

Pre-Colonial Igbo Democracy in National Development

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Abstract

This work studies pre-colonial Igbo democracy in national development. In Nigeria democracy, the executive wields much power and this makes it has many lapses these lapses make the country to be underdeveloped, this is not so in true democracy which the Igbo people practiced in the olden days. The research therefore, was carried out to bring to limelight how Igbo people practiced their democracy in the olden days. This will help in developing the nation if Nigerian government should copy it. Data for this work was collected from various books written by renowned scholars. Functionalist theory was used to analyze how arms of Igbo democracy perform their functions at family, kindred, village and town levels which the representatives of various constituencies in Nigeria fails to do. It was equally used to portray where Nigeria has their lapses and this hinders development in the nation. In view of this, the work suggested that candidates seeking for elective positions should be made to swear with an *ofo* which is the strength of Igbo democracy. If this is done, both the voters and the leaders will know that the music has

changed and everybody will perform their function very well and there would development in all sectors of the nation.

Introduction

The white men that came to Igbo land were expecting to see the type of kings or queen they had in their countries. They compared the Emirs of Hausa and Obas of Yoruba to Igbo land. When they did not see these types of kings they concluded that the Igbo people do not have kings- *Igbo enwe eze*. The type of kings (leaders) the Igbo culture areas had in those days were not hereditary like those of the Europeans, Hausa, Yoruba and Benin rather, it was the type that emerges when the need arose. The leader will give direction until the problems were resolved and when this happened, the king went back to his normal position. Uchendu, (1965:46) avers “failing to find powerful chiefs who wielded influence over a large territory, as were found in northern and western parts of Nigeria, they naively concluded that the Igbo people were living in ordered anarchy”. Corroborating Uchendu, Okafor (1992:4), opines that the British colonial Administration encountered obstacles of great magnitude when it first came to Igbo land. It had enjoyed considerable success in the western and northern parts of Nigeria. Through their agencies of western Obas and northern Emirs, the British Authorities successfully introduced a system of indirect rule in those areas.

The Igbo had organized system of democracy. They are so good in it that when the Europeans came, they did not know how to penetrate them because unlike in Hausa and Yoruba where they met Emir and Oba respectively, they could not find any king in Igbo land, hence they said that the Igbo has no king –*Igbo enwe eze*. This assertion was wrong because the Igbo people have various kings that emerge only when there is need for his role, when he finishes his function, he goes back to the society and lives like ordinary person. They have yam king- *ezeji/diji*, palmwine tapper-*diochi*, hunter-*dinta*, wrestler-*dingba*, scarifier -*dioka*, deity priest-*ezemmuo*. Their king is not hereditary because when they die their titles will be no more.

Ogbalu,(2006:24), in his own view says that the word *eze* which has now gathered around it the idea of kingship as a result of the Igbo people's contact with British system of monarchy meant nothing more than a headman in a particular sphere or a wealthy man of affluence. All the idols had a head priest and he was referred to as the *eze* (king) of a particular idol-*eze arusi* or *eze mmuo*. The priest was the *eze* of the idol for which he was responsible and was called accordingly eg- *Eze Ogwugwu*, *Eze Ngene*, *Eze Omaliko*, *Eze Aro*, *Eze Udo* etc.

Igbo people had several institutions that helped them to organize their activities. These institutions include age grade, masquerade, *umuada*, *inyomdi*, etc. The governance of their town was not vested on one individual. The oldest of the village in a town has certain privileges. Nwala, (1985:167) opines that a hierarchy of

seniority and social status plays an important role in Igbo political community. He says that seniority is a function of age and birth while social status is achieved within the open competitive social system. Both of them modify each other. There were the priests, elders, diviners, medicine-men and the first born sons, the titled men, members of secret society and the age- grade; all have their recognized roles within the political framework. There were efforts to utilize experience, knowledge and expertise of elders and priests, the physical prowess of younger men, energetic and influential leadership of the titled men as well as to exploit the economic power and influence of the wealthy citizens for the general welfare of the whole community.

