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## IGWEBUIKE AS AN AFRICAN EXPRESSION OF THE PAULINE THEOLOGY OF COLLABORATION IN MISSION

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### **Abstract**

*While the existence of one humanity and one mission are taken for granted, not every society, individuals and nations believe in the true common goal and mission of 'one humanity'. In many parts of the globe, and in Africa in particular, the concept 'unity is strength' or 'united we stand, divided we fall' articulates the complex pattern of belief and human-social understanding of the limits of individuals and the outweighing benefits of communality or communal life. As the emphasis on the need to acknowledge the existence and importance of unity in our global society surges on, this work evaluates how the Igbo's expression Igwebuiké and Paul's message of collaboration in mission can shed further light on the ethical, religious and social lessons of collaboration.*

**Keywords:** Igwebuiké, African, Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, Philosophy, Theology, Pauline, Collaboration, Mission

### **Introduction**

In several writings and in speeches, the message of unity and effective collaboration is consistently emphasised as one of, if not the only experiential reality that can address conflicts arising from the existence of gender, social and ethnic distinctions which are part of our human nature. We live in a divided society - divided by ethnic identities, gender and class differences, cultural prejudices, religious identity, language differences, occupation, income variation, wealth, bodily impairment, as well as other features that may or may not appeal to the human eyes. We create differences out of our human diversities and at best, emphasise them, especially those that are part of our human existence and which we are not at home with. People are valued and judged based on their weakness than strength, disability than ability, bad behaviours than good behaviours, disgrace than honour, individuality than communality, ethnic or racial differences than common identity, and so forth.

The message of unity is preached because it encourages collaboration in mission. First, collaboration and its cognates are defined in *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* as “the action of working with someone, group or persons to produce something.”<sup>55</sup> Collaboration employs the knowledge, expertise and maturity of the totality of people involved to produce something. It incorporates or unifies their experience, worldview, culture and cultural sensibilities, geography, social or ethnic affiliations, gender and other realities to produce the much needed or perfect result. Collaboration absorbs individual limitations, behavioural patterns and personal likes and dislikes to set up a communal standard that rises above individuals and their expectations. Collaboration is anthropological because it helps human persons achieve their human goals faster and with ease. Collaboration is eschatological, because the collective and communal experience that emanates from collaboration rises above human feelings and thoughts, and the new reality it generates is uniquely divine. Collaboration is ontological as it defines the human person as a being whose choices, actions and decisions is influenced in relation to the other. And collaboration is divine because it acknowledges the communal relationship between the three persons in the Godhead.

The expression *Igwebuiké* is a concept among the *Igbos* that bespeaks of their understanding of the philosophy of human being as one in relationship with one another. The usage of the word *Igwebuiké* evokes how human beings are ontologically and socially connected to one another, sharing duties and rights that together give them their singular communal and mission identity. Considering that the concept *Igwebuiké* could be one of the fitting expressions for interpreting Paul’s argument about collaboration, this work seeks to analyse how *Igwebuiké* could be an African expression of the Pauline Theology of collaboration in Mission. Its focus is on the mission dimension of our existence as one body in Christ called to bear witness to the unity of the children of God and to live out this unity in mutual love and value for the gift of one another.

We shall also consider certain details about Paul’s theology of collaboration in Mission to see whether there are points of divergence, such that can help shed further light on how we can achieve full human participation and collaboration in our mission.

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<sup>55</sup> Hornby, A. S., & Wehmeier, S. (ed.), *Oxford’s Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, <sup>6</sup>2000), 231.

