

## THE IGBO IN DIASPORA: THE BINDING FORCE OF INFORMATION

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### Introduction

In a carefully documented study published in 1974, Alex Inkeles and David S. Smith singled out the Jews of Eastern Europe, the Swiss Protestants, the Parsis of India and the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria for achievement motivation.<sup>1</sup>

The Igbo have been brought to the limelight of world significance especially since they fought and lost in a brutal civil war that spanned three years (1967–1970). We must understand the Igbo as we never understood them before Inkeles and Smith's seminal study. Yet it is hard to understand a people who can be incontinently moved by materialism. On the record the Igbo have established themselves as a struggling, living conflict of extremes. Their history seems to have more jarring blacks and whites and less comfortable shadings than that of any other ethnic group on the African continent. Judged from the outside, the Igbo have acted almost like a puzzling case in a mental hospital, alternating periods of long and moody solitude with violent destructive energy. The Igbo student who devoted a significant portion of time to Christian fellowship in the seventies was quite possibly the same person who fought ferociously with a heightened sense of ethnic identification and who, perhaps deliberately, fostered an attitude of self-assertiveness and disregard for the sanctity of life, his own as well as that of others. In January 1970, in the space of a few hours, the fury seemed to vanish with the defeat. The Igbo returned to their villages and stood by docilely to await the pleasure of their conquerors.

But it is unfair to write of the Igbo in terms of a caricature; for all their achievement motivation and their republican inclination (*Igbo enwe eze*, the Igbo are Kingless) they are the most unified, the most stubborn, and perhaps have one of the most eccentric of national cultures. The Igbo can be called industrious, brave, and practical-minded but no amount of characterization can well describe them if one does not first understand the premises of their society, the ethos that makes it different from others, in short their cosmology. I have already sketched this in an earlier publication<sup>2</sup> and it is not considered necessary to repeat it here. The reader is kindly referred to that publication. Here we need only mention the Igbo tendency toward adventure.

## The Igbo in Dispersion

Part of the Igbo way of life is their tendency to adventure; the Igbo are one of the most restless of people, and the most travelled. It is no accident that, while they put up in the Igbo homeland with housing that other Nigerian ethnic groups would regard as a disgrace, they make sure that their automobiles are as efficient as they possibly can be.

The Igbo love of country has always been a curiously general affair, almost an abstract one. Few Igbo have that passionate attachment to a particular soil, a particular locality or region, that is common among other African ethnic groups. The Igbo have a regional literature, it is true, but it is rather a tribute to the passing of genuine regionalism than an expression of it, and they have no literature comparable to the Yoruba literature of country and village, the loving study of the field and wall and brook, the curious histories of village ceremonies or *Owa mbe* (Yoruba) and *Sara* (Housa). The affections of an Igbo have more to do with the social and political system than with the soil inhabited. This may be because of the Igbo proverb that dictates that the man whose attachments converge upon a particular spot on earth is miserable if removed from it; but give an Igbo his institutions and he cares little where you place him. Thus Simon Ottenberg, an American anthropologist who spent twenty years among the Igbo, writes "an Igbo's country is his understanding; he carries it with him wherever he goes, whether he emigrates north to the Housas or West to the Yorubas, his home is wherever he finds minds congenial to his own."<sup>3</sup> One can say of the Igbo love of adventure that instead of fragmenting the nation, it diffuses nationalism; instead of contributing to particularism, it encourages the generalization of patriotism and loyalty. This sense of adventure is accentuated by economic opportunism.

## Igbo Capitalism

The Igbo are among the most dispersed in Africa and perhaps even in the world. Their sense of adventure and the ease with which they seize economic opportunities make them easy prey among their hosts—this is what fosters in them a deep sense of community loyalty. It is true that the Igbo at the time of Nigeria's political independence in 1960 were over-represented in certain areas of lucrative commercial activity. For example, the Igbo formed only 1 percent of the population of Northern Nigeria, but controlled 11 percent of its real estate brokerage, 25 percent of its retail trade, 30 percent of the clothing trade, and 79 percent of department stores.

