



## Book Reviews

**Raphael Chijioke Njoku.** *African Cultural Values: Igbo Political Leadership in Colonial Nigeria, 1900-1966.* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006); pages: ix + 251; price: \$75, cloth.

The construction of elitism and leadership is a unique feature of social existence of all human beings. If elites are crudely or simply conceptualized, as personalities who occupy important positions of influence in a society, then one can argue that the history of elites and leadership is as old as the history of human socio-political organization and identity. With specific reference to Africa, the kings, chiefs, elders and priests, who were both men and women, occupied significant elitist positions among the continent's numerous political and cultural cleavages before and during alien rule.

Indeed, the introduction of colonialism and western education is a major development in the configuration of political elitism and leadership, for it led to the emergence of what have been generally called the "new elites." Academic research on this category of people could not escape the "eagle eyes" of historical scholarship as Africanist, working on different parts of the continent, analyze how Christianity and the introduction of western education contributed to their emergence. The basic component of this academic fashion is that by attending western schools, exposure to oriental values and acquiring western certificates both at home and abroad, the "new elites" were able to acquire the skills needed to expose the adversaries of colonialism, provide grass root leadership and demand for the termination of alien rule. However, the configuration of elitism and the entire position of leadership in colonial Africa is beyond the acquisition of western education and oriental values.

Our knowledge of the role that alternative avenues, devoid of western education and values, played in shaping the careers of African political elites, during and after the demise of colonialism, is poor until the 2006 appearance of Raphael Chijioke Njoku's *African Cultural Values: Igbo Political Leadership in Colonial Nigeria, 1900-1966*. Njoku is among the first scholars to argue that to understand the nature of African leadership, we need to turn our searchlight from the role of western educational ideas to that of indigenous cultural and social institutions such as secret societies, age grades, village life and politics, compound or clan family networks (and, in the scholarship of Professor George Ayittey and others, even African traditional rulers). What Njoku is telling us is that indigenous cultural values are absolutely important in determining the philosophy of Nigerian leaders, and that the acquisition of western education did not obliterate the high degree of respect, which they had for custom as well as tradition. For the purpose of scrutiny and precision and to avoid undue generalization, which of course leads to the flouting of basic rules of the profession of history, Njoku critically examines the careers of the following four prominent Igbo leaders of southeastern Nigeria: Alvan Ikoku (1900-1971), Akanu Ibiam (1906-1995), Mbonu Ojike (1914-1956) and Kingsley O. Mbadiwe (1917-1990). From the look of the line up, it is obvious that these men belonged to the same generation and did share similar historical as well as cultural backgrounds because they were all Igbo men.

The methodology and the data used for writing the book are both conventional and unconventional. The use of primary data, which includes colonial documents, private papers of the leaders, oral interview and secondary sources, demonstrate the author's compliance with the rule of thumb, and that of excellent scholarship. A very unconventional source is the use of such Igbo oral literature as proverbs, idioms and epigrammatic sayings. The author appropriately understands that this genre of data is *absolutely* germane for a study, which is aimed at placing African cultural values at the center stage of colonial and post-colonial intellectual, political and philosophical thought. Few historians have seen the need to use this genre of data.

The use of Igbo proverbs is needed to understand how political ideas of these educated leaders were influenced by indigenous cultural values which they acquired through villages moonlight stories, family, membership of age grades, secret societies to mention but a few. One needs to quickly add that the use of Igbo proverbs do not interfere with the goal of making the book, accessible to all and sundry. And one does not require acquaintance with African oral literature to appreciate the significance of traditional cultural teachings in relations to the central theme of the work. All Igbo proverbs and sayings are adequately rendered in English language and weaved creatively into the themes discussed in the sections or chapters where they appeared.

Metaphorically, all academic study can be likened to a journey through a dark tunnel that has a lot of navigable curves. A good tunnel is the one with spotlights, which gives the traveler the opportunity of understanding different parts of the tunnel and assessing the success of the journey. At the end of the tunnel is the full light, which signifies the end of the journey. Since there are a lot of spotlights, a traveler does not have to get to the end of the dark tunnel to appreciate the entire journey. Apparently, the journey is not complete without the spotlights, which serve as the guide, and allows the traveler to appreciate the success of the journey. Njoku is able to achieve an exceptional feat of clipping one chapter and section of work to another by providing a lot of information, which directly or indirectly assist in putting the themes of the tome in a coherent and an all-embracing manner. All sections are beautifully laced in a manner that makes a reader consistently know where she or he is coming, as the author lucidly offers a relationship between the content of the present page and the ones already read. Most importantly, readers cannot get lost in the course of reading the 251-page book. Each chapter discusses the career of each leader, except chapter five which is allotted to the career of Mbonu Ojike and Kingsley O. Mbadiwe. All the chapters are divided into the following useful sections: family background and early childhood, indigenous versus western educational values, age – grades, marriage and gender relations, secret societies, relationship with local authorities, relationship with the church, philosophy and conception of the colonial order and lastly role in politics. Also the chapters are structured in a manner that allows readers to appreciate the background of the leaders and their place in virtually all domains and how the collectivity of the spaces influenced their political ideology and philosophy.

In historical scholarship, every piece represents an attempt to understand a phenomenon or a set of phenomena within the confines of time and place. In trying to achieve this purpose, a scholar gets into the unavoidable trouble of "exclusion". The author of this book is trapped by what could be called "Malo-centricity". This is particularly so, as one expected the author to provide a balanced discourse along the gender line by sampling the careers of one or two Igbo women leaders of this period. It is grossly inadequate to assume that women, whose positions and influence are of leverage to Alvan Ikoku *et al.*, did not exist in

Igbo land during the period examined. Generally, the work is a huge success. A concluding remark is that the author should consider filling this loophole if he plans to write the second edition.

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