

For me growing up in an Igbo family has been a unique experience. Like most of you, my childhood memories are scattered with thoughts and questions about the unique experiences that I had growing up Nigerian. Thoughts like, "is this really my cousin? Now I understand the concept of my Mother's Sister's Children, but how is it that I have 100 cousins to my 50 aunties and uncles? How many kids did grandma and grandpa actually have? Of course as we aged, we heard story after story about how some of us are connected through lineage that dates back in time to whichever village we are from. For many of you there were Igbo events in our community that seemed to be weekend on top of weekend. These were predetermined for you and booked by your parents of course. This was an opportunity for our parents to catch up with one another in person about family and life. It was the weddings, baby showers, graduations, and honestly any slight reason for the adults in our families to come together, eat massive amounts of jollof rice, fu-fu, (egg rolls for us Bay Area Igbo), puff puff, and moi moi. Oh and of course consume remarkable amounts of Guinness and or Heineken. But besides from what was on the menu for these many occasions, one thing that was a common theme whenever we got together in the Bay Area was a sense of a strong community.

Growing up Nigerian in the Bay Area is a unique experience and it has always been one that I enjoyed. Just to explain the dynamics of the Bay Area in order to understand these experiences; The San Francisco Bay Area is a massive place up here in Northern California. From as far north as Santa Rosa, down to the very bottom that is Gilroy; the SF Bay Area is home to almost 10 million people. This

population of 10 million houses some of the most diverse cultures to ever settle in one geographical area. This is often times rivaled to places on like New York City. With such far spread areas, most of us as Nigerian Youths were really only able to see each other at these events. The simple fact that we all went to different schools in our respective areas; along with us being too young to drive ourselves often times prevented us from completely connecting with one another.

What is the entire embodiment of the Igbo community was fractioned into 3 main groups. Of course these 3 main groups are the three major cities that comprise of the SF Bay Area. You had San Francisco Igbos. You had Oakland or 'the east bay' Igbos. Then you had the San Jose Igbos. Generally the youth in these major areas knew each other pretty well. For San Francisco or Oakland Igbos, all they had to do was cross a bridge in order to see each other outside of an event. A trip that was at most 30 minutes depending on traffic. For us in San Jose, it was a different story. San Francisco is about an hour drive north, just as Oakland is an hour drive up northeast. But even with our distances, the importance of our families and our culture transcended all. What bridged our gaps was the idea that we were bound by our culture. We longed to be connected with one another under one culture and one faith.

That connection could never be broken and it is clearly evident here today as we gather from across America. From different corners of this country, we all traveled here today bound by faith and culture. Two vital components of our very own existence.

My family, like most of us, has been the foundation of my faith. The most interesting thing that I have come to notice is the level of assurance that I have experienced with my family, my faith, and the life decisions that I have made. Personally, I have always been a person who ventured far from home when the opportunity presented itself. I went to school in Nigeria for my 8th grade education; I went to Ohio for my college education. Most interestingly enough it was family and faith that were the foundation of my hope and follow through in life. It was the Sunday conversations after church with my mother that kept me in sync with reality. All my decisions in life were backed by logic. It was rationale, and Christian faith that kept me in line with making the right choices that were good for my life. I can remember my mother telling me that whatever choices I make would more than likely be in line with what is deemed to be necessary as a Christian man. My parents raised me well enough to take heed of the presence of Christ in my life. That along with my Jesuit education made me realize the importance of giving back to the community around me. Even though any decision that I made was my own, faith was my rock and foundation in this physical world. It provided me with the type of guidance that allowed me to flourish as a free-minded person while in the same notion kept me connected with the catholic teachings of what is right and just.

Education wise, I am a Jesuit taught. My Igbo upbringing and experiences have merely taught me the social aspects of being raised Christian. Through my education, I was taught by Catholics and Jesuits that showed me the importance of being a man for others. Everything that I am, and everything that I know is nothing more than a source or tool that I can use to provide a better life for those around me.

The clear sense of family in Igbo culture has been pushed forward in showing me the importance of bringing things home. Family is key, culture is key, a sense of self is important. How you decide to create that understanding will go a long way. As many of us know, Igbo people are a proud people. The culture that we share is beyond just being strong-minded, strong willed, and passionate. It is vital to our very own existence, therefore we need to understand that blessing and appreciate it. The act of breaking a Kola nut for your visitors, the hospitality for you father's people, the idea that there are others in this country who are like you is a major factor in what defines you as an Igbo American. You are wise. You are friendly. We are a family oriented. This is what dictates our people.

When we look at the values of our culture we must roll back in time to understand just how important they are for us today. I will tell you a story that my father only recently just told me. It is about his first days on US soil. My father came to America for school with nothing more than a few things to get him started. In what I can only imagine may have felt like man's first steps on the moon.

Unchartered land, experiences never felt, unclear expectations, fear, and faith. All of these are just a few of many things that I cannot imagine were running through the mind of a young man in his similar case. After arriving in New York, my father took another plane from JFK to Oregon where he caught a greyhound to campus. From there he got settled, went to Sunday mass, and went straight to work. His diligence, his haste, and his faith; these were all driving forces that pushed his will to succeed. Often times when you hear about the success stories of Blacks in America excelling in education and in their careers, we can almost be certain that half the time they

are talking about a Nigerian. The cultural value of determination and faith has been a major component for our people. Right now we are the most educated group of people in the United States, and our peers continue to graduate at astonishing numbers. This along with respect for our parents, our grandparents, our aunts, our uncles, and all of our elders has also been a supplement in guiding us down our own paths. They've given us great encouragement and advice in our lives and they truly wish for what is the best for us.

Now I totally understand at times Nigerian parents can be a little too much or over the top. They tend to encroach upon things as they always wonder what is going on in your life. They're worrisome but understandably so. They love and care so much for us and in time most of us learn the importance of that. If I did have to say one thing to the parents it is this: Try to understand the pressures of being raised Igbo in the United States. It is absolutely no cakewalk and that is for sure. In our respective environments, in these classrooms, the pressures of living up to the expectations are harsh and at times striking a balance is very necessary. Parents, you should be more open to the experiences that your children have. They certainly are not your own and I agree that in your perfect world, the plans they you set for them are to be followed. Realize the perfection of 'imperfections' that you may see in your child for these may not be imperfections at all. There is always a serious tone when it comes to this. Try to warmly reassure them that you are in the race with them. We know in our culture, at the end of the day when one of us succeeds, we all do. Lets try to mirror the bliss of success and create the same bliss in understanding.

These ICCUSA conventions have been an amazing opportunity for us to get to know more about our faith, our families, and ourselves. We have a golden opportunity to share our experiences, our networks, and our fellowship. Really this is a fellowship with one another in ways that most people don't get to have here in the United States. It reminds us of whom we are. It reminds us of where we came from. It tells us how we got here, and that we should never forget. We are a unique people on this planet and the fact that we no longer live in Nigeria does not mean that we can forget that we came from there. We must keep our traditions alive. So much to the point that people in the United States will know of who we are. Can you imagine a "Little Onitsha?" in a respectable neighborhood in an American city? Other cultures have come to the United States and have created cultural harbors. They've created cultural satellites. They've paved a new road to spread and maintain their tradition even though they are thousands of miles away from home. We need to do the same. Just as the Chinese have Chinatown or the Vietnamese have Little Saigon. Now of course creating our own will be no easy feat. But even though Rome was not built in a day, it certainly did triumph.

We need to take hold of our culture and move it forward. You and I need to learn our tongue, understand our traditions, and maintain our faith. There is always a positivity in being different. Don't get phased out in being just considered an African American. Let people know that you are a Nigerian-American. Let them know you are an Igbo-American. At the end of the day, when life goes on. Family members will come and some will go. Think about how generation after generation of your bloodline has come to be. We must not let our lines get phased out of history.

We have to prepare and step up to assume the roles in our Igbo community that will be vacant at some point in time. Be proud and happy to go to Igbo mass. Granted that it is not the shortest of masses, and I can understand that our attention span is a bit shorter than our parents. Regardless, no matter how long that mass is still attend. Sit through it. Use it as a tool to learn the language and the culture. That is what is important. It is your identity. Bask in the glory of it.

I want to leave you all with 2 major things for you to consider during the remainder of this convention:

1) Is to rekindle your connection to existence. Learn more about ourselves. Learn more about each other. If you don't know the history of our great people, learn it. Own that history. Do not exclude yourself from it. The Igbos were the last to be conquered in Nigeria. It was because of our strength, our pride, and of course our stubbornness. Be proud of your existence. Rekindle our excellence.

2) Constantly keep the words, Faith, Family, and Tradition in your mind. These are perfect for this weekend.

Also maybe a third 'unofficial' thing to consider:

Try your best in reminding your parents to 'take time.' You know how Nigerian parents can be sometimes. If you don't stay on your toes, they may try to marry you off to someone here. All jokes aside, who knows? Network and meet each other.

Don't stay around only your ICCUSA community. You could have stayed at home for that. Meet one another. If you end up relocating for school or for work, these people may be your new foundation in the next place you call home.