



## IGWEBUIKE

### *Creating a Community of Strength*

—PETER O. AMAH

**T**eam building is a backbone of any successful community. According to Pace, Smith, and Mills (1991) individuals who come together with a common agenda, planning, sharing goals, and reporting to a common superordinate, work together in the path of growth. The people of Arochukwu in Southeast Nigeria called this *igwebuiké*. The word *igwebuiké* etymologically came from the three Igbo words *Igwe*, *bu*, and *ike* which mean a community of strength. Arochukwu, an Igbo-speaking community, believes that it is the nature of a community to be strong. This community strength lies in the willingness for all members to play active roles in the community affairs by helping one another in solving problems and achieving success (pp. 130–131). This is why it is common in Arochukwu to say “together we stand, divided we lose.”

To better understand the *igwebuiké* principle, we have to situate it in its social/cultural and traditional religious perspectives. The people of Arochukwu do not have a separation of power between politics and religion or economy and culture. Every branch of community life intermingles and interacts with one another and with the spirit to ensure a strong community bond. Mbiti (1969) contended that what makes the Arochukwu community strong and successful within its surrounding communities includes the active participation of the spirits in their human affairs. In fact, there is no distinct spirit world existing somewhere else, or rather outside, Arochukwu traditional culture. “The spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and these two are intermingled and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy or even necessary at times to draw the distinction or to separate them” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 75).

In this essay, I shall explore the principle of *igwebuiké* in the Arochukwu traditional concepts of material and spiritual in religious and sociocultural life. Prior to that, I shall succinctly examine the effect of the traditionally



inherited leadership conception in the Arochukwu culture. Because the global approach to leadership and followers has continuously failed to satisfy the need for interdependence; the gap of division, mutual fear, and instability widens. I shall examine this in relation to a servant-leadership model that has the potential to ensure peace and progress in our individual and global communities. Next, I shall examine in comparison with the Christian community concept, how *igwebuiké* strengthens and empowers a community in a situation of brokenness. I will conclude with a recommendation of community strength as an integral part of servant-leadership in the twenty-first century.

#### LEADERS AND FOLLOWERS

Greenleaf (1976) wrote:

Our African friend has said that we Americans are arrogant. It hurts—but I accept the charge. Our arrogance stems, I believe, from the fact of our great power. In the years that the British were the great power, they were seen as arrogant. When the next shift comes, the nation that emerges into that unfortunate spot will quite likely be seen as arrogant. Civilization, it seems, has not advanced to a point where, as a natural gift of grace, either individuals, institutions, or governments are likely to be both powerful and humble without some basic changes in public thinking that are not yet evident. (p. 29)

In Africa too, it is clearly evident that many rich and powerful leaders are often arrogant as they lord it over to their followers. Even followers sometimes, given their own privilege, will exert untold authority over the less privileged. The problem, as Greenleaf (1976) observed, is in our historically inherited leadership mindset and he offered an uneasy/unpopular alternative—a servant-first mentality and life as a leader. Although he presented servant-leadership as an alternative leadership model for a peaceful human interdependent community, often those who accept and attempt to practice it are unprepared for the obstacles that rise against this leadership approach.

Sometimes there seems to be an assumption or a claim in developed/democratic communities that the master-servant syndrome is past history. Far from it. Coercion, command, and control are still and will remain an everyday reality until the people's mindset is changed from being followers to being leaders. When a leader is a servant-first as Greenleaf (1976)



described it, then he or she sees followers as leaders and treats them as such. But if leaders see themselves as leaders first then it follows that leaders will see their followers as leaders and potential leaders of great value and, therefore, treat them as such. The present reality is that a leader often aspires/desires to be the one that leads and makes decisions that affect others, rather than empowering others to make decisions that affect healing and the growth of the community in a mutually interconnected atmosphere.

Since it is obvious that there is no master/leader without servant/follower, there is a pressing need to change the traditional leadership mindset of command and control to embrace Greenleaf's servant-leadership model where the community leader is considered by his or her actions to be the servant of all servants. By so doing, the leader inspires many more community members who will be better able themselves to become servant-leaders. The Arochukwu chiefs and elders have truly no power other than that which is granted by their followers. Such leaders can hardly go against their followers' interests for personal gain because they are truly convinced of their role as servant of their past, present, and future people where true community strength lies. Greenleaf (1976) said he learned from a Malta priest, Father Benjamin Tonna, that "humility in the more powerful is ultimately tested by their ability to learn from and gratefully to receive the gifts of the less powerful" (p. 29). This indeed is an integral part of the essence of *igwebuike* in which the leader/rich and the follower/poor are both mutual servants.

