

THE IGBO LEADERSHIP SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to study the concept of leadership, an important phenomenon presented in life as it is very necessary where people live together in any society or community such as the Igboland. Leadership is all about maintenance of laws and orders, formation of rules and regulations, protection of life and property and general development of towns and citizens. The absence of these is anarchy, chaos and underdevelopment. What really determines leadership is not its definition alone but its application in practical situation. Therefore, this study takes a look at different styles, which may be right or wrong. From the findings, we discover that the Igbo system of leadership is built on democratic principles – “Ochichi onye kwuo uche ya”. It further highlights the traits of good and bad leadership, the qualities of leadership; the good ones to be upheld and the bad ones to be avoided, as to make for successful leadership in the dynamic world today.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership means the ability to be in charge. The people being led are the followers. Leading implies a shared direction and this in turn, often suggests that all parties to the leadership relationship have a common goal or at least similar or compatible goals. Leading also may be seen in terms of occupying a position within a group and fulfilling a group's goal. To Ukaegbu (2005:248), leadership is a process of defining and clarifying the responsibility and accountability centres, policies and procedures.

The leader should have the “capacity to lead” having that ingredient of personality which causes men to follow successful solutions of problems and mould individuals into a team. The art of leadership is synonymous with influence and power. Therefore, the leader of a group is a man invested with authority and power by members of the group. More so, for him to make it as a leader, he must possess some powers which are either given to him by the constitution of the group under his control, as it is the case in a democratic society. In that case, the leader is not above sanctions from the members of the group for his excesses.

Power may on the other hand be assumed by the leader, by merely arrogating such powers to himself as in the case in an autocratic system of government. In that case, the leader is more like a “head” performing the functions of “leadership”. His influence is so enormous that he may not suffer any legal sanctions from members of the group. He rather demands absolute obedience (which is usually grudgingly given) from members of his political group (Chukwu, 1994:19-20). Nonetheless, Ehusani (2007:9) states that, in the primitive society, leadership belongs to the strong and valiant, to the daring and courageous, but behind these attributes was always the need to protect the weak of the clan, to hold and defend territory, to feed and train the young and to promote discipline and well being among the group.

Expanding his view, Ehusani posits that human society progressed; the burden of leadership naturally fell upon a charismatic, selfless and service driven individual whose power is rooted

in transparent determination to use individual strength and wisdom, unity of purpose and the entrenchment of group order for the benefit of all. Put succinctly, it is a well known fact that no organization or society can exist in isolation of government, be it democratic or autocratic. To what extent a society or organization democratizes or dictates is inconsistently dependent on its socio-cultural milieu, whether it is African, European America, Asia etc. This paper therefore, reviews the leadership system using Igbo land as a reference point.

THE IGBO TRADITIONAL LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP

Aghamelu (2009:140-145) is of the opinion that Igbo traditional leaders are symbolic socio-religious unifying forces among the communities. This automatically suggests two types of areas of leadership – viz: social and religious. Fundamentally, the Nigerian Igbo precisely, regards their leaders as human beings who claim to have some areas to the spiritual forces or powers. Some of these leaders are called priest with diversified classifications, others are mere messengers who also have access to the affairs of the spirits through charisma or acquired skills of professionalism.

Expanding her view also, states that the priest is one who teaches morality and therefore should not break the moral codes she teaches people to keep. The social leaders are those who hold the position of social or political importance in the communities. They can be single leaders like in the families, or group leaders like in towns, villages or institutions. A titled man of any category is also a social leader. Kings are also social leaders. Worthy of note is that they must be free born. Among many African traditional societies, a poor man in the sense of “never do well” has no chance at all in the social race for leadership. The reason being that; a social leader should be one who has more than enough to be able to give his followers from his abundance.

