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The Igbo nation, I salute you.

The Igbo nation, you shall prosper.

Your strange neighbours both in culture and language,  
shall also live and prosper.

Igbos dwelling at home and those resident in distant  
lands, shall have peace and prosperity.

May grace abide with every child, wherever he lives.

Let each of us, be loyal to his faith.

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**ARCHBISHOP OBINNA**, I offer you an especial  
greeting for this great honour of making me the spokesperson  
of Odenigbo 1999.

Your inspiration, along with the founding members, for establishing the Odenigbo Lectures, is marvelous. The title alone, is exceedingly beautiful. It is like an 'Eagle on Iroko'; one's admiration flirts between the eagle's resplendence and the awesome grandeur of the iroko. This is how I cherish the Odenigbo Lectures; a fable on one side, and the thrill of academic communication in Igbo, on the other. My prayer is for scholarship in Igbo language to rise from its current paralysis, lounge-out and begin to break frontiers.

The day Archbishop Obinna from Owerri traversed seven terrains and swam across seven seas and 'landed into my Seclusion, in a small place called Annandale, New York, I was alarmed. Was there any mishap, I wondered? He replied: by whatever means, you can hurry down to Owerri Archdiocese, where the Igbo nation is ready, waiting for your counsel! Igbos affirm! Consolidate! You shall remain blessed. Archbishop Obinna knows that Chinua Achebe will never trifle with an Igbo mandate: once I am aware that Igbos are eager to hear from me, that my consent and co-operation is automatic. My only anxiety is that the parcel I brought, may be a poor fraction of what you expect from me. My trepidation is that once I mount the exalted chair you have prepared for me, my legs would scarcely touch the ground. I am therefore appealing to you all, to receive me just as I am. I remember a day I accompanied my friend (Sam Nwoye, here present) to vehicle mechanics. After introductions, their foreman then said to my friend: 'is that all?' A similar incidence was during my visit to an elderly man in Ogidi. After introducing me, a colleague of his exclaimed: 'truly, very famous preys are hardly a basketful!' For these reasons once more, please accept me just as I am.

Since more than nine years ago, I embarked upon a sudden and unprepared journey overseas to America and I have had to endure the trauma of not seeing Igboland again, even for a single day. We have a saying that a goat's dense foliage of hairs obscures the evidence that it also sweats. Our consola-

# Tomorrow harbours the unknown, but today is certain

**Chinua Achebe's Odenigbo Lecture**  
**Translated by Obu Udeozo**

tion during the ordeal, myself and my wife and children, are the intercessory prayers we were aware that you were making on our behalf.

Archbishop Obinna deserves the credit of conceiving the title of today's lecture: *Tomorrow Harbours the Unknown* (Echi Di Ime). On further reflections, I realised that though appropriate, it still requires embellishment and reinforcement; in order to shield it from standing alone, since our people believe that a solitary figure is often overwhelmed by cold. And the complimentary pattern by which events and substances occur in nature proves this; an element always attracts a partner, even when that counterpoise is a mere necklace. Which is why we (Igbos) describe an unprecedented evil as uncompanionable shame.

Therefore on shopping for a suitable spouse for Tomorrow in the lecture title, Today was a self evident choice. Rejoicing, I said to my friend Obinna: how about *Tomorrow harbours the unknown*? But Today is certain. He agreed with me. So we stamped and sealed it.

Every individual with common sense, reckons with the ominous significance of the unforeseen. The next daybreak (to paint a fuller picture) is unfathomable and mysterious because God never endowed human beings with knowledge and certainty in grappling with the future.

That the future is more portentous, is an alternate way of saying Tomorrow harbours the unknown. Our prayers and supplications are for the safe delivery of our communal prospects. May our future not portend more sorrows, instead let tomorrow hatch into greater peace and prosperity for Igbos.

A protestant funeral hymn goes:

*By the power of Jesus*

*It shall be well*

*We have hope that tomorrow*

*All will be well.*

With headties, our fore-fathers embellish this maxim thus: heavens forbid a recurrence. It is the same prayer. The same supplication.

However, we need to ask ourselves this question: are there obligations we must discharge while awaiting the said prosperity of the future. Faith and prayers are imperative. Nevertheless, the husband of a woman approaching her labour period should not just sit beside her with the Bible, morning, afternoon and night. After considerable prayers, he ought to procure maternity provisions and post-delivery diet and delicacies like 'Mangala' dry fish for special hot pepper soup.

This applies to all of us, while awaiting the blessedness of the future. We need not bury our hands in our laps ex-

**I**ndeed time is no longer in our favour, actually, the twentieth century which expires in a few months has been a monumental waste to us, because we now crawl behind our sprinting contemporaries.

A certain majestic masquerade used to feature in Ogidi, during my childhood. The peculiar questions it posed to elders after exchanging pleasantries with them, made this masquerade remarkable: look at my head and say which is greater, the luggage at my forehead, or the one behind?

By the nature of this masquerade, even goats and chicken know very well, that the accouterment behind its head are more ponderous than those in front. A respondent then replies: 'Mighty and Mysterious One the luggage behind you is greater'.

The majestic masquerade then regales in triumphal laughter, greets you and says: 'Your observations are correct from the viewpoint of human beings. You are not to blame. However, had you assessed me from the perspective of spirits, you would have recognised that the luggage at my forehead is greater. That is why masquerades say that The future is more portentous!'

pecting tomorrow's harvest.

