

‘Igwebuike’ as the Operative Condition of George Okorie’s Leadership Model

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Abstract

Leadership in many parts of the world reveals indices of symptoms of diseases or maladies of leadership. Very common is the feeling of immunity, immortality and indispensability by leaders; sense of extravagance and self-exhibition; excessive busyness, planning and functionality. Many leaders have idolized themselves and lost a sense of community. Mental petrification, rivalry, vain glory and leadership Alzheimer are abundant. One does not need to go far to see how leaders have been bewitched by sterile pessimism, insatiable hunger for wealth against the growth and development of their people. Backbiting, gossiping and operation in closed circles are evident. These diseases of leadership are eating deep into leadership and thus making followership come with pain and hopelessness. This piece has studied Very Rev. Fr. George Okorie’s model of leadership that is cultural and compassionate. His leadership model remains an antidote to the diseases or maladies of leadership, especially in our time. This research discovered that his leadership model is based on six pillars: listening, sympathizing, companionship,

hospitality, protection and service. It also discovered that at the heart of this leadership model is compassion- a primary element of Igwebuiké Igbo philosophy, which is born out of a profound understanding of who the other person is in relation to you. For the purpose of this research, the Igwebuiké method of research was employed.

Introduction

Sequel to the ethnic, economic and religious tensions, the Republic of Biafra Unilaterally declared independence from the rest of Nigeria in 1967. This action triggered the Nigerian Civil War. During the two-and-half years of armed conflict, an estimated one to three million people died. These deaths notwithstanding, so many great men and women were also born at the time. Among them was Very Rev. Fr. George Okorie, SMMM, who was born to Late Chief John Okorie and Late Mrs. Veronica Okorie on 10th October 1968. He was born within the debris of the bullets that landed like confused birds overwhelmed by the wind. His birth was one of those causes of great joy in the midst of the pains of the civil war; it was one of the gains in the midst of the losses of the war; it was one of the lights in the midst of the dark challenges of the time.

One of the scientific pivots and cornerstones on which the thinking of civilized man is based is the idea that reality evolves. A cursory glance at the historical evolution of the life of Very Rev. Fr. George reveals a swaggering gait that has transmuted the retinues of life's fundamental forces into an edifice that would stand the test of time. He cannot be described less than a polymath and Gulliver of a sort, with commendable expertise within the parameters of leadership. The transmuting of life's fundamental elements to his favour began from his elementary education to the years he spent in the seminary and through the years in the priesthood to the present. God turned his various experiences into an education for him. These experiences have transformed him into a great leader, and his exceptional leadership charisma has been manifested in comprehensive

chapters, during the years as pastor, Superior General and President of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria.

Why is this piece important at this point? This is not a song in praise of a great man, even though he is; it is not the tale of a man who has handled power in a humane manner, even though he did; it is not the story of the proverbial tall man whose shoulders became the stepping stone of so many to greatness, even though his shoulder was; this is not the story of the kind of leader that Pope Francis describes in terms of leadership of compassion, even though he was a pool of compassion. This is not the story of a man whose integrity was not corrupted by power, even though he remains free from the batches of power. This is the story of a man, whom the researcher served for years; it is the near narrative of an ecclesiastic with deep cultural sensitivity and sturdy character who has created a trajectory of leadership that manifests an interwovenness with the *Igwebuiké* philosophical element, and thus worthy of retelling and study by students, pastors, scholars and in fact anyone who desires greatness.

The Cultural and Philosophical Backgrounds to Fr. George's *Igwebuiké* Model of Leadership

There are three fundamental cultural and philosophical backgrounds to Fr. George's *Igwebuiké* model of leadership include. These backgrounds are the principles on which his *Igwebuiké* leadership model stands.

- a. **His Igbo Social Construction of Reality:** Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the life of a human person is circumscribed within the *uwa* (the world)¹. In the contention of Oguejiofor "This unitary conception of reality pervades the Igbo world in a remarkable way"². The Igbo, therefore, does not see himself or herself as an individual without noticing immediately the need for the other. No wonder he often warns the other: *onye aghana nwanne ya* (No one should leave his brother/sister behind)³.

