The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria: The Same Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow?

In Memory of Professor V. C. Uchendu

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Abstract. This paper examines Uchendu’s ethnographic study entitled ‘the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria’ with a view to interrogating its relevance in explaining the Igbo of the contemporary time. Chapter by chapter examination of the book shows that although written more than four decades ago, it is still relevant in its account of the continuity and change in Igboland. For instance, although marriage in the traditional way is still the most cherished and popular, church and court marriages are acceptable. Those who can afford it can go through the three rituals. The paper notes that although phenomenal changes in population growth, infrastructure and human resources development, modern economic activities, etc., have taken place, the very essence of Igbo world view, belief system, Igbo hospitality, marriage, kinship and non-kinship networks, Igbo traditional ways in government and affinity to fatherland as captured in the book, to a large extent, still holds true of the Igbo.

Keywords: Nigeria, Igbo, Victor C. Uchendu, continuity, change, contemporary, hospitality

Background information

My town regarded me as one of the emergent elite and treated me accordingly…My town demanded leadership from me. But this leadership is a trying as well as a thankless experience.¹

As a renowned academic and foremost professor of anthropology, Uchendu had indeed become a celebrated elite and was ready to get into what he called “a trying and a thankless” leadership of his own people. Indeed by December 2006, Uchendu was to step in as a paramount ruler to serve his town Nsirimo. However, hoodlums did not allow this prospect to be actualized as they invaded his country home and terminated his life, a couple of weeks before his coronation to the esteemed office. Specifically, Uchendu was murdered on the 7th of December...
2006, barely 15 days to the date of his coronation. While he has joined
his ancestors in the spirit world, the legacy he has left in the world of
scholarship cannot go unsung. No doubt Uchendu has left footprints on
the sands of time and has indeed carved a niche for himself as a re-
nowned anthropologist and a professionally trained ethnographer as
evidenced in his study of the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria.

When I read William Graham Sumner’s *Folkways*, especially the
special introduction by William Lyons Phelps, I became captivated by
his personality citation where he was described as a tenacious intellec-
tual giant of great repute. Of all the professors I have seen, read or
heard about, Uchendu was unique in many ways. I saw in Uchendu a
model and a distinguished academic with unprecedented personality
endowment in the contemporary times. Uchendu was defiant in his
expression of opinion and general classroom behaviour. Although of
average stature, Uchendu used to enter the classroom as if he was a
giant pushing his way triumphantly through hostile forces. In the
classroom, in his office, or at any gathering on the university campus, he
exuded the air of a conqueror.

The mood in which we entered his lecture room is unforgettable. In my
view, most of our lecturers were perfunctory, dull and apathetic routine
note readers as evidenced in our out-of-classroom discussions and anal-
ysis of them as their students. Although in private, some of them event-
ually got to know about our assessment of their respective personality
traits and classroom behaviour and never visibly got upset, at least, to the
best of our knowledge. Uchendu’s style was unique and we came to his
lecture with eager expectations and were never disappointed. He
encouraged and cherished intellectual confrontation. Whenever I took a
divergent view on topical issues and was wrong he would say: “my dear
young lady, you got it all wrong” and would explain to me why he felt so.

Uchendu’s inaugural lecture turned out to be a lively discourse on
society and social order, to the delight and captivation of his mammoth
audience. Every sentence he made was a challenge and a food for
thought. He is as vivid in my memory as if I were once again one of his
students. I see his blunt expression; I hear loud and clear his deep and
eloquent voice.

**His approach to the study of the Igbo**

Professor Uchendu who turned me from a law student at the University
of Calabar to studying sociology in 1988, embodied the holistic