

# AN ESTABLISHED DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTION AMONG THE IGBO COMMUNITY EVEN BEFORE THE BRITISH COLONIZATION: A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical investigation of the established democratic institutions among the Igbo community before the British colonization. Igbo are cultured ethnic group or community found in the southeastern Nigeria, who have been well noted for their republican nature and preference for quasi-democratic approaches of leadership. Prior to the coming of the colonial masters' historical antecedents' shows that democracy formed the basis of human relations from the household level down to the larger societies among the Igbo people of pre-colonial Nigeria. The pre-colonial Igbo political system was built on democracy, and advocates for equality before the law. The Igbo also operate decentralized leadership system where the power of decision making is not from a particular person or group of persons not minding the position of such persons, group or institution in the leadership structure, but is based on a consensus agreement. Powers are separated among the various democratic institutions, which include; Village assembly, Ozotitled holders, Umunnas, household heads, age grades, cults and umuadas. Any decision to be taking has to involve the populacethrough the institutions, as mentioned above. Before any conclusion is made on any issue, there will be institution by institution deliberations on a particular subject until a consensus is reached. Though in recent years, this democratic institution which sufficiently sustained peace, justices and equity among the Igbo people of pre-colonial Nigeria has suffered a big setback. This paper recommends among othersthat the political institutions should be promoted and effectively involved in decision making and conflict resolution activities across the Igbo nation aimed at promoting more peaceful coexistence in Igbo land.

**Keywords:** Igbo, democracy, institutions, pre-colonial, British, Colonization, Community.

## Introduction

Igbo are found in the southeastern part of Nigeria. The operating structure of Igbo people is autonomous and is characterized as acephalous, i.e. "absence of a centralized administration" (Ibenekwu, 2019). Therefore, the Igbo state was segmental and equitable society. Paramount kings were in the northern and western part of Nigeria including Obas and Emirs. Interestingly, however, each Igbo village is typically governed as a republic, autonomous or sovereign state. Nevertheless, in the pre-colonial Igbo community, there are other bodies or institutions responsible for legal, legislative and administrative roles, which includes; the family institution, the village council, the ozotitled holders, the age groups and Ala (Emmanuel and Obi, 2012).

The Family institution is one of the most well-known pre-colonial Igbo community institutions, which was widely perceived as the central core of all democratic institutions. It consists of people from the same family. Not just that, the titled holder named 'Okpara' was self-leader for each family group. The Okpara regulates and handles any disputes with the family. On behalf of the entire household, the Okpara conducts ceremonial and religious roles. The most significant point, though, is that every village has been ruled as a sovereign body and that every head of the family (Okpara) in the village has been counted.

The council of Elders help to maintain law and order and settle disputes between families and communities in the pre-colonial Igbo societies. OzoTitled Holders may be known in the pre-colonial Igbo culture as the highest honorary title granted to particular individuals. Such person must be famous, brave and rich to become an Ozo title holder. The most remarkable thing is that this is not inherited. They settle differences and arbitrate them. Not only this, but the heads of families (the Okparas) also offered helpful advice. The age grade of the pre-colonial Igbo

culture is yet another significant body. They are young men based on sex. The age-grade conduct a variety of duties, including peacekeeping and justice, collective hygiene, mutual assistance during the period of harvest, law enforcement, among many others (Cynado, 2013).

According to Cynado (2019), in the district administration, the priests were also not exempted. They were granted great significance because they were called the mouthpiece of the gods, for instance, the long juju of Aro. Even the council of elders consults priests on issues beyond their expertise, that is to say, questions requiring divine intervention. Consequently, the Igbo community prior to the advent of colonialism was governed by several entities and powers were shared equally. In the pre-colonial Igbo culture, Ala is another democratic institution. Ala is generally referred to as the land goddess. The Ala is to judge cases such as kidnapping, killing, adultery, among many others. There is a priest named Ala's priest. The chief priest interprets every Ala's proclamation. That is why Igbo trusts in the needs of Amadioha, Igwe-ka-ala, Ogbaegbu, among others. In line with the above assertion, this paper sought to conduct a critical investigation on the established democratic institution in the Igbo community even before British colonization.