Meaning of Democracy:

According to Mish (2004:331) democracy is a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections, a government by the people especially the rule of majority. From what Mish said, we can now see that democracy is not practice fully in Nigeria because the supreme power is vested on the elected rather than the people. This hinders development in the country because the elected ones are there for their selfish interest- to loot and not to lead. They do whatever they want. In true democracy which is practice by the Igbo peoples, once the elected representative fails to do his work, he is withdrawn from the cabinet by those who elected him and another person is elected. Moreover, the representatives are mainly the oldest person or titled men

who had sworn oath of allegiance. They do not commit any atrocity else the deity they have been sworn in with will strike them down immediately.

Harper (2010:11) opines that democracy implies that man must take the responsibility for choosing his rulers and representatives, and for the maintenance of his own rights against the possible and probable encroachment of the governments which he has sanctioned to act for him in public matters. This means that any leader elected is obliged to protect the rights and interest of the electorate. In Nigeria, this hinders development because the leaders do not care about the rights of those who elected them. Take for instance the various bills they are sponsoring and passing in the national and state assemblies, they do not consider common masses in the bill. If the government of Nigeria will practice democracy, there will be major development in Nigeria.

Hornby (2010:398) defines democracy as “a system of government in which all the people of a country vote to elect their representatives. Lincoln says that democracy is the government of the people by the people and for the people USIA (1991:4). Going by what Lincoln said, the electorate are the major participant in democracy because they are people to choose who leads or not and this is what Igbo democracy did. Appadorai (2004:137) views democracy a system of government under which people exercise the power either directly or through representatives periodically elected by them.

National Development:

Scholars on development believe that high level of social organization and social system is not only paramount for development of the country, but also to the development of individuals. National development is the ability of a country or countries to improve the social welfare of the people, by providing social amenities like quality education, potable water, transportation infrastructure, medical care etc.

According to Nkom (1997:223), national development is an attempt to build a better society, a society characterized by greater material prosperity and better life chances for the majority of the population: a society characterized by significant improvements in the people's capacity to understand, control and transform their environment for their own good and that of humanity in general; a society which opens up new opportunities for the personal upliftment and cultural fulfillment, a society in which creativity, productivity, fairness and popular participation are enhanced. In his own view Adamolekun (2006:92) states that the overall objective of every government, regardless of its implicit or explicit political ideology, is to bring about a qualitative improvement in the standard of living of its citizens by promoting industrialization, agricultural development, the construction of roads, railways and other transport facilities and providing social and welfare services, especially in health, housing and education. Supporting Adamolekun, Nnamani (2009:23) says that national development refers to improvement in the social status of the people and the society in general. It necessitates provision in reality and not deceitful of such services, as health, education, housing, roads,

portable water and electricity. It also encompasses reduction of poverty or reduction of the status of women and improved standard of workers.

The Federal government draws up national development plans and policies based on the perceived needs of their citizens these include an emphasis on reducing poverty, affordable and available housing and community development. The goal of all national development is to improve the lives of the citizens in question within the context of a growing economy and an emphasis on the good of the community as a whole national development council. Judging by the prevailing realities in most of the states in Nigeria, it does not appear that the administrative reform exercises have produced desired results.

The Structures of Igbo Democracy

The Family-*Ezinaulo*

The family in Igbo democracy plays a vital role. Olisa (2002:220) observes that it is within the family that the individual, in the course of his development, learns the relationships between his kindred and other kindred and those between his village and other villages at town level. According to Nmah, (2003:41), corroborates Olisa, he says that it is from family that an individual is taught to obey the law, to observe the norms and traditions of the land. The family is made up of father, his wives and the

children from all his wives. Each lineage is made up of a number of territorially kin-based units called *Umunna* whose widest referent is the patrilineal members, real and putative, and whom a relation cannot marry. Sometimes it is loosely applied to all the members of the group in contradistinction to other like village groups. Within the environment, there are compounds that made up *Umunna*. Ogbukagu, (2008:169) avers that the *umunna* or kindred men constitutes the most strongest and the most effective means of managing and controlling excesses in village democracy and also an essential vehicle for maintenance of law and order.

The family has a function to perform in the Igbo democracy. It is the function of the family to bring up their children in the accepted way of the community or town. They pay their taxes- *utu ezi* and equally nominate one male from that household to go to war should erupt. All the family members recognize and respect the eldest among them as *Okpala*; it is the duty of *Okpala Obi* to represent his family at *Umunna* level. He makes sure that his household is not short changed at *Umunna* gathering. He brings back all the due share for them, pays their levies and protects their interest. He performs his function very well because he is adjured to be close to the ancestors. He dare not soil his hands with bribe in order to short change the shares of his lineage *oke ruru ezi na ulo*.

