University of Massachusetts Boston

From the SelectedWorks of Chukwuma Azuonye

June, 1984

The Igbo World in Transition: Problems and Challenges

Chukwuma Azuonye, University of Massachusetts Boston

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Uwa Ndi Igbo bu akwụkwọ ńka na mmụta meọtara ihe dum gbasara ndụ na omenaala ndị Igbo, ma n’ala Ibo ma na ngalaba umụ Igbo bi na mba ndị ọzọ. A na-ebibụta ya ugbọrọ abụọ n’afọ (na Jun na Disemba); ihe ana-ebibụta n’ime ya mgbe ọbụla bu: edemede di iche iche, n’asusu Igbo ma o bu Bekee, gbasara ndụ n’omenaala ndị Igbo; agụmagụ ohụ edere n’asusu Igbo; ndepụta agụmagụ ọdinaala di iche iche esetere n’ime Obodo, ha na nsugharị ha n’asusu Bekee na nkọwa so ha; foto ndị na-egosi nkenị udi ndụ ndị Igbo di iche iche, nke ka nke nta; umụ ajụjụ ma o bu nkọwa; edemede ntule akwụkwọ ukwu na nke nta; umụ ajụjụ ma o bu nkọwa gbasara ihe di iche iche gbasara ndị Igbo nke e nwebeghị nkwẹkorịta banyere ha; akụkọ ihe ndị na-ememugbọ a gbasara omenaala Igbo.

A chooro ka ihe dum ebibutara n’akwụkwọ a di ka e si kọwa n’Usoro Edemede maka Uwa Ndi Igbo, nke e nwere i nata n’aka edito. Nchikọta okwu agaefeghi mkpuru okwu naịrị abụọ (200) ga-esoriị edemede na ntule akwụkwọ dum, ha na okwu mmalite na-eso ndepụta agụmagụ ọdinaala na foto dum. Onye aga-edere akwụkwọ maka ihe dum gbasara nwezikọta ihe mbipụta dum bu: Edito, Uwa Ndi Igbo, Ulo Nka Okike, P.O. Box 53, Nsukka, Naijiria.
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All contributions are expected to conform to The Uwâ Ndi Igbo Manual of Style, a copy of which may be obtained from the editor. A 200-word abstract must accompany all articles, reviews, and introductions to texts and records. For all editorial matters, write to: The Editor, Uwâ Ndi Igbo. Okike Arts Centre, P.O. Box 53, Nsukka, Nigeria.

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THE IGBO WORLD IN TRANSITION: PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Otuọtụ ihe ndị na-emé n’ala Igbo ubgu a ziri na ndị Igbo a hughúkwaghị asusu na omenala ha n’anya. Q na-aka otuọtụ ndị Igbo mma isu asusu Bekee na ọmọla Omenala ndị ọzọ, ma ndị ọcha, ma ndị N’dia, ma ndị Afrika ndị ọzọ. Q di mkpa ka a chọ ọzọ mee ka ihe ndị dí otu a kwusi. Omenala Igbo juputara otuọtụ ihe ndị a choọtụara ga-abara ụmụ mmadụ uru, ma ubgu a ma na ọdịnịhụ. Ihe ndị a metụtara ọkà, mmụta na ọzọ akà dí iche iche. E wepụtara ọnọla a bụ Ọwụ N’di Igbo iji wee nye aha ịhụ na edepụtara ụmụ ihe ndị a n’akwụkwọ ka ụwa dum wea maka. Ihe ndị edepụtara na mbipụta nke mbu a bụ ndị ihe ndị a ọcho ka a na-ebipụta n’Uwa N’di Igbo mgbe ọ bula. Acho’kwa na ndị ọchachamara dum ọ nọ na ngalaba mmụta dí iche iche (ma na sayans, ma na mmụtakanà) zitere anyị ọzọ edemede ndị na-akọwa ihe ọ bula ha choọtụara maka ndị na omenala ndị Igbo. Q ga-adị ọmọ mmọ ma ọ bụla na ede edemede ndị a n’asụsụ Igbo n’ihie a na ọcho ka ihe dun a ga na-ebipụta n’Uwa N’di Igbo n’ọdịnịhụ dírị n’asụsụ Igbo. Uhe ndị ọzọ a ga na-ebipụta n’Uwa N’di Igbo mgbe dum ụmụ nkọwa na ajụya gbasara ufo ọdị a ga n’agbawaju anya na ndu na omenala Igbo na agụmagụ ọchụ n dere n’asụsụ Igbo.

This maiden issue of Ọwụ N’di Igbo appears at a time when the Igbo world appears to be passing through one of the most turbulent transients in its history. Amid the great social and political changes which are rapidly changing the face of Africa and indeed of the entire black world, the Igbo people are fast plummeting into the abyss of anomic suicide. We hate our language and culture; but we proudly ape the ways of other people. We ape the European, ape the Oriental and ape our African kith and kin; thus, today, an epidemic of microscopic chicfaincy stools patterned on Yoruba and Edos models threatens to swamp the age-old republican traditions of our own people. Nor are these realities a new phenomenon. Indeed, so upsetting were they thirty-eight years ago that a European, writing under the pseudonym “Onye-Ocha” in Nigeria Magazine (No. 23, 1946), published a protest apọt title titled “Down With Everything Ibo.” Perhaps many an alienated modern Igbo man today may wish to re-echo this slogan — this time; in all earnestness. But there will be others who will see in the realities of our current transition, problems and challenges which must be squarely faced in the interest of salvaging the great Igbo cultural heritage for humanity.

One of the cardinal aims of Ọwụ N’di Igbo is to provide a forum for this enterprise. The key to the survival of the Igbo language and culture lies in an honest effort on the part of each and everyone of us to understand ourselves from the vantage points of our various areas of specialization. This rediscovery of ourselves should not be left to artists and scholars in the humanities, social sciences and education alone. The Ahijajoku lectures of Professor Bede Okeigbo (1980) and Professor A.O. Anya (1982) as well as the numerous papers in science, technology, medicine and agriculture presented in the 1982 workshop on the state of Igbo studies at the University of Nigeria’s Institute of African Studies are a clear attestation of what scholars in other disciplines can contribute. But more than that, we think that the time has come for us to address ourselves seriously to the problems and challenges of reporting our findings — whatever the discipline — in Igbo.

Under the aegis of the National Educational Research Council, members of the Society for Promoting Igbo Language and Culture have, in a series of seminars and workshops, been tinkering with the possibilities of evolving various species of metalanguage appropriate to various disciplines in the sciences and the arts. But unfortunately a lot of what has been done is far apart to be rather forced and artificial because the tinkers have generally failed to see the need to refer their armchair coinages to the untainted users of the Igbo languages in the villages where the smouldering embers of the eating Igbo culture can be still be found. Those who have bothered to do this have been amply rewarded by many fascinating discoveries: ideas, concepts and modes of expression, the existence of which they could hardly imagine at the beginning of their investigations. For this reason, pride of place will always be given in Ọwụ N’di Igbo to works of an empirical kind based on field research, to the documentation of raw oral and traditional data and to ideas, concepts and terms, the authenticity of which have been carefully verified with reference to the traditional authorities. And it is to be hoped that we will quickly evolve from our present bilingualism to a time when all contributions in the journal will be in Igbo.

But what is the value of all these? In a world in which the great technological attainments of man vouchsafe exciting opportunities to reach out for worlds beyond our little solar system and even our galaxy (the Milky Way), what is the value of toying with the archaic and “crude" traditions of our forbears? One Igbo Senior Lecturer in Electrical Engineering who earnestly believes that the black man is inferior in every way to the white man describes Igbo studies as “Igbo oxide”, implying that there are better things like Chemistry to devote one’s time to than Igbo. The position is not new. Recently at the University of Ibadan, a female student in the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages who was asked to register for Igbo courses shyingly...
burst into tears while another who registered for the courses deliberately failed them by writing nothing in the first semester examinations and was thus allowed to strike off the obnoxious courses from his records. Why not! For long, in our schools and colleges, “Igbo-Igbo-RK” has been an odious byword for the low-academic achiever, for which reason our students regard it as anathema to be caught studying it in the university. No wonder that students of Igbo at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, mark their Igbo lecture notes with such fake course numbers as “Ig 211” or “Ig 411” rather than “Igbo 211” or “Igbo 411”. Why should a modern undergraduate mess around with “Igbo oxide”?

