAGE[[11]](#footnote-12)**

The ongoing efforts to create and promote a standardized, unified language for the Afenmai people are part of a transformative initiative aimed at bridging the linguistic diversity that exists within the region. At the heart of this initiative is the goal of harmonizing the various dialects spoken across Edo North and giving them a collective identity under the term “**AfenmaiLanguage**.” The drive for standardization arises from the recognition of the region’s linguistic complexity. While many of these dialects are mutually intelligible, there are enough differences to necessitate a common language to foster communication and unity.

A significant turning point in this effort was the Afenmai Language Seminar held in **April 2021**. During the seminar, experts, including myself, ably represented by Professor Francis Egbokhare, deliberated on the need for a lingua franca that could serve as the standard for the entire region. The consensus was clear: Etsako, with its 15 dialects, should be rebranded as the **“Afenmai Language**” for the purpose of education and communication, bringing together not only the Etsako dialects but also those from **Ivbiosakon (7 dialects**) and **Okpameri (5 dialects).** This approach would make the language more inclusive and accessible to all communities in the region, while ensuring that no group feels marginalized or excluded.

This new language development is not only a practical step toward greater communication but also an important move toward the preservation of our linguistic heritage. As **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)**[[12]](#footnote-13) continues to advocate for the safeguarding of local languages, the creation of a standardized Afenmai language aligns with global efforts to protect and celebrate indigenous languages.

**LANGUAGE AS A UNIFYING FORCE**

The Afenmai Language initiative is an inclusive project, designed to bring together the diverse dialects of the region under one unifying umbrella. The new "Afenmai Language" has been developed to serve as a tool for cohesion, education, and cultural preservation. A particularly notable achievement is the development of a new numeral system—**the Etsako New Numeral and Words**—which breaks the traditional barriers and limitations of local numeracy. This innovative system has helped expand the scope of counting, making it more versatile and advanced while remaining grounded in the cultural traditions of the region.

While some critics may challenge or oppose the development of this standardized language, it is important to remember that such bold steps are necessary for progress. The creation of a unified language is not just a temporary change, but a legacy that will be passed down for generations to come.

**THE CHALLENGE OF A COMMON LANGUAGE**

1. **Lack of Standardized orthography and consistent grammatical structure**

One of the main hurdles in creating a unified Afenmai language lies in the lack of a standardized orthography and a consistent grammatical structure. Each dialect within the Afenmai group has developed independently over centuries, with unique variations in pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence construction. These differences are further compounded by the lack of a standardized writing system. Without a unified orthography, teaching and learning the language become difficult, as students and speakers encounter different spellings and symbols for the same sounds and words. This fragmentation of the language prevents effective literacy programs and language preservation initiatives from taking root in the region.

Moreover, the variations in characters used to represent the same sounds across dialects add another layer of complexity. For example, one dialect may use a particular letter or symbol to represent a sound that another dialect expresses differently, making it challenging to find common ground. This lack of standardization not only makes it difficult to teach the language in schools but also limits its use in public life, further eroding the language’s relevance and utility in daily communication.

1. **Cultural and linguistic erosion through the replacement of Afenmai dialects by English and pidgin**

The linguistic diversity within the Afenmai region is not the only factor threatening the survival of these dialects. The erosion of cultural and linguistic identity is also a significant concern. Like many indigenous languages across the world, Afenmai dialects are at risk of becoming endangered as they are gradually replaced by more dominant languages such as **English** and **Nigerian Pidgin**.

English, being the official language of Nigeria, has become the primary language of instruction in schools, government, and the media. Over time, this widespread use of English has diminished the daily usage of local languages, especially in urban centers where globalization and modernization are most prominent. Similarly, Nigerian Pidgin, often seen as a bridge language between diverse ethnic groups, has become increasingly popular, particularly in informal settings. While it serves as a tool for communication across different linguistic groups, its rise further marginalizes indigenous languages, making them less relevant in a society that values English and Pidgin.

As these global languages dominate, younger generations are increasingly disconnected from their cultural roots. Many children growing up in urban areas may learn English or Pidgin as their first languages, with little exposure to their indigenous Afenmai dialects. This shift is contributing to the gradual loss of linguistic fluency in the region, with older generations often being the last to speak the dialects fluently. Without a concerted effort to preserve and promote the Afenmai language, these dialects risk fading into obscurity.