We ought to rise and seek positive engagements as we wait. Even the Bible tells us that prayers or faith without works is what? Dead! (James 1:20)

Various types of works exist: manual labour, spiritual exercise, intellectual engagement and others. I want us to concentrate on the intellectual vacation today. Let us ruminate over the shameful condition of Igbo language at the moment. Compared to Yoruba, or Hausa in Nigeria and Africa or even in the whole world, nothing is more apt for Igbo language, than a status of ridicule and tears. 'How are the mighty fallen?' How could the legendary Igbos, worldwide exemplars of progress, so pathologically regress in the very first index by which a people are esteemed - their mother tongue? When confronted with this question, a majority of people believe that Igbo citizens are addicted to European value-systems and have therefore become bewildered, with



*Sculptures by AkaiSON, Port Harcourt 1996 ©Owen Logan*

the consequence that they are now neither whites nor even Igbos.

Such a state of affairs, in our native communities usually compel people to seek divination for possible remedies. The equivalent prognosis is what I enjoin this very assembly of Igbos to embark on here and now. However, I wish to stress that no traditional healers, divination or soothsaying surpasses the insight and therapeutic wisdom of Igbos gathered here. Igbos accept my salute. Tomorrow harbours the unknown, but today is certain.

Indeed time is no longer in our favour, actually, the twentieth century which expires in a few months has been a monumental waste to us, because we now crawl behind our sprinting contemporaries. But endless self-pity, self-flagellation and despair is no road to recovery. The only crucial thing is to gain insight about our tragedy, to ascertain at what point our ruination ensued. After such an introspection, it becomes easier to re-engineer our future.

I shall disclose to you my discoveries about the roots of our present crisis.

It started about a hundred years ago. When the Christian Missionary Society (C.M.S) sent a certain young man called T. J. Dennis, as one of their missionary evangelists in Onitsha. Dennis reached Onitsha in 1894 and joined the C.M.S. establishment in Igboland that was founded in 1857. As an institution, the C.M.S. was about thirty-seven years, when this young man called Dennis was recruited into their service.

As a youth, Dennis was zealous for the gospel of Christ and a tireless evangelist. He was not from a particularly affluent background, which explains why his education never attained the level of his initial aspirations. Yet his people were an enterprising and faithful followers of the Christian doctrine.

Dennis was born in 1869. On the exact day he was twenty years of age, he offered himself for missionary evangelism in Africa. The C.M.S. establishment welcomed and inducted him into a four-year pastoral training programme. He was ordained Deacon in 1893 and posted to Freetown, Sierra Leone, where he served for one year before travelling to Onitsha in 1894.

Dennis knew nothing in Igbo language on reaching Onitsha, but he was bubbling with the zest to learn. After a year, however, he admitted that he could not understand a single Igbo word out of fifty sentences in the sermon that was preached in Igbo. Perhaps he had presumed that stepping unto Onitsha would translate into fluency in Igbo comparable to the native speakers themselves, ignoring the fact that Igbo language is not a dance you navigate with tobacco snuff in your palm. But Dennis is no quack who flees from the spirits he was invited to exorcise. So he stooped to learn the language.

A critical requirement in missionary evangelism is the onus of translating the Bible into the Mother-tongue of the native converts. And the Niger Mission (as the C.M.S. in Onitsha were earlier called) had already initiated this pains-



taking process. J. C. Taylor, the pioneer of the translation exercise, had arrived in Onitsha in the company of Crowther in 1857. Taylor was from Sierra Leone but his father and mother were former Igbo slaves. Taylor was not fluent in Igbo when he got to Onitsha, but was essentially an Igbo in spirit. This latent consanguinity was amplified by the presence of another Sierra Leonian, called Jonasi, a member of Crowther's team, who spoke Igbo superbly.

Taylor deserves the honour of having laid the foundation for the C.M.S. domination in Onitsha. His select texts and New Testament translations in Igbo, were the bedrock of Christian worship in the Niger Mission at the time Dennis got to Onitsha in 1894.

Dennis wasted no time in discrediting the existing translations he met, on the allegations that Taylor lacked proficiency in English. But that was a pretext. The ulterior motive of Dennis was the distinction of becoming the sole translator of the Bible in Igbo language.

As I earlier stated, Dennis was a dedicated missionary. So he braced up and embarked upon recasting or restructuring (as he deemed fit) certain legacies that were already in place. In addition to these, he undertook the assignment

Dennis realised that each of the multiple clans of Igbo land had different dialects, and configured another assignment to undertake. He felt frustrated by these variations in idioms, and resolved to cure what he considered a mosaic of discordant tongues. However, from ancestry, Igbos had always appreciated the unique vernaculars of their various clans. Not other ethnic groups like Hausa or Yoruba, but different communities within the Igbo nexus. Yet those multifarious dialects of varying communities never prevented Igbos from comprehending the *sotto voce* and non-verbal cues in their interactions. But Dennis failed to make this simple deduction.

The rainbow of dialects presented by Igbos therefore became his stomachache, a source of sleeplessness and anguish to Dennis. How could this capricious language be tamed into a polished medium for spreading the gospel of Christ in the whole of Igboland. So he contrived a solution which involved sieving representatives from Bonny, Onitsha, Unwana (Afikpo) and Owerri, for a conference in Egbu Owerri, where they would synthesise a new, neutral and mulatto Igbo which no ethnic group could lay claim to, but would nevertheless, belong to all. Union Igbo, in other words,

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of translating the remaining aspects of the Bible into Igbo. In 1910, publishers in England issued a complete New Testament Bible in Onitsha dialect; its English version being Niger Ibo New Testament. If we recall that only within six years of setting foot on Igbo soil, without a molecule of knowledge of Igbo language, the scale of this young man's fire devouring ingenuity now sparkles. Still, we are merely at the periphery of his enterprise. The zealot that he was, Dennis achieved the complete translation of the Old Testament, dispatched it overseas and secured its publication in 1906. Without further testimonies, Dennis is indeed a brave man.

Were the exploits and feats of Dennis quantifiable, these inquiries we are engaged in today, the desperate diagnosis we have assembled here to make, would never have been necessary. But Dennis is like the Ugwuoba woman, who after being praised for her coco-yam regale, dipped her two feet into the mortar, in order to increase its palate tickling power. Or the Asaba woman, who inflates compliments regarding her daughter's beauty with: 'ever seen her after showers and make-up?' It is the bath which Dennis gave the Igbo language that has become our undoing.

the Igbo of harmony, became the offspring of this alchemy.

From my presentation, you might think that Dennis was a solitary agent in the C.M.S. at Niger Mission. Others: Whites and Blacks were also present. The leader of the C.M.S. in Onitsha, was Archdeacon Dobinson, who had lived in Igboland for several years, Reverends Smith and Basden (the one we all know), Miss Warner the founder of St. Monica, the first college for women in Igboland, and numerous others. Black Africans were also around, but that is besides the point, since they were not the owners of the gospel. Nevertheless, what were the feelings of fellow white missionaries about the policies and programmes of Dennis in respect of the Union Igbo? A man like Basden raised his objections quite early, both Miss Warner and Smith found the exercise reprehensible, but Dennis was unruffled, especially with the backing of Bishop Tugwell the Supreme Head of the Church Mission. Even without the Bishop's support, Dennis had already presumed a Divine approval in respect of his vision.

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One of the branches of the C.M.S. located in Bonny called the Niger Delta Pastorate (NDP) and their director, the first son of Crowther, were opposed to the ongoing Igbo Bible translation in Onitsha. So they embarked upon an alternate translation based on the Iuama dialect. Dennis and Bishop Tugwell, his patron, immediately launched surreptitious assaults on this new exercise, by contacting publishers of the Bible overseas, with the alibi to stop-press until a multi-axial conference of the NDP, the Methodists, the Presbyterians and the Qua-Ibo, who were also evangelists in the entire Igbo region yields a unanimous consensus. And that it was only after these deliberations that a communique would be issued on the viability or otherwise, of translating the Bible in Iuama. In August 1904, this conference was summoned. Note that 1904 is the year my father gained admission into the College at Awka, from where he proceeded into the teaching profession. So he was alive and a witness to these events I am narrating. Dennis was not present in Onitsha for that conference. And the entire delegates accepted that translating the Bible into both Onitsha and Iuama dialects were commendable ventures. But Dennis had become a juggernaut in those years, someone whose absence must reverse earlier decisions, however noble. And because he was absent in the previous conference, in 1905, he organised another convention, and ensured that it was well coordinated; that Bishop Tugwell himself was not merely present, but was made the chairman of the assembly. And all things worked in accord with his solemn dreams.



It is a fact that not all the participants in the Asaba conference approved of the Agenda of Dennis, but they eventually fell silent, because those who voted for the motion were now in the majority.

Dennis chose Egbu Owerri, as the Headquarters for the envisaged programmes. In 1906 along with select assistants, he left Onitsha for Egbu, for the onward translation of the Bible into a language he called Union Igbo which Dennis aspired that all Igbos would speak in the future. To invent the language Dennis roamed across several sections of the Igbo nation selecting a key-word from one cultural entity, and from the next community an adjacent phoneme, and from the third location, the adjoining phrase in order to compose the eventual sentence. The three specific towns they concentrated on were-Onitsha, Bonny and Unwana, because Bible translation had already been initiated in these idioms.

I want everyone to note that I am not here to lampoon Dennis or his ministry. I only wish to assert that a language is not metal a blacksmith handles, pokes into the fire, withdraws and begins to flatten or mould as he fancies. A language is sacred, mythic and mysterious. It lives and breathes. And provides the differentiation between human beings and fellow animals of other species. Such treasure is what a stranger from the land my ancestors are owing herds of cattle, would arrive, confiscate my language, truss it up and discard with an advice that we shall find the out-come most profitable in the future.

The year 1913 ought to be imperishable, as the time Archdeacon Dennis invoked the deluge that is battering Igbo language today. That was the moment publishers in London issued the amazing phenomenon called the Union Igbo Bible. A crucial question is, where were the Igbos? Who owns the clothes a goat is chewing? Where was Anyaegbunam, the first ordained Reverend in Igboland, where was he? What about A.C. Onyeabo - the first consecrated Bishop in Igboland. Frankly, these people were also present during the conference, but were grossly underprivileged. Indeed they had forsaken the devil and all his machinations, but they do not own the gospel.

In 1918, G. T. Basden, as the Secretary of the C.M.S. in Onitsha dispatched questionnaires over the Union Igbo Bible, to ascertain the opinions of white missionaries, African priests and those of the West Indies. As Basden himself reported, all the white respondents forwarded their feedback on the survey... I shall state the rest in English: 'Of the native clergy the three youngest answered... The reason why the native clergy have not answered is that they are afraid to state their opinions on paper'.

It was Basden alone, that relentlessly opposed the notion of Union Igbo. From all indications however, Dennis triumphed over Basden. But Basden was hardly the one defeated, the real victim is Igbo language, that has become bastardised.

In all the ensuing years of bickering and controversies over the validity or otherwise of the Union concept, Dennis and his colleagues were fixed upon the singular axiom of comprehension. Do Onitsha people understand Union Igbo? Do natives of Owerri comprehend Iuama? Not once did Dennis bother with the intrinsic melody of the contrived words. Nor did he reminisce on whether that novel language could ever express ecstasy in songs, or shattering sorrow. Such sublime questions were of no consequence to Dennis. Yet Basden apprehended these dysfunctions and their future implications: 'Bible reading becomes a burden, rather than a duty and pleasure .... One can not find Lancashire, Devonshire, Cornish and Somerset dialects mixed up in our Bible. Why should such a system be inflicted upon a poor, uneducated people ....'

Nevermind whether or not Igbos are 'poor uneducated people'. The truth in Basden's declarations is that the damage Dennis did to the Igbo language is both unprecedented and flagitious. No where else has such an experiment been

carried out. It is important for all of us to recognise this, that what transpired over Igbo language in 1913, is unprecedented, grave and criminal.

People who are ignorant of these matters, often cite the examples of the Yoruba or Efik Bibles. They wonder: why do Yorubas have one uniform Bible, whereas Igbos do not. The answer to this question is simple. Yorubas have one uniform Bible because the pioneer of missionary work in Yorubaland was Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a native son of Yorubaland. Among several existing Yoruba dialects, with discernment, he selected just one, Oyo dialect is the one Crowther chose. I shall appreciate your full attention. Crowther never had to learn Yoruba over five or six years, never called a conference of one Ijebu man, one Lagosian, one native of Owo, one individual from Ogbomoshosho, and other representatives from the arrays of dialects in the Yoruba nation, by beckoning on everyone of them to forward a word, forward a word in order to compose a new language they will all speak and understand. Crowther realised intuitively that language is not handcrafted, neither is it a *consomme* nor *bouillabaisse* into which you fling ingredients as you fancy.

**The** oversights and errors committed by Dennis, were beyond the quest of fashioning a single Igbo dialect for translating the Bible. It flowed from the pride and contempt, which a stranger foisted upon a vast nation like Igboland; that he was a speech-engineer, whose mission was to manufacture a new language that is superior to their current idioms, and surpasses the proficiency, of their fore-fathers and everyone else along their genealogy since creation.

Nothing within the purview of my literature reviews or knowledge, bears a hint, that Dennis is either unkind or dubious. Rather he is an indefatigable missionary, whose enthusiasm to help the Igbo people made him to bring his wife, brother and sister, along with him for the sake of that service.

But these fine intentions did not dissuade Dennis from looking down on Igbos or treating their language with disdain. Listen to what he wrote about Igbos:

'Our translational difficulties are two-fold, viz. firstly those arising from the poverty of the Igbo language, and such as arose from differences of dialect. The former are, of course largely chronic in character, and are common not only to all the Ibo dialects, but also many of them to all the barbarous languages'. (Church Missionary Review 1912).

From this excerpt, the two words that erupt in self-advertisement are poverty and barbarous. That Igbo language is neither resourceful nor prosperous but penurious. That it is

a language of uncivilised people comparable to beasts and lacking in sophistication. Tell me, whoever approaches a language with this mentality, will he show deference to that language or utter disdain?

Yet, this prejudice goes beyond Dennis. It paints the traffic of emotions between the White race and Black people over several centuries. For over three hundred years, from across the oceans, Whitemen have descended upon the African soil one step at a time. Their agenda was an unparalleled belligerence. It was equipped with guns, swords and mouthfuls of fire.

The White colonialists did not execute this warfare by themselves, instead they identified and recruited the rascals and hooligans in black nations, gave them weapons, and alcohol and advised them to violate their communities; that after kidnapping men, women or children, that a lucrative market awaits their exploits. The slave trade thus began, quite tentatively, from Dan to Beersheba; everyday, every year, until the whole of Africa for a span of three hundred years was set ablaze!

The Biafran war was not exactly, three years, but consider our devastation after that episode. Now imagine three hundred years, the equivalent of Biafra, one hundred times!

What happened to Africa, in an incomparable catastrophe. Whoever belittles the gravity of the monkey's illness should witness the discomfiture in the opossum's eyes, whose breath, sustained the recovery flames.

When the gospel finally got to Igboland in 1857, the Igbos were already a traumatised people. The throes of life had transformed them into perpetual spendthrifts. Conversely, centuries of slave trade emboldened Whitemen to treat Igbos with derision. Not without basis, did one Onitsha elder vow that on reincarnation, he preferred the status of a stone, to that of a human being. What else must convince us about the deplorable conditions of life in Igboland?

Since the state of affairs in Igboland is tragic, must we blame the missionary for the contempt they bear. The just grounds for blame is that bigotry is not permissible in the teachings of Christ; the other aspect is that Whitemen are the direct architects of the current malaise afflicting Igbos.

Sometimes during my worldwide tours, especially in Western countries, people who have read my books often raise this hypothetical query: Was the advent of Christianity in Africa, a positive or negative experience? The enquiry is a trap. So my usual response is: as its name implies, the gospel is a marvelous message. But the gospel that was exported to Africa had other candidates in the mail bag. The condescension which Whites unleashed against the Black world was also part of that luggage. This superciliousness made Dennis to presume that he was a language-creating god for the Igbos; and that Aro Igbos were ignorant for admitting partial comprehension of Union Igbo, while bemoaning its utter lack of lyricism; more so, that those citizens calling for caution over Union Igbo were all cowards. Onitsha people's nickname for Dennis is 'the conqueror of



iron'. Like a shadow, Igbos believe that a man's name trails him.

This question has been asked before: where were Igbos when these events were taking place; and I reiterated that, despite their actual presence alright, they were pathetically under-privileged. Yet this answer is inadequate. We require a profound diagnosis in order to fathom the challenges that today and the future poses in our lives. After a bee-sting, a child usually flees from even flies. It is true the Igbos had no say at the infancy of the Bible in their land, but there is a certain countenance a man denied audience maintains for on-lookers to know he disagrees with the proceedings. However, Igbos are not united enough to register their discontent. Some people protested. Others were nonchalant. The White colonisers resident in different parts of Igboland pounced on this disunity to further polarise Igbos over the issue into: Onitsha, Isuama 'Bende, Arochukwu and other interest-groups. The question we need to ask ourselves in relation to the present and the future is: why do we find self-destruction attractive; Igbos are experts of internecine conflicts but blind to the war crimes roaring, across their com-

traverse other parts of Igboland, without a single word from the so called Union. Perhaps unknown to him, my maternal grandfather called Iloegbunam was an expert blacksmith who migrated to Okigwe, settled, married and had children within his new environment. Had he any prior need to be conversant with Union Igbo first, before embarking on his expedition? How can one blame the Ogidi woman who surmised that: 'after a certain point of unrestrained scholarship, stupidity's sack explodes'. We shall suspend the exposition on Dennis at this juncture. The tragedy has already occurred. Grieving over the subject is not profitable at all. We can only brood over this event, wistfully supposing that were it a wrestling match, we would gladly seek a re-match. Two or three misconceptions persist on the Union Bible. The first is that Yorubas have one Union Bible which they all read. It is a grave oversight. What Crowther actually did was to select an existing dialect among the Yorubas (Oyo) as their vehicle for preaching the Bible and evangelism. He did not resort to tinkering with Ijebu and Ibadan and Owo and Akure, and Ogbomoshos and others in order to synthesise a Union Yoruba. He chose a living tongue, authentic and in

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mon boundaries.

The C.M.S. established the Awka College for the purpose of training teachers at the beginning of this century. In 1919, one of the ardent supporters of Dennis conducted an opinion survey of the college population on that subject. From his findings nineteen persons voted in support of the Union Bible, whereas, fifteen individuals were opposed to it. The researcher came from London as a member of the British and Foreign Bible Society. And he was quite pleased with the voting pattern he witnessed in Awka. Now, listen to how one Mr. Banfield portrayed the Igbos who were opposed to the Union Bible in his report: 'You know as well as I do that the native has little stability of his own and moves and thinks as his superiors do'. How else shall we describe this attitude? Disdain!

The next point I shall highlight is the mentality of those missionary and academic trainees in Igboland. One of them disclosed to Banfield that: 'It would be good for us to learn and read the Union Bible and then we can be understood wherever we are stationed. This young man in Awka College is oblivious to the fact that indigenes of Awka routinely

use, a dialect that had a home. And whoever had inquiries about it could seek recourse to its roots.

The second mistake is the belief that what Dennis did to the Igbo language is a normal and natural course of development which every language group undergoes over time when left alone. Dr. Westerman revealed that what Dennis did to Igbo is a process small language groups in Europe achieve for themselves by accretion in the past. The only difference being that what Dennis engineered 'was done by one person within a definite time, and not by slow and natural development.' Dr. Westerman has series of other texts to his credit, could he now be telling us that there is no difference between a living and dead tree? Knowledge and folly are neighbours indeed.

Archdeacon T. J. Dennis died on the high seas in 1917 along with his wife on their home-ward journey for leave during Germany's First World War campaign. As earlier stated, I have no cause to consider him a bad man. Rather, he was an extraordinarily faithful believer of the doctrine. His mission to Igboland was vivid to him. And like a brave man, he spared no time in tackling the task. But the con-



*Chinua Achebe and family arrive for the Odenigbo Lecture. Photo: Obu Udeozo, Owerri, 1999*

comitant contempt with which he treated both the language and her people, led him into destructiveness.

Yet on this stigma, Dennis was not alone. His fellow offenders were uncountable. For example, a world acclaimed scholar named Albert Schweitzer - philosopher, theologian, musician, medical missionary was based in Gabon at the period Dennis was engaged in Onitsha and Egbu Owerri. As a mark of the profound nature of Schweitzer's works, he was honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize for his global contributions to inter-racial relations (brotherhood of nations). Sadly, all these accolades could not restrain Schweitzer from making the utterance: that though Black people were his brothers, they were merely his little brothers. An archetypal instance of the racism we talked about. Naaman was the General Officer Commanding the Syrian king's armed forces and an anointed person, through whom the Syrian nation received salvation, and though he was a redoubtable warrior, he was also a leper. (2 Kings 5:1). The indignities the native communities suffer, is akin to leprosy on the part of Missionaries. Whatever the levels of rigmarole, allegations, feints or pretences against the African ethos, in practice, evangelism was conjoint with contempt.

The legacy of Dennis and the Union Bible is a matter of grave anguish to me in various ways. But the most disheartening aspect is a precious window that the translated, Igbo Bible missed of becoming the soil upon which scholarship in Igbo studies would have taken root. This avenue was wasted in order to offer Dennis the freedom of conducting experiments in the language of other people. The most treach-

erous dimension of this misfortune is that after the experiment, Dennis went to London and halted the on-going publication of the original Igbo Bible translation from being printed. Igbos therefore lost a historic opportunity of knowing whether it was the original version or the new translation they would have preferred. What however dawned on the Igbos was the Whiteman's monopoly over the yam and the knife.

It is this tragedy of a hundred years ago that has marooned learning and academics in Igbo language till date. Archdeacon Dennis paved the tarmac of our current travails with the consequence that a single individual, in the comfort of his home, would arbitrarily intuit how Igbo language should be spoken or written in a presumed idiosyncratic mode. A dose of democracy by the individual in question might spur him into organising the workshop of a handful of other colleagues, in order to mint entirely new words and phrases. When one eventually hears an expression like 'Mahadum,' and seeks greater clarification, the retort often is: 'Perhaps you did not attend the seminar in March.'

Please forgive me, I do not intend to offend anybody. Our current state of despair are accidents of history. No one is essentially to blame.

The most unsettling issue now is how to teach Igbo language to children in schools. We have detoured from Union Igbo to Central, and from that careened into Standard. Yet whatever was amiss, is still creaking. Why? Because of Dennis. Our heads are saturated with laws of Dennis. The legislation of Dennis that everyone of us must speak or write one



**T**he crucial thing I want all of us to unfailingly understand is that no single human being whoever he may be, can dictate laws to a language. One hundred persons can never issue decrees to a system of language(s) even if their heads do kiss the skies. Languages have their natural channels. Sometimes the attributes of a language are clear to us, at other times confusing. Once we handle a language with dictatorship, we risk losing its essence entirely.

Igbo dialect regardless of the cost or consequence.

Our greatest constraints in this matter is that those who aspire to teach are usually not young people, but the instructors themselves. Recall the trainee teachers in Awka, who in 1919, envisaged a relevance for Union Igbo on arrival at their 'Specific' stations. Am I the only one that discerns from 'my mind's ears' the District Commissioner's voice in lending confidence to the 'confessions' of these teachers. They appear too zealous for success in their chosen fields.

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At the moment, what happens in our schools is to repudiate the language children speak in the homes of their Mothers and fathers. This is an especially grave development; an uncompanionable shame. Who could you ever be to cajole, discourage and banish the natural tongue of a child, and substitute it with the formulations of the followers of Dennis. As a result, when a child writes *fa*, he will be instructed to cancel it and write *ha* (different dialectal inflexions of they or them). Really, I believe that our excessive intellection has finally punctured stupidity's sack. But today is still propitious for amendments. Honestly, we have lost so much time but we require vigilance, for the next hundred years not to be wasted as well. Because after an old woman's second fall, the items in her rambo-trough succumb to curiosity's cheap statistics. If the first arrow misses the trunk and the second arrow follows suit, it then implies that the weapon's destiny is the tree trunk.

# Scholars

of Igbo language need a symposium to deliberate on how to correct the flaws in the teachings (pedagogy) of Igbo lan-

guage, and to convert it from being a melancholic burden into a source of abiding joy. When our children were quite young, I remember how their faces screamed with radiance whenever we invited them over for folk tales. Teachers of Igbo language must unravel strategies for translating unto our children's faces, this sunshine in their hearts. The legacy Dennis and his heirs have bequeathed to Igbos are the sludge which occludes the sun, like darkness.

# Which

ever dialect a child hears at birth is the language of his Creator, in the manner his name traditionally reflects the date of his birth. The English call it Mother tongue. To deny a child his Mother tongue is like preventing it from sucking the breast; pushing its mouth away from the nipple.

Some of those who have agreed on the need to compel every person to speak and write Standard Igbo, have also alleged that why Chinua Achebe is opposed to Standard Igbo is that Ogidi dialect is not the one selected as the Standard. Let me respond before all Igbos assembled here today. I have no such designs. I hope I am clearly understood. I said, I do not aspire (*ka e-welu*) to have mine selected. Do you know who is *e*? *E* are men of the ivory tower, the disciples of Dennis and those who think that language is engineering. Languages are the gifts of God. I have no intention of snatching anybody's dialect; I do not want anybody to seize my own.

Perhaps, some people believe that Chinua Achebe does not love Igbo as much as he loves Ogidi. (His home town *italics mine*). This is a lie: *asi, ugha, ashi!* (Three playful ironic variations of the same word in different Igbo dialects to underscore the Author's message of mutual inclusiveness, *italics mine*). Those who do not love Igbo language are people that employ machetes to prune its vibrant branches. I love Igbo language as well as Ogidi.

My prayers is that we must train multitudes of educated individuals that would employ our language to uplift before



*Cultural Dimensions to the Lecture Series. Photo: Obu Udeozo, Owerri, 1999*

the entire world, that day break,"the Lord planted in their hearts by publishing books of knowledge and research in various kinds of academic fields; on aesthetics and entertainment, studies in culture and folklore, sombre hymns, and songs of praise; which are both ancient and modern.

