

## **Involving Igbo Traditional Religion In Eradicating Extreme Poverty And Hunger In Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Nigeria is a nation endowed with enormous human and natural resources. Despite these huge resources, many Nigerians are wallowing in abject poverty. In the past, Nigerian government introduced programmes to ensure that the resources are tapped and equitably distributed for the benefit of the Nigerian citizens. It is unfortunate that none of the measures yielded meaningful dividend as the poverty level continued to increase unabated. Government in her continued effort to fight poverty joined in the United Nation programme; MDGs whose goal among other things, is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by 2015. This paper therefore looks into MDGs and how its quest to conquer poverty and hunger in Nigeria can be achieved by involving Igbo traditional religion. This research work derives data from secondary sources. It is the view of this paper that for MDGs to succeed in the area of poverty eradication there is the need to reintroduce the Igbo traditional religious practices, which promote brotherhood and good neighbourliness. This research work will be of help to Nigerians, policy makers and scholars.

**Keywords:** Involving, MDGs, achieving, traditional, religion

### **Introduction**

Poverty is a phenomenon challenging humanity globally and Nigeria in particular. Despite numerous natural and human resources in Nigeria the nation is being challenged by hunger. In order to fight hunger, successive administrations in Nigeria introduced some measures. These measures devised to fight hunger by previous administrations are operation feed the nation by Olusegun Obasanjo (military era), green revolution by Shehu Shagari, War Against Corruption (WAC) by Mohammed Buhari, Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and Directorate for Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructure (DEFRI) by Ibrahim Babangida, War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAIC) by Sani Abacha and Poverty Alleviation/Eradiation Programme by Olusegun Obasanjo (democratic era). All the measures adopted by these administrations to fight hunger, did not yield the desired dividend.

The failure of previous programmes in dealing with poverty has not deterred Nigerian government in seeking ways of ensuring that poverty is eradicated or at least

alleviated in the country. Nigeria being a member of United Nations, embraced Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) programme, which the United Nations initiated to promote sustainable and equitable development. Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger by 2015 is the first on the goals ([www.indexmundi.com/nigeria/millennium-development-goal](http://www.indexmundi.com/nigeria/millennium-development-goal)).

However, according to Ezeani, “government move towards eradication of poverty and hunger in the country has been very slow and poverty level has not been reduced “(2012:37). The 2015 target to eradicate poverty and hunger in connection with MDGs is fast approaching and much has not been achieved. For MDGs not to become a failure like previous government programmes by 2015, this paper advocates the involvement of Igbo Traditional religion by MDGs in their fight to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger in Nigeria.

It is the view of this paper that in involving Igbo traditional religion in MDGs, certain traditional religious practices which could help in eradicating extreme poverty and hunger should be introduced in their programme. Some of these traditional practices are; communal values, adequate training of the child, attitude towards corruption etc. These Igbo traditional practices are used in this work because the Igbo share and have similar traditional practices with other tribes in Nigeria.

The subject of this paper is a contemporary matter and therefore an evaluative research. It uses descriptive analytical approach for data collection. The researchers qualitatively analyzed and presented the information gathered. The work posits that involving Igbo traditional religion in MDGs could be a means of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger in Nigeria by 2015.

### **Clarification of Terms**

#### **Millennium Development Goals**

MDGs were initiated by the United Nations. MDGs began when it was officially established in 2000 following the millennium summit where all the world leaders present adopted the United Nations (UN) millennium declaration. The UN millennium declaration posits that “every individual has the right to dignity, freedom, equality, a basic standard of living that includes freedom from hunger and violence, and encourages tolerance and solidarity” (Free enwikipedia).

MDGs include eight international development goals which all one hundred and three United Nations member states and twenty three international organizations agreed to achieve by the year 2015. The goals are;

1. eradicating extreme poverty and hunger,
2. achieving universal primary education ,
3. promoting gender equality and empowering women,
4. reducing child mortality rates,
5. improving maternal health,
6. combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases,
7. ensuring environmental sustainability and
8. developing a global partnership for development.

Each of the mentioned goals has specific stated targets and dates for achieving the targets. This paper seeks to discuss the role of Igbo traditional religion in achieving the

first goal of MDGs; the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger which is expected to be achieved by 2015.

**Igbo Traditional Religion-** The people of Igbo have their own religion. It is this religion that is referred to as Igbo traditional religion. This religion has been defined in many ways by scholars. Awolalu in Awolalu and Dopamu (1979) define ATR which the Igbo is part of as:

... the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. This is a religion that has no written literature, yet it is “written” everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the people’s myth and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines and in their proverbs and pithy sayings. It is a religion whose historical founder is neither known nor worshipped; it is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination for Africans; young or old p.26.

