

Traditional Socio-political Organization of the Enuani Igbo of South Central Nigeria

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the indigenous socio-political system of the Enuani, an Igbo sub-culture group. It begins by interacting with some of the primary and secondary sources on the Igbo political system. The paper will prove that the socio-political organization of the Enuani Igbo is primordial and free from external imposition. In the analysis that follows, the paper sees Enuani Igbo socio-political organization as a blend of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The study shows that kingship and the *umunna* organizational concept occur together and is centred on title holding. In the course of their contacts and interactions with their Bini neighbours to the west, they exchanged kingship ideas, which benefited both sides. As a result, a more centralized system of political organization developed around the *Obi* of the Enuani kingdoms. The paper concludes that, rather than looking at this development as a superimposition, scholars should view it as evidence of mutually reciprocal inter-group relations.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a running commentary on the Igbo pre-colonial socio-political system. The root of this commentary is in the existence of kingship institution among the otherwise predominantly segmentary Igbo groups. Studies conducted by some British colonial writers (Thomas 1914; Basden 1966; Bradbury 1967) appear to have sparked this commentary. For instance, a study by Thomas (1914) acknowledges the existence of kingship amongst the Igbo west of the Niger, but posits that these kingship institutions were superimposed from Benin as a result of conquest and domination. There are also those that have erroneously referred to the west Niger Igbo kingdoms as “petty monarchies, chiefdoms or chieftaincies” with petty rulers or chiefs (Egharevba 1934; Igbafé 1974). They describe these so-called chieftaincies as tributary to Benin, and also suggest that their genesis is traceable to Benin.

It is instructive that “the principle of Igbo *Enwe-Eze* (Igbo have no kings) continues to fascinate historians” and non-historians alike (Nwauwa 2007). For instance, a study by Dike (1956) argues with considerable force that Igbo *Enwe Eze* – Igbo have no kings. With particular reference to the Igbo west of the Niger, he posits that kingship is intrusive in the area, concluding that the institution was likely to have derived from Benin. Dike (1956) tries to establish a distinction between the western and eastern Igbo political systems, pointing out that the

former has a more centralized political system than the latter, implying that the institution was introduced and nurtured by outsider elements in the pre-colonial times. A study by Ijoma (1983) reveals the existence of kingship as part of the socio-political organization of the western Igbo area. However, the study is skeptical about the indigenous development of kingship and titles found among the western Igbo communities. It, therefore, concluded like the others, that kingship among the western Igbo (including the Enuani) was influenced from Benin. A study by Onwumechili (2000) supports this position, namely, that kingship is intrusive in the general Igbo area.

This genre of historiography was rehashed so often without refutation that it came to be regarded as authentic. As a result, little or no attempt was made to critically investigate its validity. For instance, no researcher bothered to question whether the nomenclature or the substance of the institutions was actually introduced from Benin or evolved indigenously among the Igbo. The poser remains: can it be said that the west Niger Igbo were in truth ignorant of kingship idea before Benin influence began to be felt in the area? This question has remained unanswered even in this 21st century.

Although the primary sources used in this paper (mainly archival) were compiled and documented by British colonial officials to ease administrative cost, they remain very important in analyzing the Enuani kingdoms. Besides, while it is not assumed here that the analysis

advanced in the Enuani case is applicable to all other western Igbo groups (Ika and Ukwuani), it will nonetheless be useful in investigating other Igbo polities.

Objective

This paper has one specific objective. It is to show that, contrary to the received notion, the institution of kingship among the Enuani Igbo was evolved indigenously, long before Benin emerged as an influential force in the general area.

INDIGENOUS SOCIO-POLITICAL SYSTEM

Enuani indigenous system of government is an interesting blend of village democracy, monarchy and aristocracy. The democratic element in the arrangement is reflected in the village assembly, a gathering of all the male members of the community – young and old – where issues of grave import are discussed and decisions reached on the basis of popular consensus. The monarchical element is reflected in the head chiefs or *obi*; and the aristocratic element, in the bevy of titled chiefs subordinate to the chiefs or *obi* that is also known as *Eze*. Each of “these three divisions in the traditional social structure is charged with clearly defined powers, duties and responsibilities which may not be abandoned, delegated or shared” (Gwan 1964).

