

ICCUSA speech San Jose, 2014

Good afternoon everyone. My name is Ugochi Ajoku and I am so excited and honored to be here this weekend. This is my second time attending ICCUSA, the first being in Atlanta, 2012 where I was able to meet many other young adults. Atlanta is where the young adults came together and established the young adult group and it was exciting to have been a part of that process and experience. From there we created a Facebook group, and have stayed in touch ever since. I am a member of the San Jose Igbo Catholic Community but when I say just a member, it sounds a little weird to me. I feel more so like a family member, because we do act as a family. The theme of this year's convention is, *Empowering Our Youth and Young Adults Through Faith, Culture, and Family*, and I have been asked to speak on this topic relating my experiences, observations, and relationships. I will be touching on these topics: influence my family had on my faith, I will explain what my Igbo community means to me, and last but not least, the most discussed and pondered upon topics that I try to avoid speaking about with adults, the barriers that keep young adults, and in some cases youth, away from the Igbo community, and the difficulties of finding a marriage partner within the community.

Growing up in an Igbo family had its challenges. I don't know if you all have noticed, but there is a strong difference between the Nigerian and American culture, especially in behavior. As a child growing up, I often felt confused because I knew that I was Nigerian, especially at home and during Nigerian celebrations, but I had to switch my identity at school to fit in. I wouldn't say that I was ashamed of my Nigerian identity at a young age, but I just felt different and very out of place. The fact that my parents were not involved in PTA meetings, open houses, and school performances did not help my efforts to try and fit in. I remember in the second grade, I told this boy that I had a crush on, "You have never met my parents because they are too busy touring the world. I don't think you know, but my mom is Whitney Houston." Somehow this made me feel better because now I had an excuse for my parents' absence in school related events. When I would tell my parents about performances or open houses, the recurring theme was "My parents did not have to come to my school to do open house. what is open house? Common." And then it would go into, "When I was in Nigeria, we had to walk 6 miles to and fro, and you are here complaining I need a ride. Common" It came to the point where I really did not want to hear that anymore, so I just stopped inviting them to things and topped asking for things I thought would help me fit in. I gained independence fast and learned to be creative to survive in school. I really was living in two different worlds and I grew tired of that. Of course things were a little different with my two younger sisters because my parents caught on to the system. All of you first borns in the audience know what I am talking about. We were the experiment but that's beside the point.

It took me a while to really appreciate and to understand the way my parents used the Igbo culture to raise me. My great grandparents lived in a different than my grandparents, and my grandparents different from my parents. My parents were better than Whitney

Houston. They made a challenging decision to move halfway around the world to an entirely new environment, away from their family in a time where they could not pick up the phone and call their family whenever they wanted to. They came here at a time where writing letters was the means of communication, and you could wait months on end before getting a response from your loved ones back home. My parents came here to pursue education, to pursue a better life for themselves and their future children. And their childhood and young adult stories that they illustrated for us were joyful, comical, and heart wrenching all at the same time. And because they were brave enough to withstand all of that, I am here.

My parents' generation should be celebrated for paving the way for my generation to be here and have the opportunities that we have. When I look back, I think to myself how could I have been so focused on my parents missing my basketball games and open houses? Our story is so much more than that. My parents' generation has taught us to fight, and to adapt and to be strong and to carry on, as the generations before them have done. They have taught us to face the challenges before us head on and still preserve our culture. The Igbo spirit is the same wherever you are, the background is all that changes.

My family played a huge part in my perception of life, and my perception of faith. My mom loved to pray, and we would usually pray at night before we would go to bed. Our nightly prayers would last between 45 min to an hour and started off with singing. My sisters and I could be in our rooms but as soon as we heard my mom singing, that meant we had to come to the parlor or else reap the consequences later. My mom would sing so loud, and so many songs, and it used to annoy me because I would be sleepy. The less songs the better so I can get to bed. But as I grew up I fell in love with these Igbo songs, what they meant, and what they represented, and it stuck with me. It was more than the tv shows or sleep interrupted. I knew that in times when I needed God's attention, or difficult times when I needed to remind myself that God is with me, I would always sing (sing the song), Jesus I love you. All I have is yours. Yours I am, yours I want to be. Do whatever you want with me. Amen. This is my go to prayer, and it reminds me of the faith that my parents had, the faith that my grandparents have, and also God's faith in me.