¹Kanu, I. A., The concept of life and person in African anthropology. In E. Ezenweke and I. A. Kanu (Eds.). *Issues in African traditional religion and philosophy* (pp. 61-71). Nigeria: Augustinian, 2012

² Oguejiofor, J. O., *In praise of African Philosophy*. 14th Inaugural Lecture delivered on 28th January at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, 2010

³Kanu, I. A., Towards an Igbo Christology. In E. Ezenweke and I. A. Kanu (Eds.). *Issues in African traditional religion and philosophy* (pp. 75-98). Nigeria: Augustinian, 2012

- b. **His Igbo Philosophy of Resilience:** The Igbo world is not a bed of roses. This was the world he was born into during the Nigerian Civil War. It is a world of struggles that begins from birth, noticeable in the cry of a little child as soon as it is born. Circumscribed to the *uwa* (world), the human person is faced by difficulties and frustrations. This makes survival in a tolerable way a major concern for the Igbo, and it to a large extent determines the Igbo attitude to life. To face the struggles of life, the Igbo generate a corporate front, partnering with the other to avoid being overwhelmed.
- c. **His Igbo Think-Home Philosophy:** The Igbo have a saying that: *aku ruo uno* (which means wealth must reach home). If a person is known all over the world but not known in his home town then he is not known. If a person does not make an effort to return home, he or she is referred to as an *efuru efu* (which means the lost one). After the Nigerian Civil War, when the property and wealth of the Igbo in states outside of Igboland were seized by the Nigerian government, the Igbo philosophy of *CHERUO UNO*, (think home) became more important⁴. No matter where the Igbo travel to and the number of houses he builds elsewhere, he ensures that he remembers home⁵.

***Igwebuike* as the Moving Spirit of Fr. George's Model of Leadership**

Igwebuike is an Igbo proverb and an Igbo proper name. It is from three Igbo words: *Igwe*, *bu* and *Ike*. *Igwe* is a noun which means number or multitude, usually a large number or population. The number or population in perspective are entities with ontological identities and significances, however, part of an existential order in which every entity is in relation to the other. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power*. *Igwe*, *bu* and *Ike* put together, literally means 'number is strength' or 'number is power'. However, beyond the literal sense of *Igwebuike*, at the philosophical level, it

⁴ Kanu, I. A., Suicide in Igbo-African Ontology. *Developing Countries Studies*. Vol. 4. No. 5. USA. pp. 27-38, 2014

⁵ Kanu, I. A. (2014b). The Place of Igbo Myths in Igbo-African Philosophy. *American Journal of Contemporary Research*. Vol. 4. No. 2. pp. 98-102. Kanu, I. A. (2014b). Suffering in Igbo-African Ontology. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol. 4. No. 5. pp. 8-13.

means *otu obi* (one heart and one soul) – *cor unum et anima una*. It captures the solidarity or complementarity of reality- the reality that reality exists in relation to one another. This is anchored on the fact that the universe in which the human person lives is a world of probabilities. An Igbo proverb says: “If a thing remains one, then nothing remains”. This is because the power or strength generated by a person is not strong enough to withstand the existential gamble of life, as the chances of being overcome are on the high side; thus the need for an existential backing. The words closest to *Igwebuiké* in English include: solidarity and complementarity⁶.

Why then is *Igwebuiké* understood as the moving spirit of Fr. George’s model of leadership? It is for the simple reason that Fr George’s leadership model which emphasizes compassion springs from the philosophy of sensitivity and appreciation of the other in relation to the leader. The major pillars of his model of leadership speak of how the leader positively stands in relation to the led, and what he or she needs to do for the other for the achievement of good leadership. Fr. Okorie understands the leader are an agent of change⁷, who has the task of taking people from where they are to where they have not been⁸; it is the leader who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way⁹. *Igwebuiké* posits that the level of the leader’s impact is dependent on the level of connection he or she is able to have with the led¹⁰. And this has been the *substratum* of the success of Fr. George in the several leadership positions he has occupied.

