

## IGBO POLITICAL ORGANIZATION AND IMPUNITY

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### Abstract

*Igbo people are an ethnic group, a community of distinct culture who reside in the Eastern part of Nigeria. Their cultural heritage is one replete in peaceful coexistence and lawfulness and to a large extent industrious and honesty in their original way of life. Impunities refer to those things, behaviours or actions which are exempt or secure from punishment or retribution. Such actions therefore attract no reprisal or injurious consequences. A more or less expository of some of the impunities that exist with particular reference to Igbo culture will be treated in the present paper and their implications for human relationships explored. The paper focuses on the areas of leadership in Igbo land and Igbo cultural entities. While these may not represent the original Igbo cultural heritage these impunities now abound and thrive without reprisal as there are no clear cut injurious consequences of those actions. This research work will help in sanitizing the system as Igbo people may abhor some of these impunities that cast aspersions on their culture and embrace a more noble cause.*

### Introduction

In the past many scholars have attempted to describe Igbo political system, but to no avail. This shows why Horton (1971:72) classified the territory as one of the stateless regions in West Africa. Onunwa (2005:56) made it clear that “evolutionary development of Igbo political system is very intriguing and has consequently been grossly misunderstood, misinterpreted and misrepresented by both the colonial administrators and some educated Igbo scholars themselves.” The misrepresentation made Fortes and Pritchard (1940:1-10) to classify the Igbo political system under segmentary system. Onunwa (2005:58) stated that Onwuejeogwu (1987:54-55) categorized Igbo models of traditional political system as centralized democracies, middle range republicanism and non-centralized democracies. These assertions and many did not truly explain the Igbo political system; rather Igbo people have varied forms of leadership which are democratic in nature. Dioka (2007:34) examined three main categories of Igbo political system which are the priestly model of Nri, the monarchical system of Onitsha and the Democratic system village Republican model of Nguru.

The focus of this paper is on the Democratic village Republican which represents much of the Igbo communities. It is a leadership form which is by consensus and where heads are people of unquestionable character. In recent times however much flaws have perpetuated Igbo political system. Some people made their ways anyhow to the position of leadership, giving orders and taking actions without regard to the impact on the system, the people and future generation. In spite of the impact of such on community and societal development and human relations; nobody seems to care. Rather you see people go about their businesses leaving posterity uncared for. This is impunity in Igbo political organizations. It usually has evil or harmful influences. It is malevolent. No wonder Obidigbo (2006) attributed the malevolent nature of impunity to an imposition of evil, poor quality and insensitive leadership, sustained by our collective indifference and our inability to raise alarm and objection, and however lead to corruption with impunity on a very massive scale, often with no checks and internal control mechanism.

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Impunity coupled with unconcerned and nonchalant attitude of the people is dangerous in human society. It is based on this that this paper sets out to examine the political organization in Igbo land, exposing the implications of prolonging the existence of the culture of impunity and dangers in human relationships.

### **Impunity**

All aspects of people's lives have rules and regulations that guide it. People of the same cultural backgrounds behave and do things the same way as their culture stipulates. People honour their culture and frown at those who are characterized by deviating from an expected social standard. It was observed that in recent times some people are known to flout the existing rules and regulations without recourse to its effect to human relationship and future generation. To worsen the situation, they act with impunity believing that nothing will happen.

Impunity can be defined as immunity or exemption from punishment or retribution. It refers to freedom from any injurious consequences of one's action or behaviour. Impunity is an offence that should ordinarily demand punishment but is faced with no fear of punishment but instead the person goes about his business. Impunity is traced to Latin words "im" which means "not" and "poena" meaning "punishment". Impunity therefore means freedom from punishment.

### **Political System in Igbo Land and the Culture of Impunity**

It is true that Igbo people did not organize themselves under one leadership as seen in some other communities such as Yoruba, Hausa, Edo etc, but they have their own style of leadership peculiar to them. Igbo people organize themselves based on sub origins called towns. Isichei (1974) averred to this fact when she declared that Igbo people rule themselves in towns and in a democratic manner that abhors autocratic leadership. The nature of democracy practiced in Igbo land takes cognizance of everybody's opinion. Consensus must be reached before decision is taken on an action to be carried out. Okodo (2006:40) quoting Taiwo and Olaniyan (1974:348) observed the decentralization of the administration of the Igbo people as

Families and lineages who belong to the same kindred usually associated and formed what we may call the village groups, the village manage its own affairs. The village groups were held together by no central or coordinating authority. Each of them was linked not political but by social ties to the units around it. The institution of chieftaincy has firm root of recognition among the Igbo people. Religious leaders, warriors, heads of villages combined to carry out the administration of the village...

As far as Igbo leadership is concerned, there was no centralized system of leadership. Igbo people organized themselves in families, kindred, villages, and towns. However, the head of the family is the eldest man of the family, other stages of this organization also held the eldest people as the heads or, on the other hand, any other person who was deemed worthy amongst all as the head. According to Ogbalu (2006:20-21)

There was an Igbo nation only in the sense that there was a people who spoke the same language, had the same custom, tradition, religious belief, economic and social system who inhabit a geographical area... there had never been any central government, institution or authority running throughout the whole land. Each town comprise of several autonomous in every respect...each town comprise of several villages and each village of a number of families called "umunna."

Each community had its customs and traditions which guide the activities of her members. They did not owe any obligation or allegiance to anybody or group. They do things the way they felt that will serve the interest of the members of the community, they have full control of their judicial, social, religious and economic institutions. Okodo (2006:40-41) recognized that “this invaluable democracy of the Igbo is reflected in various political groups by which the Igbo land is governed in groups. These groups have their rules and regulations; they try cases for their members, contribute towards the developments of their members and communities.” Such groups are titled men, heads of different units, age grades, secret societies, etc. These groups still functions today in Igbo political system. However, the problem is that leadership in Igbo land is weakening rapidly. This is attributed to the many aspects of culture of impunity. The culture of impunity can be summarized thus

...impunity keeps alive the atmosphere of repression throughout the society by denying survivors access to the truth; impunity conditions the historical interpretation of the repressors and denies the necessary acknowledgement and reparations for victims and survivors. CULLED FROM THE INTERNET

Of course, the author earlier stated that impunity means the absence of legal justices, the protection of the perpetrators mainly assured by certain mechanisms such as impunity law etc to avoid prosecution.

### **Family**

Family is the smallest unit of political organizations in Igbo land. Basically family to an Igbo man means a lot. It encompasses all that have blood relations, and quite different from the western idea of family. Those in a family set up include the man, wives, children, parents, brothers and sisters, cousins, nephews, grandparents, grandchildren, in-laws or any other person that might have any blood relationship to them. The father is the head of this unit, assisted by the mother. Dioka (2007:44) hit the nail at the head when he stated that “the man is the family spokesman, and naturally enjoyed enormous power and authority. He must be consulted on issues relating to the family property.” Although he 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. Agreement is also reached before any action is taken. The authority of the father is explained by Kanu (2015:320) when he stated that:

The father was the leader of the household and was in possession of the family *ofo*; which is the symbol of authority, justice, law and uprightness. The father was responsible for directing the affairs of the family, however, it was done in consultation with his sons and wives.

The father ensures that every member of the family gets what is his rightful own by way of inheritance. He will share land and other properties equitably to his sons. He ensures that his family is united in love and togetherness. Also, Igbo people believe in hard work and good moral standard, and so they train their children in like manner. Every Igbo man also believes that he owes much to his family members; for this reason, after he has attained a reasonable level in the society he loves to train others and still have the interest of all the members of the family at heart.

However this long standing culture is fast dying off. Most people in their various families are becoming so much self-centered. It is hard in Igbo land for someone to neglect his family members especially his parents at their old age. It is not out of place, due to lack of resources for persons to select one or two in the family and train. Siblings also contribute resources together in

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the training of a member of the family, that after, he will help in training other members of the family but later he disappointed. Ogbalu (2006:8) affirms that “individualism incidental to western civilization has however made some inroad in this aged-longed tradition.” The tradition of one being his brother’s keeper is being weakened by selfishness.

