

**Rev. Fr. Anthony Uche Nwachukwu, PhD."AKA AJA AJA NA EBUTE ONU MMANU MMANU". A Public lecture presented on the occasion of the 34th IGWO ONWA LECURE at the Obi Uboma Nguru Aboh Mbaise LGA, Imo State this 15th day of February (Onwa Itu Aka), 2025.**

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## **Preamble**

The twin cultural celebrations, Itu Aka and Igwo Onwa, the reason for which we have come here today, are pointers to the jurisprudential standard that made Ngwuru and his sons tower tall above their neighbours over the ages. Though this has stood the taste of time, no establishment is impervious to debilitating challenges over time. A community's ability to assess and interpret these signs of the time gives affirmation to their integrity as a viable, rational and responsive human society. This is the thrust of this paper – to identify such challenges in the present time and point the way to addressing them as a contribution to food security, safeguarding the integrity of Nguru culture as a people and to defending our cherished values as a people.

Nde Ebeke anyi, ekelee m unu!

Uboma na nde ime Obi Ubomma, kaanu nka oo!

Oha mmadu nile gbakoro ebe a, nwoko, nwanyi, nne na nna, umu okorobia na umu agbogho, umu Ngwuru na nde enyi ha, nde ogo, nakwa nde nile nwhe gbasara Ngwuru Uboma Ahia Ise n'oji amasi,

Oha na eze, ndeewo nu o! Unu abiala ee!

Ndu mmiri Ndu azu! Asi m, Egbe bere, Ugo bere!

## **Okwu Mbido**

N'amamihe ha, nde nna nna anyi ha doweere anyi okwu ndu ndi a, si: "Aka aja aja n'ebute onu mmanu mmanu. Onye ruo, ya erie! Onye gba nkiti, chi ya agba. N'ihia ya, asi m: "Onye gbuwe achara onye gbuwe!"

N'okwu ndee ka m gbakwasara ukwu n'okwu m choro itogboro anyi nile n'ogbako mkparita uka "Igwo Onwa" lecture nke nde Ngwuru Uboma n'afor 2025. Ana m ekwulite ya wu okwu n'ihia na anyi no n'agha ozo. Warrior guru egwu si: "Ogu adaala". Ogu eziokwu na ogu kee ditu iche na ke aluru n'afor 1967-1970: n'ihia, ogu ke mbu wu ogu egbe; k'ugbuo wu ogu aguu. Ma abia na ha abuo, onwu mmadu na ihe ojoo nde ozo di iche iche ogu n'oji apabata n'obodo jikoro ha. Ihe ojoo ndee nile wu aru; ha ji emenyu obodo anya; doghaa agbata di n'etiti umunne, bia gboshie agam n'ihu na udo. Ogu aguu chere nwoko na nwanyi, nwata na oki aka mgba. Anyi chowa mmeri, anyi ga achifuta ogu na mma anyi, n'ihia na ogwu aguu wu nri. Ala uni wu ohia aku, onye choro iriju afor anaghi eme ihere ibanye wara eruru. Aka aka aka na ebute onu mmanu mmanu.

Okwu m na-arutu aka n'oru ubi n'ala Ngwuru Uboma Ahia Ise na nso di na ya. Okwu agbam ume anyi ga ejide aka wu: Oru ubi wu uzo furu iche anyi n'eshi aza oku Eke Kere Uwa kporo mmadu na oru Okiire ya dika akwukwu Jeenisisi 1:28 gbaara anyi ama. Ngozi na uru di n'iza ya wu oku kariri akari. N'ihia ya, azakowa ya, obi atoo Eke kere uwa uto, ya abia gozie anyi shite n'imubara anyi nri. Nna m ha si: Ji ghee ruuruu ya abara ndanda; oke zuo iro na ekworo alaa. Nri ju ebe liile, achulaa aguu. Ubiam esoshie y'azu. Ma ogbuu, ma anya ufu ma nkwukwo obi, ha liile agbafuo. Udo abata,

mmadu akpara ahu, di ta ibe. Owuru m'azakowaghi ya wu oku nsogbu adi. Ihea wu okwukwe anyi liile, ma nde Chritstian ma ndi omenala ma nde usu okwukwe.

Anyi lee anya taa, anyi ga ahu na aguu akariala. Ma abiakwani n'afor owula, Uboma ji akpo umu ya oku Igwo Onwa dika Nna Nna Anyi, onye turu ntu ala Ngwuru Uboma, naara eme tupu abiiya oru ubi. Ona eme ya iji gbaa anyi ume, duo anyi odu, nyekweni anyi ngwa oru na mgbazi onu ya na nwhe aga eme ka nkwa anyi gbaara anyi mmanu. Ndumodu o difere mkpa adife, n'ihina aburu n'agbaghi agba gaa nta ji agbata anu n'enweghi anwha. Anyi ma kwa na Uka Ngwuru wu "tii inuuru". Uboma Ngwuru 2025 akpokwala anyi odo taa ka o gwa umu ya okwu. N'aha ya na ikikere onyere m Ka m ji guzoro ngaa taa ipalite is okay anyi ga atule banyere nwhe nde anyi ga eme na mkpa anyi ga eshi eme ha ka oru ubi anyi n'afor 2025 miara anyi mkpuru n'oyo n'oyo.