To Lemchi (2010:46), leadership involves other people, subordinates or followers by their willingness to accept direction from their leader. Group members help define the leader’s status and make the leadership process possible. Without subordinates, all the leadership qualities of a ruler would be irrelevant. Nwizu (2009:26-27), in deliberating on Igbo leadership systems, posits that Igbo peoples’ life is a mixture of political, social, economic, cultural and religious activities. Most Igbo literatures reflect one or two of these activities as they are practised by the people. The Igbo system of governance which is also part of Igbo peoples’ life style is not left out in their literatures. An instance can be seen in their principles of democracy stated and explained below:

- The family and the *ọkpara*
- The kindred and the *ojiọfọ*
- The village or town and the elders (*Ndiichie*)
- Female leadership service in the village (*otu ụmụada/ụmụọkpu*)

Nwizu expanding her view asserts that the above mentioned units are guided strictly by democratic principles which Igbo system of governance is rooted on. ‘*Ọchịchị onye kwuo uche ya*’ is basically democratic in the sense that it allows for equal participation, consultation, respect for authority and consensus that must be reached before taking decision. An instance of this can be seen in an Igbo novel called *Omenụkọ* by Nwanna (1933). It is a pioneer Igbo novel that becomes a mirror which x-rays the Igbo democratic principles of governance as it was practised even before the advent of the Europeans. Eze Mgbrogwu, in a town in Igboland had the interest and peace of his people (*Mgborogwu*) at heart. He wanted a

continuation of good governance after his death. He called on Omenuko, a stranger living with him and working with him as well to hold his warrant after his death until his son Obiefula comes of age. Eze Mgborogwu chose Omenuko for this delicate office because he had been working with him and could vouch for his integrity.

But that did not make him to enforce Omenuko to rule the people. He knew he had a son (diokpara) and his race in the governance or leadership of the people. He knew also that there were Umunna who had the right to choose who should rule them. Because of these facts, Eze Mgborogwu called the “amaala” (Mgborogwu people) and said:

Ọ ga-adị mma nke ukwu ma a si na unu emee ka Omenuko were warrant jidere Obiefula nwa m rue mgbe ọ ga-enwe ike ichikota obodo m... Ana m ekwu nke a ma ọ bu na district commissioner ekwe (pg 17).

I will be good enough if you will allow Omenuko to hold my warrant for Obiefula till he is able to rule my town. I am saying this if the District Commissioner will oblige.

More so, Nwizu, in expanding her view asserts that the above is a total democracy which is a submission to the will of the masses. Eze Mgborogwu did not use his power as the Eze in council to enforce Omenuko to rule them. Omenuko himself did not take laws into his hands because eze had said that he should hold briefly for his son and therefore that is the final. He rather exhibited another aspect of democratic principle which is very vital in leadership, ‘dialogue’.

He called the people of Mgborogwu and dialogued with them, seeking their consent and approval which they gave. It was in that meeting they agreed on how and when they should meet the government for handing over. Succinctly put, in a typical Igbo system of leadership, a tree does not make a forest, ‘umunna bu ike’, one person does not take decision alone on matters affecting the community. There is a meeting of the general assembly called ‘Oha na eze’, ‘amaala’, or ‘umunna’, where there is equal participation, consensus and decision taken by the rule of the majority.

The Family and the Okpara

Family can be seen as the smallest political and administrative unit in Igboland. it is also made up of a number of closely related individuals that included the husband, wife, children, uncle(s), aunt, household servants and other individual. The head of the family who in most cases is the oldest male (okpara) exercises both moral and administrative authorities according to Nwizu (2009:30). Worthy of note, the okpara cannot arrogate power to himself. It is the unanimous decision of the assembly and not of any individual no matter how wise he thinks he may be, that matters. There is no room for dictatorship in Igbo village government or leadership.

Put succinctly, the family head (okpara) and other members of the family make and implement routine government and administrative decisions on behalf of the family. Their jurisdiction extends to such areas as the family land, property and conflicts arising from family possessions, marriage and general welfare. The family head holds the family *ofo* and consults the oracles and deity on behalf of other members of the family.

To Nwosu (2002) the leader of the extended family, who is usually the eldest male member, wields a lot of power in the administration of the family lands, property, women and shrine. In doing this, the “okpara” should be guided in his wisdom, custom, and advice of other senior and influential members of the extended family. Olisa (2002) in corroboration warns that:

Respect for family authority then, is the starting point of the civil life of the individual. Relationship with other families is also maintained by the family head and he sees that conflicts within the family and between its members and outsiders are properly resolved.

The Kindred and the Ojiọfọ

This is the next leadership unit after the family in which the individual identifies himself. It is made up of different families that are held together by one ancestor. Each kindred is under the leadership of Onyeisiala (ojiọfọ). To Nwizu (2009) also, the okpara holds the *ọfọ* of the kindred and performs all the duties attached both to his leadership position and to the *ọfọ* as the binding ritual symbol of the kindred.

The vehicle of administration is the meeting of the kindred over which the okpara presides. Any adult is free to attend but usually the deliberations are directed and most of the decisions are taken by the okpara and the most elderly adults. Influence is extended in varying degrees by titled members, medicine men (Ndidibia). Instance of this arm or sub-division of leadership in Igboland can be seen from an Igbo novel called *Ahubara Eze Ama*, by Oraka (1975). The novelist, Oraka, demonstrates consultative and consensus nature of Igbo system of leadership and dispute resolution process through the Umunna. The scenario was in the Igbo village of Umueze, where Obiesie impregnated Nwaego and Nwaego’s parents took her to Obiesie. Obiesie’s father (Ifeke) was angry with him because he did not want Obiesie to get married to Nwaego in the first place. Trouble issued and they started quarrelling which attracted neighbours. Immediately “Umunna” gathered for a meeting, after hearing from both parties, consensus was reached and the matter was settled.

The Villages or Towns and the Elders (Ndiichie)

To borrow a leaf from Nwosu (2002), the village is made up of several kindreds that come together. They may intermarry themselves if they are not from the same ancestor. The Igbo system of leadership is not centralized like the Hausa and Yoruba counterparts. In effect, the Igbo system of leadership, the segmented and historic kingdoms inclusive are “open” and democratic. Nwizu (2009:14) is of the opinion that in most communities, the highest governing authority is invested on the council of elders. The council which operates as the highest legislative, administrative and judicial body is made up of titled men, outstanding and influential family heads and community leaders, war lords, heads of secret societies, age grades, men with wealth and unusual talents. Decisions on matters are reached, not by a single leader, but by the collective effort of the members of the council. Issues are discussed, talented and informed members of the council lead the discussion and exercise greater influence in decisional outcomes. Another thing worthy of note is that, Igbo system of leadership equally provides a specialized court where the aggrieved lay their complaints. A

situation whereby the matter is serious that the “*Ụmụnna*” or Ogbe (obodo) cannot reach any consensus, the case may be resolved through oath taking.

Female Leadership Service in the Village (Otu *Ụmụada* or *Ụmụokpu*)

Dine (2007:180) believes that in the existence of two grades of women’s leadership: the *otu ụmụada* or *ụmụokpu* (the union of daughters married away to other villages) and *ndiomu alurualu* (the wives of men in the village). The leadership of the former tends to overshadow the latter because of the former’s position as the daughters of the village.

To Dine also, both groups maintain order, promote life and bring consolidation, joy and solidarity among themselves and to the village community. Women’s leadership control the moral behaviour of the women folk in the village. In general *ụmụada* and *ndiomu ala* are the “just police squads” of the village community who maintain order among themselves and the members of the village. The reconciliatory role of these groups in the Igbo village is upheld. Besides keeping order according to Dine, in expanding his view, these women are particularly, desirous to see that there is an increase of offspring in the village. They would cajole a young man who delayed too long in getting married or ‘pray’ for fruitful union for the couple who find it difficult to get children.

LEADERSHIP STYLE

Having known what leadership and a leader are all about, let us equally elaborate more on that. Amachukwu (2002:77) posits that “leadership is a factor in the managerial function of directing, which gives direction and purpose to communication and motivation for organizational performance”. However, leadership is not the same thing as management, which concerns not only people but materials and money. Mgbodile (2004:106) outlines and compares good leadership style to that of a manager of an organization in the following words:

Management is leadership which is aimed at influencing group activity towards goal achievement. It is the behaviour of the man in leadership position when he is carrying out the vital functions of administration – planning, organizing, directing or controlling, coordinating and evaluating activities aimed at achieving the goal of the establishment.

People in leadership positions have the onerous responsibility of achieving the goals of their organization. They believe that it is entrusted in them the power to organize the personnel and the materials available in an organization so that they follow each other in order to realize the goals and objectives of the establishment.

The researchers believe that confidence and communication skill are just some of the plethora of attributes that a good leader should possess. Good leadership is universal and timeless mead. Dodo (1983:18-19) sums up a good leader as “one who plans, imitates actions (result oriented) and seeks cooperation to ensure that the actions are carried out”. One expects a leader to be the builder of his society and not the destroyer of his society. Mgbodile (2004) expanding his views, posits that leadership style simply refers to a set of methods or

behavioural approaches adopted by a leader in his effort to manipulate the three important correlates of administration: the men, the job, and materials, towards goal achievement.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD LEADERSHIP

A good leader is tolerant, calm, composed and steadfast to the main purpose. Storms, emotions and crisis come and go and a good leader takes these as part of the journey and keeps a cool head.

- A good leader as well as keeping the main goal in focus is able to think analytically.
- A leader also needs to function in an orderly and purposeful manner in situations of uncertainty.
- Not giving orders or setting visions, goals and objectives, but instead soliciting this from them so that everyone is fully involved in how the society will be successful.
- Providing direction when needed to ensure that everyone is carried along. Put succinctly, a good leader communicates the vision that was set by all. If it is a vision of little interest, then another one must be found.
- Coaching people when necessary to raise them to a higher standard.
- Settling quarrels among his followers amicably.

In like manner, bad leadership is characterized by attempting to control employees or followers through orders, policies, rules, goals, targets, reports, visions, bureaucracy, and changes all designed to almost force employees or followers to work and to create and deliver what management considers to be satisfactory products and services. In this mode, management on its own decides what to do, when to do it and how to do it and listens only perfunctorily, if they listen at all, to what employees have to say?

What Characterizes Bad Leadership?

- Here the leader dishes out orders, policies, rules, goals, targets, reports, visions and changes to force followers or employees to work or do the way he believes it should be done.
- Failing to listen or only perfunctorily listening to complaints and suggestions.
- Exhibiting the “Do as I say, not as I do” mentality
- Treating followers or employees as if they do not want to do a better job, do not care about their work, and do not want to accept responsibility.
- Providing inadequate support.
- Withholding information.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study examined leadership, an important phenomenon presented in life as it is very necessary where people live together in any society or community. Its main focus was to investigate leadership system in Igbo land. The work also investigated leadership as depicted in some Igbo novel as an insight. From the foregoing also, emerges one inescapable point that, Igbo novels embody the virtues cherished by the Igbo as well as vices they abhor. Norms, values, and beliefs can be seen through these novels. More so, findings were made on how the Igbo people leads or govern themselves. Put succinctly, the study also identified various arms by leadership and their heads, the various traditional institutions that serve as agents of good leadership in Igboland were equally identified. We also discovered that Igbo system of

leadership rests on democratic principles. “Ochichi Onye Kwuo Uche Ya”. That is to say, government of the people for the people and by the people, where there is freedom of expression and participation in matters affecting the community. In conclusion, we recommend and encourage all and sundry to read more of those novels that depict Igbo leadership as well as the ones we cited and this study in particular to know their legal rights and responsibilities and what Igbo leadership is all about. This will help them know the good ones to uphold and the bad ones to be avoided as earlier stated for successful leadership in this dynamic world of today.

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