



The Life, Work and Times of Hon. Justice Prof.
Innocent Azubike Umezulike, OFR, FCI Arb, FIIAN,
Longest Serving Chief Judge –South East Nigeria.

BENEDIXITQUE PLENE DIVINA PROVIDENTIA TRACTANDUS

AB INITIO

The seemingly somnambulant serene community of Ifite Ajani village of Mgbidi, in Awgu Division, as it then was, in colonial Eastern Region of Nigeria, was oblivious of what God had in stock for it on this beautiful and tranquil Monday being the 21st day of September 1953. The community sits atop a hill range overlooking virtually all parts of Awgu Division, as it then was, now split into three local government areas viz; Aninri, Awgu and Oji River, and even beyond. The landscape resembled much that of Scotland though there exists a tropical orientation here. The economy of the area was mostly agrarian characterised by the beautiful scenery of terraced farms on the sides of the hill. This alluring scenery and serene environment, no doubt, may have prompted the colonial administrators to set up their administrative seat where it still stands today, much of which is mostly Mgbidi territory.

This early contact with and settlement of the British overlords in the first part of the 20th Century had impacted on the locals some of whom admired the new dispensation and sought to associate with it. Some joined as menial workers while others with little or no education joined the colonial government as gardeners security men, clerical staff, messengers, warrant chiefs, police officers, guides and soldiers of the army of the British Empire. Rule Britannia was the clarion call and young lads from Mgbidi and environs as indeed other parts of colonial Nigeria had readily signed up to fight on Her Majesty's army during the world wars. Others, still in the service, helped to entrench civility and British rule in the colony of Nigeria through the enforcement of law and order. To this group belonged a scion of the Unegbu family of Uhukagbo kindred in Ajani Ifite Mgbidi, named Umezulike Unegbu. It was no mean feat as not many who desired to join the Royal Constabulary that later transformed into the Nigeria Police Force, actually made it. So young constable Umezulike soon became an iconic celebrity and beacon of hope to other youths; that it was possible to aspire and acquire one's aim in life. The truism of the whole thing was a direct function of hard work. This Umezulike imbibed and tried to pass on to his progeny.

Public servants at the time were not indeed viewed then as particularly affluent, but they were resourceful and had intimidating influence in the social setting, what with a steady source of income, earned from not having to toil and till the land under rain and shine. As a matter of fact, this crop of people quickly became the nouveau riche or middle class, who could afford to have many wives and nourish a large family and still have enough to care for other dependants. This way Umezulike was able to have more than one wife as he sought to sustain the lineage through many offspring. His aspiration met with divine approval as both his first and two other wives all had issues for him, thereby having an Umezulike sub-clan.

Soon this pleasant September morning, on his duty post at Brass which was then part of the Eastern Region, but now in the present Rivers State, constable Umezulike Unegbu, who lived in police quarters in Brass with his family including his expectant second wife, Madam Perpetua Ogonnaia Umezulike was summoned home for an emergency. As she noticed some stirrings and the usual prenatal signs, word was sent to constable Umezulike who hurried home and arranged her movement to the local maternity where she later took delivery of a bouncing baby boy, to the delight of Umezulike, who already had another son, Christopher, through his first wife. Overjoyed, he lavished the newborn with love, naming him Azubike – strength resided in the progeny, which quickly meant anointment of the newborn as heir apparent. He also gave him the sobriquet-Mazi, a title reserved for nobles and which generated unease within the polygamous home. Ordinarily, this would have been a none issue, but in a polygamous setting, the import was not lost on the co-wife whose son was actually the numero uno and de facto successor. This generated a certain level of disquiet and very unhealthy revelry. This perhaps may have prompted the decision to move young Mazi to his Mgbidi roots, away from the competitive polygamous environment.

EARLY YOUTH

While at St. Vincent's as a bolder, it was not just book-mania for young Innocent, during the holidays he found time to unwind by associating with both the young and the old in plays, folkloric sessions and in cultural and masquerade displays. He talked a little but enjoyed listening. Ray Roy, elder cousin and childhood friend, remembers that "Innocent enjoyed gathering young people in playgroups and listened keenly to their discussions. This earned him the sobriquet, Judge Nwa Akowe, after a legendary revenue officer well known in the area then. Little did we know that providence was preparing him for a legendary judicial career where listening was the order of the day... of special note was his dalliance with the Ogbagu masquerade which had him trekking upwards of 12 kilometres to neighbouring Nenwenta just to associate with Ogbagu masquerade displays, though he was not an initiate... He related and associated with all, not minding age or life station..."

The duo of Mama and Bridget insisted that he had continued his love for young persons upon until his later days "Even when he rose to his present rank and was most times enmeshed in bookwork, each time he returned home, he would gather young persons and shower them with goodies as they engaged in boisterous encounters. He would, however, dismiss them when he needed to have it quiet or do some academic works. He was that genial..." they submitted. At the end of that fratricidal war, Innocent, shorn of help to resume education and having been exposed to life's realities during that war, he opted to go into public service as a Customs personnel. The meagrely wage or salary paid him in the Customs then brought home the realisation that he needed to advance his present educational standing to a higher level. The time-honoured words of that sage, Oliver Goldsmith on self-improvement; "people seldom improve when they have no other model but themselves to copy after" kept tide with him. Of course, his father was already a model and Ray Roy his cousin was already in the Customs. As he could hardly save enough to send himself back to formal education, he chose the option of tuition and private studies.

