
Modeling Ritual and Performance for Political Change: An Examination of Igu-Aro Ndi-Umueri in Anambra State

Mary Nkechi Okadigwe

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Abstract

This research studied the performance of *the Igu-Aro* ritual of the Umueri people of Anambra state to investigate its processes in terms of its viability as a model of active and positive social change. *Igu-Aro* is the Igbo annual communal festival of the prognostication of the year's events. The performance of *the Igu-Aro* of the Umueri people was perceived as an essential mechanism for transmitting the people's cultural identity and a route to collective participation in the structuring of fair leadership and a progressive economy. Victor Turner's ideologies on rituals, liminality, and social change were adopted for the research. The researcher believes that the understanding and integration of the insights gained from the transitory and collective nature of the performance of *Igu-Aro* Ndi-Umueri will be beneficial to the understanding of how the Nigerian political system could be bettered. This is because in recent times there seems to be an increasing clamour for the restructuring of the Nigerian political system with a major emphasis on the devolution of powers, duties, and responsibilities to component states. This study has provided insight into the Umueri people and their historical links with others within their common communities.

Keywords: Restructuring, Nigeria, Federalism, *Igu-Aro*, Ndi-Umueri, Leadership, and Devolving.

Introduction

***Igu-Aro* Ritual Processes as a Model for Political Structure**

Ritual has been a subject of continual preoccupation among scholars of the humanist bent as a phenomenon for ways it could be used to highlight aspects of the society from which it culminated. One approach to ritual has been to focus on the social dynamics of the processes and the type of transformation that it engenders. Many African traditional religions and rituals are founded on the bond of continuity between the living and their dead ancestors, who in some cultures return as masquerade performers to guide the living to ensure their peaceful coexistence. The complex web of human relationships is thus continuously renewed and restated during ritual festivals in Africa.

The *Igu-Aro festival* translates as the “festival of foretelling of the year’s events” is celebrated annually because it is the culmination of the year’s rites and activities. *Igu-Aro* is an aspect of the activities and ceremonies within the religious ritual year’s calendar of the Igbo people of South-East Nigeria. *Igu-Aro* ritual of the Umueri people of Anambra state of Nigeria is aimed at ensuring successes in the various affairs of the people. It is targeted at encouraging equity and fairness in the dealings among the people. The predictions of the particular year are consciously kept in mind and reminiscence through the year so those communal and individual goals are attained for the well-being and happy coexistence of the people. To this end, the peoples’ collective and individual goals are consciously kept in mind throughout the year. *Igu-Aro* processes are organized to ensure that power and duties are decentralized among the various chief priests heading the various sub-deities in Umueri. This rule of decentralization and

delegation of duties among the various subheads of the various kindred and deities are observed religiously as a violation of the decentralization of power and duties might obstruct anticipated results. That is to say that prognostications might be hindered. This might in turn attract the anger of the deities which will not only descend on the offenders but the entire community. The deity, *Aro* is said to be a benevolent and just deity, hence it will not be a partaker to any form of manipulation of the ritual process and structure intended to reawaken its presence during the ritual process.

Igu-Aro ritual festival of the Umueri people of Anambra-East local government area of South-East Nigeria is experienced communally. The processes are divided into seven stages. The ritual performance of each stage is headed by designated individuals whose responsibilities are to oversee the rituals that precede the *Igu-Aro* proper. The commonality of the ritual is made visible in the capability of the designated performers in performing their part of the preceding ritual with utmost dexterity. The acquired skills are furnished by the continuous collective and individual participation of the people in the ritual performance of *Igu-Aro* and other traditional religious activities in the community. Social values are thus expressed in the divinations, prognostications, and other activities encapsulated in the preceding ritual processes. The worldview, values, and beliefs of the Umueri people are thus recapitulated during the *Igu-Aro* ritual festival.

At this point, it would be necessary to note that the celebration of *Igu-Aro* festival was an injunction given to Umueri, the forefather of the present Umueri people by Nri people, his maternal relations. The Nri Kingdom is believed to be the ancient home of

the Igbo people. Onwuejeogwu recorded that “Chukwu, the supreme God sent Eri to Earth. Eri while on earth, fathered Nri, Ogbududu, Onogu, Onoja and Iguedo” (12). It is thus believed that most Igbo communities migrated from Nri. It was also gathered from an interview with Mr. Odikasigbue Nwasolu, *Ajie* the eleventh of Umueri (the chief priest of Aro) that Iguedo, the only daughter that Eri had was a skilled native doctor. Iguedo gave birth to Ogbunike, Awkuzu, Umueri, and Nando respectively. *Ajie* noted that at Iguedo’s death, none of her children except Umueri accepted to take her corpse back to Nri where her father Eri had settled as it is demanded by tradition. So for this honour done to an illustrious daughter, Nri people issued Umueri an *Ofo* (a symbol of authority). This singular act transferred to Umueri the rights due to a first child. The *Ofo* imbued Umueri with the right to dictate what happens among the children of Iguedo. It automatically made Umueri the head of Umu-Iguedo (Iguedo’s children). This *Ofo*, according to *Ajie* is called *Aro*, which denotes “year”. The issuance of *Ofo* also came with the injunction to organise an annual festival in honour of the *Ofo*. As a rule, every *Ofo* receives periodical sacrifices.

However, while the *ofo* symbolizing *Aro* receives periodic sacrifices offered by its chief priest, the *Ajie*; it publicly receives, an annual communal sacrifice offered by the entire community with the chief priest as a surrogate. To this end, the children of Iguedo and other communities in Igboland gather at Nneyi- Umueri annually to witness and celebrate the festival organized for the deity *Aro*.

The Deity, *Aro*

Aro is an *Alusi*, that is, a deity (a sub-god in the Igbo context) who acts on behalf of *Chukwu* the supreme God in the realm of the living, that is on earth. Onwuejeogwu avers that *Alusi* are invisible creatures of *Chukwu*. According to him, “They are considered to be the supernatural beings and, or forces that are the authors of good and evil. They manipulate the hidden laws made by *Chukwu* to produce good and evil, which they shower on the visible world of men” (22).

The 1005th *Igu-Aro Ndi-Igbo 2004 AD: A Programme* also has it that, “*Aro* is one of the *Alusi* distinguished in *Nri*”. (4) But while the *Aro* in *Nri* community has an annual festival organized for it, in which *Eze Nri*, the regent of *Agukwu-Nri* kingdom proclaims the New Year, that is the Igbo lunar calendar year; the *Aro* in *Umueri* has a festival organized annually for it in which the chief priest, *Ajie* prognosticates events of the New Year. *Osiberoha Osibe* during the celebration of *Igu-Aro Nri* in the year 2020, observes that “...stakeholders in Igbo worldwide and cultural renaissance gathered at the palace of His Royal Majesty, *Ezenri Obidiegwu Onyesoh*, the *Nri Enwerelani II*, in *Agukwu-Nri* to witness the *Iguaro Festival*...The proclamation of Igbo lunar calendar by *Ezenri*” (np). So while *Igu-Aro* in *Nri* is marked by *Eze-Nri*’s proclamation of the Igbo New Year; what is done in *Umueri* is marked by *Ajie*’s prognostication of the year’s events. *Umueri* people believe that *Aro* reveals the secrets of the invisible and visible to *Ajie*. *Aro* also sends different types of rewards and revenge to men. It dispenses justice through oath-taking. The chief priest of *Aro* in an interview related that *Aro* strikes the guilty. The oaths are administered by *Ajie* in the presence of the elders whose

duty it is to settle disputes. Supernatural sanction is thus a constant concern of all the people of Umueri. Possible retribution by the intervention of the unrelenting god is part of the peoples' consciousness. The people believe that death and affliction from serious illness are all possible retributions for offenses against the gods and, or against humans. However, is not only against individual offenders but extends to families and clans of the offender. The weight of the retribution however depends on a misdemeanor. So every Umueri person has responsibility both towards himself/herself, the dependent offspring, kindred, and the community as a whole.

As a religious service, the *Igu-Aro* ritual is a dynamic process that is intimately connected with social life. The festival entails among other acts, the performance of ritual worship which serves as a medium of communication between the people and the deity, *Aro*. The *Igu-Aro* ritual processes and the predictions thus appear to embody the values expected of the members of the Umueri community. Analogically, the Nigerian political structure is assumed to have been developed from the contents of the national constitution. Nigerian political structure is therefore identified as a federal system of government. However, Obaze Oseloka notes that "Nigeria's federalism remains so only in name." (n.p.) It appears thus that the political system practiced in Nigeria facilitates the alienation of the mass of its citizens and the component states. Mass of the citizens and the ethnic groups thus feel aggrieved and marginalized. Hence, there have been discourses on the need for the Nigerian political system to be restructured along the line of true federalism in which powers would be devolved to component states.

The Concept of Restructuring in Nigeria

The ongoing debate on the restructuring of the Nigerian socio-political system appears to have attracted more discussants in recent times. While some Nigerians have increasingly clamoured for the restructuring of the country's political system, others have joined the very crucial conversation to foreground the necessity of restructuring the existing political system of the country. The advocates of restructuring in Nigeria believe that restructuring is the only viable means through which the country could redeem itself from the economic, political, security, and social turmoil which have been besieging the country for decades. Proclaiming his confidence in the viability of restructuring in national development, Azubuike Emeka posits that "With the restructuring debate entering Nigeria's political discourse and engagement after a recession, there is no doubt that it will form the basis of sustained growth, wealth and prosperity" (n.p). According to Clifford Ndujihe, Dapo Akinrefo, and Charles Kumolu, was given vent by the then Head of State, General Ibrahim Babangida, Former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, and some democratic activists who have bemoaned the current centralization of powers in the Nigerian federal political system. According to Ndujihe, Akinrefo, and Kumolu, the adherents of restructuring in Nigeria believe that more powers and responsibilities should be devolved to component states, while the Federal Government should be vested with the responsibility of overseeing the country's foreign policy, defense, and economy only. Vanguard Newspaper quoted Former Vice President Atiku Abubakar thus:

There is no doubt that many of our states are not viable... We have to find creative ways to make them viable in a

changed federal system...we must devolve more powers and resources from the federal government and de-emphasise federal allocations as the source of sustenance of state. (n.p.)

What then is the concept of restructuring the Nigerian federal system? Akin Osuntokun throws light on what restructuring means to Nigerians. According to him:

Restructuring is simply a call for the restoration of federalism- the foundational constitution structure to which all Nigerians subscribed as encapsulated in the independence constitution of 1960. This constitution was violated in 1966...The violation has concomitantly resulted in the unitary command culture of military dictatorship –in the constitutionally prescribed decentralization and devolution of powers have been subverted and supplanted with centralization of power (n.p.).

To Dukor Maduabuchi however, the concept of restructuring in Nigeria is an ambiguous one, hence it is subjective. Although he agrees that “From an inter-subjective agreement it is all about the political and economic direction in which Nigeria should go” (n.p.) He is however concerned with a clear definition of the concept and mode of restructuring in Nigeria. Thus he reiterates that “Before restructuring, there must be an agreement among the nationalities to co-exist without hatred and rancor and with a sense of commonality and shared destiny” (n.p.) To this end, Obaze avers that the gnawing fear that equates restructuring with the break-up of Nigeria is unfounded and a defeatist notion. He insists that “Nigeria has been restructured several times, without negative consequences” (n.p.) While Maduabuchi suggests that restructuring should be geared towards addressing inadequacies and inequalities. (n.p.) Azubuike, therefore, posits that “The

restructuring Nigeria needs is a federalism that is both political and economic.” (n.p.) He reiterates that:

Nigeria, today does not run a truly federal government and this has been proven with the federal police, power issues and compulsion to connect to the national grid, education, agriculture, mineral resources which the states cannot mine, and other areas contained in the Exclusive Legislative List. (n.p.) Elucidating further on what restructuring means to Nigeria, Obaze notes that “The present demand is to make the Nigerian entity and its integral parts, more functional and above all, more equitable” (n.p.)

The desire to join the ongoing conversation on restructuring in Nigeria to proffer a viable solution directs the researcher’s attention to the viability of traditional African performance as an identity formation, a law-making, and a valuable tool for overcoming unfavourable social issues. The concern of this research is therefore to investigate the nature and viability of *the Igu-Aro* festival of Umueri people as a ritual performance geared towards the enactment of the peoples’ history and identity, and the preservation of their culture and oneness. Believing that there is no dichotomy between *Igu-Aro* ritual performance and theatre, this research explored some of the elements inherent in drama and ritual that could essentially facilitate an understanding of the essence of *Igu-Aro* to the people of Umueri.

The Igu-Aro Ritual Processes

Umueri people of Anambra state regularly perform rituals for the maintenance of well-being, harmonious coexistence of the people, and the propitiation of the gods. *Igu-Aro* annual communal ritual as a traditional ceremony is primarily a collective experience. It is

the culmination of the annual rites of the people. Hence it has so many rites preceding it. The preceding rites are variously presided over by numerous family heads and those heading the various sub-deities found in Umueri. So in its entirety, *Igu-Aro* ritual performance is devolved among families and kin.

To appreciate the extent of decentralization of the *Igu-Aro* ritual, we shall illustrate the decentralization of the festival with what this research terms the “*Igu-Aro* Cycle”. The *Igu-Aro* ritual cycle comprises the five ceremonies within the religious ritual year, *Igu-Aro* being the fifth of these ceremonies. The discussion of the *Igu-Aro* ritual cycle would buttress our earlier claim that *the Igu-Aro* festival has multi-dimensional activities which are decentralized among the various sub deities chief priests in Umueri. The four rituals preceding *Igu-Aro* are sort of rehearsals, while *Igu-Aro* has specific rituals and entertaining activities marked for it. The dichotomy between *Igu-Aro* and the preceding rituals lies in the fact that *the Igu-Aro* ritual evokes communal consciousness. In the sense that every member of the Umueri community is directly or indirectly involved in the *Igu-Aro* celebration. The people are aware of the procedures, time, and various activities that are contained in the celebration. Every indigene of Umueri including those in the diaspora is curious to know the predictions of the god as previous predictions have served to guide them well. We shall at this point, take these ceremonies one after the other as they come in the order of performance.

***Ilo-Ikenga* (pre-farming ceremony):** This is done in *Onwa-ito*, which is the third month in the Igbo native year (between March and April). It is expected that every male who practices the traditional religion should have an *Ikenga*, which is an effigy

symbolizing his guardian angel which is termed *chi* in the Igbo language. The *ilo-ikenga* entails the veneration of all the *ikenga* in a particular family by the males. The effigies are brought out and placed at the *obu*. That is at the centre of the family compound. Then a machete and a hoe are placed in front of each *Ikenga*. A cock is then slaughtered and its blood is sprinkled on the *Ikenga*. Each *Ikenga* must have a cock sacrificed for it. This is aimed at ensuring and aiding successful farming and bumper harvest during the next farming season.

Ilo-Opoto: This ceremony comes up at *Onwa-Ino*, which is the fourth lunar month. It is observed to mark the resting period before the next farming season. It is exclusively observed and celebrated for women. During the ceremony, *ako* (corn pudding) is cooked and distributed to the families' friends and well-wishers by each mother in a family. It is done to mark friendship among the various families. Newly married men are expected to pay tribute to their in-laws with gifts of yam, palm oil, live fresh-water fish among other edible items.

Ilo-Mmou: This is the third of the ceremonies preceding the *Igu-Aro* festival. It is Umueri's variance of the popular *Iwa-Ji* festival celebrated by most Igbo communities. That is, "yam-slicing" or New-yam festival as it is popularly called. The *Aro* chief priest standing as the peoples' surrogate, ushers in the ceremony by dedicating newly harvested yam to the deity, *Aro*. It is only after he offers new yam to *Aro* that anyone could perform the *ilo-mmou* rite in their various homes. The *ilo-mmou* ritual is aimed at venerating the ancestors. So it is only men whose fathers are late that could

perform the ritual. However, for one to be entitled to perform this rite, the period of his father's demise must not be less than one year. Only fathers who have lasted up to one year in the world of the dead are entitled to this veneration by their living children. The first male child of each family is saddled with the onus to the ritual on behalf of the entire family. The first son of each family performs the rite by offering pounded yam and *nsala* soup prepared with fowl or goat depending on his economic strength to his late father and his ancestors. Firstly, the fowl is slaughtered and the blood sprinkled on the effigy. The fowl is then used to cook *nsala* soup. The newly harvested yam is cooked and pounded. The portion of the pounded yam is molded into balls, dipped into the soup, and placed on top of the effigy which symbolizes his father. It is only after his father has eaten that the members of the family could eat from the remaining portion of the food and meat. It is important to note that it is the *Ajie* and the elders of the community that are saddled with the duty of fixing a date for this ceremony. It is also only after the ritual performance of *ilo-mmou* that the people become free to eat from the fresh produce from their harvest.

Igba-ngba: This ceremony comes up at *onwa-isa*, which is the seventh lunar month. It is the wrestling competition ceremony. On the day of the competition, every male child born in the seventh lunar month is brought to *Ama-Obi-Elo* (village square) to wrestle with one of his "birth-month" mates. This research gathers that in the olden days, only the winner was paid a tribute. But these days, the gifts of money are given to both the winners and the losers as well. This is done only to solidify the love and commonality shared by the people.

Igu-Aro: This ceremony comes up at *Onwa-ili* (tenth lunar month). That is the last month of the Igbo native calendar year. It is at *Igu-Aro* that the gods convey the events of the New Year to the people through the chief priest. The ritual has a hint of tragedy in the sense that the *Ajie* has a confrontation with the forces that exist within the spiritual realm. He is transformed and thus loses his individuality. He passes through what could be likened to the liminal phases as conceived by Victor Turner.

The communal nature of *Igu-Aro* essentially binds the entire members of the Umueri community together. No Umueri person detaches himself entirely from the celebration of *the Igu-Aro* ritual festival. Although some indigenes of Umueri have renounced any association with the ancestral gods, there is still the tendency from the whole indigenes (traditionalist and Christians alike) to believe the predictions from *Aro*. Those who have identified with the Christian God, desist from attending the performance. But since it appears that no family in Umueri has entirely been rid of the traditional religious worship, members of each family who still go by the peoples' traditional religion usually do well to convey the prognostications of *Aro* to the Christian members of their family who would not attend because of their Christian affiliation. Although the Christian members of Umueri might endeavour by their own will to stay away from practices that have a link with *Alusi* (deity), most of them are still curious to know *Aro's* predictions for the year.

Performance and Social Realities

Victor Turner and influential anthropologist applied much of his works to performance. Krasner notes that Turner examined the patterns of society through their ritual. Hence, he insists that theory must answer to social reality (448). Turner thus argues that the relationship between the mundane everyday socio-cultural processes found in societies and cultural performances are unidirectional and “positive”- in the sense that the performative genre merely “reflects” or “expresses” the social system or the cultural configuration, or their key relationships (449). He is therefore of the opinion that the relationship between performances and society is reciprocal and reflexive. That is to say, that the performance is usually a veiled or an unveiled critique of the social life structure that gave rise to it. To Turner, performance is an evaluation of the way society handles history. So performance could be an embodiment of the rejection of not only socio-cultural processes but also a rejection of unfavourable political or social processes.

