

IGBO MA EZE MANA IGBO ENWERO EZE: AN INVESTIGATION INTO KINGSHIP IN IGBO SOCIETY

PhilipMary Emenike Ayika

Abstract

The Igbo ethnic group have existed for an immemorial time living into the antiquities of history, beyond the Stone Age until the present time yet there are no strong pointers to the existence of powerful monarchs that united the whole of Igbo race politically. There are pointers to some quasi monarchical and/or hegemonic political organizations amongst some settlements among the Igbo. It is true to say that *Igbo ma eze* (Igbo have witnessed to some monarchical leaderships) but it still stands true too to maintain that *Igbo enwero eze* (Igbo group does not have the tradition of kingship institution).

Keywords: Igbo, Kingship, *Eze*

Introduction

Leadership in most Igbo Communities during the pre-colonial era was based on consultation assembly of the council of elders following after the then culture of the Igbos which does not recognize “kingship. The dominance of cultural precepts sustained the longevity of Igbo cultural heritage at that time. At present, these heritages are exposed to extinction with the importation of colonial vestiges into Igbo Culture. Consequently, Igbo cultural identity is gradually appearing. To redress this, it is imperative to study one of the management techniques of leadership style under which these heritages flourished in the past. Therefore, this study focuses on leadership style most appropriate for the successful management of Igbo cultural heritage.

Brief History of the Igbo People

Most scholars refer to Igbo as a group of people as well as a language stock with various dialects. This language is spoken by an ethnic group known as the “Igbo people,” who live in the southeastern part of Nigeria and are linked by culture. It’s worth noting at this point that most pre-European Igbo communities advanced without the help of a central authority. To illustrate this, (Achebe 1933: 47) asserted that the Igbo had no compelling traditional “loyalty’ to anyone outside the town or village - As a result, pre-European Igbo ruled themselves under the authority of a council of elders, rather than a king. This gave origin to the popular proverb *Igbo enwe Eze*, which means “Igbo people don’t have a monarch.” Most academics consider the traditional Igbo society of pre-colonial Nigeria to be governed under a republican style of government. Through delegated power to leaders of social institutions, this style of administration ensured that locals had a fair say in community matters.

As a result, the lack of a consensus leader in the pre-colonial Igbo community never ruled out the possibility of a leader’s position. In general, leadership is present in all

civilizations since no group can thrive without it. As a result, leadership is a valuable resource for all Cultures, and individuals demonstrate it through a variety of talents and abilities (Lester, 1975). This leaders' ability to preserve Igbo cultural legacy is determined by their leadership style. The leadership style of each individual has a significant impact on the Igbo race and its customs. These leaders are the guardians of the cultural institutions that have given the Igbo race its character.

Traditional Igbo political organization was founded on a republican system of government that was a hybrid of democracy and republicanism. This system, as opposed to a feudalist one with a king ruling over subjects, ensured equality to its residents in close-knit communities. The Portuguese, who first arrived and encountered the Igbo people in the 15th century, witnessed to this governing system. Except for a few major Igbo towns like Onitsha, which had Obi rulers, and locations like the Nri Kingdom and Arochukwu, which had priest-kings, Igbo villages and local administrations were primarily ruled by a republican consultative assembly of the people.

A council of elders governed and ruled most communities. Title holders were valued for their achievements and abilities, they were never venerated as kings, though they did frequently undertake particular responsibilities assigned to them by such assemblies. Only the Ewe of Ghana shared this system of government, which was vastly different from that of most other groups in Ghana. The Igbo have a patrilineage system known as Umunna. The Umunna is a male line descended from a founding ancestor (after whom the line is frequently called) with groupings of Compounds having closely related families led by the eldest male member. The Umunna is considered the most essential pillar of Igbo culture.

