IGWEBUIKECRACY: THE IGBO-AFRICAN PARTICIPATORY SOCIO-POLITICAL SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

African traditional political systems are often categorized as monarchical or aristocratic, as such, as having no place for democracy. European and African political thinkers see democracy as a system of government that began in Greece and was imported from Europe to Africa. Contrary to this opinion, this piece argues that democracy is a cherished African value, which existed in pre-colonial Africa as a pattern of African administration. It was already in Africa before the encounter of Africa with the West, and thus, Africa cannot be understood as a passive recipient of democracy. Before the advent of the west to Africa, the Igbo-Africans of eastern Nigeria practiced Igwebuikecracy, an indigenous democratic government designed by the people for the people or themselves. It was system of governance that puts into consideration their peculiarities and particularities.

Keywords: Igwebuikecracy**,** African, Traditional, Igbo, Integral, Socio-Political.

Introduction

The structure of the Igbo society accounts for the distinctiveness of the Igbo social, political, economic, educational and religious approaches to reality. Right from inception, the Igbo society has been an open society constituted by individuals possessed by adventurous spirits. The Igbo society is one in which the constituent individuals are clothed with self-confidence and the belief that one individual is as good as the other. The Igbo open society has an imprint on individual openness to new realities, new ideas, new methodologies and ability to adapt to new circumstances. When the missionaries came to Igbo land, the Igbos were open to Western education, accounting for their academic successes evident in the graduation of large numbers of Igbo scholars in the 1965-1966 from various academic institutions. The Igbos are fiercely progressive, republican and democratic. As progressives, independent of the government, they build their own schools, roads, town halls, village libraries, dig their own boreholes, etc. As republicans, they had no king with any significant power. They operated a political system in which decisions concerning the future of the kingdom were reached through discussions, consultations, dialogue and compromise.

As individuals and individual communities, they compete among themselves in the area of success. They are known for auto-determination or a certain radical independence of mind, a certain basic sense of individual sovereign-ness which co-exists with the communal sovereignty of *ikwu na ibe, obodo,* and *mba*.[23] This radical independence of mind, for good or bad, permeates the whole of the Igbo person's character. They are, therefore, not tied down by religious fundamentalism or traditionalism as in the North and West parts of Nigeria respectively. Their open society, freedom from the constraints of fundamentalism and traditionalism allowed reason and reasoning to progress alarmingly. This radical independence of mind, republicanism and democratic tendencies would certainly affect the socio-political system of governance that would emerge among the Igbo-Africans. This piece employs the concept *igwebuikecracy* to articulate the Igbo-African traditional democratic system of governance. Although western perspectives have denied democratic elements to Africa, it is worthwhile to investigate the possibility of such a socio-political system.

The Possibility of an Igbo-African Indigenous Democracy

Variegated political systems have emerged over the years, distinguished by the different kinds of constitutions that define responsibilities and privileges. Among these is Monarchy, a system of government in which the King is considered an excellent man who surpasses all citizens with knowledge and virtue; there is also Aristocracy, a government by a few men of virtue; from Aristocracy has emerged Polity, a government by the middle class, moderately rich and of good behaviour. We also have Oligarchy, a government by unscrupulous rich men who have no regard for the poor. Ethnocracy, a type of government where representatives of a particular ethnic group hold high number of government posts more than the other ethnic groups to the detriment of others, and use their position to advance their particular ethnic group. Theocracy, is a type of government by the clergy who claim to have divine power. Totalitarian, is an Authoritarian type of government controlled by a dictator having complete control of the government. Kakistocracy, Government by the worst men, government by the unprincipled and unqualified citizens. Kratocracy, government by those who are strong enough to seize power through force, undue process or cunning.

There is also democracy, from two Greek words: *demos* which means people and *kratein* which means to rule. Put together in Greek, it means the power of the people. It is in this regard that Lincoln (cited by Salami 2004) described

democracy as "the government of the people, by the people and for the people under the rule of law" (p. 316). In the contention of Gyekye (1997) and Busia (1975), the concept "the people" points to the power of the people to choose who to rule them in accordance with the general good of the society, and that they set up, by themselves, the constitutional rules, principles and procedures of governance. Carter (1978) described democracy as a system that is altered by time and experience, always changing, infinite in its variety, sometimes it is turbulent, however, still valuable since it has been tested by adversity. As a political structure, Salami (2006) avers that democracy emphasizes the sharing of power among people of various categories. For Brecht (1959), it emphasizes that values should not be forced upon any people against their will, and stipulates liberty, separation of power and the sovereignty of the people. Thus, Sabine (1973) avers that it must involve mutual concession and compromise as a way of arriving at decisions. From these perspectives, Chidili (2012) avers that three salient points are noticeable from the definition of democracy:

a. that democratic government is not monotypic but diverse in nature;
b. that even in its diversity, it is changing;
c. it is strictly based on the rule of law.