**THE NEED FOR A UNIFIED AFENMAI IDENTITY**

At the heart of this linguistic crisis is the absence of a unified Afenmai identity. The fragmentation of the language into various dialects, each with its own distinct features, has contributed to a sense of division within the community. While each group proudly identifies with its specific dialect, the lack of a common language makes it difficult to foster a collective sense of belonging and unity. This is particularly important in a world where globalization has led to the spread of dominant languages and cultures, often overshadowing the diversity of indigenous traditions.

A crucial step in addressing this challenge is the development of a standardized **Afenmai language**—one that draws from the various dialects spoken across the region, but that is structured in a way that can be universally understood and taught. Such a language would not only serve as a tool for communication but would also act as a powerful symbol of cultural unity and pride. By harmonizing the different dialects, we create a shared linguistic foundation that allows people from different Afenmai communities to connect with one another, even if they speak different local dialects.

The unification of the Afenmai language would help preserve its cultural significance by ensuring that it remains relevant in the lives of younger generations. By promoting a standardized version of the language in schools and local media, we can ensure that the next generation grows up with a strong sense of their linguistic heritage, as well as the skills to communicate fluently in the globalized world.

**EMBRACING DIVERSITY, ENSURING UNITY**

Importantly, the development of a unified Afenmai language must be a process that embraces the linguistic diversity of the region. It should not seek to erase the uniqueness of individual dialects but rather create a framework where these dialects can coexist under a common umbrella. This approach would respect the rich cultural history embedded in each dialect while promoting a sense of collective identity that transcends individual linguistic differences.

Moreover, this process should not be limited to language alone. The revitalization of the Afenmai language must go hand in hand with efforts to preserve other elements of Afenmai culture, including traditional music, folklore, art, and customs. When language and culture are intertwined, efforts to preserve one cannot succeed without the other.

The unification of the Afenmai language is not just about preserving words or grammar; it is about securing the future of an entire culture. By creating a common language that reflects the diversity of the region while fostering unity, we ensure that the rich heritage of the Afenmai people continues to thrive for generations to come.

**CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND THE FUTURE OF AFENMAI HERITAGE**

**The Role of Education and Modern Communication**

Educational initiatives to promote a unified Afenmai language are already in motion. For example, books and other learning materials are being sourced from authors in various communities, to provide a broader linguistic foundation for Afenmai language instruction. This material will be used in schools, helping children in the region learn a common language that reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of the zone, yet is practical for everyday communication.

Socially, the Afenmai language movement is geared towards fostering unity and cultural pride among our people. By embracing the concept of a common language, it strengthens our shared identity while promoting understanding between the different groups. The collective name, Afenmai Language, reflects this vision of inclusivity and cultural cohesion, much like how other major languages in Nigeria have standardized their dialects (e.g., Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo).

This initiative also aligns with broader national goals of language preservation and cultural promotion, while simultaneously addressing the practical need for communication across a region with rich linguistic diversity. Overall, it is an effort to ensure that Afenmai not only survives but thrives as a unified and relevant language in the face of globalizing forces and the dominance of major languages.

One of the key milestones in the effort to create a central language for Afenmai has been the establishment of the **Etsako Language Research and Development Centre (ELRDC)[[13]](#footnote-14)**, which has been, amongst other things, to develop and maintain Afenmai language. The Centre has already made significant progress by creating educational materials such as numerals and textbooks, which reflect the new unified language. This central language draws from all the dialects within the Senatorial District, with particular emphasis on Yekhee, which has been chosen as the primary base for this synthesis.

The **Etsako Language Research and Development Centre (ELRDC)[[14]](#footnote-15)** has not only launched a new phase in the preservation of the Afenmai language but also demonstrated a deep commitment to the future of our culture and identity. Despite any opposition, the initiative stands as a courageous and patriotic effort that will ultimately benefit the entire Afenmai community.

**CULTURAL REVIVAL AND PRESERVATION**

There is a vibrant and growing movement aimed at preserving and promoting the Afenmai language and culture, driven by a network of passionate cultural organizations, advocacy groups, and grassroots clubs. These entities are united in their goal to safeguard the rich heritage of the Afenmai people, both within the region and across the globe.

