

**THE AGE OF OLOROGUN MICHAEL IBRU**  
*Urhobo Perspectives on the Life and Times of*



***Michael Christopher Onajirhevbe Ibru (1930-2016)***

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British Colonial rule arrived in full in Urhoboland in 1900, following the termination of perfunctory surrogate administration of Urhobo territory in the 1890s by the Royal Niger Company. Foreign rule in Urhoboland and Nigeria ended in 1960, with Nigeria's Independence from Great Britain. In the folk history of the Urhobo people, two personalities have defined and dominated Urhobo affairs since the arrival of the British in our land at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Chief Mukoro Mowoe and Olorogun Michael Ibru.

By the time Michael Ibru was born in 1930, his Urhobo people were wreathing in self-doubt and even despair from the lack of purposeful leadership. The founding of Urhobo Brotherly Society -- predecessor of Urhobo Progress Union in 1931, a year after Michael Ibru's birth -- was a studied attempt by Urhobo nationalists to seek remedies that would end what they saw as rampant disorder and disunity among the Urhobo people. It was from their midst that Mukoro Mowoe, a wealthy Warri-based merchant, rose to the leadership of the Urhobo people in the mid-1930s as President-General of Urhobo Progress Union, amply satisfying Urhobo's urgent craving for a sense of unity in the developing circumstances of a fledgling colonial Nigeria. What Urhobo people regard as the Age of Mukoro Mowoe witnessed extraordinary achievements. However, the wonders of Mowoe's leadership unfolded rapidly in a short period of a decade plus a few years. Mowoe's untimely death in 1948 resulted in the decapitation of Urhobo leadership and plunged Urhobo affairs into another period of uncertainty.

### **Michael Ibru's Growing Up: The Urhobo Background**

When Mukoro Mowoe died in August 1948, Michael Ibru was in his first year of a remarkable secondary school career in Igbobi College, Yaba. He completed his secondary school education in 1951, serving as the Senior Prefect of that famous Methodist and Anglican missionary institution in his final year. Most modern readers of this account will probably not fully appreciate how rare it was for an Urhobo boy to gain admission to Igbobi College in 1948. By the late 1940s, there were a number of Urhobo towns and subcultures that had no record of having secondary school students. Even much more of a rarity was the successful education of all five male siblings of Urhobo ancestry from a single family in top secondary schools, as Michael and his four younger brothers so brilliantly attained in the decades of the 1940s-1960s. Felix, Bernard, and Alex followed Michael's footsteps into Igbobi College, while Goodie – the fourth of the Ibru brothers – attended Ibadan Grammar School, an equally prestigious Anglican missionary secondary school. In this stellar achievement of having all five male children educated in secondary schools in the 1940s-1960s, the Ibru family was among only a few such families in the whole of Urhoboland. In this regard, the Mukoro Mowoe family -- all of whose eighteen children, thirteen boys and five girls, completed their

secondary school education in the same period – was a trailblazer in Urhobo folk history.

In an important sense, the late Felix Ibru, Michael's immediate younger brother, was the oral historian of the Ibru family. I once pointed out to him that, aside from the spectacular instance of the Mukoro Mowoe family, I could only count a few other cases of such educational achievement by all five siblings of a single family among Urhobo people in the 1940s-1960s. I asked Felix Ibru if he could offer a reason for such a remarkable accomplishment. His response was revealing. He told me that the role played by their father, Chief Peter Epete Ibru, in providing a vocational drive and a cultural orientation to the Ibru brothers has usually been under-stated in accounts of their successes. Although not a man of many nor boastful words, Peter Ibru was of stern self-discipline. It was into this sort of fierce but silent motivation to achieve that his eldest son, Michael, was manifestly socialized. Felix Ibru pointed to another attribute that Michael and his younger brothers inherited from their intense patriarch: Peter Ibru was an Urhobo patriot. For a palpable example that his children could not escape noticing or even emulating, Peter Ibru never failed to attend the monthly meetings of Urhobo Progress Union in Lagos. His passion for -- and discernible love of -- Agbarha-Otor, his Urhobo subculture, clearly rubbed well on Michael and his younger brothers.

