

EZI- NA-ULO AND UMUNNA: IN SEARCH OF DEMOCRATIC IDEALS IN TRADITIONAL IGBO FAMILY

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Abstract

This write-up intends to locate democratic ideals the traditional Igbo family in search of democratic ideals suitable for African societies. This is done using the tool of hermeneutics. The nature of Igbo family inheres from the Igbo world-views. Igbo family is an interconnectedness of beings, visible and invisible, that mutually co-exist. It is an integral whole comprising of the living, the dead and the unborn. A hermeneutical analysis of *ezi-na-ulo* gives rise to a family characterized by dialogue, consensus, freedom and mutual understanding. One easily observes that these are ingredients for building a stable human society. This in a way accounts for the reason why the Igbo-African family serves as a model for modern socio-political and economic theories and action.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the traditional Igbo family has been grossly and variously misapprehended and misrepresented by both the colonial writers and some contemporary African writers. Yet a little study of the Igbo family reveals the rich ideals of mutual respect, dialogue, consensus, freedom, et cetera. The wrong impressions about Igbo family that have been disseminated ought to be corrected. According to the late Ugandan scholar, Okot p'. Bitek, 'The African scholar has two clear tasks before him. First, to expose and destroy all false ideas about African peoples and culture that have been perpetuated by Western scholarship....Second, to present the institutions of African peoples as they really are....'¹

Accordingly, this paper examines the possibility of the Igbo family forming a basis for an African democracy. It is an investigation into our traditional values and ideals. The life activities of man revolve around the family. Igbo people are no exception. What obtains in the Igbo family also obtains in most African families. Hence in this write up, reference could be made to African family at intervals within the work. This study intends to do a

phenomenological and hermeneutical analysis of the traditional Igbo concept of family. The Igbo family in this context, one must bear in mind, refers to the traditional Igbo family as uncontaminated by the influence of colonialism and Judeo-Christian values, ethics and morality. However, this does not entirely exclude the contemporary Igbo family which has undergone a lot of changes sequel to external cultural influences.

The paper also examines the principles that underlie the practice of democracy. How fruitful has democracy been in the African continent? It presents the colossal failure of democracy in most African states. This calls for a rethink.

Has Igbo family anything to offer or contribute toward achieving authentic African democracy? Prima facie, the Igbo family seems to be undemocratic. It seems to lack equality, freedom and dialogue because due to its patriarchal nature, the father seems to exercise unlimited amount of power and dominance over the wife and children. The general belief is that women are subjugated in the Igbo culture and tradition.

In the first place, the fact that the Igbo seemingly regard males as superior to females is undeniable. This is evidenced in the Igbo linguistic and epistemic schemes. For instance the Igbo name for male is 'oke'. *Oke* is regarded as superior to *nwunye*, the female. *Oke moto* means superior car; *oke ulo* means superior house.

The above situation notwithstanding, one finds out that the presumed subjugation of women in reality is not as it is reported. Rather, on a more critical and closer examination, one finds out that the principles that guide the Igbo family are democratic. Even the notion that Igbo family is patriarchal has come under serious challenge. Ideals that are inherent in Igbo family could serve as a panacea to the imported Western liberal democracy. Igbo family can serve to build a democracy rooted in African culture and tradition.

Democracy

The relationship between the concept of democracy and the word itself is so close that a brief glance at the etymological derivation quickly paints a picture of what democracy is about in one's mind. Etymologically, democracy comes from the Greek word, "demos," meaning people and "cratos" meaning "rule". Democracy is a rule

by the people. In democracies, it is the people who hold sovereign power over legislator and government. Modern democracy is rooted in ancient Greece, especially the Athenians. Democracy which is “rule by the people” was understood in sharp contrast to monarchy, in which one person ruled, and Oligarchies, in which a few ruled.

After a few decades of embracing democracy, most African countries are still bedeviled by series of political problems. This is evidenced in the civil wars that have been ravaging the continent, political and economic instability et cetera. We have sit-tight presidents who failed to live up to the democratic credentials they professed because of their intolerance of oppositions which they often drove underground. There are abuses of human rights, coercion, nepotism and all forms of corruption. Notwithstanding that we practice democracy, government of the people by the people; the masses still feel alienated from the government of the day. These indications point to the fact that Western liberal democracy has failed to yield its lofty promises in Africa.

On a more serious note, part of the reasons for the failure of Western liberal democracy in Africa lies in the failure to harmonize or to blend the Western ‘imported democracy’ with the realities of African culture and socio-political life. The above point is very important and should not be neglected. Oliver Iwuchukwu has argued that political theories must begin with anthropological presuppositions.² An authentic African democracy must incorporate the realities of African world.