A 1960 commercial topography of Nigerian cities would show zones of homogeneous experience; thus we had Hausa quarters, Yoruba quarters, and Igbo quarters. Certain “quarters” gather reputation for heartless capitalism and their associated social pathology, and consequently they objectify the fantasy of the dreadful enclosure. As the rationalization of urban life continues, boundaries enclose some lives more tightly, isolating and making them more alien and obscure, inspiring illusions about them, making them more vulnerable.

Urban myths, in the manner of all mythology, are based on projections, social or psychological, which are efforts of the mind, concealed from awareness, to externalize something that originates from within. A projection makes a person, place, or thing represent a process, disposition or emotion that the mind refuses to own or cannot explain. Scapegoating is the most familiar kind of projection, by which some people find other persons with dramatically different social identities to stand for feelings or acts too painful, wicked, or inconsistent to claim for themselves.

Some urban myths do claim victims. Just as an individual, in psychological acts of projection, disassociates from unwanted feelings, a group can preserve a sense of virtue and comfort by disowning some social processes and by making some other group represent collective experiences that nobody wants. The consequences of these myths have been admirably discussed by E.V. Waters in a procedure he calls “blaming the victim.”<sup>4</sup> Certain people take the rap for troubles that begin far beyond the boundaries of their lives.

In Nigeria around 1961 and after, mass drift from rural to urban centres brought new combinations of people, transforming these milieux and giving them names that were spread and sped by the wings of fantasy. According to the stereotype, Igbo quarters were loci in which cut-throat capitalists drifted together in a kind of behavioural sink, producing urban capsules of depraved financiers so highly concentrated that the ordinary resources of the body social could not control them. The press kept alive the sense of danger and contamination associated with *Sabon geri* (“strangers’ quarters” as Igbo quarters are called in Hausa).

The Igbo then, partly for their commercial enterprise and partly for intellectual reasons, were frequently resented. They were often subjected to window smashing and physical assault, sometimes culminating in murder. In its economic aspect anti-Igbo feeling was a defensive reaction by the lower middle class—artisans, shopkeepers, and traders—to the advent of full-blown “Igbo capitalism.” For the Igbo were agents of change, promoting free trade, commercial publicity, installment payments, and the sale of ready-made goods. They intruded between producers and consumers and breached the monopoly of specialized shops (run mainly by Lebanese merchants), ranging from second-hand stalls to

department stores. In fact they prefigured the 1980s' trend in Nigeria toward urbanization and white-collar specialization, a trend which the rest of Nigeria was to follow decades later.

Intellectually anti-Igbo feeling was a reaction against such features as Igbo rationalism and enlightened self-interest linked to an atavistic penchant for aggressive ethnicity.

### **The Binding Force of Information**

It is clear from the above sketch that what the Igbo most desired at the time of Nigeria's political independence—free trade among the regions, free competition, and free association—was denied by reason of what they represented. And in an existence permanently suffused with struggle, the survival of a group whom the chain of generations links inextricably with its ancestors as well as with its descendants, is not a minuscule event. Back home in the Igbo homeland, the Igbo leaders strove to redirect the psychic energies of a public disoriented by the rise of nationalism and mass society towards their perceived tribal duty and primeval custom. For they appeared to have realized that, as William Dean Howard wrote in the 1890s “. . . the struggle for life has changed from a free fight to an encounter of disciplined forces and the free fighters that are left get ground to pieces.”<sup>5</sup> Thus to strengthen the inner cohesion of their kith and kin, both at home and abroad, the Igbo leaders, apparently overcome by nostalgic atavism, resorted to the ancient practice of village square meetings. At these meetings matters affecting the security and welfare of the community were fully discussed. And since it was becoming apparent that the existing political order might break down with consequent social strife, several traditional modes of information communication were revived. Significant among them were the following:

#### *(a) The Wooden Drum*

There are several varieties of wooden drums: there is the *Ikoro* (a large hollow trunk of a tree) which is kept in the village square and beaten only in time of dire emergency, usually by a person versed in its reverberating intricacies. Its sound can reach a distance of up to twenty kilometers. Anyone hearing the sound of *Ikoro* will usually rush to the village square to enquire about what is happening.

A second variety of wooden drum is called *ekwe*; it is similar to *ikoro* but much smaller in size. It is used to summon male members of the community to a meeting or, depending upon its sound, to announce the presence of strangers in the community.