### ***Igwebuike: The Igbo Worldview of Collaboration and Complementarity***

The concept *Igwebuike* is an expression formed from the combination of three words *Igwe bu ike*. Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu analyses the grammatical construction, thus,

*Igwe* is a noun which means number or population, usually a large number or population. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is*. *Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power*. Put together, it means ‘number is strength’ or ‘number is power’, that is, when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force and more so, to express their world of relationship, harmony, continuity and complementarity.<sup>56</sup>

The concept *Igwebuike*, which Kanu has interpreted as ‘number is strength’ or ‘number is power’ and which can also mean ‘together we stand’ expresses the idea of togetherness and unity in the Igbo culture. The main feature or characteristic of standing together for a common purpose is collaboration. Collaboration is the key term. It is from the Latin word *con-* (“with”) + *labōrō* (“work”), meaning the act of working together, or united labour. Collaboration is emphasised in many cultures, in many ways and contexts. It is used in different languages to speak about unity, communality, togetherness, closeness, complementarity, social reciprocity, commitment, friendship and so forth. Many languages have expressions for working together, standing together, uniting together to achieve a purpose/goal. To some people, or rather the English proverb has expressions such as, ‘unity is strength,’ ‘united we stand, divided we fall,’ ‘teamwork,’ or even ‘solidarity’ and ‘complementarity’ as the many attempts to convey the message of bringing together our differences for a common purpose. South Africa has the term ‘Ubuntu’ - (we People) to designate the idea of togetherness and equality.

While there could be one uniting force, purpose, and mission for collaboration, it has been noted that often choices, decisions and policies of collaboration are mostly influenced by interest, family, lineage, clan, tribe, community, gender,

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<sup>56</sup> Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, “Igwebuike As an Igbo-African Hermeneutic of Globalization,” *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* 2 (2016), 3-4.

[http://www.academix.ng/documents/papers/1469608998\\_2560.pdf](http://www.academix.ng/documents/papers/1469608998_2560.pdf) (accessed June 9, 2019); “Igwebuike and The Unity of African Philosophy,” in *Igwebuikedia, Internet Encyclopaedia of African Philosophy. A Peered Review Academic Resource*. <http://igwebuikedia.info/Intricate.asp> (accessed June 9, 2109).

ethnic and cultural differences, as well geographical locations. What this means is that often collaboration could become network of systems of negotiated common interest. That is to say that collaboration can be distributed along the lines of people with common interest, common social boundaries, common social and ethnic group, common religion, common ideology, etc. This is what we have when we talk about collaboration in the *Igbo* African context.

*Igbos* are an ethnic group, and as such, when we speak of collaboration or the usage of the expression 'number is strength,' it is about how the people collaboratively organize themselves as an ethnic group, basing themselves on the religious, social, political, moral, aesthetic, cultural values of the groups for the benefit of the members. In the *Igbo* tradition, what the ideology *Igwebuike* implies is seen as a basic and indispensable element in the understanding of the human person as a relational being in the universal order. It captures the life of an individual as one in a community and by nature is meant to complement each other by supplementing and filling the gaps created by human limitations. In addition, it emphasises solidarity because it generates strength by resisting individuality, decentred identity and individual weakness and submitting to collective identity and collective strength to fulfil the collective and individual demands of the people or community involved. The *Igbo* adage, 'when spiders unite, they can tie up a lion' very much expresses the united force of united strength.

The ideology *Igwebuike* is also a spiritual philosophy since it is believed that collaboration is an interaction between the physical and spiritual worlds. There is a spiritual dimension in collaboration. In the *Igbo* worldview, collaboration is not only concerned with the individual or the community, but also with the gods, ancestors and divinities of the spiritual world. It is commonly said that 'what you believe is what the gods or spirits approve', *onye kwe, chi ya ekwe*. There is also the contrary opinion *onye mewere ma chi ekwegi*, meaning 'our achievement depends on the will of the gods'. In collaboration, there is a space for the sacred. The intercession of the spirits and divinities can help foster unity, harmony, progress and above all, peace.

But the life of an individual in an *Igbo* African context is steeped in a segmented social networks of peer groups, associations and councils. In the *Igbo* African traditional system, social life is organized in social units consisting of families or kindreds, villages or clan, towns and ethnic groups. Every community operates a

social system that is segmented, yet collective. Socio-political and religious life is coordinated using age grades, peer groups, various organizations, lineage heads, council of elders, traditional ruler, also called *Igwe* or *Eze*, chief priests, etc. For effective coordination of the community, it is the responsibility of the different sections of the community to take care of their members.

