



Introduction: The deliberative roots and gender complementarity in Igbo political system

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One of the most key facts about African political development is the autonomous character of Africa's political organizations and the relative absence of large polities along Eurasian lines. African communities placed a high value on autonomy and independence. Most were particularly concerned about the abusive potential of centralized authority or consolidation of power within an individual or group of individuals. The Igbo represent a perfect example of how Africans organized themselves into autonomous and democratic political entities and resisted political centralization. This central feature of many African societies, including the Igbo, occurred even though they were surrounded by centralized states such as Benin in the west and the Igala in the north. The Igbo, as is the

case with most central African communities, of which Jan Vansina (1990) had identified, innovated many types of institutions, including lineages, clans, and various types of associations, to maintain the "autonomy of the local community." An outcome of this form of political organization gave rise to what George Ayittey (2006) confirms as the deep-rooted culture of participatory democracy in African political systems in his exploration of pre-colonial and post-colonial African institutions. Among the Igbo, political power rests on the *oha*, the institution from which political leaders derive their power, authority, and legitimacy. According to Iroegbu (1997, 3), leadership among the Igbo is spread across several units of control that make it impossible for one man to exert overall influence. As such, the tendency to establish a

hierarchical or aristocratic machination is significantly reduced. So, despite the significant economic and ritual influence of the Aro and Nri over Igboland, they did not translate such control into political domination and centralization.

At the core of the Igbo political system is the solidarity of decisions and implementation of the decisions by the members in matters that affect the members. Central to the political arrangement, therefore, is the supremacy of *oha*. This is rooted in an ethical philosophy that recognizes that the individual within a group exists and asserts any political influence in relationship to the group or the *oha*. Thus, the *oha* represents a community of individuals and the individual exists as entities in *oha* (Ibid).

The papers in this special issue, therefore, seek to interrogate critical questions of interest to scholars interested in the evolution and structure of indigenous political systems in Africa and the intersection of politics, economy, spirituality, and gender in Igbo society.¹ How do we understand this desire at a deeper level? How can one understand political and economic arrangements from their intersection with

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the Igbo Worldview? Or was it rather that there was just some feature of Igbo society, such as the often-discussed duality within villages (with its "balanced opposition"), that made it very difficult to centralize authority? Does Igbo worldview and spirituality offer clues to the particular forms of political and economic systems that have developed among the Igbo? How are they gendered? And how does the role of women and men in these spheres offer some explanation for women's unique roles in Igbo society? This collection of essays deepens the understanding of these fundamental issues about African political development in the Nigerian, particularly Igbo, context and provides a good opportunity to explore old questions about political formations in decentralized societies through a new lens.

The Igbo-speaking people occupy most of Southeastern Nigeria. While the Igbo do not possess any central organization as a group, they share a common culture and, with some dialectal differences, a common language. The Igbo have been characterized in anthropological literature as decentralized or as an example of stateless societies. These classifications were based on the centrality of the lineage system of social organization in shaping their political system (Afigbo, 1973; Korieh, 2010; Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1940).

Although most parts of Igboland exhibit a decentralized political structure, they "embody a much more complex political

system" (Korieh, 2010, 28). The Igbo political systems range from kinship and lineage organizations of adult members to elders, the Okpara, titled persons, and age-sets, controlling "the instruments of power and authority." Other parts of Igboland have monarchical political systems. At all levels of government, however, the Igbo practised a form of direct participatory and representative democracy (Afigbo, 1973, 15). As Njoku argues, "the distribution of power, authority, and the processes of local administration are the same" in both the monarchies and the village republics. He notes further that the "elders ruled [sic] by representation, participation and negotiation," and the notion of difference is found primarily in "the king's ceremonial objects and titles" (cited in Korieh, 2010, 28).