At the demise of the father who is the head of the family, the eldest son takes the mantle of leadership and assumes the role of the father. However in some cases recently, the eldest son sees his position as an opportunity to intimidate, oppress his family members thereby perpetuating all kinds of impunity. He will ignore the equitable manner Igbo people observe in sharing property and other things, by ignoring the acceptable rules related to inheritance. He will claim the “obi” which is his fair share in the family house and also claim the “mkpuke” which is the fair share of the last son. As if this was not enough he will go further and take a greater portion of land in the family land and even sell some without consulting the other siblings. That is impunity and it is growing in an alarming rate and causing other unwanted behaviours. For instance Okodo (2006:40) cited that

One example is the case of the oldest son of a dead man who sold his father’s piece of land to fund the old man’s funeral ceremony without due consultation with his younger brothers. Although he used the influences of the law enforcement agents to fight his brothers,... The offence of the eldest son is that he went autocratic by selling the piece of land belonging to him and his brothers.

In the Igbo man’s concept of democracy, everyone is important. Therefore people must be consulted in the matters that affect them for the interest of peace and tranquility. The implication of the aforementioned action is division which generates hatreds; and which have far reaching consequences, people have known to have poisoned and killed their siblings. Others to have done other secret things in retaliation and to punish the actors.

### **Kindred**

The kindred are made up of different families. People from the same kindred see themselves as relations. They can never have conjugal relationship or marry themselves. Olisa (2002:221) also affirms that “a kinsman shall never sell a kinsman, nor give false witness against him, nor abandon him in time of trouble.” People from the same “umunna” have the obligation of protecting themselves. It is an abomination to be an accomplice against your fellow “umunna” because he is your brother. They speak with one voice. The head of the kindred is the eldest man; he is also in charge of the kindred’s staff of office (ofo umunna). In most communities the head of the kindred comes from the most senior family within the kindred. He is the mediator between the members of his kindred and the ancestors. He is an agent of peace, unity and justice. According to Kanu (2015:321) referring to Olisa (2002) and Nwosu (2002)

The diokpara presided over meetings, sacrifices, issues of inheritance, settlement of dispute among members of the extended families. In decision making, the diokpara worked in consultation with the other heads of the extended family and constituted the extended family assembly. Decisions were arrived at through dialogue, consensus, compromise, cooperation and consultation.

In the past, the sharing of the inheritance, especially land is done equitably in accordance with the stipulated rules. There must be meetings upon meetings before a consensus is reached on how or mode of sharing the “umunna” land. They may decide that lands will be shared according to need; which means that any male child of the “umunna” who is ready to erect a house will be

allotted an agreed portion of land. He will immediately start his building with the help and encouragement of other members of the family.

On the alternative, the “umunna” may agree to share the land on family bases. By this arrangement each family will take their own land and share among themselves peacefully. However, it has been observed in recent times, with dismay, that most heads of the kindred handled the communal land unilaterally, without consultation to other members of the group. Some of them have gone to the extent of selling the entire land belonging to their kindred without reserving any portion where the younger generation will erect their own houses. As far as these elders are concerned, no one has the right to question their activities otherwise one goes for it (abomination). This is clear case of impunity.

Ojo (2015) speaking on the evil of impunity states that it stares you in the face at every turn. The audacity and brazenness can be sickening, yet it is almost becoming a way of life. Indeed the culture of impunity permeates all facets of our national life. It is almost a norm rather than exemption. Igbo people assert that “aru gbaa afo o buru omenala” meaning literally that when an abomination is perpetuated in a community, it becomes a tradition. It was observed that in many cases those affected by the sell buy land elsewhere for residence. In extreme cases some remain in their cities of abode and refuse to return despite pressures from home.

### **Village**

Different kindred basically sum up to form a village. Each village has its own village square where they come together for meetings and festivals. The village assembly does not have much difference in organization, roles and modalities with that of the kindred except that it is larger in scope. Ogbalu (2006:12) affirms that “the village assembly settles disputes which the umunna could not settle and is responsible for the defense of the village against thieves, intruders or wild animals.” There are rules and laws guiding the activities of each village. Any difficult case that could not be treated by the kindred is referred to the village assembly which is made up of the priest, elders and titled men. Issues are deliberated and agreement reached before actions are taken. Apart from that, rules are made to protect the farm products of their members. They are mainly farmers, so it is not surprising that such laws are enacted. For instance a goat, sheep or any other domestic animal that was left by the owner to destroy crops in people’s farms are liable to suffer a punishment for that. The animal could be killed or be seized, by that the owner have to take it back with a fine. There were also laws that guide the sweeping of the village square, market places, stream, etc.