From my experiences as someone who grew up in an Igbo family, I can tell those of you who have children or those who want children, that your children are individuals before they are girls or boys. You don't know whether they will be a doctor, a lawyer, or an engineer before they have entered this world. Have an open mind with them. Expand the career list beyond the sciences to painters, photographers, dancers, singers, because a lot of us have great talent that we have suppressed for the sake of our parents, our culture, and peace in the household. You may be thinking those other professions won't make you money, and I understand that money is important to survive, trust me. But in this day in age, in 2014, you see people making money doing all sorts of things, and you find that those who have a natural talent for something are the ones who earn the most money using that talent. Study your children because you should know them best. Not their school counselors, not their friends or outside influences, not strangers. You should know them best. Encourage them to perfect their craft because people succeed in life doing what they love to do. Maya Angelou says it best, "Success is liking yourself, liking what

you do, and liking how you do it.” That’s what makes one happy and that’s what brings one internal joy. If you look at success this way, you will find that it better enables us to make clear and beneficial decisions for ourselves and those around us. It is also what helps us to love and establish relationships the right way. To expect the best from your kids, encourage them to pursue what they have a natural talent for and help them to discover that and find comfort in themselves and who they are, not what you want them to be. If there is one thing that is true in everything I am saying is that you cannot hide who you really are forever despite social and family pressures. Suppressing your talents, your personality, your natural God given abilities will only delay your happiness and comfort.

I would like to Segway now to talk about my Bay Area Igbo community. Words cannot describe my love them. I feel joy when I come to Igbo mass, seeing my family because I have grown up with most of the attendees. Igbo Mass is more than just mass for me. It is sharing in fellowship with my family. The Igbo songs that we sing remind me of the songs we would sing growing up during our nightly prayers. The catching up that we do before and after mass adds to the feeling of family when I am here. The projects that we take on as a community, and see through even though we are Igbo and stubbornness is one of our strong traits, shows how powerful we are together. The feelings that I have when I am here remind me of how blessed I am, and shows me the power of God.

Now, going back to the Igbo songs, not only do I prefer them to be in Igbo, I believe having mass conducted in Igbo adds to the cultural experience that we receive. The Igbo language is a dying language and it’s something that should be preserved and passed down. My mom did it through song and that was a way for me to preserve and keep my faith. Many may think that using Igbo in mass adds a barrier to the participation of youth and young adults. I don’t believe this to be the case. I may be biased because I can understand Igbo, although now it’s getting a little rough for me. A majority of us imitate our parents’ accents, and that’s how we speak and relate with one another. We want to learn and we wish that we could speak and hold conversations in Igbo. Removing the Igbo language from Mass removes authenticity to our culture. Language is a big part of culture.

There are a lot of factors that create the barrier, which impedes on the participation of the youth and young adult Igbo community. I’ll give the example of Thanksgiving dinner when the adults sit at the fancy dining table while the kids get the small table in the corner. Now, I am not saying that there is anything wrong with this setup, but it is the way it is gone about. As the hungry and chubby child that I was back in the day, I remember going to the Thanksgiving table or area where the adults were discussing and be scolded “If I see your face around here again, my bulala will be waiting for you.” It was like coming to be around adult discussion was taboo. I can’t speak for others but in my case, I felt that marked separation, which traveled with me as a child through adulthood. I still feel a little uncomfortable when I am at an “adult” meeting or gathering because there is a part of me that feels I have no place or voice with the adult crowd. I think in order to increase involvement, it is important to show that you have confidence in us, that you have respect for us and what we stand for, and that you trust our decisions.

We also don't like the feeling of judgment that comes from answering questions like, what school are you going to, or where do you work. These should be simple questions right? For many of us, it means that you are now being compared to someone else's son or daughter. Who is going to the best school, and whose son or daughter has the best job. This also causes a barrier between young adults and adults, and is something that should be addressed.

One of the things that desensitizes the barrier between youth and young adults and the adult population is dance and music. I have been a part of Igbo cultural dance and it is great because like our imitations of our parents accents, some of us have learned the art of dance by imitating our mothers and fathers. I think Igbo traditional dance is a great way to help us stay connected, and shed some pounds. Here in the San Jose community, we go Christmas caroling every year to senior assisted living communities, as well as the homes of some of our own community members. I feel a part of the community when they teach me some of the songs

I think we are off to a great start as this convention is recognizing and incorporating the youth and young adults. It is not just that youth and young adults, meet and discuss in the next room while the adults have their own important conversations. I appreciate the incorporation, and the dialogue that we have together. It shows the convention and community genuinely cares about our thoughts on sensitive matters, matters that may be affecting us in a negative way, and in a positive way. The simple fact that we can have a two-way discussion where we address how we feel, and are not told how to feel shows growth. These types of things show respect towards us, and with that we gain the confidence and take pride in the cause of the convention and are more eager to carry it on.

