

**LIFE REVIEW: AN INTERVIEW WITH MY
PARENTS, "ETE" & "NMA"**

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Introduction:

There is a saying that says, “You cannot know where you are going until you know where you have been.” History has a way of showing us the difficulties and accomplishments that our ancestors struggled through and for. What we learn about our past sets a benchmark for us to strive for success in all that we do. My father has always said that “it is always good to recall your past and upbringing no matter how humbling the experience.” Coming from a culture that honors and respects its elders, it is for this reason that I chose my parents (affectionately known as “Nma” for my mother, and “Ete” for my father) for this life review because they are a living testimony to what hard work and sacrifice means and it is their life choices that has helped to shape my views today. Some of the information that I have gathered for this paper is new to me. I am finding that as my parents age, they are more willing to open up more about themselves, sharing tidbits here and there. As the remaining child in the house, I feel very fortunate to get a first hand account of my parent’s individual and family history. Although brief, I am proud to share a part of their life story with you and do this as a tribute to them.

Nma & Ete: Their homeland

Only 67 years young, my parents are originally from Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria in West Africa. Ironically, both of my parents came from the same village meaning that they were neighbors, sharing a common history, values and culture. The name of their village is Ikot Ebitta located in the Uyo division, which is in the southeastern part of Nigeria. Ibibio is the name of their tribe, which is one of the fourth largest in Nigeria. Life in Nigeria was very hard for my parents thus various circumstances led them to come to the United State in the 1960s. Before each would make a separate journey to a

strange and foreign land, their were certain life challenges that each would have to overcome to make their dream a reality.

Nma's Life Journey:

Nma has always said that she can never tell HER story without telling her own mother's story; as she put it, "She was my defender, and I am alive today because of her." As my mother narrated to me, her voyage through life from the start was a matter of fate. Her mother, my grandmother [REDACTED] was the first wife of my grandfather, the late Elder [REDACTED]. It was commonplace in the old days to have more than one wife because a large family would hopefully only bring more wealth in the present and future. Moreover the life expectancy of children in those days was low due to the harsh living conditions. With this in mind, my grandfather decided to take on three additional wives. Considering that my grandmother was the first and oldest wife, she became the matriarch of the entire family, earning the respect and admiration of the other wives because she treated them with love, kindness and respect, like they were her sisters.

As the lead wife, Grandma was very unfortunate in having children. She tried seven times, and all of her children died in early childhood. This no doubt brought much shame and embarrassment to her family because she could not fulfill her role as a woman. Nma said that Grandma would often tell her of the sorrow that she felt during this time. Modern science today could probably explain why such things happen. But no amount of explanation was good enough for her people for some of the people laughed at her; some calling her a "useless woman." Grandma would later tell my mother of the sorrow that she felt, asking herself "why me." Her husband on the other hand, ignored the ridicule because his belief in God was strong. Likening themselves to Sarah and

Abraham in the Bible, his advice to Grandma was, "In God's time. Just be patient." She fervently prayed that God would bless her with a healthy child; a child that would live. While in her mid-thirties, her prayers would be answered more than what she hoped for.

It was in 1936, the year that marked the starting point of World War II. For most people during this time, life was rough and food and other necessities were hard to come by. What was a period of sadness for some was a time of joy for Grandma because during these turbulent times she gave birth to healthy twins, my mother and uncle. In the early 1900s, mothers of twin babies were rejected beings in some parts of Nigeria. What was seen as a blessing for some was considered a curse for others. This was due to the widespread ignorance and superstitious beliefs, that the gods cursed mothers who gave birth to twin babies and as such, they were isolated, rejected or at worst, killed. Such was the fate of my mother and uncle.

The head of the village ordered that my mother and her twin be killed or that my grandmother leave town because her presence in the village could be contagious. My grandparents refused to let their children be killed. They had suffered for so long just to have these babies and they were not going to lose them to the hands of man. So my grandmother, by herself, fled on foot with her children, walking seven miles in the night until she came upon a missionary hospital. The missionaries there took pity on my grandmother's predicament and took her and the twins under their care. At some point, Grandma returned alone to her village. Nma said that it pained her mother to leave her babies there at the hospital but she knew that the hospital would take good care of her children; besides Grandma still had a role to play in her family, and that was as the lead wife.

