

THE ABSENCE OF CENTRALISED POLITICAL SYSTEM AS THE GREATEST SETBACK OF THE IGBOS IN THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL GROWTH: A RECONSIDERATION OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Abstract

This paper, based on a synthesis of available literature on these historians' arguments, maintains that despite the absence of centralised political system, the Igbo did not lapse into anarchy. The Igbo were able to evolve a system of institutions of governance and develop a specialised and diversified economy.

Introduction

Colonial anthropologists and early European observers who studied the Igbo history and culture created a notion that the Igbo were stagnant.¹ They adopted concepts like 'acephalous' and 'stateless', words which had no real analytical relevance to describe the non-centralised political system of the Igbo. These early scholars' position was prejudiced against the Igbo for two reasons: one, they viewed Igbo history through the lens of European history; and two, the Igbo political system differed from the centralised political trends found elsewhere in West Africa. Hence, they concluded that, as one historian of Africa puts it, the existence of centralised states was 'a mark of political achievement, the bigger the state, the bigger the achievement'.² In the thinking of these early observers, therefore, progress must have been encumbered by the absence of centralised political institutions in Igboland. Many historians of the Igbo such as Kenneth Dike, Adiele Afigbo, G. I. Jones, C. C. Ifemesia, V. C. Uchendu, Okoro Ijoma, J. C. Anene, and J. N. Oriji have since argued against this Eurocentric posture of stagnation in pre-colonial Igboland. This paper, based on a synthesis of available literature on these historians' arguments, maintains that despite the absence of centralised political system, the Igbo did not lapse into anarchy. The Igbo were able to evolve a system of institutions of governance and develop a specialised and diversified economy.

Political System: Non-Centralised, But Not Stagnant

As noted above, the absence of centralised system of government did not hinder the political, social and economic growth and development of the Igbo. Pursuing this line of argument, G. I. Jones noted that:

All Ibo...societies that have been studied can be said to possess the requirement of a state in that they have some centralised administrative and judicial institution and cleavages of wealth and status corresponding to the distribution of power and authority.³

¹ J. Okoro Ijoma, *Igbo History and the Battle for Survival* (Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers Ltd, 2010): 12.

² 'Unit Two: Studying Africa through the Social Studies,'
<http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/students/curriculum/m10/activity2.php>.

³ G. I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963): 5.

In essence the Igbo developed a number of socio-political arrangements and institutions which performed the administrative, legislative and judicial functions of government. Though these institutional arrangements had some commonalities, they varied in some specific details from one Igbo community to another.

As extremes in the variations in the Igbo political arrangements, there existed and still exist monarchical institutions in Onicha, Arochukwu, Ogwuta, Abo, Nri and the West Niger Igbo communities before the British invasion in Igboland. In his study of the West Niger Igbo communities, Okoro Ijoma had suggested possible explanations for the existence of kingship in those communities. He pointed out that the control of trade routes and the wealth the trade generated could have provided the stimulus for the development of monarchy, and that monarchy could have also developed in reaction to external aggression and conquest.⁴ He went further to note that 'leaders of western Igbo communities...may also have sought to gain prestige by linking themselves' to the Benin monarchy.⁵ He also conceded that 'there may also be some historical truth in the tradition that offshoots of the Benin royal house established kingship in some of the chiefdoms'.⁶ It has even been pointed out that kingship may have been more widespread in Igboland in an ancient period but that the institution broke down due to either the absence of a candidate to assume the office or the people's decision to dispense with an oppressive and tyrannical monarch.⁷ But the situation at the time of British intervention was that these monarchies were exceptions to the general pattern of non-monarchical systems organised in villages.

These villages consisted of smaller exogamous units called *umunna*, *ogbe*, *idumu*, *ezi*. This unit of political organisation was headed by an *okpara*, who usually was the oldest member of the lineage. He had numerous ritual, social and legal rights and obligations. As an obligation, for instance, he mediated in disputes between members of his lineage and also represented the lineage in all its external dealings with other lineages. Lacking mechanisms to enforce his decisions, he relied on curses or threats of them to extract obedience. His curses were greatly feared because he was seen as the earthly representative of the lineage ancestors. The belief that obedience to the dictates of the *okpara* brought long life and prosperity and that violation of ancestral taboos incurred one protracted sickness, sudden death and other calamities⁸ helped ensure harmony. Moreover, as the oldest man in his lineage and therefore a 'reservoir of knowledge,' to do without his services meant to grope about in the dark.⁹ In return for the services he provided to his lineage, he received 'respect, obedience and material tokens of goodwill'.¹⁰ Issues that defied resolution at the lineage level were usually taken to the village level for settlement.