Michael Ibru definitely was fortunate in having virtuous parents who bore him as their first child. If his disciplined father provided the foundation of his unparalleled drive for success, as we believe to be the case, there is little doubt that Michael Ibru's sharp mercantile instinct for business descended from his maternal dynasty of shrewd and wealthy traders. The so-called legitimate trade with Europeans (in palm produce and Western industrial wares) in the late nineteenth century, on Urhobo's Atlantic coastal waterways, was dominated by a handful of well-to-do traders. Among them was Osadjere of Ovwor in Olomu of central Urhoboland; he was Michael Ibru's maternal grandfather. Osadjere bequeathed his wealth and business to his eldest son, Ovedje, who expanded his father's commerce into a vast enterprise during the beginning decades of British colonial rule in Urhoboland in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Michael Ibru and his immediate younger brother, Felix Ibru, grew up as young boys under the towering influence of their uncle Chief Ovedje and his vast trading enterprises. Moreover, Michael's mother, Janet Omotogor Ibru, took to her family's tradition of trading business as a young woman and in her adult

years. Surely, Michael had plenty to watch and learn from in this sphere of mercantile craftsmanship among his maternal heritage.

Accounts of Michael Ibru's fortunes in his various enterprises tend to glamorize the pathways to his tremendous successes. In fact, however, Michael went through the normal routines and hardships of Urhobo youth of the 1930s and 1940s. His excellent Urhobo vernacular, with a noticeable Agbarha affectation, reflected the fact that he spent a good amount of his youth in Urhoboland as well as the simple point that Urhobo was the language of the Ibru family even when it was away from Urhoboland. Once Peter Ibru and his wife, Omotogor, settled in Somolu in Lagos with their children sometime in the early forties, Lagos and its suburbs became Michael Ibru's abode not only for his education but also for attaining his life's ambitions. He mastered the Yoruba language and made friends among Nigerians of all ethnic stripes. But Michael never abandoned Urhobo folkways. He once told a fellow Urhobo friend, Chief Imo Otite, the story of his routine as a young man when his family was newly settled in Lagos. His mother had a farm in Idi-Roko, which was then a farmland; Michael helped his mother to clear the bush in preparing the land for seed planting.

### **Michael Ibru's Businesses and the Ibru Organization**

Upon the completion of his secondary school education, Michael Ibru worked for the United Africa Company, a British conglomerate which had evolved into the Royal Niger Company (RNC) in 1886 but reverted back to its former name (UAC) following the loss of RNC's royal charter in 1900. UAC was a sprawling and impressive multinational organization when Michael Ibru joined the company in 1951. There were indications that he had nursed his own organizational dreams and that he was already intrigued with the possibility of building an organization as complex and as large as the UAC. In any case, he did not seem to aspire to become a life-time employee of UAC. He left the company in 1956.

After his UAC experience, Michael Ibru single-mindedly pursued the building of his own enterprises. What is initially clear from the history of Ibru's engagement with

the building of his own businesses is that he did not aim at starting these efforts as a small business owner. From the beginning, he planned big. It would seem that the image of UAC, the British conglomerate in which he had his early working experience, guided his dreams and imagination for his future growth. As a first step in this direction, while still in his early 20s, Ibru formed a business partnership with an Englishman, Jimmy Large; it bore the acronym LAIBRU. It is noteworthy that such a business partnership, formed in 1956 during Colonial Times between an Englishman and a Nigerian, was quite rare.

Often unspoken and unwritten in accounts of Michael Ibru's enterprises is the source of the initial capital for financing his bold and imaginative business plans. The best information that I have is that he obtained most of the initial capital for financing his first set of business ventures from African Continental Bank (ACB). The credit for helping him to gain access to such financing from one of Nigeria's premier indigenous banks goes to two persons. The first of these was Mrs. Elsie Nelly Ibru, Michael Ibru's first wife. Originally a Cameroonian national, Mrs. Elsie Ibru worked for the West African Pilot and later for the African Continental Bank. It is worth noting that from both positions she had access to management at the ACB. The second person who was said to have helped Michael Ibru to gain access to capital in ACB was Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh, Federal Minister of Finance (1954-1966), who had enormous influence with the African Continental Bank. Whatever help he had in raising funds from ACB, it must be recognized that it was only a prodigious genius, which Michael Ibru manifestly was, who could have handled large capital, given the sparse circumstances of colonial Nigeria of the 1950s.

