

THE STRUCTURES OF GOVERNMENT IN TRADITIONAL IGBO SOCIETY: A STUDY OF THE EVOLUTION OF AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITIES IN ENUGU STATE

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Abstract

The evolution and emergence of autonomous communities in Igboland is consistent with the socio-political organization of the Igbo society from the pre-colonial era. Where communities in Igboland have always existed independently of the other no matter how small such a community may be. These communities must necessarily have common tie, customs, tradition and identity. The stateless, acephalous and segmentary structure of the pre-colonial Igbo society did not go down well with the British colonizers. To this end, fashioning a local government system in Eastern Nigeria was one of the most nagging problems for British administration and unfortunately the colonizers never mastered it. A careful study of the Igbo worldview years after the independence of Nigeria led to the reversion to and the adaption of autonomous community structure which was how the Igbo societies were structured from the earliest time. The enactment also created alongside the chieftaincy institution. This study strives to know if the objects of autonomous community really suit the Igbo society. Again is the establishment of the autonomous community extant on the culture and tradition of the people or does it depend on the whims and caprices of the government in power. It shall also interrogate to know how autonomous the autonomous community is. The results show that the system is still at the preliminary stage of formation and therefore yet to take a finite nature. Hence, there is the atmosphere of confusion, arbitrariness and manipulation of the system by the government.

Keywords: Autonomous Community, Family, Kindred, Village, Kingship.

Introduction

The socio-political organization and governance of the Igbo people has over the years attracted researchers and scholarship due to its uniqueness and inherent complexities and complications. Such inquiries have tried to analyze the nature of kingship, democracy, aristocracy, gerontocracy, kinship and lineage system in the socio-political organization of Igbo people. Of great concern to scholars also include insight into the various levels of organization in Igbo society. According to Onuoha and Omenma (2007), Nwagboso (2012) there are four levels or structures of governance in Igboland, the family, kindred, village and town. However, these structures have over the years undergo several changes though retaining some basic values. Thus from the Igbo political structure being termed stateless, cephalous and segmentary the Igbo society has evolved into a democratic republican state. Again from being known as not having king (Igbo enwe Eze) there is today a developed kingly system the Eze, Igwe, Obi. This evolutionary development saw the emergent of autonomous community in 1976.

This paper takes seriously the various levels of socio-political organization in Igbo land. In this attempt it makes the case on the creation and establishment of autonomous communities and chieftaincy system in Igbo land. The goal therefore is to establish that the adoption of autonomous community structure has upheld and strengthened the democratic republican nature of the Igbo society. Meanwhile, the aim of the research can be attested in the following questions.

1. Do the objects of autonomous community really suit the Igbo society?
2. Is the establishment of autonomous community extant on the culture and traditions of the people or does it depend on the whims and caprices of the government in power?
3. What is autonomous about an autonomous community?

Historical Survey of Igbo Political System

Understanding the indigenous political system of the Igbo people was one of the hardest tasks for the British colonizer. According to M. Green (1964) fashioning a local government system in Eastern Nigeria was probably one of the most nagging problems which the British Administration in Nigeria had to contend with. Unfortunately they never mastered it. From 1891 attempt were made to create a prototype of leadership system in Eastern Nigeria. Sir Claude Macdonald, Sir Ralph Moor and Sir Walter Egerton respectively fashioned the Warrant Chief System. After the amalgamation in 1914 Sir Lord Lugard in a bid to unify the entire nation radically remodeled the system to bring it in line with the system existing in the North and in the West. Without adequate and reliable knowledge of the people, the British colonizers erroneously established the warrant chief and native court system thinking that they were adapting to the indigenous political system of the Eastern people.

Part of the mistake by the British was the selection of the Warrant chiefs. Dons Eze (2015) observed that the British colonial administrators without a proper understanding of the custom and tradition of the people, arbitrarily chose their preferred candidates, and gave them warrants as members of the Native Courts. They did not put into consideration the quality and social status of the persons involved. Hence people of little standing in their communities, slaves or slave merchants, were equally fished out and installed as Warrant Chiefs. In some other cases, persons of external origin were also installed and imposed on the people like of King Jaja of Opobo. Generally, majority of these Warrant Chiefs had little or no legitimacy beyond the fact of their being installed as king, by the colonial government.

They failed to recognize that the Igbo had already their system of government which was unique, proper and indigenous to them. The error inherent with the novel importation of Warrant Chief System by the British was that it was not for the interest of the people rather on selfish interest. A.F Afigbo (1967) wrote that it is incorrect to say that the Warrant Chief system was established because the British discovered that there were no Chiefs in Eastern Nigeria. Rather, the system was established precisely because at the time of its inception and for many years after the British thought that chieftaincy could be made the cornerstone of Eastern Nigeria social organization. Meanwhile the men they made Chiefs were artificially appointed by the administration to work as subordinate agent. The system was never integrated into the indigenous way of the people. Instead, it sketched the state of confusion and leadership instability in the land. The Aba women riot dealt the final blow that led to the collapse of the Warrant Chief system in 1929/1930. Lord Lugard wrote in his forward to the

book "Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe" by C.K Meek (1937) that the system of the so-called "Native Courts" under "Warrant Chiefs" had proved a disastrous failure in both their administrative and judicial functions. The failure was obvious because the system did not reflect the mind of the people.

With the collapse of the system, the colonial government proceeded to embark on an intensive campaign of inquiry into the indigenous social and political organization of the people of South-Eastern Nigeria. One of the fruits of this intensive research is the book named above "Law and Authority in a Nigerian Tribe", where the author remarked that many administrative blunders have been committed in the past through attempts at discovering native authorities by short-cut methods, without first undertaking the arduous preliminary work of studying the various forms of social grouping and the means of which each is held together and controlled. The work is phenomenal as it initiated a paradigm shift in the perception of the colonial government to the core of the socio-political structure of the Igbo people. It made a survey into the various social grouping in Igbo society kindred, village, village group or town, clan and large clan.

From 1930 efforts were made to put in place local native authority councils to reflect the traditional indigenous structure inherent in the culture. The council was to be composed of the elders and other members of the local elites. This remains the case till there became a handful of young educated representatives whom the British government could employ to effect direct system of government. Femi Adegbulu (2011) summed up there was a conscious move in the field of local administration away from the legitimizing principle of 'tradition' towards the legitimizing principle of 'democracy': both principles were perceived to be contradictory at the time. It was a move to a more formal and civilized form of government. Chiefs played no formal role anymore in this system. The democratic reality, however, seemed to have been little encouraging, as is, for example, shown by frequent regional government intervention into the system of elected local councils.

Meanwhile, the 1950 Macpherson constitution creation of regional government made a return to House of Chief. The house of chiefs was regarded as the upper legislative house. Thus in additions to their ceremonial and customary role Chiefs were also legislators. Their strong influence continued till the outbreak of the Nigeria civil war (1967 to 1970). After the war, the administration of Eastern Nigeria led by Ukpabi Asika were hesitant to recognize the traditional rulers in Igbo land due to alleged fear of their role during the war. The period was supposed to be for the implementation of the 3Rs reconstruction, reconciliation and rehabilitation the after war mantra of Gen. Yakubu Gowon. The non fulfillment of the promise by the Federal government occasioned the flowering of local participation and formation of various town union development unions with pockets of projects to heal the wounds and ravages of the war.

The Emergence of Autonomous Communities

Autonomous community is consistent with Igbo structure of socio-political organization from pre-colonial era till date. Communities in Igbo land have always existed independently from others, with their distinct government mostly council of elders. In the effort to define what an autonomous community is Anambra State law 1981 held that it is community bound

together by a common tie, usage and custom who inhabit a definite area of land which comprises villages and has for some time been identified as a town and in some cases, forms a sub-division of a community or forms a division. In the same respect the Imo State laws 1981 added that it is imperative for an autonomous community to have common tradition and cultural way of life with a common historical heritage and recognized and approved as an autonomous community by the government.

