



Aladinmma (Amala): The foundation and evolution of an Igbo indigenous political system

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Abstract

There is significant literature on the evolution of political institutions in Africa. Much of the early anthropological literature, such as Evans-Pritchard's anthropological studies of African political systems, made elaborate distinctions between "state" and "stateless" societies. At the same time, the Igbo Nzuko Amala fits into the political rubrics of the so-called stateless societies, including its basic political unit such as the village assembly, where significant decisions concerning the community were made. However, the system had elaborate methods of checks and balances that minimised competition for power and provided its members meaningful access to economic resources. This article explores the institution of Aladinma/Nzuko Amala (Assembly of Umunna/village group) among the Mbaise Igbo to demonstrate an Igbo indigenous political organisation, its evolution, and transformation in the wake of modern political institutions. The paper suggests that developing an agricultural economic system underpinned the political system in ways that ensured that individual members of society, through their families, kin, or clan affiliations, had access to land.

Keywords: Igbo, political institutions, oha, Aladinmma, Amala

Introduction

Traditional Igbo society has been variously characterised as one of the most egalitarian societies in sub-Saharan Africa (Uchendu, 1965; Oriji, 2011; Ogbalu, 2016). Interestingly, however, the literature on the Igbo political system typically says little about the origin and evolution of the economic system that underpinned the political system of this society. In many instances, the assumption has been that the political system evolved independently of the economic system. This article explores the institution of Aladinma/Nzuko Amala (Assembly of Umunna/village group) among the Mbaise Igbo to describe an Igbo indigenous political organisation, its evolution, and transformation in the wake of modern political institutions that developed as a result of colonialism and political reorganisation in the post-colonial period. Data for the paper was drawn from two villages in Ihitteafoukwu, Ekwereazu Mbaise, Imo State, Nigeria. The researchers collected data in Umuchieze, Umunomo, and Ihitteafoukwu through participant observation and oral interviews. The researchers participated in 10 Aladinmma sessions in Umuchieze and two in Umunomo. The interviews focused on the origin, structure, and judicial function of Aladinma—the terminology used in the surveyed community—and the changing nature of its role in contemporary times. The judicial functions of Aladinma are then compared with data collected in the 1930s by British

colonial officials, generally known as Intelligence Reports, which included indigenous judicial systems as parts of the general report. Attention is paid to the judicial role of the village assemblies in the 1930s, the period of British colonial reorganisation of Igbo societies, and the contemporary role of Aladinmma in the two villages.

We suggest that the traditional political system of the Igbo, as reflected in the Aladinmma/Amala, has roots in the indigenous agricultural economy, which evolved to guarantee the right to subsistence and the norm of reciprocity. Goran Hyden (1983) described this as an 'economy of affection'. For the Igbo, "*onye biri, onye biri* (live and let another live) draws upon the basic principle of a socio-economic network of reciprocal relationships. The system has remained resilient after the political reorganisation of indigenous political systems because modern political reforms have had minimal impact on people's lives at the rural levels. Furthermore, the rural communities have been selective in applying indigenous social and judicial sanctions by limiting much of their role to the social and cultural arena, thus avoiding conflicts with state institutions. In addition, while the judicial functions of the Aladinmma/Amala in conflict resolutions and imposing sanctions are wide-ranging in the matters it could adjudicate, the rural Igbo communities have arrogated cases of a criminal nature to the courts,

thereby avoiding conflicts with state institutions. Before we delve deeper, we will describe our paper's methodological and theoretical questions.

The theoretical argument of the paper is built on the framework of democratic consensus and participatory models, which gives the Igbo society its republican nature and worldview. These models claim that the people, not the leaders, hold the ultimate power to decide the issues of governance and welfare in a participatory and consensus-oriented system. According to Arend Lijphart (1999), consensus democracy comprises broad power-sharing arrangements with segments of society. In consensus democracy, power is always contingent and reliant on the power that is established elsewhere to be able to secure the cooperation of others to accomplish a goal, making for well-ordered integration, collaboration, proportional representation, broad-based support in policy network, administrative expertise, pacification and accommodation, accountability in political institutions, transparent decision-making, and broad-based support in policy setups.

The evolution of Igbo political organization

Historians and anthropologists have detailed socio-cultural and historical structures and institutions of the Igbo society, describing them as acephalous, segmentary, decentralised, or stateless (Jones, 1963; Afigbo, 1981; Green, 1947). This classification

arises from observing pre-literate Igbo society, which comprised autonomous villages and village groups ruled through diffused authority. Adjudged as republican and without any formal, permanent, or hereditary leadership system, Igbo societies were decentralised, democratically oriented, and substantially egalitarian. Chike Aniakor has described this dispersed model of settlements and settlement variations as a "beaded necklace model," with a broad-based decision-making process and enforcement of decisions within the group. This distinguishes them from the societies organised in formal states. Except for Onitsha, Oguta, and some other Igbo communities west of the River Niger, the political organisation of the Igbo was characterised by this participatory principle (Nzimiro, 1972; Afigbo, 1972). The political institutions in both the centralised and decentralised Igbo societies are imbued with a strong spirit of individualism, egalitarianism, and achievement orientation motivated by an apparent abhorrence for political centralisation and authority.

