

Re-Examining the Food Security Paradigm in Traditional Igbo Communalist Economy as a Model to tackle Food Crisis in Eastern Nigeria

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Abstract

In the traditional Igbo communalist economy, there existed a socio-ethical mechanism which ensured that no one begged for food and that there was enough food to keep the community going at all times. It was an agrarian economy dominated by a single product (Yam), yet there were other products which were systematically placed within the agrarian calendar to ensure the availability of food all year round. The combination of farming system, egalitarian and competitive economy and pervasive religious principles ensured that there was enough food to circulate among inhabitants, encouraged start-ups, incited investment for the benefits of aristocrats and offered opportunities to the poor to invest. This work re-examines the communalist socio-economic system of the traditional Igbo society which includes the system of agriculture, the social drivers of the economy and the religious symbols/demands on the people. It is a multidisciplinary research work which brings Agriculture, Economics, Philosophy and Religion to scrutinize a system gradually being overtaken by a capitalist economy but did not build on it. The work is an ethnographic study which aims at gleaning possible socio-ethical and subsistent farming techniques which can still work in the present economy to ensure food security among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria. The work is a qualitative study which sourced data from existing literatures, applied contextual analysis and active participatory experiences of individual contributors.

Keywords: Examination; Food Security; Paradigm; Traditional; Communalist Economy.

Introduction

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in its 1996 food summit had described food security this way: “Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” (UNFAO, 2008) Global food crisis and

insecurity at the heels of COVID-19 pandemic has recently been heightened by the Russian war on Ukraine. These two events within the pre-existent global condition of climate change and greenhouse emission have made food insecurity one of the central themes in socio-economic discussions. According to a recent World Bank release:

Domestic food price inflation remains high around the world. Information from the latest month between December 2022 and March 2023 for which food price inflation data are available shows high inflation in almost all low- and middle-income countries, with inflation levels greater than 5% in 70.6% of low-income countries, 90.9% of lower-middle-income countries, and 87.0% of upper-middle-income countries and many experiencing double-digit inflation. In addition, 84.2% of high-income countries are experiencing high food price inflation. The most-affected countries are in Africa, North America, Latin America, South Asia, Europe, and Central Asia.¹

The report immediately shows the capitalist culture which generated it and the place of monetary transaction at its very core; a capitalist economy which has almost eclipsed the former communalist economy among the Igbo. According to Allan McPhee, the transition from a communalist to a capitalist economy in West Africa was necessitated by the needs of colonialists in Europe, which colonies provided in exchange for cheap materials or meagre finances.² More than the statistical accuracy and dependability of data, this research rather concerns itself with the socio-economic culture which made the food scarcity possible in the first place. That culture is capitalism/individualism which the work weighed against the former agrarian communalist culture prevalent in eastern Nigeria of pre-colonial times.

Meanwhile the global conditions which affected the availability of food highlighted above got more complicated with the excessive flooding experienced in the Igbo region in 2022, especially in Anambra State which is the location of this research. In a report filled by Michael Olugbode for *This Day Newspaper*, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Nigeria, Mathias Schmalewas quoted as saying:

In Anambra, I saw huge fields of damaged crops, a situation mirrored across the county, where over 108,000 hectares of farms have been destroyed or damaged by floods ahead of the October harvest season. “The damage to staple foods such as cassava, rice, and plantain among other crops risks aggravating the already

¹WORLD BANK REPORT. “Food Security Update/World Bank Response to Rising Food Insecurity”. *The World Bank*, April 24, 2023,

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-update>. Accessed May 5, 2023

²ALLAN MCPHEE. *The Economic Revolution in British West Africa*, London: Frank Cass, 1971, p.9.

alarming food and nutrition crisis across Nigeria. Before the floods, an estimated 19.5 million people were considered food insecure.³

Anambra State is one of the five states of Southeastern Nigeria in the current geopolitical zones arrangement. This statement underscores the fact that food insecurity is a genuine concern in the Eastern part of Nigeria now more than ever. However, the work was conducted in three communities, Amesi, Akpo and Achina which are autonomous communities in Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. The three communities are of the Eri-Igbo tradition, they trace a common ancestry to Ora-Eri and enjoy a homogeneous Igbo dialect, culture and tradition. Amesi was known for its proficiency in traditional medicine practices, Akpo was known for its invincible military and physicality, Achina was known for its doggedness and congenial hospitality. Nevertheless, these peculiarities thrived in a cultural homogeneity, an agrarian economy and socio-religious ethos dominated by yam and spirits.