*(b) Town Criers*

Every Igbo village has one or two criers, depending upon its size. The town crier goes round the village, usually late at night and early in the morning, to shout his message. He usually draws the attention of the people by beating a hollow metal gong known as *ogele*; once the shrill sound of the gong pierces the still night, the community listens for the coming message.

*(c) Burn Fire.*

The use of burn fire was particularly frequent during the civil war period. A community would build a small hut on a prominence (such as a hill top) in which combustible material, such as dried wood or grass, was packed. The hut was set alight and allowed to burn freely in a time of emergency. To ensure that the correct message was transmitted, two devices were adopted: the first allowed the fire to burn freely, the red flame showing up against the night sky. This would signify that enemies were right in the village and that every able-bodied person must arm oneself and report immediately to the village square.

The second was that the red flame was stifled, usually with green leaves which allowed only the smoke to be visible. This would signify the presence of danger some distance away from the community. An immediate response would not be required but everybody must be on guard. The hut was usually rebuilt the next morning.

*(d) Egbe Cham (Den Gun)*

*Egbe Cham* is used for only one purpose—war. When a village council deems it necessary to take a warlike measure, even if it is in time of peace, it authorizes a town crier to declare a state of emergency. This is done by firing from a tree top a locally constructed fire arm loaded with smokey gunpowder. The young men's response is usually immediate—they arm themselves and report at the village square for emergency service.

*(e) The Talking Drum*

The "talking" drum is a hollow wooden construction, one end of which is sealed with animal skin. It is used only in ceremonial occasions. A significant aspect of the drum is that it can describe vividly an event that either took place or is about to take place without the drummer uttering a word. It is particularly useful in a mixed audience where the drummer

does not want everyone to share his message. In such an audience speeches are made by employing elaborate forms of Igbo proverb.<sup>6</sup> Among the Igbo, maturity is measured by the ability to communicate with proverbs and the excessive directness of speech is regarded as ineptitude in the use of words.

It should be emphasized that these modes of information dissemination are effective mainly in the village, that is, among peasant populations with deep kinship ties from generations of inbreeding. In the pre-civil war years, this was largely the case with the Igbo in Nigeria. It was thus relatively easy for the Igbo using their traditional information dissemination methods to warn their members of impending danger and even to organize the mass evacuation of women and children from threatened zones. So complete in some cases were the evacuations that advancing federal forces, on entering an Igbo village, experienced a block about accepting the evidence of their own senses. This success led to calls for the revival of Igbo culture in the information sphere.

### **Cultural Revitalization**

In January 1970 the war ended the way it started, almost abruptly. There was a general relief that the country was once again united, but this feeling of unity was only an illusion. The old contradictions survived behind the image of a people reconciled. A welter of motives underlay the surge of rejoicing, personal, and patriotic wishful thinking; revolutionary impulses, antisocial rebellions, dreams of hegemony, and always, the yearning of adventurous spirits to break out of the routine of the prevailing social order.

It was at this time that Joel Anyim<sup>7</sup> published his seminal paper in which he called for a fundamental review of library practice in a transitional society such as that of the Igbo. He argued that a librarian could no longer stand before the people, giving them mathematically and logically impregnable postulates about the methods of information gathering, analysis, storage, and dissemination without taking into account the material needs of his clientele. In an apparent reference to the civil war, Anyim argued that recent history had shown that the Igbo could only overcome the machinations of their enemy by recourse to their traditional modes of information dissemination. He did not advocate scrapping librarianship altogether; he only called for fundamental shifts in key areas of library practice so that the profession would be sufficiently mindful of the susceptibilities of the final information consumer. Calling for a remodelling of the library in the pattern of the village square, Anyim declared: "I consider it very wrong to run our libraries as if our clientele were a reading public."<sup>8</sup>

Soon Anyim's words were echoed by other cultural revitalization librarians who were quick to remind their readers of the recent achievements of the traditional Igbo information system. Adolphe Amadi, for instance, called on Igbo leaders not to allow their culture and idealism in the information sphere to succumb to the united materialism of Europe and America.<sup>9</sup> Iwuji reminded his readers that western librarianship tended to cut the individual off from social and cultural bearing,<sup>10</sup> and an Anglican minister attacked those who thought that social problems could be solved by books, books, and more books as "men to whom books had become a substitute deity in a secularized amoral world."<sup>11</sup>