Among the many clubs and associations, **Usagbe Club of Nigeria[[15]](#footnote-16)**, **Etsako Club 81[[16]](#footnote-17)**, **Etsako Youth Club[[17]](#footnote-18)**, **Afenmai Social Club[[18]](#footnote-19)**, **Socialites Club of Afenmai[[19]](#footnote-20)**, and the **Afenmai Empowerment Initiative (AEI)[[20]](#footnote-21)** stand out as key players in this cultural renaissance. These organizations, along with others like the **Afenmai Book Club[[21]](#footnote-22)**, the **Afenmai Standard Unity Club[[22]](#footnote-23)**, and the **Afenmai World Congress (AWC)[[23]](#footnote-24)**, are playing crucial roles in revitalizing Afenmai traditions, language, and identity.

The **Afenmai World Congress (AWC)**, in particular, serves as a global umbrella, uniting all Afenmai people—whether in Nigeria or the Diaspora. It brings together organizations such as the **Afemai Club of Southern California**, the **Etsakor USA of New Jersey**, and the **Afemai Community of America** in Houston, Texas, to foster a global network of Afemai people. The Congress works tirelessly to ensure the unity of Afenmai communities worldwide, supporting efforts to enhance the region’s social, political, educational, and economic development.

At the core of these clubs’ missions is the goal of accelerating the provision of essential services like education, healthcare, and infrastructure across the six local governments of Afenmai land. The impact of these clubs and organizations goes far beyond social events. They serve as cultural incubators, fostering language advocacy and the promotion of Afenmai traditions. From language preservation to social development, these groups are essential to keeping Afenmai culture alive in a modern world. The commitment to passing on the Afenmai languageis an ongoing effort. These organizations create a space where the younger generation can learn, celebrate, and contribute to the future of the language and culture.

**THE ROLE OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION OF AFENMAI PEOPLE**

The younger generation of Afenmai people have a crucial role to play in both preserving and promoting the rich cultural and linguistic heritage of the region. While they are often more connected to the globalized world, they also possess the power to bridge the old and the new, ensuring that the Afenmai language and traditions are passed on. Here are some ways they can make a significant impact:

1. **Engaging with Language Preservation Initiatives:** Younger Afenmai people can actively participate in language development programs, such as those led by the ***Etsako Language Research and Development Centre* (ELRDC).** These initiatives are focused on creating educational resources, such as textbooks and numerals, for the unified Afenmai language. By learning and teaching the standardized language in schools, they ensure its future use while simultaneously keeping dialectal variations alive in their communities.
2. **Digital Media and Technology:** Today’s youth are already immersed in the digital world, and they can leverage this to revive and sustain the Afenmai language. By creating content in Afenmai on platforms like YouTube, TikTok and Instagram—such as videos, music, and storytelling—they can make the language cool and accessible to their peers. Social media can be a powerful tool for promoting the language, showcasing Afenmai culture through contemporary art, traditional music, and digital storytelling.
3. **Cultural Clubs and Social Organizations:** Youth-led cultural clubs like ***Afenmai Youth Club*, *Afenmai Book Club*,** and the***Afenmai World Congress*** provide platforms where young people can come together to celebrate, discuss, and promote Afenmai heritage. These clubs can host language workshops, cultural festivals, and performances that teach the language in fun and engaging ways, while also instilling pride in Afenmai traditions. They can also act as bridges between the diaspora and the home communities, ensuring cultural exchange and unity.
4. **Reviving Traditional Arts and Practices:** Afenmai’s traditional arts, including dance, music, and oral storytelling, are often tied to language and culture. The younger generation can actively participate in and promote these art forms by learning them and passing them on to younger children. Whether it's through dance troupes, music groups, or theater, they can use these art forms as a way of keeping both the language and the culture alive and relevant in modern times.
5. **Intergenerational Learning:** Younger people can also take an active role in learning from their elders. While many older Afenmai speakers may have knowledge of the traditional dialects and customs, the younger generation can help by documenting oral histories, proverbs, and songs. These records can be stored digitally, ensuring that even if certain dialects are at risk, their wisdom and stories live on. Collaborative projects between youth and elders can foster a sense of shared responsibility in preserving the language.
6. **Advocacy for Cultural Policy:** Young people, through platforms like ***Afenmai Empowerment Initiative* (AEI),** can advocate for the inclusion of Afenmai language and culture in local education systems and public media. They can push for policies that encourage the teaching of Afenmai in schools and the use of Afenmai in local government communications, ensuring that the language is actively supported by the

authorities. These young leaders can help create momentum for wider acceptance and use of the Afenmai language across various sectors of society.