This work adopts the indices for the evaluation of food security as offered by the World Bank which also gave four dimensions of food security worthy of note: physical availability, physical access, food utilization and stability/sustainability of the three. The research observes that food security cannot be 100% assured in a capitalist economy in as much as the system sustains a culture of accumulation of surplus value as criterion of class distinctions based on the stockpiling of excess wealth. The work went ahead to locate a paradigm in the Igbo culture which has the potential of assuring food security and eliminating non-availability of food anxiety in all circumstances. In line with this truth, Korieh (2006) had observed:

Throughout most of the early parts of the twentieth century, there were relatively very few individuals with large-scale capital accumulation. In comparative terms, people met their subsistence needs with less difficulty in the colonial and early post-independence period than in the later periods....⁴

The period under Korieh's review was already mired in the aggressive socio-economic change. This research accepts the hypothesis that in as much as the absence of large-scale capital accumulation was an integral part of the former communalist economy, that absence

³MICHAEL OLUGBODE. "UN: Flooding in Nigeria to Increase Food Insecurity for over 19.5 Million People" *This Day*, November 5, 2022, <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/11/02/un-flooding-in-nigeria-to-increase-food-insecurity-for-over-19-5-million-people/>. Accessed February 10, 2023.

⁴CHIMA J. KORIEH. "Voices from within and without: Sources, Methods, and Problematics in the Recovery of the Agrarian History of the Igbo (Southeastern Nigeria)". *History in Africa*, Vol. 33, p. 239.

was consequent upon an immemorial ethos and it was also a cultural ethos that could work with any economic system.

The predominant ethnic group in eastern Nigeria is the Igbo; majority of the southeastern Nigeria population are Igbo. The Igbo also understand that area of the country to be their ancestral home from immemorial times. In the current geopolitical division of Nigeria, five states are lumped together as Southeast (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo). It is also the Igbo language which dominates these areas. However, the Igbo constitute more than 25% of the populations of Delta and Rivers States, and can also be found in good numbers in Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom and Cross Rivers States with a significant number in Cameroun and Equatorial Guinea. It is an ethical element in the socio-religious culture of the Igbo that this work chose as a paradigm for food security. Wherever the Igbo is found, they uphold this value which capitalism has evidently minimized.

The researchers traversed the rich deposits of Igbo socio-religious culture and re-evaluated ancient practices in food preservation, distribution and sharing. The work delved into the *raison d'être* of such practices and found that the ancient Igbo envisaged downturns in the economy, which could be natural or artificial, and evolved means of dealing with them. For the common folk in the race, those practices were of a religious-ethical nature which one was constrained to observe both for preventing the negative consequences of breach inflicted by the spirits and ancestors as well as for the consequent favours accruable from the same spiritual agents for merely observing those ethical demands as rituals. Ultimately, the essence of traditional society was conviviality and the mutual coexistence of all and sundry, knowing that their together-existence is the very definition of being.

The researchers experienced some surviving aspects of that socio-religious culture in a capitalist economy growing up among peasants in the interior of eastern Nigeria. Going back to that environment as researchers after more than three decades of being away, they found that things have changed. The capitalist ethos has taken center stage and the accumulation of surplus value, especially for its own sake, has overtaken the former accumulation for the sustenance of the community. The result is that more people present as hungry, more vulnerable to societal ills and more susceptible to diseases. The former Igbo community of Olaudah Equiano where he bragged no beggar existed has long deteriorated into an environment where begging has become stock-in-trade for many:

Agriculture is our chief employment; and everyone, even the children and women, are engaged in it. Thus, we are all habituated to labor from our earliest years.

Everyone contributes something to the common stock; and, as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars.⁵

The work aimed at the possibility of reverting to the trend of Equiano's period by re-examining a traditional culture which ensured that the people may never become beggars. The work is a comparative ethnographic study, its method of collection of data was through oral interviews and participation in the current agricultural systems. The work also did contextual analysis of global realities and conditions of hunger and inflation to find the extent these have affected the ability of the rural populations to feed themselves. Existing literature were consulted to find collaborative evidences to the number of affirmations or negations made by this work. Finally, the conclusion followed through qualitative evaluation of food security in the two different socio-economic cultures and suggested a possible combination of the religious-ethical provisions of the former communalist economy and the pragmatic ideology of the current capitalist economy.

The Yam Economy in the Traditional Society of Eastern Nigeria

Yam is at the heart of the Igbo world. To discuss agriculture among the Igbo is to discuss Yam; the nuances of its value among the Igbo.⁶ It is not just food, it is also the ontological expression of life and one of the symbols of spirit-human coexistence of the Igbo universe.⁷ To a large extent, to discuss yam in the Igbo context, there will be need to traverse the Igbo human-spirit world. The myth of the origin of yam in Igbo culture⁸ and its connection to Ezenri underscores these points. To highlight the overarching significance of yam in the Igbo world, George Thomas Basden referred to yam as "the Igbo staff of life."⁹ Yam was also a capital asset in traditional Igbo agro-economy; it had the value of precious metals and its possession or otherwise was a criterion of measuring ones socio-economic class. Yam had a special place in the traditional Igbo ethical demands and is a reference in Igbo morality to the extent that the stealing of yam or its premature excavation/destruction in the farm is one of the foremost taboos among the Igbo.

⁵ROBERT J. ALLISON (ed). *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995, p. 39.

⁶CHIMA J. KORIEH. "Yam is King! But Cassava is the Mother of all Crops: Farming, Culture, and Identity in Igbo Agrarian Economy." *Dialectical Anthropology*, 31(1/3), 221–232.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29790779>, p.222.

