



Poverty Alleviation in Igbo Traditional Society: A Response from Indigenous Religion

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses poverty alleviation in Igbo traditional society as one critical response from the people's indigenous religious metaphysics. The Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria are known from antiquity for their religiosity, industry and egalitarianism, among other virtues. As a people, they abhor material poverty (Ogbenye) and more so, relational poverty (Mgbenye). Therefore, from their world view which has a porous demarcation between the secular and the sacred, they evolved poverty alleviation schemes. The findings of this paper reveal that the success stories of these programs were based on love of neighbour, contentment, honesty, industry, communitarian spirit and other cultural values which were made robust by their indigenous religion. Based on the findings, this work therefore calls on the Igbo indigenes both at home and in diaspora to continue along these moral virtues and positive social values got from their ancestors as they do not contradict the ways of Christianity which majority of us have embraced. The implication of this persuasion is the need by both Igbo people and all persons on earth to eschew immoral vices such as corruption, sale of babies and human parts, assassination, fraud and human trafficking, looting and thuggery, prostitution, cultism and ritual money, et cetera as means of fighting poverty which are prevalent today in many indigenous and modern societies. The methodology employed in this work is "Culture Area Approach" which means that this study focused on Igbo cultural context with special interest on her traditional poverty alleviation methods as peculiar evolutions from her Indigenous Religion.

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1. Introduction

Poverty is universally understood as a situation of material and non-material deprivation. This deprivation manifests in an obvious lack of capabilities, opportunities and security necessary for a dignified human existence. Poverty breeds moral depravity, economic disabilities, social alienation and backwardness. The term poverty is a household concept loaded with nuances. *The Readers Digest Great Illustrated Dictionary* (1984: 132), defines poverty "as having little or no wealth and few or no possessions, being dependent on charity, destitute, wanting or lacking in financial and other resources; it means to live in a sub-human condition". According to Okwueze (2003: 42), poverty generally speaking, means "a condition of lack of basic life needs especially material needs. It is a state of being so wretched and without any means of livelihood". For Gutierrez (1973: 288), poverty means first and foremost the lack of economic goods necessary for a human life worthy of the name. This aptly designates material poverty. Mveng (1963:154 – 165 in Obodochina, 2005:193) defines poverty as "basically a lack and deprivation of goods judged to be useful or necessary for the normal life of a human person living in a given society situated in space and time". Goods necessary for a normal life is not restricted to the material only; therefore, there are other goods, namely: spiritual, moral, cultural, sociological to mention but four whose lack brings about other types of poverty such as spiritual, moral, cultural and sociological poverty.

In line with the multiple dimensions of poverty, Nnamani (2000: 3 - 29) identifies five classes of poverty: material, existential, anthropological, relational and spiritual. According to him:

- *Material poverty* refers to the lack of basic necessities of life.
- *Existential poverty* depicts an impoverished life style of a morally depraved individual. The victim of existential poverty may be materially poor or could be the wealthy who become slaves of riches, exploitation and selfishness.
- *Anthropological poverty* refers to the interior state of loss of selfhood as a result of a protracted experience of poverty, humiliation and oppressive situation. The disastrous consequences of anthropological poverty include inferiority complex and loss of self worth. An example is the impoverished effects of colonization on Africans.
- *Relational poverty* is the loss of kin and friends, the breakdown of communion between neighbours in such a way that each is in the shell of his/her own world. Death of friends and family members, exile or ostracism can lead to relational poverty.
- *Spiritual poverty* is an interior attitude of detachment from worldly goods. The spiritually poor, may have enormous earthly wealth but he/she is detached from them. This is also called "poverty in the spirit" (Matthew 5:3). Obodochina (2005: 194) notes with Mveng (1963: 154 - 165) that poverty apart from being material has also the

anthropological-structural dimension. Anthropological-structural poverty is:

... when persons are deprived not only of goods and possessions of a material, spiritual, moral, intellectual, cultural, or sociological order, but of everything that makes up the foundation of their being-in-the-world and the specificity of their "ipseity" as individual, society, and history – when persons are bereft of their identity, their dignity, their freedom, their thought, their history, their language, their faith universe, and their basic creativity, deprived of all their rights, their hopes, their ambitions (that is when they are robbed of their own ways of living and existing) – they sink into a kind of poverty which no longer concerns only exterior or interior goods, or possessions but strikes at the very being, essence, and dignity of the human person (Mveng, 1963: 154 – 165 cited in Obodochina, 2005: 194).