Yet, in the most widespread form of the Igbo indigenous political system, the role and responsibility for leadership rests on a village council. Thus, a well-accepted idiom is the notion of "*Igbo Enwe Eze'* (the Igbo have no Kings). Other idioms encapsulate the supremacy of the group or community rather than the authority of an individual: *Ohaka* (the community is supreme), *Ohakaeze* (the community is greater than the king), *Eze bu iro* (kingship is the enemy), and *Ezesinachi* (kingship is from God). However, the etymology of the term "Eze" is not clear. Because the term 'Eze" can be applied to non-human elements among the Igbo, one may conclude that the term is an appellation

ascribed to one who has excelled in a profession, occupation, skill, or trade. For example, *Eze jii* (or king of yam) is used for a successful yam farmer; another related name is *Eze dibia* (or king of medicine). It seems that this appellation could also be ascribed to one in a leadership position in a relational context rather than the idea of political authority. The Eze is a titular authority in some parts of Igboland, such as Nri, Onitsha, Aboh etc. It seems it developed as an associational title imposed from outside, including Benin. The introduction of the Warrant Chief system by British colonialists in Igboland is critical in the invention of chieftaincy institutions and the transformation into Ezeship that occurred in the post-colonial period.

Igbo names further mirror thoughts and values about power and authority. While the term "Eze" can be found in common use among the Igbo, such as *Chimaeze* (God knows who is king/who will be king), its use cannot be said to be a literal equivalent of a "King." Hence, the supreme political authority among the Igbo, it seems, is *oha* which provides an ontological horizon presenting the community as that which possesses the relational character of both individuality and communal mutuality. This aspect of African humanism or social philosophy is reflected in names such as *Eze bu Iro* (the king is the enemy). Henderson's *The King in Every Man* (1972) expressed this political characteristic. In other words, the

autonomy of individuals and communities is a central feature of the Igbo worldview.

However, scholars who have identified a much more complex political organization in both the centralized societies and those founded on the segmentary-lineage principle have challenged such a broad dichotomy as applied to pre-colonial African political systems (Korieh, 2010). According to Smith (1956), "[a]ll political systems have a shared characteristic of competition at various levels – a competitive dimension that cuts across lineage groups for control of decision-making, creating the opportunity for the development of a hierarchical structure even among elementary societies" (cited in Korieh, 2010, 32).

Thus, the idea that the Igbo have no kings is a simplistic rendition of a much more complex and varied political organization among the Igbo. It is not uniformly true that "the Igbo have no king" because, in the west, more centralized political institutions emerged (particularly in Anioma). Traditions trace this to the migration of peoples from Benin (Onitsha, Oguta) and, to a lesser extent, from the Igala (Osomari) (see Nzimiro, 1972). But why did such a model of political institutions not spread beyond the direct contact with Benin/Igala peoples? The paper by Obi Nwakanma, "Igbo Enwe Eze", interrogates the well-accepted dictum that the Igbo have no kings. Nwakanma contends that it would be prudent to argue that the many indigenous egalitarian societies that

make up the Igbo world abhorred any form of political system that could give unchecked power to an individual as a king or ruler. A critical interrogation of the evolution of the Igbo political system reveals that these societies were republican. In his view, the attempt to hoist monarchical institutions on the Igbo society is an invention by modern Igbo intellectuals keen on positioning the Igbo within the competing narratives that have characterized the contested space of the modern nation of Nigeria. It seems, therefore, that the epistemological root of the monarchical system lies in the new and emerging questions of identity in an increasingly competing political and socio-cultural space of modern nationhood. For Nwakanma, "the Igbo conceived ideas fundamental to the preservation of individual freedom and sovereignty" as reflected in the saying "*Onweghi onye wu chi ibe ya*," (there is none who is master of the other). This philosophy had important implications for the fair distribution of the most important means of production—land. The complex relationship between the egalitarian political ideology and the traditional humane living among the Igbo is encapsulated in Nwakanma's conclusion that the Igbo established,

[a] very sophisticated land trust system, in which land belonged to family holdings through the clan, and no one was so poor that they could not have land. As a result of this land tenure

system, the Igbo did not evolve a feudal caste of landowners, and there was no history of peasantry in Igbo culture since all men born to the land were lords of the land – the *Ama Ala*. It is this land tenure system that deconstructs any notion about the monarchy among the Igbo.