⁷PIUS C. OKIGBO. *Towards a Reconstruction of the Political Economy of Igbo Civilization*. Owerri: Ministry of Information and Culture, 1986, p.4.

⁸METUH, E. I. *God and Man in African Religion*. Enugu: SNAAP Press, 1981, pp. 29-33.

⁹GEORGE THOMAS BASDEN. *Niger Ibos: A Description of the Primitive Life, Customs and Animistic Beliefs of the Ibo People of Nigeria by One Who, for Thirty-five Years, Enjoyed the Privilege of their Intimate Confidence and Friendship*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966, pp. 389-390.

Yam is the dominant product of the Igbo agro-economy and one staple food item among the Igbo. Yam is categorized as starchy vegetable and belongs to the *Dioscorea* genus with variety of species. The ones common among the Igbo are *Rotundata* (White yam), *Cayenensis* (Yellow yam), *Alata* (Water yam), *Dumentorum* (Bitter yam) and *Bulbifera* (air potato). Among these, there are also sub-species known very well in the Igbo yam lexicon. The cultivation of these demand varied soil types and variation in time.¹⁰ Among the Igbo, time is inspired by the movement of the solstices.¹¹ Yet time is reckoned by events in accordance with its nature and significance. Thus, the Igbo operates variety of time – cosmic time, mythical time, historical time, agricultural time, seasonal time, solar time, lunar time and so on.¹² The former agro-calendar of the Igbo people or agricultural time was formulated around the cultivation and harvest of yam which also respected those appropriate timing in the cultivation of its varieties.

For some Igbo communities, the year begins with the cultivation of yam, precisely the bigger tubers needed for the celebration of *Onwaasato* or *Ihejioku*, *Iwaji* festival also understood as major harvest. The celebration preceding that early cultivation of yam is called *Igu Afo* which may equate with the Jewish *Rosh HaShanah*. During the *Igu Afo* ceremony the *Ezenri* hands over to the representatives of the people some tubers of yam as part of the ritual.¹³ He instructs them to go plant them and blesses them for productivity and fruition. *Igu Afo* is an annual event in which meteorological prediction of the first rain is ritualized to basically prepare the people for the beginning of the agricultural year kick-started with the cultivation of yam. Perhaps it is *Igu Afo* which Olaudah Equiano referred to when he discussed the calculation of the year among the Igbo.¹⁴

Cassava, cocoyam, maize, melon, pumpkin, fluted pumpkin and other vegetables are often part of the Igbo mixed farming population,¹⁵ yet in reckoning the year and seasons, it was yam which serves as the main wheel, driving all other periods of the year into one harmonic time called *Igu Afo*. The rituals to consecrate time in the course of the year are numerous

¹⁰CHRISTIAN ANDRES, OLUGBENGA OLUSEYIADEOLUWA and GURBIR SINGHBHULLAR. "Yam (*Dioscorea* spp.)." *Encyclopedia of Applied Plant Sciences*, 2017, 2/3, 437. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-394807-6.00177-5>.

¹¹ROBERT J. ALLISON (ed). *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995, p. 41-2.

¹²ANTHONY N. O. EKWUNIFE. *Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Enugu: SNAAP Press, 2003, p. 92.

¹³CHUKWUDI NWOKOYE. "Iguaro Ndigo – Igbo Calendar System", *Codewit Publication*, 2008.<https://publications.codewit.com/igu-aro-ndigo-igbo-calendar-system/33/>. Accessed February 27, 2023.

¹⁴ROBERT J. ALLISON (ed). *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995, p. 42.

¹⁵L. C. UZOZIE. "Patterns of Crop Combination in the three Eastern States of Nigeria", *The Journal of Tropical Geography*, 1971, 33, 64

and vary from community to community.¹⁶ However, the ritual of *IguAfo* is the reserve of Umunri who jealously guarded the traditional Igbo meteorological art. Nevertheless, the *Ahijioke* festival of yam is wide spread among the Igbo and also serves as evidence to the truth that yam is at the heart of Igbo life and culture. *Ahijioke* festival has different versions in different Igbo cultural areas, *Ahijoke*, *Njoke*, *Ahajoke*, *Ajoke*, *Ifejioku*, *Iwa Ji*, *Iri Ji*, *Afiaolu* etc.¹⁷

Methodology

Ethnographic research are most times multi-dimensional in approach. In this work we appealed to both naturalism and participant observation. This is in accord with the position of David E. Gray: “Ethnography is a qualitative research method that seeks to understand cultural phenomena that reflect the knowledge and meanings that guide the life of cultural groups within their own environment.”¹⁸ We established a farm in Akpo, while our area of research covered Amesi and Achina as well. This is to avail ourselves of the opportunity of informal interaction with the people and environment. We did cucumber farm which was at variant with the common practice of yam farms to create a nuance of farming for commercial purposes, instead of the traditional subsistence farming, to determine how the traditional ethos could work in a capitalist economy.