Ofomata (2002) outlines the four levels in the Igbo political system as the family (under the headship of the father and comprised of nuclear members of the family, which is usually large depending on the number of wives a man marries); the kindred (a smaller social unit made up of the head of the nuclear family—the father or the *okpara* who holds the *ofo*); the village (comprises of kindreds and a cluster of kindreds and headed

by the *okpara* of the most senior kindred by order of birth); and, the town (the highest political unit among the Igbo and is made up of villages which are collections of kindreds with attachment to the land—Ala or Ani as a common bond). As Meek (1937) identified, the family was the basic authority unit in traditional Igbo society, with the kindred as the most operative unit, followed by the village and the town. The village groups were not organised in kingdoms, and the function of government was carried out by a council of elders (*Amala*) who shared power with other groups at various intensity levels. Thus, the Igbo generally had no kings or chiefs with exclusive executive, legislative, and judicial powers, as power was vested in the *oha* (public), the council of elders (*Amala*), the family, the age grades (*Ogbo, Ebiri*), and titled societies, (*ozo, mmanwu, ekpe*). Thus, the decision-making process engendered broad participation in the affairs of various kindred groups (Isichei, 1978, pp. 71–75).

Early colonial and anthropological accounts provide some perspective on the Igbo social and political reality. Alex J. Braham, a District Agent of the Royal Niger Company (1898–1902), noted the lack of centralised authority or chieftaincy among the Igbo. In his words, "Any freeborn man possessed of land merely has to acquire sufficient wealth to make certain presents and arrange a fetish feast, to which he invites the existing chiefs". Although Braham confused the acquisition of honorific titles, such as *ozo*, with chieftaincy,

an individual's lack of centralised political authority was recognised as the norm.

According to Ormsby-Gore,

There are no outstanding rulers of any importance, and it is not certain whether this state of affairs among the Ibos or Ibibios is due to the decay of a higher type of organisation or whether they had ever evolved any recognised form of government... As things are now, they live in villages, and no one village bears any relation to or recognises any affinity with the people of the next village who may be only a few miles away." (p. 115).

Moreover, H. P. Palmer, Revenue Commissioner, on a visit to Southern Nigeria in 1914, remarked that permanent chiefs comparable to the Emirs of the North, the Alafin, or Oba of Benin do not exist. This is, however, not to be expected among people still in the "clan" stage—where the (Chief-Eze in Igbo) like the Arab Sheikh or Tuareg Amanokel, is little more than the elder brother of the clan; the experienced elder is consulted in important questions, but not necessarily obeyed.

Stockley's Intelligence Report on the Ekwereazu and Ahiara Clans, Owerri Division comments on the "Ancient System of Government," which affirms that the smallest unit of a family consisted of a man, his wife or wives and their children. Several related families form the extended family. Different

extended families include one kindred (usually an exogamous unit) bearing the name of a common ancestor, such as *Umuagu*, translated as the children of Agu. Such extended families, *nchi*, often contain over a hundred adult males or more and are headed by the most senior man, occasionally referred to as "*Onye-isi ala* or "*Onye nwe-ala*," the Owner or Head of the Land. The order of seniority is well known and admitted, and the oldest man in the extended family is recognised as the senior man in the kindred. His position is a "primus inter pares". He is the *opara* or the eldest of a man's sons. The *opara* of a kindred never acted alone but "always together with the elder from his own and the other extended families". They formed the Amala, a council invested in issuing executive orders and settling disputes, although most of the factors that governed a man's life were governed by tradition. According to Stockley, "It is evident that the "kindred" is the highest unit which can be found today, or which has existed for many years, and that to meet modern requirements, any organisation must be somewhat artificial".

While the above comments reflect the general outline of the Igbo political organisation, these European observations failed to explain the basis of this system, the ideas behind the consensus-based philosophy of the political and social organisation, or the democratic ideas that undergird them. Indeed, Wamala (2006) has raised critical

questions concerning the application of political concepts such as representative democracy, democracy as a political system, the ideas about separation of power, and contestation for political power in African indigenous political set-up. Critical to his analysis is the question: Could traditional African societies have been democratic unconsciously, i.e., without elaborately worked-out ideas of democracy? The question is problematic because it is based on an unconscious acceptance that Western epistemological conceptions of democracy should form the basis of such comparative analysis. However, Wamala's analysis of an indigenous monarchical system bears similarities with the Igbo decentralised sociopolitical institution in two respects. First is the role of patrilineal lineage and clan institutions as the basis of political organisation. Second, is the relationship between agriculture and the social and political ethos among the Igbo, where agricultural land and the unavailability of abundant open land may have been the root of fashioning out a system of accommodative relationship rather than what Wamala describes as an "avoidance relationship," as was the case in the monarchical system among the Buganda where availability of open land and scant population encourages breakaway of lineages. However, the Igbo traditional political system is rooted in an epistemological belief, as Wamala noted in the case of the Ganda people, that "knowledge is ultimately dialogical or social,

and in the ethical belief in the collective responsibility of all for the welfare of the community" (Ibid, 437). We offer some comments on the origin of this unique political system.

