

IGBOLAND BEFORE 1800: AN OVERVIEW OF POLITICS, SOCIETY, AND CULTURE.

¹Ejitu Nnechi Ota

²Cosmas Odinaka Onozie

&

³Eziaha Onwutebe

Abstract

This study focuses on pre-colonial Igbo society and its political, social, and cultural practices. Politically, the region was categorized as “stateless” by British colonial administrators due to the absence of any form of centralized political authority vis-a-vis the situation in Hausaland and Yorubaland. The political system of the Igbo however, had a more complex governance structure where power was diffused in several institutions rather than being concentrated in one individual or group. The social fabric of pre-colonial Igboland emphasized kinship networks, while the economy was based on agriculture, craft specialization, and trade. Their religious cosmology indicates a shared but regionally diverse identity, while interactions with their neighbours were characterized by periods of conflicts and periods of cooperation. The study adopted the historical-descriptive content analysis research methodology in order to present a nuanced understanding of pre-colonial igboland’s political complexity and to contribute to the broader debates on statelessness, decentralized governance, and indigenous Igbo and African political theory. It concludes that there were perceptible diversities and variations in the cultural practices and political orientations of the different parts of pre-colonial Igboland. These differences notwithstanding, the Igbo shared a common cultural outlook and worldview which was centred around a common language, a common political system, as well as religious and cosmological beliefs. In other words, Igbo society before 1800 was neither anarchic nor uniform. Instead, there was a dynamic plurality of political and cultural forms which adapted across the region

Keywords: Culture, cosmology, justice, politics, society.

¹Ejitu Nnechi Ota Ph.D (otaejitu@gmail.com. 08057129173) is a Professor ; ²Cosmas Odinaka Onozie Ph.D (onoziecosmas9@gmail.com 08069756007) & ³Eziaha Onwutebe M.A (eziahaonwutebe@gmail.com 08063863616) are Lecturers, all in the Department of History and International Studies, Abia State University, Uturu.

Introduction

The Igbo constitute one of the single largest ethnic groups in Africa. In the 1930s, G.T. Basden had observed that:

The IBO NATION ranks as one of the largest in the whole of Africa. Its number has been estimated as high as four and never below three millions. These people occupy a very considerable area of the southeastern corner of Nigeria.¹

However, the fact remains (despite Basden limiting the Igbo to southeastern Nigeria) that the ancestral homeland of the people is located within the geo-cultural area known as Igboland. This area would include the present-day South-East geo-political zone as well as part of Rivers, Delta and Edo states.

The people were forcefully incorporated into Nigeria by the British, firstly as part of the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria after a series of political permutations (including being part of the Oil Rivers Protectorate as from 1891, and the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1893), and secondly as part of Nigeria following the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914. It is not very necessary here to recount the processes that culminated in the evolution of the Nigerian state. Suffice it to say, however, that the British invaders spent more years trying to conquer and pacify Igboland than they did in Yorubaland and Hausaland. This was because the Igbo, unlike the Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani, had no centralized social and political organizations and institutions. Every village considered itself autonomous and cherished its independence. The British, therefore, had to subdue the villages one after the other.

In present day, South-South geo- political zone of Nigeria, M.A. Onwuejeogwu has delimited the Igbo cultural area as being contained within an imaginary line running just outside Agbor, Kwale (Ukwuani), and Ebu in the West Niger area; Ahoada, Port Harcourt, and Umuagbayi (in Rivers State); Arochukwu, Azumini, et cetera (in Abia State); Nzam (in Anambra State) and Enugu Ezike (in Enugu state); Afikpo, Ndinioafu, Isiogo (in Ebonyi State)². It has to be noted, however, that some of the people who live within this Igbo cultural area are not all Igbo. For example, the people of Ntezi in Ebonyi state are not Igbo but Orri. They speak a semi-Bantu language that closely resembles the Efik/Ibibio language spoken in Cross River and Akwa Ibom states, respectively. There are also remnants of non-Igbo people in the northern tip of Enugu state, especially around Enugu Ezike.

Also included in the Igbo cultural area are parts of Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Benue and Kogi states in the present day South-South and North-Central geo-political zones, respectively. These include Umuezeokaha, Umuezeoka, Amaezekwe, and Umuoghara (in Ado and Oju Local Government Areas of Benue state), Nwajala, Umuoye, Ubulie-Umueze and Ozara (in Ibaji Local Government Area of Kogi state), Igbanke (in Orhionmwon Local Government Area of Edo state), Itigidi, Imabana, Ekureku, and Adadama (in Abi Local Government Area of Cross River state) and Isobo or Osobo, and Echara communities (in Obubra Local Government Area of Cross River state), Ohaobu (in Ukanafun Local Government Area), Ikpa Ibekwe (in Ikot Abasi Local Government Area) both in Akwa Ibom State.