New Encyclopedia Britannica (Vol. 9) classifies poverty according to the dimensions of : 1. time or duration (long or short-term or cyclical) or distribution (widespread, concentrated or individual). The classifications are further explained in the *New Encyclopedia Britannica* thus:

- *Cyclical poverty* refers to poverty that may be widespread throughout a population but the occurrence itself is of limited duration;
- *Collective poverty* which quite unlike the cyclical poverty is temporary and involves a relatively permanent insufficiency of means to secure basic needs – a condition that is characteristically general and describes the average level of life in a society or that may be found in relatively large groups in an otherwise prosperous society.
- *Case poverty* refers to the lack of ability of an individual or family to secure basic needs even in the social environment characterized by general prosperity. This inability is generally related to the lack of some basic capabilities that would enable the individual to maintain oneself.

In this work, the focus is primarily on material poverty. This is called *ogbenye*. In Igbo traditional society, there are still other forms of poverty such as relational poverty called *mgbenye*, a lack of kith and kin and so on.

Poverty alleviation is the umbrella term that refers to the strategies and policy actions of government or non-governmental organizations aimed at the breaking of the vicious cycle of the harsh realities of lack and deprivation. In Igbo traditional society, there are poverty alleviation schemes which the indigenes used to help the poor in their midst. These schemes were not introduced by Christianity, western education, colonization nor the civil government of today in her inept poverty eradication or poverty reduction programmes. Rather, they were *native products* of Igbo people within the contexts of the sociology of the family system and the metaphysics of their indigenous religion. Madu (1997:7) writes that "...the Igbos can find answers to their day to day existential problems. They are not alone. They are in communion with gods, with fellow men and inanimate matter. The Igbo man is a being in relations". Poverty is one of such problems whose answer they got from their world view.

The objective this paper is to present poverty alleviation strategies in Igbo traditional society. Nsukka traditional society is a typical specimen of traditional society in Igboland. We shall draw inspirations and present illustrations from the enormous cultural wealth of Nsukka people which are rich treasures permeated with various poverty alleviation

schemes. Our starting point naturally is the family, the nucleus of the society.

2. The Family System in Igbo Traditional Society

According to Ele (2006: 83 - 87), Nsukka traditional society is built around the family at the foundation, the extended family (*Umunna*), the kindred (*Nkporu*), the town (*Obodo*) and the tribe (*Agburu*) at the peak of social structure. Among Nsukka people, there is a high sense of community, a deeper sense of communion and a strong sense of family loyalty, all rooted in the sacred bath of consanguinity or the strong tie of affinity. The individual person is defined and appreciated in terms of his or her family ties. Consequently, a person is identified primarily and most importantly as a member of a particular family. Hence, social anthropology is based on the metaphysics of being – with – others expressed in integral belongingness to the kith and kin of familyhood. The I-existence as elaborated by the Cartesian "*cogito ergo sum*" (I think therefore I am) is not true for Nsukka people instead, the we-existence within the warmth and integralness of the family is of paramount importance to Nsukka people. This is why exile and banishment from one's relations remain terrible punishments in her traditional society.

In Nsukka culture, the extended family system is obtained. It is a strong family tie. So "brothers" and "sisters" go beyond the immediate nuclear family to include a group of persons and families who are descendants of one common ancestor. The individual person is the icon of his or her family whose history and respect he or she carries and represents wherever he or she goes. This informs the reason why marriage inquiry is taken very seriously. The family background of the suitor and spinster are investigated thoroughly and respectively by each party before marriage. There are reasons for doing this: first, every individual is conscious of family respect which he or she represents, therefore, people tend to behave well. The children of those families that are known for crimes like adultery, murder, robbery and other abominations in the land find it difficult to get married. This is because the idea of the family is related with blood, character and image in the traditional thought pattern. If a particular family goes with the trade mark that "robbery is in their blood" for example, other families will not like to have marital affinity with such a family. The neglect of thorough pre-marital inquiries as some do today has led to divorce and other hazardous consequences in the homes in particular and the society at large. Secondly, the kindred whose good image is threatened or tarnished by one of their own punishes the defaulting family or individual with fines, banishment or sanctions like social ostracism. The judicial structure protects morality and justice.

People generally dread being cut off from one's family. Consequently, everybody works towards solidarity, familyhood, community building and togetherness. In typical traditional family, every person feels at home. The welfare of the individual remains a serious concern for the entire family. In ancient Nsukka society, there is no house built specifically as old people's home and neither do beggars roam the streets. There is no motherless baby brought up in an anonymous environment that has no reference to his or her bio-social roots. Ordinarily, these old people, beggars, motherless babies and other less privileged in the society are taken care of in the elastic provisions of the extended family system. For example, in the violent crisis that preceded the Nigerian-Biafra Civil War (1967 - 1970), about fifty thousand people of Eastern Nigeria origin were murdered in the North. This

led to the mass exodus of two million people of Igbo origin into the East as refugees. These were absorbed by their kith and kin, the blood relations of their nuclear and extended families. Ojukwu (1969:8 cited in Ngwoke, 2005:162 - 163) wrote on the assimilation of the refugees thus:

Typical of the people of Eastern Nigeria, now Biafra, the people collectively and individually rose to the occasion by giving all they could and making sacrifice in order to absorb their kith and kin now back to them for refuge. The value of our extended family system stood the test and foreigners who visited were amazed that people were not found in the streets or begging for food.

We see this solidarity that alleviates poverty in the life of *Umuofia* people living in Lagos in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. In this novel we see that President of *Umuofia* Progressive Union, Lagos Branch, quietened the objections of some members who felt that Obi Okonkwo did not deserve to be assisted from Union funds in his legal troubles with the words that "... a kinsman in trouble had to be saved, not blamed; anger against a brother was felt in the flesh not in the bone". (Achebe, 1999 : 4 quoted in Ngwoke, 2005 : 163). This is solidarity among *Ndi Igbo* (Igbo people).

The principle of solidarity in Igboland shows that each person as a member of a family and the society is indissolubly linked to the destiny of the entire community at large. In Igboland a purely individualistic cosmology does not exist. There is a huge presence of "We - consciousness". Among *Ndi Igbo*, there exists a very strong community spirit which projects the interdependence between the individual and the society. As succinctly put by Uchendu (1965 : 34; 2):

Community spirit is very strong among the Igbo. Almost from the first, the individual is aware of his dependence on his kin, group and community. He realized the necessity of making his contribution to the group to which he owes so much. He seldom, if ever becomes really detached from the group wherever he may live.

Okwueze (1999:273) sees Igboland as a society which lacked extreme prosperity and abject poverty. Everyone contributes to the economic well being of the community. The more fortunate ones help the poor ones. Consequently, it is a society without beggars. He stresses that:

Igbo societies of pre-Christian era were so organized as to minimize tensions brought about by social inequalities. The extended family system was the superstructure upon which the socio-economic order rested. While success was lauded, it was never done at the expense of the less fortunate and less successful. Like in every society, some were more gifted, more energetic, luckier in their endeavours and therefore more successful while others were impoverished and less successful for varying reasons ranging from physical disability to natural diseases or outright ill-luck. What is very striking, however, is that each case, relations (nuclear and extended), friends and the community at large were on hand to provide help that would cushion the economic deprivations that ordinarily would have followed such misfortunes or lack of success in life endeavours. It is, however, to be noted that this arrangement will hardly avail the indolent. It is only meant for those whose lack of success is not their own making (Okwueze, 1999:280).