VILLAGE DEMOCRACY

Igbo traditional society was divided into kindreds (*ebo*) and these into villages or “wards (*ogbe*), which are also partrilineages” (Nzimiro 1972: 21). The principle of partrilineality, which was the basic social structure of Enuani Igbo, implies that descent is traced through male lines only. Amongst the communities of Enuani, the basic unit of socio-political organization was the compound (*ezi na uno*), which is a household with at least a man, a woman and their unmarried children. Next was a group of compounds, which were closely related, known as *umunna*. A study by Uchendu (1965: 40) defines *umunna* as a “territorially kin-based unit which subdivides into compounds (*ezi obi*)”. *Umunna* was usually under the headship of a grandfather or great grandfather as the case may be.

Next is the *idumu*, or quarter, which is a group of *umunna* all of whose inhabitants claim common lineage. Above the *idumu*, comes the *ebo* or kindred, consisting of a number of *idumu* – not necessarily adjoining one another territorially; but all the inhabitants claim common descent from one or the other of the immigrants who originally founded the communities. The sum total of the *ebo* constitutes the clan. Enuani Igbo society recognizes the authority of the family head (*diokpa*) who settles disputes among the family members.

Administratively, the lowest unit was the *ogbe* or village, which usually consisted of a group of territorially adjoining *idumu*. Each *ogbe* was headed by a *diokpa* (the most senior male) and each component family acknowledged the authority of the *diokpa*. He was and is still highly revered; for he is seen by every member of the *ogbe* as the intermediary between the living and the ancestors. All disputes within the *ogbe* were settled by a council of family heads under the headship of *diokpa* of the *ogbe*. A study by Onwuejeogwu (1972) reveals that “... the *ogbe* (federation of autonomous settlements) is politically equal to each of the parts that make up these towns”. Within this level, issues concerning the *ogbe* were trashed out whenever they arose.

In addition to this territorial and kinship grouping (Nzimiro 1972: 20), the Enuani Igbo communities were organized on the basis of an elaborate age-grade system (Nzimiro 1972). The ruling age-grade organized the different grades in the communities to cope with any eventualities such as the defense of the communities in times of war or for the purpose of communal labour. In most communities of Enuani, the most senior of the grades was *okpala* or *diokpa* grade headed by the *okpala uku* (the most senior male in the communities). Together with the *diokpa* of each *ogbe*, the *eze*, *olineze* and other non-hereditary titled men such as *ugoh* (spokesman), and *ogah* (serviceman) formed the village council. The *okpala-uku* whose words (*onu okwu*) were *iwu* (law) carried out advisory role in the council and decisions reached at the gathering were binding on every member of the community.

In the case of Asaba, governance was entrusted in the hands of *Otu Raza* age-grade. The authority of the *Otu Raza* was acknowledged by the whole town (and remained so during the

colonial period (Isichei 1969). For example, an intelligence report on the area (ASA DIV.CSO 30929) revealed that the colonial administrator of the Asaba Division advised that "membership of the Native Authority and Native Court should be confined to the *Otu Raza* age-grade alone". This clearly suggests the recognition of the traditional system by the colonial authority.

In many of the communities of Enuani, the supreme administrative authority was the *eze*-in-council, that is, the *eze* with the titled men. According to an Intelligence Report on Akwukwu-Igbo area, (ASA DIV. 8/1), for instance, the *ogbe* (quarters or wards) were "united into a village council headed by a hereditary *eze* with his council of *olinzele* or title holders and *ikei ani* (elders of the land) or distinguished elders". In Ogwashi-Uku, the *okpala* was not a "member of the village council" (ASA DIV.31350. Intelligence Report). All the same, family seniority still governed the system to the extent that in both Akwukwu-Igbo (including Atuma) and Ogwashi-Uku, the senior *okpala* of some *ogbe* were, *ipso facto* the *eze*'s senior councilors. They advised the *eze* before important decisions were taken. The distinction is partly a matter of family seniority and membership of various 'orders' and societies extant in the communities. For instance, Akwukwu-Igbo tradition claims that the senior *okpala* of *idumu* were not members of the village council solely because of their seniority, but other social qualifications (such as titles), which would not alone suffice, added to this family position, entitled them to membership of the council.

