

The Igbo: “A Stateless Society”

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Abstract

For sometime now there have arisen some interests and controversies among scholars and observers as to whether the Igbo had a political system that could be considered centralized. Some scholars and opinion are of the view that the Igbo did not organize themselves into states and so, had no kingship institution. In other words, the Igbo political institutions and structures did not constitute credentials of statehood. The British anthropologists and colonial administrators with limited knowledge of the type of government in Igboland have tended to classify the people as a stateless society. To them, what existed were federations of autonomous villages without any single individual endowed with the attributes of a king or ruler as was the case with the Benin kingdom, the Empires of Oyo and Kanem Borno, and the Hausa States. The purpose of this study is to interrogate the appropriateness or otherwise of this assumption because the people's institutions and structures met their aspirations just as those of the so-called states in the pre-colonial days. The paper is a departure from the widely held but misleading conceptions and stereotypes about the Igbo political system before the colonial era.

1. Introduction

The Igbo presently occupy the South-east and a substantial part of South-south geopolitical zones of Nigeria. The River Niger, from which Nigeria derived her name, runs through Igboland thereby dividing it into two unequal parts. Save the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba, the Igbo form the largest single ethnic nationality in Nigeria. Prior to the advent of the British, the Igbo were generally but erroneously believed to have formed a stateless society. The term state in political parlance denotes a nation or country with specific and definite territory, population, government and sovereignty. To British administrators, anthropologists as well as African scholars trained in the European tradition, these attributes of statehood were conspicuously absent in Igbo society in the pre-colonial period. Put differently, the received notion that the Igbo formed a stateless society would appear to enjoy unwavering popularity even among the indigenous population. In the face of glaring difficulties, attempts have been made to derive some Igbo states from outside Igboland such as Benin, Igala, or even the Middle East. On the contrary, the Igbo states were but a product of concrete historical conditions with governmental institutions that discharged the functions and responsibilities expected of any state. In the light of the above, the Igbo society can be said to have had states or city states, their sizes and populations notwithstanding.

2. Historical Evidence of States among the Igbo

According to J.O. Ijoma, an eminent Igbo historian, “the early beginnings of states and communities in tropical Africa are not easy to piece together because of a myriad of myths and legends surrounding them”.¹ The case of the Igbo appears more compounded because the Igbo states did not exhibit imperial ambition that would have brought about the subjugation and annexation of neighbouring territories. Contrarily, other states embarked on territorial acquisition and maintained kinglist and oral repositories that kept their expansionist activities and historical development. The absence of

kinglist and chronicle of events from oral historians among the Igbo states may have misled Margery Perham into presenting the Igbo as "having no great history, no impressive chiefs or cities."² This view is, however, debatable.

Although this study does not focus on the origin of the Igbo, a brief survey of the autochthony theory is likely to shed insightful light on the evolution of Igbo states. There is a generally held view that "there was an early Igbo homeland on the northern Igbo Plateau... (around) the Awka, Orlu and Okigwe areas."³ Nri, in Awka area, has been looked up to as the earliest centre from whence the founding fathers of the most Igbo communities dispersed to their present abodes. This is because the Nri civilization is believed to have risen "around the period 320 BC to 30 BC, and started expanding and imposing its sway on neighbouring peoples from about the period 30 BC to 550, and probably got into Nsukka area between 1130 and 1710."⁴ The archaeological evidence in the above dates seems to suggest great antiquity of the emergence of Igbo communities and their kingship institution. Thus, E. Isichei argued, that, "the excavations reveal the antiquity of the institution, and the treasures they uncovered, the bronzes and beads, reflect the wealth of the economy, and the great artistic skill of the makers of the bronzes."⁵

Both anthropological and archaeological studies carried out on the Nri suggest the time-depth of the emergence of monarchical institution in Igboland. According to Angulu M. Onwuejeogwu, the Nri established "a theocratic monarch who controlled the Earthforce by the use of a ceremonial staff."⁶ It may be reasonable to assume that most of the monarchical institutions with varied titles found in different parts of Igboland were derived from Nri. In his opinion, P. O. Opone, has observed that:

many of the early settlers in the Enuani area were immigrants from Nri, and many of these communities were founded by princes from Nri, who continued to practise in their new settlements the kingly and ritual civilization for which Nri was known in their new places of settlement.⁷

Indeed, Thurstan Shaw appears to corroborate this view. According to him, "in all Ibo(sic) settlements, west and east of the River Niger, there are various graded titles culminating in the taking of *Eze* or *Ozo* or *Obi* or *Nze* title. The highest title in places that adopted monarchy, such as Onitsha, is *Obi* (king), while in non-monarchical areas, the highest title is *Nze*, *Ozo* or *Eze*"⁸. The various Igbo communities that adopted or adapted the monarchical institution which endowed a single individual with authority and power were only responding to political exigencies.