### **Elements of Democracy in the Administration of the Pre-Colonial Igbo Community.**

Several classical and social anthropologists gave a sceptical, cum stateless description of the historical past of ancient Igbo people and their society. This description of pre-colonial Igbo is championed by the fact that the pre-colonial Igbo society was made up towns and villages which enjoyed independence and were ruled by the general authority without any fixed, permanent or hereditary system of leadership (Okonkwo et al., 2014; Ibenekwu, 2019). The Igbo can be described by definition as republican. They held democratic and reflective institutions. The democratic culture is defined by the change to the number of individuals or by the setting or restricting of persons capable of exercising influence in terms of the number of values as many individuals as possible can wield authority, whether through personal energy, control or money.

Apart from such towns as the Nri Kingdom and Arochukwu which reportedly had king priest and Onitsha town which had Obi's, the village which was seen as the largest political units was ruled based on a consultative assemblage of the common people. The conventional Igbo leadership structure was an experiment of direct democracy in the village (Ezenagu, 2017).

In Chikendu's words (2013), in pre-colonial times, many Igbo democratic groups, especially known towns such as Arochukwu, Oguta and the antique kingdom of Nri, had already founded democratic leadership institutions. All in all, the political structure of Igbo involves proven ranks and honorary posts. There were also major variations in the national organization. The basic unit was the father, the children, then the village and the city was the most operational one. The village communities in the kingdoms were not coordinated. A Council of Elders divided authority on various levels with other classes like; age-grades, named men, women, and ceremonial priests, among others, carried out the leadership of the Igbo nation.

The Igbo speaking people have been very notable for their preference for decentralized systems of rulership, and as a result, the idea of centralized or single leadership structure could not found roots among the Igbo societies, even back to the era before colonization. Leadership structure and institutions among the Igbo pre-colonial Nigeria were much decentralized, democratic in every process and were designed to pursue the good of all people from the household to the larger community. Down to the larger societies, the pre-colonial Igbo societies were more united by a common language, culture, and religious ideology, economic and social structures, as opposed to a central authority. Each community consisted of several independent villages made up of many different villagers, and many families called the 'umunna' (Ogbalu 2015).

### **The Family-Head Leadership as a Democratic Institution in the Pre-Colonial Igbo Community.**

Typically, at the household level, the father is assumed to be the head; however, while the father is the head of each household in the nuclear family settings, the oldest man in the family automatically is seen as the chief of the family within the extended family settings, and thus, the fathers become representatives of their households. For the Igbo of the pre-colonial Nigeria, age was a major criterion for assuming this position. Interestingly, the family leadership institutions in pre-colonial Igbo societies were built on the fabric of democracy, notwithstanding, the power conferred on the eldest male member of the larger family, decisions on issues of common concern is reached in agreement with the representatives, which is the male heads from each household.

Dioka (2014) stated that the family is the smallest political body in the pre-colonial Igbo society. Family means a lot to an Igbo man in general. The formed family comprises men, women and infants, parents, sisters and siblings, relatives, nieces, nephews, grandparents, grandchildren, babies, and all with their blood who is related to them. The father is the family's representative and has tremendous power and influence.

Particularly, within the nuclear family settings, the father, who is the head of the family is also seen as a symbol of authority. As such is traditionally and naturally conferred with the ofo title, which among the Igbo peoples is seen as a "symbol of political authority, law, moral uprightness, truth, justice and the link between the living and the dead" (Ajaegbo, 2014), the head of the family also functions as a member of the council of elders. The father as the head of the family, has an obligation to oversee the affairs, welfares, execution of economic activities and good grooming of the members of his households, this includes his children and wife or wives as the case maybe. Interestingly, even at this level, democracy is also maintained, as Ajaegbo, (2014) noted that the father as the head of the household does not direct the affairs of the family in isolation. Rather he relies on the consultation of responsible and older sons as well as his trusted wife or wives as the case maybe when making decisions that affect the entire members of the family. Family gatherings typically take place on family members' problems; consensus attainment formed the basis of validating the cause of action to be taken (Ojo, 2015).