Umunna- Kindred

Olisa (2002: 221) says that the *Umunna* is made up of people who are believed to have one patri lineage. Each

kindred are under the leadership of an *Okpara* (literally elder) who may be an elderly man or young man. The *Okpara* holds the *ofo* of the family and performs all duties attached both to his leadership position and to the *ofo* as the binding ritual symbol of the kindred. His duties include performing scarifies for members on request, representing the kindred vis – a –vis other kindred's at the village level, presiding over the meeting of the kindred members where conflicts and other problems are resolved. His privileges include the traditional respect everyone gives to him, entitlement to certain parts of big game or domestic animal slaughtered at home for any purpose and his right to the normal labour on his farm by younger adult members of the kindred at certain times of the year.

The strongest bond of unity within the kindred is the *ofo* of the kindred according to Olisa (2002: 222) The presence of the lineage *ofo* does not preclude other *ofos* being held in the kindred for every adult is entitled to a personal *ofo* and every shrine is entitled to an *ofo*, the *ofo* signifying in each case the relationship between the holders and *Chukwu*. Justice is executed with the aid of the *ofo*, upon which disputing parties could be made to swear. When the lineage enact new rules for itself, or desires struck adherents to establish rules, final sanction is demonstrated by *Isu ofo* (knocking) *ofo* on the ground) by all concerned.

The *Okpara* that is holding this *ofo* is conscious about it, because it is a symbol of justice, he says the truth at all time, else the ancestors will strike him dead or visits him with an ailment. He goes to the village meeting and represents his kindred. Perform his duties well and bring

back their shares. The various representatives in Nigeria democracy should copy this from Igbo people. They should be made to swear with *ofò* before they are elected as representative in their various ward and constituency. If this is done they will perform their function which is bringing development to their people. Ogugua (2013:201) posits, “One thing is certain, that *ofò* is a symbol authority in Igbo land. Another point is that not everybody can have or hold *ofò* because it means holding the soul of a people”.

Village-Ogbe

The village according to Olisa (2002:223) is in its composition of federation of kindred or sub-villages, which in itself is a cluster of kindred. The strongest basis of unity and solidarity here is the common attachment to one *Ani* (earth goddess) which embraces the village and the whole town. Another factor of group solidarity is the *ofò* which is held by the *Okpara Ukwu* the most senior of the kindred's constitutes the village, the bond of common ancestries is still recognized. The heart of Igbo democracy is the village council which is composed of the *Okparas* of the kindred's as *ofò* holder, all adults, and titled men if they are not *Okpara*, and elders. The leadership role in this level is provided by the *Okpara* of the most senior kindred. The *Okpara* and other *ofò* holders supply the ritual authority to make decisions effective, the elders supply knowledge of the customs and laws of the community.

At the village council all the decisions and laws are ratified with *ita oji Ala* (eating of kolanut of the Earth Deity) when this is done, they are bound to uphold and

protect the law of the village and to inculcate same to their younger ones at kindred level. This means that they are performing their functions.

Town-Obodo

The government at the town level is made up of the representatives of the village heads. The *ofò* holders of each village and the titled men, elders and wealthy men made up this council. The oldest of the villages that made up the town is the *ofò* holder of the Deity they have in common. In Awgu town for example, Umuhu village is the *ofò* holder. They perform all the ritual concerning Awgu town.

According to Olisa (2002:223) Government at the town level is the extension of what happens in village and kindred level. The town assembly is like the village council, an informal body and not a regular constituted executive authority. Its meetings are called when occasions arise, usually by the town's announcers (every village has one) going round in the night to announce the meeting. The town's external relations with other towns is one of the most important concerns of the town assembly, organization of war, reprisals for wrongs done to members by people of other towns disputes about land boundaries, all these are taken care of at the town level, so the maintenance of common property – roads, markets and so on.

The judicial functions of the town assembly include settlement of disputes between villages, kindred's or even individuals. The procedure here is very much like that

adopted for other purposes. Every adult present can give opinions before final decision is reached by the elders and the *ofo* holders who also announce the decision.

