



IGBO INSTITUTIONS AND LEADERSHIP

Edited by:
Gabriella I. Nwaozuzu
Patrick U. Okpoko
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Ndubuisi O. Ahamefula

Published by Centre for Igbo Studies,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

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Printed by
BARCODE-INFINITE MEDIA LTD
43 Enugu Road,
Nsukka,
Enugu State,
Nigeria.
barcodeinfinitemedialtd@gmail.com
+2349035646989 | +2348163779272 | +2348034158759

Igbo Institutions and Leadership
© **Gabriella I. Nwaozuzu, Patrick U. Okpoko, Boniface M. Mbah, Ndubuisi O. Ahamefula**

First Print 2018

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Book cover design and formatting by Barcode-Infinite Media Ltd.



ISBN 978 235 1185

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Abstract

The idea of Igbo accountable political tradition suggests that there are other political theories and traditions outside the Igbo fold. Hence, *egbe bere ugo ebere*, as a political theory, is chosen to explore how the Igbo defines good governance in the pre-colonial time, the goals a community ought to pursue, code of conduct for political officers as well as the standard for assessing the performances of political institutions. *Egbe bere ugo ebere* embodies the orientations, values, beliefs and ideas which dominate political activities in any given traditional community in Igbo land that has 'Igbo Kwenụ' and 'mma mma' as forms of greeting. It is with this understanding that the paper attempts to forge a specific category that could serve as a model theory for Nigeria democratic sustainability. The examination of the theory is germane considering the fact that Nigerian society today is characterized by loss of human dignity and communal solidarity resulting to all manners of depraved behavior, spiritual indiscipline and degenerated language attitude taking Igbo language as example. These experiences call for renewed political alternatives for Nigerian nation. Applying historical and analytical methods, the chapter examines the significant tenets of Igbo politics expressed as *egbe bere ugo ebere*. The chapter argues that it is leadership aimed at service and based on consensus of all concerned and concludes with suggestions to re-engineer the political system of the nation in the path of moral integrity and positive attitude to our Nigerian languages which Igbo is one.

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Introduction

Since her independence in 1960, Nigeria has not been able to demonstrate fully the distinctive mark of a united nation. It has been near impossible for the country to silence tribal rivalries in order to achieve the mixture of cultural blend required to forge a nation's unity. In other words, Nigerian people are different in too many ways. Yet, in political affairs, no section of the country can form a government at the national level with the required majority without the help of another part coming to the rescue. This fact could be part of what informed the comment of Nnamdi Azikiwe during the time of his active politics. He said, "Nigeria is now a political reality, let us bury our differences and build it together."¹

The political, economic and social strength of Nigeria remains in her diversity; and the effort to achieve the needed mixture of ethnic cohesion to forge a strong and sustainable democracy is still work in progress. Hence, the idea of Igbo accountable political tradition suggests that there are other political theories from other parts of the country that exist. *Egbe bere ugo ebere* is a political theory in Igbo land. It is Igbo

Hence, in this chapter, theory involves the Igbo postulations of moral ideals and methods needed to achieve an orderly law directed society. It proposes the aims, means, rules, practices and institutions under whose guidance people live together. In the light of the foregoing, the remaining subheadings of the paper highlight the Igbo and their land, *Egbe bere Ugo ebere* as the historical base of Igbo Politics and concept of power and authority satisfactory as Igbo accountable political tradition.

The Igbo and their land

The people now known as the Igbo or southeasterners in Nigeria include the areas that cover states like Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo and as well as others occupying some parts of Rivers and Delta States. The word 'Ibo' was perhaps derived from 'Heebo' which, according to some European traders of the 19th century, was the name given by Biafra traders on the coast to the hinterland area where they traded. Subsequent European traders slightly changed the word to 'Eboe' from which 'Ibo' was derived. It should be noted, also that the same Biafra traders on the coast differentiated between the 'Ibo' in the hinterland and the 'Kwa Ibo', that is, Ibos living on the Kwa River. The later are now known as *Ibibio*. The merchants, of course, were merely using the word 'Ibo' as a general name for people living in the hinterland rather than for a tribe in the modern sense of the word.⁷

Again, the riverine groups on the banks of Lower Niger, Onitsha, Osimari and Oguta, refer to their hinterland neighbours as 'Igbo', a term which they do not apply to themselves. Thus, it would seem appropriate to say that, modern tribal consciousness, represented by the application of the term Ibo, *Ibibio*, Ijaw, Ogoja in Biafra, was fostered not by the people themselves but by foreigners who were ignorant of the intricate bonds which held the community together.⁸

According to Edmud Ilogu, where the southeasterners (the Igbo) came from and when, would remain for a long time a matter of conjecture, because of absence of helpful records. However, it could be asserted that Igbo land has been under continuous human occupation for at least over 3,000 years and, as is now being discovered, that her people, like many other nations, developed an ancient civilisation that is about half a millennium before the emergence of the kingdom of Benin. Linguistic information also confirmed the antiquity of the main languages spoken in the area.⁹ Therefore, the main groups of southeastern Nigeria, in this paper described as the Igbo were indigenous to their territory or land and contact among them existed through *egbe bere ugo ebere* politics since primeval times.

Igboland, in terms of natural endowment, is well vegetated throughout the year, lying to a large extent in the basins of Niger River, the Cross River, the Kwa River and the Imo River. Three quarter of these river basins are low land less than 400 feet above sea level. Today, with a very high population density in some Igbo areas (about 711 persons per square mile) resulting into the difficulty of finding enough sustenance through agriculture, many Igbo migrate to different parts of the world.¹⁰

It was not only natural resources and trade that gave birth to a homogenous Igbo nation. In pre-colonial period, there were also the contributions of intellectual capital. The consequence of this was the prevalent division of labour within Igbo land aimed at tackling poverty. Individual communities were noted and relied upon for specific skills. This encouraged movement from one place to another, bonded together by *egbe bere ugo*

ebere, during which the solidarity and peaceful coexistence of all the communities were emphasised. For instance, the people of *Awka* were famed throughout Igbo land as wood-carvers and sculptors, while the *Nri* people supplied the priestly class so essential for the social and religious cohesion of the region. Southwards, there were the blacksmith of *Nkwerre*, the *Item* and *Ibibio* doctors, the warriors of *Qhafia* and *Abam* and the diplomats/priests of *Okonko* from *Arochukwu*.¹¹ Thus, it came to be generally accepted that one community supplied the wants of another and the tradition of mutual reliance and support became established.

The pre-colonial Igbo society

Igbo land before the advent of the British was characterized by aspects of culture and distinct political institution that flourished and contributed in the maintenance of orderliness in various Igbo communities. The Igbo generally had no king or chief (i.e. Igbo *enwe eze*). The Igbo people operated a democratic system of government. The highest democratic institution among the Igbo is the *Qha na Eze* (i.e. the Town Assembly). The quasi kinship institution presently practised by Igbo society does not represent Igbo political culture which was based on egalitarian platform and which served democratically for the well-being of individuals in Igbo land. The largest political unit was the village/village group, which was by kindred, then family unit.

The Igbo society is patterned on that of egalitarian society in which almost everyone is equal. Although the structure of the system looks thus, but in practice does not conform to it. There are established ranks and positions of honour. There are marked differences in political organisation, and movement to the top is free for any individual.

The social structure is defined by the blood line. This is traced by patrilineal linkage. The family is the center or the nucleus into which the child compound is formed. From here, it extends to village, clan, and town level. The blood relations create associations between man and his neighbour. The social organisation develops in the form of an extended family kind of village government. There is a strong tie in religious observations, trade and marriages. In each community there are associations of age groups; men with titles, poor and rich citizens who interact with one another in war or in peace and all participate in community affairs, in decision-making and all development struggles.

The Igbo had a decentralized system of government and categorised by the principle of acephalous (absence of a centralized government). It was as a result a chiefless society which was segmentary and egalitarian in nature. There was no supreme king like the Obas in the West and the Emirs in the North. However, each village in Igbo society is normally administered like a Republic, independent or sovereign state. Nevertheless, there existed many institutions in the pre-colonial Igbo society, charged with the accountability of legislative, executive and judicial functions which indeed characterized pre-colonial Igbo society as a domain of *egbe bere ugo bere*. The executive, legislature and judicial power were vested in the *Qha na Eze*, the Council of elders, the *Ofo* title holders, the family, the *Ozo* title holders, the Age grade, the *Umuada* and the 'Ala' or the Earth goddess represented by a Chief Priest. They were known to be the main political institutions among the Igbo.

The family group is one of the most recognised institutions in the pre-colonial Igbo society as the basic unit of every political institution. It comprises people of the

same family. Each compound is based on patrilineal relationships. There are two Igbo positions of esteem that are formally institutionalized- the **Okpara** and **Ada**. The first two children namely; the Okpara and Ada, have higher status in an Igbo family. Status is accorded to the male by seniority, irrespective of polygamous family and agnatic family heirlooms or symbol of authority like **Ofo**, **Chi**, and **Obi**. The Okpara controls the family and judge any family disputes. He performed rituals and ceremonial functions on behalf of the family.

The Village Council is popularly known as council of elders, it comprised of all the family heads in the village. However, the paramount thing is that each village is administered as a sovereign entity and each family heads (the Okpara) was reckoned with or named 'Ofo' title holder in the village. The Okpara have the responsibility of discussing the matters that affected the life of the citizens. They also helped in maintaining law and order in the society as well as settlement of dispute between or among group of families. The chairman of the council is known as "the eldest of the okparas". In fact these elders in the council of elders are real elders. They are not voted in and it is not a matter of money or wealth, if the current elder dies or is incapacitated, the next elder takes over. Before going for a meeting that concerns the family, he would call for a meeting of the family. The family would deliberate and present their views and then send the elder. The elder as the family representative must work hard to project the view and protect the interest of those that sent him. Apart from family responsibility of the council of elders, they are equally saddled with the duty of advising the King (where it exists), removing the King if need be, assisting in keeping law and order in the community, trying offenders and ensuring that punishment imposed on them are carried out, organizing age groups and assigning duties to them, negotiating peace with neighbours as well as planning for and engaging in war etc.

The **Ozo** title was seen as the highest title of honour which was given to the specific individuals in pre-colonial Igbo society. To become Ozo title holder, one must be prestigious, popular and wealthy. The most remarkable thing is that the position wasn't hereditary. Ozos were highly influential; they settle and adjudicated on different disputes, and also rendered valuable advice to the family heads (i.e. the Okparas).

Age grade is another important institution in pre-colonial Igbo society. They are group of young men on the basis of age. They serve as law enforcement agents (i.e. they bring somebody who had refused a summon or arrest a rebellious child in the community), they contribute to the development of the community where they exist in such ways as, clearing bush path and other sanitary exercise in the community, building and repairing of king's house, village markets, bridges, construction and repairing of local roads, building and repairing of community schools and hospitals, maintenance of law and order, they negotiate for peace between their community and their neighbours and also go to war when necessary.

The Ala plays great role in judicial functions. For example, offences such as homicide, murder, all abominable acts, and birth of abnormal children were crimes against the Ala. The final adjudication of cases was done by deities, which are attended to by the chief priests. The Igbo practised traditional religion. They had chief priests who performed sacrifices from time to time to appease the gods. The Igbo had great respect for the deities and the departed ancestors. The chief priests were the link between the

people and the deities, as well as the departed ancestors. Profaning of deities was a very serious offence among the Igbo. Indeed the religious life of the Igbo was surrounded by mysticisms and superstitions.

***Egbe bere Ugo ebere* as Historical Base of Igbo Politics**

“*Egbe*” and “*Ugo*” are different species of living things in the same family of birds. The Igbo, from the contexts of social and political arrangements, imagine a situation where both creatures dwell on the same tree together, productively and in solidarity. That is to say, that the Igbo, like every other people, understand diversity of nations, culture and religion as part of the reality of human existence on earth. It is the right of human beings to live anywhere on earth in peace. It becomes the duty of the leadership of such place to guarantee peace and security.¹²

From the outset of Igbo political philosophy, there was a belief in complementary elements and arrangements for the purpose of justice. There might be disagreement and argument as to what justice meant for the Igbo and what it required, but such public discourse concerning justice, which is outside the scope of this paper, was precisely what gave rise to *Egbe bere Ugo ebere* as the historical base of Igbo politics.

The recognised complementary elements and arrangements are common ancestry and lineage. The two factors strongly affected historical base of politics and governance in traditional Igbo society. Anyanwu and Aguwa offer a plausible explanation in this connection:

Each unit in the Igbo social structure usually claimed descent from a common ancestor. This led to a corresponding order or hierarchy of kingships. The ideology of solidarity was clear evidence of this acceptance of common ancestry and kinship by members of each social unit and it was basic to the Igbo concept of politics.¹³

In the light of the above, succeeding generation of people, at various social units, frequently used historical claims of common lineage and kinship to enhance and maintain solidarity among them. Put differently, *Egbe bere Ugo ebere* is a potent factor in the life of the Igbo. It affects ideas and values on power and authority as well as rights and responsibilities of all the citizenry, regardless of status. Thus, Igbo would say “*E mee nwata ka e mere ibe ya, obi adi ya mma*”, meaning if you treat a child as you treated his colleagues, he feels happy.

The concept of *Egbe bere Ugo ebere* was further strengthened by the religion of the Igbo. It is important to note that religion means a great many different things to different people. Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers and theologians all have their particular understanding of the phenomenon called religion. Yet, those areas of studies do not exhaust the different perspectives of religion.¹⁴ The Igbo see religion as the human experience of the sacred expressed in the worship of “*Chi ukwu*”. The practice of religion then provides the people with common experience of “*Chi ukwu*” and common veneration of the ancestors. This created the confederation of like-minded individuals that valued the laws which guided actions in each community. Anyanwu and Aguwa summarize Igbo religious and communal goals thus:

It was believed that the laws which guided action in each community were received from the ancestors who continued to keep watchful

eyes over the activities of the living. The significance of these... in Igbo political tradition was that all persons, and all organs associated with ordering the affairs of each unit of the Igbo social structures were perceived as instruments for ensuring that communal health was preserved and protected in their respective relevant units.¹⁵

Consequently, only the community could delegate power to its members, since no individual could exercise authority without the people's consent. Leadership was indeed for service in contrast to the present day selfish ambition and greed of most politicians. For the Igbo, leadership at the service of the human person brings about solidarity and progress. Though it often leads to confrontation and tends towards domination, but it finally gives rise to dialogue and fosters the needed cooperation.

Egbe bere; Ugo ebere in the theory of power and authority

Egbe bere Ugo ebere, the expression of solidarity and togetherness as identified in the proceeding subheadings, gave rise to Igbo accountable political community being seen as the "union of living blood relatives, the dead relatives and the gods of the community – a sort of spiritual common wealth".¹⁶ To show the centrality of power and authority as the natural and necessary link for ensuring the cohesion of the social body, the pre-colonial Igbo drove politics to aim at achieving the common good of the greatest number. While respecting the legitimate liberties of individuals, families, and subsidiary groups, those in power and authority were expected to act in such a way as to create effectively and for the well-being of all, the conditions required for attaining true and complete good of all, including communal spiritual well-being. Nwoga in the following statement offers some valuable insight on power and authority:

There was a dominant concept of the individuality of the person and his dignity as a human person such that every effort was made in the past to establish a context of government by consensus. Leadership was not encouraged to succumb to the temptation of tyranny and if it did, there were always some Igbo persons who could become *E ji ndu eme gini* (what is life all about) and put an end to the tyranny even if it cost him his own life.¹⁷

The Igbo meaning of power and authority was rooted in the care for justice and with devotion to the common good, for which it holds final responsibility. It did not, for any reason, deprive individuals and intermediary bodies of the field of activity and responsibility which were proper to them and which led them to collaborate in the attainment of the common good. Again, Anyanwu and Aguwa give helpful elucidation on this:

The principle of consensus in handling affairs was applied not only in the various units of the socio-political structure but also in associations like *umunna* (kinsmen), age grades, secret societies, professional guilds, and even in religious matters. Individuals as well as constituent units of the Igbo social and political group were believed to have been uniquely endowed and should enjoy equality and equivalence in the decision making and policy execution process of the Igbo.¹⁸

Greater sharing in responsibility and in decision-making were stressed so much so that power and authority were not seen in terms of struggle and will-to-dominate others. Power and authority was for harmony in the community and for preservation of moral order.

In all this, the overriding concern was to ensure that leaders and the governed played their parts to ensure that the solidarity of kith and kin was not sacrificed because of materialism and self-serving consideration. The governed accepted their responsibilities including constant vigilance over the actions and inactions of those in power and authority.

Suggestions and concluding remarks

From the foregoing, it has been made obvious that the Igbo accountable political tradition was anchored on constant concern to promote solidarity and consensus. In other words, the apt caption for Igbo accountable politics is cooperation, solidarity, and consensus expressed in this paper as *Egbe bere ugo ebere* politics. The Igbo awareness of the fact that the domain of politics is wide and comprehensive, but not exclusive should be a lesson in the contemporary efforts to achieve sustainable democracy in Nigeria. For the Igbo, the political community is an association of the same kins. Applying this understanding to the larger Nigerian society, politicians are challenged to eschew attitude of encroachment which would tend to set up politics as an absolute value, thereby bringing about serious danger to sustainable democracy and good governance. *Egbe bere Ugo ebere* politics throws up people who have to share solidarity in order to make significant and meaningful contributions to the society and give happiness to the ancestors. In the context of Nigeria society, the ancestors would be the founding fathers of Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Egbe bere Ugo ebere Politics, among the Igbo, meant that use was made of all segments and talents available in the community in ordering affairs. Hence, contemporary political calculations in Nigeria should pay greater attention to framework in which reasonable sharing in responsibility and in decisions must be strengthened and sustained. In other words, there should be wider participation in working out decisions, making choices and putting them into practice. This would help to counter balance the increasing selfishness of an average Nigerian politician, making it impossible for many to continue in their greed; and also involving the masses in a shared responsibility. Thus, human groups that make up the country, otherwise called ethnic nationalities, would gradually begin to share and live as citizens of the Nigerian nation.

The Igbo were quite sure of the roles each person and each institution played in *egbe bere ugo ebere* politics and government of the land. This made the Igbo tolerant and yet firm. Put another way, the amalgam of individualism and collective will and action in Igbo traditional socio-political organisation, which remained a major source of strength in the Igbo political activities, was made possible by *egbe bere ugo ebere*. Consequently, the leader was respected and he/she was aware that the people expected service and accountability; otherwise the leader could become a victim of *onye bu mmadu?* (Who is a human being?) Amid the diversity of people in Nigeria, *Egbe bere ugo ebere* politics deserves attention and further studies as a tribute to the sustainable democratic wisdom of the ancients in Igbo civilisation. It encouraged the principle of true freedom, progress, and humanism.

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