The above insight is shared by many as true in ancient Igbo society. As Ike and Edozien (2010:115) wrote:

No one owns food or a chattel absolutely, because his kinsfolk and even outsiders may have claims upon it

which he has difficulty in denying. Among the Igbos, certain fruits and crops growing in the farmyard of another could be plucked by any member of the kindred and eaten without being charged of stealing. During the harvesting period, the less privileged and lazy ones, are allowed to go to another's farm in search of left-over yams, cassava and other crops, which they could take away with them. They are not, if seen, charged with stealing for the original harvesting has already been done by the owner of the farm. In this way, poor man was not reduced to a beggar status, as this role was very shameful, in tribal society. But the poor man had to do a little work for himself, by going into another's farm after the owner has done original harvesting and taking to himself crops and other eatables left.

The above explains love of neighbor and commitment to the welfare of the poor among the traditional Igbo indigenes of Southeastern Nigeria. In the following subsection, we shall discuss the poverty alleviation strategies in Igbo traditional society. These poverty alleviation schemes are cultural practices as found in her indigenous religion. Indigenous Religion of *Ndi Igbo* is native to them based on their understanding of God (*Chukwu Abiama*), the word (*uruwa*) and the human person (*mmadu*); in short their world view. Every activity of the Igbo person is at once secular and sacred as both are inseparably linked in Igbo religious metaphysics.

3. Poverty Alleviation Strategies in Igbo Traditional Society

In Igbo traditional society, one can observe the following alleviation strategies:

▪ The Rule about the Left Over after Harvest

The lazy person or the poor who has not enough food to eat and sustain his or her family could gather the left-overs from other people's farm after harvest. The traditional society does not frown at this practice and the original owners do not sell such for the sustenance of their family nor regard it as stealing. Rather it is part of her elastic provisions designed to alleviate poverty. The farmer does not insist on harvesting the broken part of the tuber of yam that remains in the soil because the poor can come looking for it. Igbo society is an industrious one and therefore does not expect her members to fold their hands and wallow in poverty. If one must eat, he or she must work for it. The poor who gather the left overs by this means are seen as working for their living. They have the right to sell the excesses for money, privately consume them or dispose of them the way they choose. This is also the case for those who pick palm kernels from trees not really owned by them. They can crack and sell such for the sustenance of their family. The cassava sticks are not sold in traditional societies. One is allowed to get from another person's farm by cutting one wherever two sticks were joined or two where there were more.

▪ The Use of Economic Trees

The traditional societies have internal regulatory system that harnesses the use of economic trees in such a way that the poor are taken care of. For instance, the *Ugiri* (*Ujuru*) fruits (*Irvingia sp*) could be collected by the hungry provided that he or she does not take away the seeds. In some communities, the owner of the *Ugiri* or *Ogbono* plant (*Irvingia Vobulus*) has the exclusive right over the ones that fall in the night. After that, all other ones that would fall during the day could be collected by any other person. This is to ensure that the poor members of the community do not lack this important condiment. This rule applies to *Ukwa* fruit

(*Elaise gunnesis*) in some communities where the lucky ones carry it when it falls. The poor can also go round to gather dry palm kernels found at the foot of palm trees from unharvested palm fruits. This is not regarded as stealing (*Ishi ukpa aki, abughi izu ori*). This applies to *prospis Africana*, (*Okpeye* or *Ugba*) and African oil bean tree that is *pentaclethra macrophylla* (*Ukpaka*). The poor are free to gather *Ukpaka* and *Okpeye* (*Ugba*) seeds from any farmland provided that these had fallen to the ground. In some communities, those who have enough palm trees that bear much fruits offer some to the poor to harvest and process for them. A given percentage of oil is given to the owner annually while the poor keeps back the rest and the kernels for herself.

▪ **Livestock**

In traditional societies, livestock such as cows, sheep, goats, fowls are reared as sources of meat, money and prestige. It is also a common practice that those who have this livestock give the young ones to their poor neighbours to rear. The arrangement is that as these animals reproduce, the young ones will be shared between them. Some poor ones have through this provision become rich and can now feed their families and take care of other basic needs.

▪ **Provision for the Aged**

The Igbo traditional society makes provision for her aged. In Nsukka area for example, certain economic trees are exclusively preserved for the aged. If the aged are allowed to care for themselves, they will die in abject poverty because they do not have the strength again. The society then provides the security that shields them from poverty. Hence, we have *Nkwu Onyishi* (the eldest man's palm trees), *Oji* (*cola acuminato*) *Onyishi* (the eldest man's kola nut), *Ala Uhu* (the eldest man's land attached to his position), *Obu eshu* (the heart of a cow or beef) as the specific preserve of the eldest man (*Ochoro Onyishi*). When hunters come back from hunting expedition some game (animals) are surrendered to the eldest person or the elderly as ways of offering them both care and sources of protein.

The *Onyishi* (the eldest man in the kindred) or the *Okpara* (family head) enjoy this poverty alleviation scheme as far as they live. When they die, their successors inherit them. There are old persons (*Onyishi* or *Okpara*) in Nsukka area who have ten (10) drums of palm oil or more as the annual yield of their palm trees to say nothing about other economic trees like *Ugiri* and *Akpaka*. With these, they solve their problems and live a life worthy of the dignity of the human person. This is the result of the wisdom in our traditional system that steers functionally the structure of poverty alleviation.

▪ **Traditional Micro-credit Scheme**

Igbo traditional societies have associations whose philosophy has economic perspectives. The associations could be an age grade, women groups, family meeting, *et cetera*. A member of the association or even a non-member can apply for loan from the association's common fund. At the presentation of kola nuts, coconut or palm wine as the case may be, one can make request to borrow from the association. Most often, collateral security may not be needed based on the understanding that most facts about most individuals are almost known to all in the village setting. The beneficiary of the loan could be asked to return it at the appointed time with nothing or little interest.

Such credit facilities are encouraged and approved when one presents his or her reasons to include the establishment of a new business or to support an already existing one.

However, when it is for the reason of marrying a second wife or for social ceremonies such as funerals or title taking, the request may be turned down. Most association in Igbo traditional societies have money in their common purses placed under the care of honest members from which they solve the problems of the association, members or non members threatened by poverty.

▪ **Economic empowerment through thrift**

In Igbo traditional societies, a group of people of same class, friendly ties or business circles gather together for thrifts. This can occur weekly, monthly or bi-monthly. The membership can range from three to any number they can contain and control. The operation is rotatory in character. The members contribute a given sum of money which they give to the person whose turn it is to collect. The same amount goes round to each and every member in turn. People who are involved in this thrift (*itu isusu*) have by this token alleviated poverty variously.

Other strategies

In traditional Igbo society, one can see that the attitude of the wealthy helping the less fortunate was common. As observed by Ike and Edozien (2001:113 - 115):

The Igbo attitude to wealth in traditional society was not that of accumulation, but that of using basic wealth to keep one's family together and feed them, and using the same wealth to help the less fortunate members of the community. Greatness was merited through sharing and giving out what one has to others. Women were conditioned to reciprocal sharing of food, crops and other goods with their fellow women. A woman after cooking, would send some of it through her child to another woman to enhance sharing and this was correspondingly reciprocated. Rather than accumulate, she extended her individual responsibility outside her own house hold.

There was communitarian way of eating in the traditional Igbo society. One could eat food wherever food was found. This helped the balanced growth of children from poor homes. This cultural value has been lost to modernity or even to the fear of being poisoned. Ugwu (2002:195), writes that "the Igbo communitarian spirit, community consciousness and community solidarity are all the fruits of their residential structure"

During traditional feasts in Igboland, food items are shared. In Nsukka area for instance, the rich relation, friend or neighbour who killed fowls, goats, pig, ram or cow as the case may be would religiously share portions of the chicken, pork, turkey, chevon, mutton or beef respectively to the less fortunate ones.

