Intrusive Traits of Victor Chikezie Uchendu

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Abstract. Reflections of a former student and colleague of Professor Victor Chikezie Uchendu, author of The Igbo of South East Nigeria. This tribute reflects on his major contributions to knowledge and what a loss that the academic community suffered at the hands of his assassins.

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Will the assassins ever bear his weighty name or assume his many academic accolades? Now that they have murdered him, assassinated in a most barbaric fashion with multiple gunshots and still the savagery of cutting his major arteries and leaving him to bleed to death in his remote home, Ndlomo Lodge, Nsirimo, Abia State, Nigeria, will the assassins and their masters live forever? Did they drink his blood and eat his flesh to try to become this legendary character, as some of his fellow anthropologists would allege about the proverbial barbaric tribes?

What the murderers forgot was that they were trying to commit regicide against a philosopher king who would never really die because his ideas would outlive him by centuries. In addition, the assassins appeared ignorant of the dead man’s contention that the Igbo worldview is a cyclical one and not a linear one: beings pass from the land of the living to the land of the ancestors with their achieved titles and statuses but only to bargain with their personal Chi or God for a better life before reincarnating to continue the cycles of life. If that is what Prof is bargaining for now with his personal Chi even while serving as an elder in the land of the ancestors, I am almost certain that he would be concerning himself with the needs of others than with his own because he seemed to have had the best of all worlds only to die tragically at the hands of the very people he sacrificed his comfort to serve in retirement rather than luxuriate in America where his children have established successful careers after being raised in Nigeria.

Did he try to bargain with his attackers and to negotiate the way the Igbo believe that life is a market place, a fact that he reiterated in his
Ahiajioku Lecture of 1995 (*Ezi Na Ulo – The Igbo Extended Family System*). I heard that they never gave him a chance to lecture them or they could have fallen under his spell. They allegedly shot him on sight and then proceeded to butcher him to make sure that their dastardly mission was completed.

They butchered him after shooting him at both legs and breaking them as he answered his own door. Here was an elderly man who had just been unanimously voted *Eze* or King of his village and he was the one answering his door at his own palace? That is not customary for an elder who should be surrounded by the extended family but that cannot make a difference to determined killers who may have known that Prof was the kind of guy who would get the door himself rather than call someone else to do so.

This says much about the institution of Kingship among the Igbo who proudly proclaim that *Igbo ama eze* or that the Igbo do not know any king. This saying encapsulates the radical republican worldview of the Igbo that the dead man himself documented in a 1965 classic, *The Igbo of South East Nigeria*. In this book, Professor Victor Chikezie (God creates well) Uchendu suggested that the institution of Kingship was ‘an intrusive trait’ or something that intruded into Igbo culture from their more monarchical neighbours and some of the Igbo who have kings deny being Igbo for this reason.

He exhibited this radical independence of spirit when he wanted to write his dissertation on his beloved Igbo culture but his supervisors at Northwestern University insisted that he should do fieldwork among Native Americans because his cultural baggage would not allow him to be completely objective while studying his own Igbo culture. He agreed and studied Native Americans, making contributions to comparative anthropology in the process with the discovery that the so-called cultural baggage was never abandoned in other cultures where he found himself comparing the inquisitiveness of the Igbo with the aloofness of Native Americans in relation to strangers. Remarkably, he completed his book about the Igbo first within a year and it became the instant classic that made his name, earning him the honour of being appointed as the founding Director of the famous Center for African Studies, the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign.

Most Igbo communities did not have chiefs until the colonial authorities imposed warrant chiefs against whom Igbo women successfully resisted through the women’s war of 1929, forcing the colonial authorities to appoint councilors instead. It was General Obasanjo, in