Village was the next level of political organisation. 'The size and number of the village communities varied considerably from one traditional Igbo community to another.'¹¹ Attendance to the village council was open to all male members of the village. The meetings were held in the *obi* or compound of the oldest lineage in the village or in the village square. The village council was presided over by the oldest man in the village who held the village *ofo*. But decisions were taken by consensus. According to V. C. Uchendu, 'matters within the legislative competence of the villages formerly ranged from the control and regulation of economic affairs to questions of war, peace, and defense (sic). The economic control exercised by the villages may take the form of boycotting an enemy market, regulating the firing of bush, setting the price of palm liquor demanded in the village, or levying taxes to pay for the welfare

⁴ J. Okoro Ijoma, *Strands in Pre-Colonial West Niger Igbo History* (Nsukka: Great AP Express Publishers Ltd, 2012): 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ J. N. Oriji, 'Overseas Trade, Colonial Rule and Fragmentation of Authority in Igbo Society,' A Seminar Paper presented to the Department of History, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, on 5 May 1983: 8.

⁹ Joseph Ibodimma Ejiofor, 'A Pre-Colonial History of Agu-Inyi Clan,' B. A. Project submitted to the Department of History (and International Studies) (1973): 47.

¹⁰ V. C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965): 40.

¹¹ H. N. Nwosu, 'Politics and Administration in the Igbo Traditional Society,' in G. E. K. Ofomata, ed., *A Survey of the Igbo Nation* (Nigeria: Africana First Publishers Limited, 2002): 234.

schemes initiated by the village.’¹² However, the village assembly is not only concerned with deliberative and legislative functions. It also performed judicial, administrative and executive functions, as shall be shown later.

In some places, a number of villages agglomerated into a village-group or town. At this level of political arrangement, participation shifted from being direct to being representative. Individuals representing the various villages at the village-group council were seen more as ‘delegates’ than as ‘representatives,’ for the political relationship between the various villages constituting the village-group was basically ‘tenuous’ and ‘minimal’.¹³ The delegates to the council varied from one village-group to another. Among the Igbo of Adazi-Ani, the council comprised of nine individuals, mostly members of *Nzeselummanya* title society, drawn from the nine villages making up what is today Adazi-Ani. The village-group council met only to settle inter-village quarrels, warfare, and epidemics; or to arrange dates of religious ceremonies and observances and to share communal expenses or revenues.¹⁴

These three levels of political organisation helped in ordering the Igbo society before the British intervention. However, in the absence of a standing army or police, the Igbo relied on a number of institutions to enforce decisions. Some of those institutions were the age-grade, title society and secret societies—such as the masquerade societies. An age-grade usually comprised persons born within a certain age bracket, usually three or four years. ‘There was a logical basis for this division. The age grades and sets of between 18 and 45 years were the real working group that tackled arduous tasks. Their assistance was sought by creditors to recover debts, at times using *mmanwu* masquerade. They also formed a sort of constabulary to enforce the orders of the elders. Occasionally, they constituted themselves into pressure groups and demanded the passing of new laws to help in guarding and guiding public morality. They organized music and dance and other forms of recreational activities. In this way, the activities of the age-grade organization transcended village and clan boundaries.’¹⁵

The title association constituted one of the most important political and administrative bodies in Igboland. The names assigned to the title society followed certain geographical patterns. While *Ozo* title was common in Anambra and parts of Imo and Enugu states, the West Niger Igbo communities had a number of ranked titles, the highest of which was the *Eze* title, with its holders referred to as *Obi*.¹⁶ The *Ekpe* society, which was prevalent in Abia State, particularly among the Cross River Igbo and parts of Ebonyi States, played a vital role in maintenance of law and order in the society. Membership of the title society was in some places conferred on individuals for their distinguished service or achievements, while in others the titles were bought from the existing title holders. The title society managed societal conflicts, mediated in conflicts arising from the activities of the various institutional and occupational groups in the community, and reconciled one group with another.¹⁷

The *mmanwu* or masquerade societies were occasionally invoked to carry out certain political or social functions. These masquerades were believed to be the representatives of the spirits of the ancestors and therefore some form of link between the living and the dead.¹⁸ Membership of *mmanwu* society was opened to all male of free birth who had attained certain age. There were varieties of masquerades in Igboland, but the concern here is on the ones that performed political, administrative, and judicial function. Such masquerades, usually called *mmuo abani* because they operated mostly at night, could be invoked to visit individuals or lineages that had flouted societal laws or the will of the gods, and inflict severe punishments—like death, enslavement, or ostracism. Some of them known as gossipers could reveal certain secret activities of named persons. In these ways, they also helped to effectively

¹² Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*: 42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴ NAE 1385 ONDIST 20/1/410: 9-10.

¹⁵ Ijoma, *Igbo History and the Battle for Survival*: 28-29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29

¹⁷ Nwosu, *Politics and Administration*: 238.

¹⁸ Joseph Ibodimma Ejiofor, ‘A Pre-Colonial History of Agu-Inyi Clan,’: 53.

ensure conducive environment for the people. These institutions helped to ensure conducive environment for the varied and dynamic economic pursuits of the Igbo to thrive.

Economy: Specialised and Diversified

The Igbo economy before the imposition of British colonial rule was varied and dynamic. One of these numerous economic pursuits was iron working. Archaeological finds from the Igboukwu excavations reveal the antiquity of the iron industry and skill in metal working among the Igbo. This knowledge of metallurgy helped them to overcome the difficulties of their forest environment.¹⁹ Many Igbo smiths of Abiriba, Agulu Amokwe, Agulu Umana, Awka, and Nkwere extraction travelled the length and breadth of Igboland and beyond plying their craft.²⁰ The smiths supplied the household and agricultural needs for iron products. It was only from the 19th Century, with increasing importation of iron bars from Europe and with the imposition of colonial rule, that the iron industry in the Igbo country declined.²¹

Pottery was another gainful industry that engaged the Igbo. Like iron working, this industry was also of great antiquity, as archaeological evidence from Igboukwu, Afikpo and Nsuka has revealed.²² The industry was dominated by women. Pottery products served numerous purposes ranging from domestic (pitchers, containers, cooking pots and dishes) and ritual to musical (*udu*). But among its practitioners it was a major source of sustenance. In fact in some of the pottery centres, the industry occupied an important place in the traditional economy. For instance, John Ekeledo reported of the Ishiagu people as referring to the industry as '*omechara umu ugbuonye*,' translated 'redeemer of the poor and the destitute'.²³

Carving and weaving were two other important occupations in Igboland. Igbo wood carvers made skilfully carved wooden figures representing household gods and deities. They also carved *ofo* (staff of office and justice), doors, wooden stools, musical instruments (like wooden drums, flutes and gongs), wooden spoons, wooden wares of different sizes, mortars and pestles. But while carving was dominated by men, weaving was an exclusively women trade. Olaudah Equiano wrote of this gendered industry among the Igbo:

When our women are not employed with men in tillage, their usual occupation is spinning and weaving of cotton, which they afterwards dye and make into garments.²⁴

In communities where cloth weaving thrived, learning to weave was essential to a girl's upbringing, and her ability to attract a suitor was based on whether or not she had mastered the skill of cloth weaving. Notable places of textile manufacture in Igboland included Akwaete, Anioma, Nsuka, Udi, and Abakiliki.²⁵ The importance of this industry can be gauged from the prominence of textile materials in settling of brides wealth, in funerals and in honouring of warriors after a successful campaign.²⁶ Europeans who visited the Igbo country in 19th century left notes about the industry. I. Spencer, for instance, who visited Ubulu Ukwu, in Anioma, in the 19th century, noted the industry and dexterity of the people in cloth weaving, remarking that '...they weave cloth of every description, some of which is nearly equal to civilized making in texture'.²⁷ The Igbo did achieve considerable measure of proficiency in textile making.

¹⁹ Ijoma, *Igbo History and the Battle for Survival*: 12.

²⁰ O. N. Njoku, 'Colonialism and the Decline of the Traditional Metal Industry of the Igbo, Nigeria,' *Itinerario* xv, no. 2 (1991): 59.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Ijoma, *Igbo History and the Battle for Survival*: 14; G. J. A. Ojo, *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis* (London, 1960), cited in O. N. Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria: 19th and 20th Centuries* (Enugu: Magnet Business Enterprises, 2001): 57.

²³ John N. Ekeledo, 'Ishiagu Pottery,' B. A project, department of Fine and Applied Arts, UNN (1972): 5.

²⁴ Olaudah Equiano, *Equiano's Travels* (edited by Paul Edwards), London, 1967: 4.

²⁵ Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria*: 64.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁷ I. Spencer, Church Missionary Intelligencer 1897, quoted in Okoro Ijoma, *Igbo History and the Battle for Survival*: 15.

Making of mats, baskets and fan were also popular among the Igbo. These crafts illustrate ‘how the indigenous population were able to exploit their material environment to improve their living condition’.²⁸ The raw materials came from various parts and products of plants. The products included:

For mats, there were two types the thick and course fabric made from fronds of raphia palm and the soft tender and glossy kind made from rushes....Ordinary fans were produced by mat makers from rushes. Baskets were also widely produced from palm fronds and canes. The products included fishing and farmer’s wicker baskets and trays and shallow baskets made of thinly split cane, while the strong ones were woven from *ata*, spear grass. Bags, ropes and twine were equally produced.²⁹

Agriculture was by far the most widespread economic pursuit among the Igbo. Archaeology and oral tradition provide advanced knowledge of the origins of agriculture in Igboland. D. D. Hartle and other archaeologists noted that man shifted from foraging to cultivation in the northern parts of Igboland between 2555BC and 1460BC.³⁰ Nri and Amaigbo axis, which constitute the primary areas of Igbo dispersion, have complex traditions which are connected with the domestication of yams and other crops.³¹ Some scholars believe that there is some connection between yam culture and the high population density in Igboland. In their thinking, ‘the domestication of root crops like yams which have a higher yield per acre than cereals as well as the use of iron tools must have helped the Igbo to produce more food to sustain a large population’.³² Aside from yam, the Igbo cultivated other crops as well, namely: crops of West African origin—pumpkin, melon, okra, garden egg, pepper, guinea corn, winged bean—and exotic crops—banana, plantain, sugarcane, cocoyam, and cassava.³³

Animal husbandry was another aspect of the Igbo agricultural practices. Animals domesticated included dwarf hump-less cow, goats, sheep, dogs and poultry. Livestock constituted one of the major sources of protein in the Igbo diet. The Igbo developed considerable skill in this aspect of agriculture. Small poultry huts had ash dumped in them to provide warmth and sanitation for the births. Goats were kept in a corner of most compounds and fed on fodders. A colonial anthropologist noted of animal husbandry among the Agu-Inyi Igbo of Anambra:

Livestock is maintained, apart from grazing on scanty grass of compounds, by fodder provided by the ‘ogbu’ tree which has heavy moist foliage, and other...foliage which is collected from the forest.³⁴

Igbo agricultural and industrial productions beyond sustenance needs and the fact that no single individual can produce everything he or she needs necessitated trade. The Igbo engaged in exchange of goods both within and outside of their area. The Igbo operated a four-day market cycle, namely: *Peke, orie, afo, and nkwo*. The markets were styled into big and small markets, with the big holding usually at 8-day interval.³⁵ The arrangement of markets in Igboland ensured that markets in two neighbouring communities do not clash. The Igbo also traded with other Igbo and non-Igbo neighbours. The presence of Aro settlements across Igboland testifies to the extent of Igbo trading activities. The Igbo of Nsuka traded with their non-Igbo neighbours, such as the Igala and Akpoto. Other trade linkages existed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that though the Igbo had no centralised political system of the type seen in Hausa or Yorubaland, the Igbo evolved a number of institutions and administrative

²⁸ Njoku, *Economic History of Nigeria*: 69.

²⁹ Ijoma, *Igbo History and the Battle for Survival*: 16.

³⁰ Cited in Oriji, ‘Overseas Trade, Colonial Rule, and Fragmentation’: 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*; Ijoma, *Igbo History and the Battle for Survival*: 17.

³² Oriji, ‘Overseas Trade, Colonial Rule, and Fragmentation’: 7.

³³ Ijoma, *Igbo History and the Battle for Survival*: 17.

³⁴ NAE 1385 ONDIST 21/1/410: 1.

³⁵ Ijoma, *Igbo History and the Battle for Survival*: 19.

arrangements that helped ensure conducive environment for their numerous economic pursuits to thrive. The three levels of political organisation and the other institutional arrangements—such as the age-grade, title societies and secret societies—demonstrate that the Igbo were in no way stateless or acephalous. The Igbo remain an eloquent refutation to the Eurocentric posture of stagnation early European observers assumed of not just the Igbo but also of other societies without centralised political institutions.