Now, let's move on to the topic of making strides so that young adults can meet each other. The truth is that many of us in the community know each other well, or know of each other. We have parties and get-togethers all the time. You know the saying that there is 6 degrees of separation from a total stranger, **there is about 1 degree of separation between a young adult that you have never met before, at least in the Bay Area.** When I was living in Cleveland, it became that way as well. So I believe there are already opportunities in place to meet each other. The question is, are these platforms that give the opportunity for young adults to get to know each other past a hello, how are you? Many married couples that we see today have met through work, charity events, the gym, places where people have common interests. It seems as though our common interest in dancing and eating, and there is not much serious conversation to be held here. If Igbo communities can hold charity events or basketball tournaments where young adults of common interest can gather and get to know each other on a basis that does not appear or feel forced, then we are stepping in the right direction. Since the concentration of young adults in one single community is limited, it would be nice to have national events of this nature to expand our network and increase our chances of meeting someone that is just right for us.

I was asked to touch upon the question of, what are the factors that promote or hinder proper and promising relationships that can end up in marriage among Igbo youths and young adults. This is a tough question because there are so many perspectives, and I can only speak from my own. The focus on higher education is a contributing factor. We find ourselves wanting to attain or have that option to be financially stable. This process in most cases takes time and competition to get into some of the desired programs increasingly grows as time goes on. I know that I struggle with this. People often come to me and say, why not use your time now to settle down and find someone to marry. I usually smile and nod my head, but what I am really thinking is, No. My thought process is if I spend the time to work towards education, something is promised at the end. Whereas if I take a break, settle down and make strides to find a mate, there is a big chance I will come up empty handed. It's And I say this based off of my own experiences. schools grows **School and the economy. Let's not forget the purpose of marriage, the root, the spirit.** I can't speak for others but there are several factors that hinder this process. One being that as young Igbo girls, there is this constant voice in our ear, "You have to do your chores. You don't want to be lazy in your husband's house." "You better learn how to cook. If you don't know how, how will you find a husband." "Better stay in the house. You don't want your future husband to think you are promiscuous." We are constantly reminded that as a woman, our goal in life is to shape up and get ready for marriage. Is it the same for the young boys? Do they also have that same voice in their ear saying "You have to learn to clean up after yourself and cook. You don't want your future wife to think you are lazy." I don't know. Again, I was brought up in a house of women and my dad so I can't say confidently that this is the case. But I do have a lot of male cousins so I have an idea what the conversations were like. We are taught to be domesticated, homely, and pretense. However in more cases than not, young boys can hang out with their friends from school. Their friends from school can come to the house. They can have girlfriends and it not be a big deal. Now I am not saying this is the case for all of us young women and all of us young men. I am just generally speaking. It is a complicated matter with more layers to it, and maybe it is something we can touch upon during our panel discussion. With my generation here in America because we are in America and like it or not, there are some aspects of the Western culture that I appreciate and are in me as a Nigerian born and raised here. We hear women and men are equal, and that women can do what men can do. I don't feel like I am incapable or limited in doing anything. So why should I surppress my strength. When a young man comes up to me and asks me if I can cook, and what kinds of soups I can make, I used to be irritated. But now I answer and ask them, how much do you make, and what kind of car do you drive?

The factors that promote promising relationships are multifaceted. I am not saying that I will not cook for my husband, but an established understanding of an individual, looking past their cooking abilities, their family connections, money, education, how long their hair is, and asking, is this man or woman God fearing? Does he or she know and love God? Because if so, he will know how to love me. Conventions like this and proper meeting arenas where we can meet and conversate with others of like interests and beliefs. However there are not enough platforms that are held often like an ICCUSA convention or Umu Igbo unite held once a year in different locations. Local platforms

held frequently like a community service event, charity event, honorary event, weddings are beneficial in helping establish real relationships that could lead to marriage, or even just lifelong friendships, but again, addressing the root of the issues is empowerment right there. It is empowerment for the whole community and not just the youth and young adults.

Thank you so much for your attention. My hope is that we can all take something away from some of the points that I have mentioned. The Igbo community is a strong community wherever you go. We should use that to our advantage in raising the next generation. Chimamanda Adiechie, author of *Half of a Yellow Sun* and several other best selling books stated, "culture is constantly changing. Culture does not make people. People make culture." I challenge each and every one of us to think about that, because times are changing. It is our duty to preserve our culture through this change by meeting the younger generation at a happy medium where empowerment can be most effective.

Thank you.