

PRE-COLONIAL POLITICAL POWERS IN IGBO LAND

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Abstract

The Igbo had an enviable political system which stems up from their respect for human dignity. Every life matters and everyone is given the opportunity to belong. The African approach to life, which is holistic is exhibited. Minority is not left behind but allowed to live by its principles until he is convinced. It is said: *Ife niile nasia , ka o si so onye anaghi ana*. The Igboland is known for its egalitarian approach, which permeates all the five social institutions.

Keywords: Politics, Colonialism, Igbo, Power.

Introduction

The Igbo people before inception of British colonial rule in the 20th century, were a politically fragmentary group, with a number of centralized chiefdoms such as Nri, Aro Confederacy, Agbor and Onitsha. Frederick Lugard introduced the Eze system of Warrant chiefs''. Unaffected by the Fulani War and time resulting from the spread of Islam in Nigeria in the 19th century, they became overwhelmingly Christian under colonization. (Adekson, Adedayo & Oluwa Kayode. 2004:90-100).

The areas covered follow the outline of Onwuejeogwu (1974). They can be defined as a geographical delimitation of places or culture centres where the highest frequency of the dominant, significant and typical trait complexes or patterns of culture are '*Igboid*'. These centres will typically extend to include those areas of culture margin, where the highest frequencies begin to thin out, intermingle and overlap with the neighbouring culture areas. Achebe, (1972: p 9) helps to identify five Igbo culture centres or zones. They are:

- a. The Southern Igbo: Ikwere, Aba, Owerri,Orlu,Okigwe, Bende, Umuahia
- b. The Northern Igbo: Onitsha, Udi, Enugu, Awgu, Aguleri, Nsukka
- c. The North – East Igbo: The whole of Abakaliki division
- d. South – Eastern Igbo: Afikpo, Uzuakoli, Abiriba, Abam, Ohafia, Arochukwu
- e. Western Igbo: Ahoada, Oguta, Asaba Ila, Agbor,Kwale.

Classical social anthropologists, Uchendu, V. (1965), Isichei (1976) among several others in giving historical accounts of the ancient Igbo society had described it as acephalous, segmentary or stateless. This classification is based on the fact that the pre-colonial Igbo society consisted of autonomous villages and village groups ruled via diffused authority without any sort of formalized, permanent or hereditary leadership systems. The Igbo people can be said to be republican by nature. They maintained a decentralized and acephalous Society.

Definition of Term: Political System

The term political system has acquired so wide an extension of definition and description, thus, several of its meanings abound. Political system, has been described as ‘the set of formal legal institutions that comprise a government or a state’ Onwugeogwu, M (1981). Classically, according to David Easton, political system is defined as a system of interaction in any society through which binding and authoritative decisions are made and implemented’. The Igbo political system was such a system of interaction geared towards maintaining social order in their communities.

Igbo Traditional Leadership System

Structure of Leadership

The Igbo people, unlike the Yoruba and the Hausa-Fulani had a complex and complicated system of administration in the pre-colonial era. Igbo society is reputed to have had a more decentralized political structure than any other major group. In the online comment of Candice Goucher Vancouver of Washington State University, on “Connecting African history to the major themes of world’s history”, he summarily expressed surprise on how democratic the Igbo were at such a savage time in history, the stone age.

The basic social unit among the Igbo has been a single extended family or kindred composed of several such families and the strongest political unit has normally been the village group. The Igbo generally had no kings or supreme Sovereigns. They operated a democratic system of government where executive, legislative and judicial powers were vested on the *Ọha-na-eze*, the Council of Elders; the Family; the Age-Grades and the *Ụmụada*, so splintered as to accommodate the participation of all. From the Village group emerged a general pattern of political process which was shared by all Igbo. As a first orientation, we may distinguish two layers of political structure: The village and the village group (Uchendu V. 965:40).

Government at the Village Level

The village level of government varies in size and population, the accepted practice is a direct democracy, a system which has survived the British contact. At the village-group level, a representative system is adopted; equality among the associating villages is maintained through the principle of equal “sharing of kola” and equal contribution of material resources needed for the survival of the group. The varying internal segmentation of each village does not change the principle of equality among the village-group. Each village is autonomous and “sovereign” in most matters affecting it. What may modify this sovereignty is the “charter,” the myth from which the village-group derives its solidarity. The village is further segmented into a number of lineages and each lineage into major and minor sub-lineages (Uchendu. V. I 965: 40-4 I).

Dike (1985; 56) relates that Government at the village level is an exercise of direct democracy: it involves the entire lineage and requires the political participation of all the male adults though it formed part of village-group, the widest political community.