The mine-mine mentality is not a product of a servant-led collective community. There is a belief that what I have is not mine alone. The major resources through which I build my wealth are procured—inheritance from community members who lived perhaps centuries before me; I have the responsibility for the community here with me and the one to come in centuries after me. In the same interconnected sense, as in a servant-led community, I am another's keeper. I am interested in another's well-being. If the sources of my possessions are from the ocean, land, forest, institution, or family for example, there is the likelihood that I will leave them behind someday just as those before us left/shared theirs for us. Sharing, therefore, is an integral part of the strength of the interconnectedness of a servant-led community, *igwebuike*, a community in which there is no "me" without "we," just as there is no individual human body (or spiritual form) without its collective component parts (p. 373).



Ekwunife (1999) argued, “The Igbo world is principally a world of two interacting realities—the spiritual and the material, each impinging on the other. In this world, the material mirrors the sacred in different degrees” (p. 18). It is therefore required of humans to maintain a peaceful and harmonious relationship with the spiritual beings at all times. There are always bad consequences if one fails to fulfill his obligation to the divine bodies and the spirits. Gibran (1951) insisted that humans belong to “life longing for itself” (p. 17). This life is always seeking for fulfillment within the physical and nonphysical community. Gibran gave an example that although we may claim that our children, as an extension of our family, are ours, in the real sense of it, they are also not ours. This means that although the children for example came “through” us and are “with” us, they are neither “from” us or “belong” to us. We “may house their bodies but not their souls” (Gibran, p. 17), which is part of nonphysical community. Thus, the material and the spiritual are an integral part of the visible and nonvisible community that interacts together for community well-being.

As humans who are a composite of body and soul, we are defined from different points of view. Theologically speaking, humanity is from God and is better understood in relationship to him. In a spiritual sense, humans have a mission to fulfill in God’s plan. Socially, people strike a balance between their unique individuality and their collective identity as members of the community. Ontologically the human is a force amidst other forces in the universe. Reality is defined from the point of view of humans. “Man is at the very centre of existence, and Arochukwu people see everything else in their relation to the central position of man...It is as if God exists for the sake of man” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 92).

The Arochukwu word for human being is *mmadu*. The etymology of this word lends credence to Mbiti’s theory of humans. *Mmadu* is a combination of two words, *Mma* (goodness or beauty) and *ndu* (life). Human being in Arochukwu’s worldview is therefore perceived as the “beauty of life.” This *mma* and *ndu* (the beauty of life) is endless and subsists in the physical and nonphysical community. Gibran (1951) echoed this when he wrote, “Your daily life is your temple and your religion. Whenever you enter into it take with you your all” (p. 78).

Arochukwu’s communal endlessness is evident in their belief in *Ilo uwa* (reincarnation) and *Eke* (ancestral guardian). A community is made up of many kindred, which has many extended family members. One can only



reincarnate within his family, which can spread as far as the entire kindred. This is one of the indications of the material and the spiritual make-up of an Arochukwu community. For example, a child takes after the Eke (the one who re-incarnated in him or her) in appearance or character or both. In cases of doubt, a diviner is consulted to reveal the child's Eke. If the wrong Eke is attributed to the child, it is believed that he may fall sick or even die (Metuh, 1985, p. 99). Eke (ancestral guardian) links one with the life force of his entire clan. Because an ancestor can reincarnate within the kindred, Ibos believe that the entire clan or kindred, such as Arochukwu, are related to each other biologically with strong communal spirit.