Origin of the Igbo political system

It is challenging to trace the origin of Igbo political organisations accurately. It is widely acknowledged that indigenous political organisations among most Igbo societies were decentralised and had popular participation at their core. However, how did the Igbo system develop and resist political centralisation even when the conditions were favourable for state formation? We will attempt a political economy root of Igbo participatory political organisation as reflected in the *Aladinmma/Amala* or other forms of village assemblies, which were the main organs through which the Mbaise Igbo governed themselves and regulated public life. In his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, Olaudah Equiano, the ex-slave of Igbo origin, draws on historical memory to reconstruct aspects of Igbo life in the eighteenth century. Equiano's book provides the first glimpses into the Igbo world in the 18th century and reconstructs an Igbo world whose values or systems paralleled European societies. Much of his commentary on Igbo life focused on the politics and structure of government, administration of justice, agriculture, spirituality, art, and entertainment. Equiano's text is significant to the historian of the Igbo

past, especially with regard to political, social, and economic life. When read from a political frame, Equiano's text challenges the Western epistemological representation of the political organisation in pre-colonial Africa as largely rudimentary. Beyond his intended objective of writing the book as a political text, Equiano's presentation of a parallel culture—at least one in which the Igbo, his people, who become the representatives of the African continent in his narrative, share similar ideals and ideas as the Enlightenment Europe—of organised political institutions. This offers an opportunity to analyse the roots of Igbo indigenous political organisation.

A second aspect of the Igbo political system is the intersection of agriculture with individual and group identity, and worldview illuminates the link with political and economic life. According to Olaudah Equiano (1789, 20-21), "All our industry is exerted to improve those blessings of nature. Agriculture is our chief employment; everyone, even the children and women, is engaged in it. Thus, we are all habituated to labour from our earliest years. Everyone contributes something to the common stock, and as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars."

The interconnectedness between the political structures of the Igbo and sociocultural and economic life and how this interplay relates to agriculture provide a path to

understanding the role of indigenous political actors and their influence on matters of production, reproduction, access to productive resources, and control of labour for production (Korieh, 2010, p. 28). As Korieh (2010) notes, the control of the distribution of resources and mode of production is based on a relational approach system which weaves the political system and production system together and is shaped by their mode of living. It is speculated that indigenous Igbo fashioned ways of organising their societies, achieving cohesion, and regulating agricultural life to benefit society members. The need to regulate agricultural life, access to productive resources, especially land, and resolve conflicts arising from their agricultural pursuit were instrumental in developing an egalitarian and inclusive political system. As Stocky noted in his report on the Ekwereazu and Ahiara clans, "The kindred was in the past a man's 'Town'. Such man "would have a keen sense of the land owned by his kindred and would be ready to fight for any part of it threatened." The Igbo, we argue, were very protective of their land, and it appears that most disputes in early Igbo society were related to land and the desire to protect any portion belonging to the kindred. A clear understanding of land ownership, the economic and spiritual value of land, and the communal ethos that guaranteed access to entitled community members formed the basis of Igbo's political organisation.

Also rooted in the political economy was an ethical philosophy that recognised the worth of each individual within a framework that Chieke Ifemesia (1978) has described as traditional humane living. Ifemesia's attention to the Igbo people's antecedents and worldview demonstrates the humaneness in Igbo kingship, village democracies, secret societies, age groups, and title associations. Ifemesia states that this worldview is "centred upon human interests and values: a mode of living characterised by empathy, consideration, and compassion for human beings."

The Aladinma/Amala institution

Aladinma literally means—let the land be good—to be in harmony with Ala, while *Nzuko Amala* means the assembly of the people, which represents the voice of the people (*olu oha*). As a politico-ethical philosophy, Aladinmma aims to ensure the sanctity of the land. In other words, when the land is good, everyone benefits; everyone progresses. While the nomenclature varies from village to village, this level of political organisation is similar in various parts of Igboland except for the centralised political entities among the riverine Igbo communities West of the Niger River.

Aladinma, or the gathering of the *oha*, is at the core of Igbo political ethos. In very ordinary parlance, Ijeoma Nwajiaku states, "*oha* symbolises the people, the populace, or even the community", and "the communal

spirit has a powerful binding force in the Igbo worldview" (Nwajiaku, 2022). The Igbos, according to Ozodi Osuji, "placed enormous emphasis on what *oha* said." Hence, the idea that *Ohaka* (*Oha* is supreme). The Aladinmma, as a gathering of the *oha*, holds the community's legislative, executive, and judicial powers and carries out its function through a general assembly of all adult males who have been initiated into adulthood—known as *iwa akwa* in the villages. *Iwa Akwa* among the Mbaise Igbo is a ceremonial initiation of young men into adulthood. Before *iwa-akwa*, the young were regarded as minors and were not permitted to attend the village assembly or [participate in many aspects of village and community life. The *iwa-akwa* enables the group of initiates to be a recognised age group in the community.

