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“ỤTỌ KA ATỌRỌ TỌTA IHE DỊ MMA”: IN FURTHRANCE OF THE HUMAN AND PUBLIC RELATIONAL ATTRIBUTES OF REV. FR. PROF. B.A.C. OBIEFUNA

Chukwukere Justice Ihetu

Abstract

An Igbo adage has it that “otu osisi adighi eme ohia” (one tree cannot make a forest). This is a typical indication that even as humans, life starts making sense when we start living, interacting and coping well with others. Being able to interact and relate well with others is one virtue that is mostly overlooked by many in our contemporary society. However, all thanks to God Almighty for the gift of Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna to humanity, who not only understood this notion but equally took it upon himself to educate and mentor others in the same course. This essay simply attempts to project the importance of developing good and sound human and public relational qualities and attributes, following the good examples which have been exhibited over the years by Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna even up till this point of his retirement in the civil service. The writer sustains the view that if such attributes are upheld, they will go a long way to rid our society of the unnecessary bitterness and rancor which have become the other of the day amongst people. It will equally control unhealthy competition and rivalry seen amongst kindred and even amongst blood relations. Through the consultation of some well documented literatures (some written by Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna himself), the writer hopes that this is achievable.

Introduction

Nature, right from creation has proven that man cannot exist in isolation. This is made obvious in the common saying that no man is an island. Even in the Christian scripture, within the creation accounts, it was recorded that God after creating the first man, came to a point where he asserted that it is not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). All these point to the fact that human interaction is the real essence of humanity. Hence humanity only finds fulfillment to the extent in which humans are able to interact both positively and negatively at every given time and space. In the Igbo world view for instance, the importance of human interactions and communication is so much cherished that certain names given to people in Igboland like ‘Ibezim’, ‘Ibezimakor’, ‘Azubuike’, ‘Igwebuike’ etc., do point out the benefits of one relating with others.

Human relations which can be rendered in Igbo parlance as ‘*mmekorita*’ or ‘*uto mmadu na ibe ya*’, in the words of Lamberton and Minor (2014) is:

The skill or ability to work effectively through and with other people. Human relations include a desire to understand others, their needs and weaknesses, and their talents and abilities. For anyone in a workplace setting, human relations also involves an understanding of how people work together in groups, satisfying both individual needs and group objectives. If an organization is to succeed, the relationships among the people in that organization must be monitored and maintained. (p. 4).

The above explanation is a typical presentation of what Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna has always stood for and is still standing for. Having been in contact with him for a decade plus,



he is not just a mentor to many but equally a father who will always go out of his way to understand people, work well with them satisfactorily, and ensures that there is success in any venture and organization he is part and parcel of. He has always manifested both in words and deeds that the best good in humanity can only be achieved through human relations and interactions; just like he would always say, “*uto ka atooro tota ihe*”.

It is against this background that this paper examines the importance and beneficial nature of human interactions as seen in Igbo worldview and equally exhibited in the personality of the principal character in this work; Rev. Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna. The aim is to project the ideology for emulation and adaptation amongst people of this modern era in order to promote sound and balanced sense of humanity even as was seen amongst the early Christians in Acts of the Apostles 2:44-47. Apart from the introduction as rendered above, other parts of the work will consider the notion of human and public relations (*uto na mmekorita mmadu na ibe ya*), a concise biography of B.A.C. Obiefuna, furthering the ideology of “*uto ka atoro tota ihe di mma*” and summary/conclusion.

The Concept of Human and Public Relations

According to Obiefuna (2018), life in itself is relational in all ramifications. He opines that not only humans relate but even brutes do relate though it may be instinctively. Humans however, are the only entities that relate rationally. Hence every human person relates and interacts in ways which can have negative or positive outcomes. Human interactions can also be progressive or retrogressive, beneficial or problematic as the case may be. He firmly maintains that to live is to interact, stressing on the fact that even people with withdrawal syndromes are equally interacting by virtue of their non-visibility in the interaction system or structure. These boil down to the unarguable fact that humanity becomes meaningless in the absence of human and public interactions.

