Mr Chairman,
Our Chief Launchers,
The Representative of the Nigerian High Commission,
Our Holy Clergy,
Ndị Nze na Ọzọ,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the official launch and celebration of our Igbo Language project, a project that aims to bring the Igbo language to all Igbo children growing up around the world who for various reasons have not had a chance to properly connect with their heritage language. I thank you all for finding the time to be here with us today. And I thank the Almighty father, who made today possible in many different ways, for bringing us all here safely.

I would like to begin by letting you in on the story behind this project. In December 2011, my family and I visited our folks in Nigeria, for what was to be our children’s second Christmas holiday in their ancestral home. They were all by this time old enough to appreciate the import of the visit, and therefore eagerly looked forward to it. However, the euphoria that they felt about the visit was nearly extinguished on the first evening of our arrival, as they found they were not adequately equipped to interact with the crowd that came to welcome them. Later that night, away from the glare of the teeming visitors, our youngest daughter, Kelechi, who had just turned 9 at the time, could not contain her emotions and knew exactly where to place the blame for all the embarrassment that she had suffered during the evening. As she put it: had we “taught” her enough Igbo before the trip, none of that would have happened.

As bitter as the truth was, I had to admit that my wife and I were to blame for the fact that at the ages of 9, 11 and 14 our three daughters could still not communicate with one another, let alone with anyone else, in their heritage language. Of course, they understood enough Igbo to be able to run errands or carry out instructions at home, but not enough to speak it with any level of confidence. As a linguist, I have enough awareness and humility to admit that this can only be because they did not have nearly enough exposure in the language to make for a confident communication in it. To make it worse, they have grown up listening to mummy and daddy at home routinely conducting their daily affairs in English, with only a perfunctory attention paid to the Igbo language. The result is that whatever scraps of Igbo words they had picked up were never enough to stimulate any confidence to communicate in the language.
Back in December 2011, after that bold confrontation by the youngest of the girls, I made them a promise to do something about the situation, because I knew it should never have happened in the first place. First, I promised to speak Igbo at home at all times, except there was a non-Igbo speaking visitor present. Second, I promised to give them a home-made tool, which would show them not only how to speak but also how to read and write Igbo. But in making these promises, I made them aware that they were going to have to work with me to make it happen. Today, I am happy to report that I have lived up to my side of the bargain.

I set about writing *Our Mother Language* in February 2012, when I had worked out in my head which direction we were going to go. The first bound sample of the book was delivered to us two years later in March 2014. I have the pleasure to report that the girls played a very crucial part in its creation. Chidubem, for example, not only designed the cover, but also assisted with all the photo-editing that went into the work. At the proof-reading stages, they all competed for a prize in who would identify the most typographical errors. In the process, they became, within so short a time, familiar with the rudiments of the Igbo writing system. And finally, they have all responded enthusiastically every time we have called for an Igbo language session at home. I am encouraged by their enthusiasm and equally empowered by the progress they have made so far in the area of reading Igbo. I therefore testify that it can be done.

I am aware that the picture that I have sketched above obtains in many Igbo homes, not just in the Diaspora, but even more so within the Igbo homeland. In embarking on this project therefore, I was driven by the unquenchable optimism that it will prove a useful stepping stone, not only to my own children, but also to many others of their kind around the world, who are genuinely desirous of a reconnection with the language and culture of their root. I also dare to hope that it will prove a useful teaching/reference material in any formal Igbo language classroom.

Next, I would like to share with you a brief history of Written Igbo, if only to put in perspective the problems currently bedevilling the Igbo language, and also to show why the coming of a primer of this volume may still be considered relevant at this time. Historical records tell us that Written Igbo, in the form that we know it today, owes its beginnings to the early missionary activities that began in Sierra Leone at the turn of the nineteenth century when Britain repatriated its ex-slaves to a place which thereafter became known as Free Town. While on the repatriation mission, the Church Missionary Society that accompanied the returnees to Free Town decided on a much wider mission of evangelising the whole of Africa, perhaps as a way of atoning for the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. But to do this, they first had to learn the languages of the people as were represented in the camp by the ex-slaves. That was how they began a programme of word list collection with which they then went to work in various parts of Africa.
One of the first such collections was a 17 paged manual by Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther, himself an ex-slave of Yoruba extraction. His collection was entitled Isoama Ibo Primer. All there was to the primer were a few words, a few phrases, a translation of the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments and a translation of the first chapter of St. Matthew’s gospel. It was this that became the foundation for the teaching of the Igbo language when the Church Missionary Society arrived at the banks of the River Niger at Onicha in June 1857, with a class of only 12 persons, men, women and a boy who for the first time read the Igbo language from print. However, as they travelled further into the Igbo heartland, it dawned on the missionaries that Isuama, the brand of Igbo picked up from the ex-slaves, was severely inadequate as it did not come any close to representing the multiplicity of dialects spanning the length and breadth of Igboland. But as there were no quick fixes, an immediate practical solution was nowhere in sight. They therefore had to plod on with their missionary works, producing more translations of biblical tracts as they went along. Unfortunately, Bishop Ajayi Crowther, as he was later known, died in 1891, and with him, the era of Isuama Igbo programme which he had championed.

