

## THE THINK-HOME (AKU LUE UNO) PHILOSOPHY IN THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH: A HERMENEUTICAL INDICTMENT ON THE DIASPORA IGBO OF SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

By

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### Abstract

*The Old Testament Book of Nehemiah is a national post-exilic reconstruction philosophical document credited to the P-strand of scribal redactors. It presents the picture of Nehemiah, one of the Jewish exiles carried away by the Babylonian conquerors of Judah, the Southern kingdom of Israel. While in captivity, (in diaspora) he prospered and attained a high executive position in government, a position which earned him much affluence, influence and connection. In spite of that state of well-being and comfort, he remained unfulfilled, because, he inquired (Hebrew, מָלַךְ, 1:2) concerning his home and his people and was worried at the state of dilapidation of his country home. Moved by passion, he deployed all his wealth, influence and connection unto the reconstruction of the broken walls of his country home. Aku lue uno, a concern for development of the home base, is a philosophy that has recently started to receive an emphasis among the Igbo of South East Nigeria. However, while this philosophy is being hyped rhetorically, the reality on ground is that Igbo land of South East Nigeria is still in a state of dilapidation, full of evidence of the civil war, while the Igbo are visibly and actively involved in the development of other nations round the globe. The glaring absence amenities and investment-friendly climate has driven thousands of indigenes of the area to all parts of the world in search of means of livelihood, whether legitimate or illegitimate. Scores of such indigenes are using their ingenuities to boost the economies of foreign nations, while many are being exterminated annually for involvement in all sorts of shady deals including drug peddling. This paper hermeneutically explores the think-home (Aku lue uno) philosophy in the Book of Nehemiah and lends a voice towards the inculcation of this philosophy in the diaspora Igbo of South East Nigeria, as a way of halting the brain drain and stimulating local development.*

**Keyword: Awareness, Commitment, Reconstruction, Investment, Growth.**

### Introduction

The Igbo of South East Nigeria are a people whose history and culture have been least documented. This situation of scarcity of researched and documented information has given rise to all kinds of suspicion, giving vent to all manners of unsubstantiated allegations. Afigbo (1981) has attempted to explain this paucity of documented information on Igbo history and culture, attributing it to the fact that the early Europeans, who came in contact with the Igbo, found them unwelcoming and uncooperative, and eventually went across to other ethnic nationalities among whom they were happy to work.

That the early Europeans that came in contact with the Igbo found them (the Igbo) extremely difficult to work with, and not amenable to discipline is corroborated by Siollun (2021) who went on to gory details to show how the Igbo have paid severely for this impression. For instance, the imperial government of Britain which had the responsibility of setting up the indigenous armed forces of Nigeria, had a special liking for the Hausa and their religion, Islam, which according to them, “imposed a natural civilization and discipline on Hausa people” (Lennox, 1905, p. 51).

It is very well known that at the time the Europeans encountered the Igbo of South East Nigeria, the indigenous Igbo communities were already firmly organized and indeed operated a democratic system superior to what existed in Europe, a fact which many European authors were reluctant to admit, but knew too well all the same. It was therefore natural that these indigenous Igbo communities, having both a system of governance and a formidable defence mechanism, were in such a condition to resist any and every external invasion and oppression.

Siollun (2021) admits that;

When Britain created the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria in 1900, the people of Arochukwu, known as the Aros, (in modern day Abia State in South East Nigeria), exercised economic, military and spiritual supremacy among the Igbo, Ibibio, Ijaw and other neighboring ethnic groups. The Aros were among the well-trained of Igbos, as they had lucrative commercial interests from trading within Igbo land, with other ethnic groups and with Europeans. They were middlemen, arms dealers, slave dealers, and providers of mercenaries. Through their alliance with martial clans, such as the Abams, Edda, and Ohafia, they were able to loan out military services of these clans as mercenaries and also use them as warriors for their own interests (p. 177).