Turner’s usage of the term “liminality has in recent times been broadened to describe political and cultural changes as well. Krasner posits that Turner conceives liminality as “... how a society uses space to evolve through rites of passage” (448). The relevance of the theory points to the fact that at the point of any kind of liminality, social hierarchies may be reversed or temporarily dissolved. Continuity of tradition thus becomes uncertain and future outcomes that were once taken for granted may be thrown into doubt. The dissolution of order during liminality creates a fluid, malleable situation that enables new institutions and laws to be established. The period of liminality could therefore be described as a period of conflict which Soyinka

termed “chthonic”. Soyinka notes that the goal of the chthonic is to enforce a harmonious resolution for the well-being of the community. (37) The night preceding the *Igu-Aro* chief priest’s prognostication is in like manner, a period of liminality which could result in the dissolution of the existing order. On the eve of *Igu-Aro* prognostication, the chief priest embarks on a risky journey into the sacred forest of the deity, *Aro* so that the deity will reveal to him the events of the year. He is expected to return at dawn if he succeeds in his quest. So while the safe and successful sojourn of the chief priest from the world of the living to that of the spirits and back to the that of the living; indicates the continuity of the existing order, an unsuccessful sojourn or disrupted transition of the chief priest may bring about the reversal or dissolution of some of the existing positions held by the spiritual heads of the community. *Igu-Aro* ritual as presented here is seen as an embodiment of the rejection of socio-political ills. It bears instructions and rules which must be adhered to for peaceful and progressive coexistence of the people.

The igu-Aro ritual performance gives explicit guidance on what should be done and what should be avoided. The *Igu-Aro* ritual is performed to invoke the deity so that it may benevolently reveal the happenings and events of the specific year that appear naturally unpredictable. Through these revelations, the vision of the community and the well-being of its people are foregrounded in the dealings of the various heads and leaders of the people in an attempt to pervert the seemingly negative predictions and to facilitate the ones that appear to be positive. So the predictions of a particular year become somewhat law or guide for the people during the year.

Conclusion

Presently, Nigeria as a country could be said to be transiting through a liminal stage in which its people have been languishing in distressing economic hardships and insecurity with its attendant lack of basic social amenities and loss of lives and properties. In Turner's conception of liminality, the present disorientation of security and economic hardship plaguing the country can be said to be the manifestations of an unfavourable political structure and its assertions. Thus Nigeria of today that has been ravaged by economic hardship and insecurity could be seen as the country's indirect clamour for a more viable structure.

Modeling the *Igu-Aro* performance of the Umueri people focuses on the commonality and flexibility of the ritual processes of the *Igu-Aro* festival. This research does not suggest the jettisoning of the established socio-political structure of the Nigerian political space, but an integration of the insights gained from the study of *Igu-Aro* ritual performance, particularly in its decentralization of responsibilities and power. In other words, the researcher agrees with Victor Turner's conception of "changing socio-symbolic fields rather than static structure".

Igu-Aro ritual has been shown to culminate from the various pre-ritual performances which are traditionally devolved among the chief-priests of sub-deities that exist within the community, kin, and families. The decentralized structure of the ritual processes ensures that the *Ajie*, that is the *Aro* chief-priest focuses on the few rituals within the purview of the diety's prognostication of the year's events without bothering himself with

other rituals within the *Igu-Aro* cycle. Decentralization of the ritual processes ensures accuracy of the predictions and in turn harmonious coexistence of the people.

The performance of *Igu-Aro* Ndi-Umueri is thus perceived as an essential mechanism for transmitting the people's cultural identity and a route to collective participation in the structuring of fair leadership and a progressive economy. The researcher believes that the understanding and integration of the insights gained from the devolving nature of the performance of *Igu-Aro* Ndi-Umueri will be beneficial to the understanding of how the Nigerian political system could be bettered. This research perceives that with restructuring, the development will be spread across the states of the country. Governance, economy, and security will be more viable as natives who understand their environment would take responsibility to ensure that their states are progressive and safe. So this research recommends that the Nigerian federal government should borrow a leaf from the *Igu-Aro* ritual process of the Umueri people of Anambra state and devolve more powers and responsibilities to its component states. Therefore, the Federal Government should focus on overseeing the country's foreign policy, defense, and economy only as this will facilitate all-round development and peaceful coexistence of the various ethnicities of Nigeria.

Mary Nkechi Okadigwe, PhD is of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State

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