Michael Ibru's first major business venture was in construction. He acquired majority ownership in an important construction company, Associated Construction and Engineering, which then built under his watch the following landmark complexes in the Lagos area: Queen's College, Yaba; St. Gregory's College, Obalende; the Police College, Ikeja; and the Navy Barracks, Apapa. His dissatisfaction with the complicated processes and the relatively poor financial returns from this construction venture points significantly to the direction that Ibru's enterprises took thereafter. A reporter (Ibrahim Sule, *This Day*, January 3, 2016) was informed by Michael Ibru's sources that "the long-winded process of contract acquisition coupled with delayed payment for executed projects forced him to re-think his business strategy."

Two business models were open to Michael Ibru at the onset of his business career. The first was the *contractor model* in which the wishes and suasions of *patrons*, usually government officials and politicians, determined the scope of his business as well as its pace. The second option which he had to weigh was the old-fashioned *demand and supply* economic model in which his business would respond to how much customers would accept from him and pay for the products that his business offered them. The magic and secret of Michael Ibru's successes were that he rejected the first model; he not only adopted the economic model of demand and supply, but in fact reshaped its law. He did so by imagining and anticipating what the demand of the Nigerian populace would be as the people emerged from their humble colonial circumstances. In several instances, Michael Ibru reshaped the demand for his products and his would be the first business to profit from the people's expanded demand before other businesses engaged in the competition.

The best illustration of Ibru's business model of creating demand from which he profited greatly concerns his introduction of frozen fish into Nigeria, and indeed West Africa, as a dietary staple. Well up to the mid-1950s, fresh fish was largely absent from Nigerian daily meals, except in riverine areas where fish was caught and prepared for meals immediately. There was no means of preserving fish; refrigeration was unavailable to most Nigerians in the 1950s. The food subcultures of various ethnic groups lacked fish. With his Urhobo background, Michael was intuitively acquainted with a fish-cooking culture. When he came across the notion of frozen fish, he seized upon it. However, he had to overcome considerable cultural resistance to the notion of frozen fish which was castigated in the crucial Lagos and Yoruba markets as "mortuary" fish – or, in Yoruba, "Oku Eko", (literally, "death from Lagos"). According to Felix Ibru, it took a concerted campaign, led by Michael's mother in Lagos markets, to win acceptance of frozen fish. As a ploy in the campaign, frozen fish was renamed "Ibru fish." The business in frozen fish, mostly imported from Holland and Russia, turned out to be hugely successful, becoming the cornerstone of the Ibru business empire.

The example of Ibru's introduction of frozen fish into the Nigerian marketplace points to the impact of Ibru's businesses on Nigerian culture and society. Nigeria's food culture has changed for the better as a result of "Ibru fish." Hundreds of businessmen and women are now routinely engaged in the marketing of frozen fish in Nigeria and in other West African nations -- immeasurably improving the quality

of Nigerians' daily food diets. A secondary impact of Ibru's introduction of frozen fish is the uptake in refrigeration in Nigeria. Some of the earliest uses of refrigerators in Nigerian markets and homes came with Ibru's frozen fish agents in various parts of the country.

The deployment of the "Ibru fish" model led to the creation of many other enterprises whose business motif was the supply of quality goods and services to satisfy the demand, or even anticipated demand, of millions of customers and consumers in a rapidly growing economy. These numerous companies constitute what Michael Ibru aggregated into the Ibru Organization. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Ibru Organization included enterprises in palm oil production; transportation; tourism; brewery; timber production and marketing; poultry; petroleum exploration and storage; newspaper publishing; hotels; banking (Oceanic Bank); aviation (Aero Contractors); shipping; insurance; etc. In January 2016, the Ibru Organization named the following as some of its subsidiary companies: "Aden River Estate Ltd, Mitchell Farms, Guardian Newspapers Ltd., Time Out Nig. Ltd., Ibru Merchandise 33 Ltd, Zabadne Company Ltd., Ibron Ltd., Atlantic Estate Ltd., Ibachem Nigeria Ltd., Emsee Shipping Ltd., Ibaфон Oil Ltd, Waskar Ltd., amongst others."