Chidi Osuagwu confirms the supremacy of the *oha* thus:

In Obowo we say *oha na awu eze* which is a better framing of Igbo *enwe eze*. If you come to Obowo and want to address the people assembled, you greet them as *oha na wu eze* – people who are king or people who are the sovereign. It is the argument of who is eze for the Igbo. So, when we say Igbo *enwe eze*, we are saying that no individual is greater than the people (*oha*). We say that no individual is the Lord of the people because *oha ka nmadu nile* (*ohaka*), the people are greater than any single individual. It is the issue of where sovereignty reposes. And the Igbo say it reposes in the people (Igbo World-Interview with Professor Chidi Osuagwu).

Understanding of the African indigenous political systems and the ethics that underpinned it requires a philosophical and ontological exploration of their world. Scholars have paid attention to the intersection between the philosophy and worldview of a group of people and their socio-political organization (Isichei, 1977;

Mbiti, 1990; Njoku, 2009). As the paper by Francis Njoku elucidates, at the core of the Igbo political system are the philosophical, cosmological, and ontology thoughts that underpin the Igbo world. In this regard, their cosmology, myth, language, culture, belief system, folklore, and the order of importance of the individual and entities form the foundation of the 'initiative-democracy' and 'covenant-based authority' in the Igbo world. Njoku claims that Igbo non-philosophy is critical to understanding why political centralization was/is resisted in Igbo society. This idea is grounded in initiative democracy (as a form of social structure) and covenant-based authority (as a way of securing the well-being of persons and communities). He emphasizes that both social engagements, as existential and dispositional attitudes in organizing human affairs within the environment of occurrence of a people for whom reality is hugely encountered from the standpoint of process, will largely account for their tendency to abhor a centralized system of control.

Gender is a powerful organizing principle for understanding society and the relationship between men and women. A gendered lens is a useful framework for understanding the role of men and women in the Igbo political system. Thus, it is not simply that Igbo society wanted to be autonomous; this had a powerful economic and gender aspect. Some early literature on the role of men and women in African societies characterized

women as subordinate to men in the political and economic life of their societies. Basden (1921, 88), whose works among the Igbo provided some of the early outlines of Igbo societies and Igbo gender relations, noted that women "have but few rights in any circumstances and can only hold such property as their lords permit. There is no grumbling against their lot; they accept the situation as their grandmother did before them, taking affairs philosophically, and they managed to live fairly contentedly." This analysis of the position of women in African societies is premised on a universal patriarchal hegemony over women. Furthermore, Basden's misleading characterization of Igbo women was based on the skewed knowledge of the society and lack of a full understanding of power relations between Igbo men and women. Indeed, other studies of the Igbo people reveal a highly mobile and independent group of women.

A contextual analysis that considers the different social structures within which women operate will reveal a much more fluid power structure. For instance, The Reverend Bishop Johnson described the Igbo women early in the twentieth century as "very industrious and hardworking . . . far superior to the men in this" (cited in Falola, 2021). Did this role translate into women's autonomy, political power, and influence? Women played a vital role in rural intellectual production, meanings, and

realities. Through the selective use of language, rhetoric, symbols, spirituality, and the use of framing mechanisms, women influenced local politics and the economy in ways that challenged the idea of women's subjugation.

Women were autonomous from men, both economically and organizationally. How did this influence attitudes towards political centralization? Did men and women have different perspectives? How was this influenced by the organization of women in society via associations or age grades? This question raises issues of what female empowerment means amongst the Igbo. It is easy to slip into Western ideas about what women should aspire to or what the markers of discrimination or disempowerment are. We would like to interrogate this issue and understand how empowerment is manifested and is related to the organization of the economy or institutions, such as associations or age grades. What is it that Igbo women can achieve through their organization or autonomy that otherwise they could not?