The result of this situation was that in the formation of the nucleus of the armed forces in Nigeria, the Britain imperial government used only the Northerners. Lennox (1905) admitted this when he attested that;

The reason that the men are mostly recruited from far away north is because they make far better soldiers and also because the majority of the fighting which now takes place occurs against the tribes in the South, and it is of great advantage to have men who are in no way connected with those against whom the fighting is taking place (p. 49).

The Igbo are widely travelled people. As far back as the 1890's when records of British encounter with the Igbo had been documented, the Igbo had maintained a record of wide travelling. While the visiting Europeans encountering the Igbo in Nigeria considered them unwelcoming and uncooperative (for the reason as shown above that the Igbo already had an established administrative system and a preparedness to resist foreign invasion), the Igbo, till presently, make themselves at home in foreign lands. They easily adapt to whatever situation they meet in foreign lands, and being a people naturally endowed with ingenuity and industry, they easily prosper economically in foreign lands. Their natural love for adventure takes them to the nooks and crannies where records attest to the fact that they contribute immensely to the development of their lands of sojourn, in most cases, to the neglect and detriment of their home stead. As seen above, the deliberate policy of the British imperial government to favour the North which they (the British) considered most welcoming and co-operative, put the Igbo of South-East Nigeria at the receiving end of far-reaching vituperations and deprivations, leading to developmental challenges that have forced an increasing population of the people to explore avenues of livelihood in foreign lands. Today, the Igbo are scattered all over the world in search of livelihood. While some are doing well in diverse fields of endeavour, some are, unfortunately, seeking means of survival through some inordinate means.

### **The Old Testament Book of Nehemiah**

Internal textual evidence presents Nehemiah as a Jewish captive serving in the Persian royal court as the personal cupbearer of king Artaxerxes. That indicates a kind of domestic administrator of the Presidency in modern parlance, a prestigious position reserved for highly trusted nationals. That a foreigner was considered for such a sensitive position speaks volumes of the prestige that must have been accorded Nehemiah, and testifies of his immense uprightness in character.

The Book of Nehemiah describes the happenings in the Persian city of Shushan about 444 BC (Neh. 1:1). Later that year, Nehemiah travelled to Jerusalem, leading the third and last group of Jewish returnees from the seventy-year captivity that began with deportations to Babylon, culminating in the conquest of Babylon by the Persians, and further deportations to Persia. Because of the prestigious position which he occupied in the Persian government, Nehemiah, in spite of his prominence among the Jews, did not join in the first and second return journeys of the Jewish exiles. However, although he was visibly comfortable in Persia, it was his habit to constantly enquire about his homestead. It was on one of those occasions of enquiry that he received the very devastating report of the dilapidated state of Jerusalem, the homeland of his fathers. At that point, nothing else made any sense to him anymore, and he considered himself rather prodigious that he continued to live in affluence in foreign land, while his country home lay in ruins.

The Book of Nehemiah is a post-exilic Jewish national reconstruction manual composed, according to the Graff-Wellhausen source critical analysis, by the Priestly redactors. These Priestly redactors, also responsible for the rewriting of the history of Israel in 1 and 2 Chronicles, set out to document the working philosophy of the post-exilic national reconstruction process. The Book of Nehemiah is, in fact, part of a two-document corpus, Ezra-Nehemiah, as it presently exists in the Hebrew canon. It will therefore be plausible to describe Ezra as a contemporary of Nehemiah, in the historical era commonly referred to as the Second Temple Era. North (1990) explains that;

Today's Jewish people rather tenderly favour the expression, "Second Temple". It is a chronological term for an important period of their ethnic existence. That era after the return from exile and until the Diaspora is in a certain sense continuing today. But the century which culminated in the destruction of the Temple (AD 70) fostered the three most controversial phenomena of all Jewish history; the baptizing sectaries of Qumran and elsewhere; Hillel and Shammai; Jesus and Paul. Actually, it was precisely Herod's Temple which, during that century, became a wonder of the world to replace the modest efforts of the returned exiles. Yet Jewish tradition never speaks of Herod's as a "Third Temple" (p. 386).

This underscores the importance which the Jews attach to this post-exilic reconstruction, in that it has culminated into a historical era in the entire Jewish history.

### Concern for the Homestead

Something vital about Nehemiah's concern for the homestead cannot escape mention here. Verse 2 of the first chapter of the text reads in part;

וַיְבֹא אֶחָד מֵאֶחָיו הַחֲנָנִי

Literally, And there came Hanani, one of our brethren. This speaks volumes of Nehemiah's personal, intentional endeavour to maintain a conscious connection with home. In fact, the text suggests a regular gathering of the brethren (אָחִי) in his house for purposes of consulting on issues bothering on the welfare of the Jewish captives, as well as the condition of the homestead. In other words, in spite of his exalted position in government in the foreign land, Nehemiah still made himself accessible to his brethren, and considered the welfare of his brethren in captivity, as well as the condition of Jerusalem his home the primary reason for his being.

Next, the text says;

וַאֲשַׁאלָם עַל־תְּהוֹמוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם: ... וְעַל יְרוּשָׁלַם:

Literally, And I enquired concerning the Jews,...and Jerusalem.

The verb, וַאֲשַׁאלָם, from the root, אָשַׁא, implies a conscious effort at enquiring after a person's wellbeing. It implies that Nehemiah considered the wellbeing of his people a matter of utmost importance, above his highest joy. The tense of the verb used does not imply a casual, once-for-all ceremonial enquiry, but rather a prolonged, continuous, dutiful enquiry for which a cliché passing reply would not suffice. Nehemiah demanded a dutiful, detailed report of the matter over which he was enquiring, and he got nothing less.

### Repatriating Accumulated Wealth

It is important to note carefully the content of Nehemiah's request as presented to King Artaxerxes. North (1990) articulates this in captivating words;

With prayerful shrewdness, he waited four months before he showed the king signs of his distress... Nehemiah was doubtless spying out a moment when weariness and wine would have put the monarch into a maximally sympathetic mood. Artaxerxes is confronted with a pampered youth's plea to be made rebuilders and virtual leaders of a historic and turbulent metropolis. The city wall was a true fortification (Heb. בִּזְרוּחַ) and the authorization of its building is a genuine rearmament. Politically, the king's concession is a dangerous caprice... More plausibly, the letter of Rehum is a reaction to Nehemiah's coming. The governors whom Nehemiah finds in Palestine are Sanballat and Tobiah, and he is contemptuous of them (p. 392).

The critical point of Nehemiah's presentation to the king is worthy of note;

And (he) said unto the king; let the king live forever; why should not my countenance be sad when the city, the place of my father's sepulchers, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire? (2:3)

Nehemiah did not just stop at asking for the king's permission to go and repair the broken walls of his fatherland, he also began to utilize his wealth of connection to generate sufficient resources for the project.

Moreover I said to the king; If it please the king, let letters be given me to the governors beyond the river, that they may convey me over till I come to Judah. And a letter unto Asaph the keeper of the king's forest that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the palace... and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall enter into. And the king granted me according to the good hand of my God upon me (2:7,8).

The years of sojourn of Nehemiah in the kingdoms of Babylon, Medes and Persia, as a result of his character and ingenuity, had translated into much wealth, connection and favour. Prompted by the excruciating need to repair and restore the dilapidated condition of his homestead, Nehemiah transferred all of that wealth and favour to that priority project.

### **The Igbo in Diaspora**

The Igbo of South East Nigeria are a people in motion, a widely travelled people, a people given to adventurous sojourning. There is hardly any part of the world where they are not. Being highly ingenious and industrious, they move into the nooks and crannies of the world and invent for themselves a favourable economic climate. Siollun (2021) has explained that as far back as 1900 when the British created the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, the Aros of Arochuku in the present Abia State of South-East Nigeria "were among the most widely travelled of Igbos, as they have lucrative commercial interests from travelling within Igbo land, with other ethnic groups and with Europeans. They were middlemen, arms dealers, slave dealers and providers of mercenaries". (p. 177).

Isichei (1976) has explained that population pressures in the 19th century forced some Igbo groups to fight series of boundary wars. However, Colonialism put an end to this type of adjustment, but also made possible a much more fundamental pattern of adjustment called the diaspora, which, according to her, is "one of the most striking features of Igbo twentieth-century history" (p. 208). Isichei went ahead to explain that this phase of Igbo history might be called the second Igbo Diaspora, the first being the trans-Atlantic slave trade. According to her;

The decision to live outside one's place of origin, the process of living with consequences of this decision, what sociologists call an inter-local orientation, is a revolutionary change of the greatest social importance. Igbos came into this situation in various ways. For government employees, there was no choice; they had to accept whatever posting they were given, which was almost never in their place of origin (p. 209).

It would appear that for Isichei (perhaps at the time of writing) Diaspora would include any place of dwelling outside the homestead, in this case, outside South-East Nigeria, the predominant homestead of the Igbo. However, more contemporary usage would seem to restrict the term to settling outside one's country. Thus Hornby (2010) would say of diaspora;

The movement of the Jewish people away from their own country to live and work in other countries; the movement of people from any nation or group away from their own country (p. 403).

This rather contemporary application would seem to restrict the term "Igbo Diaspora" to Igbos living outside Nigeria. However, for the purpose of this discussion, we adopt the view of Isichei (1976) to

include in the term, “Igbo Diaspora” all people of Igbo origin living outside the South-East Nigeria, the universally acclaimed homestead of the Igbo ethnic nationality.

Amali (1967) has given further insight into the pattern of early Diaspora orientation among the Igbo of South East Nigeria;

When the railway was under construction from the North to the East, the Igbos settled along the route where there was a camp. The camps were built to help the workers on the roads and these camps were mainly inhabited by Igbos who came to work on the railway line. They came first of all singly. After some time, they brought their wives, small brothers and sisters, usually to help them in domestic work. Along the railway route where there were camps in the North, the Igbos settled down with their families and began to farm the land around the camp (p. 7).

This was the pattern of settling which gradually diversified into trade and produce work, until even growing communities of Igbo businessmen were formed, in many cases attracting resentments from communities as a result of their speedy progress. By virtue of their extensive contacts, these Igbo businessmen brought European goods into the local markets and by this increased their relevance and prominence, and in turn, their prosperity.

Amali (1967) adds that;

The Igbo man was the Headmaster of the Primary School. He was the teacher, he was the railway station master, he was the post master, etc. The feelings of a lot of people about the Igbos in Idoma before the civil war were that they were the controllers of trade, administration, the school systems and “our women”... Before the crisis, some of the Igbo traders in Idoma were buying their farm products from the farmers directly in their farms. Some of them would buy a whole plantation of corn or yams when the crop was still growing. They would pay the farmers very little for that (p. 9).

The population of Igbo diaspora grew astronomically. For instance, census figures cited in Talbot (1926) show that in 1911, there were 291 Igbos in Lagos; in 1921, there were 1,609 Igbos in Lagos, mostly men. Census figures cited in Coleman (1965) show that in 1951, there were 31,887 Igbos in Lagos, forming 44.6 percent of the non-Yoruba population of Lagos. Similarly, Igbos formed 53.5 percent of the non-Edo population in Benin; 38 percent of the non-Hausa-Fulani population in Kano and 40.7 percent of the non-Northern inhabitants of Kaduna. This is in addition to sizeable Igbo populations in Ibadan, Zaria, Lafia, Maiduguri, Gusau, Minna, Kafanchan, and Makurdi. According to Oyinbo (1971), most of the miners at Jos were Igbos. In fact, “The Igbos developed Jos almost by themselves” (p. 123).

### **The Early Impressions of Think-Home Philosophy**

Isichei (1976) has explained that the Igbos who left their villages to move to settle in big cities began to form associations among themselves.

They did so in an attempt to find friends, and a sense of identity in a ‘desert of individuals’, and in an attempt to guard against at least one of the dangers and insecurities of their new life by providing small measure of social security and mutual aid (p. 217).

It is this idea that led to the initiative of the improvement associations or unions, that is, the Igbo in diaspora gathering together to discuss the challenges and setbacks in their homelands and to contribute their own quota towards the improvement and development of their home lands. Isichei went ahead to add that;

The aims of the unions were threefold; to provide companionship and a measure of social security for villages in the town, to preserve town unity and culture, and to raise money to introduce amenities in the town. The second goal is sometimes encouraged by periodic

compulsory General Returns Home. The success of the third depended largely, though not entirely, on the economic resources of the community concerned (p. 218).

The activities of these improvement unions have helped to consolidate the town unions at home, in terms of local administration and security, as well as project initiatives and funding. In many of the communities, the strength of the town unions is owed to the impact and financial contributions of the abroad (or diaspora) members, who, with their wealth, sponsor candidates of their choice to the offices and help to dethrone officers who by their appraisal are not doing well in the town. Even the traditional rulership in many towns in Igbo land are strongly supported by the abroad (or diaspora) indigenes. Some of the traditional rulers in Igbo land can, in fact, be described as diaspora rulers for the fact that they reside and do business outside Igbo land, and only make themselves available for crucial meetings and engagements.

In terms of projects, it is on record that many of the grand projects in the various towns in Igbo land, such as rural electrification, provision of pipe-borne water, sinking of boreholes, establishment of secondary schools, skill acquisition programmes, to mention but a few, have been championed by the improvement unions, with massive support from the abroad (diaspora) improvement unions. In fact, in many cases, as Isichei (1976) has observed, these improvement unions have been initiated by the diaspora indigenes, and through their network of contacts, the home branches were eventually set up. Through these improvement unions, the think-home philosophy has been kept alive, and the greater proportion of the wealth of the diaspora Igbo has been sunk into the home projects that are helping in no small measure in bringing development to Igbo land.

### **The Stop-Gap in the Think-Home Philosophy**

Although it has been established that some measure of think-home philosophy exists among the diaspora Igbo, however the situation is not strong enough to draw down these diaspora Igbo to come back home and settle down and establish their businesses in Igbo land, which is the ultimate aspiration of the think-home (*Aku lue uno*) philosophy. The diaspora Igbo will be content to contribute only a minute fraction of their wealth to the development of their homestead, while they themselves still remain in diaspora, making huge investments that develop the economies of their host nations. Meanwhile, Igbo land remains largely underdeveloped and unexplored, leading to a situation in which annually, the greater population of the indigenes are leaving the shores of Igbo land and seeking means of livelihood elsewhere. A number of factors have been identified to be responsible for this situation.

#### **1. The Ease (or Lack of it) of Doing Business in Igbo Land**

Part of this problem is a natural conspiracy which has its origin in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial period. It has been shown that the early Europeans that encountered the Igbo found them really difficult, simply because the Igbo had an organized system which included security and readily resisted any incursion or invasion. The Europeans found the Igbo ungovernable and unmanageable. Afigbo (1981) has even added that Igbo slaves would rather commit suicide in the plantations than be subject to callous slave masters. Unfolding evidence now shows the extent to which the British meant to punish the Igbo of South-East Nigeria, in any case, for the fact that they played prominent roles the agitations to oust the British from Nigeria and end the colonialism. Part of the punishment is the fact that although there are large rivers and seas in South East and their neighbouring South-South States, the only cargo ports in Nigeria are in South West, while the major importers in Nigeria are in the South East. The conspiracy to make Igbo land perpetually underdeveloped and lacking in business climate has been unwittingly and callously prospered by anti-Igbo elements in the ruling class. For instance, at the end of the Nigerian civil war, the man who was appointed by the Nigerian Military Head of State to administer the East-Central State (the only Igbo State) was Ukpabi Asika, a man whose anti-Igbo roles in the civil war were well known. Many in the political class in South-East Nigeria are anti-Igbo in orientation and have further conspired to keep the region perpetually under-developed, while carting away into private coffers, the huge government allocation meant for the development of Igbo land. The net result of this is that the only way people can rise above poverty is to seek means of livelihood outside Igbo land.

The general business atmosphere in South East Nigeria is nothing but a frustration. The cost of land in South East Nigeria is higher than anywhere else in the country, and so is the cost of renting an apartment either for business or for residence. In addition, as soon as any business initiative is set up, all kinds of State, semi-State and non-State touts will be unleashed at the business initiative with all kinds of levies and multiple taxes. Every year, the governments in South East Nigeria declare very huge internally generated revenue (IGR) which is actually a small remnant after the larger portions have ended up in the private pockets of the government-endorsed revenue touts. And nobody undertakes a study of the impact of this multiple taxation on the business initiatives in the South East. The truth, anyway, is that State and non-State actors are responsible for stifling business initiatives in the South East, with the result that no investor would want to invest in the South East. On the contrary, those who travel to other parts of the country and outside soon get established and begin to do well.

## **2. Insecurity**

Particularly since about ten years ago, the state of security in the country has been on the downward progression. All kinds of terrorist organizations are busy ravaging different segments in the country. In the last three years, a new dimension to the situation has emerged in the so-called unknown gunmen, predominant in the South-East. Ironically, although the terrorist organizations have ravaged the different sections of Northern Nigeria, particularly the North East geo-political zone, yet, the tendency of South East indigenes to move to the North and establish business has not substantially reduced, nor have the South Eastern businessmen in the North relocated their businesses to the South East. At best the Igbo businessmen in the North have moved their families down to the South East, while themselves endeavouring to survive in the North, amidst glaring threats of sudden total extermination. This attitude speaks volumes of the attitudes of South Eastern people towards settling and doing business in the South East.

## **3. Level of Industrialization and Inter-Sectoral Connection**

It would be easy to simply argue that all it takes for the diaspora Igbo who have large establishments in other parts of the country and beyond is merely a patriotic, think-home orientation. But in reality, it is not so. Setting up an establishment in an environment would require that the facilities for running the establishment, ranging from technology, to raw materials and production inputs, as well as transportation of products and clientele, would be available in, or within the reach of that environment. Where this is not so, the cost of providing such would escalate the production and operational cost, such that the product would arrive at a non-competitive price. In fact, this is the major reason for the fact that only very few pay heed to the think-home philosophy. Take even the problem of electric power supply. The cost of providing alternative power supply has forced many to shut down their business establishments not just in South East Nigeria but also all over the country. When you add to this the cost of, and the hazards involved in haulage of goods as a result of poor condition of roads, particularly in the South East, you cannot but come to the conclusion that it is suicidal to attempt to cite and run business in South East Nigeria.

## **The Think-Home (*Aku lue uno*) Philosophy for the Diaspora Igbo**

Since recently, a new nationality spirit has arisen among the Igbo of South East Nigeria. For the first time, the crimes of deliberate deprivation perpetually perpetrated against the people of South East Nigeria have come to the forefront of public discussions. If these discussions are passionately pursued, it might lead to devolution of powers in the federation, in which the onus of development will rest squarely on the various regions or geo-political zones in the federation, and for once, the ethnic nationalities in the country will take their destinies in their own hands and generate the initiatives for their own development.

## **Conclusion**

The Old Testament Book of Nehemiah revolves around the initiative taken by a prosperous Jewish captive in Shushan, the capital city of Persian Empire, who demonstrated his peculiar love for his country home, then in a state of dilapidation, and, though quite comfortable in his exploits in the foreign land, deployed all his wealth and connection unto the rebuilding of his home land. The Igbo of South East Nigeria are currently in the forefront of development strategies all over the world, while South

East Nigeria, the acclaimed homestead of the Igbo, remains in a state of dilapidation. Nehemiah's think-home philosophy (*Aku lue uno*) remains an eloquent indictment on the Igbo currently residing in, and doing business in other parts of the world, while the state of their home land is deteriorating. The Igbo, all over the world, must rise up now and brace up to the challenge of developing their home land as a way of creating a prosperous home base for the up-coming generation.

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