Kama, achoro m ime ka anyi ghotu na okwu m nwere ike igba gharii n'anya; onwekwere ike iru oru nwhe nde asusu bekee n'iji akpo "catalyst" m'owu oru "inwhunwhoro" (gadfly). Igbo si: onye onye ya n'iji eshi n'ura anwu ji akpolite ya ma okwowe ura. Emere m nke a site n'kpalite ajuju old na ole, dika: Gini vu oke aguu di ugbo o? Ofutara na mkpuru akuku anaghikwa amita nwhe hiring nne dika na mbo? Mma aguwa odighikwa nko, ka owu si mgbeke amaghikwa ishi ala? Ike ogwula ala imifutara anyi nwhe oriri? Nke ozo, onwere nwhe na-emebiri anyi mbo oma anyi na agba n'oru ugbo? Onwere ihe anyi na-eleghara anya na nwhe gbasara oru ubi taa? Gini ka aga eme Ka mmeri wuru ke anyi n'ogu aguu o? Osisa okwu a mekutara aka n'akuku mmata di iche iche, ihe ndi bekee n'akpo anthropological, religious, social and jurisprudential perspectives. Ebe mgbakwasa ukwu m gbiiri ishi na onwere ihe ndi elefuuru anya gbasara iwu oru ubi, ana m etiiye onu n'olu egbe bere ugo bere (Igbo jurisprudence). Inwhunwhoro anaghi ekwe mmadu hiri ike; oga agbagide gi ahu hiara haira daa onodu ahu ono agbanwoo. Anyi ga enweriri osisa n'ajuju ndee, bia mee ka odoo anya wu onodu edowere nde ndom Ngwuru, iji jaa ha ike, mee ka obi di a mma n'oru ha na aru n'kofuta nri eji alu ogu ichula aguu anyi no n'ime ya ugbo. Odita anyi chefuru si oji awu anya bewe, imi ebewe. Dita nde Igbo nde ozo, anyi aguila ya si ji wu eze mkpuru akuku, bia ghiiya aka ngaahi n'akwiira nde n'akufuta ya ugwu, shie ha Eze ji na Oba ji, mana anyi anaghikwa aña nju n'ihe gbasara mkpuru akuku umu nwanyi n'kukari, dika ede. Anyi wee na-aju si: Olee mkpuru akuku kacha ibe ya mkpa?

O kpoliteweleni anyi ugbo o site n'iju anyi ajuju gbasara onodu na udi ugwu anyi n'akwiira nde ndom anyi na nde nne, nde g'ikwo nwa n'azu, sepuru esepuru n'aka, para apara n'afo, biakwa para abo n'isi gawa oru ikofuta ihe umu ha g'eri fu ndu n'afor a. Di gawa, nwunye ya esoshie ya azu. K'anyi n'eme emume iwa ji, anyi na-ajukwa ajuju banyere eve ede no? Ji oji agawa ghara ede, ka owu? Olee onodu anyi dowere ede? Ije nwoko na nwanyi oghoola akuko Ogbodudu gbasara nnabe na nduri? Oruo n'oru nduri aruo, ma abia n'oriri nnabe apafuta akpa uche?

## Introduction

What else could best describe the widespread hunger and food insecurity in a land that plummeted from number one economy in Africa to the poverty capital of the world, with our staple food (garri) now unaffordable even to the middle class, than Hunger War? It struck me when the organizers of this great event saw the need to make agriculture the focus of this year's Igwo Onwa lecture. I consider this as NDU's concerted effort towards addressing the hunger question at a time food prices, like rice, hit record highs, sharply boosting hunger in our society. In his narration to Saul, David said: "I take care of my father's sheep. Any time a lion or a bear carries off a

lamb, I go after it, attack it, and rescue the lamb” (1Sam:34-35 of GoodNews translation). So, I give them the credit for displaying the spirit of David in a critical time like this. Ebe unu choro ka anyi di ndu, ndu ga-awu oke unu!

Honestly, I would have refused this honour to give a public lecture on an area I can scarcely claim any authority, since I neither have any expertise nor a professional experience in agriculture. But realising that Igwo Onwa revolves around issues of common concern to the community, I consider this as an honour to pay my own dues to my people. My second fear revolves around the fact that Nde Nhazi Itu Aka are not oblivious of the fact that this theme has featured before, in 2011, and that justice was done to it, made me to ask myself further questions. For all I could wrap my mind on as probable explanation, I realized that ma olu nkwa adighi bie, kpururu anaghi ebi. This also informs my talk’s bend toward social justice, using the ongoing hunger war as a launchpad.

We have been told countless times that Igwo Onwa developed from an annual practice when Ngwuru Uboma, the progenitor of Ngwuru clan, gathered his children for a deliberative discussion. It is already established that this took place during Onwa Isu Oru (Mbakwe, 2011), precisely in the Week of Peace, if we could take the account in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* to the bank. From there, Igwo Onwa evolved into an annual ceremonial that offers us an opportunity to reflect on our past, appraise our present, and point the way to our future. Lessons from such lectures have taught us that though Ngwuru bears in her body the marks of many evolutionary trends, we have a common descent to one father, have reverence to God, regard to our ancestors, and respect for agricultural rules. For this same reason, our people have gathered once again to mark this admirable heritage, to promote therefrom the good values and habits of our society and to talk to ourselves about some habits that may be injurious to our ideals.