Normally these laws are fast dying. Most people who live in the cities could not allow their wards to join in carrying out these functions especially the sweeping of the village square. The worst part is that, they do it with impunity. For instance when the village youth will be going round to collect fine from absentees, they will quickly lock their gates and totally ignore them. Yet they attend the activities that are done in those village squares. They also do their sports on the village square.

The elders who are the leaders will not talk because the parents of the culprits are well to do. Either they would not want to lose certain favours they gain from them or for fear of even being thrown into police custody on framed up charges. Miller (2011) made the observation that

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“what in some way is even more frightening is the way the culture of impunity appears to be working to silence the voices of many.”

### **Town**

Town level is the highest political organization in Igbo land. A town comprises people from different villages. According to Ogbalu (2006) “it is made up of villages which have a common decent or have come to be one for one reason or the other.” Orji (1999:10) asserts that “the government of the Igbo people before the advent of the white man was by consensus, organized in towns, community and family basis.”

Towns are bound together by one common interest such as the possession of one common market that is central. In some cases, it is compulsory for every woman in the community to carry wares, no matter how little, to the market. Farm work is usually prohibited on market day. Any violation of such rule attracts sanctions. These measures are taken, to ensure the growth of the market which could also lead to the firmness of the town. Other things that could bind the town together are the possession of one common shrine that is famous, and also the fact that they are living in one territorial background.

Leadership at the town level is made up of people from different villages. Olisa (2002 :223) expressed that “the town assembly is like the village council, an informal body and not a regular constituted executive authority...the summons to meetings is usually addressed to all adults, though sometimes to specific groups, such as age grades or titled men.” In the past there were no kings or traditional rulers in Igbo land except in few places where they existed. “the places include Nri, Arochukwu, Aboh and Onitsha” as stated by Okodo (2006:44). Each town has a council which is made up of village heads, ozo titled holders etc. they wield both political and administrative powers and ensures justices to all and sundry. In monarchical towns Okodo asserts that

None of the monarchs in these towns was autocratic because they operated what was more or less a federal system of government. They have representatives who govern parts of their jurisdictions in the respective areas or quarters, the king while in council with their respective village representatives or members of their cabinets, deliberated on various matters concerning the town.

Political organization in Igbo land is republican in nature. Monarch and kingship is not general, and within the areas they existed, they rule by consensus. “Eze” and “Igwe” which has the same connotation as king later gained entry into Igbo land as a result of contact with British system of governance. Since that time, the political system in Igbo land has never remained the same. Kanu (2015:325) observed that

When the colonial authority came, traditional rulers were made warrant chiefs and subjected to the authority and supervision of British political officers. Thus, making them no longer accountable to their people but to the British political officer who appointed them. The result is that they betrayed their own people.

Following the idea of warrant chiefs there was a mad rush to the position of chief. Businessmen, politicians and wealthy individuals in the society fought to buy these positions even with money. Character is no longer emphasized. The way and manner in which the wealth is accumulated does not bother people. Most of these groups of people with their various positions are now the rulers of various communities in Igbo land. They made laws which are draconian and are not challenged by any one because of impunity. This was particularly so when we consider the assertion by Ogbalu (2006:23) when he warned that “Igbo political organization is republican in

every aspect of the word. Monarchy as a form of government was not acceptable to them for they loath subjugation to a single individual however benevolent, powerful or wealthy.” Besides Igbo (2012:109) sounds; “regrettably, in the recent times, in Igbo land, there seem to be a paradigm shift in the nature of title names people bear and criteria of selecting worthy awardees.” He also stated that this shift has tended towards reckless selections of individuals whose sources of income are basically unknown, but which are unlawful. He sees this situation as a rather unfortunate departure from predominant metaphysical tendencies that carry moral truth.