But the search for a universal Igbo dialect continued. In 1906, the CMS mission, now under the leadership of Archdeacon T J Dennis, decided on a change of base, to a locality known as Egбу in the Owere province. In 1909, he and his group not only created an Esperanto brand of Igbo (out of five local dialects) which they called the Union Ibo, but also translated the entire Bible into it. But the Union Ibo soon ran into its own difficulties, as a rival mission, the Roman Catholics, which by now had built up a strong base and achieved a very large and strong following around Onicha would not have anything to do with it. That was the beginning of a severe and vicious rivalry that led to decades of political stalemate that engulfed the whole of Igboland, as the two missions and their followers would not agree over which dialects to adopt or what orthography to use in writing the Igbo language. The Catholics stayed with their Onicha dialect while the CMS carried on with their Esperanto Union Ibo, each employing whatever propaganda and tactics it could muster to poach and win converts, all to the detriment of Igbo education itself.*

One of these propaganda was the claim that a study of Igbo was unlikely ever to take a child anywhere in life, which was exactly what a parent would get if they were to send their child to a school run by the opposing camp! It was the period during which the use of vernacular in the classroom came to be banned altogether, a tradition which continued in many schools until quite recently. You spoke Igbo in the classroom and a prefect would take down your name and a teacher would dish out a few measured strokes of the cane on your backside.

It was not until June 1962 that a new committee set up by the government of the Eastern region and influenced by the Society for the Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture produced a report that appeared to settle the conflict once and for all. This was named the Ọnwụ Orthography, after the chairman of the committee that looked into the orthography saga, Dr. S E Ọnwụ. It was
this that formed the basis for what we know today as the Standard Igbo. Contrary to popular misconceptions, the Standard Igbo is not based on any particular dialects handpicked by any individuals or institutions. It naturally evolved, overtime, from the variety of Igbo spoken in cosmopolitan centres as more and more people from various dialect areas began to converge in large towns and cities in search of a new life. Although still opposed by a minority of Igbo elite to this day, it is the variety of Igbo that has been championed and promoted since 1949 by the now defunct Society for the Promotion of Igbo Language and Culture. It is also the variety of Igbo that has been used since 1962 in education, in broadcasting and in pan-Igbo gatherings where mutual intelligibility is called for.

It is gratifying to note that the teaching of the Igbo language has come a long way from that first report on the 22nd of June 1857 by Rev. Samuel Ajayi Crowther. Today, one is happy to note that the teaching of the Igbo language is now compulsory in all primary and secondary schools in Igboland, private or public. On the 26th May 2010, the government of Anambra State made its own history by signing into law a Bill aimed at enforcing the speaking and writing of the Igbo language in the conduct of public services and the recognition of Wednesday as Igbo language day in all public institutions in the state. Some of the many provisions of this bill include the official abolition of corporal punishment for pupils accused of speaking vernacular in the classroom; the provision that students were not to be promoted from Junior to Senior Secondary Schools without a pass in the Igbo language, and the provision that all work seekers to public services must possess at least a pass in the Igbo language.

It is also heart warming to note that Igbo language is now taught in many institutions of higher learning, not just in Igboland but all around the country, as Igbo is officially recognised as one of the three major Nigeria languages, alongside Hausa and Yoruba. At the last count, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, recorded a total of 321 candidates engaged in various levels of Igbo studies in the 2014/2015 academic session, as compared to 258 for English, 130 for French, 57 for German, 30 for Russian and 10 for Chinese. That was a big turn-around for the Igbo language. In my days 32 years ago, Igbo used to be at the bottom of the heap, because the received wisdom up till then was that the study of Igbo was a complete waste of time, as it was unlikely to take anyone anywhere.