The lowest recognized judiciary that had the capacity to entertain and enforce decisions reached was the *ogbe* (village) court. This comprised the *diokpa* of a particular village often referred to as *onyechiogbe* in some communities such as Ogwashi-Uku, Olodu etc., who sat in council with the *otu ikeyi*, the administrative body. Cases between different *ogbe* were taken to the *eze* whose final decision was influenced by the advice of the senior *okpala* (*okpala uku*). The four-day week calendar was practiced and ritualized. Most of the *ogbe* courts or councils sat on market days, which varied from community to community. Some observed the *eke* day as their market day; some, *olie*; some *afor*, and others observed the *nkwor* day.

From the foregoing, it is discernible that this arrangement followed the segmentary structure

of patrilineality called *umunna*. Within the *umunna* system, political power was diffused and highly democratized. The *umunna* system "encouraged political dialogue, equality, communalism and egalitarianism at all levels of lineage segments" (Onwuejeogwu 1972: 20). In the same vein, an intelligence report on the area (ASA DIV.CSO 26/4; Ohadike 1986) revealed that in Agbor and the neighbouring districts where the (*umunna*) society is somewhat despotic and classified, where the hereditary idea is fixed and where the *Obi* are powerful, the *diokpa* still acts as the spiritual, executive and judicial head of the *umunna*. The village democratic system was centred on *umunna* and was dispensed by the *diokpa* of each *ogbe* and the *olineze* through the *ogbe* (village) court or council and has survived till date in spite of colonial distortions of Igbo traditional system.

TITLE SYSTEM

The Igbo value titles, a fact well recognized by early 20th century European visitors to Igboland. A study by Basden (1966) reveals this fact when he stated,

Pride is one of the outstanding traits of the Ibos...

there are obvious signs of superiority complex... expressed by

men in striving for titular rank, and their arrogance when

they have attained to it.

A recent study by Apeh (2006) shares Basden's view that the Igbo value title-taking. Amongst the Enuani Igbo there are various graded titles but the highest is the *ozo* title which is also called *nze*. The *ozo* or *nze* title was awarded to wealthy and prominent men who sought prestige rather than power. An *ozo* titleholder was identified in Enuani by his red cap; hence, they were referred to as red cap chiefs.

In most Enuani communities, an individual was and is still strictly forbidden to take the title of *ozo* or *nze* in the lifetime of his father. However, in some places individuals were allowed to obtain the *eze* or *ozo* title provided they fulfilled the prescribed requirements. This set of chiefs then constituted a group known as *ndi eze* (for example, Okpanam, Ibusa and Asaba). *Ndi Eze* or *Ndi Ozo* were and are still a force to reckon with in decision-making within the communities of Enuani. Other titles included

Onishe, Odogu (called ikwele in Aba Uno) – a title given to a war leader, *Okita, Ojeani, Ojigwu, Amibor, Isagba, Alum, Oza*.

There were other titles such as *Iyasere, Obaraye, and Unwague* which some writers think are of Benin provenance (Thomas 1914; Afigbo 1981). In this connection, a study by Mordi (2002: 208) reveals that ‘through a process of adoption and adaptation, these Benin titles exist side by side or in modified forms with typical Igbo-type, probably Nri-derived *olinzele/nze* and *ozo* titles...’. These titles, it would appear, were copied and adapted by the communities of Enuani to suit local social forms. However, they provide interesting evidence of relations between Enuani Igbo and the kingdom of Benin in pre-colonial times. The moment a man obtained this title, he was automatically exempted from certain general community works such as clearing of roads to streams, and sweeping of market squares.