Certainly, Igbo traditional heads were people of unquestionable character, who have the interest of the people at heart. The recent situation and trend, unfortunately is a great move from sanity and what is morally acceptable. The implication is that the idea of “ezi aha ka ego” which literally means that good name is better than money is gradually diminishing and ceasing in Igbo land. In the present trend, the younger generation will be highly misguided, and then re-direction of value system will be the order of the day. A source rightly observed that “once you make it, you are successful and legitimate. No one cares about what you did to get to the top or become rich. With such a value system which recognizes wealth and office as the standard for judging success or standing in the society.”

The recent trend in some Igbo communities is the struggle for traditional rulership. The impunity of having set is now in vogue. It is now a truth that in most communities in Igbo land, there are incidences of having two opposing traditional rulers in one community. This is in spite of the teaching by Ezeamalu (2016) that “it is globally accepted that there cannot be two kings in the same domain as there cannot be two captains in the same boat.” The scenario implies a misguided future for the younger generation and posterity. The cliché “a na-azo eze azo,” “Chi na-eme eze,” meaning literally as does one struggle for kingship position? And it is God who makes someone a king, have become contradicted by such acts.

It was observed that the self acclaimed traditional rulers, have people within and outside the community that support and hail them, they therefore force themselves on the members of the community with impunity. It was also observed that some ambitious Igbo people who live outside their communities, those in diaspora also perpetuate this impunity wherever they may be. The warning goes like this as Ezeamalu (2016) reports

A Yoruba socio-political group, Afenifere Renewal Group, has denounced what it described as an unrelenting desecration of Yoruba culture by the Igbo communities obsession with having a crowned king in Yoruba domain...The Afenifere group said that it’s earlier communication to Igbo kings in Yoruba lands “fell on deaf ears”...What use to be is, were development unions and associations of Igbo people living in Yoruba...

### **Town Union**

Town unions are also a recent development in Igbo land. It has become a norm for each community to have a town union president whose duties are to see to the unity and development of the town. Some of these groups have left their agenda to pursue shadows. Instead of uniting their communities, they have become the bedrock of disintegration. It is not far-fetched to notice the power tussle in various communities were two presidential generals emerge side by side at the same town. They are not fighting for the common good of the members of the community, rather for their own selfish interest. It is now perused with impunity. This struggle has led to a number of ills such as burning down people’s houses and destroying properties worth millions of naira in the affected communities. Ezeagwula (2012) frowning at the evil of doing things with

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impunity stated that “as a matter of fact corruption has got a more dangerous “elder brother” called impunity. The culture of impunity ferns corruption from the high and mighty to the lowest of citizens; impunity has eaten deep into our moral fabrics.”

The trend of events seen these days is not what it is used to be. The implication for the younger generation is massive accumulation of wealth by all means. Power tussle, elimination of opponents and working for selfish interest without recourse to the common good and moral justice for which Igbo people were known.

### **Conclusion**

One of the major problems of the Igbo people and community today is the culture of impunity. It is being perpetuated by the new generation of the Igbo man against the wonderful cultural heritage left by our forefathers. It is a paradigm shift from the proper things. It has penetrated different facets of the Igbo man’s life, especially in the areas of the manner and mode of leadership. Creating oppression and intimidation on the populace, since there is no fear of reprisal and the perpetrators appear protected in impunity atmosphere of repression which is gradually becoming the order of the day in leadership in Igbo land. People, in retrospect are asking themselves what is now happening to the golden approaches of the past by which the Igbo ruled through consensus, that value which generates from the family setting to the kindred, the village and blossoming finally in town assembly. The Igbo people ruling themselves in towns based on general agreement, acceptance and equity in handling issues is being seriously threatened by impunity. That is because, as time went on some miscreants, people who have no character, began to take laws into their hand, they can seize power, run parallel leadership and force their ways and opinions down the throat of their communities with impunity. It is clear observation that such act does not auger well for the development, and posterity and the legacy is bad.

It is therefore advisable to shun the culture of impunity as this ugly phenomenon leave no good hope for posterity. Frankly speaking, this aspect and new trend should be added to the courses offer by students in the Department of Igbo, African and Asian studies in the School of General Studies for the youth not to emulate these impunities but rather to shun it at all levels.

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