

WE ARE THE LANGUAGES WE SPEAK

My name is Akpa Arinzechukwu. I am a storyteller, and I'm going to tell you a story because we tell stories to make sense of our place in the world.

During the full moon, under the shade of a tree, is a gathering of people who are enthused by stories. As a child, it is something I look forward to whenever we travel outside of the city to my mum's village. My excitement is usually not because I love travelling outside of the city; it is because, under that shade, the village's storyteller embellishes stories we already know or recounts new ones as told to him by his ancestors.

Anyị adighị agbakọ maka n'onweghị onye adighị afụ ọnwá na bee ya, mana ọ bụ ihe kwesiri ekwesị ka ụmụnná na-eme. We do not gather because the moon doesn't appear in everyone's sky but because it is necessary for us to be in communion with one another, or so my ancestors, the Igbo, say. This is the reason I am excited to go out with the other kids during the cold nights of Harmattan in December.

The Igbo is one of the many nations in Nigeria and is a language spoken by over forty million people. I speak Igbo. I am Igbo. This, of course, has influenced my relationship and excitement with the world and the other four languages I am familiar with because we are the languages we speak, an age-long tradition coursing through us. The Igbo are a communal people. It is little wonder their proverbs and philosophy highlight the importance of community.

And one of those philosophies highlighting communal achievements is the phrase: Ibu anyị danda. It means no task is difficult for a colony of ants. As long as the ants keep working together, they'll achieve their goal.

We are here because we are a community of lovers — lovers of language. Igbo n'asụ n'olu n'olu mana akwa ụkwara ọburụ otu. We speak in many tongues, yet when we cough, it makes the same sound. We are because of our collective strength.

We language, therefore we are!

Ndi bee anyị, unu abịana! Nnọọ. Ndụ mmiri, ndụ àzù. Welcome, Comrades. May your lives be as the water. May you be as the fish in water frolicking with freedom.

On that note, we'll be affirming our presence in this space through a call and response just like the Igbo would, to bless our day, and welcome in good energy. So, for each phrase, I say, you respond with "Isee". Can I hear everyone say Isee?

Call:

Ikwu na-ibe mma mma nụ!

Ndi Kalifonia, mma mma nụ!

Ọha na-Eze Amerịka, mma mma nụ ooo!

Response:

Isee!

Thank you!