Madu (1996:132) sees ATR as “a way of practicing religion by Africans before the advent of the missionary religions”. Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004:4) define it as “religious beliefs and practices of the Africans”. However, Ekwunife (1990) avers that;

Igbo traditional religion means those living institutionalized religious beliefs and practices which are rooted in the past Igbo religious culture; a religion that was transmitted to the present overt and covert votaries by successive Igbo forebears mainly through oral traditions (myths and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, rituals, proverbs, pithy sayings, and names), sacred institutions like sacred specialists and persons, initiation rites, festivals, sacred spaces, and objects and religious work of art; a religion which is slowly but constantly updated by each generation in the light of new religious experiences through the dialectical process of continuities and discontinuities p.1.

Igbo traditional religion is therefore the religion of the Igbo before the advent of alien religions- Christianity and Islam. It is embedded in it the beliefs and cultural practices which aid in modeling the moral life of the people. It is a practical religion and therefore necessary in achieving MDGs.

**Nigeria-** Prior to 1914, what is known today as Nigeria existed as different entities with little or no contact or relationship with one another. By the amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914 by Lord Fredrick Lugard, Nigeria came into being. Nigeria today is known officially as the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It is found in western part of Africa on the Gulf of Guinea. Nigeria has a total area of 923,768

kilometer making it the world's 32<sup>nd</sup> largest in the world after Tanzania (Omotoso and Jegede; 2010). The country shares 4, 047 kilometers (about 2,515 miles) border with Benin Republic ([www.onlinenigeria.org](http://www.onlinenigeria.org),2012). Nigeria is made up of thirty six (36) states and Abuja (the federal capital territory). It shares common land borders with Benin Republic on the west, Niger Republic on the north, Cameroon and Chad on the east and on the south, lies on the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean. Nigeria has many ethnic (tribes) groups but the most influential and largest ethnic groups are the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. Three major religions are noticeable in Nigeria viz; Christianity, Islam and traditional religion; although Christianity and Islam dominate, splitting the nation along major ethnic groups.

Having looked at some terms, the paper is set to discuss the Igbo traditional religious practices which if incorporated in MDGs will help it to achieve its target of eradication of extreme poverty and hunger by 2015. "Africans (Igbo inclusive) are notoriously religious" (Mbiti; 1969:1). Ugwu (2002:192) also avers that the Igbo "... are obdurately religious". These assertions explain the religious life of the Igbo. Their life cannot be separated from their religion and religious practices. It is these practices patterned along Igbo religious life that form the discourse of this paper.

### **The Igbo Attitude towards Child Upbringing**

In traditional Igbo society, proper nurturing and training of the child is paramount. This is because nurturing and training go along way in determining what the child becomes and the future of the society. In view of this, both the family and the society work assiduously to ensure that the child is adequately trained to be purposeful, responsible, industrious and useful not only to himself, but also to the entire society. In order to achieve this, every adult member of the society sees it as his obligation to train every child.

In Igbo society, Adibe (2009:27) avers that "every adult is a teacher of knowledge and morals. Every child is a community pupil. He is educated by every person to do good and avoid evil". The child is publicly trained because he is public property (Mbiti; 1969). The combined efforts of the family and the society in training the child, help in bringing out the best in every child. It also has a high degree of social and moral control on the child. Such virtues as diligence, truthfulness, rectitude, obedience, honesty, justice, goodness, hospitality, chastity, respect, respect for human life and dignity etc are inculcated early in the life of the child.

However, apart from the virtues mentioned, they are also trained to be hardworking. This makes him to be responsible, productive and useful in the society. The child is trained and chooses to acquire the skill and occupation of the parents or that of his society. Such skill and occupation include; farming, fishing, hunting, pottery, basket making, carpentry, etc. The acquisition of skill and occupation places anybody in a position to fight extreme poverty and hunger. The virtue of industry, gave no opportunity for anybody to engage in idle activities such as alms begging. Anyone who chooses to take to idle activity is referred to as *efulefu* or *onye nkpokoro* (never do-well). Never do well were cajoled and ridiculed in traditional Igbo society which helped in making majority of them responsible.

It is unfortunate that the MDGs goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger by 2015 seem not to be succeeding. This is because the virtue of hard work and industry seem to be going down everyday. Many Nigerians seem to be acquiring laziness as virtue with the excuse of not being employed. At worst some engage themselves in an and unprofessional occupation like Okada. This has made craft work to be disappearing everyday. This has widened poverty gap in Nigeria every year. If MDGs target of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger by 2015 must succeed, Nigerians should cultivate the culture of hard work and acquire skill and occupation that will enable them deal with poverty and hunger.