The creation of Local Government as the third tier of government in 1976 set the stage for the development of autonomous community in Igbo land as the fourth tier with the objective to bring government closer to the people and to enhance the public participation in government. The military governor of former Imo and Anambra states (now Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states) created by fiat autonomous communities. The enactment of the autonomous community created alongside chieftaincy institution. The traditional ruler institution officially emerged with government recognition in Igboland, through the military administration with the chieftaincy edict No 22 of 1978. Section 11 of Enugu State Traditional ruler law (2004) states that traditional ruler once recognized by government becomes the highest authority in the autonomous community and presides at all important functions where he is in attendance. Onyema (2017) observed that the meaning and authority attached to the office is equivalent to and in consonance to other traditional statues in Nigeria such as the Oba of Yoruba and Binin land and Emir of Hausa-Fulani. However, the traditional institution in Igboland necessarily recaptures the republican nature of the Igbo society and that where the differences lies.

The criteria for the creation of an autonomous community as set by the state laws hold that any community or group of community seeking autonomy shall have among others, a common tradition, common identity and at least a population of notable adults. The community shall indicate in writing through the ministry of rural development and chieftaincy matter to the State House of Assembly. As required, a copy of the constitution of the autonomous community has to be forwarded to the ministry of rural development. The constitution shall also contain the customary laws of the community. The written constitution also contains a code of conduct for the traditional ruler. This was necessary for orderly selection of the traditional ruler. This definition of the criteria for creation of autonomous communities and recognition of traditional rulers created a floodgate of requests and later abuse that led to proliferation of the autonomous communities. The proliferation and other abuses will further beg...question on the legitimacy and legality of the traditional institutions. The question of the legitimacy of autonomous community and her traditional ruler has over the years received critical review. The sole reliability of the autonomous community and her traditional stool on governmental recognition has always questioned on their indigenesness. Femi Adegbulu (2011) noted that since no traditional ruler or autonomous community has legal legitimacy without government recognition, it follows then that the same government can abolish a community or depose its traditional ruler at will, if it deems it necessary; or simply withdraw its recognition. There are instances where some autonomous communities are nullified and merged with their neighbor. This raises fear of manipulation and abuse of the traditional institution by government agency. This objection draws us to ponder deeply on the following. Are the traditional institutions for the service of the people or the government? Is the establishment of these institutions extant on the culture and traditions of

the people or depends on the whims and caprices of the government in power? And more intensely we would try to objectify what indeed is autonomous about autonomous community.

Uzoigwe (2004) regards the usage of the term “auto-nomous” as a misnomer given that the so-called autonomous community is not independent in its relationship to the government and has no sovereignty of her own. The artificiality of the institution is glaring. Onyema (2018) argued that this artificiality has led to unabated proliferation of autonomous communities, disintegration of historical ancient kingdoms and traditional communities into mushroom autonomous communities. He further disclosed that the proliferation is connected to the government who create autonomous communities simply to satisfy the interest of certain individuals such as politicians, rich and influential members of the communities.

The negative development notwithstanding, there is need to strengthen these institutions to serve the interest of Igbo socio-political organization. Thus effort should be made to strengthen the traditional foundation of these institutions, thus they should be rooted in the culture and tradition of the people. Their sovereignty should be established over the government. Femi Adegbulu believes that the presence of traditional control of Chieftaincy institutions will curb the series of manipulations and bastardization in the system. There should be platform for the promotion of the culture and tradition of the people. the culture, custom and tradition of the people should be part of the primary and secondary curriculum. Hence, history and civic education should express the indigenous way of life rather than the western style.

The Structures and Levels in the Igbo Socio-Political Organization

The Igbo society is a unique setup with her own style of organization and leadership. Uchendu (1965) averred that it is a combination of both direct democracy on the village level and a representative assembly on the level of the village group. Isidienu (2016) concurred that the nature of democracy obtainable in Igbo land is the type where everybody’s opinion counts, where consensus would necessarily be reached before decision is taken. Direct democracy plays at the family and kindred level whereas representative government is practiced at the village and town level.

The Family: This is the nucleus of all socio-political organization in Igbo land. The concept of the family goes beyond the nuclear family set up and stretched to as many generations as could be traced and connected with. Members of a given family include the man, wife or wives children, parents, brothers and sisters, cousins, nephew, grandparents, in-laws. The family is not an autonomous entity; it goes with a network of connections.

Decision making and governance in the family is by consensus where everyone’s opinion matters. The family is more guided by love than by litigations. It emphasizes equality of all before the law. Ufearoh summed that the kind of democracy that play in the family is people-oriented, open to dialogue, participatory and above all consultative. The idea of being consultative is hinged on dialogue and consensus. There is always room for bargain, compromise, accommodation, inclusion and right to free speech.

The father is the arrow-head, leader of the family and the representative of the family. Isidienu recognized that although that the father is the head, he does not administer his powers by force. Family meetings are usually organized on issues that concern the members of the family where agreement is reached through dialogue before an action is taken. At the death of the father, the eldest son automatically assumes the head of the family. The head of the family is never contested. However, if the children are still young the mother will play the role of the head.

Kindred: This is the second level of socio-political organization in Igbo land. It is made up of different families that are related. This relationship is either by bloodline or by the adoption of ex-slaves (ohu and osu) into the family.

The kindred plays a strong role in the social life of an Igbo man. Every Igbo man belongs to an Umunna and no matter one's status one must necessarily submit to the Umunna. According to Okoli, Agbo et al (2020) Umunna is a strong grassroot administrative institution in Igbo land. A strong micro government in Igbo land. It is very powerful, strong and wields great influence among the people.

Such powerful influence include that no Igbo man can be buried without the consent of the umunna. A man cannot bury his dead child without the consent of the Umunna. It is the Umunna that can declare a member dead. This also play with regard to marriage. No Igbo man can customarily give his daughter for marriage or marries a wife for his son without the consent and involvement of the Umunna.

The Umunna plays great role in dispute resolution. Every dispute must begin from the kindred before going to the village or the town. In land dispute between members of a family, the Umunna will come to intervene, being that they are the closest and reliable to intervene in demarcating the boundaries with proof acceptable to both parties.

Village: This is the third level of socio-political organization in Igbo land. A village is made up of several kindred who may be related or have common history. The villages are formidable unit of the Igbo society. The structures of government in the village have remarkable semblance in organization, roles and modalities with the kindred only that it is larger in scope.

Government here has executive, legislative and judiciary dimension. On the executive wing we have the Onyishi of the village who is the official representative of the village. Also the council of elders which are eldest men from all the kindred that made up the village. There are also members of the tax force selected by the council of elders to enforce the resolutions of the village assembly. In the olden days masquerades also play great role in enforcing rules and regulations. Their primary duty is to punish those that desecrate the lands like criminals, rapists, one who poison another, one who commits adultery, those that beat their parents, drunkards, those that brutalize their wives. Title men also play great roles in modeling the village in the right path and upholding integrity.

Autonomous Community: This is the conglomeration of villages which make up the autonomous community. However with the proliferation of mushroom communities there are cases of single villages that are autonomous communities. The government of the autonomous community in Igbo land comprises the Igwe, Igwe-in-Council, town union, The youth union , church organization, vigilante groups.

The Igwe: This is a person selected and appointed by the community as the community traditional ruler and recognized as such by the governor in accordance with the provisions of the traditional ruler's law of the state.

It is the duty of the governor to recognize such person as the Igwe; at the same time the governor has the power to withdraw the certificate of recognition in such case he is no longer a traditional ruler. According to Enugu State traditional ruler's law (S.11) the Igwe once recognized by the governor is the highest authority in the community hence he is the official representative of the community function and gathering. Some of his roles include the custodian of culture, custom & tradition of the people and assist in the maintenance of law and order. He leads in customary arbitration through adapting alternative dispute resolution in settling conflicts and crisis.

The Igwe-in-Council: This includes the Igwe with his prime minister and secretary and other members of the cabinet. The cabinet should reflect the various villages or kindred that make up the community. The Igwe is also at the liberty to appoint one or two resource persons from other communities who can be members of the council. In the era of gender equality, women are also appointed into the cabinet. The cabinet members are the advisers of the Igwe and as such the Igwe is not bound to the resolution of the cabinet. The Igwe – in – council serves the community in matters of peace, development and values.

The Town Union: The town union is a recent development in Igbo land. It sprang up in various towns after the war to help mobilize the town towards development after the destructive impact of the civil war. It has developed more with passage of time and now has government backing, where the President Generals of each town are under the state government.

The town union is the agency of the community through which innovations and development purposes are achieved for the community. It engages in development and infrastructural projects. Such projects include lack access roads, lack of clean water supply, unavailability of health care facilities, poor housing system. The town union organizes the community by harnessing the resources (mineral and human) trying to make available these amenities with or without government intervention.

In administering these functions, there could be clash or conflict between the Igwe –in-Council with the town union president. This is because of the thin gap between the function of the Igwe –in-council and the town union executives. The Enugu State Justice Reform Team held that effort should be made to ensure that there is no conflict between the town union and the Igwe. Hence the town union constitutions shall not contain provisions that tend to infringe on the right of the traditional ruler but at the same time the Igwe must be subjected to the

town union constitution. However, the town union must necessarily respect the Igwe and reserve for him the highest authority in the community.

Council of Elders: This comprises the eldest men from the various villages that made up the community or perhaps from the different kindred that compose the community. In addition some titled men who may not be the oldest in their clan are co-opted to join the council as ex-officio members. These elders are the official representatives of their various villages or kindred depending on the composition of the town. Hence, in matters of decision making their opinions count. The Igwe is bound to follow the agreement and resolutions of the council of elders. In great moments the council has to consult the people they are representing before resolutions are made.

The Security Council: Enugu State Justice Reform Team described the Igwe of an autonomous community as the chief security officer of his town. Hence, the Igwe is expected to fashion out a strategy for complementing and facilitating the policing of his community. And in consultation with relevance stakeholders set up a community policing model, neighborhood watch or vigilante group in effort to maintain law and order in the community. The security council include representatives from the Igwe's cabinet, town union, youth organization, church organization, the vigilante or neighborhood watch group, retired senior security officers (army, police, civil defence, immigration, DSS, etc.) from the community, market leaders and other respected men and government officials from the community. Regular periodic meetings should be conducted to update the security strategy of the community.

The Youth Organization: The youth organization plays great role in the government of the autonomous community. Given that they constitute 70% of the population of the town and supply for the workforce and security personnel of the community. They share great influence in the legislative and executive arms of the community. In conjunction with the Igwe-in-Council and the town union, the youth work for the development of the community, visible in the maintenance of road, security of life and property, advancement of democracy and promotion of peace and progress in the land.

The Church Organization: The Church plays great role in the socio-political organization of the town. This is given that man is a religious being and inherently attached to his faith. One of the criteria for being an autonomous community is that such a community should have a parish church especially the mainline churches - Catholic, Anglican, Methodist or Presbyterian. Historically the church missionaries were the first to provide for the institutionalized social welfare services. They built and managed schools, churches, hospitals and vocational centers for the youths.

The Church has from earliest times played great roles in community development, peace building, behavioral modeling and family welfare services. Other areas where the church exert great influence is in marriage and funeral celebrations.

More importantly, the Church provides the means for public gathering of the people. At least once in a week the church gathers a great crowd and can listen and submit to order. This

create opportunity for the church to carry out her primary work which is the evangelization of the people, worship center where the sacraments are celebrated. The priest uses the medium to strengthen the people spiritually and speak against moral and social vices that affect the community. The church therefore form the greatest organ in the community through which one can reach the greater percentage of the people. Hence the collaborative efforts of the community leaders and the church leaders have great impact on peace, progress of the community.

Conclusion

The evolution of the socio-political organization in Igboland has an interesting history and moving forward it reveals a people searching for their true identity: cogitating through the pre-colonial conception of Igbo people as a stateless, cephalous and segmentary society, and then the confusion in the colonial mistake in the creation of warrant chief system and its failure due to improper calculations. It was characterized by the inclusion of the house of chiefs in the federal system of government in the later years of the colonial era till the first republic as an independent nation and finally the emergence and further development of the autonomous community and tradition rulership structure. The current system of autonomous community is still in the process of definition, exposure and in order to take a finite nature. There is the atmosphere of confusion, arbitrariness and manipulation of the system by the government. Effort is made to adapt the whole system for the service of the people through cultural mobilization and integration through dialectically process. There is more to be done to develop the system to achieve the goal of indigenous practical system of the Igbo people.

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