A basic qualification for obtaining the title by an intending candidate was that he must be a freeborn (*nwadiani*) of the community. Generally, titles were largely obtained by purchase, which involved providing items such as yams, palm wine and money in the form of cowries. These items were shared between the *eze* of the community and the *otu ikeyi* (elders) of the *ogbe* (quarter) where the purchaser came from. The cost of the items to be provided was usually related to the socio-political status and material benefits that would accrue from the title. The *Obi* or *Eze* conferred the titles on the candidates after satisfying the prescribed conditions. However, while the possession of wealth was an important qualification for obtaining a title, other considerations received considerable weighting. These included, *inter alia*, the moral integrity of the candidate, and his disposition to community service, for instance. These titled men also had large individual powers to deal with law breakers.

KINGSHIP

Kingship can be defined “as the state of being a king; the official position of a king” (Wehmeier 2000). This definition suggests the existence of a kingdom with a clearly defined office of a king, occupied by a male who is generally accepted by the people. A king is “recognized by his subjects as their spiritual leader and chief custodian of tradition” (Opone 2011).

The institution of kingship which the Enuani Igbo call *eze* or *obi* has long been part of their traditional socio-political system. The kingship institution in the Enuani area is traceable to the very beginnings of the communities. Kingship is associated with the “accounts of origins and migrations of the communities” (Opone 2011). Many of the early settlers in the Enuani area were migrants from Nri, and many of these communities were founded by princes from Nri, who continued to practice in their new settlements the kingly and ritual civilization for which Nri was known in their new places of settlement. These included Ogwashi-Uku, Isheagu, Ubulu-Uku, “all the Ogboli settlement in Enuani Ogboli-Igbuzo, Akwukwu, Ogboli-Atuma, Ogboli-Abala, Ogboli-Issele-Uku, Illah-Umuakpashi” (Onwuejeogwu 1987: 28). These settlements were already conversant with the institution of kingship “developed in Nri around or even before AD 900” (Onwuejeogwu 1987: 48), that is, centuries before the rise of Benin to a great empire and her subsequent influence on the Igbo west of the Niger.

Kingship is a universal concept well known to the Igbo world. The concept of kingship “emerged in response to social and economic pressures in the various areas occupied by the Igbo... As communities developed, the need for leadership whose jurisdiction went beyond their family or lineage units arose” (Anyanwu 2002: 69). It was in response to the need for more centralized community governance able to deal with challenges such as war, inter-group trade and land disputes that the Enuani Igbo communities over time institutionalized kingships.

To the Enuani person, by *eze* (king) is meant a leader who is physically and spiritually strong and can protect and fend for his people. He must have the capacity to defend his people during wars. However, with the passage of time, it became clear that the *eze* could not govern effectively all alone. He needed lieutenants to help in various capacities, for instance organization of trade. Some of his chiefs were made generals and had to war while the *eze* stayed behind. However, the *eze* exercised control over his generals. The *eze* had to remain spiritually stronger than the war chiefs else they could be tempted to dethrone him on their return from war. Enuani communities did not need to derive from outside the idea of choosing a leader (*eze*) from among themselves to lead them in

times of difficulties or even in running the day to day affairs of the community

In areas where there existed more than one *eze* such as Asaba and Igbuzo, this arose from a mutual understanding amongst the settler groups. Such groups might have fought themselves to a stand-still at the early stages of their settlements, without a victor or vanquished. In such a circumstance, it was agreed to have *eze* (king) from each quarter as a mark of equality (Onwuejeogwu, interviewed 2005). However, this arrangement was made a little flexible during the closing decades of the 20th century when government decided to recognize the authority of the *eze* on the basis of individual merit or qualification. In this regard, an individual was chosen by the king-makers from among the existing *eze* (*obi*) and conferred a superior title of *Azagba*, (Oyemike interviewed 2005), in the case of Asaba, and *Obuzo* in the case of Igbuzo (Oral interview: Mr. Oyemike M.Asaba, 17/12/2005). The authority of the *Azagba* or *Obuzo* has since then been acknowledged throughout the communities. This change did not deprive the other *eze* the exercise of some measure of authority and power. They automatically formed the *eze* council where important decisions concerning the kingdoms were taken.