1. **Celebrating Afenmai Identity Globally:** Younger Afenmai people who live outside of the region, especially in the diaspora, play a key role in raising awareness of Afenmai heritage. By joining international Afenmai organizations, such as the ***Afemai World Congress* (AWC)**, they can participate in global conversations about cultural preservation, while also helping to connect different generations of Afenmai people worldwide. By promoting the culture abroad and establishing networks with other cultures, they can ensure the Afenmai language has an international presence.
2. **Promoting Language through Education**
Finally, young people in the educational system can advocate for the inclusion of Afenmai language in the curriculum. They can be champions in their schools, working with teachers and administrators to establish language programs that teach Afenmai. When younger generations speak their language proudly and fluently, they set an example for the next generation to follow, ensuring that the cycle of preservation continues.

The younger generation can be both the bridge and the torchbearers of Afenmai language and culture. By combining their modern influence with a deep respect for their heritage, they can help ensure that the Afenmai language not only survives but thrives for future generations.

**CONCLUSION**

The future of the Afenmai language and culture lies at this intersection between unity and diversity. As the younger generation engages with this heritage, the challenge will be to adapt Afenmai culture to a modern, interconnected world without losing the essence of what makes it distinct. Education, both formal and informal, will be central to this process. Encouraging youth to embrace the new unified language while simultaneously cherishing their specific dialects could hold the key to long-term cultural preservation.

Looking to the future, the road ahead is both complex and promising. The world is changing rapidly, and the forces of globalization pose significant challenges to the survival of local languages and cultures. Yet, in an era where cultural identities are increasingly valued, the efforts to preserve and promote the Afenmai language and heritage stand as a model of resilience and hope. By developing a common language that respects the uniqueness of individual dialects and weaving it together with cultural practices, the Afenmai people are laying the foundation for a strong and unified identity that can withstand the pressures of the modern world. The success of this movement will depend not just on language but on the continued commitment to preserving the values, traditions, and sense of community that define the Afenmai people.

Afenmai language and culture are not relics of the past—they are living, evolving elements of an identity that has withstood the test of time. The question remains: how will the younger generation carry this legacy forward? Will they adapt and innovate, ensuring that Afenmai thrives in the future, or will they struggle with the complexities of a rapidly changing world? The future of Afenmai heritage depends on their ability to integrate the best of both worlds—honouring the traditions that define them while embracing the changes necessary to keep their culture vibrant in an increasingly globalized society

**ONE COMMON LANGUAGE IN EDO NORTH: THE URGENCY OF NOW.**

Government policy states that Edo State is divided into three language zones in line with the senatorial districts. Edo South speaks Bini or Edo;Edo Central speaks Esan; Edo North which ought to speak Afenmai as one language does not have such one Afenmai except one is now adopted through a deliberate action. This was the reason an Afenmai Language Seminar was held at Auchi in April, 2021,at an event I chaired through a representative. The keynote address which was presented by Professor Francis Egbokhare stated that the senatorial district should use the most popular language and harmonize it with other dialects in the zone for the emergence of a central language. The Afenmai Language Advisory Board resolved that ETSAKO LANGUAGE has 17 dialects that are mutual and 6 partially mutual. This sums up to 23 dialects that speak or understand Etsako language.

IVBIOSAKON LANGUAGE has 7 dialects, and they are not mutual.

OKPAMERI LANGUAGE has 5 dialects that are also not mutual. Based on this reality, the board then advised that the name "Etsako language" be changed to Afenmai Language for teaching in the zone. While Etsako language remains the main language with the harmonization of Ivbiosakon and Okpameri languages to become a new Afenmai Language. A study in this regard is currently being carried out by Chief Solomon Jegede who bought books authored in the past by indegenous experts from Owan and Akoko Edo. The goal is to ensure that no section of the zone is marginalised since Afenmai language as a common denominator is used in the teaching. A ready example is the three major languages in Nigeria.TheYorubas use Oyo dialect and call it Yoruba language; the Hausas use Kano dialect and call it Hausa language; whilst the Igbos use Owerri dialect and call it Igbo language. We will therefore not be doing anything unusual or wrong to adopt Etsako with the infusion and harmonization of Ivbiosakon and Okpameri dialects to form Afenmai Language.

In achieving a common language, we must place on record for historical purposes the unquantifiable research works that have been done by rare Afenmai gems in the persons of Bishop Anaemhemho, Chief Solomon Jegede Enaboakphe, Alhaji Wajeed Obomheighie, Professor U. M. O. Ivowi and my humble self in the study, propagation and documentation of Afenmai civilization, history, culture, traditions and customs. More work need to be done till we get to the desired destination.

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