From these noticeable points, Chidili concludes that the mutability of the capacity of democracy provides elbowroom for it to be an adaptable system of governance that can exist anywhere in the world, including Africa.

Igwebuikecracy: An African Specie of Classical and Contemporary Democracy

These points made notwithstanding, when African traditional political systems are discussed, they are often described as monarchical or aristocratic. This is a perspective that is evident in Arogbofa (2007) who argued that the traditional political systems Africa had no place for democracy. European and African political thinkers see democracy as a system of government that began in Greece and was imported from Europe to Africa. Contrary to the opinions of Arogbofa and his 'like-minds', i would argue that democracy is a cherished African value, which existed in pre-colonial Africa as a pattern of African administration. It was already in Africa before the encounter of Africa with the West, and thus, Africa cannot be understood as a passive recipient of democracy. Before the advent of the west to Africa, the Igbo-Africans of eastern Nigeria practiced *Igwebuikecracy*, an indigenous democratic government designed by the people for the people or themselves. It puts into consideration their peculiarities and particularities.

Igwebuikecracy is from the Igbo word *Igwebuike,* which is a combination of three words and a Greek word *kratein*. Igwebuike can be employed as a word or used as a sentence: as a word, it is written as *Igwebuike*, and as a sentence, it is written as, *Igwe bu ike,* with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space. The three words involved: *Igwe* is a noun which means number or population, usually a huge number or population. *Bu* is a verb, which means *is. Ike* is another verb, which means *strength* or *power;* the Greek *kratein* means to rule or the system of ruling or governance that governs a particular set of people elsewhere. Thus, put together, Igwebuikecracy means a government of the people or rulership by the people or the community. The Igbo root word of Igwebuikecracy is *Igwebuike.* As a societal order and governance, the community determines the praxis of the socio-political life of the people while putting into consideration the particularities and peculiarities of individuals. In Igwebuikecracy, followership is as important as leadership since leadership is not a one man show or a hierarchical or aristocratic system. Members are fully involved in decision making and implementation of such decisions in issues that affects them. Here, the people are the focus. Igwebuikecracy is the viable African specie of classical and contemporary democracy- it is a democracy in the African context taking into account the Africa values and identity. It builds on the African experience- history, circumstances, and situations. It is democracy that evolves with the signs of times, realistically articulating itself in view of a positive future.

The Ontological foundations of Igwebuikecracy

Kanu (2015a) and (2015b) avers that *Igwebuike,* the root word of igwebuikecracy, is based on the African sense of community, which is the underlying principle and unity of the African philosophical experience. It is anchored on the African worldview, which, according to Iroegbu (1995) is characterized by a common origin, common world-view, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny. Mbiti (1970) classically proverbializes the community determining role of the individual when he writes, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 108). *Igwebuike* as a complementary philosophy understands life as a shared reality. And it is only within the context of complementarity that life makes meaning. Life is a life of *sharedness;* one in which another is part thereof. A relationship, though of separate and separated entities or individuals but with a joining of the same whole (Kanu 2015c). Thus, *Igwebuike* provides an ontological horizon that presents being as that which possesses a relational character of mutual relations. According to Kanu (2016a) and (2016b), it represents the

perspective that 'to be' is to live in solidarity and complementarity, and to live outside the parameters of solidarity and complementarity is to suffer alienation. 'To be' is 'to be with the other', in a community of beings.

The Traditional Structure of Igwebuikecracy

Two theories have emerged in response to the question of the origin of the Igbo. There is, the 'Northern Centre Theory' which, according to Onwuejeogwu (1987) posits that the Igbos migrated from five northern centre areas, namely: the Semetic Centre of the Near and Far East, the Hermatic Centre around Egypt and Northern Africa, the Western Sahara, the Chadian Centre and the Nok Centre. The second historical hypothesis is the 'Centre Theory of Igbo Heartland'. According to Isichei (1976), the early migrations of the proto-Igbo originated from the areas termed as the Igbo heartland, such as: Owerri, Okigwe, Orlu and Awka divisions. According to Shaw (1969), Afigbo (1981), Anozie (2002) and Chikwendu (2002), the dispersal of the Igbos from the Igbo heartland dates back to the time between 2555 BC and 800 AD. Whatever theory is adopted, Ajaegbo (2014) avers that as the Igbos dispersed and permanent settlements developed, communal living led to the emergence of economic, social and political institutions. From these settlements emerged leaders who became centres of authority, as social groups developed, effective administrative systems emerged to regulate social relations. This was founded on egalitarian and democratic structures.

