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Full Length Research Paper

Republicanism in Igboland: A Critique Of 'Igbo Enwe Eze'

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'Igbo enwe eze' is a language of Igbo detractors and destabilizing agents who have continuously sought ways of disuniting and destabilizing the Igbos knowing fully well that with the 'Igwe bu ike' and 'Bunu bunu, ibu anyi danda' phenomena, under one leader, the Igbos would be as forceful as any other world acclaimed super power. This paper is a clarion call to the Igbos to vehemently reject this view, surreptitiously sold to us starting from the colonial masters who had to fight for several years in order to bring the Igbo land under control. History has it that it is only the Igbo race that gave the imperialists the toughest time before being subjected to the demands of colonialism. As a matter of fact, the imperialists had to invent the obnoxious 'warrant chief' and indirect rule' system, employing some considered as renegades in the land, as a ploy to penetrate the Igbo land beating the drum of 'Igbo enwe eze'. The two other major ethnic groups in Nigeria have equally followed the same pattern having been adequately tutored by the British imperialists on the ways of keeping the Igbos permanently divided and disunited. This paper seeks to give practical meaning to republicanism with the view to bringing out the fact that it is not diametrically opposed to the ideology of 'Igbo enwe eze'. The paper concludes with a call for the Igbos to wholeheartedly reject this view, forge a common front, in order to give the country Nigeria the much desired leadership and direction which have continued to elude the nation. Igbo republicanism is panacea for the many ills bedeviling the nation.

Keywords: Igbo, Republicanism, Colonialism, Imperialists, Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Julius (1974) of all the crimes of colonialism, there is none worse than the attempt to make us (Africans) believe we had no indigenous culture of our own, or that what we did have was worthless; something of which we

should be ashamed, instead of a source of pride. The debilitation and, one may indeed say, the ravishment brought upon African Traditional Culture in her encounter with the West has constituted the justification for the

incessant calls for cultural revival in Africa. The meeting, as we know or have come to realize, was in no way ordinary. Dr. J Agunwa (Rev. Fr.) had earlier posited that colonialism, trade and missionary activities created the forum, not for dialogue but for dominated acculturation, cultural imperialism, unrestrained and uncritical assimilation on the part of Africans (Bigard Theological Studies, 1990). In some parts of Africa, the situation amounted almost to cultural defrocking. It is in one of these many instances that Chinua Achebe wrote in 'Things Fall Apart' that the Igboland, depicted as **Umuofia** therein, that the white man secretly came with his religion and all that came with it and before the people knew what was happening, what had held them together had been 'knifed' and the clan could no longer act as one.

A chimerical position insists that the Igbos, more than any other ethnic group in Nigeria had been culturally stripped. The Igbo person had abandoned so much of his cultural heritage and values that, as a group, they hardly can be culturally identified in inter ethnic parade. Prof. M Echeruo during the inaugural lecture of the **Ahajioku Lectures** in 1979 talked about 'a matter of identity'. In that presentation, he espoused on the view that the Igbos must, as a matter of necessity, begin to come to grips with who they are, be proud of who they are and be sure that their identity is not lost in the crowd. The authentic Igbo culture had existed and today's Igbos owe it as a duty, at least to their ancestors, to recapture this Igbo culture or at least to relive within the confines of modernity what Prof. Adiele Afigbo postulated as the 'age of innocence' in his 1980, Ahajioku Lecture.

It is within this context that the republican spirit of the Igbo man has been misunderstood and misconstrued to mean that Igbos do not have kings and that within the Igbo traditional society, it is 'to your tents O Israel'. Igbo *enwe eze* as a statement must not be understood in isolation. When juxtaposed with the 'igwe bu ike' and 'bunu bunu ibu anyi danda' phenomena, the real meaning of republicanism in igbo land would evidently come to light. The denigration of this republican spirit as meaning that Igbos do not have kings is one of the many faults of the colonial masters and others whose reason for being is hinged on keeping the Igbos permanently divided.

Our republican spirit which has seen the Igbo race wriggle out of seemingly very difficult situations should be a source of pride to us and not a way to denigrate the entire race that they do not have kings. Briefly we shall now take a look at who these Igbos are.

Who Are The Igbos?

The answer to the question 'who are the Igbos?' would naturally be preceded by the knowledge of where the Igbos came from and how they managed to settle in what constitutes Igboland today. According to Adiele Afigbo

(Afigbo A, 1981), the question 'who are the Igbos?' is a very large one and in approaching it from the standpoint of a particular discipline one can only hope to lift a very small portion of the large dark veil that covers the answer. One angle from which it is possible to see the Igbo as they are is that of a people in dynamic interaction with their environment and their neighbours.

