
SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN JOHN 13: 1-10: TOWARD A RECOVERY OF TRADITIONAL SACRAL POWER FOR CONTEMPORARY IGBO LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Crisis of leadership cuts across religious, ethnic and national boundaries. Effective leadership in terms of governance eludes many regions of the world today. *Ochichi* (leadership) in Igboland is not immune from the present quandary. In Igbo traditional society, elders and those vested with sacral power exercised leadership as servant-leaders. Sacral power around priests and healers resemble the impact of oracles. Modernity has not dimmed the Igbo profound reverence for the sacred. For the Igbo, *ochichi* fostered the common good. This paper explores the connection between sacral ministry and leadership. With an overwhelming number of the Igbo professing Christianity, the biblical text becomes a critical tool of investigation and the Gospel according to John: 13: 1-10, provides the platform from which to examine contemporary Igbo leadership. Insights from Igbo Studies, Religious Studies, African theology, as well as leadership theories will elucidate the fact that proper utilization of sacral authority can reposition Igbo leadership in the emerging global world.

Introduction

A myriad of literature exist on leadership, *ochichi* in the global community. The proliferation of resources on the subject underscores the critical role effective leadership plays in human organizations. That new ideas and reflections on leadership continue to emerge remains consistent with the organic nature of the human community. Effective leadership may not be peculiar to humans; survival of other species depends also on efficient organization. *ochichi* in any community or society does not exist in a vacuum. Leadership follows a long line of tradition. There exist varied layers of relationships through which leadership emerges in traditional African societies. Primarily, *ochichi* in the community rests on the elders as well as persons vested with sacral powers. As elders and religious agents, therefore, these persons become custodians of the core values of the community: peace, love and justice. Their function as custodians grounds them in the ethos of the community. Leadership position rouses deference from the people.

Ochichi, a dynamic process that undergirds the various layers of relationships in the community has the common good as its primary goal. As that which is ordered toward the common good, leadership in its purest form approximates spirituality. Spirituality is that which gives meaning to life and allows a person of faith to participate in the large whole. In the biblical tradition, spirituality means that believers see all things in God and respond to God in and through all things. Consequently persons vested with sacral rights or authority function both as religious agents as well as community leaders. Leadership among the Igbo is intertwined with her religious cultures. Persons vested with sacral powers participate in a variety of ways as leaders in one form or another. The term "power" employed in this paper does not involve power in its politicized meaning because power can represent a means of

oppression and a tool employed to trample on the humanity of another. This authoritarian concept of power is antithetical to the concept of common good which those vested with sacral rights foster. Indeed, the parables of Jesus in the New Testament are often judgment on the use of power-to-exclude. In the New Testament, *ochichì*, that process by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective has roots in service (John 13:1-10; Luke 22:27). From a biblical perspective the servant-leader model is not only free of abuse of power and coercion, but is first and foremost based on mutual respect and love for one another, the local community and society at large.

In traditional Igbo life, a diviner, priest/priestess of a local divinity, say *Amadioha* or *Ogochie*, assumes the title *onye gi ishi Amadioha* or *onye gi ishi Ogochie*. *Onye gi ishi* translates: the one at the head. Terms such as *onye ishi* or *onye gi isi* implies headship. Headship is evocative of leadership. In Igbo times past, the aura and respect accorded *ndi gi ishi agbara* or priests/priestess, yielded positive results in the proper ordering of the community. Undoubtedly, contemporary Igbo religious sensibility continues to manifest a deep reverence for the sacred and religious agents. But can the Igbo still harness these sensibilities in rearticulating *ochichì* in contemporary Igboland? This paper attempts to recall those strands of leadership qualities stemming from responsiveness of the sacred in responding to the current Igbo leadership question. The focus on the Johannine text (John 13:1-10) is not as a justification or an imposition of leadership style, but an idea that can challenge constructively. The attempt here is to evoke the sacral power of religious agents in strengthening contemporary Igbo leadership. After considering interface between *ochichì* and sacral power, the exegetical survey of John 13:1-10 follows, specifically, verse 3-5. Finally, with insights from the Johannine text and Igbo religious traditions as guide, the study proposes a way forward in contemporary Igbo leadership.

1. Interface between *Ochichì* and Sacral Power

There exist a strong connection between sacral powers and leadership among indigenous peoples. The Asians have their Shamans. Druids dominated the religious scene in Ireland before the missionary activities of St. Patrick. The Native Americans of the United States also defer to their shamans (male or female), a priestly leader as well as spiritual healer.¹ Scholars note three groups of religious agents populate Igbo traditional society. Represented by the priests/priestesses, diviners, and *dibia*. Priests/priestesses act as intermediaries between the people and their minor deities. Diviners foretell the causes of events and offer solutions to human problems. The *dibia*, loosely translated, medicine man/woman engages in physical and spiritual healing.

Religion pervades most aspects of Igbo life. Because of the pervasiveness of religion, rituals underpin all important facets of Igbo life. It is no surprise, therefore, that a person vested with sacral rights as a religious expert is oftentimes a very important social figure as well.² The phenomenon of a religious universe is not peculiar to the Igbo; other African peoples share similar circumstance. Ejizu quotes E.B. Idowu who expresses similar reflections among the Yoruba:

The priest has always been an important social figure. He is inevitable in the social pattern of the Yoruba since the keynote of their national life is their religion. Virtually nothing is done without the ministration of the priest. For, apart from looking after the 'soul' of the community, he features prominently in the installation of kings and the making of chiefs.³

It is significant to note that the participation of religious agents in the making of kings and chiefs, underscores their leadership roles within the community.

I draw insights for this paragraph on priesthood and authority from the work of Chris Ejizu. In Igbo life, the functions of the religious agents as well as that of elders is consistent with the performance of public ceremonies aimed at fostering vital communication at different levels of society.⁴ The role assigned elders for the most part derives from their venerable age. Society considers elders nearer to the ancestors on account of their advanced age. Being closer to the forebears, presumes some degree of knowledge that is at once earthy and finer. Similarly, society confers elder-hood on another group of persons regardless of age. On account of sacredness, purity and moral uprightness of the priest/priestess and others vested with sacral authority, these qualify as elders. Sacral authority combines with elder-hood to positions ritual agents to assume a mediatory role. Agents mediate between humankind and the spirit worlds on the one hand. On the other hand, they become deeply involved in ordering positive interpersonal relationships within the community as a whole. Because of their overall positive influence in the organization of society, the Igbo discourage persons vested with sacral authority including *ofò* holders from migration.

The constructive influence of the religious agents on the community was not lost on the Colonialist. Chidi Osuagwu among other scholars recalls that it was mostly the *dibia*, that the Colonialist handed warrants to be chief in the early days of colonization in Igboland. The *dibia* on their part judged such a consideration infradig to them. Accepting positions of warrant chief (representing an intruder) would amount to betraying the community and the land. In desperation, therefore, the Colonialist recruited a “bunch of rascals” and made them warrant chiefs. Some Igbo scholars trace the problem of leadership in Igboland to this very act of imposition by the Colonial administration. Because the warrant chiefs were neither religious agents nor elders, a crisis of leadership ensued in the land.

Religious agents understandably are among the primary propagators and interpreters of religious and cultural traditions including myths, beliefs, values and norms, customs and practices.⁵ By their position religious agents become principal instrument in the preservation and transmission of vital experience and knowledge from one generation to another, a veritable function of *ochichi*. This particularly is true in traditional society that depends on oral sources as their major repository of information.⁶

In their leadership role, religious agents facilitate checks and balances that could arise from unbridled power within the community. Like Israel’s prophets of old, religious agents can mitigate excesses of designated leaders. Recall that in the Bible, the prophet Nathan confronted King David in the wake of his adulterous relationship with the wife of Uriah the Hittite, Bethsheba as well as ordering the murder of the former (2 Sam 12:1-15).

For the Igbo, the spirituality that resonates with *ochichi* impresses on the mind a quality of godlikeness. Thus the ideal leader should be fully human and divine as well. The leader is vested with the capacity for understanding the inherent contractions of human existence and ability to give a meaningful solution that is acceptable to the majority, if not to all.⁷ A leader is one who can navigate successfully the parable of wheat and the weed (Matt 13:24-30). As Del Tarr puts it, “A close inspection of true leaders, whether in business or in the church world, will show that those who rise in maturity and hold a respectable place of leadership for a long period of time are individuals who have the ability to tolerate ambiguity—the

ambiguity of wheat and weeds growing together”⁸ Tarr contends that persons involved in leadership develop a robust capacity to accommodate situations objectively.

Objectivity is the fruit of leadership. In the exercise of their duties, ritual agents pursue dispassionately various avenues in reconciling differences as well as promoting harmony in the community. The leaning towards service to the community further disposes the community members to trust their religious agents whom leadership is bestowed on. Christian leadership bestowed on and church functionaries finds expression service encapsulated John’s dramatic parable of the washing of the feet.

2. Exegetical Survey of John 13:3-5

Written about A.D. 80 – 100, the Gospel according John is called a book of faith.⁹ The author wrote “so that you may come to believe” (John 20:31) and in believing, you may act accordingly. Service, a distinct characteristic of membership in Christian community resonates in all four Gospel writings. The Johanne text provides the lens through which this study investigates service as constitutive of leadership. Although the dramatic parable of servant-leader takes up most of John 13, the study focuses on three verses (3-5).

Exegetical survey of John 13: 3-5

v.3, Jesus, knowing that the Father has given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,

v.4, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

v.5, Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

v. 3. Christian faith teaches that Jesus is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. The first ecumenical Council of Nicene (A.D. 325) settled the Christological issue of the Son of God and his relationship to God the Father. The Council’s resolution is entrenched in the Nicene Creed most Christians recite to this date. As Son of God, therefore, Jesus is said to know his time on earth was about to be over and he sets about preparing his followers for his imminent departure. John tells us that Jesus and his disciples ate the Passover meal. As in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus gave his followers parting words at the Passover meal. In John, however, in place of words over the bread and wine, Jesus offered them a legacy of feet washing. The washing of the feet remains a loving act of abasement that serves as an example for his disciples.¹⁰

v. 4. As John tells the story, Jesus gets up from table. At a formal dinner, diners normally do not get up from table unless in acute circumstance. The usual incident of getting up and taking off ones robe while dinner is going on seem peculiar. Jesus proceeds to tie a towel around his waist a gesture suggestive of a position of a servant. In culture of that age, servants wore towels, a humble piece of fabric, to wait on table. To tie a towel clearly indicates a readiness to serve. We leave to the imagination the tension Jesus’ gesture roused on those with him in that Upper Room.

v. 5. Without an aid, Jesus picks up a basin, collects water, bends low at the feet of a disciple and proceeds to wash and wipe with a towel his feet. The feet are perhaps not the noblest part of the human body to wash extempore. Undoubtedly, the feet of the disciples were probably tough and calloused from traversing lands and fields. Having trodden all over the dusty and rugged terrain of Galilee and the long trek to Jerusalem, the disciples’ feet would be in bad shape and host to certain deadly germs such as tetanus. It is significant to note that the feet, this oftentimes smelly part of the body carry the weight

of the entire body. Little wonder then Jesus chose to honor it by washing and wiping with a towel. There is a sense in which the feet functions as metaphor of the down trodden, those who bear the burden of the day, persons at the margins of society. The dramatic parable of the washing of the feet points to the fact that these seemly down and out, deserve some delicate attention. Meaning service is to the down-trodden.

Peter's objection to the washing of his own feet allows us to note the significance of Jesus' action. Peter's protest points to the unfolding of a reversal. In the culture of that time, inferiors wash the feet of their superiors. But Jesus acts counter-cultural, an indication that whoever intends to be his disciple must act in like manner: "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15 and parallels Matt 20:28; Mk 10:45; Luke 22:24-27). Jesus' preference for the life of service and the imagery of the "waiter at table" are meant to introduce a revolution in the way ministry is perceived in the church-community.¹¹

The striking act of Jesus stooping to wash the feet of his students, those whom his culture regards as his inferior, dramatizes to them, and Christians of all times, the truth of the Christian message: The basic principle of Christian leadership is service. At the end of his parabolic dramatic teaching, Jesus reconstitutes his outfit and resumes his place at the dinner table, then proceeds to teach them. The text points to leadership by example, an unusual blend of practice and theory.

In the eyes of his disciples, Jesus was vested with sacral powers. According to worldly standards, this individual must receive service from his subordinates. It was *never* his place to serve them. As a leader, the expectation is that Jesus performs select service because of the "power" he possesses. In the parable of the washing of the feet, however, service supplants power.

3. Appropriation

To minimize the negative effect of unconstructive leadership in societies across the globe, social scientists offer a varied range of leadership training opportunities. Most of these "quick fixes" lack a religious component. Given the sway religion holds on most African peoples, the failure to incorporate a religious dimension into leadership programs accounts for the ineffectiveness of some of those noble initiatives. As in the Gospel, service remains the common ground in the Igbo traditional leadership rest. Igbo leadership thrives in the service that promotes life, wealth, offspring, love, peace,¹² Igbo core values, remains that which can lead society forward. Any other kind of service is misconstrued leadership.

A common misconception among those who want to exercise a leadership role over others is that it comes with glory, power, and positions of honor. It is a sad commentary in the church and society today that there exist many eminent personalities, but very few servants. Many who want to "exercise authority" (Matthew 20:25), but few want to take the towel and basin and wash feet (John 13: 4). A servant-leader seeks to invest himself in the lives of his people in order to build a broader base that support the notion of *ohaka*, a concept which articulates for the Igbo the significance of communitarianism. The willingness of the one at the head, *onye ishi*, to give of herself/himself, to meet the needs of others, is at the heart of servant-leadership model of social integration.

Daniel Harrington among other scholars, observes that one distinctive feature of early Christianity was its insistence on leadership as service after the example of Jesus the servant.¹³ The model of Jesus as servant-leader provides a pattern for all who dare to follow the gospel teaching regardless of social status. This pattern of leadership challenges everyone who is in any kind of leadership position in the Church and the community to take seriously the duty of serving others and contributing to the common good.¹⁴ In effect, service becomes the barometer for the Christian life and also for Igbo leadership.

Some critics, however, propose this example of Jesus, the servant-leader, seems too lofty a model. The leadership pattern appears difficult to attain. Furthermore, Raymond Brown helps us to see much of the Gospel standards can be a tall order. He asserts, ". . . no society can run long in this world on such principles, and most individuals cannot put them into practice. Yet

they exemplify God's attitudes; and when they are put into practice, at the moment and in that place God's kingdom has been made a reality."¹⁵ And making God's Kingdom a reality in the community remains the aim of all religious striving. Thus, persons who profess Christianity cannot but have service as their relationship or leadership default button. In the sphere of Christianity, therefore, Religious agents, be they priests, pastors, evangelists, preachers, or church leaders of any description, must work toward service, a service that is life giving and not exploitative. In similar vein, the role of traditional religious agents, such as *ofo* holders, the *dibia* is primarily dispensing social service. Such service cannot be considered as a source of wealth or of the provision of livelihood.¹⁶ Society reposed much confidence on traditional religious institutions and her agents because of the fairness of their actions.

Confidence appears to be the driving force in valuable *ochichi*. Normally, human beings tend toward a person who inspires confidence. That is to say, a good leader remains a role model in many ways. Invariably, persons incline to expand their vision by learning from those they admire, in this case, their leaders or elders. Consequently, some leave no stone unturned to do the bidding of their pastor, priest or elder. It is not uncommon to hear people say, "My pastor ask me to do" such and such. For Catholics, it is "Father wants us to" do this or that. Priest in the traditional religious or an elder have similar influence on the masses of the people. The extreme example of terrorism in some religious traditions stem from similar understanding of taking in the instructions of a religious agent.¹⁷ The question still remains, if the people are beholden to their religious agents in matters of faith and practice, why is it difficult to make the crossing to everyday socio-political life? The incongruence in conduct questions the much trumpeted blurred relationship between the sacred and the secular in African. Curiously, almost every Igbo belongs to one religious affiliation or another, yet, religious agents appear impotent in influencing leadership in civil society in Igboland.

The real issue may not be a crisis of leadership. Perhaps the problem resides in crisis of confidence, a lack of trust. Students of religion locate the origins of such crisis in what they term dislodged cosmology, an idea beyond this present essay. However, we insist that something can be done. With the multiplication of churches and denominations, as we have in every nook and cranny of Igbo villages and towns, there is also an increase in charlatan religious agents. Charlatans hardly minister from servant leadership mode. Exploitation tends to mark their so-called ministries. Some authentic religious agents have also fallen into similar trap.

None exploitative service is consistent with Mark's teaching: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be the slave of all" (Mk 10:43-44). The author of Mark points at the pattern of leadership that prevails in the Greco-Roman world (similar to present day experience) thus: "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them" (Mark 10:42). Some of us are witnesses if not victims of the abuse of *ochichi* for self-aggrandizement. In some Christian settings, this becomes more the rule than the exception, blurring the servant-leader focus of Christian living. The contemporary example of service by means of feet washing of Pope Francis is instructive. In the two years he has been Pope, Francis, on Holy Thursday, 2013, washed the feet of those society consider "down and out," the prisoners. The Pope washed the feet of inmates in Rome's Juvenile prisons. This year, he showed his care for the weak and aged, by washing the feet of the disabled at the Don Carlo Gnocchi Foundation in Rome. In so doing, this leader of over 700 million Catholics world-wide shows a living practice of what Jesus called

each of us to do every day of our lives, to serve one another, a call particularly made to those vested with sacral authority.

Conclusion

The unwholesome inclination where positions of leadership have come to be looked upon as prizes rings hollow across the land. This attitude of self aggrandizement has become the bane of Igbo leadership; such craving for power negates the spirituality that surrounds leadership in Igbo past. The inordinate desire to be a leader often turns service to the community into social climbing. Servant-leadership remains consistent with *ochichi* where the leader is motivated first, by the desire to serve rather than the zeal to lead or rule. An ideal leader, as may be the case with *onye ishi agbara*, would first think of serving the people according to the will of the deity, and in doing so lead them to achieving a common goal. *Ochichi* that seeks domination has the potential of turning people away and tearing communities apart. As a people, the Igbo must recall and re-appropriate the sacrality of leadership, be it traditional or Christian, for the good of Ndi-Igbo both in the homeland and in the Diaspora.

Endnote:

1. The word 'medicine', associated with the Native Indians, means mystery and this word was applied by Europeans to anything mysterious or unaccountable. The Native Indians do not use the term 'Medicine Man' but in each tribe they have a word or term of their own construction that is synonymous with mystery or mystery man. In many tribes, including the Cheyenne and the Sioux, the Medicine Man also had the role of the head warrior or war chief which made him the most influential man of the tribe. <http://www.warpaths2peacepipes.com/native-american-culture/medicine-man.htm>.
2. Christopher I. Ejizu, "Priesthood: A Cross Religio-cultural Perspective," *Horizons*, 1983, 7.
3. Ejizu, "Priesthood," 7.
4. Ejizu, "Priesthood," 1.
5. Ejizu, "Priesthood," 9.
6. Ejizu, "Priesthood," 10.
7. Anthony N.O. Ekwunife, *Consecration in Igbo Traditional Religion* (Enugu, Nigeria: SNAAP Press, 1990), 149.
8. Del Tarr, *Double Image: Biblical Insights from African Parables* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 107. The parable of the Wheat and weeds (Matt 13:24-30).
9. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1997), 334.
10. Brown, *An Introduction*, 351.
11. Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 133.
12. Ekwunife, *Consecration*, 147.
13. Daniel J. Harrington, *The Church according to the New Testament: What the Wisdom and Witness of Early Christianity Teach Us Today* (Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 150.
14. Harrington, *The Church according to the New Testament*, 156.
15. Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 142.
16. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church*, 127.
17. John Carmody and Denise Lardner Carmody, *Interpreting Religious Experience: A Worldview* (New Jersey: