ENVIRON-MENTALITY: A CRITICAL DIMENSION TO URBANISATION IN IGBOLAND

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Abstract

Human communities are marked out by well-defined characteristics and practices that develop as humans adapt to their physical and social environments. These characteristics, having been built over time reinforce the totality of human existence and survival. Igbo people represent an ethnic group living predominantly in southeastern Nigeria. Igboland is such a society with strong cultural characteristics that make them easily distinguishable from their neighbours. Made up of such sub-groups as families, kindreds, villages, and clans, the people are marked out with variations in clothing, art, religious practices, rituals, folklore, festivals and a strong sense of kinship. Igbo people are also highly mobile, mixing easily with new cultures and environments. With culture-contact and increasing civilisation, many of their large villages and clans began to develop into cities. And today, urbanization has also come at great costs to the Igbo people. In urbanization, the Igbo have lost a lot of the serenity of rural life, agricultural practices, rituals, festivals, folklife and above all, their communalistic spirit. In urbanization, there is a near total disconnect between the individual and the community as well as the environment as everybody is locked in a personal challenge to work for survival. This paper, adopting approaches that are conceptual and contextual attempts to urge for environ-mentality – that is, a consciousness of the physical and social environment, in spite of the changes brought about by urbanization. "Environ-Mentality" as consciously hyphenated, goes to explain the precise and interpreted demarcations that directly determine the surrounding intelligible interactions that define man's environment and mentality. This paper maintains that to avoid a complete loss of identity, the Igbo, in his existential engagement with the world (city) must strive for authenticity even in the presence of continuous change, that is, as a relation to the group and society.

Introduction

The concept of a people could be said to represent a group of largely homogenous individuals marked out by race, geography, common language and

culture. To be a people, the group almost always have to be predominantly associated with a particular geographical location, almost always sharing a common descent, although, some have the attribute of being very receptive to visitors. When these people are predominantly located at a particular place, the develop ways of life and living adaptable to their environment. These ways of life and living, over time, become tradition and also condition their environment. Considering that tradition is entrenched, it is almost always disruptive to change it; yet, change is inevitable. This change could come with greater civilisation, culture contact and/or urbanization.

The Igbo people represent one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria located mainly in the South-eastern part of Nigeria. The people could also be said to be migratory in nature, travelling far and wide almost to all nooks and crannies of the world and settling in different parts as they travel, while maintaining strong links to their roots with the communal home. *Ndigbo* prides themselves as a people rich in culture and tradition. As O'Neil (2002) points out, there are forces within a society that bring about change in culture and there are also forces that work to resist this change. For the Igbo people, these forces can be seen from three perspectives: forces within the society; forces from outside the society, and forces resulting from changes in environment. Osuji (1998) admits that:

> It must be said that just like every other culture and tradition, some of these practices have been watered down by incursion of western education… this factor is evident by the fact that Igbo as a traveling people become influenced by other people's cultural and traditional practices….

In the same light, Okere (2007) laments:

> Cultures are indeed all in flux. In whole or in part, Igbo culture has undergone a lot of dramatic and even drastic changes. Much has

happened and changed between the Igbo society of the mid 1800s described by Olaudah Equino and the present day Igbo society in which we live. Between the sustained brutalization wrought by the Slave Trade for nearly four hundred years, the political And social upheavals caused by European wars of conquest, military occupation and colonization and the frontal assault that Christian evangelization made on traditional religion, psychology and worldview and perhaps as fatally, the bitter ordeal of having to negotiate a survival compromise within the love hate environment of Nigeria, Igbo culture, while remaining itself, has undergone a sea of change.

Mostly prior to the political creation of Nigeria in which the Igbo people became members and still true to their character today, much of Igbo traditional living and attributes is still conditioned by their worldview. This worldview Nwala (1987: p. 28) would describe as "The Igbo complex of beliefs, habits, laws, custom and traditional spirituality as it is believed that the physical si controlled by the spiritual, hence there is a strong attachment to nature - in the fellow man and in the environment.

Traditional Igbo World

The Igbo people are the largest ethnic group in south-eastern Nigeria. They are a people fundamentally marked out by their communitarian and republican spirit. The traditional social organisation is arranged in families, kindreds, villages and clans and leadership is traditionally conferred on the first son or the eldest member of the particular level. With the advent of colonialisam, towns and cities began to emerge and chiefs are now appointed to head localities. Other forms of social control in Igboland include the men's societies, age-grades, masquerades, women groups, *Umu-ada* (daughters of the land even though already married out)among others. There are also societies that are there to confer titles to individuals to designate social prestige and status. One of such societies is the *Ọzọ*, whichutilise various titles and awards to

symbolize wealth, generosity, strength, intellect and moral integrity. The compound of a member of the *Ọzọ* institution has decorated doorways to indicate his membership and an obi, a shrine devoted to the ancestors of the head of the compound. Images carved into the portals include the *Ọzọ* staff, kola nut tray, knife and python and abstract motifs such as a lozenge and star. The lozenge represents the kola nut bowl, a symbol of hospitality and the star represents the head of the kola nut, a symbol of the ritual and social value of the kola.

A lot has been written both by Igbo and non-Igbo scholars in the arduous effort to chronicle the migration and settlements of the Igbo people (see Basden, 1966; Uchendu, 1965; Isichei, 1976; Afigbo, 1981; Osuchuwku, 1995; Orji, 1999). However, it is important to point out here that *Ndigbo* have a very rich cultural heritage that has blossomed over the years. The people are very resilient, hardworking, peace-loving, industrious and adventurous. The cardinal place accorded to yam in Igbo oral and literary sources cannot be appreciated without a survey of the *habitat* of the *Ndigbo*. Onwuejeogwu, (1981) writes that romanticized by exotic legends and chronicled in European travel diaries, Igboland, the birth place of many of Nigeria's ancient traditions and civilizations, is a region blessed with vibrant communities well recognized for their diverse physical and cultural traits, artistic creations, religious festivities and philosophies of life.

Like all other sub-Saharan Africans, *Ndigbo* have dense religious traditions. The feeling of the sacred is quite a ubiquitous experience in Igboland. Obiora and Edozien (2001) have succinctly captured the situation. They state that:

> The existence of the divine Being and the invincible spirit world is
> natural to them, and it seems obvious that this Being should have his

mysteries because he surpasses human beings and the capacity for human reason. Religion imbues all of life and there is no split between faith and daily living. There is a great openness to mystery. The Igbo do not demarcate between a strictly material, sensual world and a purely spiritual world. In stark contrast to the dualism present in Greek antiquity and Western philosophy, the Igbo view life as a continuum that extends beyond the demise of the material self.

In Igboland, religion, with its traditional symbols and beliefs, affects all departments of life "without positing any division between the sacred and the profane". The wrath of the gods is held in awe. Evil forests abound and are considered the abode of dangerous spirits, of malignant deities, and of marauding ghosts of wicked persons who have recently died. Such forests have something uncanny and eerie about them, and are not cultivated for yam planting. In many Igbo communities, people do not wander into such forests.

Thus, for the Igbo, a religious perception of reality creates a sense of unity in life and directs every activity of an Igbo man or woman to the promotion and protection of ethical principles in the interest of the common good. In the traditional setting, there existed no possibility of a bifurcation between life and religion.

However, over the years, most of the rich cultural practices of *Ndigbo* have been eroded by external forces and foreign influences. Their villages and communities have become urbanized with the attendant population increase, entrepreneurship promoting individualism, commercialization and the pursuit of profit, urban housing and the distortion of the natural environment, the demise of traditional religion and ritual, erosion of the communalistic spirit and the enthronement of a political culture of winner-takes-it-all and the attendant violence

Urbanization in Igboland

Igbo people lived in their families and villages when the Whiteman arrived the place. The Igbo did not have kingdoms like the Yoruba or the Emirates like the Hausa-Fulani. In their families and villages, communalisam and republicanism was the way of life. In decision making, everybody was involved with the eldest man in the family at the head. In family matters, it was about the household and not about the individual. In economic matters, all hands must be on deck in the farms and the larger the family, the larger the expected harvest. Even sometimes punishment is taken collectively. Although, there cases in which the individual achievement is celebrated, it is still a celebration for the whole community.

The Igbo world was inclusive and highly integrated. It was a world where happiness and pain were collectively shared. The families and communities were linked by inter-marriages. The community responded together when threatened. There was a traditional sense of universal brotherhood. There are a lot of traditional Igbo proverbs that highlight this communitarian spirit. For example: *giriwuugwueze* (the respect of the leader – king, lies in the collective support of his people). *Umunna wuike* (Your kinsmen are your constant strength and support).

The Igbo people are not only hospitable, but they are very receptive to foreigners. So they welcomed the earliest missionaries that came to them. The missionaries brought with them Western ideas of governance, churches and schools. These elements did a lot to change the landscape of Igboland. In governance, people presented themselves and even lobbied to be made chiefs; in the churches, individuals highlighted their quicker acquisition of Western ways of worship and so were made catechists and church teachers with the attendant privileges and superiority complex.

In the jostle for all these, individual competition was introduced into the peoples' way of life.

Beyond that, what used to be small villages became opened up and with time, became cities and towns. The presence of the churches and schools attracted increased population; and with other personal economic activities emerging, there was almost a complete transformation of the environment. In this village-turned cities and towns, there is an ever-increasing population and an ever-increasing emergence of individual striving and industry. With this came a huge disconnection between the individual and his environment. In this newly urbanized setting, everything was about the individual. In defining themselves based on what they have or possess, human persons eventually reduced themselves into objects as "functional agents, welfare units, cannon fodder, party members, anything that is abstract and definable rather than human beings" (LangmeadCasserley, 1956: p.90). Marcel would agree with this impact of modern civilization when he states that: There is only one suffering: to be alone.This anguish comes out of the experience of alienation which inevitably implies a hunger for relationship (see Reinhardt, 1952: p. 203).

The Erosion of Igbo communalism by Urbanisation

As been stated earlier and like most other sub-groups of sub-Saharan Africa, the Igbo have a dense worldview,' a worldview steep in religious beliefs and practices, coloured by beautiful arts and culture, executed through ritual and marked out by the people's unique sense of oneness in communalism. This may be what Horowitze (1998) means when he writes that ethnic groups are inscriptive firmly

bound entities based on a strong sense of community, producing considerable capacity, persisting over time, providing large affective rewards to group members.

Igbo land was a close-knit society where play was communal, food was communal, work was communal, war was communal and others. As a matter of fact, almost all aspects of life was communal. This communal spirit was captured in proverbs and idioms of the Igbo people. For example, there is a proverb which says; *umunnawuike* (one's kinsmen are one's stronghold) in this, the Igbo believe that once an individual is isolated from his or her kins, the one is completely left exposed. Thus, every individual isasupposed to work hard to maintain the communal spirit in order to ensure community survival and even to achieve personal fulfillment.

Another proverb which depict the Igbo sense of communal strength is *girigiriwuugwueze* (the strength of the leader lies in the collective support of his people). In the Igbo world, no one can afford to stand alone. Meanwhile, the people are so difficult to lead because of also their republican nature. Everybody has a say and your strength as a leader is tested by your ability to give everybody a voice and as such is able to draw on their support. If the supposed leader who naturally is the first son or the eldest male around, is not able to generate this kind of harmony, his place is thwarted. Thus, the leader is always the rallying point of the community. He must always try to maintain this communal strength because if he fails, the whole community will be in disarray.

A scene in the internationally acclaimed and award-winning novel – *Things Fall Apart,* written by the legendary Chinua Achebe clearly depicts this. In chapter ----, Okonkwo returned from exile to which he was banished after he accidentally

killed his kinsman at the funeral. Recall that Okonkwo was a natural leader of the Umuofia people, a role he won through his prowess in inter-communal warfare and wrestling challenges during which he brought honour to his people. Okonkwo was at the time a rallying point for Umuofia people. But by the time, he came back from exile, he did not know that a lot of things have changed in Umuofia. The Whiteman had come, citing Obierika, "with his …" (Achebe, 1969: p.)

At the first confrontation and provocation, Okonkwo thinking that things were still as they were, struck the Whiteman and killed him hoping that his people could rally round him, but to his greatest dismay, they deserted him, and he had no option than to commit suicide. That is how strong communal solidarity was perceived among the Igbo until its erosion.

One of the first instruments for the erosion of the communalistic spirit of the Igbo came with the British implementation of native administration in Nigeria. Drawing from the experiences in northern Nigeria, where there were already developed and functional emirates as strong administrative units, and the western Nigeria where there were chiefdoms, the British broke Igboland into "Native Court Areas". Madubuike (2012; p.11) writes that British District Officers presided over such courts by the help of 'Warrant Chiefs.' These warrant chiefs constituted 'Native Authority.' These warrant offices as headquarters of the native authority began to attract increased number of people who came for one reason or the other. Eventually, these centres became towns and cities with increased population and thus, became urban settlements.

Urbanization then went on to break apart the elements of Igbo communal life. Individual became enthroned and the people Were disconnected from among themselves and from nature. Other factors also began to lead to the expansion of other villages into towns and cities. In the same way, the gap between individuals continued to increase. These factors include: the availability of job opportunities, commerce and trade as well as technology. Today, in most of these urban cities, everybody is now working and striving to outwit the other in pursuit of personal possession and self recognition. Technology has worsened the situation by keeping individuals isolated from their immediate environment while in good grip with the outside world. Baraceros, (2012: p.21) a Filipina columnist, graphically describes:

> Totally absorbed by the sound of their iPod or Mp3s or engrossed in building connections with somebody somewhere through their cell phones, they become oblivious to their surroundings. They regard as essential only those projected in their technological gadgets; un-essential, are those not sensed by them via their computers or cell phones ... Making these people seem isolated and holed up in their comfort zones with their digital gadgets intact. *Technology breeds citizens who tend to be complacent, individualistic, oblivious, oruncaring.*

The communal spirit is gone. However, Marcel would emphasize the role of interpersonal relationships and of community in the understanding of various modes of human experience. Despite the current problematic state of human affairs, deep within each person's heart exists an irrepressible dissatisfaction and emptiness, and an inward protest that they are not merely a network of things, functions and events (see Hanley, 2006: p.461). These changes should not have been allowed to happen without an "environ-mentality."

The Need for Environ-Mentality

The term "Environmentality" is widely associated with Arun Agnawal, who is acclaimed to have invented the term in his book – *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the making of Subjects* (2005). Agnawal, from studying villages of the Kumaon region in Northern India, traces how these rural communities came to be willing and active agents of decentralized environmental regulation and to embrace principles of forest conservation. Agnawal concluded that by dispersing power, knowledge and regulation, thereby creating more "intimate forms of regulation," changes can be brought about in the way people understand their place and actions in relation to the environment.

However, the term "Environ-Mentality" as consciously hyphenated here can only be associated with J. I. Okonkwo who in an article titled "Environ-Mentality: Heidegger's Relation Worldhood in 'Being and Time' Revisited" (2008) drew from Heidegger's mordial dimensions of the *Existentiell* and Existential, to explain the precise and interpreted demarcations that directly determine the surrounding intelligible interactions that define *Dasein*'s (man's) environment and mentality. Heidegger in his *magnum opus*, *Being and Time* (1962) had been preoccupied with the interrogation of the Being of entities that are bound-up in a relational world-hood. Okonkwo (2008) explains that it is man in his concrete here and now, his existential nature and life that is in question.

Dasein's relational-mentality is existential when explicitly interpreted as an engagement, that is, as a relation to the world and then ontologically as the authentic form. It is *Existentiell* when *Dasein* (man) is ontically interpreted to be inauthentic and

only in terms of thinghood. Okonkwo (2008) avers further that these precise and interrelated demarcation directly determine the surrounding intelligible interactions that define *Dasein*'s (man's) environment and mentality which is worldhood.

Environ-mentality here demands a constant consciousness for one's environment. There is no way one can be isolated from his or her environment because the wellbeing of that environment to a large extent determines the wellbeing of the individual. The environment here comprises the other individual(s), the culture and values of the place, the physical environment that provides natural shades, food and medicine, as well as all other elements of nature in that environment. In Igboland, there is a proverb which says: that *ngweregbawaoso hara ugwuosisi aka akparaya* (if the lizard, in a bid to escape from being caught, abandons the foot of the next available tree, then it shall surely be caught). The "group" in Igboland is a very important source of strength and of wellbeing. No Igbo person can afford to abandon the community. However, urbanization has broken the chord of communalism in Igboland. There is serious need for the people to return to environ-mentality. There is a need to return to a feeling of oneness and participation in order to achieve authentic progress.

Conclusion

It is widely acknowledged that change must happen. However, when it concerns a people's way of life, it is important that the process of change is controlled. This is because in many cases of uncontrolled change, identity has been lost. With the increasing loss of cultural identities, in no distant time, the world would be talking about indigenous societies only in past tense.

To this effect, there is need for environ-mental consciousness. The people must be conscious to preserve, sustain and regenerate those core values that mark them out as a people. They have to continue to sustain those elements of worldview and worldhood that give them a positive identity. The Igbo must continue to promote communalism even today that the global trend is greater integration and inclusion. The Igbo must realize that if they build cities on the blocks of individual achievement, then the wider community will suffer. This trend can only go to fulfill the proverb that says: *eghuoha new naanwunaaguru* (the goat that is communally owned often dies of hunger). When everybody pursues personal interest, that which is communally owned would definitely Suffer. This does not speak well of the Igbo who are globally renowned for their communal prowess.

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