In an attempt to describe the concept of reincarnation (*Ilo Uwa*) in Arochukwu tradition, Ekwunife (1999) wrote,

In "ilo Uwa", an identifiable personality in the African spiritual world is said to in a mysterious but real way incorporate his personality traits on a new unique born personality without destroying the personality. In doing so, the said reincarnate person "onye loro uwa" still retains his complete personal identity in the African spiritual world of the dead. However, by virtue of an enhanced power of spirit, he or she was able to impress his former traits on the new born child in a human way. The spiritual influence of the identified deceased is better described in English as mystical influence since it does not diminish the status of a newborn child who should possess complete freedom and possibilities of achieved fulfillment. (p. 21)

Although I have my reservations with the authenticity of reincarnation, I must also take precaution not to pigeonhole the inexhaustible mystery of the complex piece of work called human. Gibran (1951) stated, "for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams" (p. 17). The strength of each person's uniqueness is made actively evident in a collective communal relationship without a material and spiritual dichotomy.

#### IGWEBUIKE: AROCHUKWU AND CHRISTIAN CULTURE

Igwebuike has a special place for reincarnation as well as ancestors. Ancestors in Arochukwu are dead members of one's family/kindred who had lived good lives. They are believed to be dead yet not gone from the community, hence the name "living dead." Physical death, therefore, is not the end of existence. After death, a person changes his mode of existence



and becomes a ghost. Gibran (1951) argued that “life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one” (p. 80). Mbiti (1975) held, “It is through the ‘living dead’ (ancestors) that the spirit world becomes personal to men” (p. 3). Ancestors are an integral part of people’s families and communities. They plead their cause in the spirit world. Ancestors are believed to be close to Chukwu (the almighty God) and should not be neglected. Therefore, an offense against the ancestors was an offense against God since the network of relations was totally integrated (Mugambi, 2005, p. 66). Mugambi further argued, “Breaking relations within the physically living community would offend the ancestors, and offending the ancestors would arouse the wrath of God” (p. 66). Thus, it is the nature of the Arochukwu community to remain together physically and spiritually to be strong and blameless.

In the Judeo-Christian culture, Abraham is referred to as the father of the Hebrew people and their ancestor. He therefore enjoys a special place in Judeo-Christian religion largely because of his great faith in God and his role in the well-being of the Judeo-Christian, and in turn, Islamic community. Christianity also reserves a special place for the saints who passed through death to endless life. The term *Saint* refers to those departed Christians the Church recognizes as having lived exemplary Christian lives (C.C.C., 2000). There seems to be a similarity between the African “ancestor” and Christian “sainthood” since both not only are recognitions of excellent good life but also intercede for their physical communities. According to Gibran (1951), “It is well to give when asked, but it is better to give unasked, through understanding” (p. 20), as the saints and ancestors seem to do to strengthen the life of their respective communities.

When a community member suffers, for example in the case of death, the entire community grieves. In Christianity and in the Arochukwu religious culture, death is considered a great loss to the loved ones. Christianity is consoled by the hope of eternal life, for life on earth is a preparation for the real blissful life in heaven. In the Arochukwu belief, physical death is but a passage to a nonphysical existence on earth.

Oborji (2005) contended that in Arochukwu’s worldview “life after death is a life in which all the complex relations characteristic of life in the world of human community are retained” (p. 56). This means that there is a continued interest in the affairs of one’s progeny and the collaboration with community members and God in the creative process, by playing the role of patron and guardians of newborn members of the community (p. 56). While Christianity sees Christian virtues as the yardstick for a



well-lived life, the Arochukwu sees living according to the established customs of the community and having a family as testimonies of a good life. In this culture one is greatly pitied if he dies without having children. To be without children and a home as a way of strengthening and perpetuating the Arochukwu community is a form of evil that is very hard to bear. This is why Catholic celibacy/priesthood was frowned at in the Arochukwu traditional community. It is seen as a refusal to love work. Gibran (1951) argued, "When you work with love you bind yourself to yourself, and to one another, and to God" (p. 26). Thus, "one who has neither home nor children moans" (Mbiti, 1975, p. 20).

In Arochukwu thought, God's providence is manifested in the community. No one should lack in the community "if you know how to fill your hands" (Gibran, 1951, p. 37). However, there seems to be a conflict between predestination and personal responsibility in the Arochukwu community. Because the community believes in "*akaraka*," (destiny), human actions appear determined. But a closer look at these two concepts reveals some differences. In his articulation of this difference Metuh (1981) wrote, "It is true that what one may hope to get out of life is only what has been predestined by God. But what he actually gets is his own responsibility. He only gets what he has worked for" (p. 101). The implication is that "where a person is not resourceful, a particular fortune in his [her] destiny package may be lost" (Metuh, p. 101). Perhaps, it is best to describe Arochukwu's "destiny" as a "collaborative destiny" which is the fundamental of *igwebuiké*.