Igbo Pre-Colonial Political System

There was no consolidation of power among the Igbo because of the numerous political institutions that existed in Igbo nation. Political institutions, on the other hand, were fulfilling identical or dissimilar functions. There were no inherited claims to traditional stools because there were no traditional rulers in the form of Kings (as there were among the Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani). There was never an Igbo Kingdom or Empire in this world. The village was the most powerful political entity. Family heads, the council of elders or Ofo title holders the age-grades, Ozo and Iyom title holders or the Lineage chiefs were among the institutions that held governmental power.

Many historians have classified the Igbo political system as an acephalous political system," which translates to "a leaderless or chiefless political system." Because it was decentralized and based on local and direct democracy, where everyone in the village had the authority to participate in decision-making, this phrase is appropriate for defining the Igbo pre-colonial political system. Each Igbo village was viewed as a political unit made up of connected families that shared common beliefs and a common ancestor. In some Igbo groups, each family leader in the community bore the 'Ofo,' and collectively they made up the council of elders. The elders council presided over significant matters concerning the village's welfare, safety and progress among other

things. The most elderly amongst the council of elders had the power to convene and adjourn meetings, as well as make decisions.

In some other groups like the Nri clan, the Ofo is borne by one through one's hard work and just achievements. This is to say that the Ofo is an exclusive property of an Ozo person or a chieftain and these sit in adjudication of justice over land matters and the overall welfare of the people. It is surprising to note that there were no enforcement institutions physically. All their injunctions were rather enforced by Ani, the goddess of morality. The elders' council was thought to be earthly representatives of the Igbo ancestors. They upheld the land's long-standing customs, traditions, and laws. These included regulations prohibiting misconduct or immoral conduct, as well as the appropriate penalty for those who committed them.

The age-grade was another key institution in the Igbo political system. The age-grade was made up of young people in the same age range. The older age group was responsible for maintaining peace and order in the village as well as providing security to fight off external attacks, while the junior age group was responsible for communal sanitation and other necessary tasks. The age-grade was also involved in village governance and served as a check on the elder council and other administrative bodies.

The priests and priestesses were also included in the village's governance. They were revered as gods' mouthpieces. Even the council of elders sought advice from the priests on problems outside their jurisdiction, such as those requiring spiritual intervention.

Pre-Existence of Kingship Institution in Igbo Society

The pre-existence of the kingship institution in Igbo land before it vanished, as a result of the people's abhorrence of the institution due to monarchs' despotic and autocratic behaviour, among other factors had been proven by archaeological findings, linguistics and literary sources.

Archaeological Source

Archaeologically, a great deal is now known about the Igbo culture's richness and antiquity. The Igbo-Ukwu discoveries, which have altered the much-uninformed talking and writing about the Igbo people that was previously popular, are of particular importance for our current purpose. In 1938, an Igbo-Ukwu farmer was digging in his garden when he came across a collection of magnificent metal sculptures. Professor Thurstan Shaw excavated the find-spot as well as two neighbouring sites that were also identified in 1959. (Shaw, 1970: Passimi Shaw 1980: 42-47). More bronzes were discovered in the initial site, which had been put out in a rectangular pattern. Aside from the bronzes, there were several full pots fashioned in a highly ornate style with deep channeling and projecting bosses. There were also a lot of beads. The bronzes appearance strongly suggested they were ceremonial bronzes. The first location was a treasure chest. The second location was a burial chamber with a floor that was 312m below the current ground surface. Someone prominent, either a king/ruler or religious

dignitary, had been buried in it, propped upon a copper-studded stool in one corner of the wooden-lined chamber, dressed in coronation finery and surrounded by wealth.

The bodies of at least five individuals were put on top of the burial chamber after it had been roofed in with planks, maybe slaves dispatched to accompany their lord in the next life. A third location adjacent had a pit with ceramics, more bronzes, trash, and charred debris. These bronze objects, some of the wood from the stool form the burial chamber and other antiquities which had yielded a radiocarbon date of ninth century A.D. Meanwhile this dating has been contested by Afigbo (1981). He refutes Professor Thurstan Shaw's suggestion that Igbo Ukwu culture dated to the 9th century AD and maintains that the richness and artistic sophistication evident in the bronzes suggest a millennium or more of civilization from agricultural community.