But despite these massive boosts in the fortunes of the Igbo language, it seems that the average educated Igbo man still needs a lot of persuasion to begin to take the language seriously. It seems that once we had bought into that fallacy many years ago that Igbo had no practical or pragmatic values, then it lost all prestige forever, and nothing was ever going to shake that out of our psyche.
The unfortunate outcome of the saga described above was that, in the words of a young British researcher of that era, Sylvia Leith-Ross, the Igbo man came to see the English language and education as a whole, not as a food for the mind and soul but as a means to achieving fame and material success, what with the fact that the first people who learned to spell their names in English went on to become the interpreters, the court messengers, the teachers and sometimes the paramount rulers of their locality, and invariably, the controllers of the new wealth that had just arrived with colonization and westernisation. It was therefore clear for all to see that in his quest for the new fame, the Igbo man had practically turned his back on his own language, prompting speculations and predictions as far back as 1939 as to how long it would take before the Igbo language got replaced in its entirety by the English language. This in turn prompted the caution by Sylvia Leith-Ross that the future of the Igbo language must lie in the hands of the Igbo himself; his attitude towards the language and his willingness to transform it from just the spoken language of his past to a vibrant written language capable of expressing his future.

Today, 76 years after that wise caution, we find that English is no longer just the pragmatic language of job opportunities; it has become the operative language in nearly every educated Igbo household, as, overtime, we have cultivated it as the default language for every conversation. Which is why speaking unadulterated Igbo has become such a struggle, even for those who still make the effort. We measure our intelligence by how much command of English we have attained. Very often you hear that someone can’t even string a simple sentence together, a suggestion that although the person in question did go to school, they never managed to master enough English to measure up in that assessment! Never mind that the person passing this judgement may himself be completely illiterate in his own language. Apart from the one gallant effort made in the 1970s by the late Tony Uchenna Ubesie to create authentic Igbo fiction, Igbo literature is virtually non-existent. But even if there were any to speak of, the average Igbo man is still averse to reading anything written in the Igbo language.

As a result of our penchant for English, one observes that generations of Igbo children growing up around the world, including the Igbo homeland, cannot speak a word of Igbo. Speak to a child in his heritage language and a parent is proud to announce to you that Junior does not understand that. That means that, wittingly or unwittingly, we have placed our children in a position where they may be unlikely to ever pass this language onto the future generations.

It was this sorry situation that led to the observation by Prof. Adiele Afigbo that:

“The Igbo resisted British political and economic domination but allowed its language to fall the abject victim of the English language. The clearest demonstration of this fact is that while there is hardly any Igbo literature to talk of, the Igbo elite are in the vanguard of those who created what is now popularly known as African literature in English...[by

Now, before you get me wrong, I am not about to begin to deny or wish away the facts of our colonial history. The English language has happened, and I recognise that it would be wishful thinking to expect that it will one day leave the way it came. Nor do I intend to deny that English has its merits: as a world lingua franca, it enables us to co-exist and interact and even do business with the peoples of other cultures with whom we have come into contact. As the official language of our own country, Nigeria, it has facilitated communication on a national level and across the multiple ethnic and linguistic boundaries. It also continues to open closed doors to individuals in many different ways.

I also recognise, as someone once predicted, that we are now already in that era where there is no one in Igboland who does not speak at least a smattering of the English language. And that is not a bad thing at all, for I agree with UNESCO that a multilingual world is a better world indeed. But what would be very bad however is, God forbid it, a world in which there would be no one left in Igboland who could speak the Igbo language fluently. And that, sadly, is where we would be headed if the current trend of neglect of the Igbo language by the educated Igbo elite were to carry on unchecked. We just cannot over-emphasize the fact that language death is real and a language which no one speaks anymore is a dead language.

I am hoping for the day when Igbo would begin to grow and flourish into the kind of language foreseen by Sylvia Leith-Ross, the vibrant written language of our future. Who knows, Igbo might even one day become the language of medical and space science, but it is unlikely to ever get there if there is no guarantee that it will even live from one generation to the next. In order for it to have any kind of future at all, it demands to be spoken and written and read, just like any other. It demands to be taken seriously by its native speakers. It demands to be continuously enriched through constant usage and through the creation of authentic literature in every branch of human knowledge: the Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities. Above all, it demands to be passed on to the next generations, for that is the only passport they will ever need to identify themselves as Ùmụ Ịgbọ. I believe that the responsibility for ensuring that continuity falls on the current generation of Ndi Igbo, the leaders and the led, because if we didn’t, no one else would. Were that bridge to our past be broken in our time, or at any other time, we would go down in history as the generation that extinguished the torch we inherited from our forebears. It is not for nothing that the United Nations decided in the year 2000 to inaugurate the International Mother Language day, which is now celebrated annually around the world on the 21st of every February.