The Igbo story has been traced from archaeological and mythological perspectives. It is important to observe here that both perspectives of Igbo history and culture go far back into human history.

From the point of view of archaeology, Anya O. A, systematically presented the emergence of the Igbo person from the entire evolutionary continuum which stretches into the pre historic era. Tracing the emergence of man from the discoveries and interpretations given to paleontological fossils up to the time of *the homo erectus and homo sapiens*, the erudite Professor of Zoology wrote that "the hominid remains which has been unequivocally identified as *Homo sapiens* was found in Zambia in 1921, and a date of about 35,000 years has been given to it. Other finds of *Homo sapiens* in Kenya indicate that the emergence of *Homo sapiens* in East Africa would be a little more than 100,000 years ago but perhaps close to 200,000 years. What needs to be emphasized is that the periods when these various forms or morph species of man existed on the East African plains certainly overlapped. *Homo erectus and Homo sapiens* may have lived side by side in the same environment but each specialized in its way of life. It is from this location that these forms radiated to other parts of Africa as well as Asia and Europe (Anya, 1982).

According to Anya (1982), what is today Igboland would seem, however, to have been always, through prehistory, squarely in the tropical forest zone. The evidence suggests more northern extensions to the tropical forest in earlier times. He went on to say that despite the co-extension of the grasslands and forests through West, Central and East Africa, the area which is now Igboland falls fully, in the main, within a geographical area of potential isolation in the forest zone. The potential isolation is suggested by the physical features of the quadrant demarcated by the Adamawa Highlands and the Cameroon Mountains in the east, by the Atlantic Ocean and the Niger Delta in the south, by the flood plains of the Niger Valley in the West and by the Benue Valley and trough in the north. It was within this compartment that the ancestors of Nd'Igbo lived, and moved and had their being (Anya 1982).

An interesting fact pervades the history of Igbos to the extent that some part of Igbos do not accept others as being Igbo. Isichie Elizabeth quoted in Onwu E N, a professor and reverend gentleman, as indicating that Mbieri people did not regard the Onitsha people as Igbos. Similarly some groups in Onitsha who traced their root to Benin Kingdom used the expression 'nwa onye Igbo' (an Igbo person) in a spiteful manner to refer to other Igbo

people (Onwu, 2002). Yet this seemingly negative description could be explained as the effect of what had transpired within the prehistoric movements within the evolutionary continuum. Anya (1982) had anticipated this when he maintained that on each migratory route, successive migratory bands of people may have entered into south eastern Nigeria at different times. Being essentially of the same stock, and with a reasonable expanse of land at their disposal, integration of these bands was facilitated and could not have led to major conflict situations. This obviously explains why igbo culture is essentially a culture forged under the aegis of peaceful co-existence rather than conquest (Anya 1982). Thus, it is the contention of this erudite professor that the igbo man inhabits his present location, south east of Nigeria, having been part of the extensive migrations of the peoples of Africa in prehistory. The river systems and their basins as a result of geological features are concentrated in the Western Section of the continent, through much of Central Africa and down to the eastern face of East African highlands. West, Central and Eastern Africa have been, through prehistory, one contiguous environment in which man wandered with rather local but often temporary barriers to his movements.

The mythological aspect of igbo history took its point of departure from the scriptures which synchronizes with the Igbo-Israel relationship. As recorded in the Bible, precisely in the books of Genesis 46 : 15-18 and Numbers 26 : 16-18, a man named Eri, who, oral tradition noted as the progenitor of the igbo race, was identified as the fifth son of Gad. Gad, as it were, was the seventh son of Jacob. According to igbo origin as presented by the Aguleri people, in the present Anambra State of Nigeria, Eri migrated from Egypt with a group of companions just before the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt many centuries ago. They travelled by water and finally arrived at the confluence of Ezu and Omambala (Anambra) Rivers, located in the present day Aguleri, where, according to the same oral tradition, it was spiritually or divinely revealed to Eri that the point was to be their final destination and settlement.

About this arrival at the confluence of Ezu and Omambala, the revered Igwe Onyesoh of Agu-ukwu Nri is on the same frequency with the oral tradition coming from Aguleri. According to him, a man called Eri, the progenitor of Ndigbo, lived in Egypt and was the special adviser on religious matters to the 5th dynasty of Pharaohs of Egypt. It was in those days in Egypt that Eri determined who was going to be the next Pharaoh. And by their law, there was a deity called Emem and for anything to happen during the time, the man called Eri, in his capacity as the religious adviser to the Pharaoh of Egypt, was responsible. Now Eri needed people to help him and he recruited devotees. These devotees were all appointed by him but he had to do something to really

found their own loyalty, thus began the movements. In their movement towards the southern side, they arrived at another confluence. This confluence was the tributary of River Niger and Benue known as Ezu and Omambala (Ujumadu 2014).

As contentious and controversial as some of these stories are, what is undeniable is the fact that igbos migrated southward to their present location, South East of Nigeria and this character of migrants has been with them all through history. It is believed that from this Ezu and Omambala settlement, igbos in their character migrated to other parts of igbo land and settled within and along the 'imaginary line' (Afigbo 1981).

Thus along this migratory routes away from the Ezu and Omambala river to other places where the igbos have found themselves today, the igbo person had carried such character traits that have manifested in his zest for adventure and industry. Igbos do have a dynamic and fascinating cultural heritage. This culture comes with different application and understanding as a result of intermingling with their immediate neighbours identified by Prof Afigbo .A, as the Edo, Igala, Idoma, Ogoja, Efik-Ibibio and Ijaw (Afigbo, 1981). With the coming of the British, the igbos equally acquired more neighbours whose influence impacted both positively and negatively on the igbo race. According to Afigbo A (1981), first in the new group of neighbours were the British themselves who began dictating to a greater extent than any of the traditional neighbours had done so far, what happened in and to igbo society. The other neighbours whom the igbos acquired as a result of the British conquest were the rest of Nigerian peoples and then other people around the world to which the igbos became exposed through intermingling and in so many instances, in search for greener pastures. It is this zest for adventure and industry which the igbos had carried along their migratory route within and outside the country that has given the igbo race a bad image among her detractors and those seeking to keep the igbos permanently divided. This zest has been understood as the republican spirit of the igbo person which, as it were, brought out a most outstanding quality of the igbos regarding their receptivity to new ideas and adaptability to change, which under the stimulus of so many influences, like Christianity and Western Education, readily triggered in them an obsessive desire for self improvement. According to Professor Nwabueze B., 'the igbos were quick in grasping the value of western education. The drive for education thus became the driving force in the igbo society. A whole community would team up to build a community school and finance its courses, to institute a scholarship scheme for its sons and daughters, and even establish a secondary school or college'. (Nwabueze 1985). We shall now take a look at the full implication of this republicanism and why it has been misunderstood

and \misinterpreted by non igbos and even some igbos who have been completely taken in by western mode of thinking.

Igbo Republicanism

The traditional Igbo had a deep sense of community. Individual existence and freedom are appreciated, but they are delicately balanced with the underlying philosophy of life-in-community. This life-in-community is captured by the Igbo concept of *Umunna/Umunne/Ikwunne*. Part of Igbo problem is using foreign concepts to define Igbo life and thought. *Umunna* is a spiritual idea embedded in Igbo origin. The concept of democracy (*oha, umunnakwuru*) which is contained in the Igbo philosophy of republicanism is deeply rooted in Igbo life and thought as embodied in the *Umunna* concept. Before taking any decision, the Igbos have the tradition of gathering together to discuss matters of interest in order to arrive at a consensus and agreement. This is called in Igbo *Igba izu* (consultation). 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, education and technology (Onwu, 2002)

According to *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary*, republic is defined as an affair, interest, a state or nation in which the supreme power is rested in the whole voting community which elects indirectly or directly, representative to exercise the power; a group whose number are regarded as having a certain equality or common aims, pursuits, etc. In other words, republicanism is a system with clear pattern of organization and a mode of behaviour.

Here we find that the republican idea recognizes individual worth and input. It also emphasizes a situation where people deliberate and take decisions that are of common interests. *Ndi Igbo* lived and still live in units of villages, and clans called *Umunna*. The relationships among them are so close from the family to the clan level including the age grades system. Similar close relationships are found in the Eastern and Western Igbo. Power resided with *Umunna* or *Oha*. People to represent each unit are chosen on the basis of age, ability and character. There is consensus, constant consultation covering every aspect of their lives from individual to group levels - including marriage, education, funeral.

In Igbo republicanism, individuals and groups of individuals up to the clan level aspired to relevance, had rights and responsibilities, worked harder to better their lots and welfare and contributed to policies. Igbo republicanism is hinged on people's rights and founded on forthrightness, hard work, truth, and character.

The democratic spirit in Igbo checks any possible

excesses arising from seniority, status and achievement. This is further strengthened by the Igbo principle of equality and equivalence which Prof. Afigbo rightly says is fundamental in Igbo democracy (Onwu, 2002).

Ndi Igbo do not worship people; they do not 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 acts of rudeness to their elders. 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.

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 republicanism does not mean the freedom to insult, maltreat or abuse people because of one's position.

Critique of Theconcept of Igbo Enwe Eze

It should be noted that the Igbo expressions like:

Igbo-ama-onye-ukwu

I na-enye m nri

Igbo enwe-eze

were not in traditional Igbo thought. They have become Igbo expressions in the mouth of those who harbour envy, hatred and jealousy for others, those who do not appreciate 'excellence,' people influenced by the Hebrew saying: "a prophet has no honour in his own community." They served a colonial interest of destabilizing Igbo unity.

It has become worrisome that even some of our Igbo intellectuals are accepting the expression - *Igbo enwe eze* - as reflecting traditional Igbo situation. It has its origin in the early colonial European writers who spoke about the Igbo in particular as people without any universal conception of God, and without history. It is important to observe that unlike the other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, the igbos are known for adventure and migrations. Thus each group settling in one locality does have a leader regarded as the king though his influence would not go beyond his locality. Chinua Achebe had written in 'The Trouble With Nigeria' that beyond town or village the igbo has no compelling traditional loyalty (Achebe, 1983, P.47). this statement suggest that within each town or village, there is always a leader whose influence may not stretch beyond the town. That the igbos lost a central system of administration due to their migrant nature should not be used as a yardstick to conclude that they have no kings. We must take note of the fact that Igbo history did not start with the advent of the white man. As a matter of fact, it is arguable that the

man who denied that you had a history could not possibly come to believe you had a 'king' or 'chief' which ever title one may prefer.

The truth which historians have agreed on is that of 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. These colonialists created the warrant chiefs. These chiefs were installed to serve the interest of those who established them firstly to assist them hold down the Igbo and secondly 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 then imposed their own subjects who ruled in their stead (Onwu, 2002).

The truth of the matter 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 and identity as a people.

We have to realize that this concept is introduced into our 'Culture,' the very essence of the 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. It would be something next to impossibility to have a vice president of Nigeria of igbo extraction working together to promote igbo interest with a governor of any of the south eastern state who does not belong to the same party with him. It has happened before and may likely repeat itself if such opportunity occurs again. Today many of our state governors are in conflict with our people in government at the federal level instead of uniting to project a common igbo interest.

It is important to point out that 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 (Onwu, 2002).

One may go further to ask, who is afraid of Igbo unity? The Igbo people say: *Igwe bu ike* (unity is strength/power) and have demonstrated the *ibu anyi danda* phenomenon in several ways like in the awarding

of scholarships, communal building of schools and hospitals etc. *Igbo enwe eze* concept is strange to Igbo psyche and history. It should be discarded, forgotten and a formal education at re-orientation 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 do not need to invoke the expression to support our philosophy of republicanism for self-reliance nor as a way of checking the excesses of any Igbo leader.

CONCLUSION

Igbo republicanism goes with the consensus philosophy of *Igbo-kwenu*. In Igbo land it represents constituting symbol of the gathering of *Umunna*, which allows for the full deliberative and consultative participation of every adult in decision-making. It not only recognizes the freedom and right of each individual but more importantly it awakens the *Igboness* in every Igbo person. *Igbo-kwenu* in the Igbo land underscores a social formula of action, a call to order and unity and collective will vital in all Igbo relationships to fashion its destiny as a people. There was a time when we used to hear - *Igbo kwe* - and all present would agree and shout 'ya'. We used to hear also *Enyi Mba Enyi* and the effects it usually has whenever it was sang - we see with our eyes Igbo solidarity in action, the clearest expression of *Umunna*. We need to recover that time and to offer to our country the best that is in us, because we have what it takes to move Nigeria forward. Finally Prof Ben Nwabueze : 1985, concludes by saying that our sense of common identity as igbos is too fragile and, must be strengthened. Igbo must learn to restrain the propensity for intra group feuds occasioned mostly by the negative understanding of this concept 'igbo enwe eze'. It is a tragedy of igbo historical development in Nigeria that, in their pursuit of excessive individualism and self-centredness, the igbos have lost the co-operative spirit and the sense of obligation to the family, village and clan which characterized them during the period 1930-50 and enabled them to achieve an almost revolutionary breakthrough in the educational field. The spirit needs to be revived not only for the progress of the igbo race but for the country as a whole.

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