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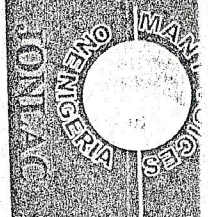
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TOWARD PAN IGBO UNITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: IGBO MYTHS OF ORIGIN AS A TOOL

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Abstract:

Some extant Igbo myths of origin portray Ndiigbo as a people with a common primordial descent. Over the millennia the Igbo have experienced steady growth and expansion to the point that the Igbo nation today no longer reckons with that original bond of kinship relation as revealed in their mythology.

The modern Igbo society is as volatile as any other society in Africa. Conflictual incidents and situations that trigger inter community feud as evidenced by that between Aguleri and Umuleri in Anambra state, do arise. Ndiigbo are seen by other Nigerians as a people who are anything but united as demonstrated by their undaunted readiness to sabotage one another in their selfish quest for political offices, and the lack of will they exhibit in the pursuit of any common goal for their collective well being.

The discordant tone that greets any attempt (such as the recent one by Ohanaeze) to make Ndiigbo form a common front for them to make positive impact on the Nigerian polity is a clear indication of their disunity which affects not only the realization of their political ambition but also their attainment of desired heights in other spheres of national life.

This paper first of all highlights some instances of incidents and attitudes that illustrate the disunity of Ndiigbo. The paper then attempts to demonstrate that one of the ways of stemming the tide of disunity among Ndiigbo lies in emphasizing the people's common descent using their myths of origin some of which embody the tenets of Igbo/African traditional philosophy of life that encourages tolerance, peace, hospitality and being one's brother's keeper; and condemns violence, murder and other forms of abominable acts. The paper, therefore, explores the possibility of using Igbo myths of origin to re-orientate, educate and sensitize the younger generation of Ndiigbo in the 21st century about their close affinity. It suggests that disseminating the information on the close affinity of Ndiigbo will promote the unity of the Igbo nation.

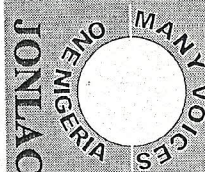
Finally, the paper recommends the introduction of Igbo myths of origin into the oral literature curricula of our schools, and the encouragement of our dramatists to adapt such myths for dramas or films for public consumption. This way, myth can be a tool for enhancing panIgbo unity in the 21st century, and thus the veracity of the Igbo saying, 'Idi n'otu bu ike' (Unity is strength), will be more appreciated.

Preamble

In spite of modernity and technological development and their attendant influences on man's actions, thoughts and feelings, it is difficult for man to completely renounce his primeval root and cultural heritage, which have largely been explained in myths. As Parrinder (1967:10) rightly observed, "... behind modern political doctrines, there are countless myths and stories which form part of the background to the thinking of African people" today. Modern political and religious doctrines have permeated Africa yet many Africans are still "untouched by the new religions, and even the millions who have joined them are still influenced by the old outlook and mythology" (Parrinder, p. 16).

On the relevance of myth to society, Larrington (1992:ix) also acknowledges that myth has been appropriated by politicians, psychiatrists and artists, among others to tell us what we are and where we have come from. At the beginning of last century, Boas underscored the importance of understanding a people's mythology as prelude to understanding the people. The Herskovitses, in their study of Dahomean (presently Benin Republic) narratives in the middle of the same century, reiterated Boas' view that mythology and tales of a people

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constitute 'the autobiography of the tribe'. This observation is still valid today.

No cultural tradition exists without some mythological foundations. As it is true of other cultures, the Igbo have mythological tradition. They are a people whose world, like the Greek's, operates between the two poles of *mythos* and *logos* modes of thought. Myth still provides impetus for some of what the people 'believe' and 'suppose'. Some of what we know today about the social, political and religious life of the Igbo society are reflected in some of the people's myths. There are mythically transformed references to historical episodes, and to understand Ndiigbo's past, one would derive valuable information through the investigation of their wealth of mythological tradition.

Since some Igbo myths are woven around historical incidents and experiences, such myths perform the function of preserving the Igbo past history. As this paper will focus partly on Igbo myth, we are adopting archetypal /mythological criticism as the framework for that aspect of our discussion. This is because archetypal criticism, sometimes called mythological, is according to Scott (1979) also historical in its investigation of a cultural or social past. The cultural history of a people is one of the interpretative aids of myth criticism.

By citing some examples of Igbo myths of origin, which reveal the social and cultural past of Ndiigbo, we intend to demonstrate that in spite of the changes in the physical and intellectual aspects of his existence, the Igboman is connected with his primeval root. And one way of creating awareness about it is by inputting into the younger generation and re-awakening in the older generation of Ndiigbo, the consciousness of their common root as revealed in their myth of origin.

The Volatility Of The Igbo Society Today

A number of things make the Igbo society volatile today. A few years ago, we witnessed a fierce battle between the Aguleri and Umuleri people of Anambra state. This battle occasioned by land disputes led to huge loss of both lives and property of inestimable value. As we shall see later in our sample myths of origin, these two communities that have been embroiled in bloody hostility have kinship relation. Conflicts ignited by disputed lands and boundaries also exist in different communities of Igboland.