### Reactions

Shortly after the publication of Anyim's paper, there were reverberations from all strata of society. There were strong reactions from both Igbo and non-Igbo intellectuals. The recently established *New Nigerian* newspaper referred to it as "the bombast of an intellectual who is all too conscious of his impotence."<sup>12</sup> *The Daily Times*, in an acrid editorial comment concluded that Anyim's attack on Western Librarianship "exemplified the lack of grip upon reality characteristic of socially alienated intellectuals."<sup>13</sup> Even the maverick Marxist sociologist, Ikenna Nzimiro, who bestraddled the traditional and the modern, thought that cultural revitalization librarianship "reflected the more diseased side of the Igbo psyche."<sup>14</sup> The public bewilderment was articulated in the *New Nigerian* of 6 August 1972, which described Anyim, with an acuteness born of hatred, as "a gushing advocate of the irrational with an obsession about culture and idealism."<sup>15</sup>

The questions that naturally come to mind are: Why is it that Joel Anyim, who absorbed librarianship, and formal Western education generally, with the eagerness of a suffocating man breathing oxygen, advocated the traditional mode of information dissemination system so readily? How was it that the Igbo scholars who were distinguished by their wealth of tactical ideas and optimistic attitude so easily became atavistic in the information sphere?

Answers to these questions must be sought from the prevailing tendencies at the time. The spirit of a time is larger than any philosophy. Only a mind that has learned nothing from the misfortunes of those times will fail to recognize that a powerful tendency of the age culminated in Anyim, a tendency that dominated the library profession in Nigeria during the seventies. It is also clear that Anyim had been by no means without his share of the small disappointments and humiliations so often experienced by men of letters who, elated by provincial

applause, venture to display their powers before the fastidious critics of a larger city. For he had acquired a high local reputation for eloquence and literature just before he moved to the former temporary capital of Biafra. Perhaps the origins of the cultural revitalization movement in the emotions of a disappointed people were all too apparent. For the first time the Igbo as an ethnic entity had a glimpse of what awaited it; the basic pessimism of the elite minority had become the mood of the entire community. But the real tragedy of the cultural revitalization movement is that its cultural insight was so much larger than its professional intelligence. Within their hearts, conservatively oriented librarians, deeply entangled in their romantic backwardness, fought a hopeless struggle with the present. One can also add that the Igbo acquiescence to cultural revitalization in the library sphere reflected the inconsistencies of thought and action forced on all people by a time of rapid social change.

## **Conclusion**

The gifted historian of ideas, A.O. Lovejoy, astutely observed that every idea is associated with, or generates, a set of sentiments which those subscribing to the idea could only dimly sense. Lovejoy called this "the metaphysical pathos of ideas," a pathos which is exemplified in any description of the nature of things, any characterization of the world to which one belongs, in terms which, like the words of a poem, evoke through their associations and through a sort of empathy which they engender, a congenial mood or tone of feeling.

As a result, a commitment to an idea often occurs by a process other than the one which its proponents believe, and it is usually more consequential than they realize. A commitment to an idea may be made because the idea is congruent with the mood or deep sentiments of its adherents, rather than because it has been cerebrally inspected and found valid. This is as true for the rigorous analysis of library and information science as it is for the more lucid metaphor of fictive literature, for each has its own silent appeal and its own metaphysical pathos.

Furthermore, those who have committed themselves to an idea almost always get more than they have bargained for. We do not make a commercial contract with an idea in which we agree to accept only the consignment of intellectual goods which has been expressly ordered; usually we also take the metaphysical pathos in which the idea comes packaged. In the end, the idea reinforces or induces in its adherent a subtle alteration in the structure of sentiments through which the world is viewed.

So, too, it is with the idea of traditional culture. Paradoxically, some of the very ideas which promise to make traditional information systems

more intelligible and more amenable to their cultural environment are infused with an intangible metaphysical pathos which insinuates, even in the very midst of new discoveries in information science, that all is lost. For the metaphysical pathos of much of the traditional information system is that of pessimism and fatalism.