How this project may help:
The book, *Igbo – Our Mother Language*, is structured into two parts, namely: Basic concepts and Essentials of Igbo grammar, with each part adequately complementing the other. I do not wish to bore you with details of the individual contents, for as they say, the taste of the pudding is in the eating. But I believe that a familiarization with any number of the concepts covered within these broad headings would no doubt place the learner in a good stead towards a general understanding and appreciation of the language as a whole.

The presentation is deliberately simple: the language is descriptive and assumes no prior knowledge. As you will find, the book is copiously illustrated with tables and pictures to aid understanding. The tone marks are applied in all cases to aid pronunciation, in recognition of the fact that Igbo is a highly tonal language. A work colleague of mine described it as “very very user friendly”. I hope that you too can see it that way.

Today, I am also happy to report that in addition to the book, we have created a robust interactive audio trainer which is now accessible to any interested party on our website ([www.ezeogupublication.co.uk](http://www.ezeogupublication.co.uk)) subject to a token subscription fee. The interactive media allows the learner to click any words, phrases or objects they would like to know, listen to the voice that is generated by this action, and then repeat what they hear. Apart from just teaching the language, the package can provide a fun family time where people are able to hook up their laptops to the wide screen TV in their living room. That way, everybody - mother, father and children - gets to participate and parents and guardians have a chance to correct the children if they get it wrong, or provide supportive additional information, based on their own experiences. Together, I believe, the book and the audio package will help the enthusiastic learner not only with their speaking skills but also with reading and writing Igbo.

It is also our hope that one day we will be able to set up formal classes across the UK that will bring the Igbo language to those that are willing to connect with it. But that requires more than just our hope; it requires your co-operation as parents and guardians to begin to see the learning of the Igbo Language as a cause worthy of your precious time.

**How you may be able to help:**

You may not be in a position to say what will happen in a few hundred years to come. But what you do today, and from this day forward, may spell the difference between the survival of this language and its possible disappearance in some years to come, as have been variously predicted. You do not have to be a language expert to show a passion for your language and be ready to contribute to its growth. An illustrious Igbo daughter by the name of Chiọma Mbanefo is not just content with organising annual educational conferences and symposia on Igbo subject matters; she has also floated a number of audio learning materials on the net and is currently working on an Igbo Dictionary. Other individuals too, such as Lọọlọ Hope Oforomata, Rev Dr. Vince
Ọnwụkanjọ and Prof. Nnamdi Ichongirị are making their own contributions in many different ways to reposition Igbo to where it needs to be. That is what it means to believe in a cause. I am sure that we all have got it in us to do something just as laudable if only we can recognise our collective challenges. As our great ancestors noted many centuries ago, “Aka weta, aka weta, o ju ọnụ”, meaning: “the more hands you have supplying the little crumbs, the quicker the mouth fills up”.

Still on the subject of how you can help, there is no greater way to propagate a language than by actually speaking it. Where at all possible, it is essential that Igbo parents get to speak Igbo to one another at all times and especially to the children, at home or out of it. Even where one of the parents is not Igbo by birth, it creates another imperative for the Igbo parent to make an effort to encourage not just the children but also the non-Igbo spouse.

Regrettably, since the publication of our book, I have had occasions to interact with many folks on this subject and a great many appear to have resigned themselves to the idea that their children have now all passed that stage at which you could teach them anything. Well, the answer to the problem is not to give up; if we can no longer teach them anything, we can at least give them an opportunity to teach themselves. And that is where this twin package comes in. The book is easy to read and understand and the interactive audio package is also very easy to follow; hence it is my hope that any 10 year old child with enough zeal and parental support will find using these tools a very rewarding experience.

You could also help someone by purchasing the package as a present to anyone you know who has a genuine desire to learn Igbo. It may be your God son/daughter, your niece or nephew, or just a friend’s child. And you do not have to be Igbo to do this.

As individuals, we belong to all different community interest groups, some of them with very charitable goals. You may help by recommending a bulk purchase to your organisation to support a needy community school or library somewhere, or just for distribution to the children of your group. You may also encourage your organisation to set up a Saturday Igbo language class for the children of your group. Who knows, you may also know a group that is willing and able to sponsor the project and make these tools available to everyone free of charge.

If you have any friends who were unable to make it today, these tools are available to purchase from our website: www.ezeogupublication.co.uk, or through eBay and Amazon UK. So, do please spread the words.

Once again, I thank my family for their support, inspiration and shared optimism. And I thank you all for coming and lending your presence and support to the events of today. I now invite
you to sit back and enjoy a demonstration of the interactive audio. Enjoy yourselves and God bless you.

*Suggested Reading: