



## A journey towards the correction of some distortions in Igbo thought system:

Ndi Igbo have suffered the double misfortune of being misunderstood and having a bad press. In spite of their stupendous achievements in every area of human endeavor, particularly in science and technology, religion and education, the Igbo nation has been deliberately and systematically marginalized press wise.

At the risk of sounding patriotic and accommodating, Ndi Igbo have suffered the loss of their integrity and reputation but have also shown great courage and determination to survive as a people. I am not, however, ignorant of the propaganda mounted by western writers about the sub-humanity of Africans as a people without history, without religion, (Green, 1964:52) denying them any conception of morality (Basden; 1966:34) and lacking in intellectual and technological accomplishments. I am not unaware of how African religions in general, and Igbo religion in particular suffered neglect, misinterpretations and distortions in the hands of missionaries and colonial government and their agents. The Igbo studies by C. K. Meeks (1937) and M.M. Green (1964) only helped to perpetuate the bad press the Igbo already had as a lawless and ungovernable people. The traditional Igbo had a deep sense of community. The popular sentiment among the Igbo, as found in most other Africans is as J.S. Mbiti (1969:108) puts it: When kinsmen gather together under the moonlight it is not because they cannot see it from their different roofs or because of what they will eat together. it has a reason beyond just coming under the moonlight. For René Descartes I think therefore I am but for the igbo race. "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am. "I relate therefore I am. The Igbo man is a being with others that explains expressions like mmadu ka aku, (person is better than money), oko taba anumanu ojekwuru osisi mana okowa mmadu ojekwuru nwanne ya (if something scratches an animal it goes to the tree to scratch it but when it scratches a man he goes to his brother). Individual existence and freedom are appreciated, but they are delicately balanced with the underlying philosophy of life-in-community.

### Igbo world view before the advent of marauders

These agents of distortion won't pick these expressions but rather capitalize on the ones that serve their warpage prowess. But to them I say nothing and remind them that the tailless cow has dog to chess flies for him. Thus modern democracy is not after all foreign to the Igbo because it has its root in Igbo origin and thought. The Igbo life did not start with colonization rather before the advent of the Europeans Igbo already had a philosophy, established structure of government which was democratic, education and technology. Igwebụike/ọha bụ ike (Umunna is strength), Umunnakwe ( Umunna agreed) Agwo out onye huru bu Eke (snake seen by one



## A journey towards the correction of some distortions in Igbo thought system:

person is python)The democratic spirit in Igbo checks any possible excesses arising from unnecessary seniority, status and achievement. This is further strengthened by the Igbo principle of equality and equivalence which rightly brought out in the saying *egbe bere ugo bere nke si ibe ya ebela nku kwa ya* which means live and lets live. This is fundamental in Igbo thought pattern. Ndi Igbo don't worship people; they even have sanctions against rude people. They respect people. In fact, there is great respect to the elders in an Igbo society but they allow people express themselves. Ndi Igbo do not tolerate of acts of rudeness to their elders. Osagie Jacobs's generalization and insults against Ndi Igbo in his (This day, September 17, 2002 page 11) where he claimed that Igbo do not respect the elders, and that they respect money not age is unfortunate. Osagie himself knows that he is dishonest, rude and crude, how because of one person he has the guts to insult a whole race. Igbo people respect their elders, but they resent oppression and authoritarianism. It is reported that during the slave trade period Igbo slaves who were constantly starved by their European masters organized a revolt to resent their starvation. They had to be fed by force. They refused to be treated as sub-humans. The original Igbo understanding of leadership which the colonialists succeeded in destabilizing and erasing is that every Igbo community strives to elect "collective" leaders who function as partners and colleagues of the other members of the community or institution. These other members are themselves called to do something to function actively as partners and colleagues. Membership and leadership are organic whole; they have influence on each other. Effective leadership needs responsible membership responsible membership needs focus, needs ways of participating, and needs an atmosphere that fosters various ways of involvement. Leadership resides in the person the member elect and it resides also in the members.