Age grades, for instance, “are formed by people born within three to five years from each other, and are a means to create a peer group, foster unity and responsibility, acting mainly as a socio-cultural institution”<sup>57</sup> Certain Age grades or organizations such as, women’s organization or male organizations normally have persons that head the group for the political, administrative and social responsibilities and needs of the group, even as far as helping the members adhere to the norms of the society.

To talk about *Igwebuiké* is to talk about the life of an *Igbo* man/woman as one in a community. In the African setting, the community is an indispensable aspect of the life of an individual. John Mbiti, notes in his *African Religions and Philosophies* that the African view of relationship could be summed as “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”<sup>58</sup> The life of an individual is anchored on the life of the community and in the same way the achievement and greatness of the community is measured by the commitment of the individuals. Speaking about the effective influence of the united force of a community in achieving a goal, Christopher Agulanna comments, “among the *Igbo* people of Nigeria, as among other African peoples generally, the obvious curtailment of a person’s power to do as he wills is provided by the potent force of what is known as ‘the will of the community’.”<sup>59</sup> And according to Kanu, “the community ... gives the individual his existence and education. That existence is not only meaningful, but also possible only in a community.”<sup>60</sup> This reminds us of the *Igbo* expression, *ikwu na ibe* (community and person) which is meant to show that a person exists in relation to the community/other.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Michael Widjaja “Village,” in *igboguide.org*. <https://www.igboguide.org/HT-chapter10.htm>. (accessed June 9, 2109).

<sup>58</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies* (New York, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1970), p. 141

<sup>59</sup> Christopher Agulanna “Community and Human Well-being in an African culture,” *TRAMES* 14 (64/59), (2010) 3, 282–298, 288.

<sup>60</sup> Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, “Freedom and Determinism in African Ontology,” *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* (AJHSS) 2 (2014), 47-53, 48.

<sup>61</sup> See also Agulanna “Community and Human Well-being in an African culture,” 292.

To talk about solidarity, togetherness or complementarity in the *Igbo* African context is also to talk about systems of ordered differences that can be brought together to enhance the good of the individuals and the society. It is ordered differences because each individual or group exist as a body, with its differences, particularities and vision that can be brought together to make sure that the system flourish. Most of the community activities are organized in groups, and each group is interdependent upon the other for reciprocity, solidarity, friendship as they serve as support system for every individual.

The interesting thing about the social solidarity of organizations or age grade groups is that it extends to every member that is part of the group. No one is left out. Collaboration or working together as a group is an interesting concept for the *Igbos* because it enforces what we call 'imperative responsibility', meaning that the responsibility of taking care of every member is imperative. In addition, norms and rules are put in place to guide, define and protect individual's actions, choices and responsibilities towards another. It also acknowledges disabilities, brokenness and differences of every member. The social, economic, political, religious, physical and gender differences of the members are important for the varieties of contributions and as well as the proportionate strength of the group.

When we talk about harnessing ordered differences, it is about coming together in solidarity and complementarity.<sup>62</sup> In solidarity, individuals form a bond that unites them in a shared or common interest. The emphasis on unity help them achieve together what they cannot achieve individually. With a common purpose in view, the individuals strive to support each other. No one is to be judged better or worse than any other. No one is to be given special status at the expense of others and no one is meant to feel inferior or superior over others. In complementarity, the emphasis on accentuating the strengths and accommodating the weaknesses of every member help overcome challenges and work towards achieving common aspirations and goals. In the spirit of complementarity, united force works for the good of co-creation, co-service, co-support and co-self-actualization.

### **Collaboration: Its Pitfalls**

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<sup>62</sup> See also Kanu, "Igwebuikipedia, Internet Encyclopaedia of African Philosophy."

While we speak of *Igwebuike* as an *Igbo* African ideology that unites people in mutual relationship for mutual support and goals, its practicality is encumbered with host of problems that work against the good of this social collaborative system. It must be pointed out that the practical aspect of this social relationship is often one sided. The *Igbo* culture promotes femininity and womanhood, but when it comes to collaboration between men and women, the act of joining hands as men and women is not always smoothly promoted. Most of the collaboration in the different sectors of the society; religious, political or social are gender split.

