

POWERS AND ROLES OF INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AFIKPO

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Abstract

Abundant in colonialist and imperialist literature awash with racism is the view that the traditional African-Igbo society had no ethical or moral principles. That was why Basden (1983) categorically maintained that the word morality had no significance in the Igbo vocabulary and that the Igbos are not patters of morality. Lord Lugard on his part, and in the same vein, is said to have referred to the people of Southern part of Nigeria as those with no ethics and no principles of conduct. In order to debunk these Eurocentric views this paper highlights how indigenous institutions settle conflicts amongst individuals and groups in Afikpo an Igbo community in the South-East. The Afikpo model of conflict resolution has been recognized as an alternative system of justice in South-East Nigeria. The model is rooted in cultural tradition. Indigenous social and political institutions as channels for conflict resolution are emphasized. The model has been widely recognized by the state and non state actors especially those who are in the business of conflict management. The paper also emphasized that indigenous institutions have power in resolving conflicts in Afikpo. The findings of this study is that the model is victim-centered, victims, offenders and their relations, and the entire community, are involved in defining harm and repair. The paper adopted primary and secondary research methods. The paper recommends that Afikpo model should be studied by government and private organizations who are involved in conflict resolution and adopt the relevant aspects in resolving conflicts in this present world.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Indigenous, Traditional, Political Institutions.

Introduction

It is a common knowledge among western scholars that Africans are far behind the Europeans. They see the Africans as stateless, uncivilized, ungovernable, because Africa was not part of the state system which is generally regarded to have been born in 1648 with the peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War in Europe. The European powers in their wisdom decided to move into the dark continent and give them civilization and political administration. This development propels us to take a look at Powers and Roles of Indigenous Institutions in Conflict Resolution in Afikpo. This study established how informed Afikpo people are in the area of human rights, politics and conflict management. In this decentralized

Igbo society, day to day life is well ordered as it is in centralized societies including the states of Europe.

Afikpo, like other African Igbo societies developed a well-defined system of political and social control. The British colonial administrators were not able to discern this and other aspects of African, democratic socio-political practices. The colonial authorities assumed that African Igbo and their neighbours had remained as such a low level of civilization which made impossible for them to develop any form of government which could maintain the modicum of law and order required for sustainable development. The British also developed the attitude that the Igbos could not govern themselves and the distribution of power in the indigenous political system (Afigbo 1980, 416).

Afikpo people resisted colonial rule and the British political and judicial institutions and that is the reason traditional conflict management survived till date. The study highlights the processes and principles of justice making and the rights of the citizens. The egalitarian nature of African-Igbos made it possible for them to accept changes. The Afikpo indigenous institutions of social control have been playing key roles as agents of socialization and have been managing crisis by moderately solving problems or cases between the weak and the strong, the poor and the rich. Through this indigenous mechanism wounds are healed and peace restored (Elechi 1999, 2). The Afikpo type of conflict management is widely recognized even law courts give recognition to its rulings.

The most important thing is that Afikpo people both educated and illiterates from different social and religion background are at peace with this indigenous institutions of conflict resolution. The Afikpo type of conflict resolution has been playing a complementary role to modern institutions of conflict resolution such as the police force, court, human right commission which Nigerian government inherited from the western imperialists. The Afikpo indigenous conflict resolution mechanism is unique. Most of the traditional institution that play the major roles may not be found in other parts of Igboland. The work highlights how Afikpo people do justice without the state.

Historical Origin of the People of Afikpo

Afikpo is located in Southern part of the present Ebonyi State, Nigeria. there was an early group to settle at Afikpo, these were the Egu and the Nkalu (Aja 2005, 102). Oral tradition establish that the Egu were the first settlers in Afikpo, followed by the Nkalu. The Egu inhabited the area long time ago. They were wonderful people highly talented and skilled in handcraft, smiting and farming. Similarly, the Nkalu were skilled farmers and great warriors. It is said that the Nkalu people brought yam to Afikpo.

The history of Afikpo has involved the movement into the area over the past centuries of various peoples, mainly Igbo-speaking people. This has resulted in a rather complicated organizational structure in the village-group, including double descent and considerable variations in rituals among different section (Chen 1980, 44). According to oral sources and written records, the Igbo-speaking people that migrated to Afikpo from different directions include: Arochukwu, Okigwe, Uturu, Okposi, Ohafia, Isuochi and Amaigbo-Orlu. R.A. Aja stated that “beginning from the periods of the slave in south eastern Nigeria, between 1700 and 1830, there was a gradual movement of Igbo groups from Arochukwu, Ohafia, Okposi and Okigwe areas into Afikpo and Edda” (Aja 2005, 103). The leader of these groups that arrived after the Egus and Nkalus was Omaka Ejali, he arrived earlier and played host to others on their arrival.

African-Igbo Concept of Human Rights

In the present world you cannot do anything without considering the rights of the people. The democracy that the United States of America is preaching across the globe is centered on human rights that is treating all man equal. In Afikpo and in Igbo land generally the rights of the citizens are respected. It has been an old practice before the advent of European in Africa. The conflict resolution in Afikpo cannot be achieved without considering the rights of individuals. The same thing is obtainable in other parts of African-Igbo society.

This paper will at this point correct the impression the West has created that Africans have no respect for human right or know nothing about human right and that is the reason Africa was not represented in the historic event that took place on December 10, 1948. Three years after the World War II, appalled by the holocaust, the genocide against the Jews the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in France and proclaimed it “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations” (Okoro 2015, 6). It marked a watershed in the annals of world history in the struggle against human rights abuses and violations, a point against authoritarianism, dictatorship, state terrorism, oppression and intimidation. It was packaged to stop man’s inhuman treatment to fellow man.