Kings in traditional Enuani society had defined powers and functions; and the institution is sacred and highly ritualized. It is "endowed in myth with special political and ritual powers, so that the office became the focus of people's political values" (Nzimiro 1972: 142). Furthermore, Nzimiro (1972) identifies two aspects of this sacred institution, namely, "the sacred ritual aspect and the secular-political aspect". As he states, both are emphasized at various points in the life cycle of a king who is a symbolic representation of the values that support the institution". The *eze* or *obi* was highly revered in traditional Enuani society, a fact evident in their praise names: *obi bu agu* (the king is lion) and *obi bu igwe* (the king is sky). The praise-names symbolized the general belief that the *obi* was sacrosanct and a source of protection and security to his people. The power and authority of the *obi* was based on the belief and recognition that the occupant of the office had spiritual authority over his people, and that the authority was conferred by the ancestors. He ruled with the *olinzele* (state officials) palace chiefs and age-grade associations within his kingdom.

APPRAISAL OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

All through history, in every age and clime, no state has existed in isolation. On the contrary, every state has sought to establish external relations with other states. Such relations, which were governed by diplomatic norms or conventions, ensured free movements of peoples and goods across boundaries. Accordingly, the Enuani kingdoms established links with the neighbouring kingdom of Benin. For instance, it was reported that the *obi* of Ogwashi –Uku visited Benin in about 1836 (Jull 1936) on a diplomatic mission.

This practice was not peculiar to the kingdoms of Enuani. A study by Alagoa (1976) has demonstrated this in respect of the western Niger Delta kingdoms of Ughelli, Iyede, Ozoro and Agbon. Similarly, a more recent study by Okotie (1999: 23) notes the exchange of gifts and greetings between the Abraka and Aboh kingdoms in pre-colonial times. This practice was encouraged and sustained by the need to maintain close and cordial diplomatic relationship between kingdoms, and by disparities in natural resources endowments.

It is instructive that Ubulu-Ukwu kingdom was not considered too small to partake in the installation of the Oba of Benin. An Ubulu-Ukwu tradition claims that Benin for long "relied on the potency of the Ubulu-Ukwu charms and the proficiency of Ubulu-Ukwu medicine men to put an end to the premature deaths and the insecurity of the coronations of the early Benin royal house" (Mordi 2002: 204). Ubulu –Ukwu medicine men from Onicha Okpe quarters visited Benin on the invitation of the royal house to perform rituals that ensured the peaceful coronation of the new Oba and for his long reign. It is persuasive to argue that such interventions by Ubulu-Ukwu medicine men were a form of ritual assistance in moments of needs. This cannot be indicative of political/military imposition by Benin on Ubulu-Ukwu.

A study by Afigbo (1987: 65) shows this pattern of relationship among many groups in the pre-colonial period. Also, a study conducted by Henderson (1972) reveals this relationship among communities along the River Niger. He described it as a

Web-like social order... with the ideological convention held in common by the rulers of

both Igala and Aboh that they shared ultimate descent from Ado/Idu peoples through Benin

Such ideologies were designed to maintain cordial diplomatic relations which guaranteed peaceful economic activities among states and kingdoms. It was also encouraged by the fact that they viewed themselves as one and thus frequently exchanged visits and, by extension, ideas too. Through this means, the *Obi* of Enuani kingdoms and their titled men have for long, “copied the style of clothing of the Oba of Benin and their important chiefs” (ASA DIV.31350. Intelligence report). However, this did not in any way change the nomenclature and substance of the institution of kingship in the area.

No doubt studies by Dike (1956), Basden (1966), Onwumechili (2000) and others have helped to engender the false notion that the west Niger Igbo kingship institutions were derived from Benin. A study by Nwaezeigwe (2007) reveals that Nri kingship, from where many western Igbo derived their institution might have originated as a result of their contact with the Igala kingdom many centuries ago. His argument is based on the age long connection between *eze* Nri (king of Nri) and the king of Igala (Attah) evident in their common royal paraphernalia. The reality is that the institution of kingship in this area antedates the birth of Benin monarchy; and it is of authentic Igbo provenance. That Niger Igbo kings later borrowed some royal paraphernalia and practices of Benin is not in doubt. But this should not be interpreted as evidence that the institution of kingship itself among the western Igbo came from Benin. What is most dominant and fashionable needs not be seen as most ancient. As a study by Anyanwu (2002: 70-72) has shown, “kingship is real in Igbo culture...even though the colonial authorities...found it difficult to admit that all parts of Igboland had kings or those they literally called chiefs (implying that they were not like European Monarchs) prior to the European presence”. These pejorative accounts were encouraged and sustained by the “political expediency of colonialism to build up large paramountcies ... [as] a viable basis to implement the policy of indirect rule”. Afigbo (1987: 13) A more recent study by Afigbo (2001) argues that the “Igbo kingdoms hemmed round by other groups lacked pomp and pageantry which go hand-in-hand with violence and force...” They

