

The Igbo Anglican Church

By Franklin Udensi

On Sunday, you followed your uncle to the Igbo Anglican church.

“It's not like those other churches,” your uncle says in the car, “they stay true to their roots.” Roots. You weren't even Anglican. What you were, was lonely, bored, and sick of staying indoors all week. Secretly, you wished he'd take you to those other churches (you'd heard the stories of white pastors loading their members with food), but you nodded and smiled when the woman at the church said, “It's always nice to welcome a new member.” Or was it “this one you're wearing bracelets, I hope you're not homosexual”? She had said it in quick Igbo, so you weren't so sure. You were so sure, though, of the hint of disapproval at the end of her smile when you kept replying her Igbo prompts with English answers.

The Bibles were written in Igbo, the sermon was delivered in Igbo, and your age mates sat as far away as possible and spoke amongst themselves in quick bursts of unintelligible American-accented words. Terrific. You felt just as at home as the only white people present, the couple who sat at the first row and smiled a little too widely whenever the Igbo hymns came on.

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You could sense the air of Nigerian pride around the men as they gathered after service and talked about Nigerian politics using a blend of Igbo vocabulary and phrases like “for real?” and “I hear you.” You could see the pride in the tightly stretched smiles of the grannies as they posed for Facebook-able group selfies in their vibrantly colored ankara and sparkly jewelry.

“We know our roots, unlike the others,” they'd boast, while their cool teenage americanah grandkids were still upstairs in the sanctuary, playing Call-of-duty on their iPhones because they hadn't even noticed that service had ended a long time ago.

It irked you, how much these Nigerian-Americans missed Nigeria like the way last-borns in university missed their family until they came home to wash plates. You listened to them as they complained about the cold in America, about how unsafe the country was becoming because of the gun problem, about how they yearned for their Nigerian backyards where they could easily plant fresh bitter leaves for onugbu soup. “It's been sooo long, we can't wait to visit Nigeria in the summer,” they told you, but you knew it was something they had been saying every year for seven years, and you knew it was something they would keep saying for the next seven years. They rarely followed through, but they did send home large suitcases of cheap clothing from the Dollar Store. And during service, they sent their prayers to their brethren back home and God's mercy for whatever hardship those Nigerian people were facing now.

You found it funny, how unnecessary information just seemed to fall out from people here.

“You just arrived from Nigeria? I was just in Abuja last month with my husband — he's a surgeon in Virginia. We'll visit again in the holidays when my daughter is back from Yale.”

It puzzled you, this contempt you nursed for these people. Was it born out of spite for them having lived an arguably better life than you and many of your friends back home and still whining about it? Or was it born out of envy for not being able to mix with the cool teenage americanah grandkids upstairs? Whatever it was, you needed to discard it—it was unneeded and of no benefit to you. What you needed was these people, their friendship, their community and their network if you needed to make it in this foreign land.

After all, like it or not, you were one of them now.