Another cause of turbulence in Igbo society is ritual killings, which are sometimes connected with the notorious fraudsters in '419' or 'OBT' business. Following the ritual killing of a young boy, Ikechukwu, by one Mr Innocent in Owerri in 1996, hell was let loose as angry mobs went on rampage on the streets of Owerri, burning houses and business premises belonging to the suspected '419ners' and ritualists. That was the inglorious 'Otokoto saga' that shook not only Igboland but also the whole Nigeria that year.

Use of charms, witchcrafts and other devilish means to suddenly terminate the lives of progressive young men and women, is sometimes alleged to be in practice in Igboland. This makes some Ndiigbo shun their villages and towns and become permanent residents in other states outside Igboland where they are treated with cool disdain and repugnance by the indigenes.

Also prevalent in Igbo society today are bitter political rivalry with its attendant political inspired killings, and tussle for Ezeship especially in the newly created autonomous communities, between those favoured by some traditional considerations and influential moneybags whose sources of sudden wealth remain suspect. The weekly magazine, *The Week* of August 11, 2003, reported how the peace of Lagwa autonomous community in Abo Mbaise local government area of Imo state, was disturbed following the death of a kingmaker over the tussle for recognition. Two persons, one a wealthy person and the other not very rich perhaps, were said to be presenting themselves for recognition as the traditional ruler elects, each claiming to be the rightful choice for the controversial traditional stool. The arson and killings that were sequel to this tussle led the people of the area to desert their homes. The Imo State Government has since waded into the controversy in order to find a lasting solution to it. These and similar incidents make Igboland highly volatile today.

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Ndiigbo And Their Discordant Tone: A Threat To The Unity Of The Igbo Nation

A wide range of literature in form of books, pamphlets, magazines, journals and newspaper articles are available on the Igbo, their world, history, culture, politics and character. Ndiigbo are conspicuous in Nigeria today, not because of their numerical strength as one of the three major ethnic groups or because they occupy the highest political position in government or control the nation's economy but because they possess many traits some of which make them either repulsive or the envy of their neighbours.

Nwankwo (1999: 1-7) outlines and discusses twelve traits of the Igboman [including woman], which, according to him, 'deserve significant mention'. These include the Igboman's dogged determination to survive, his spread, domination of the informal sector, high visibility, absence of solid home base economy, lack of perspicuity, individualism gone berserk, hypermaterialism and money mania and apparent disdain for education. Also mentioned is the character of the Igboman as 'Ogba oso' because of his characteristic tendency to be always on the run for his dear life whenever a problem erupts between him and other ethnic nationalities in his resident state. His realization that he has two countries his home state and resident state and his extreme republicanism manifest in the cliché 'Igbo Enwe Eze' are, according to Nwankwo yet other traits, which define the identity of the Igboman.

Nwankwo does acknowledge that the Igboman possesses more than these twelve traits. One cannot but agree with him. Arising from the experience of the last electioneering campaigns and general elections in Nigeria, one may be persuaded to quickly add to Nwankwo's list of Igboman's traits, his 'quest for political power at all cost'. His ultimate ambition in this regard is not necessarily to be at the helm of affairs but to be close to corridors of power.

The last election witnessed unprecedented political rivalry and rancour which led on some occasions to the assassinations of some politicians perceived or adjudged to be more favourably disposed to win, by their political opponents. To be there at all costs means the elimination of any real or imagined opposition.

The disunity that is the bane of the Igbo nation today is nurtured by some attitudes and self centered disposition of Ndiigbo. Such attitudes constitute a serious impediment, to their progress in some spheres of national life. Take, for instance, the lack of collective will to form a formidable front or to pursue a common cause for the overall well being of the Igbo people. This character of Ndiigbo cannot be better described than the way Nwankwo puts it while elaborating on one of the traits he referred to as 'individualism gone berserk':

'Whether we look into politics or business or social life, we see an evidence of anarchist individualism that has run amok, like a masquerade whose restraining rope has broken off and whose intoxicated flutist is inciting it with wilder and wilder music' (quoting Chinweizu, 1998).

The anarchist individualism seems also to have permeated the state administrations. Instead of pooling resources for strength, one observes atomization of growth structures each time states are created in the East. While the Northern states wisely retained intact the Northern Nigeria Development Corporation (NNDC) and the Bank of the North and the Arewa group as their catalyst for growth and manpower development and Western Nigeria Development Corporation (WNDC) metamorphosed into the Odua Group of Companies and a strong real estate giants as a catalyst and anchor for the enviable development of the Western states, the Eastern Nigerian Development Corporation (ENDC) was progressively atomized into insignificance in the various state development finance companies; and Igbo states stood by while their finance flag bearers, the African Continental Bank Limited (ACB), Co-operative and Commerce Bank (CCB) and Progress Bank retrogressed and distressed into liquidations and out of existence (underlined emphasis mine).

The issues raised in the above excerpt are such that can be disturbing to any right

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thinking Igboman.

Obi (1996) in an article titled "The Igbo: A Nation in Distress" spotlights the "endangered status" of Ndiigbo at this point in our national history. Nostalgically, he appraises among other things the gallant attempt of Ndiigbo at self actualization which was frustrated by a combination of factors but nonetheless earned them some respect; and their doggedness after the civil war experiences, to forge ahead even as "misguided Nigerians took delight in the displacement of the Igbo from national scheme of things." But he laments that between then and now, so much has happened and over the years, the Igbo have been climbing the pole of re-integration; they have been striving to reclaim their pre eminent status in the scheme of things in Nigeria.

The thinking of many Ndiigbo is that the nation is on the verge of retrogression because of the seeming neglect and marginalisation it has suffered over the years. For instance, it can be argued that between 1984 and 1998 during the era of the military juntas in Nigeria, what the Igbo witnessed was, to use Obi's words, "a systematic devaluation of their ethnic group", a humiliation as evidenced by the manner their son who occupied the second position of Chief of General staff in one of the military regimes was dropped; and a deliberate suppression and subjugation in the military profession as not more than one Igboman was ever promoted to the rank of a Major General in the Army or its equivalent in the Navy by any of the military regimes in Nigeria. In the same vein, no Igboman has risen to the rank of Inspector General of Police in Nigeria since after the civil war.

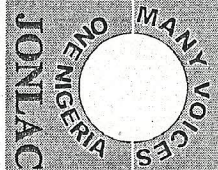
In the light of the above argument, accusing fingers have been pointed at those described as Igbo detractors but the questions are: Are they really the cause of the undoing of Ndiigbo? In all these situations Ndiigbo have found themselves over the years, what has been their own attitude to the issues of Igbo interest? Or is it true that "most of our decline are self inflicted and are now interminable with little hope for change" (Anokute, p. 44)? Does their predicament not call for the harnessing of their material and intellectual resources for national strength and greater solidarity? The issue raised above by Nwankwo about ENDC, the distress and liquidations of the financial institutions jointly owned by Igbo states, illustrates the fact that Ndiigbo to a great extent may be the architect of their own problems.

Again, looking into politics as pointed out by Chinweizu and reiterated by Nwankwo, his political behaviour indeed reveals the 'anarchist individualism' of the Igboman. This became more manifest in the last general elections in Nigeria long after Chinweizu and Nwankwo had made their observation.

During the elections, a good number of Igbo politicians indicated their interest to run for the presidency. That was a good development; at least it, showed that the Igboman has become more politically aware. And again, they like other Nigerians are free to exercise their fundamental human right. What was worrisome though was how about three Igbomen rushed out and stood under the platform of a single political party, ANPP, to vie for presidential ticket during the party's national convention. At that convention, there was only one Hausaman, General Buhari, and only one Yoruba contestant. Since the Yoruba had abandoned their home base party to support their son, the incumbent President, for a second term, even the active politicians among them did not show interest in the presidential race. The convention was to produce only one presidential flag bearer. And after many weeks, if not months, of announcement and preparation, about three Igbomen still came forward; some accompanied by fanfare of publicity, to scramble for the single ticket, each hoping to emerge the choice.

When they perceived that General Buhari was going to carry the day because the North had, before coming out to the venue of the convention, done its home work well with the connivance of one of the Igbo presidential candidates who abandoned his original aspiration and opted to play the second fiddle, claiming that he did some political arithmetic, the remaining aspirants left the convention venue in 'protest' alleging an unfair treatment and 'imposition' of Buhari on them. The action of that candidate who opted for vice presidential aspirant is reminiscent of Zik's when he accepted subservience to Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and that of Ekwueme to Shehu Shagari thus lending credence to Ubby's remark that "history bristles with the fact that Ndiigbo had often found it very comfortable to align with the Hausa-

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Fulani in their quest for the nation's top seat. They had almost always played the second fiddle" (*Daily Champion*, March 20, 2003, p.10).

The politicians' lack of cohesion, lack of equilibrium and their shameful display of political immaturity attracted howls of derision and a barrage of criticisms from critically minded political watchers among both Ndiigbo themselves and members of other ethnic nationalities. Some saw Igbo politicians as mere political gamblers, as people who are unserious and not ready yet to rule or as people who are completely ignorant of the dynamics of political equation in Nigeria. They saw the disunity of the Igbo politicians as very endemic and counter-productive to their political success.

Again out of the eighteen other mushroom political parties that challenged the incumbent President Obasanjo at the April, 2003 polls, over eight of them fielded Igbomen as their presidential flag bearers prominent among whom were Chief Odumegwu Ojukwu, Dr. Idika Kalu and Senators Ike Nwachukwu and Jim Nwobodo. This situation once again illustrates the reality of stark individualism of the Igboman and buttresses Obi's (1999:6) observation that;

Whereas other ethnic groups are busy identifying and agitating for the rights and privileges of their ethnic nationalities, the Igbo nation is caught in the wire mesh of individualism. The thinking in Igbo circles is that individual prosperity is enough; that it does not matter if the rest of the nation is oppressed and suppressed in the national scheme of things. Thus, whereas the Igboman as an individual may be a success, the Igbo as a group is a failure.

The farcical way Igbomen were emerging as presidential flag bearers in different political parties was seen by some political analysts as a grand design and a well calculated attempt by nonIgbo political top notchers of the ruling PDP to divide Ndiigbo and split their votes so that instead of giving a block support to one of their sons from the Southeast, such support will be divided and reduced into insignificance where it will not make any impact and therefore pose no threat to the ruling party. Others simply saw the Igbo politicians as mere dummies in a political chessboard, which the more mature and experienced political players manipulate to their advantage. This is because other Nigerians have since realized the weakness of the Igbo and have come to discover that they cannot come together to fight a common cause.

As the Igbo presidential aspirants behaved like people who lacked focus and direction, Ohanaeze Ndiigbo, the panIgbo sociocultural organisation that was formed as a response to the ethnic based Afenifere of the Southwest and Arewa Consultative forum of the Northern Nigeria, intervened to arrest the situation and instill a sense of direction into the politicians. Ohanaeze initiated a meeting of all the presidential aspirants to persuade them to form a common political front and come up with a consensus candidate for the Southeast. Some did not heed the call and among those who attended the meeting, Ohanaeze's move was marred by discordant tones as the 'I or no other person' syndrome reared its ugly head. Unfortunately, Ohanaeze's effort could not yield any positive result. Some of the politicians even addressed press conferences rejecting and scoffing at Ohanaeze's initiative.

Ohanaeze Ndiigbo is a child of circumstance because of the prevailing circumstance that gave rise to its birth. It is not surprising therefore that it will lack the courage and enabling legislative force to prevail on Ndiigbo who are by nature highly individualistic. This trait coupled with their extreme republicanism that is manifest, according to Nwankwo, in the aphorism 'Igbo Enwe Eze', makes it difficult for Ohanaeze to function effectively. Its inefficiency has led many Ndiigbo to criticize or doubt its genuine intention. To some, Ohanaeze remains suspect because of its unclear agenda, visions and mission. Others wonder if it will not be an instrument in the hands of the privileged class to foist their selfish and hidden agenda on the Igbo masses. There is a feeling that "few old men have used the umbrella of Ohanaeze to go to Abuja to enrich themselves,



families and friends instead of the generality of Ndiigbo". It is along these lines of thought that Anokute in his essay, written from New York and published in Sunday Vanguard of August 10, 2003 casts a critical glance at Ohanaeze and remarks as follows:

...Since its creation, the Ohanaeze has no impact on economic, social and political lives of ordinary Ndiigbo. I have never read or seen nor heard any memorable subject or project accomplished by Ohanaeze Ndiigbo. We seem like people who have lost their self-prominence and determination. The lack of a coherent agenda has put our future in the Nigerian household in compromise ...

Ohanaeze Ndiigbo is a good idea whose vision remains blurry. Its objective is not quite clear to the majority of Ndiigbo, and if it is, it is very hard to read the perception. Misplaced priorities have characterized the organization.

The leadership is so stripped of wisdom that, when you take a closer look, defines for you, why we are the way we are. Ndiigbo are scattered all over the world and remain dangerously unorganized. Unity always eludes them (p.44).

I think that Ohanaeze still has room for improvement. It should rise to the occasion and put its house in order for more effective operation. Ndiigbo should embrace Ohanaeze and support it to achieve its objectives.

Anokute is right in pointing out in the same essay that "they have always used one of us to oppress all of us" but recent observation has shown that they use more than one of us; in fact as many as they wish. Those sycophants, praisesingers they use are always roaming the corridors of power, beating their chest that they are connected with the powers that be, without considering themselves qualified or capable of occupying the seat of power. They can be collaborators in a conspiracy against their own son who aspires to rule the country, and can justify and favour the continuity in power of men who have over the years neglected the Igbo nation. They can even singlehandedly fund and manage the Southeast electioneering campaign of such candidates, propagating at the same time their master's campaign of deceit that "Ndiigbo have a future in the PDP".

The use of Ndiigbo by other Nigerian politicians to achieve their personal goals is aptly illustrated by a very striking cartoon (see appendix) carried by Sunday Vanguard Newspaper of August 10, 2003 (p.44). Two men, supposedly a Yorubaman and an Hausaman, are depicted to be riding on the back of Igbomen. While their 'oppressors' carry a bag of money each, the Igbomen clench in their fists a few naira notes, which they may have received as inducement. It is indeed a sad humiliating and derogatory portrayal of how an Igboman has been subjugated and made a mere instrument with which those perceived as powerful Nigerians achieve their set goals and aspirations in a country which belongs to all of us. To use Ubby's words, such Ndiigbo are "mere charlatans who roam the entire place cap in hand, asking for the crumbs that fall from the master's table." When they are eventually considered for any appointment in the federal government, they never make any impact on the Igbo nation throughout their stay in office.

Still on the political terrain, we saw another evidence of the disunity and individualistic propensity of Ndiigbo when in less than two years of the first four year term of the PDP government in Nigeria, two Senate Presidents of Igbo extraction were impeached. What was disturbing was not only that some fellow Igbo senators were used by the masterminds of the impeachment of their brothers, but also the fact that on each occasion, only a mere impeachment threat ignited campaigns for possible replacement. The same Igbo Senators, while their brother was still occupying the seat, lobbied and canvassed for support as each jostled to grab the yet to be declared vacant seat.

Given the sad reality of his situation, assuming he is really being suppressed and exploited by other Nigerians, it was expected, as Obi opines and I agree with him-that:

the Igboman would look inwards with a view to circumventing the nefarious

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tactics of his detractors....

It was also expected that the Igboman would realise that collective destiny of the nation cannot be achieved through uncritical republicanism. But experience has shown that the Igbo have not done this. If anything, they have played into the hands of the enemy. They have allowed others to plunder the country's patrimony to his (sic) exclusion (Obi, 1999:6).

In the same trend of thought, Anokute laments that

Thirty two years after the civil war, we ought to have been firmly entrenched into the heart of Nigeria's developments. Sadly, we are sidelined at every juncture, with no protest. Since the end of the civil war, every Nigerian leader has played his hand on Igbo politics. They have always used one of us to oppress all of us. Today, the Igbos are little more than an obscure people looking for leadership...

(Sunday Vanguard, of Aug. 10, 2003, p.44).

It has been credited to the Igbo that they "are the greatest advocates of Nigerian unity. Wherever they live, they accept same as their home". But what about their own unity the unity of the Igbo nation? What has become of it? Does charity not begin at home? I do not advocate discriminations and disunity within the larger Nigerian household. I am an apostle of unity. I cite the above instances of Igboman's attitude to illustrate the spate of dissenting voices of Ndiigbo on issues where their sense of solidarity and broad consensus ought to be at play.

If Ndiigbo would not realize "the collective destiny of the nation" and have remained "dangerously unorganized" thereby allowing "unity" to "always elude them" as pointed out by Obi and Anokute respectively, then the Igbo need to be reminded of their original bond of kinship relation as revealed in their mythology. This will be the burden of our discourse in the remaining part of the paper.

Igbo Myth Of Origin: Background To Kinship Relation In Igbo Society

The belief in a created universe is expressed in many world mythologies. However, different societies have different creation myths, Guerin, et al (1979: 161 2) observe that '...virtually every mythology is built on some account of how the cosmos, nature and man were brought into existence by some supernatural Being or Beings.'

Through myth and legend, an insight can be gained about people's oral history their origin, founding fathers, migration and relationship with their neighbours.

Parrinder notes, with reference to Africa, that "probably all African peoples have traditions of their first ancestors and these may also be mentioned in myths of God or legends of history." The Yoruba for instance, believe and this is narrated in their myth that the first men had been made in heaven and sent to earth with the help of Great God. The first man was the giver of morality and family codes, and has been respected as ancestor and lawgiver ever since.

Though different Igbo communities may have local myths that say something about their origins and ancestors, there are 'great' myths that give accounts of the beginning of the Igbo nation. Some of the myths even go as far as tracing the origin of the entire human race to primeval Igboman (see Nwosu, 1983; Ikwubuzo, 1998; Kalu, 1999).

The egocentric tendency of a people tracing the origin of humankind through their tribal myth of creation is universal. The Jewish myth of creation, for instance, relates that everybody came through the first couple God created Adam and Eve. In one version of Greek myths, it is told that after the universe had been formed and it remained to have people in it, Gaea united with her son, Uranus, and produced the first race the Titans who were twelve in number - six male and six female. In Indian creation myth, The Absolute, Brahman, is believed to embody everything, and the world does not exist when he is not manifested. Brahman is a creative god, the father of all gods and men. A pigmy myth relates that the first human couple a woman and a man emerged with the eruption of great flood that spread all over the earth after a trunk of a tree was cut open. At first time, no other people lived on earth. The couple gave birth to the first child.

One characteristic of Igbo myths is their orality which no doubt explains the spectrum

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of forms noticed in Igbo myths of origin. The diversity of Igbo myths of origin and the divergent views and speculations about the origin of Ndiigbo is a subject that requires a separate discussion to give a full-blown expose. For the purpose of this paper, we are neither concerned with the elucidation of the variations that typify Igbo myths of origin nor with the exegesis of the hypothetical claims that could be distilled from history books on the origin of Ndiigbo. We do not also intend to delve into any critical inquiry of the most authentic or standard version of the Igbo myths of origin.

Even with all their regional or local images and variations, one of the common themes that binds these myths together is their concern with the fundamental issue of the Igbo affinity the fact that Ndiigbo we have today, are, as revealed in their myth, linked to common ancestors from centuries and millennia past before their migration and dispersal to the different culture areas they now occupy.

Our discussion now is therefore anchored on the premise that Ndiigbo are the progeny of a mythical primordial father, Igbo or Eri. It is our belief that the myth of the common descent of Ndiigbo could be exploited to encourage the unity (Ndinotu) of the Igbo nation in the 21st century.

We shall proceed to consider a couple of Igbo myths of origin to drive our point home. Our examples are myths that claim either that the Igbo were created where they are now found, a claim of autochthonous origin or that they were the first people to inhabit the forest lands of West Africa.

Lawrence Emeka's (1989) article, "Eri: the founder of Igbo Nation", presents one of the versions of such Igbo myth of origin (we refer to it as our myth 1a). It is a myth which is said to be related by the Igbo of the Anambra basin and Igala to explain their origin and their progenitor, Eri, whom they call "father of their race". The myth also traces the emergence of the Igbo nation to this great personage whose origin enjoys no consensus account or opinion among those who tell the myth. Some, however, believe that he came from God; that God opened the sky one good day and let him down". It is also believed that he was sent down from heaven to deliver mankind. Various accounts are given as to his exploits and the genealogy of his descendants.

In this version¹, the myth has it that "Eri came paddling his canoe down river Omambala (now called River Anambra) and settled at Eriaka, near the tributary of Omambala known as Odanduli." In this basin of Omambala, Eri met and lived among indigenous inhabitants described as "people who knew no law outside their immediate caprices and desires [and] lived in scattered independent groups and hunted in the forests or fished in the streams and rivers and fought against themselves". The tale goes further to highlight that "every year, the rivers swelled and broke their banks and the floods chased beasts out of the jungles and the peoples out of the settlements. People could not be sure of food, and life was insecure for man and beast."

This gives a picture of the state of lawlessness, violence, disorder, lack and insecurity that characterized prehistoric human society before the advent of Eri. Eri then restructured and re-organized the society and brought sanity to it.

Another version of this myth (myth 1b) says that Chukwu sent down Eri from heaven and he landed at Aguleri. He found that the earth was waterlogged and unfit for habitation and so complained bitterly to Chukwu who sent down an Awka blacksmith who blew on earth with his bellows and dried it up (Afigbo, 1986:2). After a number of other adventures, he married and multiplied.

In myth, a culture hero is not generally credited with the creation of the world but with the completion and ensuring the fitness of the world for human life as Eri is said to have done in myth 1a. After restructuring, reorganizing and sanitizing the people's settlement and its environment, he established different institutions that formed the basis of Igbo social and cultural existence. He founded agriculture, medicine, religion and introduced laws and other aspects of Igbo culture.

Of particular interest to us, for the purpose of this paper, is the hint about the structure of Eri's family given in myth 1a. If Eri is believed to be a man whose progeny constitutes what

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we know today as the Igbo nation, it is essential to examine the structure and nature of kinship relations the primordial family is shown to have had which, we can infer, formed the backdrop of relationship in Igbo society.

According to the myth, Eri had two wives. The first bore several children many of who are reputed to be "founders of towns and progenitors of people". His children include Agulu, Menri, Onogu, Ogbodudu, a daughter and unmarried mother, Adamgbo. Agulu, the first son, and his children, in coalition with Adamgbo's children founded Aguleri (Agulu Eri). Menri with his household and group migrated out to settle in a big uninhabited land, Aguukwu, which became the foundation of Nri whose people began to exercise priestly and magical power inherited from their father, Eri. One of the sons settled among the hills to the southeast of the original settlement, Enugu, which became the foundation of Nsugbe. Onogu migrated to found Igboariam while Ogbodudu established Amanuke. Some children of Menri and those of Adamgbo settled as Nwunyimbe to found Umuleri while another son of Menri founded Nneyi.

This mythichistorical account is concluded thus:

Inter marriages with original inhabitants of the areas under their influence increased the growth and influence of the generations of Eri's children. Then, there were waves of migration and wars and conquests. And this was how the Igbo nation came to be. Igbo oral traditions and accounts trace many Igbo customs, rituals religious beliefs, social practices and codes of behaviours to Eri, the founder of their race.

The second wife of Eri is said to have had a son who 'after a long time left his father and travelled up the river where he founded Igala.'

In another version of Igbo myth of origin (myth 2) some hints are also given about the primordial Igbo family though with character names that are at variance with the personages mentioned in the preceding version (myth 1a).

One of the speculations about the origin of Ndiigbo is that they migrated to the forestlands of West Africa "from desiccating Sahara about ten thousand years ago at the same time as other peoples of the earth including the ancient Egyptians and Greeks were migrating to their own regions." After their migratory trips that led them to different camping sites, they finally settled in Igboetiti between the Olu and Okigwe highlands where they developed their unique culture (Ugonna, 1989: 1)

Myth, according to Ugonna, has it that at this time, Igbo had five sons, namely, Njoku, Isu, Osu, Nkalu and Oru and undisclosed number of daughters. Their population grew steadily and eventually there was great famine, which threatened to wipe out the Igbo family. Igbo complained to Chukwu Okike (the Creator) who then told him that their redemption lay in the immolation of his first son, Njoku, and first daughter, Ada (this motif of immolation of first son and first daughter is also related in myth 1a).

Consequently, Chukwu's instruction was carried out and the flesh of Njoku and Ada were cut into pieces and buried in mounds. Tender shoots of yam and cocoyam later sprouted from the mounds where the children were buried respectively. With the crops harvested the famine ceased and the people looked upon the spirit of yam, Ahiajoku, as a saviour. Ndiigbo till today celebrate Ahiajoku festival (Iri ji) in commemoration of Njoku, the sacrificed son of Igbo.