The Clan assembly or Amala/Aladinmma in our present context is at the basic level of the political organisation. Aladinmma seeks to achieve the sanctity of the land while balancing individual interest and group interest. Aladinmma, therefore, addresses issues that arise in social and economic interactions between community members. The belief that community members are part of an integral whole is central to Igbo's ethical philosophy. Traditional Igbo society is replete with proverbs that portray the importance of consensus-building and the dialogical nature of knowledge. *Echiche wu ugwu akpa odighi onye nke ya juru eju* (knowledge is like a half-filled sack; none has

a full one." The Aladinmma derives its legitimacy from the Igbo kinship system, which embraces the community's equal participation and guarantees its members' rights.

In practice, the political process is deliberative and consensus-based. The deliberative policymaking inspired by the consensus-based political process is at the core of the Igbo political system. Aladinmma, as a deliberative forum, provided free-born members of the society with the opportunity for popular participation. However, here, politics is not an organisation of society for its own sake; instead, the utilitarian value of political organisation is for the sake of a social order linked to the people's economic life. Making laws and rules governing society, adjudicating cases, and imposing sanctions on erring members of society was the collective task of most of its members. The separation of powers, which marks Western democratic and liberal institutions, was absent in a larger sense of these principles in the Igbo system. However, the absence of separation of powers was compensated for with popular participation at every stage of the political process. The root of the deliberative forms of governance exemplified by the Aladinmma arose in what has been described as a "largely meritocratic authority structure that repudiated permanent hereditary power".

The Aladinma/Amala must have evolved to ensure equitable land distribution and the protection of individual and communal plots at the economic level. On the political and social levels, Aladinmma sought to avoid domination by individuals or groups of individuals and any form of autocratic rule by an influential leader or group. The Aladinma/Amala, like other traditional organisations, must not only be understood in the light of the maintenance of social order within the territorial framework of the organised exercise of coercive authority through the threat of or possible use of force but also as a system of communal leadership, expressing the functions as well as the powers of leaders (Barber, 2004).

At the root of the Aladinmma is its philosophy of participatory democracy. A distinctive feature of participatory democracy is that it shapes democratic interactions from the bottom up, driven by participants in the public domain rather than by guardians in the polity (see Lijphart, 1999). In these models, 'the people rule' as they are governed by village councils in a cooperative manner through unwritten customary laws. Participatory democracy is 'self-government by citizens' rather than the representative government in the name of citizens. Barber Benjamin (1984) believes this involves more than the expression and aggregation of preferences: 'Self-government is carried on through institutions designed to facilitate ongoing civic participation in agenda-setting,

deliberation, legislation, and policy implementation.

In a participatory democracy, public opinion-making is more than a mere addition of individual preferences for decisions made or policies formulated. Uchendu (1965) opines that on critical matters in the assembly,

Every villager who [could] contribute to [a] discussion [was] given a hearing. When the matter [had] been thoroughly talked out, the leaders from each lineage in the village retire[d] for *izuzu* (consultation). The right to participate in *izuzu* [was] a greatly cherished . . . one and [was] restricted to men of weight and prestige, men who [had] the wisdom to understand and appreciate all schools of thought and achieve a compromise which the Amala [could] accept. After *izuzu*, a spokesman who [was] chosen not because of his age but for his power of oratory, his persuasive talents, and his ability to put the verdict in perspective, announce[d] the decision. This [was] either accepted by the Amala by general acclamation or rejected by shouts of derision. In the latter event, the view of the assembly prevail[ed]' (pp. 40-41).

While not every matter went into *igba izu*, it is apparent from Uchendu's description that while the assembly was open to all adults

(the *amala*), it is apparent that the assembly was also controlled by opinion molders (*ndi onu na eru na okwu*).

The enforcement of decisions is done spontaneously by specific institutions within the community with oversights from others to ensure compliance with religion, justice, law, and politics, which play essential roles in a government that is the concern of all. The flexibility of the institutional structures (Ottenberg, 1959, p. 141), the pattern of decisions, reactions, and information travel from the families to the lineage meetings to the Aladinma/Amala, all making sure they were responsive to popular or community will ensure social security and harmony.

March and Olsen argue that the quality of the involvement is more important than the quantity of the collective preference indicators. So, autonomous policies emerge from integration and exchange, ensuring that the most effective deliberations among citizens are achieved. This enables society and institutions to rediscover themselves for public service and good (March & Olsen, 1989). What makes these models endure is their commitment to dialogue, self-government (based on intense human contact), commonality, trust in the collective, participation, soft power, and accountability (Robert, 2000). These approaches explain the democratic and republican nature of the Aladinma/Amala as a genuinely democratic traditional institution amongst the Igbo.