### **The Igbo Attitude towards Corruption**

The bane to achieving MDGs target of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger in Nigeria by 2015 is corruption. Corruption has been defined in various ways by scholars. Onuh (2002) posits that;

Corruption has its etymological root from Latin *corruptio*- meaning corruption is- which means, to decay, to be depleted to rot to degenerate, to desiccate, to waste away. With regard to the society, it is a situation which results from the neglect of justice and fairness as principles of life. It is abuse of the true essence of contract whereby parties renege and found the contractual will on the shifty basic that it will not be kept by either party. It is a crime against love, charity and the law. It is deprivation violating the rules of equity p.50.

The Cambridge international dictionary of English in Chuta (2004:1) defines corruption as “dishonestly using one’s position or power to one’s advantage, especially for money”. Corruption therefore means to outwit others using one’s position of power. Corruption has been institutionalized in Nigeria that it permeates every establishment. Ekwunife (1995:64) opines that “the institution has been eroded by corruption at all levels, duplicity, insincerity and lack of commitment”. Corruption has been and is still being witnessed in the aviation industry, national identity card, transcorp, health and education sector, oil and gas industry. It is corruption that killed previous programmes initiated by government to deal with poverty and hunger. Ehichioya in Gbenda (2002) observes that corruption is the cause of poverty in Nigeria. Corruption breeds greed and selfishness.

However, traditional Igbo society was not exposed much to corruption. This is due to their religiosity which made them to have no inclination and penchant for corruption which would sever their relationship with the Supernatural Being. Corruption as it exists today was unknown and un heard in traditional Igbo society. Igbo and Anugwom (2002:110) posit that “corruption as it exists in Nigeria today was almost unknown and therefore did not constitute a problem as only few Nigerians were in positions of power where they could appropriate and misappropriate national resources”.

There were corrupt elements in traditional Igbo society. This means that their society per se were not sacrosanct. What deter one from being corrupt is due to their

religious life. The Igbo people were aware that whatever behaviour one exhibits; honest or dishonest, sincerity or insincerity, good or bad, corruptible or incorruptible, attracts punishment not only from the society but from the gods. For one not to sever or estrange his relationship with his fellow human being and the gods, one had no option than to live in consonance with the dictates of the societal norms, traditions, customs and values. Corruption was abhorred, condemned and frowned at which led to Igbo corrupt free society.

The success of MDGs target of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger in Nigeria depends how fast Nigerians and Nigerian leaders curb the muster; corruption. This can be done using traditional Igbo model of achieving corrupt free society. It is through this means that poverty and hunger can be reduced to a minimal level.

### **The Igbo Communalism as a Tool for Poverty Eradication**

Communalism is the practice in traditional Igbo society which values community togetherness, solidarity and care for one another. Gyekye (1996) sees communalism as;

the doctrine or theory that the community (or, group) is the focus of the activities of the individual members of the society. This places emphasis on activity and the success of the wider society, not necessarily to the detriment of the individual, but rather to the well-being of every individual member of the society p.36.

Madukwe and Madukwe (2010) also observe that communalism;

... connotes concern for human beings and their well-beings. ...There is a care for one by all. There is the bearing of one another's burden and everyone is his brother's keeper. There is a mutual assistance for one another. The haves help those who do not have so that no one perishes because of wants while his next door neighbour lives in affluence. There is sharing of virtually everything. 279.

Communalism could be the community consciousness and solidarity by all for one and one for all in traditional Igbo society. This aspect of their religious practice cut across their social, political, economic etc life. Communalism breeds co-operation, mutual understanding and trust. This gives opportunity for relationship and social interaction on mutual level without one outwitting the other or suspecting of being manipulated. The essence of Igbo communalism is to fight poverty and hunger which is the first goal of MDGs. This is because there is mutual assistance and sharing of burden and needs. It helps in bridging the gap between the rich and the poor. The rule of communalism therefore places responsibility on those that have not to close their eyes against their fellow human being in need or use their status to maltreat and dehumanize them. The traditional Igbo society was able to achieve low level of poverty and hunger through their communal practice. For instance, in agrarian areas one does not harvest all the crops in the farm; part of it is left for the poor to harvest. Members of the community organize

group work which rotates among them. The community helps in erecting a house for the less privileged and also contribute a lot to ensure that any man who is due to marry, marries.

The Igbo cultural heritage embedded in their communalism is not valued much by the contemporary Igbo society in particular and Nigerians in general. Sense of individualism is eroding communal value, making people now to think more of themselves and their well-being. The mutual assistance shown in the areas of child care and nurturing, communal labour (like clearing the bush for farming, cultivation and harvesting), rendering of help without monetary gain etc which Igbo communalism preaches, is almost disappearing. This has given opportunity for selfishness and the attitude of “have it all alone”. The checks and balances communal practice had on the Igbo society in bridging the gap between the have and the have not are disappearing. It seems that no one cares for the poor and the less privileged, rather they are being exploited. No wonder corruption and other deviant behaviours are holding sway in Nigerian society.