The village is autonomous in its affairs and accepts no interference or dictation from any other group. The institutions which are utilized in the political processes of the village include Amala, Oba, the title-making societies, the Dibia fraternity (a priestly association), the secret society, oracles, and the age-grade association.

Authority in the Family

The lineage is made up of a number of territorially kin-based units called **Umunna**, a fluid term whose narrowest referent is the children of the same father but of different mothers: its widest referent is the patrilineal members, real or putative, who cannot intermarry one another. Gailey calls the term *Umunna*, a located patrilineage unit as a nation within a nation' Sometimes it is loosely applied to all the members of the village-group in contradistinction to other like village-groups. Edmund I. (1974:71-75) maintained that *Umunna* is made up of a number of compounds, it is in these compounds that traditional authority mainly lies. The compound (Ezi, Obi) consist of a number of economically independent households each with a man or a woman as the head of the household. All the householders and their dependents recognize the authority of the compound head and would not make a major political decision without first consulting with him. *Onye nwe ezi* (Obi) as the compound head is called has numerous ritual, moral, and legal rights and obligations (Isichei, F. (1976: 85)

Lineage

Within the family there are two Igbo positions of esteem which are normally institutionalized. These are *Okpara* (the first son) and *Ada* (The first daughter) they are accorded high status in the Igbo family. At a high level than the compound units we have the lineage, whose most important ritual figure is the *Okpara* (the first son), he is entrusted with the family heirlooms like *Ofọ na Ogu*, Chi and Obi. He holds the symbol of the family authority; he may be the oldest member of the Lineage or the oldest member of the senior segment of the Lineage; he is regarded as intermediary between his lineage and ancestors. His authority symbol, *Ofọ* is a branch of the tree known as *Detarium elastic*. This *Ofọ* is different from personal *Ofọ* of the priests and the medicine men. The former is a symbol of ritual authority: the latter is the symbol of priesthood (Onwugeogwu. M. 1981:82-84).

The Priestly Function of the Okpara

The Priestly function of the *Okpara* includes sacrificing to the earth deity (Ala) on behalf of all the members of the lineage. His political power is limited, he simply presides over the meeting in which disputes may be referred for arbitration; he does not normally initiate political action, but his consent is required for every action being planned. He cannot interfere in the internal affairs of the component lineage segments. His power to punish is limited to one sanction. According to Uchendu (1965:39-40) the succession to the office of *Okpara* follows the adelphic principle, passing from the incumbent to his next brother in line rather than from father to son. In this regard character is important for election or selection for office, the personality of office holder

determines how effective the office would be. If the person has a questionable character, the office may not be given to him.

Legislative Activities

Legislative activities are performed by all adult males meeting in general assembly called the *Amala* or *Oba*. The meeting place may be in an open square where all the people of the village converge. In modern times, village hall is built in an open square, in it their public matters are thrown open for discussion. Every villager who can contribute to the discussion is given a hearing. When the matter has been thoroughly talked out, the leaders from each lineage in the village retire for *izuzu* (consultation). The matters within the legislative competence of the village formerly ranged from the control and regulation of economic affairs to questions of war, peace, and defence. The economic control exercised by the village may take the form of boycotting an enemy market, regulating the burning of bush, setting the price of palm liquor demanded in the village or levying taxes to pay or the welfare schemes initiated by the village (Edmund, 1974: 29-33).

Age-Grade

They were involved in the administration of the village. They served as the defence of the villages against external enemy. They acted for the preservation of social ethos and maintenance of order. They helped in the implementation of policies made by the council of elders. They also perform ceremonial and cultural functions during important ceremonies in the village or communities. The Age Grade System, for Ikpechukwuka (2019:89-92), is among the Igbo fundamental institution of government and principle of traditional political organization, which is also variedly developed in the cultures of some other African nationalities. The Age Grade System is a manifestation of the republican way of life of the Igbo people as well as their popular system of direct village democracy. The roles played by the Age Grades have in recent times expanded to incorporate that of security militants, economic development, policy making and policy implementation among several others. As a multi-functional institution, the Age Grade System through the creation of opportunities for systematic political participation by every member of the community strengthen popular democratic process as well as the stable development of the political and other related institution.

Government of The Village - Group (Town)

Village government is based on direct democracy. The village- group government is neither a federation nor a confederation. It has no well-defined powers except on matters affecting the earth-goddess and the market places. What laws or decisions it makes are not binding on any village which is not represented or which disagree with the others. The power of village group is based not on the possession of a standing army, nor on any admitted right to use coercion, but rather on the consensus of the villages. Edmund (1974) added that, in the assembly every villager has equal voice. There is no majority decision. The village representatives are not a permanent body of legislators' at each session for their ability to present the point of view of their village. They have a delegate

and not a “representative” status and cannot commit their village to any matter not previously discussed and agreed upon by it.

Okija Political System and Administrative Structure as a Sample of Political System in Igbo Land

In the generic sense of it, the picture of the Igbo political community which emerges from these settings is one that is territorially small enough to make direct democracy possible at the village level as well as representative assembly at the village-group level; a government in which the principle of equality is respected; in which the use of force is minimal or absent; and in which there are leaders rather than rulers, and political cohesion is achieved by rules rather than by laws and by consensus rather than dictation. In general, the Igbo have not achieved allied political structures which can be called a federation, a confederacy, or a state. Just like living organism or society, culture enjoys some elements of persistence and sometimes, some elements of edge and adaptation.

Particularly, taking Okija as a case study, Okija is a homogenous community with a common ancestral descent. With a democratic system operative in the land, the leadership and government are hierarchically structured; progressively, beginning from the kindred level to village and town level. In Okija community today, there is an exalted position or office of the Igwe Okija who is politically the village head and ruler of the community. Tracing down the lane of history, in antiquity, the elders, with the most elderly person called Okporo heading the group were used to constitute the administrative executive body in the community. When a certain Igwe in the past had no son, a supposed heir to the throne, another person ascended the throne through a consensus reached by the community.

Given the enigmatic problem involved in making the right choice of selecting who occupies the throne if there is no heir available, it has come to be rotational among the thirty villages in Okija’s hierarchical order of seniority. Recently, the position and function have now been shifted from being by hereditary to someone who by merit is elected as the choice and mandate of the people. With his Council of chiefs, he spearheads all matters pertaining to life, progress, peace and unity and development of the town. However, although very rare, in exceptional cases, he can resign when he deems fit and makes his intention explicit. The Igwe in collaboration with his council of *ndi Obi na Ichie* composing of all villages in the community makes his primary concern the maintenance of peace and order in the community. Since the Igwe and even his councilors cannot on their own stand out policing people as if they are men of the force, there are certain political agencies and traditional institutions created primarily to help foster peace and harmony, growth and development for the people.

Merits of the Igbo Traditional Leadership System

The Igbo traditional leadership system has many positive ends attached to it.

1. It is by nature democratic- It is democratic in the sense that it involves all adults, albeit in groups. By converging at the village square or other designated meeting points, issues affecting the community are deliberated on and actions to be taken

on such an issue will be jointly agreed upon. Efforts are made to elucidate issues and convince all or bring the other sides to a witless shade. The more witty presentation wins the support of the community. Ikpechukwuka (2015) maintains that decisions thus reached are jointly implemented and more often than not, a monitoring team will be constituted to oversee the implementation process.

2. Cookey. S. (1974) avers that leadership in the Igbo traditional society is representative. It is representative in the sense that every adult male is entitled to attend. Even in situations whereby clan leaders (usually elders) are required to serve as representatives of their respective clans, they bring feedback home. This is unlike what obtains in democracies as practiced in Nigeria in which representatives only visit constituencies when they are to canvass for re-election. Through this means, every member of the community is kept abreast of issues.
3. According to Onwuejeogwu (1956), the Igbo traditional leadership system is development oriented. The communities are mobilized to put in place social amenities like: walk path, gutters and drainages and the village arena.
4. Edmund (1974) relates the issue of accountability, which helps to keep off fatal misunderstandings. Leaders in the Igbo traditional system “make every effort to be accountable to the people. It is believed that any leader that lives unjustly or who exhibits bias in his judgment is exposing himself and his family to the wrath of the gods. Thus leaders make sure judgments are delivered without fear of favour.
5. Also, the succession method in Igbo traditional leadership system in most cases is based on seniority or achievement. Thus there is no issue of having to fight and spill blood over who is to succeed the current leader except in a few exceptional cases. This is unlike what is obtainable in Nigeria’s democracy in which every election is characterized by electoral rigging, violence, and political assassinations. Such trends discourage many qualified candidates from coming out to vie for public positions thus leaving politics in the hands of mediocre.

Conclusion

The traditional political system of the Igbo people did not allow the colonial masters any penetration into the polity and life of the people. It was a society full of itself without beggars and people on the margin of life. It was an egalitarian group with Ubuntu principle of leaving nobody behind. The British only penetrated with force of power and turned the society upside down. This shows that when politics is honest, it is intertwined with the culture and life of the people. Democracy or any system of government should emanate naturally from the lifestyle of the people and this is evident when the social institutions are naturally faceted into one another with little or no efforts.

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