These commentaries reveal two critical factors related to our discourse. First, there is widespread agreement that the Igbo operated a decentralised and inclusive political system that allowed a large portion of the society to participate in political life. Second, is the Igbo apathy for centralised political power and control by an individual or group of individuals, even though women were primarily excluded from deliberations in the Aladinmma meetings.

Colonial encounter and the transformation of Igbo political institutions

While a central motivation for European imperialism was economic, transforming local political systems was critical in achieving the economic goals. The men who carried out these tasks had a mindset of a dysfunctional political system and needed more regard for the existing institutions. Historian Adiele Afigbo articulates the political transitions and transformations among the Igbo in the classic *The Warrant Chiefs*. Indeed, the confrontations that would occur between the British and the Igbo following the imposition of the Warrant Chiefs system did not arise from a cultural misunderstanding on the part of officials but an avowed prosecution of an imperial policy that had been elevated to the status of ideology (Korieh. 2010).

With no hereditary chieftaincy institutions, with few exceptions such as the Onitsha, the British created the warrant chief system. Native authorities were created by

regrouping minor, less organised units headed by residents into provinces (divided into divisions). Palmer (1914) noted the cautious approach in introducing British rule among the Igbo.

From the early days of occupation, therefore those responsible for the administration of the country sought to avoid the wholesome introduction of British Law and European methods. A means was sought whereby "Native Customs" should be applied in the settlement of Native Disputes, so controlled, as it were, by the Government that it should be "pure" and not "corrupt." District Commissioners felt and still feel the practical necessity of their having power to use common sense and summary jurisdiction in dealing with primitive people. Courts called "Native Courts" were therefore designed to be in the fact "Provincial Courts," in which the District Office would always sit, but would not be bound by the letter of the English law when sitting there (RH, Mss Afr. s.1873, Broocks, "Reports and Papers).

Allen, J. G. C., who arrived in Nigeria in 1926 and served as a District Officer in Eastern Nigeria, recalled in his memoir, "From the Government's point of view, this system had the advantage of being decidedly more efficient than government by a vague and

inchoate council of elders" (RH, Mss Afr. s. 1551).

At the centre of the Native Administration system were the Provincial Courts—operated by European administrative officers, which tried more severe offences or any other. They were regarded as repugnant to Western moral concepts, even if accepted under local law and custom. The Native Courts, which dealt with offences against customary law or similar civil cases and where the warrant chiefs operated, became part of the new administrative changes in Igboland. The new authority given to the warrant chiefs and enhanced by the native court system led to the unprecedented exercise of power in pre-colonial times. It challenged the core of the Igbo traditional political system—government by consensus—in which decisions were made by protracted debate and general agreement. The men who became "Warrant Chiefs," one official wrote:

Soon enjoyed power and authority to which they possessed no traditional right or title and most of them created an entirely artificial administrative structure in which the elders were pushed aside and authority was granted to a cadre of "Headmen" whose only qualification for their position were a tough and ruthless personality and a capacity for blind obedience to the dictates of the "Warrant Chief" (RH, Mss Afr. s. 1551).

In some areas, these kindred heads, known as idimala (a corruption of headman), became as arrogant as the warrant chiefs and a source of exploitation of villagers. In some areas, these "Warrant Chiefs established a form of personal dictatorship, and the traditional administrative system started to disintegrate" (RH, Mss Afr. s. 1551). The memories of their arrogance and intimidation are still remembered. Onyegbule Korieh remembers these men as gods. "They seized other people's land, bicycle, and took young women without paying bride-wealth. Some took other people's wives or other properties that they fancied" (Onyegbule, K. Interview December 14, 2000)

There were practical reasons for adopting the warrant chief system and the relatively high support given to the new administration by many of the newly appointed warrant chiefs. First, with few Europeans on the ground, some form of native administration as adopted in the north became inevitable. An official, F, B, Carr, noted that the "Warrant Chiefs" system and the adopted judicial system "formed a cheap and expeditious form of justice." African officials had some practical reasons for embracing the system since it offered the opportunity to accumulate wealth and achieve high status in societies where these two motivations fit into the social dynamic of Igbo societies. Hence, part of the tax collected went to the Native Administration, including the payment of these chiefs. The political changes from

the introduction of the Native Authority and the creation of the warrant chief system created a class of wealthy individuals by the 1920s. These chiefs, who had become salaried officials of the colonial government, reinvested their wealth in the produce trade and people by marrying several wives and having several children. They built mansions roofed with corrugated iron sheets. Court clerks whose "opportunities for taking bribes are great," as A. E. Cooks, District Officer for Owerri District, wrote in his memoir, also exhibited their newfound wealth by investing in wives and building large homes (RH, Mss Afr. s. 1924). Falk Edward Morris, who became the District Officer for Aba in December 1920, observed the changes during the decades following European colonisation.

Rapidly increasing wealth is everywhere raising the standard of comfort with amazing rapidity. Chiefs who a few years ago could hardly boast of the possession of a decent garment to cover their nakedness now dress in the latest European style complete from sun helmet to patent leather boots and drive about in their own motors. The progress of the people apart from the villagers who still till the soil is corresponding (RH, Mss Afr. s.1000 (1).

Palmer recalled that some form of individual solid authority in the villages was undoubtedly necessary in the early days of

pacification, "but the Administration had not divined that it had quite inadvertently and with the best intentions imposed on the hapless villagers a form of autocracy entirely foreign to their custom (RH, MSS Afr. s. 1551). Many colonial officials, like Palmer, admitted that these Native Courts had, however, "developed in a manner quite contrary to the spirit in which they were designed" (RH, Mss Afr. s. 1873). Indeed, Allen, a former district officer, noted that many of these warrant chiefs "led a very precarious existence, the perils of which were not always offset by their illicit gains." Many of them, he noted, "died suddenly in suspicious circumstances, and although their bodies were exhumed and examined, it was never possible to discover sufficient evidence to support a charge of murder" (RH, Mss Afr. s. 1551).

Colonial officials admitted the difficulty of implementing the system. However, they were more concerned with applying the idealistic philosophy of the Native Administration project than dealing with the contradictions inherent in the Igbo political system. Indeed, the confrontations that would occur between the British and the Igbo when the system of Warrant Chiefs was imposed from the first decade of the twentieth century did not arise from a cultural misunderstanding on the part of officials but an avowed prosecution on an imperial policy that had been elevated to the status of ideology. Indeed, for many officials,

the Indirect Rule policy was the Bible that guided colonial administration and defined the relationship between the administration and colonial subjects.

However, the process of selecting warrant chiefs was sometimes arbitrary and bizarre. Often the British appointed willing participants, most of whom had made their wealth in the palm oil business as produce buyers. One official, A. F. B. Bridges, who joined the colonial service in 1921 and became District officer for Onitsha recalled in his memoir:

It was, therefore, the practice, when a Warrant Chief was to be appointed, for the D.O. to visit the town or quarter concerned and hold a public meeting. At this meeting all candidates would be put forward and required to weigh their claims before the public, the D.O. endeavoring to weigh the claims against one another and gauge both the validity of the claims and the degree of support for each candidate. If one of them had some obvious standing as a descendant of the founder, he was likely to be chosen but whatever the claims it was usually the majority votes that decided the issue, unless there was evidence that the meeting had been rigged. Other things being equal, the people tended more and more as time went on to vote for candidates who were literate and

knew something of the outside world (RH, Mss Afr. s. 1881).

Another official recalled the difficulties of the early days of colonial rule among the Igbo:

The interpreters were either content to tell the Europeans what they thought they wanted to know or to extend a helping and well-greased hand to these ambitious individuals, and the difficulties of the Ibo language and the timidity of the people prevented the Administrative Officers until many years later from learning the truth. Therefore, at the outset of the British regime, each village was called upon to nominate its 'Chief' who was promptly presented with a cap and staff of office and a warrant formally appointing him as a representative of the Government (RH, Mss Afr. s. 1551).

Others did not fit this mode. In the case of Umuchieze, a village in Mbaize, Owerri Province, for example, oral sources say that the warrant chief was a 22-year-old young man, Philip Eluwa, who, out of curiosity or stupidity, refused to run away when other members of the village took to the bush on the arrival of the British in his village. For this act of 'bravery,' he was appointed the Warrant Chief of the village. Under normal circumstances, the oldest kindred of Umudionu, Umunjeke, would have produced

the Warrant Chief since his own kindred Uhuala was the last in the town hierarchy. Allen recalled similar circumstances. In some cases, some powerful men "persuaded their people to nominate them, but in others, the people, fearing a trap, selected the most insignificant individual in the village—in some cases even a slave—in the hope thereby of being freed from official interference with the village administration." Allen further noted: "The Government, believing that they had won the support of the traditional authorities, exaggerated their status and granted them an increasing share in the day-to-day administration of the area" (RH, Mss Afr. s. 1551).

The new administrative structure was very patriarchal despite the visible role played by women in both the economy and politics. While some Igbo men participated in the local administration as interpreters, messengers, policemen, army recruits, and warrant chiefs, the British ignored women. Colonial anthropologist, Leith-Ross (1969) noted them and the failure of the colonial administration to recognise their role in Igbo society.

. . . apart from their cupidity, which was trying, how you felt respect for those hard-working, shrewd, vided Ibo women and what admiration for the wisdom and tolerance and knowledge of human nature which had dictated many of their customs. It is a pity that, from the beginning,

some executive local powers had not been given to them. At that time, the men would not have resented it, as it would have meant little more than official recognition of powers the women already possessed. Now, too many vested interests are involved (RH, Mss Afr. s. 1520).

This created significant problems for the administration and resentment among the Igbo. The 1929 Women's Revolt, among such protests, was primarily a reaction to the Warrant Chief system, among other issues, such as taxation and the Great Depression.

Overall, some officials, notably Palmer, acknowledged the ideological consequences of the Native Administration on societies such as the Igbo. In his view, the attempts to preserve Native Custom "have so far resulted in steadily destroying it and among these relatively primitive peoples full Europeanized individualistic government is being introduced. . . . The Government machine is steadily grinding to powder all that is 'Native' and transforming the people into 'black Englishmen.'" Complimenting the state in effecting this change, he argued, "are the spread of missionaries and education" (Robert, 1873).

Some disagreed with Palmer's assessment. The Commissioner of Calabar Province did not see the wisdom in challenging a policy formulated by officials highly regarded within colonial circles.

It will be interesting to ascertain if when making such a sweeping condemnation of the Government's Policy, the writer considered who was responsible for the building up of the existing system of administration. The names of Sir Claude MacDonald, Sir Ralph Moor, and Sir Walter Egerton might have occurred to his mind. All these were men of mark and each one continued the policy on the lines of his predecessor (Robert, 1873).

Reiterating the so-called backwardness of the Igbo, the Commissioner remarked:

It is obvious that the inhabitants of the Eastern provinces are of a much inferior mental caliber than those in the West of the Niger. . . This fact was very quickly ascertained by former Administrators of the protectorate (old Southern Nigeria) and the system of native courts instituted for the simple reason that the object aimed at was to try and educate the native and to bring him on a higher scale also by the said system of Native Courts to make the Chiefs (so-called) feel that they were Chiefs not only in name but as such were responsible for the welfare of their country. To this end, not only successive Governors but all Political Officers have striven and striven hard. Mr. Palmer, beyond his tour

through the Provinces, has I believe no experience of the type of native his report deals with (Robert, 1873).

This reaction to Palmer's report points to how policy was driven by ideology and why it witnessed little shift until the 1929 Women's Revolt a decade later. Nevertheless, the new structures and institutions became essential instruments for expanding an economy based on the production and marketing of palm produce and the better opportunity to market an extensive array of foreign commodities.

However, much of the Igbo indigenous political and social institutions survived

locally. The resilience of the organising of rural life was the result of several factors. The political transformations after colonial rule did not transform much attitude toward centralised authority. The rural population was content with paying state taxes and embracing Western institutions such as the church and schools. But even with these changes, attitudes toward political centralisation and control did not change; rural populations still found ways of indigenising new instruments of the states.

Table 1: Crime and Punishment in Traditional and Contemporary Igbo Society

<i>Crime</i>	<i>Punishment (pre-colonial)</i>	<i>Punishment (Contemporary)</i>
Murder (<i>ochu</i>)	The murderer dies by suicide or is executed	Murder cases are no longer tried by <i>Amala</i> .
Manslaughter	As in murder, the principle is life for life or giving to the deceased family a third person to be killed in his place	Manslaughter was not handled by <i>Amala</i> . But in some cases, the <i>Amala</i> may intervene, and the murderer pays compensation to the deceased family.
Stealing farm produce	Public shame. Compensation to the property owner by the thief	Public shame. Compensation paid to the property owner by the thief
Rape	Public shame. Ritual cleansing/appeasing the land (<i>ikwa ala</i>)	Court/police
Adultery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensation was paid to the husband of the woman by the lover if the husband had not consented to the 	

	<p>relationship (twenty yams, salt, and meat).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The woman would also kill a hen from her house and cook it for her husband as an act of contrition. • The relatives of the wife are required to visit the man and ask for forgiveness. 	
<p>Sexual intercourse in the bush</p>	<p>Regarded as an insult to "Ala." A fine of four goats or a cow</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sacrifice of a hen or female sheep to "Ala" 	
<p>A sexual relationship with a woman in their own exogamous unit or with the wife of their father while their father was still alive</p>	<p>An offender could be deprived of his house and crops and be exiled from his community for one year</p>	

Aladinmma and challenge of liberal democratic ethos

In the contemporary Aladinmma in Umudionu, Umuchieze has a leadership structure that rotates the principal leadership position among the 7 kindreds that form the village. The positions of Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, Financial Secretary, and Provost are allocated to different kindreds. The kindreds nominate candidates for the positions allocated to

them, which are then voted on by the whole assembly. This principle prevents the domination of the Aladinmma by particular kindreds. This power distribution also ensures that each section of the community is represented. The oldest person from each kindred also forms an informal council of elders, and their views are often respected. A group of titled men also occupied an exalted position in the general assembly. However,

the contributions of every member of the assembly carried equal weight in deliberations.

However, our observations at Aladinmma sessions reveal conflicting ideas of popular participation. Even within this democratic principle, there are opinion moulders and traditional intellectuals whose views and opinions shape public policy. Despite the influence of these individuals, the group abhors the appropriation of power by individuals or groups of individuals or any intention by wise members to centralise power. Their role could be compared to the few in the formation of America who fashioned the nature of the republic with a guarantee of liberty for all. The fear of autocratic leadership or monarchical institutions was at the root of the Igbo political structure.

The Igbo liberal democratic ethos can be examined regarding popular participation and gender. The Igbo political system operated what Kamene Okonjo (1976) characterised as a dual-sex political system. The operational principle of the system involves each sex managing its affairs, while the interests of women are represented at all levels of the political and social system. Unlike their Western counterparts, women's control of aspects of economic and social life gave them wide-ranging opportunities to participate in the politics of their societies. Women's opportunity to straddle the public and private spheres is unique to African

societies. The uniqueness of women's power among the Igbo is reflected in the Omu institution among the Igbo communities on the west of the Niger River. The Omu institution confers on a female leader the same spiritual and temporal powers conferred on the male counterpart.

The kinship principles place boundaries on political participation. The more widespread non-monarchical system limits the role of women in Aladinmma. In most cases, it is limited to male members or adult males who have entirely performed the initiation rituals into adulthood—the *iwa akwa* ceremony. In these societies, women are often not participants in Aladinmma deliberations. Our fieldwork observation reveals that women showed no interest in attending the Aladinmma except when invited to deal with particular issues concerning women. It would be reasonable to suggest that the Aladinmma was a male affair. As Ejike Obasi noted, Aladinmma is a male affair. In the past, he noted that "only men attended the Aladinmma as it is assumed that women's interests are represented by the general assembly" (Obasi, E. Interview, January 10, 2022). The fact that the Aladinmma is linked to the kinship system may explain why women were less visible. Women in the community are members through marriage; they do not share the kinship and lineage structures linked by blood. While marriage enables women to be incorporated into the lineage and kinship systems, they are still considered strangers to the community.

The Aladinmma, like pre-colonial indigenous political systems, was dominated by male folks. Male participation, however, was conferred by membership in a lineage, clan, or village group. As mentioned earlier, pre-colonial Igbo society was a system of diffused authority, fluid, and informal leadership with shared rights of decision-making and enforcement. It was an honest, stable balance of male and female power and authority for the political stability of society. Pre-colonial Igbo women were marginally involved in politics due to inhibitive cultural traits, and at no time were they wholly excluded. Though the Aladinmma was male-dominated, women were regarded to a considerable extent with an inherent predisposition to complement men in every sphere of endeavour. It has been argued that women were, to a reasonable extent, integral to the socio-political stability of society. In the Aladinmma meetings, anyone who desired was free to attend and was given ample opportunity to contribute. As Castradori (2021) notes, "Though by no means immune from a degree of patriarchy, the deliberative apparatus was also fairly inclusive of female interests. While seldom the representatives of their families, conflicts, and issues judged to be relevant to the women at the segment level would be deliberated upon in the presence of women, and parallel structures of women's deliberative decision-making bodies often existed to address "female" concerns" (n.p.).

However, women had a parallel political influence on communal decisions and, in a way, independent of the men. According to Smith (1975), women were complementary to men and not subordinates to them in the pre-colonial Igbo society. Women controlled aspects of the economy as they planted vegetables and were keen on petty businesses (Meek, 1937). The *Umuada/Ndi iyom* and *Otu Ogene* (oldest woman) in decentralized and centralised polities, respectively, influence communal decisions for their benefit and that of the communities (Isichei, 1977). These women groups emphasised collective responsibility by looking after their welfare, security, and survival while sharing their joys and sorrows with members of connected groups. Objectively, as the political authority of the assembly of elderly men in the Aladinmma was recognised, so was the political authority of the female members. In a situation where a man has been suspected of beating or maltreating his wife in any way or in the case of men who at mid-night go to the houses of widows to rape or steal from them, the women fora may impose restrictions on such individuals by not greeting them whenever they come across them or report them to the general assembly who would determine the adequate punishment for them. In extreme cases, women could stage protests, and besiege the offender's house while singing bizarre or satirical war songs (*abu ikpe*) as a way of venting their grievances. They could also go on sex strikes (*igbasi - ukwu*) to compel the

men to act on the matter. With this, the village listens to and takes the women seriously. So, the Aladinma/Oha creates a dynamic societal balance. The British colonial rule altered the gender-political balance prevalent in traditional Igbo society. The introduction of indirect rule limited the power of the Aladinma/Oha as the general assembly and empowered selected individuals as warrant chiefs to represent their communities.

Conclusion

Despite the modern political reorganisation of the Igbo society, the Aladinmma/Amala system demonstrates the inalienable and exercisable power of choice among the Igbo. The value attached to the principle of consensus enables qualified persons to participate in community life. The persistence of this indigenous political system in modern times must be understood within the context

of the resiliency of traditional institutions and their egalitarian, political, and socio-economic paradigms that value equity, liberty, individual rights, and consensus.

Aladinmma continues to function despite the political transformation because it performs a different function that draws from the Igbo worldview and ideology. The basic mores and laws guiding society, the customs and traditions, and ethics are often outside the purview of modern state institutions. The Aladinmma allows the Oha (the people) to deliberate on matters relevant to the lives of its members. These include enacting laws and rules, trying cases, and imposing sanctions on erring members. In the absence of a centralised political authority controlled by an individual or group of individuals, the people (Oha), through the Aladinma (Assembly of the adults), provide the opportunity for popular participation in the governance of societies.

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