What this means is that there are Igbo-speaking communities outside the geographical Igboland. In other words, the Igbo are found not just within geographical Igboland, but also in Edo, Rivers, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Benue, Delta, and Kogi states. Different dialects of the Igbo language are spoken by and in the different Igbo communities. Some of these are barely mutually intelligible, though there is a standard dialect that is popular among the people. But these communities maintain their Igbo linguistic and cultural heritage while being integrated into the larger ethnic and cultural landscape of the respective states where there are found. This is in spite of the fact that they are geographically situated outside the core Igbo heartland.

Their dialectical differences notwithstanding, the Igbo, wherever found, do share some common cultural traits and practices. Prominent among these is the centrality of the Earth deity (Ala, Ali, Ana, or Ani) in their cosmology. Among the Igbo too, there is a very high premium accorded the yam as the chief crop whose cultivation and consumption were governed by very strict rules. Other cultural traits common among the people were the practice of circumcision eight days after a baby's birth, as well as the four or eight-day market week³.

Therefore, an Igbo is someone either of whose parent is an Igbo and whose ancestral homeland is located within the geo-cultural area known as Igboland. It has to be noted that apart from the market days, there were some other divergences in terms of culture among the Igbo, so much so that there is hardly any cultural practice that can be justifiably said to enjoy universal applicability among the people. An example would be the marriage system/ family arrangement. Among the Cross River Igbo communities of Abam, Abririba, Afikpo, Edda, Ihechiowa, Nkporo, and Ohafia, the matrilineal system of inheritance and succession is practised. This is quite unlike the patrilineal system which is common in other Igbo communities⁴.

Pre-colonial Igbo political systems and organization

Prior to British colonial rule in Nigeria, the Igbo did not come under any single political authority. On the contrary, pre-colonial Igboland was largely fragmented politically, and each part had its own political system, though there were no marked differences. In other words, there were a number of common features, both in the political institutions and in the attitudes of the people towards them. Thus, most Igbo communities had similar political orientations and institutions.

Ogbu U. Kalu has identified four basic types of Igbo political system. These are:

- a. Those with a monarchical state system (Onitsha, Oguta, Nri, Ossomari and Arochukwu). Here, the king had a graded cabinet and often used a secrete society as an executive arm. Titled people (ozo) were not automatically advisers to the king.
- b. Those in which the village chiefs ruled with titled people (nze or ozo/ichie) as advisers, often consulting the people and the women (umuada) and using some secret societies as enforcement agencies.
- c. Those in which the village chiefs ruled with representatives of family heads and members of a key secret society.
- d. Those in which the village chiefs ruled with representatives of the autochthonous families and with the oldest age grade. The next two age grades acted as the executive arm, while the populace and women shared in decision-making.⁵

On his part, Afigbo also identified four types of political system among the pre-colonial Igbo. The first is what he called the “presidential monarchy”. It was practised in Igbo communities bordering the Bini and the Igala. In such Igbo communities, some of the political trappings and paraphernalia, as well as ceremonials of these non-Igbo groups were readily borrowed and integrated into the local political systems of those Igbo communities who lived close to them. However, in as much as such “monarchs” kept courts and displayed other non-Igbo political orientations, they were in actual fact merely the spokesmen or presidents of their councils of elders (ama-ala) and village-group assemblies.

The second is what he referred to as the “village republic”. This, he argues, was the commonest form of the political systems, and was found mostly among the peripheral and riverine Igbo. It was the original political system in these areas before it was influenced by the political cultures of the Bini and Igala. The distribution of power and authority in this second type of political system, as well as the practices and processes of government were basically the same as what obtained in the presidential system. But there was a noticeable absence of the title, regalia, and ceremonials of royalty.

A third type of pre-colonial Igbo political system is the type found among the North-Eastern or Cross River Igbo, such as the Abakaliki and Afikpo Divisions of colonial Nigeria. Their contacts with non-Igbo groups of the Cross River area led to the borrowing of their highly developed age-sets system. The result was the evolution of a political system where the requirements and demands of government were adequately satisfied by a combination of the kinship and age-set systems.

The fourth type of political system, according to Afigbo, is the one where the domination or lack of it of government by the kinship system is the major feature. Here, one finds many other types of Igbo political systems. For instance, among the Igbo of Okigwe, Orlu, and Owerri Divisions of colonial Nigeria (that is, the Central Igbo), the kinship system had an overwhelming influence on the government in pre-colonial times. Institutions and agencies like title and secret societies, as well as age-grades, did not necessarily confer political leadership on any individual, though they did confer some kind of social status and respect on members. What obtained in these areas, according to Afigbo, represented the real indigenous political system of the Igbo. The reason he has given is the fact that since these areas are located in the centre of Igboland, they were not exposed to alien cultures and were, therefore, better positioned to preserve authentic and pure Igbo ideas and institutions of government.⁶

In all, most pre-colonial Igbo communities generally had the village group as the largest political unit. Each village group was usually a collection of villages with a common history and myth of origin from a common ancestor. The villages were ranked in order of seniority which did not necessarily affect the population size and territorial spread of the villages so ranked. Each member-village comprised lineages which were believed to have descended from the sons of the founder of the village. The lineages in the village were also ranked according to seniority. Below these were the sub-lineage or compound (or extended family) which was made up of households whose heads were usually brothers. At the level of the household, 'government' was strictly a family affair involving the husband and his wife (or wives).⁷

It was at the sub-lineage or extended family level that the rudiments of an elementary form of government could be discerned or isolated. Here, the oldest man was considered the head of the family. It was he that took custody of the family's ancestral symbols, such as the 'ofo' (the Igbo symbol of authority, right conduct, justice, and continuing union between the dead and the living). He presided over meetings where decisions reached were enforced by informal sanctions, and he was highly respected.⁸

At the lineage level, other institutions of control were found. These included age-groups and secret societies which acted as the police force in controlling its members and enforcing the decisions of the village assembly. Next was the assembly which, unlike the lineage assembly, was made up of the adult members. However, it had an inner council of lineage heads known as 'Ndi Ama-ala', or 'Ndi isi Ofo'. All adult males took part in the deliberations, though the 'Ama-ala' usually had to withdraw to consult (Igba izu) before presenting their views to the general assembly for approval or rejection. It was at this level that direct democracy ended.

At the level of the village group, member-villages sent representatives to the assembly which was the supreme authority of the group. Usually, the representatives were the 'ofo'-holders or leading members of the title and secret societies. Decisions were reached by consensus, and these were enforced by the age-grades and secret societies, such as 'Ekpe', 'Obon', 'Ekan', and

'Okonko', especially among communities like Ihechiowa, Isu, Arochukwu, Ututu, Ohafia, Abiriba, Edda, Nkporo and Abam (the Cross River Igbo).

To quote Afigbo:

Each village was virtually autonomous and could not be made to accept decisions it did not agree on or in which it took no part. The village council or assembly had no executive agents of its own, nor could an age-grade or secret society from one village go to another to enforce the decisions of the village-group assembly.⁹

The observation of G. I. Jones when he submitted his "Report on the Position, Status, and Influence of Chiefs and Natural Rulers in the Eastern Region of Nigeria" to the colonial government is in tandem with what Afigbo said.

According to that Report:

The traditional government of communities in the Eastern Region depended on the general will of the component segments of the groups as expressed through their representatives at a general meeting of the tribe. This does not mean that communities in the Eastern Region have no chiefs... It means that the functions they were required to perform differed. Every local community has some person or persons whom they refer to by a term signifying head or chief.¹⁰

While there is no denying the fact that the pattern of political organization in pre-colonial Igboland exhibited variations in much the same way that the Igbo language has several dialects that are mutually intelligible, there was a common thread running through all of them, namely, consultation and consensus.¹¹ There was nothing like an oligarchy. Rather, government was Republican; that is, it was the concern of everyone.

Justice and the judicial processes in the pre-colonial era

Pre-colonial Igboland also had a variety of judicial processes which differed from one locality to the other. In some parts, the first son of the extended patrilineal family held the 'Ofo' and offered sacrifices to ancestral deities. He also mediated in cases involving members of the household. In more serious and complicated cases, especially those that threatened to tear the family apart or bring it to disrepute, the oldest son (Okpara, Okwara, 'Okpala' or 'Opara') would summon members of the family ('Umunna'). This was in recognition of the fact that the first son realized that his authority derived from the 'Umunna'.¹²

But in cases involving members of two different villages, the councils of these villages had to intervene to resolve the contentious issues amicably. Similarly, in cases involving the desecration of the land (Ala, Ali, Ana, or Ani), the priest of the earth deity, (Eze Ala) mediated. As a matter of fact, he was quite powerful because in Igbo religious belief, the earth claimed every person upon his/her death. Both the defendant and the plaintiff in matters involving the desecration of the land were usually required to swear before the earth deity, declaring that should they tell

lies, the deity should strike them dead. Witnesses were similarly made to swear that they would give correct and honest evidence.¹³

Writing on oath-taking among the Igbo, Udobata Onwunwa has observed that:

In Igboland, oath-taking is known as Idu-isi or inu-iyi, implying the physical action one performs when carrying out the ritual. This external action is what an observer sees but the deity sees both the external and internal dynamics of the oath. In idu-sis (sic) or idu-ishi, a person literally nods his head in the name of the god that he accepts the stipulations of an oath or that what he is saying is the truth. On the other hand, Inu-iyi implies 'drinking the 'iyi' (water). The idea of 'drinking' presupposes the use of water or wine which one sips as a practical enactment of the oath. Often the gods in whose names the oath is sworn, have springs [iyi] from which the one taking the oath drinks to declare his innocence.¹⁴

Oath-taking in Ihechiowa is called 'Ita Arunsi', and is different from 'Igba-ndu' or blood covenant. Although 'Igba-ndu' involves oath-taking, it is considered much more serious, and has a much wider dimension than mere oath-taking. It is a mystical joining together of two parties, be they individuals or groups, in which each of the parties literally swallows the blood of the other. 'Igba-ndu' could be undertaken by two villages or individuals who had experienced cracks in their relationship occasioned by mistrust and betrayal. For instance, two neighbouring villages that had fought and spilled blood over a disputed piece of land could enter into 'Igba-ndu'. Also, in a place like Ihechiowa, a man who suspects that his wife was cheating on him could demand that she proves her innocence and commitment to the marriage by taking an oath.¹⁵

A number of reasons have been given as explanations for oath-taking in traditional Igbo society. These include the need to establish the truth of what is said, especially when relationships are not anchored on trust and confidence. It is intended to affirm the veracity of the claims of an individual whose conduct in the past was dubious and to make him/her desist from further misconduct. Secondly, oath-taking could serve to establish and maintain good human relations, especially between two individuals who are not related by blood. In this instance, the parties involved go through a ritual that often involves each donating some quantity of blood which is then mixed and either swallowed by the parties or rubbed into each other's body. The two then become committed to not cheating or hurting each other. Finally, oath-taking could serve to compel parties to keep their shared secrets from others. Among secret societies, for example, it is obligatory for members to swear to an oath of secrecy not to divulge their organization's internal dynamics and secrets to non-members.¹⁶

At other times, a wife who is suspected of involvement in the husband's death could be compelled to take an oath to prove her innocence. Suspicious husbands may ask their wives to swear to an oath not to divert their property to their (wives') maiden homes on their (husband's) death. In some Igbo communities, oath-taking is used to detect and sort out criminals. More often than not, this happens when a suspect does not own up to the crime.

No matter the form and purpose of an oath, the deity in whose name it was taken, was expected to inflict maximum punishment on anyone who committed perjury. The general belief was, and still is, that the culprit will die irrespective of where he/she runs to after lying on such an oath. However, cases such as murder, arson, poisoning, stealing, as well as incest, involved a lot more care in pre-colonial times. The accused person was usually made to appear before the village council. To prove his/her innocence and clear his/her guilt, oath was administered on him/her, after a week. The accused had to reappear before the village council to swear to the oath. The idea was that after his/her first appearance, the one-week interval would be enough for him/her to be cross-examined by his/her relations regarding his/her innocence or otherwise. The oath was administered on him/her thereafter. If nothing happened to him/her one year after taking the oath, the innocence of the accused was proved beyond reasonable doubt. This was usually celebrated by his/her relatives and friends.

Pre-colonial Igbo society made laws and prohibitions to regulate community life. These had both political and religious significance. Thus, when customs or codes were breached, priests of oracles as well as diviners were quick to alert the community of the actions as well as the dire consequences of not promptly propitiating the gods and giving justice to individuals who had been wronged. Among others, murder, stealing (especially of yam), incest, fighting in the farmland during the planting season, as well as hiding children born with legs out first or those born with teeth, or goats that delivered in the night, were abominable acts which, it was believed, attracted the wrath of the gods. These were considered contraventions against established and accepted social and religious norms. The priest of the earth deity was the one that usually made the sacrifices needed to appease the gods because all forms of abomination ('aru') were against the land.

Justice, by which is meant “giving a person what he deserves, the equitable and fair judgment and punishment to the offenders, in the light of existing laws, morals and customs”,¹⁷ was part of pre-colonial Igbo society. According to Otonti Nduka, retributive justice was perhaps, the most frequently encountered and best articulated form of justice.¹⁸ He sees it as the foundation or basis of many legal and social sanctions prevalent among the Igbo. That is why the principle is enunciated in Igbo proverbs. For example, there is a saying among the Igbo that, “Onye mere ihe oma, ga-erite ihe oma, onye mere ihe ojoo, ga-erite ihe ojoo”. (“He who does good deeds is rewarded with good deeds, while the person who delights in doing evil will always reap evil”).

Apart from the retributive type, another form of justice that was prevalent in pre-colonial Igbo society was commutative justice. Here, the idea is on the need for individuals to support and complement each other's efforts towards achieving collective success. There is a saying that illustrates this principle, namely, that “If the right hand washes the left hand, the left hand should also wash the right hand”. Similarly, the principle of distributive justice in pre-colonial Igboland had to do with liberty and equality. It demanded equality in the award of material benefits, such as equality of opportunity and equal pay for equal work. Thus, together with retributive justice which emphasized reparation for injuries suffered, and commutative justice which demanded that parties engaged in transactions involving bargaining should be fair and honour the contracts mutually

agreed on, distributive justice helped to stabilize pre-colonial Igbo society by ensuring that peace and harmony were sustained on the basis of equality and fairness.¹⁹

Pre-colonial religion and cosmology

The pre-colonial Igbo were also very religious. In fact, there was a sort of spiritual commonwealth between the living, the dead, and the gods. Politics and government had much in common with religion because while government and politics involved serving the people through the creation of new rules and conditions for life, they also served to ensure the relevance and application of old rules. Thus, the belief was that any individual who failed to adhere to such old rules was invariably challenging the spiritual components of the community, namely the gods and the ancestors. It was, after all, the gods and the ancestors that created such old laws in the first place. It was, therefore, the fear of an inevitable retaliation by the gods and the ancestors that ensured conformity to the laws of the community. That also explains why oracles and diviners played very important roles in the Igbo traditional political system.²⁰

Every household in pre-colonial Igboland had its own shrines and gods. The various lineages also had their own shrines and gods which were usually located at a central point as directed by diviner priests. 'Ogirisi' or 'Ogurusi' trees were planted to indicate the principal shrines. According to Edmund Ilogu, the shrines and the gods were worshipped and offered sacrifices at specific periods as ordered by the diviner.²¹

The gods were worshipped and sacrifices made to them either to ask for their blessings or to atone for sins committed by individuals, groups, or even the whole community. The belief was that no one person could commit a sin against the gods. Consequently, the punishment intended for one individual was often visited on all members of the family or community. Similarly, the blessings of the gods were shared by all. Indeed, the life attitude of every individual was geared towards the gods, and the brotherhood of man was expressed by the fact that what affects one individual affects the entire village.²²

In Igbo traditional politics and religion, the 'ofo' staff of office occupied an important place. It was the symbol of political authority of the family, lineage, village and community leaders. Usually, it was the lineage staff of office for the first or oldest son in the family (Okpara, Okwara, Okpala, or Opara), and he could not be deprived of it except there were cogent reasons for that, such as negligence or insanity. In traditional Igbo society, 'ofo' was also the staff of the religious authority of the priests, especially the priest of the earth deity. It was used as a channel through which the elders prayed to the spirits. It was also used to distinguish the order of seniority at every level of the social organization in pre-colonial Igboland.²³

Thus, in both the political and religious spheres, the 'ofo' was held as a special and sacred staff of office. It signified the unity, truth and the symbolic nexus between the living, the dead, and the gods. It was also a spiritualized moral agent which represented what was right and just. According to A. G. Leonard, whenever the good offices of human judges and mediators could not

satisfactorily settle a case between two contending parties, recourse had to be had to the 'ofo' as an impartial arbiter.²⁴ It was, in other words, the Igbo equivalent of the modern symbol of justice in law courts, whose pendulum always favoured truth and justice over evil and mischief. It was used for swearing, especially in very serious cases.

Igbo traditional religion was anchored on a cosmic structure which perceived the universe as consisting of the sky above (Elu Igwe), the solid earth (Ala, Ali, Ana, Ani), and the underworld (Ala mmuo). The high heavens were the abode of the supreme god (Chukwu). Important and powerful gods or divinities, such as 'Amadioha', 'Kamalu', and 'Anyanwu', also dwelled there. The Earth was the abode of men, the earth deity and some minor deities, while the underworld was home to the dead ancestors and numerous other spirits and natural forces. Yet, man's life in all these was intricately related with the activities in both the sky and the underworld because of the belief in a continuous flow of movements from one sphere to the others; that is, a cyclical movement of life and forces through and in all three cosmic spheres.²⁵

The picture of the Igbo worldview and religious orientation has been summarized thus:

The traditional Igbo vision of his world is a coherent system of ideas and concepts which explains how things came into being, gives the rationale for different cultural institutions and practices, and above all, located the place of a moral being in the universe. Igbo traditional worldview is fundamentally a religious one. Man's fortune and destiny are conceptualized in dynamic and delicate relationship with the activities of numerous spiritual beings and forces believed to inhabit the various regions of the cosmic order. However, the enhancement of his life remains the most vital consideration in the entire perception and scheme of things. Within that framework, the variety of activities which the traditional Igbo perform most often in partnership with the gods, ancestors and well-disposed spirit forces, assume their full meaning and expression. Such activities include divination, ritual sacrifices, and other forms of worship.²⁶

There was a belief in a Supreme Being called 'Chiukwu', 'Chineke', 'Obasi di N'elu', or 'Olisa'. There was also a belief in the worship of various classes of divinities. While individual life was believed to have come directly from the Supreme Being (Chukwu or Chineke), the deities or divinities were linked to the origin and destiny of the people. In this case, therefore, there was a bond of relationship which was both religious and moral and which connected man with the many classes of spirits or supernatural beings within the Igbo cosmology. Morality in this context, derived from both the authority of the social group and the force of the people's religious cosmology.²⁷ The traditional Igbo worldview of morality was, therefore, such that it ensured orderly and harmonious co-existence through the creation or construction of a number of norms and taboos. Those that constituted disregard or misconduct attracted spiritual sanctions. Individuals and groups guilty of such offences had to atone for their misconduct either through retributive justice (that is, restitution or compensation) or through appeasement by way of ritual sacrifices to the gods.

Finally, Igbo cosmology believed in life after death. In other words, life's enhancement entailed a strong commitment to religious and ritual acts to enable an individual to live well in the land of the living and to transit and continue blissfully to the afterlife as a worthy ancestor. The transition to the level of 'ancesthood' represented the fullest realization of personal salvation, and it was only for individuals who did not commit any abominable acts but lived upright and moral lives. Such individuals were adored and were not only expected to watch over the living, but also to reincarnate in their families. That way, their lineages could be sustained.

One other thing that has to be noted and appreciated is the fact that in pre-colonial Igboland, the traditional social structures as well as the institutions of the family, religion, and economic pursuits all placed emphasis not on the individual but on the commune. Accordingly, moral obligations were not guided by the exercise of individual moral judgment and conscience, but more by the demands of existing moral codes, tradition, and custom. Every member of the village, for instance, was socialized into the ethos of that village through observing the customary behavioural attitude and moral code in the locality. Thus, every individual knew what was expected of him/her and what he/she expected in return.²⁸

Traditional Igbo society before 1800

Igbo group life in pre-colonial times was integrated and continuous, and provided satisfying moral conceptions of life for the individual who, willingly or unwillingly, had to share in the group life. For instance, most traditional homes were polygamous, and the father built houses for his wives who lived with their children. He had the right to ask any of his children to run errands for him. Yet, it was more of the duty of the mothers to train their children in the manners, ethos, and patterns of life in the community. But the fathers, as well as members of the extended family, were also expected to teach, admonish, and correct the children. Communal attitude to child upbringing was aided by the fact that many members of the extended family often lived close together in a compound. It was, therefore, easy for a child to be watched and guided closely by many of his/her close relatives.²⁹ This, no doubt, ensured proper moral upbringing of children.

A major distinguishing feature of pre-colonial Igbo society and politics was the high premium placed on achievement, especially the accumulation of wealth. This ensured that those who, by reason of birth, could not become lineage heads, could at least bolster their social image by buying titles and joining privileged associations. Competition and rivalry were therefore, seen as the life principle of Igbo society. They kept everybody and every group up-and-doing in order to remain relevant in the scheme of things.

Not only did this tendency to materialism result in a highly competitive and economically stratified Igbo society,³⁰ it also made them to be ultra-democratic, tolerant and individualistic.³¹ Yet, these values and attitudes had their merits. They kept disruptive social tensions under control because, in the words of Afigbo, "... any social segment that allowed its internal tension to get out

of hand would be overshadowed by its rival groups, and what was worse, would be laughed at by those rivals”.³²

Furthermore, and as Nwabara has observed, the jealousy, internal squabble, and inter-village fighting which were the direct outcome of the competitive and materialistic nature of the people and which appear to have kept them divided and suspicious of each other, vanishes in the face of any external threats to their corporate existence and development.³⁴ That was why the people were able to adapt to the colonial situation where they now had to compete with members of other ethnic groups for relevance in the new scheme of things.

The Igbo and their neighbours before 1800

The Igbo shared common borders with non-Igbo neighbours. Such frontier Igbo communities maintained extensive and varied relation with their neighbours, and these were shaped more by trade, kinship ties, cultural interactions, and shared ecological or riverine geography than by centralized diplomacy. Igbo communities in the west, such as those in the Aniocha, Oshimili, and Ika areas, interacted closely with communities in the ancient Bini Kingdom. There were, therefore, cultural borrowings and intermarriages. For example, Bini political and cultural influences, including centralized kingship practises, became part of the governance system of these communities.³³

Similarly, Igbo communities in the southernmost parts engaged with the ijo and other ethnic groups in the Niger Delta through riverine trade networks. This pattern of trade relations involved the exchange of foodstuffs, salt and craft goods, yams and other agricultural produce.³⁴ Relations between the Igbo and their neighbours in the Southeast was characterized by both trade and periodic conflicts over land, markets, and trade routes, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries when the trans-Atlantic slave trade was at its peak.³⁵ However, extensive intermarriage, shared markets, and cultural borrowings (including overlapping masquerade and title-society traditions) served to mitigate the intensity and violence of such conflicts.³⁶

Igbo communities in the north, particularly around Nsukka and areas around the River Niger, also interacted with Igala-speaking peoples across the Niger-Benue confluence area. As a matter of fact, the centralized monarchical system of the Igala kingdom exerted political and cultural influences on Igbo communities that shared borders with it, including some tribute relationships and the diffusion of certain common names such as Attah, Ameh, Akor, and Onogu, among others.³⁷

In all, the pre-colonial relationships between the Igbo and their neighbours were less defined by rigid ethnic boundaries than by overlapping networks of trade, ritual authority, migration, and intermarriage. In this regard, the Aro trade and oracle system served as perhaps, the most integrating forces that connected Igbo communities to the wider regions before significant European incursion.

Conclusion

The Igbo operated a dynamic society prior to contacts with Europeans in the 19th century. The social and political structures made provisions for a peaceful, harmonious, and humane living among the people. There were various institutions that regulated inter-personal relations. Also, the people's collective ethos was guided by religious observances which sustained relationships at the individual and community levels.

The political structure, though not as complex as those of the Yoruba and the Bini in the period under review, was nonetheless, sophisticated, such that power was broadly distributed. Thus, there was no concentration of authority in any single ruler, and its republican nature allowed for flexible and locally responsive governance that was rooted in consensus and merit rather than inherited privilege. Thus, before 1800, Igboland constituted a distinct and sophisticated civilization, a fact that challenges conventional notions of centralized state formation in African history.

The Igbo enjoyed a harmony of economic, cultural, and political interests with their non-Igbo neighbours in the pre-colonial era. Interactions sometimes led to frictions and conflicts. However, social relationships, including cultural borrowing and intermarriages helped in the amicable resolution of such conflicts.

The changes brought by Christianity and Western civilization have greatly eroded Igbo political, social and cultural systems and values. While these may not necessarily have impeded the people's pristine characteristics, there is no denying the fact that the fabric of the traditional society and ways of life, as well as the value system, have been the victims of the madness of modern civilization. It is true that among the Igbo, individual dynamism and success are applauded and respected because the society is a highly competitive one. But the tendency towards excessive materialism has manifested in selfishness, greed and the atomization of the society. In the end, the traditional values of morality and honesty which were the hallmarks of pre-colonial Igbo society would appear to have become obsolete.

Endnotes

- ¹ G.T. Basden, *Niger Ibos* (London: Frank Cass and co ltd, 1966), xi
- ² M.A. Onwuejeogwu, *An Igbo civilization: Nri kingdom and hegemony*. (Benin-City: Ethiope publishing corporation, 1981).
- ³ Ejitu Nnechi Ota, *Igbo ethnicity in Nigeria: Origin, evolution, and contemporary forms*. (Balti, Moldova: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2018), 9.
- ⁴ Ogba U. Ndukwe, *The matrilineal system of succession and inheritance in Nigeria*. (Calabar: Executive publishers, 1996), 6.
- ⁵ Ogbu U. Kalu, "Ethical values in Igbo tradition of politics", In U.D. Anyanwu and J. C. U. Aguwa (eds). *The Igbo and the tradition of politics*. (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd, 1993), 15.
- ⁶ A. E. Afigbo "The indigenous political systems of the Igbo". *TARIKH*, vol. 4, No 2, (1973), 14-16.
- ⁷ Afigbo "The indigenous political systems of the Igbo". *TARIKH*, 16.
- ⁸ Afigbo "The indigenous political systems of the Igbo". *TARIKH*, 20.
- ⁹ Afigbo, "The indigenous political systems of the Igbo", *TARIKH* , 22
- ¹⁰ Quoted in S. N. Nwabara, *Iboland: A century of contact with Britain, 1860 -1960* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 22-23.
- ¹¹ Nwabara, *Iboland...* 26.
- ¹² Nwabara, *Iboland...* 27.
- ¹³ Udobata Onunwa, *Studies in Igbo traditional religion*, (Obosi: Pacific Publishers, 1990), 115-116.
- ¹⁴ Onunwa, *Studies in Igbo traditional religion*. 117.
- ¹⁵ Ejitu N. Ota, "Aspects of the pre-colonial history of Ihechiowa", Unpublished B.A. Long Essay, Department of History, University of Nigeria, (June 1983).
- ¹⁶ Onunwa, *Studies in Igbo traditional religion*, 119-120.
- ¹⁷ S. L. Salwan and U. Narang, *Academic legal dictionary*. (New Delhi: Academic (India) Publishers, 2007), 192.

- ¹⁸ Otonti Nduka, "The traditional concept of justice among the Ibo of South-Eastern Nigeria". *ODU: A Journal of West African Studies*, No 15, (July, 1977), 95
- ¹⁹ Nduka, "The traditional concept of justice... 99
- ²⁰ Afigbo, "The indigenous political system of the Igbo" *TARIKH*, 20-21.
- ²¹ Edmund Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo culture*. (Enugu: Nok Publishers Ltd, 1974), 17.
- ²² Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo culture*, 18.
- ²³ Andrew E. Nwaordu, *Cultural symbols: The Christian perspective*. (Owerri: T' Afrique International Association, 2001), 19.
- ²⁴ A. G. Leonard, *The Lower Niger and its tribes*. (London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1985), 428.
- ²⁵ O. U. Kalu, "Igbo traditional religious systems", In Ofomata (ed), *A survey of the Igbo nation*, 352-353.
- ²⁶ Kalu, "Igbo traditional religious systems", 353.
- ²⁷ Kalu, "Igbo traditional religious systems", 355-356
- ²⁸ Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo culture*, 22-23.
- ²⁹ Ilogu, *Christianity and Igbo culture*, 25
- ³⁰ Nwabara, *Iboland: A century of contact...*, 16.
- ³¹ Afigbo, "The indigenous political systems of the Igbo". *TARIKH*, 22
- ³² Afigbo, "The indigenous political systems of the Igbo". *TARIKH*, 22
- ³³ Emmanuel Nwafor Mordi "The Benin factor in the West Niger Igbo History: The example of Ubula-Ukwu". *International Journal of History and Philosophical Research*, 13 Vol. 6, No 2 May, 2018, 1-18.
- ³⁴ See K. Onwuka Dike, *Trade and politics in the Niger Delta, 1830 -1885: An introduction to the economic and political history of Nigeria* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1966).
- ³⁵ See A. E. Afigbo, *The Igbo and their neighbours: Intergroup relations in Southeastern Nigeria to 1953* (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1987) and Femi J. Kolapo "The Igbo and their neighbours during the era of the Atlantic slave trade". *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of slave and post-slave studies*. Vol. 25, issue 1, 2004. Published by Taylor and Francis online.

- ³⁶ See Ejitu Nnechi Ota and Chinyere Samuel Ecoma, “The presentness of the past: Pre-colonial inter-ethnic relations and the challenges of national integration in Contemporary Nigeria” *Saudi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, August 2021, 280.
- ³⁷ See Uche U. Okonkwo, Joy N. U. Ejikeme and Victor O. Ukaogo “Horse-related title taking and animal cruelty in colonial Eastern Nigeria”. <https://www.cambridge.org>. Accessed on 15/07/2026. See also Odenigbo Aka-Ikenga “Igbo and Igala-Geographical, historical, and cultural relationships”, June 15, 2021. <https://www.akaikenga.com>. Accessed on 15/07/2026.