Through the tuition course, even while still in active customs service, he was able to read and obtain both his O- and A- levels certificates. According to one of mentors, close confidant and cousin, who incidentally was ahead of him in the Customs then, Chief Raymond Roy Olieh "after the war, he did private studies, got his GCE certificates, and got admission to the University of Lagos, even as a Customs officer, all by his own effort. His father had then retired and had even taken a third wife and with an increase in family responsibility, could not assist much" Ray Roy, as he was fondly called by Innocent recalled with glee.



ADVENTURE INTO LAW

Innocent, burning with uncommon zeal for education, had really wanted to read medicine at the University of Ibadan, but the cruel hands of fate denied him that opportunity. Undaunted and not dismayed, when the University of Lagos Matriculation exams came out, he embraced it with equanimity and a voracious zeal even as he was admitted to study law instead of his first love which was medicine. “Little did anybody know that Divine Providence was really at work, moulding an important future for Azubike in law... indeed it was really God at work, otherwise given the state of affairs in the family then, being as it were, a polygamous one, with a burden of responsibilities, he would not have been able to achieve the much he did and become the giant academic tree he had become” Bridget surmised. She revealed that he had had to go to the wharf and quays in Lagos to hustle to make ends meet, and even worked at restaurants in Lagos, including one owned by an Mgbidi compatriot. He was so intent on making it as he had explained that his foray into the customs service and his long absence from home, were geared at raising money for his studies and consequent admission into the ivory tower. However, then, as a child of destiny, providence never abandoned him to his fate; instead, it ushered in a Cinderella into Innocent's life and circumstances. This way, the arduous tasks of acquisition and funding of legal education became a *fait accompli*. Within the study period from 1976 to 1982, he not only graduated but also bagged a Master's degree in the law discipline from the same Unilag and equally earned his BL from the Nigerian Law School, Victoria Island, Lagos. This Akoka legal upstart still found time within this period of attainment to participate in the National Youth Service Corps programme. Having achieved his objective of being a graduate and lawyer, Barrister Innocent Azubike Umezulike, felt that the real journey into life had started, and a maze of prospects confronted him as to what to do with his new learning and status so as not only to benefit himself and his folks but how to impact positively on the larger society. He chose to combine and grapple with both just as the stealth hands of death make a steady but slow advance to his ancestral homestead.

At this juncture, when he still wanted to settle down after his studies, he was approached by operatives of the defunct National Party of Nigeria, NPN in the old Anambra State to come out and vie for an electoral seat. He sought the wise counsel of his best friend – his father, who dissuaded him from accepting the offer. He had advised his darling son to shun politics and instead to embrace public service recalling that it was on account of his acceptance of the job of a ward/kindred councillor for his kin that had engendered in his having stroke and being bedridden. Young Azubike Umezulike accepted this advice and returned to Lagos to commence legal practice as Assistant Legal Adviser in NTA Lagos for a little under one year; from October 1981 to September 1982. The erudite Innocent, though thriving in his legal practice, felt he had to give back to the academic part of what he received from there. He elected to join the law faculty of the University of Ibadan, whose denial of admission to read Medicine had sent him to the joyful embrace of Lady Law for he agreed with the eternal words of Elbert Hubbard that “A teacher affects eternity; he cannot tell where his influence stops”. He got employed on the 3rd day of March 1983 as Lecturer Grade II in UI and rose to Lecturer Grade I on the 1st of October 1985 in the same institution, by dint of hard work and scholarship. He had a stint in unionism as he became the Legal Adviser of the Academic Staff Union of Universities, ASUU, UI branch in 1986, a position he held until 1987, when he relocated home to the then Anambra State University of Technology Awka Campus as a Senior Lecturer from 1st October 1987. He stayed in this position until November 1992 when sweet Providence pointed the way to the executive arm of the Federal Government.

The then Attorney General and Minister of Justice under the Babangida era, Chief Clement Obiora Akpamgbo, SAN now deceased, fished him out from the academic crowd and made him his Special Adviser.

This position would expose and broaden his perception of legal firmament and led him to other national assignments such as : Chairman of the Failed Banks Tribunal, Zone 6, Lagos, 1998-2000, Chairman Visitation Panel for Enugu State University of Science and Technology, 1997, Chairman Judicial Panel on Adoration Tragedy, 2002, Chairman, Judicial Panel on the Mission Cables for the electrification of 10 out of 17 LGAs in Enugu State, Chairman, Judicial Committee for the Drafting of Position of the Judiciary on the Amendment of the Constitution/Secretary for the National Committee for the Incorporation of Companies by Guarantee, Sec/ Member National Committee for Southern and Northern Nigeria, 1993 and the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Land Use Act, UA 1993.



He had also at various times within this period in the academia acted as Acting Head of Private and Property Law department, ASUTECH Awka, now UNIZIK, Research and Project Coordinator, Faculty of Law, UNIZIK 1989–1992, Sub Dean, Faculty of Law, UNIZIK 1990/91, Workshop/Conference Coordinator, UNIZIK, 1989–1992, Associate Professor of Property Law, UNIZIK, 1992, Visiting Professor of Property Law, Enugu State University of Science and Technology ESUT, Member, Senate Curriculum Committee 1983 to 1996, UI, Faculty of Law Representative in the UI Committee on Academic

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Promotions 1985/86 sessions, UI, member ASUU 5-man Committee, UI on the 1986 Visitation Panel of UI. In all these, the young scholar remained focused and reasoned that the real trophy for hard work was indeed more hard work in consonance of the wise thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi “the history of the world is full of men who rose to leadership, by sheer force self-confidence, bravery and tenacity”.