### **Michael Ibru and the Ennoblement of the Ibru Family**

Up to the mid-1960s, the Ibru family was like any of the numerous Urhobo families that had settled in significant numbers in Lagos or similar metropolitan areas elsewhere in Nigeria (such as Jos, Port Harcourt or Ibadan) in the 1940s-1950s. In many instances, single members of such Urhobo families grew wealthy. In varying degrees, these wealthy men helped their family members to escape poverty and other difficulties in their lives. However, they remained singular figures and sole wealthy notables in their families.

It should be said that Michael Ibru became well-to-do in the late 1950s and quite wealthy in the 1960s-1970s. In so becoming a rich man, Michael Ibru transformed the cultural meaning of wealth from being an attribute of a singular personality in a family to that of the enrichment and ennoblement of an entire family. The

beneficiaries of this transformation included Michael's parents; his younger brothers; his wives; and his own children. What this transformation of the cultural meaning of wealth meant was not the generous donation of gifts to these members of the Ibru family, although Michael was justly praised for having been a generous man. Well above that, it entailed providing a forum where members of the Ibru family were enabled to participate in wealth creation. In a real sense, the Ibru Organization became a vehicle that enabled members of the Ibru family to become individually wealthy. As a consequence it ennobled the entire family.

This was an exceptional contribution from a man who was prepared to share the glow of wealth and fame with other members of his family. It is a rare perspective on wealth management among the Urhobo people; its cultural rarity applies to other Nigerian ethnic nationalities as well. In an evening of conversations, I once pointed to this uniqueness of his family to the late Felix Ibru. His response was intriguing. He said that the starting point of the involvement of their parents and of himself in Michael's business was at the beginning, well before Michael became wealthy. He recalled that Michael often met with their parents and himself (Felix) at their Somolu home to review difficulties in Michael's young businesses, particularly about adverse cultural reactions to his frozen fish trade in which their mother, Janet Ibru, was involved as Michael's selling agent as well as his chief campaigner. The role played by their father, Peter Ibru, was equally remarkable: Because Michael travelled a lot, often going to Ikeja Airport at odd hours, he could not rely on regular banking hours for the needs of his business. A vault was accordingly built in their Somolu family residence for holding cash; its key was kept and safe-guarded by their father. As for himself, Felix said that he doubled in the evening hours, after his regular day-time work, as a financial clerk for his elder brother's budding business. It was a story of a tight-knit family that wanted the ambitions of the family's young leader to be fulfilled.

As his business prowess grew formidable and his resources expanded, Michael Ibru not only sponsored the post-secondary school training of his younger brothers in diverse professions but also got them involved as leaders in segments of the Ibru Organization. Three of his four younger brothers, who chose to participate in Michael Ibru's scheme of enriching the family, became wealthy and famous men of their own standing -- thanks to Michael's ideology of enabling every member of the Ibru family to engage in wealth creation. First, Felix Ibru, an architect by profession,



was the first civilian Governor of Delta State; he later served as a Senator representing the Urhobo constituency of Delta Central in the National Assembly. Felix Ibru became President-General of Urhobo Progress Union. In all these positions, Felix received important personal and financial support from his elder brother, Michael Ibru. Second, Goodie Ibru, a lawyer by profession, was picked by Michael Ibru to be Chairman of the landmark Lagos Sheraton Hotel at a young age; he did a superb job of making Sheraton an institution. Goodie has been closely associated with the economic sinews of Lagos Metropolis. He has served as the President of the Nigerian Stock Exchange, President of Lagos Chamber of Commerce & Industry, President of the Federation of Tourism Association of Nigeria, and on numerous national and international boards. Third, Alex Ibru, the youngest of the Ibru brothers, worked initially in Michael Ibru's car sales and distribution. Planning with Dr. Stanley Macebuh and Dr. Dele Cole, Alex designed a quality newspaper for Nigeria. Michael Ibru funded the establishment of *The Guardian* which he chaired until 1983 when he handed its management totally to Alex Ibru as Chairman and Publisher. Needless to add, this Ibru invention has been a huge success. Alex Ibru also served as Federal Minister of Internal Affairs, the first southern Nigerian to hold that office.

These diverse activities by Michael Ibru's younger brothers strengthened the Ibru name and they added much lustre to the Ibru brand. While Michael Ibru remained the lodestar of the family, Felix, Goodie, and Alex were – by their performances in Urhobo and Nigerian affairs – notables of the highest calibre.

Michael Ibru's ideology of enabling members of the Ibru family to engage in wealth creation under the aegis of the Ibru Organization included his wives. Elsie Ibru, Michael's first wife, was very much involved in some of the early companies of the Ibru Organization, chairing quite a few of them. For a memorable example, Swiss watches came to Nigeria in the 1960s through an Ibru company managed by Elsie Ibru. Similarly, Cecilia Ibru joined the Ibru Organization in 1978 and worked in various high-profile positions, an experience that enabled her to play several vital roles when her husband, Michael Ibru, took ill and was no longer involved in the daily management of the affairs of companies in the Ibru Organization. Now retired, Cecilia Ibru is actively engaged in preserving Michael Ibru's legacy. Significantly, the Urhobo people count on Cecilia Ibru among those they expect to enshrine her husband's memories in Urhobo culture. Her founding of Ibru

University in Agbarha-Otor, Michael's cherished hometown, is considered by Urhobo people to be an important step in that direction.

Finally, Michael Ibru seemed to have been in a hurry to engage his own children in the Ibru Organization. Oskar Ibru and Peter Ibru, the first set of Michael Ibru's children to attain maturity, were prime movers in the 1980s in planning and designing the conversion of Ibru's Apapa fish jetty into a petroleum oil depot and storage. As others of Michael Ibru's children have grown up, they have shown signs of great desires to make wealth in new ways, exploiting the capital that is available to them from their parents' wealth. It is fair to add that the story of wealth-creation by the Ibru family has, happily, not come to an end.

### **Michael Ibru and Urhobo Destiny and High Culture**

For decades, Nigerians -- particularly those living in polyglot metropolitan communities like Lagos -- have assessed their fellow men and women by assigning reputation markers to their ethnic groups. In the late 1940s up to the 1950s, Urhobo people were poorly perceived by fellow Nigerians because their reputation was besmirched by the misconduct of a few con artists among Urhobo migrants, in Lagos especially. The rise of Michael Ibru in the 1960s as a dominant Nigerian businessman, who was associated with valuable and good deeds, led to the upgrading of the moral worth of his Urhobo people. Michael Ibru was not the only Urhobo man who became prominent in business and professional circles in the 1960s. Men like David Dafinone and Gamaliel Onosode were also well respected professionals. However, Michael Ibru had an uncommon positive impact on the Nigerian economy. The net result of these changes was that Urhobo people, with a purposeful leadership in Nigeria's capital in Lagos, were much better valued from the 1960s onwards. This was especially important during the years of the Nigerian Civil War (1966-1970). Indeed, by the late 1960s, Urhobo people, at home and outside Urhoboland, were looking to Michael Ibru for leadership.

The benefits flowing from Michael Ibru's enterprises were more direct for individual Urhobo men and women than the above generalization would seem to suggest. This was so because the successful marketing of Michael Ibru's innovation of frozen fish -- nicknamed "Ibru fish" -- depended on agents and market women who were engaged in its distribution and sale. Hundreds of enterprising Urhobo

men and women, inside and outside Urhoboland, became agents for the distribution of frozen fish. Many of them were also agents or dealers in Ibru drinks (Skoll beer as well as soft drinks). Similarly, thousands of Urhobo market women, inside and outside Urhoboland, were engaged in the sale of frozen fish and other Ibru products. At its peak in the 1980s-1990s, there was a stampede for agency and marketing opportunities for these Ibru products among Urhobo men and women many of whom were able to send their children to secondary schools or build nice homes from their profits.

Thousands of Urhobo men and women were employees of companies of the Ibru Organization. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Ibru Organization was probably the largest single employer of working Urhobo men and women. Some of these Ibru employees were recruited from professional schools and universities in the United Kingdom and Europe. Indeed, Ibru Organization became a place of first choice for Urhobo men and women seeking employment in these decades. Significantly, the top management of the Ibru Organization had a good number of Urhobo men. Examples of Urhobo luminaries who were close advisers to Michael Ibru and the Ibru Organisation included Albert Egoh, Aggrey Agoreyo, Patrick Okitiakpe, and Wilson Nakpodia. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Michael Ibru recruited two top Urhobo men as his advisers from Nigerian universities: Dr. Robin Imishue, an economist from the University of Lagos, and Mr. Sam Okudu, retired Registrar of the University of Ibadan.

Michael Ibru's personal impact on Urhobo society and culture in the decades between 1960s and 2000s has been extraordinary. First, Michael Ibru and his younger brothers have transformed their hometown of Agbarha-Otor and its culture. In the 1970s, Michael Ibru built and equipped Agbarha College, renamed Ibru College, as a pioneer secondary school for his people. At about the same time, he built an airstrip where light planes could land and take off in Agbarha-Otor. In 1995, Alex Ibru, the youngest of the Ibru brothers, handed a complex of buildings in Agbarha-Otor to the Anglican Communion that is now named *The Ibru Centre, an International Ecumenical Centre* for "retreat, spiritual solace, short courses, pilgrimages and other spiritually rejuvenating exercises in a Holy environment." With the recent addition of Ibru University to the landscape of Michael Ibru's hometown, Agbarha-Otor has become one of the most attractive centres of education and culture in Urhoboland and Western Niger Delta – especially when

the Bruce Onobrakpeya Foundation and its Agbarha-Otor-based Harmattan Workshop are thrown into the mix.

A sense of the strength of the bonds of affection between Michael Ibru and the Urhobo people can be gained from how much they empathized with him on two occasions of personal difficulties in his life. First, sometime in the early seventies, Michael Ibru lost his first son, Onome, in a car accident on Ife-Ibadan road. This grievous loss of a promising youth, who was a student at the University of Ife, hit Michael Ibru very hard. The Urhobo community at Ibadan and Ife gathered around him and offered help and solace to Michael Ibru in that dire hour of sorrow. By especial waiver of rules for internment at the University's Burial Grounds, Onome was buried at the University of Ibadan Cemetery. A second instance of Urhobo rallying around Michael Ibru occurred in 1983 during the Federal Elections of that year. Close to the end of the campaign for selecting a party candidate for the top position of Governor of Bendel State – when various factions had taken positions in support of other candidates – Michael arrived in Warri and put in as a candidate of the National Party of Nigeria. Although it was extremely difficult for individuals to pull away from the established candidates, the whole of Urhobo and Isoko constituencies went along with Michael Ibru's late candidacy. While Samuel Ogbemudia won the contest, the Urhobo-Isoko solidarity behind Michael Ibru was impressive.

There is another way Michael Ibru's influence on Urhobo's high culture may be weighed by comparison to an earlier era in Urhobo folk history. In the 1940s, Mukoro Mowoe set standards of leadership which many aspiring to aristocratic status followed. His honorific moniker of "Chief" was thus emulated by many would-be chieftains in Urhobo communities. As Chief Mukoro Mowoe's influence spread, so was the use of the title "Chief." Now, Mowoe's era is yielding to the Age of Michael Ibru and his replacement for "Chief" which is "Olorogun." Until Olorogun Michael Ibru bore that title, its use was restricted to a few subcultures of Urhoboland. Now, in clear emulation of Olorogun Michael Ibru, and indeed in an unspoken acknowledgement of Olorogun Michael Ibru's impact on Urhobo culture and society in the last four decades, that title is spreading throughout Urhoboland.

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