Ezi-na-Ulo and Umunna: A Hermeneutical Approach

In Igbo language the concept of family is expressed as “*ezi-na-ulo*”. Morphologically speaking, *ezi-na-ulo* are two nouns joined by the coordinating conjunction ‘and’. They are binominals and antonyms but they conjure an imagery of complementarity. Example of other polar binominals in Igbo language are *olu na Igbo* (riverine and heartland), *ohia na uzo* (bush and road). One needs a thorough knowledge of Igbo culture to fully appreciate the anthropological import of complementary binominals. Uchendu did a socio-cultural analysis of *ezi-na-ulo*. He writes:

Ezi-na-ulo is more than a homestead. It is a cultural phenomenon of great complexity. A basic spacial unit in Igbo social organization, analytically *ezi* precedes *ulo* in structural time, but *ezi* loses its functional integrity once *ulo* disintegrates. It is the peace of *ezi* that brings prosperity to *ezi-na-ulo* Although in structural time, *ezi* precedes *ulo*, both protect *ezi-na-ulo*. In cultural terms *ezi-na-ulo* constitute a unity. You cannot meaningfully think of the one without thinking of the other. In structural analysis *ezi-na-ulo* are polar concepts but they are also complementary. Their complementarity lies in the fact that it is the social life in the *ulo* that activates the cultural life of the *ezi*, the achievements of the *ulo* that are celebrated in *ezi* and vice-versa.³

From the above citation one can easily deduce that the seeming polarity that exists between *ezi* and *ulo* gets harmonized or reconciled in the *ezi-na-ulo* -the family. *Ezi* connotes outside, exteriority whereas *ulo* connotes inside, interiority. The family now becomes the point of harmonization. The family is both a natural and sociological institution. Being a natural institution and the first cell of the society, it is common to all men in all cultures. From a sociological point of view, the family is as Carl Smith holds, “a close warm group of people, which creates a large environment where all the members especially the children, feel secure, accepted and loved.”⁴ It is a primary or sociological unit and serves as the basis for the development of the larger society. For this reason, the sense of family is not restricted to Igbo and Africans alone.

Ezi na ulo structurally unite to form one concept. *Ezi-na-ulo* is not just a bundle of material cultural traits; it is a people -- people united by a bond of kin network and interlocking functions and reciprocities. It is this network of people that is referred to as *Ezi na Ulo*. This is primarily a nuclear family; conglomeration of which gives rise to extended family –*Umunna*.

A conglomeration of different families which may or may not be from the same lineage gives rise to *umunna*. The concept of *umunna* far exceeds the nuclear family set up of just a husband, wife

and children. It is rather a wide range of extended family relations. Iroegbu explored the limits of *Umunna* as follows:

‘Umunna’ literally means: children of the father. The father in question here determines the level of the closeness of kinship. The extended family father is the determining parent in ‘Onuama’ which is constituted by the totality of the nuclear families who are descendants of the same grand or great grand father.⁵

Odimegwu gave a hermeneutic approach to the concept of *ezi-na-ulo*. He states: “Indeed the ideal of the family that emerges from a proper hermeneutic of *Ezi-na-ulo* (the Igbo term for family) is quite enlightening and captivating. This term captures the reality of holistic being and existence.”⁶ He further x-rayed the complementarity of the two words *ezi* and *ulo*, highlighting the political implications.

The two words *ezi* and *ulo* are polar words yet they are complementary. The conjunction ‘na’ serves as the operative conjunction that unites the shores of the river of human existence into the new reality of procreative bridge, bond and institution. The Igbo family therefore symbolizes unity of being as well as multiplicity of aspects....The Igbo family is therefore predisposed “...for the production of dialogical person: the quintessential leader in the communalist leadership system of the traditional Igbo society....”⁷

Among the Igbo the extended family is not simply made up of father, mother and children. It comprises a whole group of persons: the head of the family with his wife or wives, his children, and grandchildren, and also his brothers and sisters with their wives and children, his nephews and nieces, in a word, all those persons who descend from a common ancestor. In Igbo language there are no separate words for cousins or nephews or nieces; every person is either a brother or a sister. It is not how large this family is that is important, but what role it plays in keeping together the members.

Although some people may argue that in the Igbo family the husband tends to be domineering over the wives and children. But this is not the ideal. Inasmuch as the Igbo family is patriarchal it does not give the man the unlimited lease to become a despot over the entire family. It does not also negate the high respect accorded to women in Igbo family. Women are highly regarded in Igbo culture. This is because it is not only that they are closely related to child bearing but also the beauty and the care of home depends so much on them. One of the major manifestations of the life-forces is procreation. It is natural for a man to seek for the female womb wherein he will plant his seed. In this case, woman stands in the position of being the most powerful symbol of perpetuation of unity and life in the universe.

In traditional Igbo setting women have their structure of political authority parallel to and often countervailing those of men. The Igbo have male crops and female crops, male functions and female functions, ceremonies that are exclusive to women as well as ceremonies that are exclusive to men. And so it seems that there is a very intricate sense of balance in those arrangements.

In the study of cultures, when it comes to religion, we see the culture of the people in its nakedness. It is here that one sees the high regard which the Igbo culture has for women. Unlike Eurocentric Christianity and Islam which do not allow women to become priests and imams, Igbo culture has a place for priestesses who attend to most of the powerful gods in the land. Chielo was the priestess of Agbala in the novel: *Things Fall Apart*.⁸

The Metaphysics of the Igbo Family

Metaphysics is concerned with explaining the fundamental nature of being. Here it involves the fundamental nature of the Igbo family. This is the *raison d'être* and the essence of the Igbo family. A little examination of the metaphysics of the Igbo family shows that the Igbo family just like the Igbo world view comprises of both visible and invisible members. Talking about the Igbo worldview Uchendu says:

First, the Igbo world is an integrated one in which all created beings, the living and the dead, are in

communion through symbolic interactions and other communication channels. In Igbo view the world of man is not strictly divorced from the world of the spirits. Lineage continuity is a cooperative enterprise between the world of man and the world of the spirits. Existence in this world involves interaction between the visible and the invisible, and the living and the dead, each honouring a contract based on mutual interest and reciprocity.⁹

Following the Igbo worldview, the Igbo family has a tripartite membership which includes the living, the dead and the unborn. The concept of the family goes beyond the living members. The ancestors and all the dead members are part of this large family. This means that the family never reduces in number. Those who are married into the family and the children born into it help to swell the number. The dead relatives remain permanent members. “The living-dead (ancestors) solidify and mystically bind together the whole family...African concept of the family also includes the unborn members who are in the loins of the living”¹⁰. They are the future hope.

The inter-connectedness of the individual and the community stems much from the extended family system that serves as the framework on which the community is built. The extended family system gives rise to kinship, which is one of the most fundamental constituents of all human societies. The above interconnectedness also underscores the spirit of unity and oneness that obtains in community. This has been described as communalism. This communalism is built on the Igbo extended family. The spirit of oneness is not limited to the nuclear family, it extends beyond the group from the same ancestral tree to a clan or village or even town. The individual is not alone in the world; he is surrounded by members of his community. A person is complete only in so far as he is part of this community. An African, right from birth, learns to believe that ‘I am because I belong’.

The Igbo social structure is modeled on the extended family system. The extended family is made up of a number of nuclear families bound together by blood relationship. *Ezi-na-ulo*, therefore,

is not the extended family system, per se. It is the nucleus of the extended family system. The extended family comprises the *Umunne* and the *Umunna* congregations of as many *ezi-na-ulo* or nuclear, conjugal families as there are in that lineage. These include the brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, uncles, aunties and cousins, extending to as many generations as could be traced and connected, who have their origins from the same ancestral father and mother, as well as the in-laws.

No nuclear family is totally autonomous. Each must necessarily be connected to others so as to form a complete Igbo family, which then is normally large. This model of the family widens further so as to include the kindred- the extended patrilineal family known as *umunna*. A gathering of kindreds in turn constitutes a lineage-*Ebo*. This lineage eventually extends to form a village- *Ogbe*, which is simply a collection of lineages. A conglomeration of villages forms a town- *Obodo*. This is the wider extent of the Igbo social unit.

The peculiar fact about the family is not only that it is a relationship built on love; it is also open to life. Every human being has a form of nostalgia towards home. It is a natural habitat for human beings. One can choose one's friends but the same cannot apply to one's mother, father, sister or brother. The relationship that obtains in the family is a relationship based on love and not solely on legislation. There are values and principles that guide the Igbo family. *Ezi-na-ulo* and *umunna* operate on the principles of dialogue and consensus. The metaphysics of the Igbo and African family further informs and enhances this sense of dialogue and communal communication. In Igbo ontology, man is not an isolated being. He is a "being- with". He is in communication not only with his fellow human beings but also with gods, ancestors and other visible and invisible beings that are existent in Igbo world view.