As the people continued to increase and multiply, scarcity of land set in and then migration started. The sons of Oru migrated to the flood plains of the lower Niger; the sons of Osu crossed the Niger and settled in pockets in the forest of Ijebu, Ife and beyond; the sons of Isu migrated to the East and South forming the Nkwere, Echee, Ubani, Ndoki and Asa; the children of Nkalu migrated northwards settling in Wawa, Nsuka and Idoma areas and beyond to the Niger Benue confluence; and the children of Ahiajoku before he was immolated migrated to the Anambra basin under their leader Eri whose progeny established the Nri civilization which spread throughout the forest regions of West Africa (Ugonna, 1989:23).

As can be seen in this tale, the progeny of the five sons of Igbo migrated out in companies according to their father's names as also observed in myth 1a. They settled and

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consolidated in the different areas that could now be delineated as Igbo culture areas.

Though these two versions of origin myths (myths 1a and 2) differ in account, we can discern the occurrence of similar elements in them which suggests that they may be variants of the same original myth but perhaps told in different localities. Due to the oral character of myth, as we have noted earlier, modification, introduction of new elements, reconstruction, etc., are possible as the tale passes from one narrator to another.

It can be deduced from myth 1a that (i) Eri is the primeval father of the Igbo and Igala nations we have today and that (ii) Anambra river basin is the cradle of Igbo civilization being the original habitation from where Ndiigbo dispersed to different areas. Myth 2 portrays 'Igbo' as the ancestral father of the Igbo nation and also identifies the Anambra basin as the cradle of civilization under the influence of Eri and his progeny. But it does not restrict the dispersal and early settlement of Igbo's progeny to areas found in the present Anambra and Enugu states. The migratory trips led the groups to settle in different parts of Igboland: east, west, north and south, and also beyond Igboland: Ijebu, Ife, Idoma, etc.,. Whether this great mythical personage-the founder of Igbo nation-is called 'Eri' or 'Igbo' or any other name that may be found in another version of origin myth, the common fact that underlies our two myth samples is that Ndiigbo recognize that there was a primordial hero father that founded the Igbo nation. Whether the culture hero is said to have met original inhabitants of the earth as myth 1a has it or that he was sent down from heaven to meet an uninhabitable earth, that is not relevant for our purpose here. Our concern is to pinpoint the original affinity of Ndiigbo.

From the point of view of these myths that form the framework of our thinking in this paper that Ndiigbo have a common origin, we can reiterate Ikwubuzo's (2000:95) assumption that:

...the origin of what is today known as the Igbo society or the entire Igbo race can be traced back to a primordial family which according to myth had just one man, Igbo [or Eri], and his children. That was undoubtedly the origin of kinship in Igboland as members of this primordial Igbo family always moved about and settled together, guided by the consciousness that they are of one blood. As the children of Igbo increased, multiplied and dispersed to different locations where they inhabit throughout Igboland, their movement and association were based on kinship consideration. As the population of the erstwhile single family continued to expand, their relationship started becoming distant and different levels of kinship began to develop.

Thus, patrilineage, villages, towns and clans became the organizational levels or the rallying points of defining their closeness as Ndiigbo experienced steady growth.

Today, every Igbo town maintains a high degree of autonomy and behaves as a self contained political entity with internal affairs but it still maintains a general relationship with the neighbouring towns (Ejiofor, 1981). Again, the communities we have today constituting clans or Local Government areas were at a time in history part and parcel of a single community before they became autonomous as a result of growth in populations. Because the phenomenon of growth is continuous, new autonomous communities are still being carved out from the old ones, an exercise which we witnessed in Abia and Imo states, for instance, in the current democratic dispensation. Mbaise, an erstwhile single community, is today divided into more than three Local Government areas and the possibility of their being divided further is still there.

Though the Igbo nation has become complex and human relationship intricate, in the face of threatening forces of disunity, recourse can be had to their myth of origin to restate their agelong affinity and remind the younger generation of the kinship ties that once bound the people together.

For all we know, Ndiigbo regard and esteem kinship relation. They have "an organized kinship system that sustains both individual and collective existence in their society. In the people's cultural, religious and political organizations, the kinship system provides a secure environment of existence. This is because their cultural and socio-political interaction are



mainly based on and sustained by strong kinship affiliation" (Ikwubuzo, 2000).

When this awareness is created among the Igbo youths, it will go a long way in promoting unity in the Igbo nation in the 21st century.

Recommendations: Mobilizing Ndiigbo Towards Organic Unity Using Their Myths of Origin:

There is an urgent need to take some measures to discourage the divisiveness, conflicts and crises of disunity among Ndiigbo. One of the ways lies in emphasizing the people's common descent using their myth of origin, the examples of which we have cited above. Igbo myths of origin can be efficiently deployed to restate the Igbo affinity, socially and culturally with a view to encouraging the unity of the Igbo nation. In order to instill an enduring sense of unity and patriotic spirit into the younger generation of Ndiigbo, there is need to re-orientate, educate and sensitize them to the fact of their common root. They can also be taught their societal values through myths.