### De-constructing the marauders conceived stereotype

The relationship of leaders and members comes from their understanding of leadership as from the gods and that is to be carried out in both a personal and a communal manner. The actual living of that relationship in an organic way is a challenge that both leaders and members face in the then Igbo community before the bastardization meted out on this thought system. In modern times it could be seen that Nigerian colonial Politics had remained passive until the arrival of the Igbo intellectuals on the scene in the person of Hon. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dr. K.O. Mbadiwe, Mr. Mbonu Ojike, Dr. Akanu Ibiam, Dr. Nwafor Orizu, etc. Igbo democracy does not mean the freedom to insult, maltreat or abuse people because of one's position. I stand to refute such distortion and misrepresentation of Igbo thought system with phrases as these: 1. *Igbo-ama-onye-ukwu* (igbos don't know a great person) 2. *I na-enye m nri* (do you give



## A journey towards the correction of some distortions in Igbo thought system:

me food), 3. Igbo enwe-eze (Igbos have no leader or king) These were not in traditional Igbo thought. They have become Igbo expressions in the mouth of those who harbor envy, hatred and jealousy for others, those who do not appreciate 'excellence,' people influenced by the Hebrew saying: "a prophet has no honor in his own community." They served a colonial interest of destabilizing Igbo unity. It has become very appalling that even our Igbo intellectuals are accepting the expression - Igbo enwe eze - as reflecting traditional Igbo situation. It does not and it is arrant nonsense. It has its origin in the early colonial European writers and philosophers like Hegel who spoke about the Igbo in particular as people without history. We must take note of the fact that Igbo history did not start with the advent of the white man. The man who denied that you had a history could not possibly come to believe you had a 'king' or 'chief' which ever title you may prefer. The truth which historians have agreed on is that all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, it is only the Igbo that really resisted the white man, not months but several years. Igbo historians have also agreed that the Europeans had a basic dislike for the Igbo whom they found ungovernable and what was worse irreverent in their attitude to members of the 'master race'. Put simply, they hated the Igbo. This is what informed their introduction of the indirect rule in Eastern Nigeria. This colonialist created the warrant chiefs. These chiefs were installed to serve the interest of those who established them (Nwajiuba 2001:25): for reasons like : 1), to assist them hold down the Igbo 2), to serve their economic interest including collection of taxes and settlement of local cases. The colonialists distrusted the original Igbo chiefs. Thus the colonialists used the indirect rule to remove and destroy the legitimacy of Igbo rulers and they imposed their own subjects who ruled in their stead. And the people rebelled and refused obedience to chiefs of such kind We must not forget the fact that right from time in Igbo history there is what we call 'Igbo pride.' The Igbo saw himself from time as a superior race. For example King Jaja of Opobo treated the European traders and administrators as his inferiors. They latter feared him and tricked him to go aboard the British warship for friendly discussion but was carried away into exile where he died. Do we not know the implication of the fact that he died in exile, he died with the history of his people in his memory. The Arọchukwu people and most Igbo royal princes never removed their hats or stood up or prostrated for the British colonialists unlike most other subservient African tribes. Specifically in 1896 at Aba a man refused to remove his hat for a white man (Isichei, 1976:59) (Leonard, 1966:191), because he felt he was superior to the white man. Have we even bothered to ask why up till today 'Eze Nri' is not listed among the first class chiefs in Igbo land (along with Eze Arọ, Oguta, Nnewi and, Obi Of Onitsha). Nri model. Of kingship which controlled many parts of the Igbo land for several centuries was finally liquidated by the British imperialists to



## A journey towards the correction of some distortions in Igbo thought system:

exploit the Igbo (slave trade). The truth of the matter in our view is that the “Igbo enwe Eze” concept was introduced into the Igbo psychic, and in practice by installing warrant chiefs in order to destabilize the Igbo society and make it impossible for them to retain their ‘Igboness,’ their uniqueness, their industry, their confidence and their pride/identity as a people. You will realize that this concept is introduced into our ‘Culture,’ the very essence of a people. It has succeeded to work like magic in the Igbo nation which presently is the most destabilized and disunited ethnic group in the world. It brought the culture of disrespect and greed as well as that of falsehood thereby destroying every evidence of a well laid down functional leadership pattern prior to the advent of the white man. How else could we explain that our people in government could not be united to promote Igbo cause. We saw what happened in the period of Shagari government. It was a near impossibility for the vice president and the governor to work together to promote Igbo interest. It is what is happening today. Today many of our state governors are in conflict with our people in government at the federal level. Does it happen elsewhere? Indirect rule is not yet over.

Igbo land still remains its testing grounds. This system was and is still the basic instrument being employed to destabilize the Igbo race, incapacitate and frustrate any plan of the Igbo people to form a common force where together they can challenge the ills done to them. There is hope. Let me ask you, who is afraid of Igbo unity? The Igbo people say: Igwe bụ ike = unity/strength is power. We know even as the Igbo Bible puts it, that divided we fall, but united we stand. Igbo enwe eze concept is strange to Igbo psyche and history of the origin. It should be discarded, forgotten and formal education at reorientation of every Igbo undertaken. A family regarded as the smallest unit in a locality has the ‘father’ as the head, how much more a village, a clan and a tribe. Let the issue of Igbo enwe eze be laid to rest. We Igbo people are not crabs; we are men and women with great propensity for leadership and followership we do not need to invoke the expression to support our democratic thought system for self-reliance. Nor as a way of checking the excesses of any Igbo leader.

**IGBOMAN LIKES MONEY TOO MUCH**-It is important to notice that the history of Igbo origin as legend has it, reveals that the word ‘Igbo’ refers to ‘forest-dwellers’. We are aware that at this time the primitive Igbo lived a hazardous wandering life of the hunter-gatherer of wild edible plants. The Nri myth which preserved for us how agriculture came meant that the Igbo became ‘farmers’ who had to be directly dependent on the land for their livelihood. Definitely these kinds of job descriptions will require among other qualities - strength and intelligence. The implications that right from the Igbo genesis, the Igbo man was born into a tough world that



## A journey towards the correction of some distortions in Igbo thought system:

demanded him to be rugged, courageous, fearless, determined and hardworking to survive. Thus I will agree with D.I. Nwoga (1984:48) who said:...the .most prominent aspect of Igbo concept of man is that of a struggler for survival, a hard and determined person in confrontation with the environment to force out of it a means of sustenance. Luckily enough, this Igbo nature of hard work had been acknowledged right from the pre-colonial period. It is reported of Igbo slaves in Haiti that they were... excellent for work in the fields yet difficult to manage. They kept a strong sense of their Igbo identity and gave help, care and instructions to new arrivals from Igbo land. (Isichei, 1976:44; Herskovit, 1931:20-21; Uchendu, 1965:37). Even in the New World Igbo slaves were outstanding for their hard work and intelligence. Igbo slaves became much more productive than the other slaves, by exhibiting higher degree of intelligence, honesty and craftiness. Nwosu (1983:7) argued that the Igbo slaves showed a greater degree of brotherly love among themselves, which was lacking also in slaves of other nationalities. This discovery made the American Masters of Igbo slaves to become more productive, and wealthier than their counter-parts in Cuba and South America, Igbo slaves thereby became more expensive than others. Admittedly, this Igbo achievement orientation as an important aspect of Igbo life is one area in which the Igbo have been badly misunderstood and misrepresented. Many non-Igbo use it and argue that the Igbo are materialistic. Interestingly enough on this kind of accusation (Jordan, 1971:115) reported that Bishop Shanaham who had worked in Igbo land for years had come to the conclusion that: The average native was admirably suited by environment and training, for an explanation of life in terms of the spirit, rather than of the flesh. He was no materialist. Indeed nothing was farther from his mind than a materialistic philosophy of existence. It made no appeal to him. This was several years ago and I wish to categorically state that the Igbo do not cherish money more than the other ethnic groups. In fact, if money has today become an Igbo problem, it is a problem which Nigeria created for them. So it is a Nigerian problem. This achievement orientation has been found in their industry, courage, determination and in traveling in search of adequate means of livelihood in all nooks and crannies of the world, in all human endeavors.