Undoubtedly, some Igbo societies such as *Nri*, *Onitsha*, *Oguta*, *Aro*, *Osomala*, *Aboh*, *Illah*, *Akwukwu Igbo*, *Agbor*, *Ogwashi Ukwu*, *Issele Ukwu* etc had various forms of political organizations that reminisced statehood. With particular reference to *Aro*, J.O. Ijoma argues *inter alia* that, "the *Aro* do not mince words about... the fact that they had a state and an *Eze* (a hereditary king) of all *Aro* who had charge of his territory or kingdom."⁹ In a similar manner, U.D. Anyanwu in supporting the antiquity of the *Eze* institution has persuasively contended that, "kingship is real in Igbo culture... even though the colonial authorities...found it difficult to admit that all parts of Igboland had kings or those they literally called chiefs (implying that they were not like European Monarch) prior to the European presence."¹⁰ In the context of the above, the assumption that the Igbo were without "monarchical institutions with jurisdiction over wide tracts of country,"¹¹ or that "the Igbos (sic)... had neither states nor empires, never developed centralized government,"¹² are erroneous and misleading.

Given this, it has to be stated that the Igbo, like any other human organizations, developed kingship institution because it offered solution to their problems at the early stage. Hence Uche Nnadozie's argument may be instructive here. To him, "in the struggle to satisfy their needs, human beings made all kinds of invention and developed several strategies and organizations including... families, clans, villages or ethnic groups, nations and states of different categories,"¹³ and indeed kingship institution. The Igbo have been known to be dynamic and responded adequately to natural stimuli. They invariably experienced both socio-economic and political challenges which inspired the establishment of states and monarchies in various parts of Igboland. Then too, U.D. Anyanwu opines that, "the concept of kingship emerged in response to social and economic pressures in the various areas occupied by the Igbo...As communities developed, the need for leadership whose jurisdiction went beyond their family or lineage units arose."¹⁴

Since the Igbo did not live in isolation, they had trade as well as political relations with their neighbours. The institution of monarchy among them was therefore worthwhile to ensure conducive atmosphere for trade to flourish. It is also not unlikely that the institutions were put in place not just to maintain laws and order within the polity but also to checkmate external aggression and conquests. Interestingly "from all appearances, kingship is an institution of great antiquity in Igboland, where, through the centuries, it influenced and was influenced by events and developments in its cultural ecology."¹⁵

2.1 The Originality or 'Igboness' of the Institutions

The monarchical institution among the Igbo, like other pre-colonial states of West Africa, has always been credited to external influence. While these states and empires were ascribed to the Hamites, those of the Igbo were derived from either the Benin or the Igala kingdom or even Middle East by western historiography. Writing on the history of the Igbo west of the Niger, Ijoma has posited thus: "some observers of the Igbo past have created the impression that the Igbo people have always been kingless, and they have tended to attribute kingship among the West Niger Igbo entirely to Benin influence"¹⁶. Such assertions belong to the Hamitic hypothesis which is now not seriously canvassed any longer. Archaeological evidence based on the interpretation of the material culture unearthed at Igbo Ukwu has tended not only to challenge such a hypothesis but also to revolutionize views about the institution of monarchy in Igboland. Both Isichei and Ifemesia appear to be unanimous in their agreement with this line of thinking. For instance, the latter in his deposition contends that "the contents of the burial chamber (at Igbo Ukwu) indicate the existence of a monarch with an elaborate and highly stylized ceremonial"¹⁷.

One fact that appears incontestable about the originality or "Igboness" of the institution of monarchy in Igboland is that it pre-dated both the Benin and the Igala kingdoms. While the Benin kingdom is said to have emerged in around 11th or 12th century, that of Igala rose in the 17th, many centuries after that of Nri whose princes were the scions of most Igbo states. As Shaw has put it "...it is interesting that on the east side of the River Niger we appear to have evidence of centralized authority of some kind some hundreds of years before the earliest dynasty at Benin"¹⁸. Furthermore, one obvious question that suggests itself is in the name of political institutions. The institution in Igboland was referred to as Eze or Obi which bore no resemblance with those of Benin or Igala. The comparison between the Benin and the Yoruba kingdoms would appear to bear this out clearly. Writing on the rise of the Benin kingdom, Alan Ryder argues thus: "similarities between the political institutions of Benin and those of Yoruba kingdom lend some weight to the belief that they had a common origin"¹⁹.

R.N. Henderson's postulation would seem to throw more light on the 'Igboness' of the kingship institution. As he puts it "Onitsha kingship does not derive from either Benin or Igala in any simple way; its major historical roots reach much deeper in time, at Nri"²⁰. Unarguably, in Nsukka area, the kingship institution is also believed to be of Nri derivation not Igala. For instance, a version of the people's tradition says that in Nimbo, "the Ukpabi group to which the Eze belong(ed) is traditionally connected with Nri (in the Awka Division) it (is) ... said that the forefather of the group left Nri in order to avoid the necessity of having his face cicatrized with the markings known as *ichi*"²¹. The same applied to some other communities of the area such as Nsukka, Eha Alumona and Imilike with presence of descendants of Eze Nri. This view is also shared by Austin J. Shelton when he argues that "there have been many contacts between the Umunri and the Nsukkans, but their influence has not been every where very strong"²².

However, in spite of glaring difficulties, some scholars have tended to derive this institution from Igalaland. The royal visits to the Atta Igala which were probably intended to strengthen diplomatic ties and inter-group relations were believed to translate to descent or allegiance. S.C. Ukpabi as well as A.E. Afigbo are apostles of this Igala influence on their Igbo neighbours. For instance, Ukpabi once opined that "...until the decline of Igala power, the Ezes(sic) of Enugu Ezike, Akpugo, Nkpologu, Ibagwa Ani and Opi continued to receive their titles from Idah and did not consider themselves properly installed until their position had been confirmed by the Attah"²³. The impression being created that some Eze of the Nsukka area had to go to the Atta Igala for investiture or confirmation should be treated with caution. This is because nothing seems farther from the truth than that.

In his deposition, Meek further argues that "the Eze is the final authority on all public matters, and no one may take any important title without receiving his permission and paying him dues"²⁴. By implication, the Eze Niiibo in Nsukka not only had nothing to do with the Atta Igala but was reported as having "...prosecuted a prominent person in Niiibo for going to Idah to receive a title"²⁵. As the present writer observed elsewhere, these visits to Idah might have been to buy Igala choral beads '*aka*', staff of office believed to be imbued with protective charms to ensure longevity and security of the Eze as well as prestige animal (horse) to bolster up their ego. There are, therefore, good reasons to believe that "the Nris were the high priests of the idols, and from their hands the chiefs loved to receive the insignia of office"²⁶. Furthermore, the fact that the title was 'Eze' or 'Obi' not 'Gago', 'Idegeri', 'Achadu', 'Onu' or 'Atta' suggests that they were indigenous to Igboland; and an attempt to derive them from elsewhere is to distort historical fact.

Other Attributes Of Igbo states

Size and population would appear to have been a factor used to designate the Igbo society as a stateless one. In her study of the history of the Igbo people, E. Isichei cautions that "historians have sometimes written as if large political units are 'more advanced' than small political units, and as if the change from small to large units was a form of

*progress*²⁷. What is implied here is that the territorial limits and/or the numerical strength of the Igbo states should not be used to reduce their status because no two states are equal based on the above criteria. Furthermore, population as an attribute of a centralized society or state does also apply to those considered to be stateless. This is because in both cases, there have to be some people living within a defined territory before any form of government is set up. In the Igbo states, different people formed the various organs of the government thereby agreeing with A.A. Radcliffe- Brown's postulation about what constitutes a state. Undeniably a state has a collection of people endowed with different roles, some with special power or authority such as kings or chiefs who give commands that were to be obeyed, as legislators or judges²⁸.

Other recognizable features of a state included boundary which indicated territorial limits. There is no geographical entity without a boundary and so were Igbo states in the pre-colonial period. What would appear to have stunted the appreciation of the existence of states in Igboland was the limited knowledge of the peculiarity of these city states. For instance, Leo Enahoro Otoide has advanced the view that "the attempt to impose a European understanding of boundaries on the African state system and use it as a basis for analysis is misleading"²⁹. Although frontiers might appear fluid probably because of the absence of such landmarks as beacons or sign posts, recognizable natural landmarks like rivers, streams, hills or forest always delineated spheres of interests and authority of one state from the others. As agriculturists, the citizens of each state knew the limit within which to carry out their farming activities without trespassing on the territorial rights of the other state.