Non-formal and unstructured interviews were also carried out with other rural dwellers who were still practicing the traditional farming of yam at a subsistence level. Existing literatures were consulted to acquaint ourselves with the findings of earlier research on related subjects. The work is qualitative research which exposed the traditional socio-religious culture of the Igbo whose practice ensured availability of food and economic opportunity for everyone. It understood that the practice was one of the characteristics of the former communalist economy, but suggests that it could also serve the Igbo in the present capitalist economy.

Since it is qualitative research, we gleaned from responses and attitudes from working ethical convictions, understanding of traditional communalist ethos and the degree of social cohesion in the sample area. These were marched against the traditional ethical practices which the work had chosen as the paradigm for food security. We also found in the contemporary socio-religious environment practices which can be compatible and will

¹⁶EKWUNIFE, A. N. O. (2003). *Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Enugu: SNAAP Press. Pp. 92-4.

¹⁷D. G. COURSEY and CECILIA K. COURSEY. The New Yam Festivals of West Africa. *Anthropos*, 1971, 66(3/4), 444–484. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40457684>

¹⁸DAVID E. GRAY. *Doing Research in the Real World* (3rd ed.). London, UK: Sage. 2014 <https://www.sfu.ca/~palys/Gray-DoingResearchInTheRealWorld-Ethnography.pdf>. Accessed February 27, 2023.

produce the same results. The researchers grew up in a rural Igbo community and have firsthand experience of an egalitarian society where basic human needs especially food and housing were available to everyone in a sense that the cultural practices and ethics demanded the sharing of burden and protected the capital product of the economy as sacred:

Chima J. Korieh had made this contention:

Although the Igbo have been often described as an egalitarian society, the social and economic system suggest otherwise. There were rich and poor farmers and the level of success defined wealth. The accumulation of yams and the size of a man's barn defined his status in many Igbo communities. Success in yam production acted as the ladder for social mobility. In most parts of Igboland, men who distinguished themselves as yam farmers were also recognised and rewarded by their communities with the title of Ezeji or "yam king." Aspirants to the powerful ennoblement had to meet the rigorous criteria of cultivating a certain number of yams in addition to feasting a large number of people.¹⁹

The reply to his objection is contained in his submission and this research offers more clue as to the nature of this egalitarianism. Igbo egalitarianism means that everyone is free to aspire and there are enablers to assist anyone at any level to struggle and achieve their aspirations. For instance, becoming Ezeji is open to everyone who can achieve it. "Feasting a large number of people" as a requirement of attaining the Ezeji status is the symbolization of the moral demands of the status. Therefore, becoming Ezeji is a social arrangement aimed at food security. As a result of this, the present research upholds the position that the Igbo's was an egalitarian society. This is the hypothesis behind the participation /observation which is care method in this research.

Some Socio-Cultural practices among the Igbo; Their economic Import and Ethical Significance

Harvest Practices among the Igbo

In the former Igbo traditional Igbo culture which was both communalist in ethos and agrarian in economy, it was the sense of community and religion which sustained laws, institutions, structures and practices. This was the sense portrayed by Anthony I. Kanu about Africa.²⁰ This Igbo sense of religion and community is founded on worldview. According to Ogbonnaya (2015):

¹⁹CHIMA J. KORIEH. "Yam is King! But Cassava is the Mother of all Crops: Farming, Culture, and Identity in Igbo Agrarian Economy." *Dialectical Anthropology*, 2007, 31(1/3), 223.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29790779> Accessed March 2, 2023.

²⁰KANU, I. A. (2015). *Africa Ethics: Foundations, Community and Religion*. Jos: Augustinian Publications

The Igbo traditional worldview forms the basis of Igbo representation of reality in the physical, and spiritual symbols reflected in concrete form in rites and rituals. These intermingle to give substantive meaning and form to being and life, which are apprehended as not only active but also as worth living in spite of changes and chances that may accompany them.²¹

Harvest practices among the Igbo here reflects the socio-religious ethical practices found among the three communities studied in this research, Amesi, Akpo and Achina.

During harvest, *Ala* demands some informal sacrifices both as thanksgiving, appeasement and entreaty. *Ala* is the 'Earth'; it is regarded as deity of fertility for plants, animals and human beings too, as well as the principal deity of customs and tradition.²² It is the most powerful deity in the Igbo pantheon, wielding equivalent powers with *Igwe*, *Amadioha* and *Kamalu* and revered at every level of the society structure (family, clan, town etc.).²³ The Igbo do not meddle with the demands of *Ala*.

For the harvest of yam, the farmer does not take out all the seed yam from any stem that yielded a multiple. These multiple seed yams are called *MkpUrU Ji*. The farmer is required to leave at least one of such and cover it back with earth. Some go to the extent of also covering the lower part of the yam which may accidentally breakaway in the process of being dug out of the soil. Some also leave off seeds that they consider poor in yield or diseased. Farmers who observe this believe that they are offering back to *Ala* for good harvest and at the same time guaranteeing the blessing of more abundant yield next time they may cultivate on the land.