The pattern of political centralization within Igboland reinforces the need for gendered notions of autonomy. This is because it is precisely in the western Igbo where institutions are centralized that "dual sex" political systems emerged where women assumed political offices, like the Omu, in parallel to those of the men. This seems to have gone along with more institutionalized control of markets by women. Why did the

spread of external models of political authority create, in response, such a unique set of female political institutions? Was this a way for women, faced with men's centralizing power, to institutionalize and thus preserve their own power? From this standpoint, Daniel Olisa Iweze examines the *Oga* institution among the Oko community west of the Niger River, exploring how it operates in parallel with and/or in the absence of the king, *Eze*. The paper highlights the collaboration and overlapping functions of the *Oga* with male institutions of power. The transformation from a female into the status of a king with all the political rights and privileges of a male, including marrying a wife and raising a family, affirms the fluidity of gender roles in the political system of the Oko people. Such female expression of power challenges institutional notions of power and male dominance of the political space. The *Oga* institutions further confirm the complementarity in Igbo political systems that Kamene Okonjo has called the "Dual Sex Political System" (Okonjo, 1976).

Elizabeth Onogwu, Amuche Nnabueze, and Simon Ezike extend the discourse on female power. Focusing on gender autonomy as conceptualized in the context of female-female marriage, a "complex, institutionalized system of gender-bending elaborately documented by Ifi Amadiume in her groundbreaking book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*," the paper engages in a metacritical analysis of Ifi Amadiume's

anthropological work. It argues that the practice of female-female marriage in Igbo land is a strong indicator of the strength, agency, and individuality of Igbo women as well as the density of the Igbo culture. At the root of female-female marriage among the Igbo are cultural and social needs that border around the need to reproduce the lineage and ensure that inheritable properties, especially land, remain with(in) the lineage. The ability of women to enter into such conjugal relationships and their acceptance by society is a further affirmation of women's extraordinary opportunities to negotiate their place within the Igbo patriarchal structure. As Urama (2019) observed, at the root of female-female marriage is the need to produce male children who would ensure the continuity of the lineage and inherit property, especially land. Thus, female-female marriage is essentially a social and economic arrangement that seeks to obviate the discriminatory inheritance rules that bar women, particularly widows and female children, from inheriting under customary law.

We cannot understand Igbo indigenous political arrangements without considering the central role played by Igbo spirituality and worldview and how they ordered individual and community life. As Martin (2012) affirms, religion is an essential and inseparable part of African life and systems of thought. Thus, there is the belief that supernatural powers and deities operate and

order human activities, including the sacred and secular. Among the Igbo, therefore, societal arrangements are impacted by spirituality and worldview. It is, therefore, essential to consider how Igbo spirituality and worldview provide access to freedom, provide codes of conduct, and support the norms and mores that guarantee the rights of individuals in society or stifle autocratic tendencies. This perspective informs Okonkwo Eze and Emmanuel Alaku's analysis of the role of deities in Igbo traditions and political organizations, particularly their role in administering the law and justice. This contribution establishes the link between Indigenous religion and spirituality in maintaining acceptable social order and administering justice among the Igbo. The paper contributes to a useful body of literature, such as that by Adogame (2023), who has called attention to the centrality of religion in instantiations of indigeneity politics and identity, culture, tradition and power dynamics. His examination of the worldviews, cosmologies, ritual symbolism, and praxis of the Indigenous Oza people in Southwest Nigeria reveals the widespread use of indigenous religious symbols in the political and social organization of African indigenous societies. It would be difficult, therefore, to separate African indigenous spirituality from other aspects of life. As Jacob Olupona (2015), professor of Indigenous African religions at Harvard Divinity School, affirms, "African spirituality simply acknowledges that beliefs and

practices touch on and inform every facet of human life, and therefore African religion cannot be separated from the everyday or mundane."

(<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/10/the-spirituality-of-africa/>). The paper provided deeper insight into the intersection of spirituality and politics in general and the role that deities play in non-centralized Igbo communities.

Odigwe Nwokocha's paper picks up the role of Igbo spirituality in ordering political life, focusing on the Ala (the earth goddess). He explores the concept of *anikanmadu* (the earth is greater than humans) among the Ibusa people of Aniomaland, an Igbo group who inhabit a section of the western bank of the Niger. It seeks to do this against the background of the fact that so much scholarly work has been done on *ani*, the earth goddess and a very strong deity all over Igboland, yet the political underpinnings of *ani* (land) as the community have been ignored. This work focuses on an understanding of *ani* as a political force that is akin to the state, employing the pre-colonial Ibusa political order as a case study. It focuses on locating and discussing some political power relations within the community by exploring the deeper political meaning of the concept that the community or state is greater than the individual. While noting that *ani* occupies a unique position in Igbo cosmology and exercises a major influence on behaviour, this work explores

the deeper significance of *ani*, representing the community, as a kind of leviathan that towered above all in Ibusa society and that commanded the respect of all. Focusing on the pre-colonial Ibusa community and using mostly primary sources, this work also explores the *anikanmadu* group as a very important political organ that operated in secret and mostly at night while enforcing the will of the community in a way that demonstrated the supremacy of the community overall. The work concludes that the concept of *anikanmadu* that underlined the secret executive organ, also known as *anikanmadu*, was instrumental in maintaining the oneness, well-being, and sovereignty of the community while ensuring that societal rules and laws were enforced, and sanctions placed on recalcitrant members of the community.

While many indigenous aspects of Igbo spirituality are falling out of favour as a result of Christianity and Westernization, some aspects have been resilient in the face of these challenges. Christopher O. Okwor et al. examine the explosion of the spiritual impulse in Igboland since the end of the civil war and the emergence of several cult groups. One such group is *Ezenwanyi*, which started as a call to serve the spiritual needs of the people but has, in recent times, gained prominence and grown to include other interests. The cult's uniqueness, as the name implies (woman king), is its exclusive reserve of membership for women. The paper critically

analyses the emergence of a female-centred spiritual space within a predominantly patriarchal society. The authors explore the notion of gender autonomy in *Ezenwanyi* in Enugu-Ezike, Obollo-Afor, and Okpuje in Enugu State. Besides the claims of call to service, the growth in the influence of *Ezenwanyi* is attributed to peer influence, economic interest, social relevance, and cultural revival. Such a tradition of women's spirituality is rooted in the African indigenous worldview. The Igbo, in particular, recognize the duality that exists within their world, which can translate into male and female parts necessary to make a whole. These philosophical constructs allowed women the space to also act as intermediaries between the temporal and spiritual worlds as integral parts of their communal being.

Some of the essays focus on traditional political institutions. Although some of the institutions remain vibrant to some extent, they have been significantly impacted by governance forces of colonialism, postcolonialism and globalization. For example, the Eze in most current Igbo communities is not a traditional political office. There are also completely modern institutions like the town union. How does the town union relate to the Oha? The former is contemporary; the latter is traditional. How should we conceptualize colonial legacies? For instance, one sees in some communities (like Owerri) that families that were able to claim the position of warrant chief were able

to create perpetual political power and influence. In others, however, the abolition of the warrant chief system and the re-organization of colonial government in the 1930s and 1940s led to no such persistence. Can we document and account for this variation?

Chima Korieh and Reginald Keke focus on the evolution of *Aladinmma/Oha/Amala* or (Assembly of Umunna/village group) as a political unit among the Mbaise Igbo to demonstrate an Igbo Indigenous political organization, its evolution, and transformation in the wake of modern political institutions. As an assembly of segmentary lineages, the exercise of political power rests on an assembly of participation (adult) members of the various lineages that make up a clan or village. The *Nzuko Amala* fits into the political rubrics of the so-called stateless societies, including its basic political unit as the village assembly, where major decisions concerning society were adopted. Although much of the early anthropological literature on African political systems, such as that of Evans-Pritchard, made elaborate distinctions between "state" and "stateless" societies, such studies lack a deep understanding of the complex institutional structures and mechanisms in operation among African societies such as the Igbo. Korieh and Keke's intervention contributes to two critical areas for understanding aspects of the Igbo indigenous political system. First, the paper reveals an

elaborate system of checks and balances that minimized competition for power and provided its members with significant access to the political process. Indeed, it emphasizes the diversity and complexity of Igbo political systems that are rooted in their underlying republicanism. Second, they suggest that the evolution of an economic system rooted in agriculture underpinned the political system in ways that ensured that individual members of the society, through their families, kin, or clan affiliation, had access to land not just in its spatial sense but as a central productive resource in an agriculture-based economy. At the core of this economic-based political ethos is the ethical philosophy of "*onye biri, onye biri* (live and let live).