THE PEOPLE’S ADVOCATE AND TEACHER

While he felt that he was settling down to teaching, he never really left his first love as he still received briefs and did matters for many clients. Even while in Lagos and Ibadan, he always journeyed to the East to handle issues for his widespread clients’ base. Most of the denizens of his area were his clients as he scripted all their letters, deeds and agreements. However, then, he never really hobnobbed only with the rich, but in conformity of his character of association with men and women of all stations, he pandered to the needs of the needy in the society through the provision of legal succour by way of pro bono or free legal services. The legal luminary cum academic effected a service record of unblemished and stellar teaching career spanning a period of nearly forty years, combining legal practice, legal literature, teaching and the reviews of judicial decisions with a view to broadening the general perception and application of the laws of the land in concurrence with William James that “The best use of life is to spend it for something that outlasts life”. A multifaceted academic, he taught Legal Research Methods in his inchoate lecturing days between 1984 and 1986 at UI just as he treated and clung to Equity and Trust variously in ASUTECH, later UNIZIK, UI and ESUT from 1983 to date. He was also engaged in the teaching of land laws in UI, ESUT and UNIZIK between 1983 and 1986 while from 1988 to 1991, he taught Property Law in ASUTECH. Umezulike also taught the Law of Instrument Registration since 1988 to date in some of these institutions even as he engaged the MSc class in the ESUT Environmental Sciences Faculty for 1991/94 and 95/96 sessions in Environmental Law. He also taught Law of Contract and Land Law and Conveyance in the ESUT Law & Environmental Sciences Faculties from 1988 through 1995 to the time of his demise.

Prof. Umezulike also acted as External Examiner, Rivers State University of Science and Technology, RSUST, Port Harcourt. Indeed, he spread widely his intellectual tentacles in the transfer of the knowledge of Law that his imprints and protégées dot every corner of Southern Nigeria, nay the whole Nigeria. He believed like erstwhile British Prime minister, Winton Churchill that responsibility is the price of greatness”. The erudite academic had taught, supervised, co-supervised and examined scores of students for Masters and doctorate degrees.

ARRIVAL ON THE BENCH

Just as a goldfish that has no hiding place, in the midst of his toils and bustles, Providence once again beckoned on him to rest his feet, long used to standing as he did his legal cum academic work. This time around, he was invited to move from the boisterous Bar to the hallowed Bench and become a member of the Body of Benchers, precisely, on August 6, 1993. Barr. Innocent Azubike Umezulike was made a judge of the Enugu State Judiciary after 13 years post call and 13 action-packed years of legal cum academic fireworks. No doubt, his sterling performance and quality if courteous and erudite law practice may have mainly contributed to his elevation to the exalted Bench, for it was no less a person than the former US President, who said “no man who continues to add something material, intellectual and moral well-being of the place he lives, is left long without proper reward”. Now, as a judge, he sat in various courts within the State and still found time to service the universe of law in another sphere – lecturing in his specialist and other areas in various institutions of learning. His service to Law encompassed the three main areas of Law – the Bench, the Bar and the Academia and he succinctly paid his dues for over two decades for he consciously believed in line with his father’s legacy and tacit agreement with the dictum of a former US President that “it is only through labour and painful effort, by grim energy and resolute courage, that we move on to better things”. He left indelible and inimitable imprints in the annals of the Enugu State Judiciary.



He became the first Judge from his Mgbidi Community and the first in Awgu L.G.A. While he sat, those who had the opportunity of appearing before him were astounded as to his brilliance and profundity of his knowledge of the Law,” His court was a delight to all lawyers, the respect he accords to lawyers and litigants, his recording speed, the speed at which he adjudicates interlocutory issues, dishes out authorities, backs up his decisions with legal reasoning before citing authorities... I enjoyed his court when I was appearing... something that strikes you very well is his brilliance, his intellectual prowess, the way he analyses legal issues, I can say I am a student of Prof. Umezulike, I studied him. He appeared to be an encyclopaedia of the law who relied solely on the provision of the law. He has the laws on his fingertips, never relied on personal idiosyncrasies; he is very meticulous and follows the law. He doesn't yield to sentiments, never swayed by public opinion. He relies on the provisions of the law, and his judgments when put to test, have always been vindicated, he has gone in-depth in law and this enabled him to go as far as he had,” recalls the Secretary of the Enugu State Judicial Service Commission, His Worship Frank Enuma Chukwu, a protégé of Justice Umezulike. Fr Justice Umezulike held that “sentimentality is the only sentiment that rubs you the wrong way” as espoused by W Somerset Maughan.

On his part, Prof. Agu Gab Agu, former dean of ESUT Law Faculty who met Justice Umezulike in the 1980s when he taught Property Law at ASUTECH and who had appeared many times before his court, “He was a brilliant judge, whose ability to make bench rulings is very unique, almost unparalleled, the lucidity, the clarity of his judgment and its soundness were delivered in a beautiful language that brings to the mind’s eye the issue before the court... I have obtained and lost my matters in his court, he was an upright judge, he favoured the intellect, not the individual. He draws a big line between his relationship with people and his judgment ... I remember that sometime in 1994, I raised a very fundamental issue of the control and superintendence of markets between the State Department and the local governments flowing the provisions of the constitution; and he ruled that the control of the markets laid squarely with the LGs and not the State departments,” recalled Prof Agu. And rightly so, the eminent jurist was a stickler for justice and affirmed solely like Justinian in this immortal lines “Justice is the firm and continuous desire to render to everyone that which is his due” A brother judge Hon Justice B.E Agbatah, retired, corroborates this; “he was a judge before me, he was one of those people who recommended me to be a judge... He, Justice Umezulike, was a professor of Law, he was a very good judge, he knew his law very well, in fact, he had been delivering lectures to even Court of Appeal Judges and Supreme Court Judges.

He is known to be very strong in law... The thing that went for him was that as a professor of law, he had been writing books. He had time to do his judgments. In fact, he was one of the most proliferating judges and he was still writing books. He worked hard as a judge. His brilliance is very surprising, and is very wonderful. He would write more judgments than any of the judges.



There was a rule in the Judiciary that judges must write six judgments in a quarter; he was writing 30 and more, and yet he was writing his books,” recalled Agbatah who was his colleague and friend.

Agbatah veered further to reveal the unique performance of Justice Umezulike and astuteness “... his judgments, all his judgments, are locus classicus. All his judgments, in every topic, were exemplary judgments which people quote in every part of the country. He wrote many books... a very brilliant man. Though I cannot mention a specific judgment now, all his judgments, all were exemplary judgments to all judges including Supreme Court judges and Court of Appeal judges. We are all using his books and landmark judgments.”

NOMINATION TO SUPREME COURT OF THE GAMBIA

Perhaps, it was because of his sterling predisposition and his optimal if excellent performance on the Enugu Bench and its reverberating impact on the Nigeria Judiciary that culminated in his nomination to serve on the apex bench of another country; to wit; the Supreme Court of the Gambia. That was in his fourth year on the

Bench in 1997.

For Justice Umezulike, this honour which rarely comes in the life of a judge and which some illustrious compatriots such as Justice Akinola Aguda, and a few others before and after him, is the prayer of a very successful jurist. However, taking into consideration of facts rooted in his firm commitment to revamping and repositioning the cause of justice in Nigeria, the Super-Patriot chose to be Pro-Patria.

He listened to the resonating patriotism of George Santayana which insists that “A man’s feet must be planted in his country, but his eyes should survey the world.” He jettisoned all the trappings of such exalted office as well as the material gains derivable from that place and preferred to work for his fatherland. It was no mean decision and sacrifice to make. He preferred remaining in situ on the local Bench. However, as usual, sweet providence, always savvy and near at the right time, beamed its rays of favour on Justice Innocent Azubike Umezulike, once again, seven years after he refused to grab the top Gambian job.

ELEVATION AS CHIEF JUDGE OF ENUGU STATE

His predecessor in office, Hon Justice JCN Ugwu, deceased, was due to retire in December 2004. The judiciary hierarchy of succession had Justices R.A. Agbo, I.A. Umezulike and V.N. Nebo on the top rungs. To remove the void after Justice Ugwu’s retirement, the State Judicial Service Commission quickly swung into action intending to select a fitting replacement. The Commission met in September 2004 and brainstormed and later voted 4 to 1 one in favour of Justice Umezulike who was not the first in seniority. However, a supernatural twist developed in the scripting and expedition of the Commission’s decision to the National Judicial Council. The report deviated from and was a severe variance with the Commission’s decision earlier validated by 4 to 1 vote referendum. Instead, the report submitted the names of the three erudite judges as contestants who were fit and qualified to occupy the seat of the State’s Chief Judge. This development created a scenario of helplessness on the side of the Commission in Enugu thereby leaving the NJC no option than to wade in and resolve the imbroglio. In arriving at a decision, the NJC opted for the meta-legal option since all three were said to be equally competent and qualified. Consequently, Justice R.A. Agbo, as he then was, was chosen and this decision was communicated to the State governor, who promptly and in obedience to the law, forwarded Justice Agbo’s name to the State Legislature for confirmation.

Alas! Agbo’s candidature was rejected unanimously by the House of Assembly for reasons which only themselves knew and which they were not bound to reveal by law and which they never did. Instead, they communicated their decision to the governor for onward transmission to the NJC.

Some furious elements within the NJC sought to have a faceoff with the Enugu State Legislature for daring them even as petitions poured into the NJC concerning Umezulike’s candidature by persons who had issues to grind with him or who had reportedly been indicted by some panels and tribunals headed by him. Again, the NJC under the sagely Muhamad Uwais, CJN, as he then was, employed still the concept of seniority and Hon Justice Innocent Azubike Umezulike, the gangling erudite law professor and jurist from the hill country of Mgbidi in Awgu LGA, was chosen and his candidature later confirmed unanimously by the Enugu State House of Assembly in 2004, to the exhilaration and delight of his admirers and keen watchers of the judicial dynamics in Enugu State.

A MONUMENTAL SUCCESSFUL TENURE

He thus became the first professor in Eastern Region of Nigeria to be made a Chief Judge of a State and recorded many other firsts namely; first Mgbidi Chief Judge, first Chief Judge from Awgu LGA, first Chief Judge from old Awgu Division comprising the present three LGAs of Awgu, Aninri and Oji River and ended as the longest serving Chief Judge in the former Eastern Region and Southern Nigeria. Mounting the saddle, Justice Umezulike set in motion specific mechanisms geared at improving the judiciary “There were core improvements during his tenure regarding physical development, the judiciary under him grew larger; there were more courts... There was training. He organised training for magistrates, judges and the staff of the judiciary. Umezulike did very well” Justice Agbatah declared.

His Worship Enumah Chukwu, Secretary of the Enugu Judicial Service Commission, added his recollection **“The former Chief Judge was an erudite jurist, an academic to the core, he loved writing ... for somebody to become a professor of law and a Chief Judge means he has distinguished himself as a jurist and an academic. He was humane and one of the incorruptible human beings I have ever seen, he believed in whatever he did and did things passionately.”**

Prof Agu Gab Agu viewed Justice Umezulike's tenure as “A monumental successful tenure; many judges under him moved higher to the Court of Appeal and Supreme Court; had new judiciary and court buildings, many more magistrates were employed and elevated, created Awgu, Enugu Ezike and Ezeagu Judicial divisions, the High Court Rules in use today was done during his time, many reforms aimed at improving the machinery of justice came into being during his tenure, remained an academic even a Chief Judge, was made a professor by ESUT and EBSUT while he was a Judge also as he continued to write and publish his books. Indeed when I went into the academia, and we were looking for people who were prodigious and well published, I fished him out, and he was made a professor of Law in ESUT. He was part of the General Justice Reform Programme of the Federal Government, along with other eminent jurists.

Of his achievements as a judge and Chief Judge, Enuma Chukwu Esq recalled that “He did his best within his ability, he loved his job, the State, and he gave all to the State. All the achievements of the present Chief Judge were built on his foundation. He created the Customary Court of Appeal as other Chief Judges were closing theirs as they did not want competition. Enugu Customary Court of Appeal is rated as the best in the country given the support he gave to it. He made more magistrates make justice reach the masses and made them have respect and by extension, judicial officers he also made to have respect... We are grateful to God for giving him to us and for the State of innovations and ingenuity he dispensed,” he averred.

Mbah Chinedu, a director in the High Court Registry Enugu noted that as Chief Judge, Justice Umezulike was very punctual and his administrative function did not interfere with his work ethics. His Lordship usually handle cases efficiently and effectively, most of the time within the quarter, he had to delivered more than 20 judgment within the quarter while they were given three judgment as a target by usually delivered more than 20 within the quarter. Most of the time, the Chief Justice of Nigeria usually gave him a stellar recommendation as the best serving Judge Nigeria has produced. Remarkably all his landmark judgments were never overturned and were upheld at the Supreme Court. Most of his judgment has been reported as the best in both the state and federal level, he is regarded as the Lord Denning of land and property law. The new High Court of Justice complex was built and commissioned under his tenure as Chief Judge of Enugu State Nigeria. Justice Umezulike spearheaded the creation of first ever Customary Court of Appeal in Eastern Nigeria. A multitude of customary courts such as Awgu, Orji River, Udi, Oboloafo, all of this are created during his tenure. His Lordship ensured many judges were appointed, more than 20 judges are appointed during his tenure and magistrate likewise, most of the current serving Judges and magistrate at the time of his demise were appointed during his administration. He motivated workers during his tenure and spearheaded independence financial autonomy as the constitution stipulated.

For Justice Agbatah, he was successful because “he controlled his judges well, he controlled them well, even though some lawyers, as usual, were writing petitions and all that. They equally wrote against me, and I survived my own, he also wrote, they wrote, and they were all continuing, at the tail end of his career as a judge, some elements he had some problems with, I don't know because I had already left, I retired before him. I am not so deep in it. I had already left when I was hearing some of the antagonisms going on, some of the quarrels going on between him and some lawyers and even one of our Judges. I tried even to step in but when I left the thing blew (up), you know, many problems. He survived it, he was not sacked, he was retired, and he was earning his retirement benefits.

So, if anybody retires, therefore you cannot do anything better than retirement. He was not sacked, he was retired which means that he was right in what he did. So, if you are asked to retire and rest maybe they want to save you from more troubles or so. I don't know what happened between him and some individuals" Justice Agbatah contented.

Of course according to an anonymous saying, "there is so much good in the most of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it hardly becomes anyone to talk about the rest of us". Enumah concurs thus "Because sentiments do not motivate him, people can whip up sentiments. As the longest-serving CJ in the South East, when people do not find the opportunity to monopolise the system, they start castigating. So when these people could not compromise the system, they sought to terminate his long stay. What happened to him was that of corruption fighting back, when he had blocked the operations of a cabal, then they sought to remove him. History will vindicate him," affirmed Enuma Esq. Moreover, his friend High Chief Richard Ozobu volunteered, "He was hounded by petitions, some of which were unwarranted...people get annoyed when not given an appointment, from outside one would think that the Judiciary under him was at peace but we knew that some persons who were not favoured felt bad, not everybody would be favoured, and these bring up unnecessary accusations against the man at the helm of affairs".

THE SOCIAL REFORMER CUM WRITER

Not feeling fulfilled in his monumental development of and contribution to the legal environment via his work and impact in legal service, adjudication and law teaching, he wanted to reach the unread through the literacy medium for he shared the wisdom of August W.von Schlegel that "literature is the immortality of speech". **To say that Hon. Justice Innocent Azubike Umezulike loved writing and wrote books is a gross understatement** and a discourteous way of impinging on the psyche of the literary society and his numerous readers who recourse to his profound understanding and elucidation of the tangent topic or subject he treated as well as a

unique fluidity in delivery in every day and beautiful language that makes the message to be lucidly internalized by all and sundry.

A HARVEST OF BOOKS AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS

This teacher, lawyer and judge who was actively engaged simultaneously in all the legs of a legal tripod is well published. Justice Umezulike began his writing in the fall of 1992, debuting with Guide to Instruments Registration in Nigeria, which was quickly followed in 1992 by the duo of Guide to Land Instruments Registration and Land Registry Practice in Nigeria, and Issues in Contemporary Land Law in Nigeria. Others included Title by Adverse Possession in Nigeria, Nigeria's Major Land Reform, The New Wigs and the Challenges of Legal Practice in Nigeria. The last and by no means the least is the flagship in the Umezulike literary stable – the ABC of Contemporary Land Law in Nigeria which was written in 2013 and quickly revised in a current edition that was published in 2014. There is no gainsaying the fact that this book which was not written just for the fun of writing or to join in the melee of numerous other writings by other learned authorities in land law but to set straight the principles and practice of contemporary land law in Nigeria. This is more so because this work whose revised and current edition was enlarged, contained, as indeed did the former, original theses that cannot as of today, be found in any textbook on the subject of Land Law in Nigeria.

The Act had occupied so much of his personality and thought that even within the confines of his home and chambers and in the company of bosom friends, such as Professors Uche Jack-Osimiri, Professor Agu Gab Agu and Dr C.O.C. Egumgbe among others, the Act dominated discussions as they chatted and disagreed on some points bordering on the applicability and essence of the Act. While Osimiri wanted the LUA dead and buried as it smacked of socialism, and Egumgbe would disagree with him on certain sections of the Act which he, Umezulike held dear, yet these arguments never affected their relationship somewhat, it became more exciting and fresher

• after each encounter and never became reduction ad absurdum.

These intellectual encounters characterised, sustained, enriched and underpinned Justice Umezulike's relationship with his ideological and academic soulmates. Nil desperandum, he sought to maintain the arguments intending to whip up and eliciting interest and discourse on this very fundamental legal quagmire occasioned by the Land Use Act. The debate continues and reverberates; does the Act expropriate, is it really necessary in Nigeria, especially in the States, should it apply only in some parts whose cultures are in consonance with its precepts, just as is the case in Tanzania where there are separate Land Laws for the mainland and the offshore regions of the country, and or should it not indeed be abrogated as it is at variance with the capitalist nature of Nigerian economy? To these realities, Prof. Umezulike had consecrated his life to achieving a resolution geared at full implementation to assuage and accommodate all shades of the argument.

Justice Umezulike, in his firm resolve and commitment at ventilating pertinent legal issues, had written three more books which are still in the works after he left the Bench. Indeed his last published work in 2014 was designed to relaunch him into the academic world which he confessed he loved much and viewed as his domain of origin from where he had joined the Bench, describing as “a world marked by freedom of disputation, of freedom to disagree with your colleagues on sundry issues free from sanctions and victimization...” This pulsating desire may have fired his unquenchable gusto for research and impartation fresh ideas via his writings. Also, he believed like Mortimer Adler that “Reading is a basic tool in the living of a good life”, and so read as much as he read. He had therefore edited and co-edited some other 13 books in varying fields. This erudite academic giant wrote and published 230 articles in professional journals viz, 75 articles in Property Law, 22 in the Law of Trusts, another 34 in Constitutional Law; 21 in Criminal Law, 22 in Intellectual Property, 12 in Labour Law, 23 in Civil Procedure, 22 in Planning (regional) Law, and further 16 articles which in the publisher's Kitty and ready to be published. Indeed, taking a profound look into the numerous writings of Justice Umezulike, one wonders how he had employed

his time to be able to discharge his other obligations creditably.

The eminent jurist and social crusader took to activism outside the confines of the ivory tower, the courtroom and the literary world, he moved forward and scripted and delivered 170 papers, seminars and workshops within and outside the shores of Nigeria. The lecture and seminar papers targeted not just men of law but the civil society whose burden of ignorance Umezulike sought to lift off their ignorant and beleaguered heads. Some of these conferences and seminars were initiated and or were facilitated by himself, in tandem of course, with men of the same orientation. Umezulike sought to change the general perception of law and the justice system. The seminars and workshops he organised as head of the Enugu State judiciary had, in no small ways, enlivened, rejuvenated, reinvigorated, rejigged, energised and repositioned the judiciary, making honourable members of the Bench more enlightened and distinguished, and more dedicated in the due discharge of their duties. Indeed, the high pedigree of the judiciary and its personnel derives from and is a direct function of the superintending direction of an exalted man of letters and jurisprudence in the person of Innocent Azubike Umezulike, OFR, FCI Arb, FIIAN, CJEN, as he then was, whose masterly lecturing method permeated the minds and brains of the participants engendering in attitudinal and behavioural changes.

The scholarly Umezulike was very unassuming in his ways and never claimed or pretended that he was the closest thing to Methuselah in wisdom or that he was at par with Socrates, so he continually sought knowledge as he read ceaselessly and embarked on more issues-driven researches, for as George Santayana said, “the wisest mind has something yet to learn”. Indeed, he looked forward to the day he would honourably leave the Bench and re-join the academia to restart his academic work unhindered by the burden of justice administration. He had commenced research in three diverse areas namely, Trends in Trusts Concept, The Chief Judge of a State in Nigeria – My Experience, and Contemporary Study of Right of Occupancy Systems in Nigeria and Tanzania. These were still ongoing even as he hoped to tackle them as he left the Bench in

2016, however, he fell short of achieving these as cruel deaths got in the way and extinguished that burning academic zeal.

BON VIVANT

While his life and times were dominated by hard work crowned by Providence, a workaholic though he remained unto death, he agreed in toto with the age-old maxim that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. Umezulike always sought and found time to unwind, to recharge his system and replenish his intellectual faculties via entertainment sessions. High Chief Ozobu is on hand to recall that “He did socialise, he wouldn't want to go to public social functions though, anytime he had time to listen to good music, he would invite some of us. He socialised within his realm and avoided public places of entertainment, but he attended functions in so far as he knew they would not affect his function as a public officer.” Prof Agu agrees; “He was sociable and not extravagantly so. In his good moments, he enjoyed Osadebe's music and enjoyed red wine,” he said.

His kid sister Bridget recalled his love for the mashed dry coco yam delicacy,” he never wanted to share a meal of ukwa with anyone, never would invite any to a meal of ukwa. He would direct that such person is given other even more delicious dishes. I had prepared and kept mashed cocoyams in readiness for his expected return from London. God knows the best.” she sobbed in recollection.

On the social scene, Enuma Chukwu Esq says “He was a very, very sociable person, loved highlife, liked singing and usually sang after working hard, he usually unwound listening to music and even sang the tunes of some high life music. He attended functions of relations and friends, enjoyed spending time with allies and close associates, and he did so by creating time to listen to music. After functions, he would personally entertain guests by singing” Ray Roy disclosed that he organised and held regular parties for select friends where he entertained them lavishly with drinks, assorted eateries, suya, barbecue as well as live band performance, reminiscent of Owambe

housewarming parties of the Lagos high society.

He had needed to host a reunion of his alma mater – St. Vincent's Secondary School, Agbogugu. He had equally organised, by proxy, his Mgbidi Town Union meetings on many occasions in Enugu, though he never attended in person, on account of the sanctity of the office he occupied and perhaps because a prophet is never dishonoured except in his native land.

Nevertheless, Justice Prof Innocent Azubike Umezulike never hesitated or wavered in community service and general contribution to community development. Aside from the numerous pro bono services rendered as a lawyer, he assisted indigent persons from his area to acquire education from the secondary to the tertiary levels “He contributed a lot to village projects, identified very well with community development efforts, but don't expect to him as he was given to discretion. He had hosted our town and village unions meetings twice, he usually got the bills and settled them” Ray Roy said.

His in-law from neighbouring Mmaku, Chief Ngene recalls how he had assisted him personally and how through his intervention, he had assisted his community get public power supply under the State Rural Electrification programme. He said that he had also given both Mgbidi and Mmaku separate Customary Courts as well as gave many others employment pointing out he had assisted and encouraged him personally to further his education. Ray Roy insists that those he helped cannot forget him even when they fail to appreciate him. However, then, not all men are ingrates, His Worship Enuma Chukwu declares, “my association with him started in 1999 when I was in level 300, he became my lecturer and mentor at ESUT. So when he became a judge, the relationship grew; he employed me as a magistrate and made me Deputy Secretary of the State Judicial Service Commission, which I am now the Secretary. He was my father's friend and was known by all as a father figure to me...” he stated.

The Honourable former Chief Judge of Enugu State, Justice Prof Innocent Umezulike served humanity and his fatherland mostly within the realm of law. Moreover, in all his national and local assignments, he fully discharged his duties and was consequently lauded and bestowed and festooned with honours. Right from his university days, he was honoured as the best LL.M student in Unilag in the 1991/92 session and was a member of the Editorial Board of Nigerian Barr Journal paneled by the entire NBA, from 1992 to 1993. As a judge, he was a member of the Governorship and Legislation Houses Election Tribunal for Enugu and the Anambra States, 1991/1992 and was again Tribunal member for Plateau State, August/September 1992. Justice Umezulike led the Nigerian Delegation to Asian-African Legal Consultative Assembly in Kampala, Uganda from February 22nd to 27th 1996.

Back to Nigeria, he served as Secretary of the Taskforce on Company Incorporated by Guarantee in Nigeria from January to September 1993. In the same January 1993, he became Secretary of the National Committee on the Unification of Criminal Laws and Procedures in Nigeria. He also served Editor, Justice Journal 1993 series, member, Editorial Board, Nigerian Biannual Law Journal, member, Editorial Board, the University of Lagos Journal of Private and Property Law and was benighted by the National Honour of OFR – Order of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. He had also served as Secretary of the Ministerial Committee for the Revision of the Land Use Act in 1993 and became, Chairman of Failed Banks Tribunal Zone 6, Lagos from 1998 to 2000. He was also named Chairman, Composite Judicial Inquiry on Land Distribution or Allocation in Enugu State in 1999 on account of his competence, savvy and experience in Land Laws, on Dr Egumgbe's recommendation, before his becoming the Chief Judge of Enugu State in 2004. Due to his modesty and the demands of the office of Chief Judge of a State, Justice Prof Innocent Azubike Umezulike, humbly rebuffed persistent offers by his local Mgbidi community and others to invest him with a traditional title. He shunned royal investiture and aggrandisement in preference to remaining a beautiful Prince of the Law, whose whole essence was enmeshed in the knowledge, practice and adjudication of the Law.

He came to the legal scene providentially, saw and conquered in law. Prof Jack Osimiri says this of him, "Eastern Nigeria, Ndi-Igbo, Enugu State, Ajani Agu, Mgbidi and Awgu Local Government have lost an illustrious son, fearless lawyer, painstaking, highly resourceful academician, jurist, honest, principled and amiable gentleman. The human race has witnessed the exit of a great servant of the law" and Egumgbe Concourse; **"His arguments, debates, language of writing, are uncommon in the Nigerian literary world"**. Prof Gab Agu maintains that "he was a gentleman, an icon, a prodigious scholar and deep intellectual with a worldview, very urbane and masterly" even as the duo of Maria and Bridget insist that "he was like and shone like the moon, he had achieved much, he has lived a life of fulfilment, he was a powerful person and great personality, well known in his father's homestead, in his town, in Enugu, in Nigeria and globally through his works ... May his successors be greater than he was, may his progeny outshine him. We pray for God to sustain and guide them, they are very wonderful what the way they were able to care for their father and took him abroad for treatment. However, it is usually the offspring that buries the parent, and we will stand solidly behind these children to do exactly what their father urged them to do. We are resolved on that" they prayed, and Enuma enthused "He was a good, fulfilled, worthwhile and worthy life. He has lived a good life as a perfect gentleman. He was always well and impeccably dressed all the time he was alive. You could never see him off the card, i.e. not wearing a well-tailored suit and a tie on" he declared.

UNTIMELY DEMISE

Was it not one of the proverbs of the ancients that has it about the reality of death as an inevitable and inclusive fact of human existence in this pilgrim world; "good men must die, but death cannot kill their names. Hon Justice Innocent Azubike Umezulike, OFR, FCI Arb, FIIAN, former Chief Judge of Enugu State, a renowned scholar and jurist of global note, an icon of justice and a prince of the Law, was to all intents and purposes, a mortal and so he yielded to the invitation to the great beyond. He breathed his last as he was encircled by his offspring in the hospital room in a London hospital.

Justice Prof, Innocent Azubike Umezulike, was not the conventional nominal Christian but professed and practiced his belief in his life and work and consequently repulsed all temptations and the attraction of corruption. He was, therefore, able to transfer to his children a life of hard work, integrity, probity and profound morality. He never concealed his belief in Jesus Christ. According to Enuma Chukwu Esq, "His absolute faith in the deity our Lord Jesus Christ, he never hid his belief in Jesus, his teachings and makes him the centre of his life, because of his resolute belief in Jesus and believed in him to the last," he averred. Indeed Justice Umezulike's belief had become an open secret to his colleagues, friends and adversaries as he had adopted a signature phrase which he used as dedication in his literary works.

"I must announce immediately my absolute, and unwavering faith and belief in the Divinity and Deity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ whose protective arms and unction have enabled me to function in this pilgrim journey."

Prof. Uche Jack Osimiri, whom he affectionately called "the Human Jack of Pitakwa" (Port Harcourt); "...the human race has witnessed the exit of a great servant of the Law. Even as a judge, he continued to write his books and articles as he lived a life of excellence, great diligence and followed what was just and human," he mourned.

Dr. C.O.C Egumgbe, viewed the late Chief Judge thus; "as a judge, his court demeanour was one of the best. He rarely spoke or interrupted the proceedings. He was very unassuming but fearless in his decisions. He was indeed an institution... he loved passionately and scarcely forgot his injuries"... he volunteered. Some others who spoke sub rosa insisted that if you ever found yourself on the late erudite jurist's wrong side, you were sure to feel the impact of his repulsion while on the converse, if you remained on his affectionate list, then immeasurable would be his love, favour and charity to be lavished upon you. Still, some others insist that he perhaps may never take such hurts to heart and not resort to manifest vindictiveness, as he often reached out to known foes and invited them out for parties or dinners and never minded approaching them for resolution of issues along with his career line. He was such a beautiful enigma of Janus disposition.

Former President of Nigeria Olusegun Obasanjo remembered the late icon as **"a good man, an inspiring leader, a remarkable personality and a distinguished educationist whose intellect, integrity, hard work and vision impacted significantly on the legal profession and one who had shaped the lives of a younger generation of Nigerians. He served his nation and his faith with diligence, honesty, and professional integrity. His death has robbed the nation of the services of a great patriot and public officer of sterling character but his service record will remain a noble challenge to subsequent generations to emulate"**.

In summation of the life, work and times of this iconoclastic legal luminary, who though was viewed by mortals as suitable only for woodwork, who had considered a future of successful medical practice, but whom the masterly and deft hands of omniscient providence, had positioned and rooted in law, one designed to take Law and its practice to the élan, it is submitted that Justice Prof Innocent Azubike Umezulike, OFR, FCI Arb, FIIAN, lived a life of fulfilment and was providentially fully blessed-benedixitque plene divina providentia and departed this earth an **undisputed GREAT MAN**.

*An Honest man here lies at rest
As e'er God with his image blest;
The friend of man, the friend of truth,
Few heads with knowledge so informed;
The GREATEST MAN out of these lands;
He lives in bliss in the bosom of Jesus Christ.*