Agriculture has a history that most scholarly works date to the 12th century BC agricultural revolution. That revolution marked the break with the State of Nature which was nomadic, and the transition to settled life in society. Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques Rousseau alluded to such transitions in their fictional tales on the emergence of the political state. Leaving that long history for another day, Ngwuru people of pristine days knew that agriculture has many laws and taboos. They strove to respect these laws, knowing the impending doom that would befall them if these are flouted. However, contemporary social concerns are forcing this once homogenous agrarian community to open itself to new horizons in responding to the signs of the time. These require new interpretations that could enhance bumper harvest and promote peaceful and progressive society where food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition and other social vices would be reduced to the minimum. After reading the former U.N. Secretary-General, Kofi Annan’s that women are at the heart of a “policy revolution” to boost small-scale farming in Africa, I reminisced with great nostalgia how my mother and other women (mostly widows) farmed daily to provide food for their families and also the markets. That reminiscence gave me the spark to plough this path to examine the prospects of according women their rightful place in the society to food security, using Igwo Onwa and Itu Aka Ngwuru Uboma Ahia Ise as a platform. I invite you to journey this terrain with me. I begin with a reappraisal of Igwo Onwa

### **Igwo Onwa in Its Essence**

Nde Igbo’s judicial system is constructed around an indigenous jurisprudential worldview of Ebe bere Ugo bere. This standard of sociality is illustrated in many

linguistic formulations unique to nde Ngwuru. The prize is seen in the esteemed regard Nde Ngwuru are accorded by their immediate and distant neighbours. Such statements like

Uka Ngwuru wu ‘Tinuuru’ (you heard, that is, you cannot feign ignorance over the given matter or conduct – culpability is inevitable)

Nwa ngwuru emee nwhe na ataka n'aka. No Ngwuru person does any sticky thing. Impropriety is not allowed.

Ikaa nwa Ngwuru Uboma Ahia Ise – You cannot be referring to a real Ngwuru person. You must be joking to demean an Ngwuru son or daughter (Anoka, 1999)

are both indications of our people’s glaring flare for moral propriety and safeguards to standards. They were like golden rules that guided every Ngwuru son or daughter, and depictions of their level of moral and legal consciousness.

That standard (live and let live) assumes a new significance as a call to inclusivism in John Rawls’ conception of “justice as fairness”. To Rawls, fairness means the same thing as “considerability” character that applies only when it is accorded to whosoever deserves it, irrespective of gender, race, tongue or class. This 20th century theorist therefore accepts inclusiveness as the minimum standard that promotes equity and fosters both cooperation and collaboration in the given society.

Fairness, as the basis of our native jurisprudence and principle of sociality, is ipso facto, of the very essence and the *raison d’être* of Igwo Onwa, be it in those pristine days or today.

Besides consensus over the area to cultivate in a given farming season, there were other contentious issues our forebears looked into, at least, to make ensure peace and tranquillity in the land. The belief was that resolving these issues amicably would avert the destructive wrath of the gods and or the ancestors – mass death, strange sickness, epidemics, poor harvest, etc. – from visiting them. My mind goes to that famous painting on the wall of one of the classrooms in Central School, Nguru Centre. We used to call it “Nwa Njoku Iñuona Mpi Ole?” That painting could have been a depiction of Ngwuru Elders in Council, Nde Mmii Orie Umunna, or Igwo Onwa Ngwuru. The replica is found in Obiri Ikwere Roundabout in Rumuokwurushi, Rivers State. Whichever, this painting spoke to us about an important culture of collegiality and consultation, as the method of our jurisprudence. Sadly, this aspect of our culture is rapidly eroding away today. In such consultative assemblies, peace was ensured, the safety of all assured, the anger of the gods averted, and finally, “bumper harvest” guaranteed. The result of such deliberative process enounced always in prescriptive rulings that were symbolically tied in a prohibitive crest (Ebo) that was hung on the entrance to the community or harem, to enforce compliance, peaceful and social coexistence in the community, particularly during the sacred Week of Peace (Oral Interview with Luke Ikegwuoha of Umunkwoko Umuanuma Nguru). One can then see why Okonkwo’s action of beating his wife in his own house during the Week of Peace was severely punished, as sin against the entire community, hence an abomination that can make the gods punish their land with bad harvest, food scarcity and malnutrition.

Since the cause of peace in Ngwuru Uboma Ahia Ise required addressing any matter that would hamper the tranquillity needed in the pre-farming period (oge Itu Aka na Igwo Onwa), new questions arise today when the “women question” has risen to a non-negligible theme in contemporary discourse. The cry of the woman, which eco-feminists associate with the cry of nature (Plumwood, 1993), sounds too in our land, even within the bosom of celebrating our elated culture. Femininity is a triangular bond that engenders the affinity between the Earth goddess, Earth and the woman. As

the redispotion to fertility, procreation, and agricultural productivity, the Earth and the woman play literally similar roles of receptivity and re-productivity. This perspective considers oppression, discriminatory attitudes and exclusion of women as direct affront to the gods, hence, an abomination. Redressing this anomaly entails placating the gods who, as Xenophon, the ancient Greek thinker described them, were capricious with an unprintable soft spot for women. Doing so would be congenial to the very essence of Igwo Onwa. Contrarily, it would be inimical and foreign to the spirit of Ngwuru jurisprudence therefore to exclude the women talk from Igwo Onwa discourse. Let us look at this from the contemporary need for food security.

### **Igwo Onwa and the Gender Disparity**

This jurisprudence model, as the very essence of Igwo Onwa, is culpably challenged today. This is flagrant in the collective silence of contemporary society over the contribution of women in agriculture today. Despite the enormous milestones in awakening the conscience of the world in the present age by stakeholders, like the abolishment of the killing of twins in our land by Christian missionaries, women's second class status remains almost as it has been since the pristine past. It is therefore doubtful if Igwo Onwa is not complicit to this by its long silence over this injustice, or whether it could achieve its mission unless it is able to untie the colt and let the poor breathe. As a dialogical platform where contentious issues affecting life in Ngwuru Uboma Ahia Ise is addressed, one would ask: What threatens Nde Ngwuru most today than hunger? How do we fight this other than waging a war that attracts the blessing of the gods and the ancestors? How can we win this war other than placating these capricious deities whom the ancient Greek thinker, Xenophon, have an unprintable soft spot for women? Keeping mute over the status of women over the years tantamount Okonkwo beating his wife over and over again, oblivious of what harm that would bring the community. Umuofia people had to step in, punished the culprit, averted the danger, and protected the poor woman from further molestation. That, to me, is an awakening call for Igwo Onwa.

The worsening condition of women in our own time is glaring. The percentage remains high with a global spread as countless statistical reports disclose. We can infer from such reports that ours is a time when the woman's place is most missing, and voice unheard, and concern not catered for, in many sectors of public life. Women themselves are even conscious that they have been pushed to the margins, a corner that is much closer to non-humans (O'Connor, 2022). The impression today is that they exist in men's world. Even if this appraisal is found objectionable, indices of inequality between men and women, the boy child and the girl child, trend in statistical records across the various regions of the globe. Nwachukwu (2025) insists that this would probably endure much longer, unless concerted efforts are made to change or replace those philosophical foundations into which the ideological base is engrained. As Aristotle put it in his *Physica*, "we think we do not have knowledge of a thing until we have grasped its why" (*Phys. II 3, 194b17-20*). Many scholarly works link contemporary gender disparity to the mental frameworks and cultural constructs that shaped the Western intellectual tradition, beginning with the wake of the Modern Period, though with remote foundations in the Plato-Aristotelian thought (Nwachukwu, 2025). Aristotle's classification of all beings places "man" (*homo anthropos*) at the apex point of the pyramidically structured *scala naturae* (scale of nature), insisting that all other beings on the lower rungs exist for man (Aristotle, *Politica*, 1 III, 125b15-22). Under the Cartesian influence where the ego (self) is ideologically appropriated by the superior gender with its culturally equipped power

of the pulpit (right to interpret), “humanity” (anthropos) has no common meaning for all that is supposedly human. Being biologically differentiated from men therefore, the women are not “human” in the same sense as men (O’Connor, 2022). This taxonomy became over time the ground for constructing structures of inequality, domination and oppression. Toeing Plumwood’s steps, SORCHA O’CONNOR interprets gender therefore as the construal of unequal treatment of the inferior (female) by the male, superior (male) (O’Connor, 2022). Thus relegated, women lose their inalienable rights and find themselves at the whims and caprices of men, as Aristotle insinuated. Like a piece of property, without subject hood, person good, dignity, and other privileges therefrom, they can be acquired, beaten, or even excluded.

Gender disparity has a perennial presence in Igboland. Ngwuru Uboma Ahia Ise, as part of the central Igbo group, instantiates those communities where people feel that it is ordained by culture. Evidences abound to prove that women have not been accorded their proper place, neither in literary works of Igbo origin nor in cultural expressions. It is not a surprise that none of the foremost publications on nde Igbo, even by Igbo scholars like The Interesting Narratives of Olaudah Equiano, Pita Nwana’s Omenuko, Tony Ubesie’s Ukpara Okpoko Gburu and Isi Akwu Dara n’Ala, could have a woman for its principal character. Even in F.C. Ogbalu’s Omenala Igbo and Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, outstanding attention is paid to Ji (Yam) and Iri Ji (New Yam) Festival, while Ede (Cocoyam), Ji’s feminine counterpart, is not mentioned. Majority of previous Igwo Onwa lectures make no exceptions to this as none paid a fair attention to or devoted a paragraph to feminine contributions (nwhe gbasara nde nne, umu ada, na nde ndom anyi ha) in agriculture. Thus stereotyped, it matters not to these works whether Okonkwo would go ahead beating his wife, even during the Holy Week of Peace. The gods, as respecters of no perdonages had to speak against such misconduct by punishing the super-ego, Okonkwo. Since Otu aka ruta mmanu ya ezuo ibe ya, does this malfeasance have our collective fiat? Or, do we not feel that this subjugation of our mothers falls within the scope of Igwo Onwa discourse? Can the spirit of our fathers truly find rest when their cherished wives and daughters remain treated as the scum of society? This to me, is the veritable "tears of the fathers" that our own Mark Odu’s book refers. Addressing this should be a major concern to capture what Igwo Onwa festival truly stands for.

### **Women in Response to Food Insecurity**

One field where this underscored disparity is noticeable has to do with “the growing of food” as Vandana Shiva’s “Women and the Gendered Politics of Food” (2009) illustrates. Accross the different cultures and climes, women have remained relentless in making enormous contributions to food production and holistic human development. In other words, the war against hunger is contemporaneous with human history. In their fight against this war the ancient Egyptians discovered the irrigation technique. Today, the use of fertilizers and more lately GMOs grains are found necessary to meet the mounting food need of the world’s growing population. This goal occupies a central place on the UN’s development agenda for the 21st century, as the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), goal two shows: “End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”. Recognising hunger and food insecurity’s capacity to subject humanity to a precipice, the then UN Secretary-General, Gutierrez, launched the “Zero Hunger Challenge at the Rio+20 World Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 “to inspire a global movement towards a world free from hunger...” (UN, 2024). However, in her criticism of contemporary agricultural practices, Shiva (2009) explains contemporary

food insecurity as a consequence of discriminatory practices whereby the source of food supply is wrested from the control of women who happen to be “the world's original food producers”. The author's main argument can be thus summarized: women play crucial roles in food production, but they are excluded from the food chain. This first recognizes their importance; the later refuses them a voice.

The remaining part of this discourse tends to respond to the above questions. First, is to underline the fact that women have played active role in food production, though this faces numerous constraints, locally and internationally. The second will focus on Ngwuru Women' contributed to this basic need.

If we all accept that as Shiva claims, women are “central to food production system”, there is then no better time or place their indispensability in the war against hunger should be acknowledged than today and on such grounds as Igwo Onwa and Itu Aka Ngwuru Uboma ceremonies. I mean to say that in a state of war, especially when it gets tougher, it is wise to consult with the past, aware that those who take history to be anachronistic end up repeating the same mistakes of history.

Our proof of women's role in agriculture in Ngwuru can be drawn from direct observed experience which majority of the people here had in early childhood or in their youth. That experience reveals among other things, that:

- neither men nor women played a lesser role in this vital sector of family economy, since they complemented each other's work
- women played gender-specific roles in crop production, livestock tending, and in the care and use of farmlands, in processing and preparation of food (cf., FAO, 1995; Shiva, 2009).
- certain crops and agricultural activities were distributed along gender lines (genderized) (cf., Mbakwe 2011; 2024)

Cusack (2021) warns therefore that to underestimate women's activities in agricultural food production is to remain glued to patriarchal ideologies. To people who grew up in Ngwuru at a time when farming was the major source of economic supply, we ask: did you observe these? Can you remember still the size of nkokpagwa your father harvested near ukwu orji (iroko trees) or the akasi uhie your mother harvested from ishi olulu? Does this not remain only as memories whipping up periodic nostalgic feelings today? Suffice to say here that childhood experience reveal that our respective mothers made immense contributions to ensure that food was on the table. Despite the afore mentioned discriminatory attitudes, we all can affirm in unison that our mothers were even more actively involved in agricultural production of food, producing more than 50 percent of the total food that was grown (FAO, 1995). The diversity and nutritional value of what they produced are incomparable with the monoagricultural crops from multinational agricultural firms (Shiva, 2009). One can therefore agree with the 1995 FAO declaration that these women were nearly universally responsible for food provision and preparation for their families.

Modern African societies inherited the tradition of their founding fathers where men and female complemented each other, with each playing gender-specific roles and planting genderized crops. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, planting of Ji (yam), rearing of large herds, tapping of palm wine, were for the men. Ede, cassava, vegetables, and other food crops were left for women. However, so many developments in our history induced a meteoric shift in these gender specific roles, as shown below:

- i. One is demographic factor. Whereas large family size was counted as a blessing, hence the esteemed Ewu Ukwu ceremony, the attendant population boom became a scourge too heavy for anyone, especially due to land fragmentation, tenure and management (see Mbakwe, 2011).

ii. Urban migration. Many men migrated to urban centres in search of white collar jobs. Majority are now engaged in salaried jobs, transportation, and other trades, rather than food production

iii. Feminization of agriculture. Male emigration from rural communities meant engendered women dominance in agricultural production. With that came the disappearance of gender specific roles in farming.

iv. The cultural perspective suggests that food insecurity is a result of breach of customary agricultural norms owing to culturally imposed boundary lines that were not favourable to women form the bulk of such breeches.

v. Politics. Hunger and starvation were deployed as weapons of war in the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967-1970), while bureaucratic bottlenecks hindered the dividends of Obasanjo's OFN and Babangida's SAP and BLP from meeting expected goals (Arua, 1982).

vi. Bureaucratic bottlenecks. A vivid example is the organizational structure that appointed her 17 year old daughter, Aisha Babangida (born 1970) who lived in the presidential villa, as national chairperson of Maryam Babangida's Better Life Program for African Rural Women initiative. Such bottlenecks only paved ways for hijack of the programme and its dividends, thus preventing poor women in rural communities from accessing the services (Ikedionwu, 1995).

vii. Ethnicity. This situation has most recently been exacerbated in the war against farmers, especially by Fulani terrorist herder groups under the watch of their tribal kinsman, Mohammadu Buhari, as president, without bringing any to book. Their unbridled kidnapping, rape, sack of farmers from their farms and destruction of crops and farmlands caused food scarcity, and consequently, inflation in the country. This dashed Nigeria's dream of meeting the targeted food security by the year 2030 (cf., UN, 2023).

Altogether, these obstruct food production. The hope of achieving food security would be feasible only if these constraints are removed and these attitudes changed. Since anyi agaghi eri nwhe nwata rikwee nkata ya, appreciating women for the vital role they played, and continue to play, in food production and their protection is an elixir that motivates them to do more. As the saying goes, emekowa onye akidi ya agwota odo.

### **Ngwuru Women in Family Food Security, Nutrition, Economy**

Given the hunger, food insecurity, and the high cost of food in the local market, there is need to take a hindsight on the past for possible lessons that could ginger a new commitment in the fight against the menacing hunger and food insecurity confronting present society. This past portrays a period where women proved themselves to be economic and home management amazons that never folded their arms in the face of death. It is a past where women engaged in diverse activities, besides food preparation, to ensure the economic and the nutritional health of their families (FAO,1995).

To be able to make a realistic appraisal of this situation, we are therefore left to ask this contextual question:

Have women ever involve in food provision in Ngwuru Uboma Ahia Ise?

Are there identifiable attitudes and constraints women suffered or are still suffering in Ngwuru that tend to militate against food security in our time?

What possible steps can we adopt today to address these bottlenecks and ensure food security in today's society?



It is commonplace to hear of women who bought parcels of land of their own. My grandmother, Nne Chinaagorom Robert (Nna Aka), bequeathed one to my eldest brother, George. Such examples not only refute any claims that women had no rights in Igboland nor owned any property, they illustrate women's involvement in the economic chain alongside the wellbeing of their families. Hence, both men and women had different responsibilities, all gearing towards providing the basic needs of their households. In an agrarian community where subsistence agriculture (farming and herding as their main sources of wealth) remains the mainstay of the economy, a man's measured wealth by the largeness of his family size and of his barn or livestock, in which case their wives played outstanding roles (see Mbakwe, 2011). Since large family size and large barns were extolled in Igboland, the ultimate reason behind polygamy was supposedly for more food production – the more wives a man married, the more children he was likely to raise, and ultimately the more food they altogether to produce: “Women in this regard help in the reproduction of children that form the bulk of workforce of the family which helps a man to attain enviable economic and social status in Igbo traditional societies” (Udeagha, & Nwamah, 2019). This highlights the Igbo cultural reality that men who coveted wealth and influence in society marry wives in order to raise many children to support in farm work and other economic activities. For example, three characters in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* - Okonkwo, Obierika and Nwakibie were all polygamous. Nwakibie, for instance, had nine wives, thirty children, three large yam barns, and attained a top rank in Umuofia. By that standard, he was rated a “stupendously wealthy” man (Nduka & Nwamah, 2019). Eze Nwaturuocha from Umuanuma is said to have married over a hundred wives. So were many other notable chiefs from Ngwuru of his time.

But, could one man feed those children all alone? We can guess the answer. This underlined complimentary role of women affirms the veracity of the saying that “beside every successful man is a woman”. Women formed the bulk of the workforce that helped their husbands attain enviable economic and social statuses. As underscored in Mbakwe 2011, they contributed to the economic wellbeing by engaging in activities that ensured the food security and economic wellbeing of the families. A graceful woman in Ngwuru saw as part of family care-giving her support to her husband in the upkeep of their children. That entailed involvement in farming and other forms of agro and allied practices from crop planting, tending animals and weeding, harvesting and processing, often selling of the produce to raise money for other domestic needs, and food preparation. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, though Unoka is portrayed as a lazy man, his wife, Okonkwo's mother and her two daughters “worked hard enough” to ensure that there was always food on the table (Nduka & Nwamah, 2019). In like manner, nwanyi Ngwuru could labour to ensure food security for the family.

I learned two lessons from my mother, Nne Chikere Nwachukwu Odu (nee Agbakwuru Eberendu of Umuezie Nguru):

- No real woman stays idle (nnine nwanyi anaghi afii aka n'ukwu) waiting all the time for the husband to bring. According to her, oji evuda ugwu nwanyi (it rubbishes the woman's integrity).

- Nnine nwanyi owula ga-enweriri nga on'akunye owuladi otu aku ugu o ga ikpara ji shiere umu ya nri – a real woman must have a place she could plant even ugu (pumpkin) which she could pluck to cook food for her children.

That a real Igbo woman should support her husband by contributing to the economic wellbeing of her family was her constant counsel and exhortation to younger women

who visited her in her retirement age. She gave them testimonies on how this philosophy of life and work enabled her to weather the storm the Nigeria/Biafra War created, and how this philosophy made her able to raise seven children, even in the face of apparent impossibility.

Her words of counsel resonate more loudly amidst today's challenging poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition. It is left for present day mothers, wives, and sisters to say whether this exhortation and philosophy of life makes no sense to them. Poverty and inflation are currently ravaging our communities; they are pushing our people, young and old, male and female, into abominable behaviours and conducts (including nso ala) that ignite the ire of our ancestors and the gods of the land. Does akuko Ogbodudu (onu mmanu mmanu without the causal aka aja aja – through ego mbute) guarantee a healthy society and future? Hunger is key to such contemporary social vices as Satanism, ritual murder (for money), prostitution, armed robbery and kidnapping. Added to these is the death we court in the genetically modified organisms (gmos) in those imported food we buy deadly (Lachkovics, 2015). The second philosophy explains why every woman would set up kitchen garden (mgbaja) where she would grow varieties of fruits and vegetables. One can plant crops like coco-yams, groundnuts, melons and cassava, mkpuru ofe (garden eggs), pepper, ugu and other vegetables and legumes. These tackle hunger and ensure the dietary balance of the family meal. They eliminate rising cases of unbalanced diets and dietary vitamin deficiencies. Organic from your gardens, like vegetables, red oil, salt and pepper, ukwa, oka, ede and abrika/unere contain sufficient nutrients that keep the family healthy. Of course, anu okuko Igbo na any English fowl awughi otu. Ke Igbo vu ndu, ke bekee vu onwu. Our only security is organic farming, no matter how small the parcel of land could be, thanks to the new technique of planting in sacks.

### Evaluation

The severe economic condition of the present time has created an existential condition that should not be ignored. This comprises of anomalous conditions that required only a revolutionary paradigm shift to address. Present day Umu nwanyi Ngwuru, widows, wives or mothers, are equipped as their predecessors of the post Nigeria-Biafra War era, to take the challenge to bring help to their families, at least to meet the ever increasing economic demands of the day. In those early post-War days, everywhere was gloomy with many families still licking their bleeding wounds from the War. To tackle the challenge, many men who did not die or get maimed in the War left the villages for the big cities. The coast became clearer the moment the women launched a counter war (war against starvation and hunger) by aggressively embarking on subsistence farming and petty trading to place food on the table, thanks to the resilience of these adorable amazons. My mother was one. With her, everything was for the most part work, work, and more work. You can understand with me therefore why this paper considers it a blameable and a grossly culpable offense to leave unpaid these women's labour and contributions towards the making of Modern Ngwuru.

My paper has argued that the outer society may disregard the discrimination against women, an unpardonable injustice that cries for redress, but its connection of this cry for fairness and the very essence of Igwo Onwa makes its mark as a minder to Nde Ngwuru of its timeliness to take the bull by the horn and speak boldly for our mothers. Peace and tranquillity cannot reign on the foundations of injustice. It is high time we made our society to remunerate women as major role players in food economy. Eclipsing their sweats and contributions gives the impression of complicit conspiracy and a reinforcement of the global downplay of their contributions to the overall

human development. The cultural festivities that exclusively extol masculine labour roles and genderized farm crop, Ji (Yam) and related festivals and ceremonies like Iri Ji, to the negligence of Ede (ji's feminine counterpart), is indicative of the flagrant imbalance in our cultural consciousness and expressions. For the benefit of the doubt, a hindsight reveals that the woman question is flagrantly missing in previous Igwo Onwa lectures and from the articles in Nguru Mbaise in *Historical Perspectives*, edited by Nwogu et al. (1999), though some may have merely scratched it in passing as they address specific topical issues. It is understandable therefore why Mbakwe (2011) laid more emphasis on Ji (Yam) which we still reckon as the king of all crops. At least, it should be a preoccupation of Igwo Onwa, as a platform for Igbo jurisprudence, to highlight this injustice or negligence by according Ede a right of place in our cultural consciousness and celebrations, as a people. This is a clarion call to end this silence in modern Ngwuru. Fixing this lack would reassert the inalienable equity, diversity and inclusiveness among a people that are known for their moral probity and judicial propriety.

For some caveats, the subjugation of the woman is even a jailable offense once challenged in the court of law today. Moreover, recent arguments that Ede (Cocoyam) – Ji's female counterpart – is nutritionally more valuable than Ji strengthens this call for inclusivity. On the other hand, women are assuming more manifest roles in recent times in corporate organizations, even in the Church, beyond CWO Presidents and secretaries to Church Councils. Fr. Prof. Nicholas Omenka stands to be duly commended for reminding us of the role of Mother Mary Coleman and the graduates of the Domestic Centre at Ogbor Nguru in the evolution of modern Nguru. Since many of our parents rose to the heights because of supports from their wives, our history would be complete when this gender is accorded its proper place in our cultural annals.

## **Conclusion**

The lines above are indicative that motivation and increased access to opportunity have high probability of changing the dynamics in food security. This is because women are integral to our food systems, from planting seeds to feeding our families and communities. However, we have seen that their contributions have too often been overlooked or undervalued – due to the deep-rooted gender disparities that becloud their contributions. Following the advice of Saul Morris and Mduduzi Mbuya, taking necessary actions to undo these entrenched and systematic biases by creating platforms of women empowerment and support systems is necessary today. These outdated perceptions and stereotypes and ingrained beliefs that perpetuate gender inequalities within the food system should be seen for what they are, hindrances to authentic human development. These should be replaced with more supportive environment.

I have demonstrated therefore that culture never emerges from a vacuum; it is a response to peoples' existential realities over time. Novel existential questions usually create what Thomas Samuel Kuhn calls anomalous conditions that challenge existing paradigms. Then a new response with higher problem-solving power would be needed to address the anomaly. Though a radical paradigm shift of a revolutionary nature where recourse to existing paradigms would not be sufficient, in this wise, the paper opts for an accommodative paradigm shift that sees in the other person an enriching potential that could be harnessed for the common good, given an enabling environment. Thus doing, righting ingrained wrongs in the polity would require only a healthy, sustainable approach. Nna anyi ha naara asi: "Oke zuo, iro alaa". Again,

emee nwanyi mkpa emere ibe ya ogbuu alaa”, onweghikwa onye ikoli ga akpo ibe ya onye ikoli. This paper is therefore saying, Nde Ngwuru, oge erule mgbe aga eme umu nwanyi mkpa emere ibe ha n’inye ha oke ruuru ha n’ala Ngwuru. Tinuuru. I rest my case.

## WAY FORWARD

This paper has asked: Is there a possibility of carving out a day to celebrate our women? Would it violate the spirit of Igwo Onwa to boost gender mainstreaming as endorsed by the UN in the 1995 World Conference on Women global celebration of women in the International Women's Day? As a matter of fact, celebrating Iri Ji without Ime Emume Ede leaves something missing even in the most sublime celebration of our culture. Do Obi Uboma and Council, as custodians of Ngwuru culture, have the capacity to strike the needed balance by honouring nde nne, nde ndom na umu ada Ngwuru in their fatherland, and by so doing, getting their contributions duly appraised, their voices amplified, and their place assured? Can we revamp and modernize our near extant annual offices of “Mmaji” in keeping in the light of cultural renaissance our own brother, Gaius Anoka of blessed memory, lit in his Imo State? Does the present age have the capacity to create the office of “Ada Uboma 2025” or “Uboma Princess” without upturning the statusquo (Nwigbe) or running counter to the aspirations, neither of Ndi Eze Ngwuru, the apex leadership of Nguru Development Union, nor of the larger community of Nde Ngwuru Uboma Ahia Ise, provided the criteria for such selections are clearly spelt out. Would such offices not encourage good upbringing of umu ada daughters in the virtues of hardwork and good moral standards, especially as a counter against the indoctrinations sub-culture? Can such offices be tied to some agricultural templates that Igwo Onwa and Itu Aka promote? Can such titles or honours be conferred during Itu Aka ceremony? I raise these questions, nay, proposals, not for some selfish purposes, but for the deep respect I owe all uncelebrated Ngwuru women who went to work in the farm pregnant, tying another child on the back, and holding the other by the hand, still carried the farming basket on the head. To almost everybody here, our mothers belonged to that circle. Let us celebrate them. Let us not prolong the tears of our fathers, their husbands and our ancestors.

And before I take my final bow, I pray everybody here to pay a brief visit to Nwa Njoku Inuona Mpi Ole painting, a depiction of Igwo Onwa ceremony at Ngwuru Centre, the ground of Itu Aka. It taught me great lessons as a child. Sadly, that painting has disappeared, and this is an affront to Obi Uboma, all custodians of culture and all old boys of that great institution in this gathering. While encouraging all Ngwuru elders and custodians of culture to encourage our children and grandchildren to visit that one painting just too many, I exhort you imbibe the message of that visual teacher in reflecting the essence and spirit of Igwo Onwa as the gathering of nde Oki deliberating in truth, fairness, singleness of purpose, over the common good that promoted Ngwuru cohesion, peace and unity.

Once more, permit me to thank most respectfully the indefatigable President General, Sir Dr. Udunze, along with the entire NDU Executives who found me worthy of consideration as the guest lecturer for this year’s session of Igwo Onwa Lectures. My gratitude goes to the various branch chapters and their leadership who jointly gave me the feathers to fly, by according me the privilege to adding my voice to those of other eminent sons of Ngwuru to speak before this august assembly of the crème de la crème of Ngwuru. How else could I have stood before Kings and Princes, government officials, heads of institutions and parastatals, Nde Eze na Ugoeze, Nde Nze na Ozo,

Nde Ji Okwa, ma Nde furu Ákà ma Nde Gba Ákà, Nde Chief na Nde Lolo, your majesties and lordships, members of the Academia, Captains of Industry, members of the clergy, great sons and daughters of Ngwuru Uboma Ahia Ise, oha na eze, and distinguished ladies and gentlemen, to speak on a matter over which you are more knowledgeable than my humble self. I therefore pray you to prize not my inadequacies and inabilities, but my great joy for the singular privilege to mount this rostrum to deliver a public lecture before Nde Ebeke Anyi. I must acknowledge too my predecessors whose Igwo Onwa lectures quite insightfully shaped my thought. I duff my cap for Prof. Paul Mbakwe for going extra miles to ensure that his latest publication reached me when I needed it most. In fact, on discovering his beautiful work in the 2011 version of Igwo Onwa Lecture, I took the initiative to via towards a social justice theme, considering the spirit of Igwo Onwa as a ceremony with the goal of resolving anomalous or contentious conditions that run the risk of turning the ire of the gods against the land, convinced that we need to ask new questions in our attempt to find answers to pertinent questions of our time.

Once again, I remain open to dialogue for possible correction and improvement in respect of any part or whole of this paper. Meanwhile, this rostrum has become too hot for me, I humbly beg to come down from it.

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