Furthermore, Lamberton and Minor (2014) suggest that not all human relations decisions involve life-or-death outcomes, but can have very serious impacts. In their view, the importance of human relations in our personal and work lives cannot be exaggerated. The skills that are necessary for good relations with others are the most important skills anyone can learn in life. They thus rightly stress that in all aspects of life, one will have to deal with other people. No matter what one does for a living or how well the person does it, one's relationship with others is the key to one's success or failure. Even when someone is otherwise only average at a job, good human relations skills can usually make that person seem better to others. Sadly, as they claim, the opposite is also true as poor human relations skills can make an otherwise able person seem like a poor performer. Giving an instance, they state that a doctor who respects patients, a lawyer who listens carefully to clients, a manager who gets along well with others in the workplace, will most likely be thought of by others as successful. The same is true of a teacher, a lecturer, a mentor and a father like B.A.C. Obiefuna who in himself does not joke with quality human and public interactions as referring to him as a successful man will only be an understatement. He is one man who has gone to greater limits to prove that the study and application of human relations attributes can help one in several ways. His teachings have always been in line with that of Lamberton and Minor (2014) that human relations skills can help one get a job, enjoy one's work, be more productive at it, and stay there longer with better chances for advancement. This is because an understanding of oneself and others can help one be happier and more productive in all areas of one's life.

On the other hand, public relations as Cutlip and Center (1952) present it, is the planned effort to influence opinion through good character and responsible performance, based upon mutually satisfactory two-way communication. The Institute of Public Relations in the UK devoted prolonged attention to evolving a comprehensive definition of Public Relations. Their exercise yielded a definition, which now generally finds favour with Public Relations practitioners in many parts of the world. According to the Institute, Public Relations is defined as the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its public. A careful analysis on the above explanations still points to the success orientation in public relations which is very present in human relations as well.

Unarguably, Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna has proven in various ways to be a very good communicator with well seasoned character and responsible performances; always channeled towards the success of any organisation he belongs to. Being a member as well as a fellow of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, it is not surprising to always see him being in full control whenever he is delivering a speech both in and outside of the lecture room. He is in fact a public relations expert per excellence.

Nevertheless, Public relations as a process serve a number of functions. While the definitions may vary, the nature of Public Relations indicates that it is essentially a task promoting rapport and goodwill between a person, firm or institution and the community at large through dissemination of information. It seeks to earn support, mobilise or solicit favour for an idea, a cause, and a problem, for an institution or an individual. It uses a two-way communication in dealing with public opinion. First, it assesses the attitudes of the public towards the organisation. Next, it executes communication programmes to gain public understanding and acceptance of the management's point of view. Public Relations aims to bring about harmonious and mutually advantageous adjustment between an organisation and the community through dissemination of ideas and also by providing feedback from the public to the management. It also evaluates public attitudes, identifies policies that interest public and executes the programme of communication (Cutlip and Center, 1952).

One can confidently ascertain that a good human and public relations attribute imply a sound moral base, i. e., communication must be sincere and based on facts. Harmless conduct is not enough. Action is required to gain favourable recognition. This may be expressed as striving for three objectives: to attract attention, to win belief and to impart understanding. It must be reemphasized here that Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna is a typical representation of these objectives.

Furthermore, both Human and Public Relations serve a wide variety of institutions in society such as business, trade unions, government agencies, voluntary agencies, foundations, and hospitals, educational and religious institutions. To achieve their goals, these institutions must develop effective relationships with many different audiences or "publics" such as employees, members, consumers, local communities, stakeholders, other institutions and with the society at large.

In a nutshell, just as Cabot (2012) submits, Public Relations undoubtedly is an effective way to achieve smooth relationships, safeguard reputations, promote sales and build a corporate image. However, it should not be seen as a panacea for all ills. It is to be borne in mind that Public Relations can help to achieve recognition only when there is a matching performance. Public Relations efforts are not composed of stunts or gimmicks. It

is not a magical remedy like a coat of white-wash applied to the soiled walls. It is not propaganda. It cannot afford to disregard ethics, truth or public good. It is not hollow publicity efforts directed at achieving sales. It is not also a fire alarm service that can help reverse a crisis because goodwill cannot be established overnight. Hence, Public Relations is a sustained long term sincere effort, which along with genuine performance and concern can earn public goodwill. Even in the Igbo parlance, a saying goes that “*onye biri, ibe ya biri*” (live and let others live); a saying which ascertains the fact that maintaining good human and public relations takes conscious effort from all the human entities involved. All these have always been in the teachings and mentorship style of Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna who has been and remains an advocate of Human and Public Relations.

A Concise Biography of Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna

Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna was born on 24th June, 1954. He is a true son of Nwokoye and Ozoaku Obiefuna of Nkitaku village, Agulu, in Anaocha Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. He was ordained a priest in the Roman Catholic Church on 2nd July, 1983.

Academically, Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna is highly and exceptionally well read and sound. He bagged a bachelor’s degree in Philosophy in 1980 from Bigard Memorial Seminary Ikot-Ekpene Campus; an affiliate of Pontifical Urban University, Rome, bachelors degree in Theology in 1983 from Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu; an affiliate of Pontifical Urban University, Rome, got a masters degree in Political Science (International Relations) in 1993 from the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Enugu State; grabbed another masters degree in Religion (Religion and Society) in 1995 from the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Enugu State and finally secured a doctorate degree in Religion (Religion and Society) in 2008 from the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Enugu State. Thus it remains an unarguable fact that here is a man who has what it takes to stand as an academic guru, rightly stood as one and is still standing as one.

Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna started his teaching career at All Hallows Seminary, Onitsha between the year 1975 and 1976. He joined the university system as a lecturer in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka in 1997; a profession he has been carrying out excellently until this point of retirement, having mentored so many great entities both spiritually and academically. Rev. Fr. Prof. Obiefuna has supervised numerous projects, thesis and dissertations for both undergraduate and postgraduate students all in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. He ascended the rank of a Professor on 1st October, 2009.

Throughout his active years in the university, he contributed responsibly and immensely in different angles so numerous to be contained here. He served as Faculty of Arts Senate Representative in Unizik from 2004 to 2007. He served as the Acting Head of Department, Religion and Human Relations, Unizik between 2007 and 2008. He also played the role of Head of Department, Religion and Human Relations, Unizik from September to October, 2014; the short period of service for a head in that department. He assumed the post of the Dean of Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka from October 2014 to 2016. As an erudite Professor, he became inducted into the Nigerian Academy of Letters in 2022.

Outside the shores of the University, Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna has been an active member and fellow of several professional organizations and bodies which include the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR; joined since 2005), Nigerian Institute of



Management (NIM; 2005), Nigerian Association for the Study of Religion (NASR; 2003), Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria (CATHAN; 2000) etc. Of course being a religious professional, he served as an Assistant Parish Priest, St. Patrick's Cathedral, Awka, 1984-1985; Chaplain, Awka Diocesan Catechists, 1983-1984; Chaplain, Young Christian Students, Awka Zone, 1983-1985; Assistant Secretary, Awka Diocesan Presbyterium, 1984-1986; National Spiritual Director, Teaching Ministry, Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria, 2010 till date; National Deputy Coordinator, Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria, 2011 to 2016, etc.

It was actually through his initiatives that the Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, inculcated 'Human Relations' into its curriculum, leading to a change of appellation to Department of Religion and Human Relations. In what seems to be an icing on the cake, Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna successfully delivered his inaugural lecturer in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka on the topic "Religion and Human Relations in Contemporary Nigeria: The Wounds, The Healing" on Thursday, 8th November, 2018. He has really proven to be a man of timber and caliber in his discipline and even beyond.

Furthering the Ideology of "*Uto Ka Atoro Tota Ihe Di Mma*"

The Igbo quote as used here is a common saying which Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna has been undeniably known for. Not only has he been known for often using these words, he has equally been living them out in his interactions and relationships with other people around him. Hence the writer feels justified to attribute this ideology to him. Obviously, the universe is so vast and complicated that no single person can withstand it and its challenges all alone and single-handedly. Hence there is need for one to relate and communicate with others properly. In any field or works of life in which one finds him or herself, there is always hierarchy be it intellectually, spiritually, academically, economically etc. In other words, one can find him/herself in a place where he or she is greater than others or where others are greater than him or her. In any of these settings, it is either others will need one to succeed or one will need others to succeed. This alone makes human and public relations very sacrosanct for a harmonious human coexistence.

However, "*uto ka atoro tota ihe di mma*" as an ideology is not far fetched from the Igbo philosophy of communal consciousness or community living (*Ubuntu*). Just as Uchendu (1965) notes, community spirit is very strong among the Igbo. Starting from birth, the individual is aware of his dependence on his kin group and his community. He also realizes the necessity of making his own contribution to the group to which he owes so much. He seldom, if ever, becomes really detached from the group wherever he may live. The Igbo, therefore, see the community as an organism. An organism has different parts and each and every one of the constituent parts is very essential to the organism in question. Because, with any of the parts lacking, the organism would not be complete or perfect any more. Thus, Onwuatiegwu and Nwagu (2021) affirm that in Igbo community, no individual is taken for granted, but is seen as part and parcel of the community. In the words of Ekwunife (1996) "Man, for the African, is never a lone individual. He is primarily an embodiment of relationship; a being whose ontological existence is often defined through the prism of the community to which he belongs" (pp.36-37).

Furthermore, Onwuatiegwu and Nwagu (2021) rightly submit that an Igbo sees himself or herself in others; hence everyone within the community is everyone's '*nwanna*'

or 'nwanne' (brother or sister). Moreover, in the first instance, every person is valued for his or her own sake and not for material purposes or what will be gained (utilitarian motives). For Igbo people, '*mmadu ka aku*' – he who has relations is richer than he who has wealth. Money is not the original meaning of wealth for the Igbo. Rather wealth is conceptualized in terms of parents, children, brothers, sisters or relations. Meanwhile, a childless man, an orphan or a man who is without a relative are all considered poor. On the contrary, one who has children, parents, brothers and sisters or relations is considered or counted as a rich man. Abjectness of life is not considered from monetary point of view by a true Igbo. In other words, the condition of having no children, parents, brothers and sisters, relations and friends is what the Igbo regard as being or living in abject poverty. It is, therefore, simply easy to comprehend why an Igbo desirously prefer human wealth to monetary riches. Moreover, both the old and the young, male and female, rich and poor, healthy and unhealthy are all human beings and hence important in Igbo community. The aged and the sick are shown by people around them that they are still being valued and needed. The idea of invalidity or liability of a human person is foreign to the Igbo world view. For the Igbo: '*enwe si na ya a anaghi atufu ma oreghi ure*' - a monkey does not cast its young until it begins to decay. Everybody is therefore, considered valuable. The aged for instance, even when they are no longer good at every other work; at least they are still very good at praying for the youths, the members of their family, their villagers and even the general public.

Ozumba (2003) further argues that what the label 'communalism' tends to place in the minds of Africans is nothing but the Idea of common spirit, a collective spirit of being together, harmoniously working for the benefit of all and sustenance of the communal life in the whole of Africa. Communalism for him is a kind of social relationship that defines one's appreciation of another in a defined community. The spirit that moves and sustains Igbo man in his existential situation and possible circumstances is the spirit of belongingness and togetherness or communion. Even in his religious tendency towards the world beyond, the energy that keeps him on towards the good moral life is the possible hope of the togetherness of the saints in the ancestral community. He however stresses that the Igbo communalism as African communalism must be distinguished from Marxian communism in which there is class struggle. Igbo – African communalism is community – individual relationship. As one realizes oneself as a "self", one is already at the same time immersed in one's community. It must be stated clearly that it is only in this kind of interaction does the Igbo community thrive, having in mind the notion of '*onye aghana nwanne ya*' (no one should neglect or abandon his or her kin) because "*uto ka atoro tota ihe di mma*" (good things are gained from good human interactions) like Rev. Fr. Prof. Obiefuna will always reiterate. It can equally be deduced here that having gone far and wide in academic pursuit, Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna has not allowed this cherished Igbo worldview to slip away from him but has continued to abide by it as well as impact it on the younger generations through his mentorship; a lifestyle worthy of emulation. This same attribute and ideology of "*uto ka atoro tota ihe di mma*" has always made him a very supportive personality wherever he is, being a leader or subordinate; one cannot help but be attracted this exceptional personality.

Conclusion

It must be clearly stated at this juncture that this write-up is not just set out to appraise the personality of Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna but also to reawaken the consciousness of

good interpersonal and public relations which he is a good advocate of. The paper has attempted this in the most concise manner and approach. It equally made effort in highlighting a brief biography of B.A.C. Obiefuna.

To the writer, Rev. Fr. Prof. Obiefuna is exactly synonymous with Human and Public Relations and the little exposition done here has really shown that he is a man who values interpersonal relations so much as is seen in the way he cares for others, exhibits the spirit of solidarity, social harmony, reciprocal tendencies and nurturing attributes. That the writer of this paper is in the academic cycle today is as a result of his topnotch mentorship. This is exactly how he has mentored so many into different field of endeavours.

It must not be omitted here that Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna in his human relational dispositions has this unique way of mixing it with some kind of strictness. This has led most of his students in misjudging him as a very strict person. But in sincerity, what he does in this instance is simply trying not to spare the rod and spoil the child. Thus, whenever, you are working with him, you must get it right or not get it all. All his actions towards his students have always been shrouded in love, care and concern. Indeed, he lives out his principle of and common saying of “*uto ka atoro tota ihe di mma*” (“In Love We Gain, In Hate We Lose”).

Finally, this work hopes to have achieved its aim in encouraging good human and public relations amongst people of this contemporary time as these attributes appear to be eluding humanity in this age of mad pursuit for materialism. The Igbo adage “*Onye nwere mmadu ka onye nwere ego*” (one who has people is greater than one who has money) should not be neglected if we must uphold our value of communal living; we cannot do away with good and sound human interactions. Rev. Fr. Prof. B.A.C. Obiefuna has really proven to be a paragon in this aspect of life as well as in all other endeavours of his life even till this point of retirement from civil service. As he officially retires from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, the writer prays and believes that he will continue in this attributes that have earned him so much reputation within and outside the University Community.

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