In the larger family settings, the Umunna serves as a democratic institution via which disputes especially those related to land among families, are resolved. The Umunna is comprised of different families sharing patrilineal heritage (Olisa, 2012). At this level, the father being the head of the households, becomes a representative of the households. The Umunna is an assemblage of male heads of households, as well as other significant members of the family and his head by the oldest male member traditionally called di-okpala (Ajaegbo, 2014).

The di-okpala is seen as an advocate of harmony, solidarity and justice within the extended patrilineal family. As such, the di-okpala presides over major family matters, such as the issues relating to the sharing of family inheritance, this includes houses, lands, the performance of family rituals, consolidation of patrilineal marriage arrangements as well as in settlement of disputes between husband and wife and among families within the patrilineal settings. Thus, it can be seen that the di-okpala enjoys a considerable degree of power over all other family members. However, despite these culturally and traditionally influenced affluence and authority ascribed to the di-okpala, democracy remains the bedrock for which the di-okpala is expected to perform his traditional obligations. Matters concerning the entire family are resolved in consultation with the Umunna's and is based purely on democratic processes such as dialogues, agreement, cooperation and compromise, with great tolerance for opposing views (Ajaegbo, 2014).

Thus, each member of the Umunna are bonded by the resolutions reached on given matters as an outcome of the series of "igbaizu" (consultation) and "nkwokolita" (consensus) embarked on by the di-okpala and his assemblage of Umunna's. While every member of the Umunna is allowed to air their opinions and concerns on given issues, however, such a person is expected to abide by the decision reached by the general house and as such defaulting automatically warrants some sanctions which could be ostracism or payment of fines as decided by the di-okpala in agreement with the Umunna's (Ajaegbo, 2014). The Umunna system ensured that democracy is achieved and justice is served to every member of the family. It abhorred the killing, suppression and uncultured suppression of a fellow kindred, especially in such areas as the wrongful takeover of a fellow kindred land or even wife (Kanu, 2015).

#### **Village/Town Assembly- (NdiObodo, Mba) as a Democratic Institution in Pre-Colonial Igbo Community.**

The village as earlier noted formed the largest political units in pre-colonial Igbo societies. Members of the village assembly were drawn from the many families which comprised the village. The village assemble mostly comprised of warlords, seasoned hunters, senior male members of families, medicine men, elders, ezemou/ezenwayi (priest/princesses of deities), title holders, men of wisdom and other influential male members of the village. The village assemblies are seen as the administrator of the entire village, asserting the highest executive, legislative and judicial authority (Ajaegbo, 2014). The headship of the village assembly was based on two criteria, the first one is age, under this arrangement, the oldest member of the village elders has traditionally conferred the mantle of rulership over the village council, on the second arrangement the custodian of the Ofo becomes the head of the village council, these were the major criteria for the selection of headship over the village council.

As the body with the highest executive, legislative and judicial authority, the village assembly was chiefly responsible for protecting lives and properties of villagers, planning and implementation of developmental activities, they were also involved in the resolution of conflicts which has defiled the capacities of the Umunna's cum the council of elders (Olisa, 2012)

Importantly, the head of the village assembly enjoys a considerable level of respects, however, does not enjoy unilateral power, especially in the decision making process or mapping and implementation of a course of action. Decisions relating to a war declaration, market creation, establishment of public institutions, inter-lineage or intervillage disputes and every other decision which affects the general functioning of the village are reached with due consultation of every member of the village council, through a series of meetings which are often held in the market square or any other location which decided upon by the members of the village assembly. In the words of Ajaegbo, (2014), in the pre-colonial Igbo societies;

The village assembly head enjoyed the respect and commanded the obedience of his ministers, especially by virtue of the fact that he was the link between the living and the ancestors. He was a constitutional leader, and ipso facto, political, administrative, military and judicial decisions were taken by the collective efforts of the constituent members of the village assembly. Disagreements were resolved by consultation, consensus and compromise – a political action was often taken by the assembly caucus variously called ndichie, ndiisiofo, ndiisiozo, ndiokaokwu or ndiamala – all translated to mean a small group of wise, courageous, transparent, titled and knowledgeable elders and men of intelligence. The village square (amala, ama nzukoora) was the common meeting place for enacting laws and taking vital decisions affecting the village group. It was the political, religious and social and commercial centre of the village group (P. 19).

#### **Council of Elders/ Ozotitled holders as a Democratic Institution in Pre-Colonial Igbo Community.**

Minor conflicts were settled by the Community in the justice system, while major conflicts were settled by the council of elders or Amala in the traditional Igbo community. Generally, elders are revered and valued. During both good and difficult days, elders are sometimes asked for guidance. A leader is always supposed, to tell the truth. The head of the village also incorporates the priest of the region. An elder may also be a competent adult who is in charge of traditional roles within the family and the village. To this end, the Igbo system of government is both secretive, inclusive democracy and bulwark of all the family members or the people against some sort of inequality. The title of Ozo holding is granted to the rich and powerful people in the society or village. The designation honours the leader of the family and then may lead meetings with elders on topics concerning the community. The conference with the term Ozo is always a product with progress (Onuoha & Omenma, 2017).

#### **Age Grade as a Democratic Institution in Pre-Colonial Igbo Community.**

According to Igwe (2015), age-grade is an aggregation of people of the same age group. Age grade participants are selected based on their birth at a particular time. However, certain Igbo organizations pick ages grade institution members based on those born in a given year, certain memberships last two years. The age grade institutions serve the following roles in Igbo cultural society:

- The carry out civic duties including clearing highways, constructing wooden bridges and markets, among others.
- They worked in the village administration
- They acted as a reserve in support of the outer enemy cities.
- The police were functioning as law and order enforcement forces.
- They contribute to the implementation of the mapped out strategies.
- They helped the top rulers and the council of elders to monitor the misuse of powers.
- They also conduct ritual and cultural roles in the village or societies during important ceremonies.

According to Igwe (2015), the Age Grade institution is a central government agency and a mainstream political body, but also has diverse innovations in the societies of some other African nationalities which the Igbo are included. The position played by the ages has recently increased to include, among others, defence, military, cultural, political and policy-making. The Age Grade institution as a multi-functional structure enhances the

mainstream electoral mechanism and thus the inclusive growth of the political and other related systems by providing mechanisms for systematic civic involvement for all community members. Identifying certain general characteristics of the conventional Igbo leadership structure is also fitting. The age grades make laws of their own, and only old people are allowed to follow laws which the elders approve depending on their merit. Their succession to power is not a tradition in the Igbo political system. The village's problems are addressed periodically by age grade institutions members.

### **Umuada as a Democratic Institution in Pre-Colonial Igbo Community.**

According to Cynado (2013), the umuadainstitution is an aged socio-cultural body of females whose interests are uniform. As was told, the group formed a power block or unit; on the one hand, it played the part of the sisters and the children and on the other hand, mothers and wives. In the pre-colonial era of Igbo division, the umuada worked as the watches and guards of marriage institutions. The umuadas' also played key roles in the resolution of family disputes.

They were allowed to exclude any objectionable woman or wife from the position of their husband, during which they said that a woman was rejected in marriage, "let no one look at her again in the house of their husbands." The declarations were widespread in the Igbo land, and once made, they were definitive because they were undisputed. That married women tried to preserve peace and order as much as possible in her family so as to not incur the wraths of the umuadas'. An association of women from groups in the field of studies was also the other institution of Ndi-luru di. Since they were also qualified to take part in the umuada community in their varied social events, the organization took a double aspect view. This encouraged the inclusion of women from outside cultures. Ndi-Luru di was remembered, valued and secured as its name implies. It is suspected that they abandoned their families and people in another culture to settle, nurture and succeed, by adoption, because of their determination. In the story of Okonkwo who has committed sacrilege in his paternal house, fled to his mother's home and was quickly received, harboured, absorbed, and rehabilitated, Achebe correctly understood the flagrant sense of this relational arrangement through marriage. Therefore, the connection is binding (Onuoha and Omenma, 2017).

### **Cult as a Democratic in Pre-Colonial Igbo Community.**

In words of Onyemaechi, (2010), the Uju Ede Cult is a widely regarded woman social body for maintaining spiritual uprightness, and it was the leading women's society in pre-colonial traditional Igbo culture. This became a practical guide and a platform for social experiences. The cult is celebrated once a year, particularly before the cocoa yam harvest, historically considered being a female crop. Neither woman was permitted to enter and was only suspected of theft or some other social sin. Documented robbers were revealed and mocked by songs and their husbands. The women put up their very best costumes and decorations for this festival and displayed their power, ability and solidarity.

The cult groups are of male and female groups. Taking Uju Ede Cult, for a woman to apply for the Uju Ede Cult institution, such a woman is expected to have held an EgwuNwa (that is, a child's birth ceremony) or after having 2 or 3 children. Once the EgwuNwa was established, a woman became recognized as an important entity and was entitled to represent the Eju Ede Cult women's organization. Intended member will be asked to play the "IgbuUmu," which was when she was advised to inform participants whether she had gained her wealth as she had to earn more wealth and her cocoa yam had to be very large in order for a woman to enter. Two sticks were put in the field in the process of "IgbuUmu," with a palm front attached. At this point, the intendant will also be obliged to swear how she and her family had obtained their property. She had never been to cheat or to engage in anything bad since the moment before her death. If the story is real, a kitchen knife has been given to her, and the party begins shortly afterwards. She would not become a candidate again, either, if she lost (Igwe, 2015).

The ritual at the Uju Ede also includes appeasing the ancient spirits and goddess of the earth. In the case of women in society, the business always demonstrated a civil aspect. All experienced women in society were eligible for membership. In matters affecting gender dignity, morals and sanitation, culture operated mainly as the judicial and administrative arm of government. The key function in the community was a spiritual one, but it should still serve the interest of anyone belonging to it by putting maximum weight in its membership. If a member had been found to have involved in stealing after initiation, it could not eat and drink like the rest of the cults from the same bow (Igwe, 2015).

The woman leaders of UjuEde society entitled themselves in the community to the same rights and privileges as their friends. It was free, during initiations and rituals, to cross the palm frond (a tabuist for non-male ritual), and to travel through the villages at the initiatory Ekpe and Okonko ritual rites, a taboo for non-members. They are allowed to eat and drink throughout rituals. At death, people even had the same burial privileges with their male peers and the "ikpupuahia" (a cycle where the children and descendants of the late mourned her by conducting the rites in her market, led by the 'isinkpuru' masquerade, in a pilgrimage from her residence to a market square) (Dioka, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

This paper aimed at reviewing the democratic institutions that are found in the Igbo nation prior to the coming of the colonial masters. Igbos are peace-loving and democratic people right from the time immemorial. There are also good things about Igbo's conventional leadership system. It is egalitarian and democratic. When gathered at the village square or other approved gatherings, steps to be taken are unanimously decided on, with majority vote prevailing. Democratic leadership is symbolic of the traditional Igbo culture. This unity, peace and cordial relationship among the Igbos in the pre-colonial era were not achieved without the help of some institutions. The institutions include, among others; the family, age grade, kindred, council of elder, the umuadas, i.e. the women guild, the village institution, towns unions, among others.

In recent years, this Igbo democratic institution has been neglected due to civilization cum technological advancement. This paper recommends, among others, that the democratic institutions should be promoted and effectively involved in decision making and conflict resolution processes aimed at promoting a more peaceful leadership and healthy living among inhabitants in Igbo land. More so other tribes should borrow a leaf from the Igbo tribe by establishing their democratic institutions, thereby encouraging total democracy at ethnic group level and Nigeria in general.

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