

OPINION

Etiebet and burden of greatness at 76

Nsikak Ekanem

On top of his brilliant record in the course of his scholastic trip from Nigeria to Britain, and to Canada, Donatus Obot Etiebet's defining moment in showing strength of spirit as well as prospects of brighter future came to the fore in his mid-twenties when he developed computerized contouring program in FORTRAN (IV). That was during his Master's Degree Programme when he was concurrently a Graduate Assistant at the University of Western Ontario in Canada.

Derived from "formula translation", FORTRAN is defined by The Free Dictionary as "a high level computer programming language for mathematical and scientific purposes, designed to facilitate and speed up the solving of complex problems."

That innovative mettle in Canada must have been one of the major forces, propelling him to dump working with Shell in preference for private entrepreneurship when he returned to Nigeria after the Nigerian Civil War. It is either one or a combination of both the giantess in his physique and the gigantesque of his cerebrum that warmed him irresistibly to the heart of Magro when his boyish accoutrements were at their peak. His greatness, which had come to ample manifestation before the 1990s must have largely accounted for Nike, whom he renamed Imaobong, to embrace Chief Etiebet's marriage proposal with alacrity around his golden age.

Had he built his career in Shell Petroleum, maybe he would have risen to the position of executive director. Except he would have perfected ways of flouting the company's rules, which is unlikely, in view of standard operated by multinational oil companies, he would not have been able to open Shell's gate for his family members, let alone his kindred from Akwa Ibom. But through a number of his enterprises, scores of his kindred and other Nigerians from all parts of the country have got employment and leapfrog from there to higher pedestal of life.

Etiebet made pioneering role and bold signature in information Communication Technology (ICT) in Nigeria since 1970s through his Earth Science, later called Data Science. In Midas Touch, authored by Donald Trump and Robert Kiyosaki and published in 2011, it is remarked that "The old economy of the Industrial Age is dying, and the new economy of the Information

Age is emerging." It would not be out of place, therefore, for one to deduce that the book has taken the strides made by Etiebet in ICT in a third world country into consideration.

It is also his imposing footprint in entrepreneurship that made him made intimidating presence in Nigeria's politics, though his fortune appears to have been marred instead of being made by politics. He belongs to a club of very few Nigerians, which I can count with my fingers from one hand that had their financial status shrunk instead of skyrocketing, as it is normally the case in our clime, after getting into full time politics.

Think of former Vice President Alex Ekweme, who was declared by a panel investigating him after the collapse of the second republic to have been poorer than he was before becoming Nigeria's number two citizen under Shehu Shagari presidency. Think of the colossus MKO Abiola, who won the 1993 presidential election but was not installed into the office and later died in detention and his multifaceted business enterprises suffered irretrievably.

Aside the accruable from his innovative and entrepreneurial acumen, which a number of people from Akwa Ibom have been beneficiaries, Etiebet has made decisive impacts in three major areas that are of enduring legacies in Akwa Ibom. He is one of the few well-heeled Akwa Ibomites that successfully worked for the creation of Akwa Ibom State by Ibrahim Babangida military government on September 23, 1987. Also, in addition to his role in the politics of Nigeria, his avowal commitment in the political development of Akwa Ibom, whether for or against a particular political persuasion, will ever remain iconic in the building blocks of Akwa Ibom polity.

While the other two areas are glaring for all to notice, Etiebet and some other persons' unassuming role in the 1995 Constitutional Conference, which gave rise to

enshrinement of 13 percent derivation in the 1999 Constitution, appears to be on the prowl for deliberate obscurantism, if not obliteration. In truth, he was not a member of the 1995 Constitutional Conference. The Etiebet that was in the conference was his late elder brother and former Cross River State governor, Donald Dick Etiebet.

At the time, the then younger Etiebet was Nigeria's Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources. Taking advantage of his topnotch position and together with few others like Edet Akpan, a retired a Major General, who died recently, delegates to the conference were robustly lobbied for institutionalization of appreciable derivative principle for allocation of resources.

In fact, regarding the story of the 13 percent derivation, which remains the most significant success, so far in the battle for resource control, a number of delegates from the South-South, who staged a walk-out at the conference in solidarity for enhanced sharing formula for the oil producing states have never been mentioned even by one of their colleague who would later used his executive position in government to excellently prosecute the battle beyond the defunct conference.

Given that he came into politics after his name has steadily had a golden niche, it is not hard to find why he is being dreaded by minions who are unduly apprehensive of his might. From the Hilltop Mansion in Uyo to Aso Rock Villa in the nation's capital, Etiebet's name has since 1999 remained a compelling subject matter to open gate for political blackmailers and has been a sufficing agendum for interesting discussion on the table for political gladiators that have developed sophisticated expertise in the act of blackmailing at the expense of developmental initiatives. Notwithstanding, his integrity in business and public service has not been impugned.

Since 1999 to date, each for its own era, there has been deafening rhetoric on Akwa

Ibom as investment destination, location of industries in the 31 local government areas and establishment of almost 20 industries in just five years.

Aside Ibom Power Company and airport project, if, the fabulously publicized Akwa Ibom State government-driven enterprises had done closed to what data science alone has done in terms of sustainable employment, it is quite unlikely that the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), would have positioned Akwa Ibom as the second state with highest unemployment rate in Nigeria and Ini Ememobong, the state government's spokesman would have been spared the futile effort of fanatically defending what is glaring to every eye in Akwa Ibom.

The alienation he encountered in the hands of successive Akwa Ibom State governments and conscious or unconscious non-recognition of his tremendous contributions to the development of the state may be traced to his attaining greatness to the discomfiture of those who attain largeness through either opportunism or counterfeits. Therein lies the burden of his greatness. At 76, his burden is not getting lesser. Notwithstanding his age, so many of us still look up to him for one form of succour or the other. That is still the burden of being a big man amidst many small men.

Recently, in no fault of his but dysfunctional system in Nigeria, he was defrauded over N2.5 billion. Though those suspected to have got their hands soiled in the alleged criminal transaction are currently standing trial in court, the investigation of the matter by relevant governmental institution tempts one to reason along Honore de Balzac assertion that "Laws are spider webs through which the big flies pass and the little ones get caught". Still, it may not be far away from the burden of a great mind with legendary liberalism and forgiveness.

Whether his succeeding generation keeps the flag of his name flying or not, whether his stories is properly chronicled by chroniclers of history or not and irrespective of whether organized institutions embosses his name on something or nothing, it is hope that history, in whatever form, will hoist his flag strategically for posterity, for Etiebet's name is so exceptional to be expensed with in the annals of human history, most especially in the Nigerian part of the universal community.

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