What the Igbo approve and disapprove is sometimes reflected in their myths. As an agency of educating the people, Igbo myths also introduce the children in particular, to the various cultural traits of their society and inculcate in them those cultural and moral values of the Igbo that are carried by the myths. Myth 1a, for instance, spells out some code of conduct, which Eri handed down to his people the Igbo race at the beginning to ensure a harmonious coexistence, as the following excerpt expresses:

Eri fell down to the ground and licked the soil as a sign of perpetual covenant, that in his household and among his people no one may violate Aja Ana (the Earth Force) by spilling blood, especially innocent blood, and no one may kill another by violence or poison or witchcraft. Suicide, especially by hanging or drowning would be forbidden as would be forbidden the termination of life in the womb... Eri also vowed to forbid all degrees of incest and carnal relations with a father's wife, the wife of a relation or with a woman in mourning (Emeka, 1989:41).

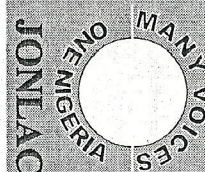
One can do no more than to agree with Lusweti (1984:10) that oral literature of which myth is an aspect "provides a medium for the demonstration of knowledge, values and attitudes from one generation to another". The myth also gives a picture of one united people under the leadership of Eri.

In the traditional Igbo society, myth telling affords the people the opportunity to come together and interact. The participatory nature of myth narration in oral context heightens this interaction and strengthens the relationship in the community. The level of acquaintance and friendship among the audience is beefed up especially when the myth narration involves people from an entire neighbourhood converging to listen to a session of myth narration.

Myths have practical and social functions of promoting a feeling of unity among the members of the society as well as a sense of harmony with the whole nature. It has been observed that myths "counteract the destructive and divisive activities of intelligence" and "promote belief in the solidarity of life" (Sebeok quoted by Ikwubuzo, 1998).

Apart from the social atmosphere generated during a session of myth narration, an atmosphere of togetherness also prevails during any festival associated with a myth. For instance, the Iri Ji Ohuu (New Yam) festival among the Igbo, which is associated with the myth of Ahijoku, the god of yam (mentioned in our myth 2), is one during which social solidarity is fostered. If the occasion of Iri Ji is used throughout Igboland to recreate the myth of the origin of yam and its link to the primordial ancestor of Ndiigbo, it can be a unifying factor. In other words, a feeling of unity will be promoted as the people celebrate and cast their minds back at the mythical epoch when the Igbo race was together as a single family in its celebration of Ahijoku festival.

As one of the ways of enhancing their unity, Ndiigbo can designate Iri Ji Ohuu as 'Ahijoku Day' which will stand as the 'Igbo National Day, to be observed by all on a given date. And to ensure the participation of everybody, and that it does not offend anybody's religious sensibility, this festival has to be divested of all trappings of rituals that are capable of

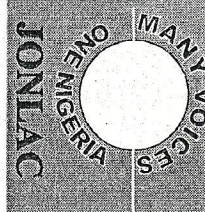


making people regard it as a modernized form of idolatry. It should be organized to suit the taste of the present-day society and be disentangled of all the features that will make people shun it as a meretricious paganism. The Ahiajoku Lecture Festival has already been instituted as a forum for erudite Igbo scholars to give an expose of the Igbo society from any perspective at all (historical, political, etc.,) with the aim of projecting the image of the Igbo nation. This Lecture that enjoys the sponsorship of Southeast governors can be one of the activities to mark the suggested Igbo National Day (Ahiajoku Day). Ndiigbo at home and in Diaspora are to celebrate this day annually.

We also recommend the inclusion and teaching of Igbo myths of origin in the oral literature curricula of our educational institutions. Here, the Igbo children and youths will be the main target audience. In recent time in Nigeria, we have seen a preponderant production of home videos. The youths' addiction to these videos and the resultant influence on them is enormous as they are the greatest consumers of the video products. Adult also are not left out. Our dramatists, video makers in the film Industry can be encouraged through sponsorship and patronage to adapt Igbo myths of origin for the stage, television, etc. Violence, which features in some of the existing home videos, should not be incorporated in such dramas. Instead, the dramatists should emphasize those humane traits love, tolerance, hospitality, accommodation, being one's brother's keeper, etc with which our people were known in the past. Such dramas should also portray how feats could be achieved and tasks accomplished by collective efforts. This can be used to promote the unity of both the younger and older generation of Ndiigbo.

If the Igbo children and youths are taught their societal myths and encouraged to imbibe the tenets of peaceful coexistence and other cherished virtues embodied in those myths, they will turn out to be peace loving people who will work together for the interest of their society. This way, myth of origin becomes a veritable tool for achieving and enhancing panIgbo unity in the 21st century. Thus, the philosophy of mutual coexistence and solidarity encapsulated in the Igbo saying, 'Idi n'otu bu ike' ('Unity is strength'), will be the guiding principle of Ndiigbo in their pursuit of a common cause.

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APPENDIX



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Note:

There are other versions of Igbo myth of origin (see Nwosu, 1983; Ugonna, 1984; Nwala; 1985; Ikwubuzo, 1998; Kalu, 1999)

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