Those who champion our use of one engineered dialect also posit that we no longer have the time to wait for the natural development of the Igbo language into a Standard mode. But they forget that it was in the bid to get a Standard that Dennis offered us Union Igbo, which begat Central; the father of Standard. Being in a hurry at this point, is of no use. It can be likened to the decision of a bachelor who wakes up one morning and summons his relations to help him secure a wife before nightfall: does he think that women are ready-made clothes you hang-up for sale? The past is spent, we ought to make use of whatever time we have left to re-channel our resources for the progress that beckons on us at day break.

What shall I tell you people about the condition of Igbos in Nigeria today, that you are not much more aware of than myself. Let me therefore start from the bowl's periphery, in order to savour the hot soup.

Various peoples and nations have unique traits, that is, group identity or national character. But what surpasses all these, are the inner-directed qualities by which a people identify themselves.

If it were possible to reverse and visit history, to interrogate the early White slave dealers in Africa, on what they think about Igbos: you would be advised to beware, that

Igbos are a resolute people, who prefer drowning to being slaves. Which implies that they are totally unprofitable for despicable duties. They will recall an episode wherein a certain batch of slaves on disembarking from their ship in South Carolina, turned back: males, females, children and adults, turned back all of them, and jumped into the ocean, wasting the money that was invested on them. The memorial name of this location where this calamity occurred is called Ibo-landing till date. There is a funeral dirge which Black Americans still sing till date called 'Walking In The Water,' in order to commemorate that event which happened in our hallowed past.

To leave Ibo-landing a few steps in history, to say about two hundred years ago, you would meet a young man called Ekweano, from Iseke in Orlu Division (from my research findings); a prisoner of war at eleven years of age, he was converted into a commodity of trade in the West Indies and America, both on the high-seas and coast lands until he matured into manhood. Impelled by the legendary resourcefulness of the Igbos, he taught himself how to read and write, earned sufficient money for his freedom, and wrote a widely acclaimed best selling

autobiography titled - *The Interesting Narrative of The Life of Oluado Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*.

Ekweano is the first Igboman that wrote a book to inform the whole world that he was not barbarous, instead, that he was an heir of a noble lineage, who slavery had dragged in the mire. Every Igbo man should read Ekweano's book. To the credit of the book publishers, every person can still purchase that autobiography. The book is an encyclopedia of knowledge about Igbos, the Western world and the rest of mankind. Several of the topics Ekweano discussed are especially sensitive and pathetic, but none exceeded the joy he had after he had re-purchased his freedom from slavery; and in frantic excitement, exclaiming: 'I am my own master'; about two hundred years before Martin Luther King Jr. would exult: 'Free at last!'

## Why

### I am making these

remarks are that the unseemly stories I have heard about certain current events among us in Igboland, suggest that some people do not know or have probably: forgotten our generic and quintessential attributes. So I decided to either enlighten or refresh your minds concerning these. Igbos are not modeled to look up to any human being as either Lord or Master. Igbos resent being enslaved or anyone that reduces them to subservience. Whenever an Igboman finds himself trapped by marginality or servitude, he fights to rectify, transcend and metamorphose into a more civilised mode of being. When did we acquire the habit that a man of affluence and integrity, leaves his home for Abuja to join the chorus of those wishing the Emperor's reign eternal peace and prosperity?

What does the saying that, 'the Igbos have no kings' imply. It is certainly not that the Igbos have no knowledge of the existence of kings. Remember that Igbos are close neighbours with Benin, that numerous anecdotes of the Obas of Benin litter Igbo folk tales. Remember that the Igalas of Kogi State, are also their neighbours.

That the Igbos have no kings neither implies that an Igbo man does not aspire to kingship. Every Igbo man wants to be a king, however, he does not approve of another person's coronation as king to avoid becoming a mere subordinate.

That is why from hindsight, our ancestors came to this conclusion: 'alright, everyone must return to his own household and reign as the king of his own compound. Because Igbos share a comparable illumination to theirs, anthropologists desist from visiting Igboland. Yet one American

visited Onitsha to learn about their traditions and culture more than forty years ago. The book he wrote based on findings from his research survey is titled: *The king in Every Man*. Nothing else on earth ever said about Igbos has been as accurate. When therefore did we succumb to the notion that no Igbo man is qualified to be the Head of State of Nigeria, that leadership is more befitting to other ethnic groups?

When did the Igbos discover that the most appropriate social order for Nigeria is dictatorship, the leadership of tyrants. One of my family friends, a Nigerian, whom I exchange views with on the topic, visited me in America. My friend espoused the opinion that we do not merit democracy, instead that we 'deserve a strong man like Abacha, who instills fear into the Western world.' I pleaded with him to stop. But he then uttered the sacrilegious. He expressed surprise at any posture; was I no longer the author of *Things Fall Apart*? And was Okonkwo not a strong man, was he not the prototype of Igbos' ideal for leadership roles.

And I was almost dumbfounded, but not quite, because it was not my first encounter with someone who had misunderstood the theme of *Things Fall Apart*. Several years ago, a German scholar visited me. The questions he posed to me were merely rhetorical. He was actually substantiating the nature of events; and he declared to me that Okonkwo is a representative of the Igbos. I replied that this was true, but also false, and the man became extremely upset, and was on the verge of scolding me. I savoured fleeting peals of laughter in my heart because I knew that my response had placed the man in a great dilemma. The man had concluded in his dissertation that Okonkwo is the representative of the Igbos and had merely approached me for confirmation, only to have me puncture his presumptions.