It is either the group is divided between male and female or that the group constitutes both genders, but the female gender is not actively represented in roles and expectations. One of the reasons is that the *Igbo* culture is heavily patriarchal. More than ever, women are not actively represented in most social, religious and political activities of the society. Biological differences (sexual differences) are used as ideologies to define social relationships, religious, family duties, honour and responsibilities. It is as though collaboration has boundaries imposed by culture. The participation of women with men in all forms of united force or leadership positions have not gone beyond the margins of subsidiary roles for women and major roles for men.

Similarly, people with disabilities are not always welcomed or tolerated in most groups or societies. Africa in general has not developed a standard culture that takes care of people with special need, people who are poor or people who are incapacitated in various ways. Their respective physical condition makes it extremely difficult for them to be accepted in certain groups, and worst still, be given the opportunity to develop themselves and make their own contribution to the group or society. For most people, collaboration as a group has not gone beyond the union of those who are physically and mentally strong, benevolent, economically and socially stable. In the same manner we talk about people who are discriminated based on certain cultural norms and values; those who are regarded as outcast, people who have been disgraced in the community, people who have been trashed from a group because they committed one wrongdoing or another, or even ostracized because they married someone from outside their tribe or faith.

Collaboration is also about hierarchy. In the name of patriarchalism and authority, persons become part of groups where they are intimidated, subjected,

denied their freedom, dignity and respect. At the long run, their being part of the group has not helped in their or the groups' growth and development. The creation of groups, communities and societies based on hierarchy does not always promote the vision of collaboration as the different aspects of human condition and its corollary effect may keep people apart instead of binding them in unity. Religion, culture and its narratives, economic and political problems, ethnicity, gender and geographical confines carry with them identities that create boundaries which in turn rob us of the communal goal and relational connection that should exist among us as people that share a common fate, destiny and goal.

What is suggested so far is that the *Igbo* ideology *Igwebuiké* has important significant features that offer good and meaningful vision of what collaboration embodies in the life of a community and could extend to the various mission in the Church. In addition, the cultural elements that enhance the spirit of collaboration; such as, the relationship between the individual and the community, the bond of fraternal relationship, the obligation to harness ordered differences, solidarity and complementarity and the spirit of oneness are strong elements that can also be found in the Apostle Paul's teaching on collaboration. While we promote the *Igbo* ideology *Igwebuiké* as a cultural model that allows for a comparison between the *Igbo* view of human reality as 'collaborating together' and Paul's teaching on collaboration, it is good to note that what we presently experience in the *Igbo* African system is a fragmentary vision of what *Igwebuiké* endorses and promotes.

We need to raise again the question of why so much discrimination, exclusion and domination when a discussion on the realities of an *Igbo* African shows that 'unity is strength'. That is to say that the more we keep on emphasising our differences the more we are heading towards disintegration and destruction. In order to properly assess, understand and apply the ideology *Igwebuiké* as an African expression of the Pauline theology of collaboration in mission, the concept in question must be accessed and criticized vis a vis Paul's theology of collaboration.

### **Paul and Collaboration in Mission**

In different parts of the letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament, Paul speaks about collaboration, or rather about the members of the believing community coming together in love for the good of the believers and the Church. In view of our foregoing discussion about how the concept *Igwebuiké* could be an

African expression of the Pauline theology of collaboration, we briefly look at the following passages, Romans 12:4-6a; 15:5-6; 16:1-16; 1 Cor 12:12-31, 2 Cor 8:13-14 and Gal 3:26-28 as they majorly speak about the overcoming of the different patterns of divisions of humanity for the purpose of bringing together our different gifts of God for the common purpose of realizing the message of the Gospel, namely, the building up of the body of Christ for the realization of the mission of Christ.<sup>63</sup>

Common to Romans 12:4-6a and 1 Cor 12:12-31 is the theme of appreciating our human socio-cultural diversities for a common purpose. By using the imagery of the human body, Paul in 1 Cor 12:12-31 analyses how the different members are to come together for a mutual benefit and function. He first acknowledged the fact that the members are from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds, but having been baptised into the body of Christ, they now form a new body with a new purpose and mission. *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and all were made to drink of one Spirit.* (1 Cor. 12:12-13). With these beginning statement, Paul goes on to analyse how the different parts of the body constitutes one whole body, with the different parts fulfilling different mission and yet supporting one another.

One of the outstanding themes of 1 Cor 12:12-31 and which has been defended in a long term is that of unity, an attitude that defines the believers' oneness in Christ. In many commentaries, monographs and articles, scholars have defended that the focus of 1 Cor 12:12-31 is to correct the prevailing disunity caused by factionalism among the Corinthian believers.<sup>64</sup> Using the baptismal context as transforming and confirming the believers as new people in Christ, Paul urges the Corinthians to be united by overcoming the importance they placed on their

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<sup>63</sup> There are so many Pauline passages that either speak against the use of certain cultural oppositional categories to evaluate the stand and status of the believers in the community and in Christ, to encourage the transformation of social and interpersonal relations for the good of the believers or promote the unifying of the different gifts for the realization of the mission of Christ. The passages chosen here are just a representation of the different positions of Paul with regards to building good relationship and working together for the purpose for which we have called.

<sup>64</sup> See collections of discussions on Factionalism in 1 Corinthians in Chapter 1 of Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 1-19.

differences. Although they are made up of different groups with different social classes, gender and tribe, they now share one thing in common, namely, Christ.

The same could also be said of Romans 12:4-6a where Paul emphasized further on that we are diverse, made of different groups, race and gender, yet we are united. *For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another* (Rom. 12:4-5). In both Romans 12:4-6a and 1 Cor 12:12-31, the metaphor of the body is used to illustrate the unity of the Church, but more importantly the analogy is used in Romans 12:4-6a to encourage the Romans believers to serve one another.<sup>65</sup> According to Charles K. Barrett, the main points Paul draws out here is that the members of the body do not have the same function and, though individual, belong to each other.<sup>66</sup>

The use of the metaphor of the body, which some identify as 'metaphor of body politic' is one important feature of collaboration which can also be linked to the ideology of *Igwebuike*. The metaphor of body politic served in ancient Greco Roman world as a political illustration of how both government and the people work together for the good of the community,<sup>67</sup> a picture of the ideal fraternal harmony.<sup>68</sup> In the use of the metaphor, the interrelatedness and corporate nature of the body as well as the diversity of the group is emphasized. It served as an initial analogy of how the Corinthians, though representing different aspects or diversities of human beings are called to function together for the good of the society. But something other than the body politic is used as the basis, instrument and purpose of the unity of the believers, namely, the identity of Christ.

The repeated emphasis on 'one in Christ' (*heis este en Christō Iēsou*) which we find repeated five times in 1 Cor 12:12-31, one in Gal 3:28 and Col 3:11, is a Pauline formula that epitomizes Paul's vision of social unity. In these passages, especially Gal 3:28, cf. Col 3:11, Paul talks about the overcoming of differences, the exclusion of human classed differences for the purpose of unity and fulfillment

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<sup>65</sup> C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: A. & C. Black, 1962), p. 236.

<sup>66</sup> Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 105.

<sup>67</sup> Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 157-64.

<sup>68</sup> Karl Olav Sandnes, *A New Family: Conversion and Ecclesiology in the Early Church with Cross-Cultural Comparisons* (Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity 91; Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), 119-30; Reidar Aasgaard, *My Beloved Brothers and Sisters: Christian Siblingship in the Apostle Paul* (JSNTSup 265; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004), 56, 82-85, 100, 102, 106, 182.

of the mission of Christ. *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28); In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! (Col. 3:11).* Paul preaches about the obliteration of differences, or rather of nullifying every sense of privilege attached to sexual, social or cultural differences so that the believers can be united people in Christ. It is only in Christ that the union becomes closer since it emphasises the equality of all members and the relationship becomes indissoluble.<sup>69</sup> As the new reality or union is associated with Christ, and the mode of existence in the group is with Christ, so also the mission of the group.