But as some of the articles featured in this issue of Úwá Ndí Êgbó will show, the rediscovery of traditional Igbo culture, through research, is not only a powerful antidote against anomic suicide but an endeavour which could lead to many practical discoveries. Maurice Iwu’s communication, in this issue, on “The State of Studies in Igbo Pharmacon and Therapy” clearly shows what a potentially revolutionary agent “Igbo oxide” could be in pharmaceutical chemistry. The investigations, on which he reports, by eminent scientists into age-old Igbo traditional remedies are pointing to new directions — even towards the solution of a number of problems for which up till the present time Western medicine has been unable to find answers. The pity, as Iwu laments and has since lamented again on Television, is the apathy of the governmental and academic establishments which have failed to give research into traditional medicine its due recognition and support.

“Igbo Oxide” can also point the way in many other positive directions, especially in reshaping our conception of leadership roles and responsibilities in society. Through it, we can reach back again for the ideal of heroic leadership which seems to have effectively sustained the republican traditions of our people before the blight of the warrant chieftaincy system descended upon us.

The infamous warrant chieftaincy system introduced by the British Colonial Administration in the first quarter of this century as part of their programme of indirect rule seems to be at the very root of the crisis of Igbo leadership as well as of our wider cultural alienation today. Literally, overnight, the traditional democratic and progressive patterns of leadership based on wisdom, achievement, probity and accountability was displaced by the enthronement of little, favoured upstarts armed with money and what has since been recognized in the Igbo world as the insuperable power of Western education. In a series of gun-breaking rituals, traditional leaders — the heroes and champions of their clans — were publicly disgraced and relegated to the background. They stood impotently aside while erstwhile slaves became the lords of the land. The new warrant chiefs never saw the need to use their powers with moderation. They corrupted the whole society and above all established the firm basis for anomic and alienation through their brutal assaults on customary privileges. Those who clung tenaciously to the old ways quickly became little men cowering under the almighty power of the English language.

But why did indirect rule through the warrant chieftaincy system alter the Igbo psyche so decidedly? Why did it not inflict damages nearly so devastating among other major Nigerian peoples, e.g. the Hausa and the Yoruba? The answer is simple. In pursuing the indirect rule system among the Hausa and the Yoruba, the British found and made use of traditional monarchical establishments — the Emirs and the Obas — and in so doing achieved their administrative goals without the kind of naked assault on the traditional society experienced in Igboland. It was thus possible to practice indirect rule without destroying cultural pride and subverting traditional leadership roles. But after the ravages of the warrant chieftaincy system in Igboland, subsequent Igbo leaders became afflicted with a lack of historical sense, with cultural alienation and with the lack of accountability to the people whom they claim to represent. Little wonder that contemporary Igbo leaders have hardly attracted lastling tributes of the kind found in the traditional Igbo epic.

The traditional Igbo epic is of two kinds: the romantic and the historic (see Azuonye’s article on page 4 of this issue of Úwá Ndí Êgbó). The Igbo romantic epic presents a fantasy world dominated by gargantuan culture heroes who destroy monsters and teach their people various arts of technology. The historic epic, on the other hand, presents a realistic world dominated by warriors, hunters and other kinds of real human champions who win honour and security for their people by risking their lives in various kinds of dangerous enterprise. Glimpses of these two kinds of heroes can be got from the articles by Chukwu Emekwem and Obiora Udechukwu in this issue of Úwá Ndí Êgbó. Many will see these folk heroes as portrayed in these epics as a dated cultural phenomenon confined to the dark and backward abyss of the past heroic or mythical ages. But far from that, the folk hero is an everpresent reality in every society in which the spirit of community has not died. The capacity to project the heroic image in the contemporary leader is a powerful cultural indicator of social vitality. But how far has the Igbo in recent times been able to project such an image?

It would appear from the evidence available to us that there have been two great phases in the evolution, or shall we say devolution, of the folk hero in modern Igbo history, namely the African nationalist phase and the Biafran phase. In the former, the archetypal Igbo hero was reborn in Zik (Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe) and other nationalist champions while in the latter, he was reborn in Ojukwu and other Biafran leaders. But longevity and
inconsistency have tended to destroy the heroic myth with which these personages were invested in their heydays. The true folk hero dies young in a consistent pursuit of the common good. After Biafra, nothing like it has uplifted the popular consciousness. Today, not only the Igbo world but the entire black world is crying for the return of the hero — the man of destiny who will lead them to new frontiers of positive achievements. The little men who floated across the political arena between 1979 and 1983 will be forgotten, despite the statues and statues in which they sought to immortalize themselves. The folk imagination remembers only the young legendary Zik who fought the dragon of white imperialism, the Zik who towers above all other contemporary leaders in Kaalu Iginiri's account of the Nigerian civil war published in next issue of *Uwa Ndi Igbo*. For those interested in speaking about leadership "factors" in modern Nigerian politics, the implications of the image of Zik presented in this account need to be examined carefully. The traditional Igbo bard is not only a traditior but an intellectual and mentor of the silent majority in the rural areas who do not read newspapers.

The Igbo world before the great cultural alienation not only revered the folk hero as the epitome of the beauty of human achievement, it was also a world in which environmental beauty was invested with sacrdotal reverence as can be seen in Chike Aniakor's study of Igbo traditional architecture* and Obiori Udechukwu's detailed photographic record in full colour of women's ceremonial wall-painting in the shrine of an Nri deity (page 55 below). Chinua Achebe is of course right in asserting that "our past was not one long technical idol" in terms of cultural attainments, but looking at the high levels of aesthetic refinement revealed in the works of our traditional artists (mere shadows of their more ancient predecessors) we cannot but lament at the enormity of the iconoclasm that has overwhelmed the Igbo world (indeed the entire African world) today where philistines in power are busy everywhere bulldozing and destroying the natural environment only to make way for squalid cubicles and mountains of garbage.

There is, in addition to the documentation and study of Igbo life and culture, a place for controversial issues in Igbo studies in *Uwa Ndi Igbo*, in our Notes and Queries section. We begin in this issue with a note by Kay Williamson showing that the word 'Bekee' usually associated with the name of one Dr. Balkie was in existence long before the Dr. Balkie in question ever set foot-on Igboland. Was there another Balkie, or...? What could be the possible root of the word? Can we say the same of the word 'Maazi' which many believe was borrowed from the Portuguese? Linguistics, no doubt, is one area in which many queries must be raised. Williamson and other Lexicostatisticians have been busy in the recent past partitioning the Igbo world into little autonomous language groups which they have labelled *Ika, Ikwere, Izi, Eza*, etc. Is this politics or linguistic science? Some linguists think that the Ojicha dialect of Igbo is a pidgin... How true? What of the Igbo orthography, the status of the Igbo dialects in literature and the evolution of the litera... standard Igbo? How valid are the prescriptions of Nwachukwu, Emenanjo and others criticized in this issue of *Uwa Ndi Igbo* in Ebo Ubahakwe's review of Nwachukwu's recent books and Chinua Achebe's comment on Emenanjo's review of *Aka Weta*? And how do we interpret the numerous cognate words in Igbo and other southern and central Nigerian languages? Polygenesis or diffusionism?

No less fascinating are the problems of history and oral historiography. The load of data in Igbo place names is yet to be unravelled and the post-Igbo Ukwu archaeological finds by Anozie, Chikwendu and others are pointing new directions in the understanding of the Igbo past. Philip Oguagha's examination of the enormous Igbo influences in the Igala Kingdom (next issue) is a fine piece of historiographic revisionism; and against the Niger-Benue confluence and the fanciful oriental theories of Igbo origins are some clues, in linguistics and oral tradition, of possible authochtony. We need to look at words. Analytic etymology may provide valuable clues. What does 'Igbo' mean? Tone differences notwithstanding, does it have anything to do with 'gbo' (ancient) or the Yoruba 'Igbo' (forest)? What of the word 'Oku' (fire)? Does it have anything to do with the primeval method of producing fire by the knocking together (iuku) of two pieces of flint? And what of the words 'ezu' and 'nzu' which appear to be related to 'izu' (to fear)? These are important questions for anthropology and history. The Igbo-Yoruba connection is another matter. The Moremi myth suggests an ancient Igbo invasion of Yorubaland and there are hints in Portuguese sources that the men who taught the Bini the art of Bronze casting came from over 300 leagues east. Could the Portuguese, the greatest cartographers of their day, have got it wrong here for once?

The pages of future editions of *Uwa Ndi Igbo* are open for these and many other questions: on Igbo metaphysics and the occult sciences, witchcraft, reincarnation or rebirth, ogbanje, metapsychosis, the mystery of the anyunwebe plant, divination and spirit mediumship, etc. Creative writing will continue to be a regular feature of the journal and we do hope that Igbo writers will avail themselves of this forum to explore new techniques in poetry, fiction and drama.

* Next issue.