The missionaries that were there at that time were trying to spread Christianity and Western Civilization amongst the Ibibio people. Some Ibibios felt that their culture was not respected and that it was being suppressed. Not long after, Christianity was spread throughout the region which brought light to the people. They were made to realize that twins and their mother's were not evil but a gift from God. Finally, my mother and uncle were able to go home to a place that had once shunned them but now embraced them. Their stay at the hospital lasted 3 years and during those years my grandparents would visit them often. My mother said that her and her brother's stay there was made quite comfortable and that she really didn't know why they could not go home with her parent's. She said that it just seemed as if they were on holiday since they still got to see their parents. My mother said that perhaps this lapse in time was for their protection because as time past hopefully certain traditions would fade into obscurity. Also, being older made them more useful to the village, i.e. more hands to help out.

Unfortunately, my mother's twin would die from a childhood illness by the age of 9 and her mother felt as if history was repeating itself. However, Grandma went on to have 4 more children who would live into adulthood. How persistent she was, for she gave birth to her last child while in her early 50s. My mother would often talk about the roles each of the children played in the family. Since she was the oldest child out of 15, and eldest daughter for that matter, she would have to set an example for the rest to follow.

I can remember when we would visit Nigeria and people would refer to her as "Nma Teacher," translation, "Lady Teacher." I asked my mother what was the reason for calling her this. She said that she was a teacher, right from her youth, having started

teaching at the ripe old age of 15. Nma was the first female in her village to go to school. There was a lot of opposition at that time from her father's family about going to school. They saw it as a waste of time and that she would probably get pregnant thus wasting the money invested in her education. They felt that she should forego an education and get married instead. School fees were very expensive and hard to come by so if your parents had the money to send you school, she stated, "you had better not waste it." She said that her father sat her down in the family room and brought out a bag, which contained her school fees (during this time in the 1940s the currency was in manila's). She said that she could remember him dropping this heavy sack on the table as it made a loud "thump." He asked her point blank to choose between school and marriage. My mother told him that she would choose school. Grandfather did not argue with her and happily accepted her decision. She said that her father wanted to make sure that every child of his was educated because he did not have the opportunity to acquire a formal education himself.

The rule was that as one child obtained a formal education, they would in turn teach and pay fees for the next sibling behind them. Nma said that nobody complained. They knew that it was for the good of the family and that as their parents and forefathers before them sacrificed, they would have to make sacrifices as well. By the age of 21, my mother decided that it was time to leave the nest and start a family of her own. Her parents were a little apprehensive at first because they would be giving their oldest daughter away. However they relented and my mother went on to marry the "neighbor boy," my father.

Ete's Life Journey:

My father's journey was also a test of not succumbing to fate. He is the oldest of 4 from his mother and father. But like my mother's father, his father had 4 wives as well with a total of 9 children. Although his mother died when he was young he can recall her taking good care of the children, making them her first priority. He said that his mother's death was a tremendous blow to his life because she was a very loving mother. When his father remarried, he could not find any kind of close attachment to the new wife and sought solace, love and attention from his maternal and paternal grandmothers who would later succumb to illness as he approached adulthood.

The things that stand out very clear in his mind about his upbringing are the things that his father emphasized: that there has to be unity and love in the family to provide an atmosphere that is conducive to raising children, devotion and dedication to the work of the church of Christ, and lastly, the education of the children should be brought under strict discipline. His father was a strict, authoritative disciplinarian who taught that children must obey their parents and respect the elderly; that the respect that children owe to their parents is that of unquestioning obedience. When any of the children disobeyed, his father believed in not sparing the rod and made sure that the punishment would leave an indelible mark on their minds with a promise never to do it again.

Culturally, like my mother, Ete was taught that the word family extended past the nuclear family to include ALL of the relatives. Each member in this family structure had a duty or obligation to help the other members of the family in any circumstance requiring whatever assistance that member could render. By the time that he was old enough to leave home to school, the experiences from the strict discipline at home, the

would benefit from too. When my mother finally joined him, my father said that his journey was now complete. All that he had labored for was now a reality.

Conclusion:

I am very grateful for the opportunity to share my parents' experiences with this class. My parent's are very private people however it was not too difficult to get them to open up and talk about themselves. Recording your family history is very important and as my parents said, "There is too much information to remember and write about. You can't possibly cover our entire lives in so few pages." I assured them that this was only the tip of the iceberg and that in the future I plan to do a more extensive research and writing on the families and keep for generations to come.

As my father told me, he considers it "a enormous responsibility to tell his children about his experiences and that one should never be ashamed to tell others about the past. It is never good to remember the past with sorrows and tears of regret for our failures and mistakes; but to recall the past with pride and gratitude to God, and to look at it objectively to see where we have come from and hopefully, what we have learned from it." Through them I know what the value of family means. This only makes me more appreciative of the sacrifices that they have made like those before them and for that I say, "thank you."