Leadership within the context of *Igwebuiké* philosophy is understood as an inclusive enterprise, and this is witnessed loudly in Fr. George’s model of leadership. The leader does not see himself as a separate entity from the people,

⁶Kanu, I. A. (2016). “[Igwebuiké, Personal Identity and Alterity](#)”. In Kanu, I. A. (Ed.). Published by *Igwebuiképedia: Internet Encyclopedia of African Philosophy* published by the Augustinian Institute of Philosophy, Makurdi. <http://igwebuiképedia.info/Alterity.asp>. Online.

⁷Bernard Bass Cited in Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, Leadership Workshop for Catechists, organized at St Vincent Catholic Church, Olodi, Apapa, Lagos. 2017.1

⁸ Henry Kissinger, Cited in Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, Leadership Workshop for Catechists, organized at St Vincent Catholic Church, Olodi, Apapa, Lagos. 2017.1

⁹ John C. Maxwell, Cited in Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, Leadership Workshop for Catechists, organized at St Vincent Catholic Church, Olodi, Apapa, Lagos. 2017.1

¹⁰ Kanu, I. A. (2016). “[Igwebuiké and the Unity of African Philosophy](#)”. In Kanu, I. A. (Ed.). Published by *Igwebuiképedia: Internet Encyclopedia of African Philosophy* published by the Augustinian Institute of Philosophy, Makurdi. <http://igwebuiképedia.info/Intricate.asp>. Online.

but as leading from among the people; while the individual is a potent and viable being, as such a force, it is potent and viable in a limited way; however, when there is a conglomeration of forces, the human potency can be extraordinary. Leadership is not about power but about service. The leader sees himself or herself as part of a group and not as a person different from the group or better than the people he or she is serving. He or she understands that there are no leaders without followers, and leadership always involves interpersonal influence or persuasion¹¹. In the absence of followership, interpersonal influence and persuasion, the so-called 'leader' is only taking a walk and not leading¹².

Okorie believes that the relevance of the leader is based on the people whom he or she is leading; if there are no people, there can't be a leader, and the ability of the people who constitute the state to achieve their national goal, is dependent on the ingenuity of the leader. So the leader needs the led as much as the led needs the leader. This springs from the understanding that every reality has its purpose of existence. The leader and the led both share in this pool of universal purposefulness of existence, which they draw from and contribute to by playing their unique roles in the journey of existence. Situations where by the leader sees himself or herself as superior and indispensable to the people that he or she is leading, can be considered an aberration or alienation of true leadership. Likewise, the polarization and fragmentation of society into antagonistic factions, in the lead to 'divide and rule' is a disservice to and an aberration of the human society¹³.

In every circumstance, Fr. Okorie has always placed the good of those he led over his self-interest. This is the leadership that promotes the valuing and development of people, the building of community, and the promotion shared power. leadership is, therefore, not a position, rather, it is about how well we work together; the great leader is the one who has been able to connect to the different dimensions of society, not minding the depth of its diversity. There are

¹¹ Sandra E. Crewe, *Five Key Styles of Leadership*. Young African Leaders Initiative, Online Courses. <https://yali.state.gov/courses>. p. 2

¹² Kanu, I. A. (2017). Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Philosophy of Inclusive Leadership. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 3. No. 7. pp. 165-183.

¹³ Kanu, I. A. (2017). Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Philosophy of Inclusive Leadership, p. 166

all kinds of human beings- good and bad, in the society, and this is where the role of the leader comes in, it is a responsibility and not a call to enjoy life; the leader should be able to manage all these peoples and make the best out of them. This makes the deciding difference. As a philosophy, *Igwebuike* in relation to leadership recognizes that a team is made stronger through diversity; it acknowledges that our differences are what make us stronger¹⁴. This would mean that the less the diversity, the less the power of the group¹⁵.