In *ezi-na-ulo* and *umunna*, there is basically recognition of common responsibilities, reciprocal assistance pattern and joint economic activities either on production or consumption or both. There is also maintenance of expressive relations among extended family members through visits and support at crisis periods. Extended family is found everywhere but it is emphasized in some societies more than in others. In the societies it is emphasized like Igbo societies it could sometimes not only lead to undue parasitism

but also adversely affect the individual freedom. Some other principles that underlie the Igbo family include:

Integrity: Every *ezi-na-ulo* and *umunna* has a name to protect. Members strive hard not to defame the family. Hence the Igbo say *Ezi afa ka ego*, meaning that good name is better than wealth.

Consensus: Life in *ezi-na-ulo* and *umunna* operates more at the level of mutual understanding and consensus than at the level of legislation. This does not mean that there are no guiding laws. There are guiding laws. Far beyond the rule of law, there is the rule of love and mutual understanding. When conflicts and misunderstanding occurs, brotherly love guarantees reconciliation.

Equality Before the Law: Equality has remained one of the most controversial words in politics. For some equality seems to lack a place in Igbo cultural setting where women seem to be subjugated by men. *Prima facie*, this seems to hold true but on a closer look and examination the situation is not as it is presented. One is now left in a dilemma as to who subjugates who? But we must make the distinction between functional equality, ontological equality and equality before the law. Being *homo sapiens* all human beings are equal for the fact that they possess rationality which distinguishes man from other lower animals. But functionally all human beings are not equal. This was radically presented by Aristotle when he argued that some are born to be masters whereas others slaves. People are differently gifted. All fingers are not equal and can never be equal. Equality before the law applies to all. Nobody is above the law. In Igbo setting, not even the king is above the law.

Ezi-na-Ulo and Umunna: A Model for African Democracy

It is these values found in *ezi-na-ulo* and *umunna*, as have been x-rayed that made Izunwa conclude that ‘the democratic spirit is easily discernible in Igbo land through the forms of government which we find within her organization viz: the family (*ezi-na-ulo*), the compound (*obi*), the village (*obodo*)...’ etc. All political thinking

transcends individual domains into these vast conglomerates...¹¹This is a democracy that is authentically African. It is a democracy that is people-oriented and open to dialogue. It is participatory and consultative in its process of decision-making.

Western liberal democracy is faulted on its emphasis on aggregate of votes which overlooks the dichotomy that exists between the majority and the minority. One of the classic complaints against majority voting is the risk of 'majority tyranny'. There is a dire need to reconcile this dichotomy through dialogue and consensus. In multi-ethnic African states consultative democracy finds a way of somehow circumscribing the authority of majorities. Here voting is not the "be-all and end-all" to the legitimating of the decision. There is room for dialogue and consensus.

Consultative democracy calls for compromise (if not literal consensus), in place of overt conflict. There is bargaining, but its tone should be accommodative rather than adversarial. The political style is 'inclusionary' rather than 'exclusionary'. Representation becomes proportional rather than majoritarian. There is no doubt that consultation functions to generate inputs into the policy process. Consultative democracy may seem clumsy and at times the consultation itself may be toothless. Yet we notice that the toothless consultation just has exactly the same structure as the 'right to free speech' — which is something we ordinarily (and rightly) regard as absolutely central to democratic politics. The practice of rotational presidency in Nigeria is an example of an outcome of consultative democracy.

Conclusion

This paper has x-rayed the fundamental principles underlying the Igbo family. A hermeneutical analysis of *ezi-na-ulo* gives rise to a family characterized by dialogue, consensus, freedom and mutual understanding. A look at the metaphysics of the Igbo family shows that the Igbo family has tripartite membership: the living, the dead and the unborn. These interact, forming a web-like structure. This underscores the place of unity in Igbo family setting. There is unity in diversity. The above principles are essential characteristics of any stable and efficient society.

Some prominent African thinkers have as such tried to use the African valuable concept of extended family as basis for modern socio-political and economic theories and action. The family model is particularly noted for its compatibility with some fundamental, cultural and anthropological dispositions of Africans. One easily remembers Nyerere's philosophy of *Ujamaa*. In Okolo's book, *African Social and Political Philosophy*, one reads that Nyerere used the concept of *Ujamaa* (family) to outline the type of socialism he thought would be suitable for Africans. This suggests that the Igbo-African family can also serve as a model for authentic African democracy. Sequel to the community-oriented and elastic nature of Igbo family, a democracy that accrues from it necessarily becomes people-oriented. It is participatory and consultative in decision making.

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