From what has been said about Igbo democracy which is what true democracy should be, the representatives in family, kindred, village and town levels perform their functions well. This is due to the fact that they are all *ofo* holders. They swear by the *ofo* that they will always do the right thing else, let *ofo* strike them dead. For development to reach all the four corners of Nigeria, the voters and leaders should emulate Igbo democracy.

Arms of Igbo Democracy:

The leader (*Onyeisi*): The leader in Igbo democracy is not autocratic; his works is to carry out the decision of the General assembly. His reign is not hereditary because he does not transfer his reign to his son or descendent. There are a lot of thing that were put into consideration before choosing a leader; he must be a freeborn of that village, he must be of unquestionable character and a worthy man in all ramification. In the olden days a leader was chosen from those who have taken the highest title. Again he will be an elder who had integrity.

Process of Election: Two or three people will be nominated and from them the leader will emerge. The electorate may consult a deity to ascertain the authenticity of the election. When the leader emerged no one will doubt it.

The Executive-

Ndi Okwu Di N' aka the executives in Igbo democracy are elected by general assembly of the people they represent. If it is the town, they are elected from various clan/kinsmen. Their work is to help the leader to execute the decision of the general assembly. They are not there to fill their bags just like the Nigeria senators and representatives do. They perform the functions of which they are elected because they are sworn in with a deity to do so.

The General assembly- *Ohanaeze* or *Ndi Onu na-eru n' Okwu*:

The general assembly is made up of people that have come of age that is young men that had started paying tax in their various towns, villages and kinsmen. They are free to air their views at any matter in the village assembly. They are the people who votes during election and can be voted for to become either a leader or the executive. The functions of general assembly is to make decision, they are not there to take money before voting for someone, they vote for only credible person, because in the Igbo village democracy everybody exercise his right, nobody is paid to vote or be voted for unlike the Nigeria nation where electorate are paid by the candidates to vote for them.

How Igbo Democracy can help National Development:

The Igbo democracy can go a long way in national development if the agreement of the national conference which states that all the state should practice true federalism will be put into practice in Nigeria. That is

each zone should control the wealth that comes from their area, the Igbo democracy starts from the family level, *ezi*, in this, the oldest plays the role of the head there, he controls their wealth and give account of it to the family members. The *Umunna* and village level equally manage their affairs. Equally the towns manage their affairs also. The town declare war and made peace with whom even they deem fit, they practice autonomy and it bring development in each family, clan, village and town level because there is always competition to outdo the other people.

Nigeria government should emulate the type of democracy practice in the Igbo village assembly and allow the common masses to air their view by organizing town assembly with representatives which will be documented and aired, they will know what the people they are leading are need and how to provide it to them, this will bring development.

The representatives of various senatorial zones and constituencies should perform the functions of which they were elected to do and avoid filing their pocket with constituency money meant for building various infrastructure like pipe born water, good road, bridges, modern markets, health facilities there will be development in the country.

The president will borrow a leaf from Igbo democracy and stop being autocratic. The function of the Igbo leader *Onyeisi* is to execute the decision of the general assembly, nothing more noting less, if the general assembly needs

good road, good education and so on that is what he will do. But what do we have in Nigeria, a Country where one man will wake up and increase the price of Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) to N145 naira per liter without consulting anybody.

There will be development in Nigeria if the electorate should examine themselves and adopt the way, the Igbo democracy is being practice. The electorate, *ndi onu na-eru n'okwu* do not take bribe to vote for someone, rather, they choose their representatives and leader from a trustworthy person, a person not collect with integrity and unquestionable character.

They must be of age and has started paying their tax. In last 2015 general election African Independent Television (AIT) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) aired the video of underage voters in the North. All these thing hinders development because if the wrong person is elected the masses will suffer.

Therefore, I urge the Federal government of Nigeria to adopt the real democracy, which is government of the people by the people and for the people by listening to the masses, they should call a town hall meeting through the senator and reps in every community and state so that the poor masses can say their minds. This will bring fast development. The president who leaves in Abuja do not know what is happening at Awka or Awgu. He does not know that this road is bad or that bridge has collapse, the masses through their representatives should tell the president their needs. That is performing the function of

which they were elected to do they were elected to work for their constituencies and not for their interest.

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