The practice of Igbo communal value is a veritable tool for MDGs to succeed by 2015 in the area of eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. Sense of communal value will help bring back the community consciousness and solidarity in the contemporary Nigerian society. This may lead to concern for one another. Communalism if appreciated by Nigerians will check individualistic life (individualism enthroned egocentric life that has made people to acquire corrupt life as a virtue and not a vice).

### **The Belief in Supreme Being And Divinities**

Belief in God is prominent in traditional Igbo religion. Smith (1950) in Iwuagwu (1998) uses triangle to illustrate the order of spiritual forces. The supreme Being is at the apex, the nature gods and the ancestors are at the either side while magical (lower) powers are at the base of the triangle and man is at the center. The position of man in the illustration is paramount. The Igbo belief in God and the pantheon of divinities make them religious. Obi (1996:49) avers that “the Igbo are religious through and through and their religiosity is best understood in reference to their belief in uncountable spiritual forces”. The belief in the existence of Supreme Being and divinities give meaning to the life of the Igbo. God is supreme and punishes unrighteous acts. The divinities especially the ancestors are the custodians of morality. This they do by keeping surveillance over the affairs of the living (Ezekwugo; 1992). The living members of the ancestors who err are punished. The belief in God and divinities who judge the deviant members of the traditional Igbo society, deter people from living unrighteous life. The customs, norms and the traditions of the people are adhered to in order to avoid the punishment of the spiritual forces.

The fear of the spiritual forces- the Supreme Being and the ancestors, help in shaping the moral life of the Igbo. Deviant acts among the leaders and the subjects have helped in increasing the poverty level in Nigerian society. If leaders and those implementing poverty eradication (MDGs inclusive) programme in Nigeria should have the fear of God, funds met for such programme would not be diverted into private purse. The traditional Igbo model of fear of God and the consequences associated with



unrighteous acts could help in achieving MDGs target of eradicating extreme poverty by 2015.

### **The Igbo Religio-Political Leadership Model as a Tool for Poverty Eradication**

In traditional Igbo society, their religious and political leadership method are of necessity in poverty eradication. The Igbo religious leaders namely; the priests, medicine men, diviners, rain-makers, mediums, seers, prophets and prophetesses as well as the political leaders such as the elders, kings, chiefs, *ozo* titled men, *nze* etc exhibit leadership by example. As the custodians of the society's norms, values, culture and traditions, they live morally upright life. They are aware of the implications and the consequences of being corrupt not only on themselves, but also on the society they are leading. They therefore live life devoid of self, unjust, nepotism etc. Igbo leaders who showed corrupt life are not only punished or removed from the office, but also incur the wrath of the gods. The Igbo society does not celebrate their corrupt leaders rather they are seen as a disgrace and calamity to the society.

In contemporary Nigerian society, the most challenging problem is leadership. Achebe (1983) posits that "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely the problems of endemic corruption and failure of leadership, the unwillingness of our leaders to rise to the responsibility and the challenges of leadership and personal example". The opportunity to be a leader in Nigeria has become an avenue to cart away public fund and property. Programmes that do not have impart in the life of the people are initiated just to create avenue to embezzle the public fund. Where good programmes are initiated, it will not be carried out to the latter as corrupt means of carting away the fund allocated to the programme are also devised. If MDGs target of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger must be achieved by 2015, the traditional Igbo leadership model where they not only accept and rise to the responsibility of leadership, but also lead by personal example is required. Nigerian leaders should shun corrupt life, render selfless service and equitably pursue programmes that have direct impact in the live of the citizens, and the target of MDGs will be achieved by 2015.

### **Recommendations**

Having examined how Igbo traditional religion could be incorporated in MDGs to enable it achieve the target of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger by 2015, it is practically expected of this paper to give few recommendations that would ensure the application of the purpose of this work. It therefore recommends that;

1. The culture of hard work should be inculcated in the members of the Nigerian society early in their life.
2. The citizens of Nigeria should accept industry as a virtue.
3. MDGs should teach the people how to fish. This can be done by helping Nigerians to acquire and develop skills.
4. Nigerians should practice what they profess. Every religion preaches about fear of God. If Nigerians have the fear of God, selfless service will be rendered by the leaders and corruption will become a history.
5. Nigerians should show concern for one another. One should not live in affluence while his neighbours and relatives are living in abject poverty.



## Conclusion

Poverty and hunger is a serious threat to human existence. It leads to social, religious, political and health problems. The effort of Nigerian government in fighting poverty and hunger through MDGs is commendable. The nation cannot afford to allow this programme to fail like previous ones. Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger is therefore necessary for the continued existence of Nigerian society. In order to achieve this through the MDGs target of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger by 2015, this paper advocates the involvement of Igbo traditional religion. The good religious and cultural practices if incorporated in MDGs outline could be of help in achieving this first goal of MDGs; eradicating extreme poverty and hunger .

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