The authors also explored these issues in a comparative context: how does the situation in Igboland compare to that in surrounding societies? Both the more centralized, like the Edo, Yoruba, and Igala, but also the less centralized, like the Ibibio or the Ijaw. For example, was it that the Edo people valued autonomy less and were prepared to tolerate greater political centralization? If so, is that manifested in the culture or worldview of the Edo people? Or perhaps, historically, they were organized in ways that made it easier for centralization to be achieved (did they lack the dual organization of Igbo villages)? On the gender elements, is there a relationship between the Queen Mothers of Benin and the Omus of Anioma? Is there variation in basic aspects of women's

autonomy, such as in the agricultural economy, control of markets, or associations such as the daughters (*umuada*)?

African political systems have undergone significant transformation as a result of the European colonization of African societies. There have been increased attempts to understand how the African traditional political systems operated before and after the colonial disruption. In recognition of this, Ranti Mathew Ojo's paper compares the Indigenous political organization of the Okun-Yoruba and the Igbo. This paper reveals the widespread existence of small-scale political systems among Nigerian societies. Like the Igbo, the Okun-Yoruba indigenous political structure was decentralized and consisted of autonomous village polities. As the paper further reveals, the imposition of external hegemony transformed the pre-existing political institution. First, the political structure of the Okun-Yoruba was transformed as a result of Nupe rule (c 1840-1897). The Nupe administrative structure in Okunland laid the foundation for the British administrative re-organization of Okun-Yoruba.

The imposition of British colonial rule on Nigeria from about 1900 marked a watershed in the political organization of both the Okun-Yoruba and Igbo. The British indirect rule system, which led to the creation of larger political districts and divisions, significantly transformed the indigenous political systems and power relations. British

colonial administrative changes not only introduced rivalry for control of power, but the changes had far-reaching consequences on inter-group relations.

Conclusion

The papers in this volume provide thoughtful insights into issues that have been of concern to scholars: the nature of the indigenous political system, transitions, and transformation in the face of European contact, and how these systems are mediated by gender ideology. The unique situation among the Igbo, it must be noted, does not provide a template for understanding the nature of political authority in other African societies. The Igbo share some similarities with many societies in Africa, since, as Henn and Robinson (2023) document, at the time of the scramble for Africa, at least 80% of Africans were living in societies which did not have centralized states. However, the uniqueness of its political system lies in the various ways that political power is controlled through several organs and the emphasis on participatory and consensus-based democracy. Access to meaningful political participation and the economic resources that guarantee individual freedom, liberty, and a high level of autonomy from hegemonic control by a section of the society is the foundation of the Igbo political system. The papers in this volume also stress the autonomy and independent spirit of Igbo women.

The research contributes to a key agenda in African studies, trying to understand the distinct way in which Africa entered the modern world. With a few exceptions, Africans did not construct the same predatory, militarized, centralized state that much of Eurasia did. The Eurasian states did not just wage war and expand; they also marginalized and repressed women. Little of this happened in Africa. Of course, this had the unintended consequence of making Africa extremely vulnerable to the pernicious expansionary forces unleashed by European modernity. But in this volume, we delved into the norms and practices which led Africa to be so different, so resist centralization and

emphasize autonomy, not just for men but also for women. The papers are not interested in making simple causal statements, but in describing some of the features of African society that are associated with these different outcomes. We also think they illustrate that while organizing their society in the way they did, the Igbo people, while they might have reduced the ability to resist colonial expansion, also created societies which, in many ways, were far superior in terms of individual freedoms to the Western societies with which they were contemporary. Perhaps the lessons from this history are useful in building modern post-colonial societies in Africa.

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