To ensure that he taught the rich element of collaboration, Paul embodied collaboration in his own mission. Paul adopted collaboration as a mission strategy that saw to the success of his missionary activity. His missionary companions included men and women who were from every part of the Ancient Greco-Roman world. Paul worked with Silas and Timothy who were from the province of Asia (Acts 15:22-18:5); Aquilla and Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 18; Rom 6:3; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:9). He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Beroea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia (Acts 20:4 NRS). He described Philemon as a friend and co-worker (Phm 1:1); Justus (Col 4:11); Epaphras (Col 4:12; Phm 1:23); Mark and Luke (2Tim 4:11; Phm 1:24); Demas (Phm 1:24); Archippus (Col 4:17). There were also women like Phoebe who was a deaconess (Rom 16:1); Mary who worked very hard (Rom 6:6); Junia who together with Andronicus were prominent among the apostles and were in prison with Paul (Rom. 16:7); Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis who were workers in the Lord (Rom 16:12); Mother of Rufus who was a mother to Paul (Rom 16:13) and Urbanus, a co-worker in Christ (Rom 16:9).

The missionary and collaborative role played by Paul's companions were not only leadership roles. Some were leaders in house churches like the Church in Philippi where Euodia and Syntyche were greeted and appreciated for having been loyal companions and missionary collaborators with Paul. In 1 Corinthians 16:19, Aquila and Prisca were greeted, together with the church in their house. In Col 4:15, Paul greets "Nympha and the church in her house." The same for Aristobulus and Narcissus who had a church in their house. Some were given

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Parsons, "'In Christ' in Paul," *Vox Evangelica* 18 (1988), 25-44, 25.

the designation sister, like Apphia in the letter to Philemon and Phoebe in the letter to the Romans. Others struggled beside Paul in the work of the Gospel as *prostatis* (helper), *diakonos* (deacon both masculine and possibly feminine), *synergous* (fellow workers), *sunaiçmatoloi* (fellow prisoners) and *kopiōsas en kuriōi* (workers in the Lord). Some were teachers of faith as Junia and Aquilla in the case of the Jew named Apollos (Acts 18:24). Some were prayer warriors like Epaphras (Col 4:12). Whatever these different collaborative efforts implied for Paul, one thing is certain, they were not only leadership roles and were not restricted to leadership roles.

Paul preached and embodied collaboration as he fought against ethnic, social and gender inequalities. Although in some of Paul's letters, one may argue that Paul may have endorsed the silence and subordination of women (1 Cor 14:33-35; cf. 1 Timothy 2: 9-15 and Eph. 5:22-30) or supported slavery (1 Cor 7:21-23; the letter to Philemon; cf. also, Eph 6:5). One should also note that Paul operated within the Jewish world setting of his time, a time deeply rooted in patriarchal culture that had negative attitude toward women, including restrictions on the right and role of women in the public and in religious spaces.<sup>70</sup> But under the aegis of Roman Empire, where women were given special prominence and privilege authorities, Paul capitalized on that to promote women's collaboration in mission.<sup>71</sup> Attitude towards slaves and slavery, on the other hand, was negative in both the Greek and the Jewish worlds.<sup>72</sup> Against these backgrounds, Paul made great effort to undo the notion and reality of slavery by calling into question the effect of the social structure of slavery (confer Gal 3:26-29; Col 3:11), coming to terms with the situation of slavery by identifying himself as slave of

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<sup>70</sup> See Judith Reesa Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Brandeis Series on Jewish Women; Hannover: University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 2002), 13-42, 16-17; Mayer I. Gruber, "The Status of Women in Ancient Judaism," in Jacob Neusner and Alan Jeffery Avery-Peck eds., *Judaism in Late Antiquity*. Part 3, Volume 2: Where We Stand: Issues and Debates in Ancient Judaism (Leiden: Brill, 1999-2001), 151-176; Tal Ilan, "The Woman as 'Other' in Rabbinic Literature," in *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World* (AGJU 71; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 77-92, 77.

<sup>71</sup> While women in the Roman world could not hold public offices, vote, serve in the military or appear in court without a guardian, they were free to appear in variety of public places, manage their households, be patrons of clubs, benefactors and could also be accepted as priestesses and prophetesses. See Judith P. Hallet, "Women's Lives in the Ancient Mediterranean," in Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo, eds., *Women and Christian Origins* (New York, N.Y: Oxford, 1999), 13-34, 19.

<sup>72</sup> The life and service of a slave is repudiated in the Greek world. The reason was that it denied one the right to freedom, the right to say no in the face of any request and the right to his or her self-dignity. According to Orlando Patterson, slavery is a 'natal alienation' or 'secular excommunication', i.e., slavery is a form of death, a social death that renders the slave totally powerless and denies the slave all rights and claims. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1, 4-7.

Christ (Phil 1:1; Rom 1:1), and more importantly, integrating slaves in his mission (Phm vss. 10-13).

Looking at Paul speaking about the way many of the believers collaborated with him, one immediately notes that collaboration or collaborative effort goes beyond participating in leadership and ministerial roles. It goes beyond concerns about gender roles in the early Christian communities. Paul offers us the example of collaboration. It is about collaboration in mission between Jewish and Gentile Christians. It is about the members providing mutual support for mutual upbuilding and for evangelization. It is also about reciprocal relationship and complementarity in service; with both men and women serving as patrons, teaching the faith, sharing of possessions with the needy, being a benefactor, creating bond of friendship and welcoming strangers, etc.

The act of assuming certain privileges or superiority over others as a result of religious, gender, ethnic and social differences place limitations on the ability of people to collaborate, and at worst create crises. When we talk about collaboration, the discussion is not only about the resistance and reservations toward women's full participation in leadership or ministerial roles in the Church or society. It is also about the recognition and acceptance of the collaborative effort of every believer; disabled or abled, strong or weak, slave or free, male and female from different ethnic, social, religious and cultural environment.

### **Collaboration in Mission: Insights from Scripture and Culture for Today's Church**

At different periods in human history, history has taught us that the exclusion, isolation or deprivation of people with differences weakens our society, resulting to major conflicts, controversies, oppositions, violence and at worst death. Like the Igbo concept *Igwebuike* which preaches unity as the building blocks and strength of a society, Paul's message of unity has further shed light on the 'in-between' identities that can be forgotten in our group identifications, various reasons for collaboration, the religious impact of collaboration and the act of overcoming our social and ethnic boundaries for the purpose of the Gospel message.

When we talk about collaboration in mission, the Igbo concept *Igwebuike* can offer us perspectives. To begin with, *Igwebuike* emphasized the indispensability

of community as the source, strength and setting for the realization of the essence of collaboration. In the letters of Paul, likewise, Paul defends the essence of community as the space where believers collaborate to bring Jesus' work to fulfillment. Not only that, it is the space where the eschatological people of God encounter one another by transcending the consequences of their social, religious, gender and ethnic identities for the common good of all. This is the juncture where Paul and the Igbo concept *Igwebuike* differs.

While by its very nature the idea of a community is a social construct, the beliefs and practice of collaboration would be culture bound. That is to say, the forming of identity, relationships, interactions, motifs for collaboration and collaboration itself can be limited by human-cultural phenomena or presumptions. Despite the beauty of *Igwebuike* as an African ideology that promotes togetherness, unity, complementarity etc., it has not entirely embraced the diversities and differences of the people that make up the society.

Our culture is very patriarchal, and the lived experiences of people bear remarkable impact of patriarchalism. Discussions about attitude towards women, especially about the participation of women with men in leadership and ministerial roles have not gone beyond the margins in most societies. People with disabilities are less regarded and voices denied, of which the question of collaboration is simply a vision and not reality. Our collaborative experience is beclouded by hierarchy, gender biases and resistance towards people of other ethnic group or people with disabilities. In Paul's teaching, however, collaboration is for everyone, Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female, they are all one in Christ. Collaboration is done in Christ's; sharing in the mission is done in Christ's, the purpose of mission is for Christ's, the success of collaboration is because of the grace of God/Christ and the beginning of the union in Christ is baptism.

We recall that Paul critiqued the culture of his time, especially those aspects of culture that were not maintaining the proper order of things according to the message of the Gospel. Paul preached about unity, about acceptance of one another and about collaboration with one another. He demonstrated how the principal forces of culture could not dominate or overshadow the principles of the Gospel of Christ. Paul operated with the structure the society offered him; either with the view of challenging the culture to change it, turning it around to bring the best out of it for the good of the Christians or adopting it. As Paul J.

Achtemeier *et al.*, rightly notes “the world as represented by a NT writer will overlap with but is not identical to the real world, since authors shape their messages by emphasising what they regard as having particular importance.”<sup>73</sup>

Society has evolved, so is our culture. As culture continues to evolve bringing changes, our society has not learnt well enough from the struggles of the early Christians, the universal Church and from the positive things in our culture to propagate authentic collaboration of men and women in every aspect of life. We do not live in a society of equals. Often you hear Christian and non-Christian males insisting on the privilege of men’s sexuality, of the importance of our patriarchal culture, of the sexual differences between male and female, of lack of regard and respect for people with disability and of the precedence of culture over certain religious practices. Most people resist authentic collaboration because of gender, social, cultural and religious differences. Others resist collaboration because they have a way of life to protect. Some are afraid of losing the empire they have built around their ego, others are afraid of losing their power and authority, others still are afraid of losing their control over the other person.

It is not as though the Church and society are not making effort to understand, encourage and support ethical reflections and praxis on the essence of effective collaboration and the recognition of insights, roles and importance of women and people with disabilities in the society. Our insufficient response to the challenges of our time, especially those cultural expressions that mitigate against the freedom, integrity and creativity of women and those with disabilities is an indication that we have not reached a certain level of maturity in collaboration.

Collaboration is not only limited to leadership roles. Just as in the *Igbo* African context collaboration is not limited to leadership roles, so also Paul has illustrated in his letters. Collaboration is about co-responsibility, co-creation, co-admonition, co-solidarity, co-leadership, complementarity, and most importantly, giving women and people with disability more opportunities to represent and participate in missionary and social activities. With so much division in our society (class division, status, ethnicism, religion and gender),

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<sup>73</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green & Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 19.

there are negative biases, prejudices, marginalization and acrimony that hinder our achieving our common goal.

Collaboration is about acknowledging and appreciating the importance and contributions of diversities in family building, religious and social communities, as well as society. There are positive things to learn from Paul and from the *Igbo* understanding of the expression *Igwebuike* to propagate authentic collaboration of men and women, disabled and abled, slave and free, Muslim and Christian. We need to purge out of our system certain elements that inhibits our openness and appreciation of the other. When every sense of privilege is overcome, no one will be subordinated, neglected over lack of importance or rejected as being weak. In collaboration, differences are not obliterated, but harnessed for the common good.

### **Conclusion**

The message of unity, of working together or collaboration as one humanity is not a distinctively Christian theological anthropology. The *Igbo* African expression *Igwebuike* also highlight the same. The common themes that link the ideological and practical understanding of the *Igbo* African expression *Igwebuike* with Paul's message of collaboration in mission can be employed in our different spheres of life to accomplish the goal of collaboration. While the expression *Igwebuike* encourages co-responsibility, co-creation, co-admonition, co-solidarity, co-leadership and complementarity, far more outreaching is Paul's concept of collaboration which challenges our gender, status and identity issues in collaboration. The full implication and value of the ideology *Igwebuike* would be realized when we allow the transformational message of Paul to expunge the *Igbo* ideology of collaboration held hostage by our expressions of culture, ignorance, power and control.

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