It is the pathos of pessimism, rather than the compulsion of rigorous analysis, that leads to the assumption that western librarianship has stacked the deck against traditional culture. Wrapping themselves in the shrouds of pre-colonial Africa, some culturally sensitive librarians appear to be bent on resurrecting a dismal era. Instead of telling us how modern information systems might be made to accommodate traditional cultural values, they blame colonialism. Instead of explaining how librarians can be eclectic in their approach to transitional societies, they paint a rosy glow of nostalgia. Instead of helping to cure the disease of underdevelopment in the information sphere, they suggest that we are deluded, or more politely, incurably romantic, for hoping to control it. And instead of assuming responsibility as realistic information clinicians, by striving to further western information potentialities in transitional societies, many African librarians have become morticians, all too eager to bury one's hopes.

Those to whom cultural revitalization librarianship appealed were people with a strong but directionless craving for a return to the glorious past. They scarcely understood, or misread, the new anti-traditional codes of value, new social forces rising from the bottom of African society.

Their doctrine of a minimum dose of westernization was bound to fail because it flew in the face of a truth to which anti-colonial, conservatively oriented librarians were blind; this truth was that any civilization, any way of life, is an indivisible whole in which all the parts are bound together and are interdependent. The secret of the success of librarianship and information science in the West cannot be found without also taking into account the whole mind and soul of the Western society of the day. The truth is that Western librarianship has always been one facet of the Western way of life. Hence an alien society that tries to acquire the art without also attempting to live the life is bound to fail to master the art. Conversely, an Igbo, a Yoruba, or a Fulani who did succeed professionally up to the normal Western standard could achieve this only by acquiring much more of the Western civilization than was to be found in textbooks and newspapers. It is the failure to appreciate this principle that has given the cultural revitalization movement its particularly distressing note. Anyim, as has been pointed out earlier, was distinguished by a wealth of tactical ideas and optimistic attitude, yet he had the misfortune to be on the side which later Nigerian library historians

were to judge the wrong one, certainly the losing one. Intellectual fashions change, and perhaps, who knows, their time may come again.

## Notes

1. Alex Inkeles and David H. Smith, *Becoming Modern: Individual Change in Six Developing Countries* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 5.
2. Amusi Odi, "Library and Information Dissemination in a Traditional Society: The Igbo of Eastern Nigeria." *International Information and Library Review*, 25 (1993): 1-9.
3. Simon Ottenberg quoted in *The West African Pilot*, 2 Sept. 1973, 5.
4. E.V. Waters, "Dreadful Enclosures: Detoxifying an Urban Myth," in Peter Worsley, ed., *Problems of Modern Society: A Sociological Perspective*, 2nd. ed., (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1981), 141.
5. Quoted by C. Wright Mills, *The White Collar Takes Over in Windows On the Past* (New York, Society of American Historians, 1953), 128.
6. For a systematic documentation of this procedure, see Angela N. Alimole, "Information Dissemination in Local Government Areas: A case of Ahiazu Local Government," (Okigwe, Imo State University, School of Social Sciences), unpublished undergraduate project in library and information science, (Aug. 1987).
7. Joel C. Anyim; "Public Libraries as Cultural Centres," *Nigerian Libraries*, 8 (1972): 16-19.
8. *Ibid.*, 16.
9. Adolphe O. Amadi; *African Libraries, Western Tradition and Colonial Brainwashing* (London, Scarecrow, 1981).
10. H.O.M. Iwuji, "Librarianship in a Non-Literary Society," paper presented at the Library Week of the Library Science Students Association (Imo State University, Okigwe, 1984).
11. Rev. G. Kalu; "Libraries, Culture and Social Development," paper presented at the Library Week of the Library Science Students Association (Imo State University, Okigwe, 1984).
12. *New Nigerian*, Editorial Comment, (12 June 1972), 2.
13. *Daily Times* (18 June 1974), 6.
14. Ikenna Nzimiro, "Public Library and our National Development," *Morning Post* (2 Aug. 1974), 7.
15. *New Nigerian* (6 Aug. 1972), 3.