also lacked the familiar British Empire syndrome: war/domination, aristocracy/commoner.... Only kingdoms that have the reflections of these characteristics which they found in India meet the term kingdom”.

In Nigeria, the Sokoto caliphate, Oyo empire and Benin kingdom fitted into European model of kingdom probably because they forcibly extended their influence or authority over many groups. Igbo kings have never been absolute monarchs in the mould of Yoruba *oba* and Hausa-Fulani emirs. They were and still democratic monarchs. Besides, in traditional Enuani society, boundaries between kingdoms were clearly defined and held sacrosanct by the communities. This discounted wars of expansion; but rather encouraged mutual interaction among neighbours through trade, marriage and other forms of interaction. Even the development of a highly ritualized culture, which culminated in Nri theocratic hegemony, was not achieved by force or through war. Rather, Nri men were itinerant ritualists and diplomats who carried on political and ritual activities from one place to the other hand-in-hand with trade.

Although kingship in Enuani appears more centralized than in Igboland east of the Niger (apart from Onitsha), this difference is not only found among the Igbo. For, while, for instance, the Oba of Benin is an absolute monarch, the Alafin of Oyo is a constitutional monarch. Yet, both kingdoms possessed the credentials that met the European concept of a kingdom.

In his ethnographic survey of the Edo country *vis- a-vis* the Igbo, Ryder (1969: 12) points specifically to the fact that Edo political institutions, like those of the Igbo, are based on *ogbe* (Village) patrilineal arrangement and age-grade organizations. This suggests therefore that before Benin emerged as a great kingdom and empire, most of the Edo traditional settlements were organized, like the Igbo traditional society, as autonomous small-scale village polities. It follows therefore, that the kingdoms of Enuani did not encounter major problems acculturating and integrating some Benin elements when it suited them. Nor can it be said that the idea of kingship in Enuani area was an innovation imported from Benin elements, since it already existed. Kingship is an integral part of Enuani traditional socio-political system. Even those communities that borrowed a few ideas from Benin merely adapted them to suit local social

forms. In other words, the structures were already there, otherwise, “you cannot promote a donkey to a horse” (Nnanna 2009). This is why the process of adaptation was without any difficulties.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show that the basic traditional socio-political organization of Enuani Igbo was at root structured and determined by the people’s concept of *umunna* and membership of various orders and age-grades based on an elaborate title system such as *ichi eze, ichi ozo or Ichi obi*. In their *umunna* organization, the *diokpa held* a superior position. The authority of the *diokpa of umunna* and that of the *ogbe* (quarters) and the *Obi* or *eze* were acknowledged as well as the personal prestige of title holders. The institution of kingship which the Igbo call *Obi* or *eze* is ‘real’ and ancient in Enuani and the concept was conceived and freely developed by the people through their own genius. However, their sustained contact with Benin kingdom led to cross-fertilization of cultural practices, including ideas such as kingship. As a result, a more centralized system of political organization developed around the *Obi* or *eze*.

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APPENDIX

<i>Igbo Words</i>	<i>Meaning in English</i>
<i>Diokpa</i>	The oldest man in a family
<i>Eze or Obi</i>	King
<i>Ichi echichi</i>	Title taking or coronation
<i>Idumu</i>	Ward
<i>Ikeyi</i>	An elder
<i>Ndi ozo</i>	Holders of ozo title
<i>Ogbe</i>	Quarter
<i>Otu</i>	Group
<i>Okpala-uku</i>	The most senior male in a community
<i>Umunna</i>	Members of the same family