Mixed farming and shifting cultivation are age long practices among the people of this area understudy. Before the current genetic modulations that make cassava yield in six months, cassava used to be a biennial crop. After the harvest of yam and other vegetables (melon, fluted pumpkin cocoyam or peas), cassava remains to be harvested about a year later. That way, the farmer comes back to the same portion of land in the least every other year, it could be more.

In the year of fallow, with adequate rain fall, the yams left under the earth, begin to sprout. There is a common practice among this people called *Mkpa Ji*. It is undertaken by enterprising younger folks and the elderly who barely afford their means of livelihood. *Mkpa Ji* is an exercise in which people stroll into farms where harvest were newly done to

²¹ JOSEPH OGBONNAYA. "Moral Integrity and Igbo Cultural Value: The Contemporary Challenge of Secularization and Materialism". Apollos A. Nwauwa and Chima J. Korieh (ed.), *Perspectives on the Igbo: Multidisciplinary Approach*. New Jersey: Goldline and Jacobs Publishing, 2015.

²²METUH, E. I. *God and Man in African Religion*. Enugu: SNAAP Press, 1981, p. 94.

²³ANOZIA, I.P. (1968). *The Religious Import of Igbo Names*. Unpublished PhD. Thesis. Urban University, Rome.

identify freshly sprouting yam stems, dig them up and take them home. These yams are mostly re-cultivated by those who gather them. Young folks begin their own yam-enterprise gradually this way and poor folks build their store of yams through the same means. There were people reported to have built large yam barns through this means in years past.

It was also a general harvest practice among the people that passers-by who stopped by to exchange pleasantries with the farmer or lend some helping hands may go home with some of the harvest as gift from the harvester. This ethic applies across the harvest of any crop or fruit. If by accident the fruit from a harvested tree fell on a passerby, it reverts to him/her, with more to accompany it. There are other similar customary ethical laws which enables the Igbo to sustain practice of sharing the fruits of harvest among themselves, especially to reach those who find it difficult to afford their means.

Ipụ Ọriri and Igbo Hospitality

Ipụ Ọriri was a traditional socio-cultural practice among the Igbo. *Ipụ Ọriri* simply implies to visit and tarry with folks especially within one's neighbourhood. When the older folks were off to the farms, children engaged in *Ipụ Ọriri*. They visited and stayed in whatever house they chose to go for long hours waiting for their family members to get back from the day's work. There, they were assimilated; they undertook chores, played and were fed as family. Sometimes children ate a whole day's meal outside their homes. More meticulous parents might keep lunch for their children so they may during lunch time go to the house and help themselves. Yet it was expected that those in whose house they had tarried fed them especially when they were found to be of good behavior. There were no formal schools, so children were trained through this means in customs and culture which prepared them for life in the community and they bond among themselves especially according to age brackets.

It was an Igbo wide belief that children are community responsibility. "It takes a village to raise a child" is an old African aphorism popularly credited to the Igbo and Yoruba,²⁴ but which has other forms of rendition. For instance, "One knee does not bring up a child" in Sukuma and "One hand does not nurse a child" in Swahili. In that socio-cultural disposition, the cost and burden of taking care of children was not the responsibility of only the biological parents. Everyone was obligated to contribute; it was a socio-ethical demand which everyone adhered to with religious faith and commitment. One is not, therefore, constrained to economic concerns to give birth to multiple children.

²⁴ ADAM RHAITI. "It takes a Whole Village to raise a Child' – An African Saying". *Right for Education*, July 7, 2016, <https://rightforeducation.org/2016/07/07/it-takes-a-whole-village/>. Accessed March 4, 2023.

Ipu Oriri was also done by elders when they have enough time to spare in the evenings or on days when they did not go for work *Ipu Oriri* was an important social pastime where the older folks engage in palaver for the exchange of ideas and proffering solutions to existential problems. Francis Anekwe Oborji²⁵ and Stan Chu Ilo²⁶ understood palaver from the perspective of community life, but the model of palaver is pervasive in seeking solutions and developing models for references in the African environment.

Palaver spreads across public engagement to interpersonal interactions which generate or improve upon existing ideas, solutions, norms and customs. At such engagements, kaolin, kolanut, palm wine and food are common symbolic items for mutual disposition, agreements/bonding and validating conclusions. Interestingly, going for *Ipu Oriri* for the older folk may deliberately be undertaken in hope that food will be available at the host's house. There was an ethical demand on the host to serve or share food with his visitor, compliance to which determines the perception of one's personality and character in the community.

Title-Taking and Periodic Celebrations among the Igbo

Title-taking and periodic celebrations among the Igbo are moments slated for feasting. Eating and drinking are essential and indispensable part of these feastings. Every month in the traditional Igbo calendar is dedicated to an elaborate feast;²⁷ still mindful of the fact that from the days (*Eke, Orie, Afo* and *Nlwo*) dedicated to spirit forces and weeks understood as mystically and essentially feastful, the Igbo environment is replete with religious feasting. Anthony N. O. Ekwunife understood this in terms of consecration of time.