Again, thatched houses were built for widows and the weakling through the joint efforts of family members and neighbours. Children from polygamous homes did help out in the farms of the barren parents or those who have fewer children. The traditional society generated from within her structure these poverty alleviation schemes because of its deep sense of solidarity and sharing. As Mbiti (1982:108 - 109) wrote about the African:

When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone, but with kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or living. When he gets married, he is not alone; neither does the wife belong to him alone, so also the children belong to the corporate body of kinsmen, even if they bear only their father's name. Whatever

happens to the whole groups, happens to the individual. The individual can say: I am because we are; and since we are, therefore; I am.

In line with the above, Onwubiko (1988:22) maintains that poverty was a foreign concept among Africans. A community may have poor people but it may not have beggars. A beggar in this context meant someone who is not accommodated in the elastic means of the community, life and resources. In the traditional societies of Igboland, there is hope for every member's survival due to the collective effort of the fortunate who help alleviate sufferings of the unfortunate or the less fortunate.

4. Recommendations

In order to ensure that *Ndi Igbo* in these modern times do not perish in want, the following recommendations are made:

1. There is need to continue the ancient traditional schemes of alleviating poverty in Igboland which existed before the advent of the obnoxious foreign cultures that eroded our ways of family social net and communitarian spirit. They unfortunately offered us in exchange for those good cultural values the vices of selfishness and individualism.
2. These traditional practices which are underlined by love of neighbor and help to the poor are very basic principles in biblical cultures and in Christianity. Igbo people are largely Christians and therefore should have interest in living out these Christian principles by practicing them.
3. There is greater need to make the fundamentals of poverty alleviation programmes in governmental circles and other non-governmental organizations those virtues found in Igbo traditional society. These include honesty, accountability, industry, collaboration, among others. In the situation where poverty alleviation strategies impoverish the poor and enrich the rich as found in dishonest modern circles should be resisted.
4. The coast of the subsistent poverty alleviation schemes in the characteristics of peasant variety should be enlarged to meet global features. In ancient traditional societies and times, animals could be reared in few numbers for domestic use and for prestige, today the perceptions of the activity as business of commercial dimensions and global trends should be appreciated.
5. The youths in modern Igbo society should shun laziness, idleness and become fully interested in agriculture and other good means of livelihood. This too means that the supportive hands of both adults and governments of all levels are needed.
6. The management of micro-credit scheme should continue among the various age groups, women groups and associations in Igboland as in the olden days. However, they should link the safety of those financial securities with the modern banking systems of micro-finance banks or commercial banks which are many across the length and breadth of Igboland.
7. Poverty alleviation through the sale of babies and human parts, kidnapping, human trafficking, assassination, advanced fee fraud (419 syndrome), political thuggery, proliferation of fake churches, looting of government treasuries and public property *et cetera* are crimes which are unwanted in Igboland. Traditional institutions and churches in Igboland should preach against these evils and unrecognize their perpetrators.

5. Conclusion

Igbo people are known for their great sense of egalitarianism and industry. It is in the psyche of every Igbo

person to abhor poverty. Material poverty, *Ogbenye onu ntu* – a kind of hunger that forces one to lick ash, roasting palm fruits and the likes yet goes unsatisfied are not acceptable in Igbo culture. However, when poverty strikes, whether from natural or man-made means, Igbo society from ancient times cushioned, reduced and eradicated poverty by her traditional methods which evolved from her indigenous world view. These schemes which are noble and dignifying should be allowed to exist and thrive even today. Let us take away from the traditional society that our ancestors were contended with what they had as they detached from materialism and were religious people. It becomes necessary to assert that fight against poverty through the evil means of sale of babies, adult and human parts, fraud, assassination and thuggery, human trafficking, money rituals, looting and criminal ways are offences against God, humanity and the Igbo nation in particular.

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