### WHAT PROPELS THE IGBO MAN-

First, the Igbo is afraid of failure in life. He believes that nature has endowed him with the ability to subdue his world and succeed and therefore had to do just that. Definitely the mandate to control the land is a mandate to be successful. As dede Afigbo rightly put: It is thus quite clear that the Igbo saw failure in his world as a terrible calamity which implied damnation and so did every thing possible to avoid it. It is this fear of failure, this drive to succeed here,



## A journey towards the correction of some distortions in Igbo thought system:

and attain the status of Ogaranya (a rich man) which he could carry across to the next world, which helped him to account for the economic drive of the Igbo man, as for the high score and prestige set on hard work, resourcefulness, foresight, and rugged individualism. Second, the Igbo is not prepared to attribute any failure to his personal 'chi.' Thus the Igbo saying that *onye kwe chi ya ekwe* locates the Igbo in the context of determination and faith to succeed. It is for this reason he has to get all forces on his side. The achievement orientation finds the Igbo in reverence of Ikenga, the cult of strength, a symbol for personal achievement, heroism and success. The Igbo people love to be rewarded and recognized after having worked hard. Thus recognition for achievement is well entrenched in Igbo life. For instance, far from despising manual labour, the Igbo esteem the successful farmer. Some parts of Igbo land award them the titles of Eze ji (King of yam), Oko ji (yam planter). This Igbo saying reaffirms :*egbuwa ofija a hu akụ* i.e. When you clear the forest you see wealth. The Igbo people believe so much in the dignity of labour (work) probably more than any other ethnic groups in Nigeria, and it is for this same reason, the Igbo are also hated. Everywhere in Nigeria you find the Igbo working for his livelihood. It is a new phenomenon seeing an 'Igbo' begging for alms. We know as Oluadah Eouiano wrote centuries ago, that begging was unknown to the Igbo society. The only circumstance that begging was probably accepted was rather than being a thief (*Onye arịrịọ ka onye oshi mma*). Stealing was a terrible crime in traditional Igbo society and its punishment could be death, at times. Creating wealth is based on hard work and intelligence. It is just recently we started seeing people who do 'nothing' but we find them building 'estates.' It is only recently we find people who do nothing and yet become leaders. In traditional Igbo society, you can't lead without your being an accomplished person, having something doing. We have what is called the British pride, the American pride; we also have from time immemorial what is known as the 'Igbo pride' which some historians refer to as 'Igbo identity'. This 'Igbo pride' is that Igbo spirit, that Igboness in every Igbo person, that courage, that determination, that fearlessness, that self-confidence in every Igbo person. That which made him Igbo rather than any other tribe He knows that he is not judged by what his father or relations have but rather by what he is able to achieve by himself for his community. We see with our eyes Igbo solidarity, ingenuity and uniqueness. We need to recover these heritages and to offer to our country the best that is in us, because we have what it takes to move Nigeria forward.

As the Igbo child puts forward here A NOSTALGIC RECOUNT OF CHILDLIKE FAITH AND HOPE. IGBO NO N'UZO NA NDI BI N'ULO EKELEM UNU. WE ARE NOT HERE FOR A FLATTERY OR PRAISE-SINGING VENTURE, BUT TALKING OF A PEOPLE WHO HAVE THE CAPACITY TO CHANGE THEIR



## A journey towards the correction of some distortions in Igbo thought system:

WORLD.NKE A BU EZIOKWU CHARA ACHAIGBO NO N'UZO NA NDI BI N'ULO MMA MMA NUUMUNNE DI UTO UDO DIRI UMUIGBO, **CHUKWU** GOZIE UNUOHA NA EZE MMA MMA NUONYE SIN A O BU UNU N'ANYA O BUY A N'AJA OCHA

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### Egbufoama Chike

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