The political organization was constituted by different levels of autonomous democratic governments which exercised political, social and economic control over the lives of the people. These autonomous democratic governments include the Nuclear Family, the Patrilineage (Umunna), the Maximal Lineage and the Village-Group Assembly.

a. **The Nuclear Family** was the bedrock of social and political organization, referred to as *ezi na uno*. It consisted of a man, his wives, his married and unmarried sons, unmarried daughters and the servants or slaves, if any. The Father was the leader of the household and was in possession of the family *ofo,* which is the symbol of authority, justice, law and uprightness. The Father was responsible for directing the affairs of the family, however, it was done in consultation with his senior sons and wives.

b. **The Patrilineage or Extended Family** is the next unit of political organization after the nuclear family, which is referred to as the *Umunna*. It

is composed of a number of families that have a common eponymous father. Uchendu (1965) defines the *Ununna* as "a territorial kin-based unit which subdivides into compounds *(ezi obi)*" (p. 40). The head of this political unit was the oldest male member of the extended family also known as the *di-okpara* and had the *ofo* of the extended family in his possession. This according to Ogbukagu (1997) is based on the gerontocratic nature of the Igbo system of governance, even though Isichei (1976) avers that the important place given to elders does not mean that all elders have equal rights to speak. According to Opone (2012), the leader is usually a grandfather or great grandfather. In the contention of Olisa (2002) and Nwosu (2002), the *di-okpara* presided over meetings, sacrifices, issues of inheritance, settlement of dispute among members of the extended family, marriage, allocation of lands and the representation of the family with other extended families. In decision making, the *di-okpara* worked in consultation with the other heads of the extended family who constituted the extended family assembly. Decisions were arrived at through dialogue, consensus *(nkwekolita)*, compromise, cooperation and consultation *(Igba Izu)*.

c. **The Maximal Lineage** is the next biggest socio-political organization after the extended family. This is a referred to as *Idumu* in Igbo, which means quarter. It is made up of a number of extended families who are linked by a common putative ancestor. This major lineage is headed by the oldest male among them. He holds the *ofo* of the major lineage and presided at functions concerning the major lineage and was considered as a sacred person with taboos and rituals accompanying the violation of his authority. In his exercise of authority over the major lineage, Ajaegbo (2014) avers that he worked in consultation with a large assembly comprising of senior household men, titled men, priests, men of honour, intelligence and wealth etc.

d. **The Village-Group Assembly** was the biggest socio-political group referred to as *ogbe* (village). Ajaegbo (2014) observed that it was composed of a number of major lineages who are descended from a common ancestor or different putative ancestors. Onwuejeogwu (1972) refers to the *ogbe* as federation of autonomous settlements, and by Ozimiro (1972) as wards. The assembly was the highest authority with its members being senior males of households, professional hunters, priests, honourable and wealthy men, warriors, titled men, medicine men, etc. The leader of this

assembly varied from one village to another, in some it was headed by the council of elders: a group of wise, knowledgeable, courageous and transparent men, Maquet (1972) refers to their authority as "a collegial authority exercised by the chiefs of the various lineages living in the village" (p. 57). In some, the oldest member of the council of elders referred to as the *diokpa*, and in this case, he becomes the custodian of the *ofo*. The supreme head of the assembly took decisions in consultation with the constituent members of the village assembly. Consultation, consensus and compromise were necessary elements in resolving issues and decision making. The village square (*ama nzuko ora*), usually a common place, was the arena of assembly.

Igwebuikecracy and Nationhood

Igwebuike carries the idea of the purpose of having a nation- the purpose of coming together. It is rooted in the ideology that when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force or strength, and at this level, no task is beyond their collective capability. Without solidarity and complementarity, of what use is the nation? The nation must be one in which everyone participates in the construction and re-construction of the political community. The people must agree that they are a nation in spite of differences and conflicts, and consent to build it on the grounds that individual and corporate success depends on national success. For if a nation fails, its individuals fail as well.

Before the advent of the organized political society, there was a situation of lawlessness with no authority, morality, sense of right or wrong and justice. It is a state that can be comparable to the Hobbesian state of nature, where every human action was guided by personal interests- the rule of action was the satisfaction of personal appetite and nothing else. The result of this is quarrel, fight and conflicts. Thus, it was a state of war and insecurity, inundated by perpetual danger and fear of death as conflicts, struggles and war prevailed. In a situation of this kind, there was obviously no progress, development, agriculture, navigation and industry as no one permanently owned anything for fear that the stronger would come and snatch it away from him or her. Everyone used the means within his power to preserve his life. Hobbes (1946) describes the depredation of this state: "No knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society; and, the worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short"(p. 32). While this was true, the state of nature was not an entirely

disorganized society, as its members were guided by human reason, that is, the law of nature. The law of nature obliged them to connect to the other, to love the other, to respect the rights and dignity of the other, etc. The problem at this point was that there were those who transgressed the natural law with no organized system to punish or protect the other. And since there is no intervention, the end is resistance from the other and thus, war and destruction.

The emergence of igwebuikecracy as a political system of governance emerged as a result of dissatisfaction with the state of affairs- a state where man became a wolf to his fellow man- *homo homini lupus*. It is an attempt to avoid the inconveniences of the state of nature. Thus, igwebuikecracy did not emerge with the emergence of men, it is the product of development and sophistication: a process of learning and improvement. Igwebuikecracy is a political system that the people developed by themselves with the passage of time and encounter with new experiences. It is a government of the people, by the people and for the people. It speaks to their particular and peculiar experiences. By this, there emerges a common authority that intervenes in the relationships between members of the society. While coming under igwebuikecracy, the members of such a society do not lose their freedom and rights, but rather, they consolidate their freedom and rights by having the other be involved in the preservation of such rights and freedom. It now becomes not an individual thing to fight for freedom and rights, but a community affair- as the loss of the rights and freedom f the other affects me. This makes the fight more fruitful, more powerful and more realizable. It is a system where individuals must submit to the will of the majority and to act contrary is to wage a war against the will of the community. It is in this regard that is it said that: *igwe bu ike* (there is power in number).

Igwebuikecracy as a participatory Democracy

Contrary to the argument that there was nothing democratic in the African traditional system of governance, Igwebuikecracy in its rudimentary stage reveals indices of democratic values. For instance, in the Igbo political system, particularly, during decision making, it is not the eldest man that imposes his will upon the people, but decisions are reached through discussions, consultations, dialogue and compromise which might take the shape of imposing the will of the majority on the minority and this reveals the democratic value that does not see the community as a constellation of impersonal forces but rather a complex of human beings and human interests that upholds the ethos of resolving human antagonistic interests through negotiation. According to Wirendu (1995):

This should not be confused with decision-making on the principle of the supreme right of the majority. In the case under discussion the majority prevails not over, but upon, the minority- they prevail upon them to accept the proposal in question, not just t live with it, which latter is the basic plight of minorities under majoritarian democracy. In a consensus system the voluntary acquiescence of the minority with respect to a given issue would normally be necessary for the adoption of a decision. In the rare case of an intractable division, a majority vote might be used to break the impasse. But the success of a system must be judged by the rarity of such predicaments in the working of the decision-making bodies of the state. (p. 62).

During decision making, the perspective of every lineage in the village is represented in the presence and contributions of their representatives. It can be compared to the House of Representatives, a structure that provides the space for the genuine meeting of minds for the interchanging of opinion and understanding. Decisions arrived at this Council is not enforced through policing, but what Maquet (1992) called 'collective pressure'. At the centre of these African traditional political structures was the rule of law. The choice of the king or leader in Igbo traditional societies, or access to the throne was based on equal opportunities; the aspirants were treated as equal candidates and were subjected to the same rules and treatment.

Conclusion

The foregoing study reveals that what we find in African traditional democracies is a balance of autocratic dictatorship and popular democracy. It could be referred to as a participatory democracy. These democratic traditions were however, disrupted, undermined and devastated by the colonial political infrastructure. The strike at African indigenous institutions affected virtually all aspects of the African life. The religio-social formations that ensured democracy, such as the *ozo* title holders, elders, deities, masquerades etc., were disregarded, disorganized and divested of their political roles. When the Colonial authority came, traditional leaders were made warrant chiefs and subjected to the authority and supervision of British political officers. Thus, making them no longer accountable to their people but to the British political officer who appointed them. Although the indigenous system of government may not have been well organized as in the West, it is possible that out of them could have be formulated a distinct, unique political theory that will better suit the African people instead of the ad-hoc Western government system on Africa. However,

this study is a contribution to the development in studies on African renaissance. It affords Africa and Africans the opportunity to look into their past and see systems that were of value that can still contribute towards the growth and development of the continent, and help to solve the long predicamental situation or crisis of Africa countries.

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