The responsibility of obtaining the benefits of the reward rests on oneself. He/she may get all the reward or may lose a good part of it depending on how hard he/she worked and how skillfully he/she managed his/her affairs within the community. The strength of the community also lies in the collaborative use of an individual member's talents because "it is in exchanging the gifts of the earth" to one another that one finds "abundance" and "satisfaction" in the community (Gibran, 1951, p. 37). Gibran stressed that the exchange must be based in love, justice, and service; otherwise it leads to greed, hunger, and unethical conduct in the community (p. 37).

#### IGWEBUIKE AND MORAL ETHICS

The Arochukwu community believes in the existence of an innate moral consciousness in mankind. However, the basis for morality in this culture is debatable. In Christianity, natural law and divine law are usually referred to



as the fountain of morality (C.C.C., 2000). Arochukwu's traditional thought shares a similar view. This traditional community believes in doing unto others what good one would want done to oneself. There is a great sense of repercussion for evil acts in this tradition. However, unlike Christianity, which sees heaven as a place of ultimate reward for good work, Arochukwu tradition and moral life do not deprive others of their due reward in the community. "Others" here include the divine, ancestors, and fellow human beings. Perhaps an Ibo ritual prayer will help buttress this point:

Ezechiokike	Lord, King of creation
Obulu na mgbulu mmadu	If I killed any person
Obulu na mzuru ife onye ozo	If I steal another's property
Obulu na mgbalu ama	If I bore false witness
Obulu na mbolu ji mmadu	If I dug up another's yam
Obulu na myili oyi	If I commit adultery
Mobu nalu mmadu nwunye ya	Or abducted another's wife
Ezechiokike, welu ndum tata	Lord, king of creation, take my life today.

(Metuh, 1981, p. 135)

Interestingly this ritual recitation is not just done as oath taking, but as a form of regular daily prayer. From this prayer one can infer the high standard of morality in this culture and the consequences for not living up to it. This is also a three-dimensional prayer: the person, others, and God (as the guarantor or the enforcer), and "when you pray you rise to meet in the air those who are praying at that very hour" (Gibran, 1951, p. 67) the physical and nonphysical members of the community. An offense against another is perceived as somehow offending God. Metuh (1981) stated that Arochukwu "morality is linked with the ontological order set by God, and any infringement of the moral precepts disturbs the ontological order" (p. 136) and weakens the community strength.

Although Arochukwu tradition is community-oriented, they wish for individual and collective blessings and warn of evils and consequences of bad actions. The moral code of Ibo traditional heritage is called "*Omenala*" (customs of the community). Theologically, it means norms sanctioned by the earth deity. Every member of the community is expected to know the "*Omenala*," and all strangers to the community are educated on the customs of the land.



In this tradition, moral life is rewarded both here in the physical life and in the ancestral world. A good man is recognized in the community with a traditional title, and it is believed that good fortunes will come his way. At death he will receive a befitting burial and will be counted among the great ancestors who would be honored with offerings and consultations. In Arochukwu, “The absence of original sin and redemption necessarily implies the absence of final judgment” (Olupona, 2000, p. 3). As indicated above, there are degrees of offenses in Arochukwu thought. Some offenses are antisocial, some are antimoral, while others are antireligion. Most often, however, moral and religious offenses have a lot in common. Paralleling Catholic teaching of venial and mortal sin, Arochukwu thought distinguishes between *ajo ihe* (bad action) and *aru* or *nso* (grave evil or abomination). *Aru* or *nso* describes those evils that attract supernatural wrath if not expiated.

According to Mbukanma (1979), “Every transgression of the laws and customs of the land is a sin but some transgressions carry more blame and punishment than others” (p. 41). Sin harms the welfare of the community. “The structural nature of the society, which is characterized by common life, makes it apparently unavoidable for any member of the community not to share in the sin and suffering of the individual members” (Mbukanma, p. 55). These sins separate one from the relationship of the community and require ritual cleansing to reconcile him with both the community and the divine. Thus, sin goes beyond the individual offended. This is why someone who commits abomination in the Arochukwu community risks ostracism (i.e., exiled to isolated forest) to avoid polluting the rest of the community. Although ostracism is seen as a capital punishment in Arochukwu, modern development has rendered it obsolete. Today, “You cannot separate the just from the unjust...for they stand together before the face of the sun even as the black thread and the white are woven together” (Gibran, 1951, p. 41).