## The

philosophy of Igbos is not feather-weight, it is quite profound. It is no dance you can navigate with tobacco snuff in your palm. My Igbo friend that visited me, misconstrued Okonkwo, the great scholar from Germany misunderstood him as well. But the worst part is that Okonkwo himself misconstrues his own essence.

Okonkwo is a man of great valour, ingenuous, enterprising, honest, wealthy and a titled personage. These constitute the Igbo worldview of excellence. Not only are these attributes stated, they are loudly broadcast. And Okonkwo heard and heeded them. But there are other values Igbos also whisper to us. They say that existence is marked by complementarities; that we are therefore enjoined to refrain from being dominated: by guns and swords; that we must



not mock the flutes and iron-gongs, and floccinaucinihilipilification and the women's fellowship, and the meek and mild; Okonkwo never heard these messages that were delivered in subtle tones. So the people of Umuofia turned their backs on him the day he broke his waist and was desiccating in the fire.

Igbos believe that, 'a man does not go to bed by trespassing over his neighbour's territory.' It is an important lesson. But whoever misunderstands this lesson, might make the mistake of thinking that all men are equal in the several faculties God has endowed upon us. Any society that thinks in this direction can hardly prosper.

# Those

who claim that

democracy is not suitable to the Igbos neither understand Igbos nor democracy. Igbos are self-governing people on the basis of towns. Once there is a crucial issue for discussion, a matted canopy is erected, a town crier's summons is heard, and all enfranchised males would proceed to the village square and the matter would be openly deliberated upon and in public. Igbos do not send 'representatives' who would speak on their behalf. It is clear that this practice of the Igbos since creation is the birth of the democratic ideal or the father of democracy. We can no longer afford to say that we shall revert to these traditions of our forebears, because we are no longer the sole owners of our present nation. But we shall not for this reason say that we are incapable of democracy or that it is beyond us. Instead, we must seriously channel our thoughts and resources on how to prevail on our elected member into various democratic institutions in the country to reflect our mutual principles in truth and practice. During pre-independence politics, a rather fanatical young adult went on campaign to Awka for a seat in the House of Assembly. In those days the decorum of political utterance was unfamiliar to most people. The young politician in question then down-loaded his battle and war speeches: how the White colonialists would be expelled in absolute terms, and their portfolios would be re-assigned among our indigenes; an old man then confronted him with this question: 'that institution you are aspiring to enter, is it madmen that are needed or men of sober spirits?'

The most vital requirement for us today is the leadership of men of sublime temperaments. We do not want the reign of hooligans. It is true that hardship and hunger are prevalent in our country at the moment. It is in times like this that a society falls into the snare of hooligans. We must therefore exercise extreme caution in selecting ambassadors for our eyes and ears. A hooligan will never be an honest

representative of our eyes and ears, instead he will transform into our stomachs to devour his and our allocations as well. The renowned writer Chinweizu, compared this sort of character with a sinister masquerade that is usually restrained by a tether, which on stepping into the public space disperses even those monitoring it and a great calamity ensues.

When still an infant, there was a valiant and very popular young man from our town. He was outstandingly tall, handsome and eloquent, but he was a dubious fellow. However, his exploits were never home-based, he exported his criminality. What he often does is that at wild afternoons, when every soul has gone to farm, he sneaks into the neighbouring town, snatches a goat and returns. After several successful raids, the inhabitants of that town initiated countervailing plans. And when he returned as routine and seized another one, eight men emerged, surrounded, caught, homed a six-inch-nail into his head and abandoned him and he fled mortally wounded, emerged and scattered across the road.

His relatives rallied and collected him, and as was customary, dressed the body, out-fitting him with a red cap and announced to the town that he died a natural death, but after a while, as if stirred by self-criticism, the nail that was buried into the man's skull, wondering why it was being dormant and acquiescent, shot out from the brain, ka tum! Blasting off the red cap into the crowd's centre. The entire people who gathered for the funeral rites each person sought which way to escape from the compound.

This event is not a pleasant story. My reason for the narrative is to remind ourselves that hooliganism is not a new phenomenon. The next point is to prove that hooligans are related to people, and those who always cover up the vices of their relatives are merely wasting time because you cannot camouflage pregnancy with bare palms.

The hooligans existing in our current political theatre ought to be called to order by their immediate constituencies, before inquiries begin on what actually exploded tum! thereby making everyone an accessory to crime. And I am not saying that there is nothing positive in Igboland. There are many instances of progressive values existing in Igboland. One example will do. The manner Dr. Alex Ekwueme handled the aftermath of the Presidential elections shows the characteristic of an heir to a noble lineage. All-or-nothing politics are witnessed in a society of ignorance, a society of poverty, a society of desperadoes. We must break away from this self-seeking and fatalistic mindset; become united in elevating the Igbo nation, that it may glitter like gold in the land of the rising sun; through joy in the various idioms by which we exist: the roaring of lions, the anthems of birds, the hymns of the wind, the music of rainfall, the lyrics of the metal gong and trumpet; the cadence of Udu, the harp and psalter; that the entire world may see and hear that Igbos are blessed by superlative virtues. GR