Another fact worthy of consideration is that natural landmarks such as rivers and streams served other purposes as sources of water supply and points of interactions between states just as forests did for hunters. Contrary to the European concept of boundaries as "a point of separation, ... (in the states of Igboland as in other parts of Africa), it was seen as a point where the interest of one state attained a type of union with the interest of the other"³⁰. It is, therefore, a misnomer to refer to the pre-colonial Igbo as a stateless society based on the absence of pillars, beacons and posts as obtainable in the West. This is because, according to Raddiffe Brown, "every human society has some sort of territorial structure... This territorial structure provides the framework not only for the political organization... but for other forms of social organization also, such as the economic for example"³¹. What is important to note is that there were no overlapping claims of jurisdiction and political authority among the states. On the basis of this, the attempt to classify the Igbo society in the pre-colonial days as stateless can hardly be sustained.

Also included in the attributes of a state was (and still is) being sovereign, having a will (law being defined as the will of the state) or as issuing commands. Sovereignty here has to do with "a definite territory within which all comers...(were) automatically subject to a definite body of laws"³². It is interesting to note that each of the states or communities of Igboland had a body of laws which was put in place for the security of the weak. These laws had a strong link and flavour of non-human people (spirits) hence they were observed with religious fervour. In fact, authority figures in these states were believed "to be backed by the spiritual forces...who walked with them whenever they were in the legitimate exercise of their authority"³³. In spite of the number of states in Igboland, each king maintained his sovereignty and independence of actions. One factor that would appear to have sustained the sovereignty of these states was that they were non-expansionist and had no imperial ambition. It may be plausible to assume that these city states were on easy terms with one another as a panacea for commerce to flourish.

All things considered, the sovereignty and independence of the Igbo states appear to have been attested to by S.N. Nwabara's interpretation of the impression of the British about the Igbo. As he has posited, "...before effective entry into Iboland(sic) the British... had read or heard, (among other things)... that the government was conducted by petty independent chiefs or by a king"³⁴. At all events the Igbo did not build an organic state symbolizing Igbo unity probably because each city state guarded its independence very jealously. As Nwabara further argues, "they dislike(d) and suspect(ed) any form of external government and authority"³⁵. Given the above, it seems plausible to state that the Igbo states met the requirement of statehood their size, population and cultural homogeneity notwithstanding. As it were, the Igbo society, like any other human organization, was dynamic and not static. Historians of Igbo society appear to have paid greater attention on the changes that have taken place without giving deserved attention to the continuities on which the changes were predicated.

2.2 Continuity and Change in the Political Structure

The Igbo political system in the pre-colonial days can best be discussed from two periods viz the monarchical and the democratic eras. However, some practised "village democracy blended with monarchy and aristocracy"³⁶. As Opono has further noted "the democratic element in the arrangement is reflected in the village assembly, a gathering of all the male members of the community-young and old-where issues of grave import are discussed and decisions reached on the

basis of popular consensus. The monarchical element is reflected in the head chiefs or Obi; and the aristocratic element, in the bevy of titled chiefs subordinate to the chiefs or Obi that is also known as Eze³⁷. It may be reasonable to assume that this development took place during the transitional period in some Igbo states. Thereafter, monarchy in such states, it seems, faced threat of extinction probably because of the tyranny and absoluteness of the occupant of the stool. It may, therefore, be permissible to argue that in order "to guard against this absolutism) many elected not to have chiefs or any centralized authority at all"³⁸.

There can be little doubt as shown above that the Igbo were not averse to monarchy as presented by western historiography. In his deposition, C.C. Ifemesia appears to debunk the view that the Igbo have been kingless all through history. His words run thus "...much of the evidence avoidable so far, ...and a more careful consideration of the question, would appear to suggest that the Igbo generally-perhaps in the-too-distant past-did have kings; that their society though open and distinguished by its social mobility, was so characterized by rank and hierarchy; that their communities were neither paradoxically anarchic nor excessively democratic"³⁹. After the kingship institution had waxed and waned, various Igbo communities adopted and adapted a more representative government. Undoubtedly, the new-found system gave every section and every major interest group a sense of belonging in the governance of its community. Paul Bohannan's argument lends credence to this thinking. He opines that "Africans who live in stateless societies tend to see the state as (un)avoidable tyranny; they seek and find order in other institutions"⁴⁰. Consequently, the institution fall on evil days.

Given this, it seems scarcely open to doubt that the Igbo evolved monarchical institution but abandoned the idea owing to the dictatorial and tyrannical tendencies of the kings. This action would appear to have given rise to the concept of *Ezebuilo* – the king is the enemy. E. Isichei has persuasively argued that there emerged "Agave of Enugu (a village in Aguleri) who, founded a dynasty which endured for a time, but became a dictator. Then kingship was given up, until in the second half of the nineteenth century another crisis (European encroachment on the Niger, and the military aggression of the Royal Niger Company) threw up another natural leader, Onyekomeli Idigo who founded a royal dynasty which has endured to this day"⁴¹. This suggests that the institution at a point in time was fluid. Most likely the development of village democracy, gerontocracy and aristocracy was a direct consequence of the abandonment of the kingships. It is in the context of this that the concept of *Igbo enwe Eze* (the Igbo have no kings) or *Igbo echi Eze* (the Igbo crown kings) became pervasive and received as an apt description of the Igbo political system.

This received notion would appear to have influenced most views about the 'statelessness' of the people. Such a view is erroneously shared by A.A. Apeh who posited that "Igboland had no centralized authority any time in history"⁴². This cannot be sustained as the institution of monarchy still dots the Igboland's scape. Ifemesia's view appears instructive here. According to him, "but the antiquity of the much-advertised saying-*Igbo echi eze* (the Igbo crown no kings), is now being seriously called into question... even if at one stage in their history, circumstances developed in which several Igbo communities ceased to have kings, the situation cannot have been absolute..."⁴³. Having lost its pride and force in some communities, many people became reluctant in accepting the stool except perhaps "those who wanted to cap their success in attaining to titled institution"⁴⁴. In such a case the title bestowed enhanced social status on the holder but not political power and authority. As Afigbo has further argued "...more detailed investigation revealed that in spite of his claims and pretensions, the Eze of Enugu Ezike had no real powers and in fact by the time the British came no one had bothered to occupy that position for decades"⁴⁵.

In order to cope with the challenges of general participation in governance, some Igbo communities evolved democratic institutions in place of monarchy. This, as it were, launched such communities on the part of democratic governance. According to Isichei, "in traditional Igboland enlargement of scale offered no obvious advantages, and the small scale of political institutions made true democracy possible"⁴⁶. The Igbo would appear to have adopted village democracy comprising three organs of government to ensure popular participation. In this arrangement, the Council of Elders (Oha Obodo), Title holders, and the Village Assembly which could translate to gerontocracy, aristocracy and village democracy played complementary role in the governance of the society. It is interesting to note that "these three divisions in the traditional social structure is (sic) (were) charged with clearly defined powers, duties and responsibilities which...(might) not be abandoned, delegated or shared"⁴⁷.

This arrangement enjoyed acceptance among the Igbo because it not only foreclosed absolutism, arbitrariness and tyranny but also gave every section a sense of belonging and participation. As it were, "a system of checks and balances were instituted in which two or more power centres were balanced against each other and applied in all levels of the community so that no single centre predominated"⁴⁸. These inbuilt mechanisms would appear to have sustained this system of government among the Igbo before the advent of colonialism. This further explains partly the Igbo resistance against the colonial authorities' attempt to abrogate their preferred system of government and also their sovereignty. All the same, monarchy survived in some parts of Igboland while in others it fell on evil days until resurrected by the military in the mid 1970s.

3. Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that the Igbo were not averse to monarchy but they never took kindly to autocracy. Although they did not build an organic kingdom that could galvanize the entire Igboland into a political unit, there existed several independent states that superintended the affairs of the citizens. In other words, the Igbo had multifarious states and chiefdoms as sovereign as they were independent from one another. On the strength of this fact, monarchy can not be said to be an anathema to the Igbo society before the advent of colonial rule. Just as the Benin people preferred monarchy (culminating in the emergency of the Ewaka dynasty) to republican government, the Igbo moved in an opposite direction. The Igbo adoption and adaptation to the new political system was an apt demonstration of dynamism. Even at that kingship still endured in some Igbo communities such as Nri, Arochuku, Onitsha, Aboh, Oguta and a large section of Igboland west of the Niger.

It is noteworthy that "the Ibo(sic) – resilient by nature and adaptable to changes and new conditions"⁴⁹, had nurtured their democracy to a point where they were regarded as a kingless people. Interestingly, "... at a particular stage in its development, an Igbo community may not have had a single individual styled king or chief. But, ... it should be clear that there was centralization of authority at each level of political organisation- from the family, through the lineage, to the village or village group"⁵⁰. The concept of *Igbo enwe eze* or *Igbo echi eze* as espoused by western historiography is, therefore, dubious because there existed in Igboland states with all the attributes of statehood. The recent crave for autonomy by every community in Igboland (especially perhaps east of the Niger) is a pointer to the fact that monarchy still has some measure of political value among the people. The creation of Igbo communities in most of the major cities of Nigeria lends credence to the Igbo idea of and disposition to monarchy.

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