



Continuing the Quest of *Dialectical Anthropology* in the 21st Century: Reflections on the Igbo of Nigeria

SABINE JELL-BAHLEN

San Antonio, TX, USA

Stanley Diamond, the founder of *Dialectical Anthropology* has left us with a remarkable legacy and challenge to continue his vision. Inspired by his memory, his relentless critique of Western civilization, colonialism and capitalism, and shared inspirations from the non-Western world, we carry on with his critique and search for alternatives. Diamond's oeuvre is complex, as has been outlined earlier by Wolf-Dieter Narr,¹ and others.² This editorial focuses on one specific aspect of Diamond's work, his search for a future vision of humanity as an alternative to contemporary Western civilization. Stanley Diamond has most succinctly formulated this search in his book, *In Search of the Primitive*.³ As Wolf-Dieter Narr has pointed out earlier,⁴ Stanley Diamond's notion of "the primitive," is not idealized, or nostalgic, nor is it uni-lineally evolutionary, demeaning, or relativistic. Instead, Diamond's vision invokes "the primitive" as an *a priori*, original, or pristine model of human society, "a primary human potential,"⁵ or social formation he conceptualized as having been "first", a *primus inter pares*, resulting in a "primitive civilized dichotomy."⁶ From this perspective, later social developments appear as aberrations, or negations of prior achievements, but a dialectical relation with this primary human potential may create new and modern forms of society.

Primitive is, I believe, the critical term in anthropology, the word around which the field revolves, yet it remains elusive, connoting but never quite denoting a series of related, social, political, economic, spiritual and psychiatric meanings. That is, *primitive* implies a certain level of history, and a certain mode of cultural being.⁷

In contrast to Diamond's version of the primitive, other authors, notably writing in the service of colonialism have used the term, "primitive," differently, emphasizing as deficiencies the *absence* of European style institutions in non-European societies e.g. the absence of political power, or of a monolithic state structure, thus justifying colonial conquest and intervention. After first having stimulated and

encouraged ethnic groups in Africa to fight each other as rivals for trade, notably in slaves exchanged for firearms and other European goods, in a perpetual spiral of accelerating conflicts to the commercial benefit of Europe, colonial conquerors proclaimed the necessity for pacifying warring tribes. While 500 years of triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas have robbed Africa of her manpower and thereby under-development the continent,⁸ the development of industrialization and capitalism in Europe and America was simultaneously accelerated as part of the same process,⁹ entailing colonial conquest, the fleecing of Africa's natural resources, and the degradation and annihilation of her cultures, and ultimately leading to the continent's stinging impoverishment.

Diamond's concept of "the primitive" inverts the negative European-American perspective on the non-Western world. In his teaching and writings, he consistently contested any description of pre-colonial African society as "missing" a European quality or institution, or as presenting a negative image of European models. His anthropology was radically anti-Euro/America-centric, radically critical, and Marxist.¹⁰

As Lawrence Krader has reaffirmed, Marx conceived of primitive society as the critique of civilization – the theme of this book.¹¹

Stanley Diamond emphasized the need for an inquiry into the institutions of primitive society which functioned without a coercive state apparatus, through custom rather than written law, and reciprocal kinship obligations rather than class, and had guaranteed an ordered life, social equilibrium and peace for centuries. Even though centuries of slave trading and colonialism have transformed Africa, examples of such a self regulatory society could still be found in local communities of Nigeria's large and vibrant Igbo ethnic group of approximately 30 million people, as well as in the country's smaller ethnic groups such as the Anaguta numbering only a few hundred members, whose cultural annihilation Diamond observed in the 1960s.

This mode of cultural being is continuously obliterated or attenuated by the processes of civilization and more radically so than we are usually able or willing to acknowledge; as a result, the image of an identifiable, cross-cultural, pre-civilized and, yes, a priori human possibility has practically disappeared from our lexicon. Unyielding cultural relativism, cultural determinism and social scientism are, in part and each in its own way, rationalizations of a civilization that has forgotten what questions to ask itself. These attitudes have

helped blunt the sense of universal human need, conflict and fulfillment which has been most adequately expressed, in the past, through art and religion. It is, I believe, a singular task of anthropology, no matter what its practitioners call themselves, to assist in the reformulation of pertinent life-preserving questions.

The search for the primitive is the attempt to define a primary human potential.¹²

In accordance with Diamond's dialectical mode of reasoning, "the primitive," represents a positive¹³ hypothesis, negated by the anti-thesis of civilization materialized in colonialism and capitalist society, yet potentially offering a new synthesis for the future.

The search for human potentials that have been lost or destroyed in our own well-known social environment proves increasingly difficult. After centuries of assault, people in the non-Western world are increasingly suspicious of the West. Travelers from America and Europe are no longer welcome in other parts of the world and fear terrorist attacks and kidnappings. Anthropologists find it increasingly difficult to connect to indigenous peoples, face mounting problems to obtain visas and research permits abroad and funding at home, to study non-European cultures in depth. Most social scientists prefer to examine their own backyard, which is not only politically correct, but also fits in with the media's preference of an America-centric vision of the world. While everybody seems pre-occupied with studying globalism and its effects, this self-serving and limited vision of the world allows little space to opposite view points, e.g. indigenous African thought and cultural expressions. Moreover, the insistence on privileging one's own culture, its expressions and history, even as a villain, is a well-known fascist strategy that has historically prohibited any in-depth look beyond the borders of one's own political state with the exception of research aimed at confirming its own ideology.¹⁴ Any quest that goes beyond spreading the gospel of Western superiority and refuses to serve or focus on globalization and acculturation is unwelcome at home. Thus, listening to African voices, learning from an African culture, or even acknowledging the existence and potentials of an alternative vision of humanity born out of a non-Western culture remains a radically critical enterprise. To Diamond, pursuing this alternate vision of humanity was anthropology's major tasks.

In any event, contemporary American anthropology, faced with the disappearance of primitive peoples and having rationalized the concept of the primitive out of existence, will have to create some

new trembling vision of humanity as a metaphysical grounding for the science it supposes itself to be, that is, if it is to assume a virile part of civilized man's search for himself.¹⁵

Although Diamond's model is complex and there is no society unaffected by centuries of colonial conquest, lessons can still be learned from African cultures. I will confine my comments to Nigeria's Igbo people, whose culture I have studied first hand over an extended period of time 1977–1994, an ethnic group Stanley Diamond admired, loved, and supported, and actively supported during the Nigerian civil war over Biafra.¹⁶

Igbo culture from the perspective of critical, political and *Dialectical Anthropology*

Today, some 30 plus years after the Nigerian civil war, we may still ask ourselves, "What is the significance of studying Igbo culture in view of globalization, marginalization, world wide warring, and rapid transformation?" – First, we must recognize that the development of Europe and America went hand in hand with the under-development of Africa.¹⁷ Second, this process was coupled with an ordering of knowledge and an invention of a scale of values favoring European and American achievements and agency over African achievements and agency.¹⁸ Third, given the devastation of the Third World and Africa in particular the grand theories of cultural evolution must be challenged. Unprecedented violence, fascism, economic, moral and artistic decline, gender-, class, and ethnic discrimination, as well as man-made health- and environmental problems, call for a critical perspective on the so-called achievements brought upon humanity by the developed countries. Fourth, neither the form of a particular culture, nor its historical state of development is inevitable, but rather historical and political in nature. Diamond has consistently challenged the a-historical, behaviorist and deterministic tenor of social science, of the materialist determinist brand of Marxism, and of cultural anthropology in particular.

... "social science," and anthropology especially, must begin by being interpretive, sophisticated history. ... anthropology would have to chose between being history or nothing at all.

The significance of the individual and of the individual event in determining the course of history (and thus the more abstract morphology of culture which interests many anthropologists) can be readily established.¹⁹

Political anthropology, in a radical departure from established academic convention, enables us with Stanley Diamond to recognize African customs, e.g. of the Igbo people presented here, their beliefs, oral literature, and artistic expressions, as political actions based on decisions made by people making history.

The point is that history is a thread of contingencies, woven by decisions into cultural forms. Moreover, since the rise of civilization, history has grown progressively more universal in its effects, concentrated on specific decisions which now echo instantaneously around the world. Official histories, more precisely, histories conceived by the establishment within a single political society, are no longer possible. .. To begin to be sane, each state must recognize the effects of its actions on every other state. This does not absolve us as individuals, for we are all confronted with existential choices in almost every aspect of our lives in a world which has become a village in circumference, if not yet in substance. Today the actions of any state, in the name of its people, *are* the actions of its people, with their consent or by their default.²⁰

The indigenous cultures of Africa, Asia, the Americas, the Arab World, Australia, Europe, India, and Oceania, are all being marginalized by globalization and religious colonialism. However, none of these cultures is rendered irrelevant by that experience. It would be preposterous to assume that the annihilation of any ethnic group, however large or small, is in vain, or of no consequence. Moreover, many of these cultures represent valuable historical and cultural alternatives to the neo-imperialism of the dominant civilizations, especially the USA, and as such are potential models that present us with increasingly important lessons. Taking a critical approach to Western civilization as we look at Igbo culture enables us to search for new-old modes of conflict resolution, of balancing gender interests, of creating and maintaining a social equilibrium, of a non-exploitative religious relation to nature, of a people-empowering education, and much more. This knowledge of (once) existing vital alternatives enables us to envision more humane ways of living than those offered by our contemporary civilized, alienated state of existence. In this quest, stemming from the perspective of critical, political and dialectical anthropology, the preservation and promotion of the knowledge and wisdom of Igbo culture and language, among other threatened indigenous cultures and languages, emerges as a human necessity.

People can and will do without the overwhelming and brute force of the power of the state, if given the chance. Thus, in contrast to the written, monolithic rule of laws dominating Western civilizations, the order of custom appears as a rather subtle agent compelling people to live up to their society's norms;²¹ the authority of custom, its representatives, and values still maintain coherence in Igbo society while keeping its culture alive locally, despite the chaos prevailing in the nation-state of Nigeria. Among the Oru-Igbo of Oguta, for example, the order of custom is based on the sanctions and religious beliefs encoded in myths and celebrated in the annual *Agugu* festival.²² While these beliefs may change and thus modify custom,²³ their complete erosion would threaten the very integrity of the people's culture and society,²⁴ their identity and emotional and economic wellbeing.

Even though we may recognize the importance of their custom to the people themselves, we still may be compelled to ask: "what is the rationale for studying an indigenous African custom, why present it to a world wide audience, and what is the relevance of African custom in view of the rapid "progress" and "acculturation" of African societies, and more alarmingly, in view of the environmental, economic, and political disasters, toppled by the AIDS crisis devastating the continent? When facing Africa today, we must admit that

We are confronted with what Lévi-Strauss has called...junk-heaps of Western civilization, and not with societies that can be honestly analyzed as if they were pristine. Africa *is* the edge of *our* jungle ... "acculturation," ... is largely a matter of conquest and ... almost always implies the assault by civilized people upon ... traditional societies.²⁵

We must furthermore acknowledge that the same civilizations that have assaulted African cultures have so far produced major portions of the body of writings that constitute the grand cultural theories and the dominant view of the world. Based on this ordering, devising of categories and typologies of the achievements of humanity,

Civilized peoples seem always to project their specific forms of development as the inevitable progress destiny of fate of the human race. The political component has been largely replaced by deterministic arguments.²⁶

The raw facts of colonial conquest, and its continuation in globalization, are thinly veiled by the arguments of a four-pronged ideological strategy embracing (1) the proclaimed need to pacify non-European warring groups, (2) a perception of non-Europeans as

“others”, (3) a definition of “the other” as negative or inferior, and (4) religious fervor.

Religious fervor, colonial conquest, and the continuous dismantling of indigenous cultures, institutions and values

The intimate link between the colonial conquest of Africa and Christian missions justifying religious colonialism, builds on the instrumental importance of Christian education in subverting and destroying African culture and ethnic traditions. This recurrent theme has been documented in many instances and on multiple levels of experience, thought and expression. The Congolese philosopher, V. Y. Mudimbe, illuminates the theoretical framework of the Christian missions’ destructive enterprise. Following Eboussi-Boulaga, he asserts that the European conquest of Africa and its impact on the continent’s political geography went hand-in-hand with Christian missionaries. Historically, the dismantling of African beliefs, custom and traditions, and the replacement of these indigenous values with a Eurocentric system of thought were a pre-condition and an integral part of colonial conquest, suppression and exploitation, a process that continuous – albeit in different political forms as part of globalization – until this day.

Sharing this belief in the superiority of Christianity, expressed in its essential qualifications, that is, its identification with reason, history, and power, the missionary’s discourse has, according to Eboussi-Boulaga, always presented five major features. First of all, it is a language of derision, insofar as it fundamentally ridicules the pagan’s Gods. .. Second, it is a language of refutation or systematic reduction: all pagan religions constitute the black side of a white transcendental Christianity... Satan and God. The third feature illuminates the missionary’s pragmatic objectives: his action is supported by a language of demonstration, ...his civilization ... sacred cultural model ... divine seal. ... A fourth characteristic:... only Truth. ... supremacy of the European experience. The last trait ... Christian God ... as history’s only force. .. Thus we have three moments, rather than types, of violence in missionary language. Theoretically they are expressed in the concepts of derision, refutation-demonstration, and orthodoxy-conformity.²⁷

The social implications of such diminishment of indigenous beliefs and practices are clear. Serving the goals of imposing colonial rule and

global power structures, Christian values build upon supremacist attitudes valuing one belief system more than the other. Such a conceptual order automatically invites a social divide as a way of thinking that maybe outdated by urban European standards. But Christian evangelical movements, promoted by the USA, are stronger than ever in the Third World, Eastern Europe, and have become deeply entrenched by missionaries in Africa. As a result, the imbalanced Christian scale of values that puts Europe at the top and African peoples, their cultures and even their food at the bottom, is kept alive, e.g. among Nigerians, even today. Mbabuike and Salamone assert that,

The belief persists among many Igbo that a priest should be aloof, wealthy, deal primarily with the rich, and be condescending in discussing matters with the community. For these people, a priest cannot be at home with the people or eat what they do. These behaviors, certainly, reflect aspects of class.²⁸

Frantz Fanon has elaborated on the psychological damages inflicted by the derision of the achievements of once colonized peoples, turning the creators of non-European cultures into *The Wretched of the Earth*.²⁹ Religious beliefs and practices are the very core on which African cultures hinge. Africans in general and especially “Nigerians are a very religious people.”³⁰ Consequently, the ridicule and reduction of African deities and of the customs based on the people’s spirituality are particularly painful to individuals anchored in the emotional sanctuary of their traditions.

The African notion of divine womanhood, historically linked to female rule in the Sahel, is a case in point. The notions of multiple deities and female divinity in particular contradict both European and Arab cosmologies. As pointed out by Zulu Sofala, as a result of these ideologies, the African woman, both secular and sacred, was and still is a prime target of monotheism and its associate powers:

She [African woman] has been most viciously attacked through the cosmology of the alien cultures of the European and Arab that has left her stripped bare of all that makes her existence worthwhile in the traditional African system of sociopolitical order and governance.³¹

Christian missions bolstering the colonial endeavor have used a language of derision and miracles, to diminish African beliefs and achievements, and especially the reverence of womanhood, while at the same time promoting their own male- and state dominated monolithic Christian views. Islam, equally tied to Arab slave trading and con-

quest, has historically operated the same way, despite its greater flexibility towards certain African customs, e.g. polygamy. Female rulers and female oriented religious beliefs were once common throughout Africa, but were subjugated or killed together with their totem animals by the onslaught of the monolithic powers structures fueled by monotheism. The lore of these events is still lingering in Africa's Sahel region, e.g. in the tales of the queens, Amina, Daurama, and Sarraounia.³² Contemporary scholars and African intellectuals have pointed to the simultaneity of the defeat of female rulers and forced introduction of the conquerors' colonizing religions, a coincidence that has become the theme of several African movies, e.g. by the acclaimed film makers Mel Hondo from Guinea Bissao, and Ousmane Sembène from Senegal.

Sembène's *Ceddo*, a film highly critical of colonizing religions, depicts the Ceddo resistance to Islamic patriarchy ... forced conversion makes it easier for the imam to marry Princess Dior.³³

The theme of a foreigner and his beliefs subjugating the African woman through marriage resounds in many stories, e.g. in the Hausa myth of the origin of their urban centers. According to this saga, the Hausa culture hero, Baghida, came to Daura from Baghdad, killed the snake guarding over the town's source of water (life), and married the then ruling queen, Daurama. The couple's children are said to have founded the seven original Hausa cities. The mythical end of female rule coincided with the introduction of Islam to Hausaland, around 800 AC.

Anthropology and the politics of studying cultures

To this author and following Stanley Diamond's line of thought, the significance of studying Igbo custom cannot lie in tracing a developmental stage as part of a grand scheme of "progress" along the lines of any "ethnocentric notions of inevitability",³⁴ nor in the pursuit of a grand theory attempting to merely locating Igbo culture within "the multi-colored fabric of world culture – a fabric woven on a political loom."³⁵ Instead, the significance of studying African cultures lies in acknowledging the politics of her people, e.g. in Igbo art and ritual. These politics are expressed for example in Igbo satire,³⁶ or in the Oru-Igbo annual staging of the *Agugu* festival,³⁷ activities based on underlying political decisions.

Political decisions are, however, rather more existential in nature. ... For politics is people in groups deciding to act in order to reject, create, or maintain the patterns of authority that legitimate their social behavior.³⁸

Political anthropology enables us to recognize a cultural event based on myths and religious beliefs, such as the performance of satire in Ihiala, or of the *Agugu* festival in Orsu-Obodo, as a form of political action. This interpretation is unusual in the established field of cultural anthropology as commonly perceived in academia. Moreover, a critical perspective privileging African culture at the expense of Western civilization also pose a threat to those conceptually clinging to European-American patterns of social evolution as the only conceivable way of development and scale of values. Stanley Diamond thus cautions that

Civilized peoples and civilized disciplines have therefore been particularly sensitive to political action on the part of “backward” peoples which created *possibilities of alternative patterns of social evolution*, patterns that the patron states thereby considered a potential threat to the integrity of their entire cultural spectrum.³⁹

An avenue that recognizes only one line of social evolution would perceive history as inevitable fate, rather than as based on individual decisions. Yet, as Diamond’s discussion of the Anaguta⁴⁰ illuminates, decisions have been taken that have dramatically altered peoples’ fates, the course of their histories and the economic and technological development or under-development of different peoples in different parts of the world.

These things I have learned, once and for all, from observing and associating with the Anaguta, for they have decided not to join the modern world. They move like ghosts on the outskirts of civilization on the high plateau of Northern Nigeria and say *Anaguta mini ma gehri*, “The Anaguta are a basket of water.” Their culture crumbles, their population declines, their lands shrink, and as an ethnic entity change only disintegratively. They accept, they pursue their decline; for them the world ends. We are obliged to ask why have similar, even adjoining, peoples responded so differently – although not uniformly – to the stimuli of new conditions? This is a historical question but most significant is the spectacle of a people forming out of their natural, material and spiritual resources, their “fate.” That is what history is.⁴¹

Eric Williams has succinctly shown how the decisions to trade in fire-arms and slaves, have accelerated warfare and the impoverishment of the African continent on the one hand, and the growth of technology and capitalism in Europe and the USA, on the other.⁴² These developments were clearly based on capitalist economics and politics, rather than inevitable stages of social evolution. The resulting perceptions and categorizations of African peoples, cultures and history are the direct results of 500 years of slave trade and furthermore, clearly indebted to 19th century European politics, rather than to scientifically provable truth.

Commercial slavery ... found it necessary to conceive blacks not only as culturally exotic, but as inferior objects... Europeans have rarely glorified the culturally alien or racially distinct as superior to themselves. .. Since Portuguese slavers...it has been typical in the North Atlantic world to stereotype the peoples and cultures of the continent, to regard them as history-less, featureless, backward and largely passive mass. These conventional rationalizations are familiar ...the way masters are compelled to regard those whom they enslave.⁴³

Committed with Diamond to a critique of contemporary Western civilization and other rationalizations of the exercise of repressive political and economic power, the portrayal of the Igbo culture is critical and potentially dialectical at the same time, for it illuminates remnants of human alternatives that could become dialectical through being reactivated on another level, e.g. as an anti-thesis to global capitalism, as pursued by ecological movements and tribal activists on an international scale.

Once we begin to consider sociopolitical types in their historical dimension, that is, levels of sociopolitical integration... the dynamic of any given area becomes of paramount importance. Moreover, we can then move from people to people, area to area, in order to refine our understanding of what Julian Steward has called “regularities” and, one should add, *alternatives* of change throughout widening segments of our increasingly constricted modern world.⁴⁴

The politics of Igbo culture

Igbo culture is a particularly rich cultural model in providing ample examples of socio-political integration by peaceful, non-violent, ritual

and artistic means. Two examples may serve to illustrate this point (1) the performance of satirical songs at Ihiala,⁴⁵ and (2) the celebration of an annual town festival, *Agugu*, at Orsu-Obodo.⁴⁶

Igbo Satire

Satirical songs were and still are performed on the occasion of semi-sacred funerary and marriage ceremonies at Ihiala, despite the increasing dismantling of the underlying religious beliefs and the connected moral and behavioral codes by Christian proselytes. The performance of Igbo satire is a complex cultural expression with various functions. While satirical songs are entertaining, they also expose individuals whose behavior has transgressed society's norms and customary behavioral codes, either to a lesser, or more serious extent. The potential public exposure of the transgressor is a strong deterrent to irregular or even anti-social behavior. In a society that can be characterized as a "shame culture,"⁴⁷ social ostracism is taken very seriously. There are enormous psychological pressures, e.g. in the form of public ridicule, preventing people from doing wrong. Similar ritual performances exposing and ridiculing aberrant social behavior have been documented in other cultures, where they take on different forms, e.g. in the *Gèlèdè* masquerade of the Yoruba ethnic group, in South Western Nigeria and Benin Republic,⁴⁸ but have the same integrative effect in society. Satirical songs and other ritual performances can be viewed as powerful agents of social integration in a culture with whose custom and norms the individuals still identify and whose scorn they fear. In rural Igbo culture, the threat of social ostracism is taken very seriously, even as a form punishment, and perhaps feared more than the police or a modern jail. For example, in a murder case witnessed by this author, the convicted individuals and their extended families were not locked up, and instead at first punished by their fellow villagers refusing any interaction with the offenders. The individuals so scorned eventually left their town and started a new life elsewhere, in anonymity.⁴⁹

A shame culture, such as the Igbo example, is diametrically opposed to a culture driven by guilt, as in Western/ Christian culture where the sense of wrongdoing is held internally. Here confession, such as in the Catholic Church, is private rather than public. After confessing in church, an offender may be relieved of his "sins", keep his face and continue to live in his community, while the political state monopolizes the power to punish the guilty. Satire on the other hand may lead to

confession, or exposure, precluding crime, rather than invoking actual punishment. This important integrative function of satire persists despite the increasing prominence of the entertainment component in post-colonial satirical performances.

While observing the performance of satirical songs acting as a powerful deterrent against certain types of anti-social, or even criminal behavior, we also recognize an important female component in this regulatory institution, for Igbo satire is performed by women.⁵⁰ The Igbo people's performances of satire aimed at ridiculing an offender clearly is female politics of preventing anti-social behavior. As an expression of female authority as an integral part of custom, and moreover linked to pre-Christian religious beliefs,⁵¹ satirical performances increasingly come under attack by Christian fanatics demeaning all forms and parts of indigenous cultures, their religious beliefs, behavioral codes, ethics, and female seats of power.⁵²

The female politics of satire prevent anti-social behavior, rather than relying on retroactive punishment and are an important factor in maintaining social peace and protecting members of the community from each other. By contrast, male centered contemporary political states do little to prevent negative behavior, e.g. crime, or abuses of women, and instead rely on policing and punishing culprits *after* the fact. Moreover, Christian churches preach an ideology of guilt and sin that may be purged by obedience and confession, and again, would only be dealt with in the afterlife. In addition and, as Mbabu and Uwazurike illuminate,⁵³ the modern democratic institutions of Nigeria and many African countries are comparatively helpless, cannot prevent political despotism and corruption, or protect their citizen from abuses of power by the brute force of repressive state monopolies, e.g. Nigeria's dreaded mobile police force, or the military, or even foreign mercenaries, nor do they seem willing to they shield their countries and their citizens from economic exploitation and degradation, as attested to by the horror scenario of rampant oil extraction, environmental pollution, destruction of the water as a resource for the livelihood of the peoples of the Niger delta, and political witch hunting, e.g. culminating in the execution of the novelist, Ken Sawo Wiwa, in Southeastern Nigeria in 1994. By contrast the traditional counterparts of contemporary rulers could not as easily get away with murder or non-customary and non-reciprocal behavior on the local level, as villagers would not tolerate the arrogance and excesses of many a modern despot, and instead expose and even depose his local counterpart.⁵⁴

Despite these limitations and potential Christian bias of many contemporary Igbo villagers, and against the odds of acknowledging

pre-colonial life as full of hardships, we may still recognize the art and ritual performance of satire as an expression of Igbo custom as a powerful, viable, yet non-violent integrative force empowering and protecting people by way of prevention.

The Agugu festival

The *Agugu* festival is the major annual cultural event celebrated by the Oru-Igbo, a group of Riverine Igbo who live in and around Oguta.⁵⁵ To the Oru people the staging of the *Agugu* festival means: “doing, acting out, or celebrating our custom”.⁵⁶ The entire body of their custom, *omenala*, represents the people’s culture, and defines and re-affirms their collective identity that is ultimately founded in their spirituality.⁵⁷

The *Agugu* festival is a multi-layered, complex event: a ritual, it addresses the religious beliefs in the divine forces of nature and teaches respect rather than mere exploitation of the environment; An event of economic importance, it signals the beginning of the planting season, while it is also an occasion and venue for the accumulation and subsequent distribution of surplus staples; A major educational and social event, *Agugu* initiates boys into the ranks of men.⁵⁸ During this process, the initiates are taught esoteric knowledge and moreover are educated in the most essential existential skills necessary to live and flourish in their social and geographic environment; An occasion for festivities, recreation and play, *Agugu* entertains, educates, and unites the townspeople in their customs and beliefs in the multiple gods and goddesses of their land, in local knowledge and survival skills, in the necessity of balancing power, and of recognizing the importance of complementary contributions of men and women. This wisdom also emphasizes a basic albeit complementary distinction between the wilderness of nature and civilization created by humans.

Agugu re-enacts sacred myths and celebrates the indebtedness of successful farming and pro-creation to the forces of nature and to the mysterious force of *Owu*. The *Owu* myth, celebrated annually during the *Agugu* festival, encodes custom, *omenala*, or the (unwritten) “laws of the land”. The masquerade, initiation ceremonies and other ritual events performed at that time re-enact the underlying myth and re-confirm custom. Oru-Igbo custom, *omenala*, religious beliefs, local environment, knowledge, practical skills, and the economy are closely interrelated.

The Oru-Igbo farmer knows very well that an accurate observation and analysis of the water levels of the lake, rivers, and local creeks are

basic to survival which to them is a success. Male and female must complement each other step by step, just as “you cannot walk on one leg alone”. During the festival, young men are initiated into adulthood. They become men and may soon plant their seeds to grow and yield fruit in the form of both, yam and children. Men must eat to survive, and without women, there are no children, and there is no cooked food. Moreover, it is nearly impossible to eat without one’s hands or handiwork. These are some of the practical lessons learnt by the initiates during the time of the *Agugu* festival. The lessons are devised and taught and the exams are taken in the informal “university of the village”, rather than in formal education.

While Americans, Europeans and some Nigerian urbanites may arrogantly belittle the achievements and knowledge of the villagers as “inconsequential,” the indigenous people insist on the importance of their knowledge and may ultimately be better equipped in dealing with their local environment, than the arrogant foreigners, e.g. adjusting to rather than attempting to dominate their local waters. The Igbo culture’s existential lessons are still valid today, despite the onslaught of the Nigerian nation state and the overwhelming of Shell Oil, Texaco, Mobil Oil, Chevron, and other foreign companies. The people of South Eastern Nigeria refuse to vanish – against all odds and in contrast to the Anaguta of the middle belt.

All of the lessons of *Agugu* are highly relevant to the local life and environment. The graduates of initiation are well prepared to confront and master their life at home. Their education is for their life, rather than feeding into, or from a body of Euro-centric knowledge that may justify and linger upon European-American politics and the history of death and destruction, but whose benefit to progress in Africa is often questionable, e.g. when a postal clerk in Oguta might be able to recite Shakespeare, but not the stories of his village; at the other extreme, the Chinese forbade and destroyed all foreign books during the Cultural Revolution and sent the children of their intellectuals to the villages for re-education by the peasants, ostentatiously in order to liberate their people from foreign thought and oppression.⁵⁹ Neither the deliberate destruction, nor the ignorance of an accumulated body of knowledge and artistic wealth in time and space makes much sense beyond very near-sighted political goals. Instead, we may envision a synthesis of African and European-American knowledge, e.g. re-thinking the non-beneficial uneven relationship of men and women, exploiter and exploited, and man and nature. Studying indigenous wisdom and evolutionary strategies and adding this knowledge to the library and

awareness of human possibilities and historical and social alternatives is not only an asset to all of humanity, but may ultimately be our only chance at survival.

Conclusion

There are many lessons that can be learnt from the Igbo and other non-Western cultures, e.g. in the “university of the village”, in the alternative form of education that is part of the *Agugu* festival and its initiation ceremonies, or in the integrative agency of Igbo satire. All of these lessons are highly relevant locally. Moreover, some are of critical importance beyond the local level and have relevance to all of humanity worldwide. To give just one example: The indigenous notion of learning from, adapting to, and respecting nature and its limits, rather than merely battling, suppressing, and exploiting the ecosphere and environment is an important wisdom. The pitfalls of Western civilization’s greed are obvious, closely linked to an imaginary conquest of nature, and a devastating insistence on treating nature and its flora and fauna as mere commodities and commercial resources. Taught that major diseases have been eradicated, we may dare to believe in medical progress; yet while ancient diseases such as TB and Malaria mutate to evade conquest, new plagues, e.g. cancer, AIDS,⁶⁰ SARS, mad-cow disease, bird flu, and many more including the ravages on the body by chemical and nuclear pollution, emerge and raise havoc. Power-drunken despots brutally suppress their people and/or threaten to destroy the world, while protecting the interests of multi-national conglomerates reducing human beings to mere roles and numbers. Green movements are taking hold in European politics and emerge as a desperate, last minute effort to avoid the worst, as environmental disasters are increasingly riddling most of the world and many people fear that the world’s climate has already changed, taking us on the sure road to doom. In view of these disasters, we are in dire need of alternative metaphysical models, as expressed in Diamond’s key term, “the primitive.”

The search for the primitive is the attempt to define a primary human potential. Without such a model (or, since we are dealing with men and not things, without such a vision), it becomes increasingly difficult to evaluate or understand our contemporary pathology and possibilities. For instance, without an anthropology bent on rediscovering the nature of human nature, the science of

medicine may survive, but the art of healing will wither away. For healing flows from insight into primary, “pre-civilized” human processes; it presumes an knowledge of the primitive, a sense of the minimally human, a sense of what is essential to being human.⁶¹

In the context of uneasy progress, wide-spread economic impoverishment, and social and political turmoil, non-Western cultural models and their expressions, e.g. the *Agugu* festival, or the performance of Igbo satire, and the arts, ritual and wisdom of many other indigenous cultures, emerge as highly significant positive vantage points for a challenge and critique of the dominant neo-imperial Western world view and civilization. From this perspective and in this spirit, we shall continue Stanley Diamond’s mission of *Dialectical Anthropology*.

Notes

¹ Wolf-Dieter Narr, “Editorial,” and “The Anthropologist as a Partisan,” both *infra*.

² *Dialectical Anthropology*, 1992, Special Issue dedicated to Stanley Diamond.

³ Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive. A Critique of Civilization*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1974/1983.

⁴ Wolf-Dieter Narr, “Editorial.” *infra*.

⁵ Diamond, *op. cit.*, 174, p. 119.

⁶ Diamond, *op. cit.*, 174, p. 111.

⁷ Diamond, *op. cit.*, 1974, pp. 118/119.

⁸ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-d’Overture Publications, 1970.

⁹ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*. New Heaven: Harvard University Press, 1994 (1067).

¹⁰ Diamond’s relationship to Marxism was complex, for he did not subscribe to the ideology of materialist determinism, and instead emphasized the importance of human actions, decision making, and the dialectics of history. Stanley Diamond, “Introduction: Critical Versus Ideological Marxism”, in: Diamond ed., *Towards a Marxist Anthropology. Problems and Perspectives*. The Hague: Mouton, 1979; see also: Narr, “The Anthropologist as a Partisan,” *infra*.

¹¹ Diamond, *op. cit.* 1974, p. 353.

¹² Diamond, *op. cit.* 1974, p. 118, 119.

¹³ Diamond, *op. cit.* 1974, p. 129.

¹⁴ For example, in Nazi Germany, the citizens were largely prohibited from even learning a foreign language, or listening to a foreign radio station. Ethnography was largely replaced with folklore studies focusing exclusively on Germany, and anthropology was permitted only in the service of the regime’s racial ideology. See also: Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, “Ethnology and Fascism in Germany,” in: *Dialectical Anthropology* 9, 1985, pp. 313–335.

¹⁵ Stanley Diamond, *op. cit.*, 1974, p. 347.

¹⁶ Stanley Diamond, "Who killed Biafra?" In: *The New York Review of Books*. Vol. XIV, No. 4, 1970, pp.17–27.

Stanley Diamond, "Reflections on the Biafran revolution: The point of the Biafran case," in: Gutkind, ed., *The Passing of Tribal Man in Africa*. Leyden: Brill 1970, pp. 16–27;

see also: Wolf-Dieter Narr, *infra*.

Michael Mbabuie and Chudi Uwazurike, "Nigeria's Perennial Crisis of Nationhood, Democracy and Development. The Essence of the Social Capital Approach (In Memoriam: Stanley Diamond 1921–1991)." *Dialectical Anthropology*, 28(2) 2004, 203–231.

¹⁷ Rodney, *op. cit.*, and Williams, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

¹⁹ Diamond, *op. cit.* 1974, pp. 348, 349.

²⁰ Diamond, *op. cit.* 1974, pp. 350, 351.

²¹ Stanley Diamond, *op. cit.*, 1974/1983, p. 258. Paul Radin, *The World of Primitive Man*. New York: H. Schuman, 1953, quoted in Diamond 1974, p. 256.

²² Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, "Owu, Agugu, and Omerife: The Sacred Art and Ritual of Balancing People, Nature, and Water Spirits." in: Michael C. Mbabuie and Y. James Emejulu, *Education, Culture and Development*. White Plains, NY: Jimacs-Hillman Publishers (*in press*); see also: Jell-Bahlsen, Sabine, "Civilization, Wilderness, and Secrecy: Making two Nigerian Films." *Visual Anthropology*, Special Issue on Africa, 13(4) (2000), pp. 363–393, and Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *Owu: Chidi Joins the Okoroshi Secret Society* (video). Goettingen/ Germany, IWF & Ogbuide Films, San Antonio, TX, USA 1994.

²³ Leslye A. Obiora, "Reconsidering African Customary Law." in: *Legal Studies Forum* XVII (3), 1993, pp. 217–252. 1993).

²⁴ Diamond, *op. cit.* 1974, p. 258.

²⁵ Diamond, Stanley. "Introduction: Africa in the Perspective of Political Anthropology". *The Transformation of East Africa*. Edited by S. Diamond & Fred Burke. New York: Basic Books, 1966/1969, pp. 3–4.

²⁶ Diamond *op.cit.*1966, p. 4.

²⁷ V.Y. Mudimbe, *op. cit.* 1986, pp. 51, 52.

²⁸ Michael C. Mbabuie & Frank A. Salamone , "The Plight of the Indigenous Catholic Priest in Africa: An Igbo Example." in: *Missology* 23: pp. 165–177, 1995, 3.

²⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1965.

³⁰ Nwalutu (Nne Abaraonye), "Nigeria's Sculptural Heritage..." (unpublished manuscript), p. 4.

³¹ Zulu Sofala, quoted by Nwachukwu Frank Uhadike, "reclaiming images of women in films from Africa and the diaspora", in: Manthia Diawara and Mbye Cham, eds., *African Experiences of Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 1996, p. 197.

³² The historical warrior queen, Sarraounia, is the heroine of a film of the same name by Mel Hondo. See: Diawara & Cham, *op. cit.*

³³ Nwachuku Frank Uhadike, "Reclaiming Images of Women in Films from Africa and the Black Diaspora." In: Diawara and Cham, *op. cit.*, 1996, p. 197. The familiar theme of foreigners and their beliefs subjugating the African woman through marriage resounds in many stories, e.g., in the Hausa myth of the origin of their urban centers. According to this saga, the Hausa culture hero, Baghida, who came to Daura from Baghdad, killed the snake guarding over the town's source of water (life), and married

the queen, Daurama. The couple's children are said to have founded the seven original Hausa cities. This mythical end of female rule coincided with the introduction of Islam to Hausaland, around 800 AC.

³⁴ Diamond, op. cit., 1966, p. 4.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Christine N. Ohale, *From Ritual to Art: The Aesthetics and Cultural Relevance of Igbo Satire*. Lanham, NY: University Press of America, 2003.

³⁷ Jell-Bahlsen, op. cit. (in press), 2000 and 1994 (video).

³⁸ Diamond, op. cit., 1969, p. 4.

³⁹ Ibid., emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Stanley Diamond, "The Anaguta of Nigeria: Suburban Primitives." in: Julian H. Steward (ed.), *Contemporary Change in Traditional Societies*. Vol. 1. Urbana, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967; see also: Narr, infra, "Obituary."

⁴¹ Diamond, op. cit. 1974, p. 351. The idea that people could form or influence their "fate" is, of course, alien to Western thought, particularly of the materialistic and deterministic kind. However, the idea of altering an individual's destiny appears in Igbo cosmological thought, where the mother water goddess is perceived as capable to altering a person's destiny, akarakra, albeit at a price. (Mrs) Chinwe Achebe, *The World of the Ogbanije*. Owerri: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986.

⁴² Williams, op. cit., 1994 (1967).

⁴³ Diamond, op. cit., 1964, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Diamond, op. cit., 1964, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Ohale, op. cit. Christine Ohale, a native Igbo speaker, scholar, and professor of English in the USA has given us an eloquent description and analysis of Igbo satirical songs, based on her in-depth field study at Ihiala,⁴⁶. Unfortunately, Ohale's Christian bias limits the validity of her analysis and casts serious doubts on the neutrality of her description in terms of her scale of values and ordering of knowledge (Mudimbe), for she writes, "Satire was practiced in the crudest form in Ihiala before the colonial era," Ohale, op. cit., 2003, p. 121.

⁴⁶ Sabine Jell-Bahlsen in: Mbabuike and Emejulu, op.cit. (in press)., Jell-Bahlsen op. cit. 2000, and op. cit. (video) 1994.

⁴⁷ Ohale op. cit. 2003. Simon Ottenberg, "Book Review: Christine Ohale, *From Ritual to Art*." in: *Dialectical Anthropology* 28(2), 2004 (forthcoming).

⁴⁸ Henry and Margaret Drewal, *Gelede. Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Babatunde Lawal. *The Gelede Spectacle. Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture*. Seattle: The University of Washinton Press, 1996.

⁴⁹ Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, "A Murder Case: Igbo Conflict Settlement." In: *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 12, 1988, pp. 359–366.

⁵⁰ The actual agency of women in Igbo Satire is a significant contrast to the Yoruba performance of Gelede masquerade, where men clad as women and re-enact female authority as a guardian of social peace.

⁵¹ Perhaps biased by her Western training and Christian perspective not only ignoring but even scorning and bedeviling African religious views, Ohale unfortunately does not fully acknowledge the religious underpinnings, peaceful merits, and socially integrative promises of Igbo satire, and instead negatively associates this institution with "crudeness." Simon Ottenberg, an eminent, long-term scholar of Igbo culture challenges this negative perception and view and despite his praises for the merits of Ohale's important

account of Igbo satire, also cautions the reader: “Ohale gives the impression that Igbo pre-colonial times were brutish and rough, dangerously linking her to older Western conceptions of Africa ... She does not discuss in detail the possible negative influence of colonialism on the satirical songs and the manner of their performance. Christian Igbo influence has led in other Igbo areas, to discouraging their presentation as vulgar, particularly since they sometimes employ terms for human sexual organs; some Igbo Christians prefer other methods of social control and of singing. How many Christians are forbidden by their beliefs about “paganism” from being satirists or audience members at these song events? ... There is a sense that the author is uncomfortable with the pre-colonial satires but at ease with the postcolonial ones.”

Simon Ottenberg, “Book Review: Christine Ohale, ‘From Ritual to Art’.” in: *Dialectical Anthropology* 28(2), 2004 (forthcoming).

⁵² Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, “Female Power: Water Priestesses of the Oru-Igbo.” In: Obioma Nnaemeka, ed., *Sisterhood Feminisms and Power*, Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1998.

⁵³ Mbabuike and Uwazurike, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ Examples are the removal from power of several chiefs by Igbo villagers during colonial times.

⁵⁵ The present author has carried out an in-depth, long-time study of the local culture 1978-1994.

⁵⁶ Jell-Bahlsen, *op. cit.* (in press), 1994, and 2000.

⁵⁷ See also: Diamond *op. cit.*, 1974, p. 141.

⁵⁸ Young men are collectively initiated into adulthood during the *Agugu* festival, while women’s coming of age is celebrated individually throughout the year.

⁵⁹ Dai Sije, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2001.

⁶⁰ See also: *Dialectical Anthropology* 28 (3/4), Special Double Issue on HIV/AIDS, Guest Editor Eudora Chikwendu. 2004 (forthcoming).

⁶¹ Stanley Diamond, *op. cit.* 1974, p.119.