However, of special interest to this paper are the contents of the burial chamber which indicated the existence of a monarchy with an elaborate and highly-stylized ceremony. The finds have been associated with the Eze Nri, a priest king of Umueri clan of the Igbo. Tradition had it that the Oraeri people, now occupying northwest of Igbo-Ukwu had lived in the place presently known as Igbo-Ukwu before they were displaced by the more populous Igbo-Ukwu people. As (Shaw 1980: 42) had posited, the "abandonment might indicate a raid or some disaster like warfare or just a decision of the community to move elsewhere for whatever reason, intention while leaving these objects behind." Moreover, the treasures excavated at Igbo-Ukwu are an indication of possession of considerable social wealth, at least by a sizeable section of the Igbo people in the distant past.

Linguistic Source

In Igbo nation, the titles "Eze," "Igwe," and Obi" were formerly used to honour kings. (Basden, 1966:131). Ifemesia (1979:52 & 53) noticed in his great work that the most convincing argument for the primacy of monarchy in Igbo nation is that all of the office's titles and expressions are original, not derivative. He cited some indigenous kingly titles and names. Eze, Obi, Nna-anyi, Igwe, Nkpu, Agu, Okaaka, and others are among them. It is good to note that when an Igbo word is not a conglomerate of words, its originality may be tested by the consistency of the vowels used. Light vowels, *Udamfe*, (a, i, o, u) are often not mixed up with heavy ones, *Uda-aro*, (e, i, o, u,) in such words. More so, he believes that the concept of kingship is so deeply embedded in Igbo culture and language that it could not have come from a foreign and recent source.

Written Source

It can also be proven from accessible textual evidence that the kingship institution existed in the Igbo kingdom prior to the arrival of the Europeans. Writing about his difficulties when he arrived the Igbo country (Basden 1966: 114 & 115) had recounted:

When I arrived (1900), foreign influences had not appreciably affected Onitsha. Yet, largely, the people and the country were as they had been for generations - It was difficult to obtain trustworthy information concerning the interior. Before leaving

London, I had endeavored to secure maps, but, beyond a survey of the river, there were little else procurable. No Europeans had penetrated far into the Ibo country and native reports were scanty. The name of “Abam” and “Nri” were mentioned. They had elements of interest for two reasons. “Abam” stood for bands of mercenaries employed and controlled by the chiefs of Aro-Chukwu while “Nri” is the home town of a priestly cult whose particular services are connected with the coronation of kings and purification ceremonies. These priests travel widely and because of their reports, their home-town was engrossed upon the maps in what was otherwise, a blank space.

A variety of things are obvious from the above quotation. This section, on the other hand, is mainly interested in why “Nri” was mentioned and engrossed upon maps in what was otherwise a blank place. “Nri is the home town of the priestly cult whose specialized services are related with king coronation and purifying ceremonies,” explains the reason. It is so obvious that the Igbo had kings long before the arrival of the Europeans, and that the Nri priest traveled abroad and crowned these kings, in addition to performing cleansing procedures, which was the reason why their home town was engrossed on maps before 1990. Basden (1966:49) noted, among other things, in a chapter titled “The Heart of the Ibo, ‘NKWU. This ‘alusi,’ which resembles a man, is found primarily in the Okigwi(e) district. The priest visits once a year, but no one is allowed to see him. During the harvest season, the chief performs three days of sacrifices and dances before the god. It is obvious from the preceding quotation that the institution of chieftaincy is not new in Igbo land. Many customary functions were undertaken by chiefs prior to the arrival of the Europeans including ensuring that customary laws were not broken and that sacrifices to the gods were made as demonstrated in the quotation.

When he stated that “At Ogidi, Erulu ranked next highest to the monarchs, Basden (1956:142) must have preconceived that the Igbo had kings. In fact, the Ogidi people of Anambra state, Idemili North Local Government Area had stated explicitly in the introduction to their constitution: “From time beyond human recollection, Ogidi had always had a traditional head. Eze Inwele was the traditional leader of Ogidi in the past. The post was hereditary, but only to the extent that it was passed down through one extended family Umunna), the Umuezeani family of Ire village in Akanano Quarter. When the ruling Eze Inwele died, a successor was chosen and installed from adult male Umuezeani family members.” (Ogidi Igweship; Constitution, 1975. cited in Ifemesia, 1979: 51). Nevertheless, after mentioning the activities of Nri people in the coronation of Kings in Igbo land, the performance of kingly functions by the chief in Okigwe district and the existence of EruIu as the next highest rank to the king of Ogidi, Basden turns around in the same book and claims that “Igbo enwero eze” (The Ibo have no kings).

Evaluating the above submission,

1. Isichei (1976: 23 & 24) maintained as if in response to Basden that in times of crisis, some communities tried the rule of one man (obviously a king even if not addressed as such) and then abandoned it when the crisis passed. ‘Thus Aguleri, in times of war, the bravest and most powerful men became dictators and controlled the town.
2. Another way to think about this is found in Nzimiro (1972:5) The author maintains that kingship as an institution was diminishing in many communities by the time Europeans came, with most of them having only various subordinate offices rather than the office of king (Obi).

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated in this study that the kingship institution has existed in Igbo country since time immemorial. Archaeological finds, linguistic and textual sources have all confirmed the existence of a monarchy institution in the pre-history Igbo community. Nevertheless, by the time the Europeans arrived, most Igbo tribes had abandoned the institution of kingship for a variety of reasons, most notably because of the kings authoritarian and oppressive behaviour. This is clear because most Igbo communities adopted actual democracy after that. In any event, the institution of royalty survived in several Igbo villages. Even among these communities that have kept monarchical institutions, royalty has always been a symbol of Igbo democracy. In these kingdoms, the Igbo’s democratic essence was fully expressed. If the King tended toward authoritarianism there were several means to bring him to order. In the worst-case scenario the monarch could be forced to commit suicide. As a result, the phrase “Igbo enwe (ro) eze” (“the Igbo have no kings”) should be understood to mean that the Igbo despise autocracy and the monarchical institution from which it developed.

Rev. Fr. Dr. Philip Mary Emenike Ayika, C.S.Sp

Department of Religion and Human Relations,

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Email: ayikas@yahoo.com

References

- Acholonu, C. (2009). *They lived before Adam: Prehistoric origins of the Igbo – The never been ruled, ndi-Igbo since 1.6 million BC*. Abuja: CARC
- Afigbo, A. (1981). *Ropes of sand: Studies in Igbo history and culture*. Nsukka: University Press
- Basden, G.T. 1921. *Among the ho of Nigeria*. London: Seeley Services.
- Isicbre, E. (1976) *A History of the Igbo people*, London, Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Basden, S. 1- (1966). *Niger Ibos*. London, Frank Case & Co. Ltd.
- Equiano Oludah (1989). *The interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustatus Vassa the African, written by Himself*.
- Ifemesia, Chieka (1979). *Traditional Humane Living Among the igbo; An Historical Perspective*. Enugu, Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd.
- Fsichei, Elizabeth (1976). *A History of the Igbo People*. London and Basingstoke, The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Nzimiro, Ikenna (1972). *Studies in Ibo Political Systems: Chieftaincy and Politics in Four Niger States*. London, Frank Cass and Co. Ltd.
- Shaw, Thurstan (1970). *Igbo-ukwu: An Account of Archaeological discoveries in Eastern Nigeria*, Vols. Evanston, Northwestern University Press.
- Shaw, Thurstan (1950). "Prehistory in Ikime Obaro(ed) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Ibadan, Heinemann