



Excerpt from the work-in-progress

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Chapter I: Birth, Circumstances, and Names

I was born in the morning hours of Sunday, February 6, 1966, at the then Queen Elizabeth Specialist Hospital, Umuahia, to Mr. Dennis and Mrs. Eileen Chukwuma. I am the fifth in a family of seven, comprising three girls and four boys. I was first given an Igbo name at birth: Chukwuemeka. As was customary in the Anglican Church, The English name came about three months after, during baptism.

The name, Chukwuemeka, means “God has done well”. You need to understand my family history to appreciate the import of the name. My father was married for about twenty years to his first wife, Ihuchi, without a child. And not for want of trying. The [fact] is that they had seven miscarriages and on the last one was advised not to try again. In the face of the prospects of a childless marriage, which was a taboo in Igbo tradition at the time, the first wife pestered him to take a second wife, arguing that she would not be alive and see him die without children of his own. As the story goes, he reluctantly agreed to marry, and married a 17-year-old girl by the name, Eileen Onyenze, my mother!

As if by providence, my mother came in and had seven children, the exact number of miscarriages that my father’s first wife suffered. Given that he waited for two decades before the children started coming, my father named his first child Isaac, drawing from the biblical story about Abraham’s first child. He named the second child, Samuel, again drawing from the bible. The third child he named Chinyere, meaning God’s gift. By the time I came as the fifth child, it was as if his gratitude to God knew no bounds and hence the name, Chukwuemeka. My birth was the capping of prayers by my parents.

My English name, Innocent, which came during my baptism on April 3rd, 1966, also has a rich story behind it. 1966 was a turbulent year in the political history of Nigeria. To many people,

it marked the beginning of trouble in the country as two bloody military coups took place that year. The first was the January 15th coup, carried out by a group of young and idealist soldiers, who within a blink of an eye wiped out leading political figures mainly from northern and western regions of the country. A countercoup that was even more bloody in its planning and execution, took place on July 15th and targeted officers and civilians from the Eastern part of the country given that the first coup was alleged to have been an “Igbo coup.” Being born and baptised in-between these bloody episodes that precipitated the Nigerian civil war in 1967 compelled my mother to give me the name “Innocent” since I didn’t ask to be born at the time. By that stroke, I was absolved from blame for all the challenges of my mother carrying a pregnancy and having a child at such a turbulent period.

Another noteworthy point is that, as the story goes, my mother complained on the eve of my birth that she was not feeling too well and needed to go to hospital...

The foregoing preface is the first fruit of Innocent Chukwuma’s metaphoric tilling of his autobiography soil, and for which he had secured a fellowship at University of Oxford to concentrate on writing, before death’s cold cudgels amputated his flourishing life on that fateful April 3, 2021.

Echoes from Early Childhood

Young Innocent always knew his father with grey hairs. As a young boy, the image of his father was that of an advanced man who married Innocent’s mother when he was already in his forties. He was a stern disciplinarian. He emphasized hard work as the key to unlocking a better future. Innocent’s mother was a young damsel at the time of his birth. He was the fifth of seven children. His immediate younger sister, Mrs. Joy Okpan, who we had the opportunity of interviewing before she

passed in October 2021 (6 months after Innocent's demise) revealed that their mother was married to their father at the young age of 17. With a voice laden with emotion, she recounted aspects of the family's early days: "My mother was married off to my father when she was 17. It wasn't my father that went out of his way to marry my mother. It was my stepmother, my father's first wife that married my mother for my father..."

In the highly patriarchal society, it was a common practice for a "barren" or "ageing" wife to support her husband to take another wife, either to bear children for him or to keep him warm. The logic was that by going out to get the woman herself, the new wife would extend her loyalty to her, and in the case of Innocent's stepmother, share the joys of motherhood with the younger wife.

Innocent was born on 6th February 1966 at the Federal Medical Centre, Umuahia, in present-day Abia State, formerly Queen Elizabeth Hospital. It was commissioned in 1956 by Sir Clement Pleas, the then Governor of Eastern Region of Nigeria on behalf of the Queen of England. It started as a joint mission hospital administered by the Methodist, Anglican and Presbyterian churches. Before its takeover by the Federal Government in 1991, it had first been taken over by the then Imo State Military Government headed by Navy Captain Ndubuisi Kanu (now a Retired Rear Admiral). He renamed it Ramat Specialist Hospital in honour of the late slain Head of State, General Murtala Mohammed. During the first republic, under the administration of late Chief Sam Mbakwe as Governor of old Imo State, it was reverted to its original name, The Queen Elizabeth Hospital. It became Federal Medical Centre (FMC) Umuahia in 1991, the first FMC to be so-called in the entire federation.

It was barely one month after Nigeria's first military coup that Innocent Chukwuma was born. His birth was significant, not just in the fact that he was born during a troubling moment in

the new nation, but also due to the fact that he was born when his ageing father's wealth was fast diminishing. He was truly born in troubling times. And remarkably following his birth, his parents had severe challenges paying the hospital bill.

The Nigerian civil war broke out a year after Innocent's birth, and as was the case in all former Biafran strongholds, his parents had to flee their residence at number 41 Awolowo Road, when Umuahia fell. They returned to that address shortly after the war and began to piece themselves together once again. Innocent was almost four years old when the war came to an end, and like every other surviving family in the defunct Biafra, each household was given 20 pounds by the Nigerian government, notwithstanding how much they had in the bank before the war. It was under this existential reality that little Innocent was raised, alongside his siblings.

Innocent's father was ageing quickly and could no longer provide much for the family. The household had increased by two children, and the survival of the family rested solely on the shoulders of Innocent's young mother—his stepmother having relocated to Mbaise. The migration of Mbaise people to Umuahia at the time was because of the industrialization that was taking place in the nascent city then. It took an average of 38 minutes by car, approximately 27.1 kilometers to get to Umuahia from Mbaise. Hence, it was common for many Mbaise men to migrate to the new city with their families as part of some kind of upward social mobility.

With the burden of providing for the family on Innocent's young mother, she had to introduce the children to work as early as practicable. Besides farming, which was seasonal and which Innocent's mother did with her eldest children, she also engaged in hawking and petty trading to raise money to feed the family. The pressure of eking out a living under such tough conditions strongly impacted young Innocent; he helped his mother to hawk fruits and other items of interest, doing many rounds a day, before and after school. Innocent was so proud of his humble beginning

that he not only embraced it but encouraged his children to take pride in it and trumpeted that such humble background was laced with “possibilities unlimited,” which he chose as the title for his autobiography.

Innocent’s pride in contributing to the family income through hawking goods on the streets of Umuahia for his mother and engaging in lottery business drove his passion for hard work and success. Often favored even as a child, his father would sometimes ask him to pick a lottery lucky-deep for him. One of his indelible memories of the period was how he picked a lucky ticket that fetched him 100 pounds—a lot money back in the days—which he invested in starting his business after the war. Innocent’s amiable soulmate, Josephine, remarks with pride glowing on her face that those tough early years “helped him cut his tooth in entrepreneurship, which helped him later in life to become a serial social entrepreneur.” Josephine added that Innocent “never had a childhood, as he had to help from an early age in augmenting the family income.”

Reminiscing on her brother’s difficult childhood, Innocent’s sister, Joy, further stated:

My brother, Innocent suffered a lot to get to where he got to before his untimely death. My father’s little fortunes went south when my mother began to give birth. By the time Innocent arrived, they were very poor, and my mother depended on hawking fruits to survive. When I came of age, we diversified the hustle to selling Agidi, a corn meal that looks like moi-moi, while Innocent started “Try Your Luck,” a kind of lotto game, to fend for himself. That was what he did to raise money to support his primary education before moving on to Holy Ghost College Umuahia where he lived in

the dormitory. But then, I couldn't tell why, at a point he left the dormitory and was covering miles on foot to school from home.

Before attending Holy Ghost College, Innocent had his primary education at St. Stephen's Primary School Umuahia, which he attended with his siblings and other children in the neighborhood. The school was located about two kilometers from their residence at 41 Awolowo Road. They usually trekked this distance to and fro daily. To deal with the tiring long walk, they moved in groups, sang, and told stories on the way to and from school. They also stopped to fight, when necessary, as those who had scores to settle and who couldn't settle it in the presence of cane-wielding teachers made out time on their way home to prove their might. The cheering students would often form a ring around the warriors and chanted praises to the aggressor, who would usually be spoiling for a fight from a reluctant opponent. If the fight kicked off and the reluctant opponent had the upper hand, the praises quickly reverted to him or her and, at the end of the show, the winner would be lifted shoulder high to his or her parents' house, and respect was sure to follow him or her about the next day when the brawl would be retold in the school.

St. Stephen's Primary School is located along Eket/Niger Road, Umuahia, a few minutes' walk, away from the busy but clogged expressway. The street looks cut off and hidden from the town; it looks shy, as if it were located against its will. There are two St. Stephen's at St. Stephen; one is the Anglican cathedral, and the other is the school. Housed separately in different compounds, the cathedral is more imposing, even as a new cathedral is being raised. Opposite the cathedral is the administrative block of the church, a single storey building with a fading ash painting. Just before the building is a walkway that leads to the back gate, from where one can access the second St. Stephen, the primary school that looked like a forgotten, weather-smitten sofa inside an unroofed building. There's a narrow, one-way street that demarcates the church from the school. By the right flank of

the school gate is the faded signboard of the school, struggling to retain the letters on its walls even as grasses and shrubs suffocate it. Another signboard beside the school's main signboard bears the details of the type of contract and construction work going on in the school; it is wooden and weak with faded alphabets too. Inside St. Stephen's Primary School, residues of the miniature buildings that housed Innocent and his peers still subsist. The buildings are dwarf, old and dejected with cracked, falling walls and leaking roofs like the shrine of a disillusioned chief priest, but they had their own stories, their own glories, and despite neglect by the authorities, manages to stand amidst a stubborn hope that is only visible to a discerning eye. The school's field and playground are in the centre of the compound, surrounded by the old blocks. During the rainy seasons, the fields are swampy and hold large pools of mud water like a wicked debtor. From these pools fingerlings emerge in numbers.

During our visit, we spotted new structures being raised in the school's compound. Some of the old blocks were being pulled down to make room for the new buildings that were at different stages of completion. One could almost hear the remaining old blocks screaming, pleading to be left to stay for posterity's sake, for unfinished testaments to the passage of great men like Innocent Chukwuma through the institution.

Innocent's recollection of his primary school years spotlights a checkered experience that includes, in his own words, "bombed classrooms, makeshift learning places, Shift system of schooling (day and afternoon students)." He also recalled the tough experience of "dealing with bullies (Okefi), learning how to curse (Kalu), and association with friends that almost disoriented [him] (Chigbo Chukwu)." But it was not all rough knuckles. Amongst his positive recollections were his clinching first in class and being celebrated by his brother, Isaac; stints at commercial

entrepreneurship between primaries 4 and 6; being a problem solver in primaries 5 and 6; and witnessing mass promotion by Christopher Agom Eze while in primary 5.

At a time when there were few exceptional schools that were highly sought after, passing the usually tough common entrance examination to a prestigious school was tantamount to the proverbial camel passing through the eye of the needle. So, when Innocent passed into Holy Ghost Secondary School, Ohokobe Afaraukwu, Olokolo Road, Umuahia, it was a notable community news. While in school, young Innocent would spend his holidays with his eldest-but-one brother who lived in Port Harcourt. As Innocent writes in his concept notes for his memoir, “I particularly remember my first day in secondary school—wearing white on white and carrying a metal suitcase on head; dealing with bullies in dormitory, almost killing a schoolmate and learning fast (Ekeke the wrestler).” Innocent also recalls his “addiction to reading the novels James Hadley Chase; pranking of teachers in secondary school (Sugar); making female friends and writing of love letters influenced by Onitsha Market Literature; spending weekends with relatives in Aba (Boniface Anyanwu).” He also recalled the challenges of cultivating friends, especially close friends such as Sylvanus Okwunodulu. Among the most memorable aspects of secondary school life for Innocent were “stories about encounters with ghosts” and his “attempts at different sporting events such as goal-keeping and long jump.” Innocent also recounted his living in a common room in the second term of his first year and having to deal with break into his locker and his beverages stolen by second-year students. The experience was most painful for Innocent because part of his strategy for coping with perennial shortage of funds was the unusual small business of selling his beverages once supplied by his parents.

Holy Ghost College, Umuahia, was farther from 41 Awolowo Road than St. Stephen. The buildings are old but well-maintained as some precious monument. There are flowers—ixoras,

hibiscuses, fruit trees; mangoes, oranges, *udara*, etcetera—and a well-mown sporting field in the compound. Opposite the school is St. Theresa Catholic Church. There is a belltower at the far left of the entrance with a bourdon. It used to summon the students and other faithful within the vicinity for morning masses, Angelus, and other prayers of the faithful. The walls of the church, just as most of the buildings in the school compound, retained its original style and structure, characteristic of Holy Ghost Colleges across Nigeria. Beside the school also, is a Reverend Sisters' Convent with a high-rise fence that speaks loudly of its intention.

Holy Ghost College was the cradle of Innocent's social consciousness and activism. The story is told of how while in senior class, Innocent became the Prefect of the entire boarding house and, as such, became the mouthpiece of not just the boarders, but any student who had any issue that required management's attention. Prominent among these issues was the "beans story". In the dormitory, one of their regular meals was beans. Innocent, like most of his mates loved beans. But there was a little problem that needed addressing: the menu became too regular, and the beans was always too watery, and the students always purged after each meal. The students grumbled and complained, yet the menu remained unchanged. One fateful afternoon after class, the beans was served as usual. To send a strong message to the school's authorities, young Innocent led a revolt by discarding his own portion of the beans with disgust. Before long, other students joined him in discarding theirs and the whole dining became a mess, in full, mass protest.

Innocent's father was summoned by the authorities. A principled man, before he accompanied his son to the school in response to the summons, he asked his son three questions thus: Did you steal? Did you cheat during examination? Did you impregnate any girl? When Innocent's response to all three questions was "No," his father accompanied him. Upon arriving at the school, when he realized he was summoned because his son incited other students to pour the

pot of watery beans that they were served after they had complained severally, he took sides with his son and the students. He asked the school authorities why they would be serving the students tasteless beans despite several complaints by the students. Nevertheless, he turned to Innocent and said to him, for every action, there is a consequence. The consequence here is that you must now walk miles to school every day having been kicked out of the boarding house and demoted as prefect. Innocent had to cover over twenty kilometers on foot daily. To help alleviate his suffering, his father bought him a bicycle to ride to school.

It was also at Holy Ghost College that Innocent learned another important lesson in standing up for his rights and confronting bullies. According to Innocent, “I almost killed a bully in my first year and decided not to fight again in my life.”

Despite the unfortunate consequences of his pursuit of social justice, young Innocent maintained his top position in exams till he finished secondary school, and the “beans incident” principally marked his first lesson on rights and responsibility: You cannot claim rights without embracing the corresponding responsibilities that go with it.

Innocent’s younger sister, Joy Okpan, in reference to his academic brilliance, declared that “education was his talent. My brother loved school a lot.” This declaration was corroborated in the robust testimony of Innocent’s childhood friend, a Reverend Canon and Professor, Greene Eleagu. In Professor Eleagu’s words,

Anyone who knew him would attest that from inception, he was destined for the top. He was not rascally in any way. He was very humble and quite intelligent. Among his peers, he stood out. He conquered the natural circumstances around him. He was quite distinguished, and nobody had any doubt

he was destined for the top the way he was coming.

Academically he was sound. Socially, quite acceptable.

Innocent was a southpaw who shone with the myth that left-handed people were usually brilliant. The myth followed him. It was easy to hear his peers associate his brilliance with his left-handedness. Beyond his brilliance, he was blessed with a Midas touch. His widow, Josephine, agrees that “Innocent had a Midas touch; anything he touched turned into gold.” His parents and siblings noticed this in his early years, and this contributed to his father insisting that he must be educated. He was a smart child and stood out among his peers and siblings. Much so that not even the tragic circumstances of the Biafra war would keep him away from school. His parents insisted that he must be educated. His sister, Joy, fondly remembers that “our father believed that his smartness would go to waste, and he may amount to nothing if he failed to get educated. His were gifted hands and my father believed that education would seal the fate of his success.” She further recalled an incident that happened some months after the civil war, when some agents of the government came to Umuahia to distribute few household items through lottery. Trusting his providentially blessed hands, their father selected Innocent to play the lottery which he did and won some important household items like plates and buckets for the family.

The incident marked the beginning of Innocent’s delving into “Try Your Luck” gamble through which he raised money to augment the little his mother gave him for his textbooks and other school stationeries. He disliked farming and other strenuous jobs that his senior siblings and mates did. So, to escape them, he focused heavily on education and devised other means to raise money for school matters.

After his secondary education, Innocent dared to go further but money became a problem. He had written and passed the entrance examination to study at University of Nigeria, Nsukka

which was a sign that he was “certainly destined for the top”, as his friend, Professor Greene concluded. The justification stemmed from the Reverend’s observation that:

... the war period and the post war era were marked essentially by poverty. So, for anybody to have struggled within those periods and made it then to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, that person was certainly destined for the top and must have been quite high academically, in terms of intelligence quotient.... At the end of the civil war, Nsukka was about the only university servicing the whole of what you now know as the South South and South East. Uniport (University of Port Harcourt) and Unical (University of Calabar) joined later in the 70s, and look at the population of these areas; so many people, as far as Edo, were coming from all over and the demand for admission there was very high, meaning that you needed to have scored very highly before you could secure admission into University of Nigeria, Nsukka. And talking about the poverty that defined these areas, for you go to school, sometimes on an empty stomach and still pass very well to compete with people who were coming from other places is an indication that that person was an “A” student or at least above average.

Innocent was admitted into University of Nigeria, Nsukka, to study Comparative Religion. The coincidence in the role of fate in the possibility of his family raising the funds to send him to

university on the one hand, and on the other, the religious” course he was accepted to study is one of those recurrent tropes in Innocent’s progress through life. To overcome the financial challenges that almost prevented Innocent from going to Nsukka, his family stretched their resources to their limit, with his mother borrowing and his siblings supporting with the little sacrifices they could muster. The challenges which framed his going to Nsukka, and which persisted with difficulties in paying school fees and having upkeep expense, played a vital role in his commitment to excel. More importantly, it contributed to Innocent’s development of social consciousness which defined his Nsukka years—the highlights of which included joining the student movements (MYM, Frontline Movement). It also included his emerging as Speaker of UNN, Senate President of NANS (National Association of Nigerian Students), and his eventual career in the pursuit of civil liberties.