However, the most important aspect of Igbo time is that it is primarily a religious time. By religious time is meant: time that is intimately associated either with Igbo spiritual beings or ritual celebrations which have some link with these beings.²⁸

Most often, it is the social and religious significance of these feasts which writers get attracted to and highlight.

²⁵ FRANCIS a. OBORJI. "The African Palaver Reconciliation Model and Mission". *Int. Rev. Mission*, 27 November 2020, 109/2, pp. 222-235, <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12330>. Accessed March 4, 2023.

²⁶ STAN CHU ILO. "Exploring the Possible Contributions of the African Palaver towards a Participatory Synodal Church", *Exchange*, 14 Dec 2021, 50(3-4), 209-237. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543X-12341600>. Accessed March 4, 2023.

²⁷ FRANCIS A. ARINZE. *Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Onitsha: St. Stephen's, 2008, pp. 49-52.

²⁸ ANTHONY N. O. EKWUNIFE. *Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Enugu: SNAAP Press, 2003, p. 92.

This work derives the ethical dimension which demands the provision of surplus food and drinks which revert to random people; even during market days which occurs every four days in every community, food items can be gotten by people without money through portions reserved for the spirit of the market. At such feasts, according to Francis A. Arinze: “There is plenty to eat during such feasts and to complain of hunger would be a strange thing at such a time”.²⁹ Some people look up to these feasts which were sure to come for eating and drinking to their fill and have something to preserve which could last them for a day or two.

Ik. N. T. Ogbukagu elaborated on different categories of title-taking in Adazi-Nnukwu (*Nze-na-Ozo, Fejioku, Uke, Ekwe, Nkwu, Uke, Ichi, Ozala*, etc)³⁰. Entertainment and lavish feeding was an important and recurring part of the whole narrative around these title-taking. These were deliberately designed to make food available to the whole community in season and out of season. These titles were taken by those who had the financial capacity to do so and who from that moment on are vested with the moral burden of providing means of sustenance and livelihood for members of the community especially those who may not afford them.

The Igbo Ethical Universe and Food Security

John S. Mbiti had identified Africa as a religious universe.³¹ On the other hand, Laurenti Magesa understood Africa as a moral/ethical universe.³² Interestingly, to explicate the nature of the African moral/ethical universe, Magesa appealed copiously to religion. It is not difficult to see that it is religion more than anything else which holds the center of the African universe and stabilizes the interaction of different entities which make it up and always mindful of the prime place of the human species who are the king of the universe. Magesa observed that the tripartite forces of God, ancestors and spirits (in their variety) both created and sustains the universe and are, therefore, the moral agents of this universe. Nevertheless, the moral codes derive immediately from and gains its legitimacy from the ancestors.³³ In other words, African morality/ethics is essentially religious. Within this parlance, it is the Divine command ethical theory which better encompass African religious morality/ethics.

²⁹ FRANCIS A. ARINZE. *Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Onitsha: St. Stephen's, 2008, p. 51.

³⁰ IK. N. T. OGBUKAGU. *Traditional Igbo Beliefs and Practices*. Owerri: Novelty Industrial Enterprises, 1997, p. 63-91

³¹ MBITI JOHN S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann, 1975, p.262.

³² LAURENTI MAGESA. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of abundant Life*. Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1998, p. 41.

³³ LAURENTI MAGESA. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of abundant Life*. Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1998, p. 42.

Among the Igbo, *Chukwu* is the ultimate lawgiver. Other spirits, both ancestral and especially the localized spirits often referred to as *Arusi* exist to enforce those laws. In misdemeanors or sin, the Igbo easily could be understood as having no sense of offending God. Yet the fear of the punishment due to even as little as a misdemeanor is so palpable that the Igbo would hardly renege from performing ethical duties.³⁴ The Igbo do not have rational explanations for moral actions and do not bother themselves to establish rational basis for their strict ethical practices. This idea was also succinctly captured by Francis A. Arinze thus:

Tradition is the final court of appeal. “So did our fathers; so have *ndịmbụnandịabọ* (the first and the second group, meaning, the ancestors) handed on to us”; this is the unimpeachable answer that returns again and again to forestall the acute probings of the clever philosopher or speculative theologian who asks the Igbo man: “Why do you do this or that?”³⁵

It is important to highlight and emphasize this understanding of moral/ethical duty by the Igbo as both a religious and social demand, and to underscore their strict adherence to that demand which offered sustainability to them. It is this unwritten and unreasoned moral/ethical code which constituted the backbone to the practices discussed above and sustained food security in the traditional Igbo society, so much so that even as a slave who had been away from the Igbo environment, Olaudah Equiano could still remember: “Everyone contributes something to the common stock; and, as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars.”³⁶

The socio-ethical practices discussed above were not mere festivities or social engagements for the mere purpose of socializing, they were moral/ethical demands with strict religious force. The Igbo are well aware of the dire consequences of not living out their demands and no Igbo would wish to contend with the angry ancestors or retributive spirits whose essential roles in the universe is to bring defaulters to bear the brunt of their actions. Even when such practices were making no rational sense or were taking their toll on the Igbo, they know better than not adhering to the letters of their demands. That way the practices which they have no rational justifications for and which they inadvertently perform make available food to all and sundry; no one begged for food. It is in this sense that food security was achieved in traditional Igbo society.