The Dimensions of Fr. George Okorie's *Igwebuike* Leadership Model

There are specific dimensions to Fr. George's *Igwebuike* model of leadership, and these dimensions include:

a. He is a Great Listener

Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of listening in leadership, which is an approach that many leaders have failed in. He refers to the approach of listening as the approach of Jesus who listened to the little children even at a time when what they were saying might not have made sense to the apostles who wanted to send them away. The problem with many leaders is that instead of listening to people attentively, "all too often, there is a tendency to provide prepackaged answers and ready-made solutions, without allowing their real questions to emerge"¹⁶. This is a virtue in which Fr. George has distinguished himself. He allows people to make their contributions, indicating his appreciation of new sensitivities and openness new questions.

b. He is a Great Empathizer

We live in a time when people struggle in war zones and experience violence in countless different forms: kidnapping, extortion, organized crime, human trafficking, slavery and sexual exploitation, wartime rape, and so forth. Others, because of their

¹⁴ Sandra E. Crewe, *Advantages of Servant Leadership* p. 3

¹⁵ Kanu, I. A. (2017). *Igwebuike as an Igbo-African Philosophy of Inclusive Leadership*, p. 167

¹⁶ *Final Document of the Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, 8. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20181027_doc-final-instrumentum-xvassemblea-giovani_en.html.

faith, struggle to find their place in society and endure various kinds of persecution, even murder. Many, whether by force or lack of alternatives, live by committing crimes and acts of violence: child soldiers, armed criminal gangs, drug trafficking, terrorism, and so on. Abuses and addictions, together with violence and wrongdoing, are some of the reasons why people go to prison¹⁷. Many people are taken in by ideologies and exploited as cannon fodder. Worse yet, many of them end up as individualists, hostile and distrustful of others; in this way, they become an easy target for the brutal and destructive strategies of political groups or economic powers¹⁸.

The leader is like a mother who watches over and cares for her children. A mother weeps when her children are hurt. She weeps as though it was her who is hurt. Leaders, therefore, must never fail to weep before these tragedies of their people and our time. Pope Francis teaches that “anyone incapable of tears cannot be a mother”¹⁹; in the same way, anyone who cannot weep cannot be a leader. Fr. George is not the kind of leader who judges the situations of others from the ivory tower of his reasonable comfort. He feels with others what they feel, and approaches the situations of others from the context of its peculiarity.

c. He is Sensitive

There are three distinct but complementary levels of sensitivity that is observable in Fr. George.

The *first kind of sensitivity* is directed to *the individual*. This level of sensitivity concerns listening to someone who is sharing his very self in what he says. A sign of this willingness to listen is the time we are ready to spare for others. More than the amount of time we spend, it is about making others feel that my time is their time, that they have all the time they need to say everything they want. The other person must sense that I am listening

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post-Snodal Apostolic Exhortation, 25th March 2019, no.72

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post-Snodal Apostolic Exhortation, 25th March 2019, no.73

¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post-Snodal Apostolic Exhortation, 25th March 2019, no.75

unconditionally, without being offended or shocked, tired or bored. We see an example of this kind of listening in the Lord; He walks alongside the disciples on the way to Emmaus, even though they are going in the wrong direction (cf. *Lk* 24:13-35). When Jesus says he plans to go farther, they realize that he has given them the gift of his time, so they decide to give Him theirs by offering their hospitality. Attentive and selfless listening is a sign of our respect for others, whatever their ideas or their choices in life²⁰.

The *second kind of sensitivity* is marked by *discernment*. This level of sensitivity is when we ask ourselves what is it that the other person is trying to tell me, what they want me to realize is happening in their lives. Asking such questions helps me appreciate their thinking and the effects it has on their emotions. This kind of listening seeks to discern the salutary promptings of the good Spirit who proposes to us the Lord's truth, but also the traps laid by the evil spirit – his empty works and promises. It takes courage, warmth and tact to help others distinguish the truth from illusions or excuses²¹.

The *third kind of sensitivity* is the ability to *perceive what is driving* the other person. This calls for a deeper kind of listening, one able to discern the direction in which that person truly wants to move. Apart from what they are feeling or thinking right now, and whatever has happened up to this point in their lives, the real issue is what they would like to be. This may demand that they look not to their own superficial wishes and desires, but rather to what is most pleasing to the Lord, to His plans for their life. This kind of listening seeks to discern their ultimate intention, the intention that definitively decides the meaning of their life²².

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post-Snodal Apostolic Exhortation, 25th March 2019, no.292

²¹ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post-Snodal Apostolic Exhortation, 25th March 2019, no.293

²² Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, Post-Snodal Apostolic Exhortation, 25th March 2019, no.294

d. He is an Agent of Hospitality

In a world where many feel orphaned, the leader has a responsibility to be welcoming and accommodating. To be welcoming and hospitable is to create a 'home' and for Pope Francis, this implies creating "a family":

It is to learn to feel connected to others by more than merely utilitarian and practical bonds, to be united in such a way so as to feel that our life is a bit more human. To create a home is to let prophecy take flesh and make our hours and days less cold, less indifferent and anonymous. It is to create bonds by simple, everyday acts that all of us can perform. A home, as we all know, demands that everyone work together. No one can be indifferent or stand apart, since each is a stone needed to build the home. This also involves asking the Lord to grant us the grace to learn how to be patient, to forgive one another, to start over each day... To create strong bonds requires confidence and trust nurtured daily by patience and forgiveness. And that is how the miracle takes place: we feel that here we are reborn, here we are all reborn, because we feel God's caress that enables us to dream of a more human world, and therefore of a world more divine²³.

This is an area where Fr. George has distinguished himself. His sense of hospitality is unique- he creates a family and a home for those who approach him.

e. He is a Great Servant

The record of Fr. George's leadership in several capacities shows that he makes no distinction between leadership and service. For him, to lead is to serve and to serve is to lead. He strongly believes that a balanced leadership must begin from the desire to serve from which a person makes a conscious effort to lead. It is on the basis of this that he has been able to support the greater good of the body that he leads even if it means temporarily sacrificing

²³ Pope Francis, *Address at the Visit to the Casa Hogar del Buen Samaritano, Panamá*, (27 January 2019): *L'Osservatore Romano*, 28-29 January 2019, 10.

himself and his ideas. He knows that meeting the needs of others is what allows the group to reach its full potential. It is, therefore, not surprising that he is a listening, empathizer, a healer, sensitive, persuasive, foresighted and committed to the growth of people.

Conclusion

This piece has studied Very Rev. Fr. George Okorie's model of leadership that is cultural and compassionate. His leadership model remains an antidote to the diseases or maladies of leadership, especially in our time. His leadership model is based on six pillars: listening, sympathizing, companionship, hospitality, protection and service. These pillars come together, as though knit by a thread to support the achievement or realization of his excellence within the parameters of leadership. No one is born a leader with all these pillars, however, as a person grows in holiness, selflessness, understanding that you are a being in relation to the other, one is able to build gradually on these pillars and thus become a great leader. No one who lives within the proportions of selfishness can achieve greatness in this direction.

Igwebuiké is considered as the moving spirit of Fr. George's leadership model because it is born out of 'the sense of the other intelligence' or the *Igwebuiké* thought current of the other as a part of me. Although principled, Fr. George is very compassionate in relation to the other. You cannot be compassionate if your 'sense of the other intelligence' is dead or weak. Compassion is born out of a profound understanding of who the other person is in relation to you. *Igwebuiké* understands the other person as part of me, in spite of his or her peculiarities, weaknesses, etc. From this spirit, compassion takes up the forms of seeing with the eyes of another, hearing with the ears of another and feeling with the heart of the other. Compassion is richer when we understand, are sensitive, aware and vicariously experience the feelings, thoughts, experience of the other in an objectively explicit manner. And this was the moving spirit of Fr. George's model of leadership.

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