With cognizance of the examination of Ibo morality, one can notice a human and divine dimension. Metuh (1981) summarized, “The basis of all morality is therefore seen as the maintenance of harmonious relationship between man and these other groups of beings,” and “although morality is conceived in the idiom of a relationship with the mystical forces, it has at the same time, supernatural, social and personal dimensions” (p. 138). These harmonious moral forces help in strengthening Arochukwu community. Metuh further argued that sometimes, depending on the case in question, the human or the divine dimension may be emphasized more (p. 138).



## AROCHUKWU COMMUNITY AND EVALUATION

Community in Arochukwu includes both living and dead relatives. “The bond which links the family to the community is not only a socio-biological bond but also ontological and spiritual” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 107). The individual in Arochukwu culture finds fuller meaning in the group. Cardinal Arinze (1970) argued, “To exist is to live in the group, to see things with the group, to do things with the group. Life is not an individual venture, each one for himself” (p. 5). Hence, one “does not and cannot exist alone except cooperatively. One owes his/her existence to other people, including those of pre and post generations and one’s contemporaries. He/she is simply part of the whole” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 109). One of the times when the individual submits to the group relationship and support is at the time of loss.

Individuals support and strengthen one another in the Arochukwu community and by no means isolate anyone in times of need. Sittser (1996) wrote, “Loss does not have to isolate us or make us feel lonely. Though it is a solitary experience [it] can lead us to community...once there we will find others with whom we can share life together” (p. 154). A community of strength supports wounded people by actively listening and being compassionately available without critically judging them. This helps to alleviate the suffering in the community, which may be caused due to ignorance or insensitivity (Sittser, p. 156). The “power to love is boundless” (Gibran, 1951, p. 62) in a community that feels the challenging condition of one another. Each person decides, however, to “become a contributing member of the community [and] not only willing to receive but also to give love” (Sittser, p. 164). This indeed is the cornerstone of *igwebuiké*.

The Arochukwu Christian family tries to fulfill the requirement of both the Christian and the traditional family. At one level they belong to the ecclesial family, which cuts across kinship ties and unites people of varied backgrounds in one faith and common ecclesial life. At another level and at the same time, they belong to their kinship groups. Although the social linking kinship ties in the extended family may not be as strong as they used to be, if they are known they are acknowledged irrespective of whether the relatives are Christians or not (Mbiti, 1969, p. 109).

We can see that when we talk about *igwebuiké* in the Arochukwu community we are inferring the strength of interconnectedness. In the same way, Nair (2009) argued that “servant-leadership is about the connectedness among us” (p. 372). The community interconnectedness is not limited to the



physical human existence but goes beyond this immediate interest to include the community of all ages existing before and after us. It is a formidable interconnected force, which was reckoned with in the ancient Arochukwu kingdom in eastern Nigeria. Nair further argued that some community members who no longer believe in the strength of interconnectedness argue that “life is a series of transactions to be won, while others lose” (372). This belief is not only opposed to the aforementioned Arochukwu aphorism that states, “together we stand and divided we lose” but also goes against the fundamental principle of the servant-leader, whose primary preoccupation is to ensure that everyone in the community, especially the so-called losers, become “wiser, freer, more autonomous, healthier,” and better able to become “winners” (servant-leaders), who can benefit without being continuously deprived in an imperfect playing field. In a world of abundant resources for all ages and generations, servant-leaders form a community where everyone has the opportunity to have, and not a community built for a few bourgeois. When leaders learn to think and live in a communal way rather than for personal interest they strike the inner chord of servant-leadership. In such interconnected servant-led community, everyone is truly free and without being overly conscious of the need for personal security from each other.

In conclusion, one is a product of his or her community. The bond with one’s community continues even after death. This bond forces us to be servants-first and to find a source of love, service, and strength beyond ourselves. That source, according to Sittser (1996), is God, “whose essential nature is love” (p. 167) and relations. This shared love, service, teamwork, and communal relationship is the nature of *igwebuike*.

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