In other words, food security was programmed into the social fabrics of the Igbo; they had no need to sit and plan for the provision of food in as much as they religiously lived out the

³⁴FRANCIS A. ARINZE. *Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Onitsha: St. Stephen's, 2008, p. 57.

³⁵FRANCIS A. ARINZE. *Sacrifice in Igbo Traditional Religion*. Onitsha: St. Stephen's, 2008, p. 9.

³⁶ROBERT J. ALLISON (ed). *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995, p. 39.

moral/ethical demands of their social, cultural and religious engagements. In the contemporary society, these engagements have been impaired by new social, cultural and religious consciousness. The present research seeks the meeting point of the old and new consciousness and ways in which the old consciousness would work in the new social, cultural and religious structures.

Traditional Igbo Food Security Schemes in a Contemporary Capitalist Economy

It is evident that in the traditional Igbo communalist society, there were neither beggars nor people dying with hunger and disease. The Igbo social environment was deliberately designed to ensure food security and its sustenance thereof. Evidently, the case is radically different in the contemporary Igbo society. The contemporary Igbo social environment is inexorably becoming capitalist, the cultural environment individualistic and the religious environment Christian. Farming for subsistence is gradually giving way to farming for profitmaking or accumulation of surplus value. Interestingly, in the environment of our study farming for either or both purposes (subsistence and profitmaking) can be found.

Our cucumber farm was typical of the capitalist mode of farming. Cucumber is not a familiar vegetable in the Igbo food culture even though it has been introduced into the Igbo environment from the northern part of the country and is popular for its touted health benefits. Since it is not part of any known menu among the Igbo, most people eat it raw with some legumes or spices to accompany it. Cucumber farm is gaining grounds among the Igbo, but is embarked upon for commercial purposes. At the same time, in spite of the capitalist social environment, the king of the Igbo agricultural space (Yam) is still cultivated by majority of the Igbo at subsistence level; in other words, not for commerce or profitmaking. The contrast of farming for profit is still done by a negligible few.

This contrast elicited different social behavior from the locals compared to what is ordinarily normative and obtainable. The locals easily walk up to each other and ask for produce from the farm. For instance, a woman can walk into another's farm to cut fluted pumpkin for her pot of soup and is allowed without charge provided she does not take in excess. No one came up to the cucumber farm to make such request. However, in the northern part of Cross River State of Nigeria, where cucumber farming is very common, people can pluck as much as they would want to eat from other's farms. Locals were not willing to work in our farm for free because they understood us as commercial farmers and our product is not their kind of food. In fairness, the mutual labour exchange or labour-food exchange has not been lost on the locals, but the exchange of these for money is clearly more acceptable.

Like many other traditional practices among the Igbo and Africans, the socio-ethical-religious practices which sustained food security are being lost because the modern humans do not know the *raison d'être* of those practices or that the practices have been portrayed in bad light or associated with evil and darkness. Like has been observed earlier, the Igbo do not attach importance to the rational justification of their actions, but religiously stick to them because of their ancestral origins. Without rational justifications such practices may not withstand the probing of a rational culture which western civilization espouses. Therefore, when the western rational tradition was introduced, it offered power to the African recipient who quickly abandoned the ancestral ways and its hidden wisdom. It is this rational perspective which this work offers.

It is true that the Igbo do not bother themselves with the rational justification of their moral/ethical, religious and cultural practices, however, this does not mean that they have no rational basis or that they were not deliberate. Studies have shown the internal logic behind those practices which are often organic in generation. There is need to recoup these practices with a coherent rational tradition so as to sustain them in the midst of modern social evolution.

Capitalism and individualism thrive in the western Christian environment, but they do not define the core value of Christianity. On the other hand, the core value of Igbo-African environment is community and conviviality rooted in a religious culture. Since Christianity is taking over from traditional religion among the Igbo, it can constitute that religious force needed to sustain these moral ethical practices. For instance, the early Christian converts in Jerusalem evolved a community which highlighted the core value of Christianity³⁷ which seemed to have been lost in the midst of radical capitalism with its obsession with surplus value mired in individualist culture. When the traditional Igbo society is placed side by side the early Christian community, one can only deduce that the Igbo traditional practices especially those under review where solid foundation upon which Christianity can thrive.

The promise of a perfect afterlife which at the face value dominates the message of Christianity seemed to have beclouded a possible good and decent life here on earth especially in Africa. Therefore, it appears to be lost on African Christianity to foster ways of affording temporal good for its adherents. Even when existing human culture in Africa provides a leeway to achieve it, that same Christianity is stuck in the practice of wishing them away or condemning them as antiquated, uncivilized, dark and evil; understanding the ancient Africa as savage, barbaric and pagan. This work offers the rational basis of the practices discussed in this work and asserts that it is possible to evolve ways and means of upholding such practice in a Christian, capitalist and individualist environment.

³⁷ Acts 4:32-35

The God of Christianity can demand compliance to moral/ethical values with the same dexterity as *Ala* and evolve a Christianity which is less indulgent with a permissive God. The principal product or service of an individual can be elevated to the sacred status of Yam, with the rules of harvest applied to its yields. Various Christian festivals and title-taking can be designed deliberately to make food available to the faith community. The whole idea is that the traditional cultural practices provided paradigms for living out the Christian message in more practical and impactful ways. In doing that, Christianity must assume the force of the former traditional religion in offering sustainable and formidable religious drive to get its adherent conform to its moral/ethical demands.

Conclusion

Food security is much more than the availability of food; it must also be accessible to all who are in need of it. Capitalism as an economic system cannot sustain food security without a socialist blend. This work simply asserts that there is a moral/ethical scheme in the social fabrics of the Igbo which capitalism can harness. These schemes were discussed under the subheadings: Harvest practices among the Igbo, *IpuOriri* and Igbo hospitality and Title-Taking and Periodic Celebrations among the Igbo. These schemes were organically generated, but were deliberately aimed at ensuring the availability of food among the Igbo in season and out of season.

The unsustainability of the capitalist scheme was felt in the western world in the early 19th century and from Britain and across other countries of Europe a welfare capitalism began to emerge with industrial paternalism. Since then, a lot of models have been evolved to inject some kind of social welfare into a capitalism that has been overburdening especially on skilled workers. Typical of the capitalist scheme, even the social welfare models were often hijacked by the capitalist themselves and exploited for personal gains. However, those attempts show the need for programs to ameliorate the exploitative tendencies and crushing effects of capitalism on the middle class and low-income earners who are often left without food, clothing and shelter.

Meanwhile capitalism is a fertile breeding ground for individualism. Emphasis and discourses on autonomy, freedom, liberty, rights, independence, self-sufficiency, authenticity and so on are characteristic of the 18th and 19th century which was in turn secularist and atheistic. In other words, the recession of the influence of God and religion gradually gave birth to the individual who acquired the inalienable right live for himself. That individual in contemporary times has been so empowered that it could even reject and revert its nature by mere stint of the will. Yet the existence and relevance of society is predicated upon the tenets of collectivism. Invariably, functional collectivism presumes the existence of individual entities which may band together as collectivity.

Collectivity becomes a hybridization of the community which in its organic formation was merely communalist. The Igbo traditional society is a typical communalist society which generated schemes to ensure food security in the society. We acknowledge the argument for and against communalism as an exclusive African character. F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo understood communalism as distinguishing of the African society.³⁸ On the other hand, Isaiah A. Negedu and Solomon O. Ojomah argue that communalism is not exclusively African but there are some values rooted in African communalism which can be universally applicable.³⁹ More than the claim or otherwise of communalism for Africa, this work emphasizes the moral/ethical practices among the Igbo in a communalist and religious society which could apply in a capitalist and Christian society.

It is important to discuss these food security schemes against a backdrop of communalism and Igbo Traditional Religion. Yet the work did not insist that the moral/ethical practices which constituted the scheme were tied to the economic and religious systems. As ethics and morality, they can be practiced and sustained in different economic and religious environment. The contemporary Igbo is dominantly Christian and the practices discussed above can apply in Christian environment. It remains for Christianity among the Igbo to harness these values present in its environment of operation to ensure food security among the Igbo.

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³⁸ F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo. African Philosophy of Communalism. In: Imafidon, E., Tshivashe, M., Freter, B. (eds) *Handbook of African Philosophy. Handbooks in Philosophy*. Springer, Cham, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-77898-9_21-1.

³⁹ Isaiah A. Negedu & Solomon O. Ojomah. The question of African communalism and the antithesis of democracy. *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions*, 2018, 7(3): 53-71. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v7i3.5>.

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- not the focus but the durability of the construction works. Actually, the PWD Material Section was divided into two main sub-divisions viz Field Control and Headquarters Laboratory.ⁱ The Field Control Unit was responsible for preliminary investigations and quality control of materials used during construction, and observation for the behavior of the materials after construction.ⁱⁱ The most frequent problems were whether the soil would be suitable as a sub-grade for a road or runway or whether the soil could be satisfactorily stabilized with cement.ⁱⁱⁱ By 1960, the Headquarters Laboratory had conducted tests on hundreds of samples of soils, aggregate, building blocks, concrete cubes, steel, soil-cement and bituminous materials. Other building materials like paints, iron rods, roofing sheets, timbers *et cetera* were subjected to tests to ascertain their quality and behavior over time how the materials like soil behaved in terms of ability to withstand pressure was the focus and not really what the impact on the environment would be.

ENDNOTES

ⁱFederal Republic of Nigeria, Annual Report on the Works Division of the Federal Ministry of Works and Surveys, 1960-61, 13, Published by the Federal Ministry of Information Printing Division, Lagos, 1964

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱNAE,Annual Report of the PWD for the year 1949-50, 40