In her statement on the occasion of the adoption, the chairperson of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt declared thus: “we stand today at the threshold of a great event both in the life of the United Nations and in the life mankind” (Okoro 2015, 7). The 18 delegates that made up the commission were picked across all races with exception of Black or Africa. The Chinese delegate felt that the document should include the philosophy of Confucius; a catholic commission member fought very hard to make sure that the teachings of Thomas Aquinas is accommodated in the document; the U.S. delegate fought tooth and nail for the commission to adopt American Bill of Rights as part of the document; the Soviet pursued the ideas of Karl Marx – these were few of the opinions presented in the great commission. Unfortunately Africa was not represented. The rich heritage of Africa, the motherland of humanity, the cradle of civilization was suppressed in racial hatred and bigotry. In the words of P.O. Okoro: “we call the Declaration a long unfinished for the Declaration remains an on-going job until the virtues of African culture is given expression and force in it’ (Okoro 2015, 7).

In any case, our interest here is to establish that Africans including Igbos have their own concept of human right. Recall that human rights are trans-cultural. Meaning that the existence and practice of human rights are not confined to any one culture. They exist in all cultures. This is what we understand as universality of human rights. In Igbo land particularly Afikpo human rights are given adequate consideration in conflict resolution.

Human rights have an inherent dual nature-moral and legal in every culture. According to P. O. Okoro, moral comes first before legal, that is you must be moral before being legal. Supporting the view of the primacy of morals over law in relation to rights, Okoro states thus:

Moral is dealing with the question of what is right and good, what is wrong and evil in human conduct. It is from this moral sense (consciousness) that customs, rules, laws, traditions and taboos of the society are formed. In other words, it is not the ‘custom and tradition’ that pre-exist ‘moral’, rather it is from the

moral vision of a people that customs are couched (Okoro 2015, 15).

Rights are moral because it is condemnable when they are denied. A denial of rights also engenders a feeling of revulsion, particularly when it touches directly on life. Denial of rights is only tolerable under the rule of law and due process. Otherwise, it is morally reprehensible to violate, abuse or deny rights. It is therefore inherently evil to deny anyone his or her rights or abuse or violate their rights and it is recognized as such in all cultures.

Also, rights are legal entitlements because their denials, abuse or violations are issues of adjudication and the establishment of violation, abuse or denial goes with reward or punishment as the case may be. There are equally sanctions and prohibitions in every culture as pertains to rights. It therefore means that every legal system of a people provides remedy for the violation, abuse or denial of human rights. This does not presume the justiciability of all human rights in all states, a phenomenon peculiar to the practice of human rights in societies influenced by liberalism such as the western societies and western influenced polities as seen in the human rights movement which started in Western Europe and spread to United States of America. Thus, it must be borne in mind at this point that the Igbo society had no room for such differentiation in human rights practice as a result of her culture. In other words, it is culturally home to Africa that human rights are indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, and so, to distinguish between moral and legal rights is an aberration introduced by colonialism into the Igbo worldview that had a holistic view of human rights as interrelated and interdependent.

The above analyses come under the background that human rights are those rights inherent in our nature and without which we cannot function as human beings (Okoro 2015, 16). Viewed from socio-economic perspective, they are those conditions of social life without which no man can seek in general to be himself at his best (Appadorai 1975, 77). Therefore, human rights are inherent in and at the same time inalienable from the nature of the humanness of the individual. It operates on the inherent equality in dignity of all human beings. Also applies to all human beings on those bases. Therefore, it is universal in application, without regard to culture, colour, religion and ideology. It is life and best expressed in living.

Human rights are those rights that every human being is entitled to enjoy simply by the virtue of being human. That is why the Igbos pay serious attention to the rights of the citizens. In Afikpo the rights of the people are highly recognized and respected and they play significant role and also influence the way and manner conflicts are being resolved by indigenous institutions. This has been the situation before the coming of Europeans. Human rights were not given to Afikpo people or the Igbos at large. Before United Nations made the first declaration on human rights in 1948 and the World Conference on Human Right held in Vienna, Austria, on June 25, 1993, our people had been practicing human rights in all aspects of life. That is why the researcher highlighted human rights before touching the main subject matter.

Indigenous Institutions and Conflict Resolution in Afikpo

Many traditional institutions participate in conflict resolution in Afikpo community. It does not cost anything to settle dispute or conflict in Afikpo. But in some cases money is required from both parties, for, example when land is involved in a case, those settling the matter must inspect the land. The inspection attracts some cost. Disputes receive urgent treatment and quick resolution. Findings and judgments of the indigenous institutions are

honored and recognized in some situation a matter goes beyond the traditional level to more formal institutions such as police or court of law. The indigenous institutions apply mediative approach based on the fact that their primary objective is to restore peace and well-being within the society (Elechi, 1999) also, at the highest level or authority of indigenous institutions of conflict resolution in Afikpo, cases are handled with dispatch. These institutions refer some cases to primary groupings before handling them. In the words of O. O. Elechi "In some cases, these bodies insist that matters before them first pass through the primary groupings mediation forum. They will rather handle a case only after the primary groupings failed to resolve them". He further emphasized that, "unless they are serious conflicts, violations against the land, or conflicts that are classified as abomination". At this point cases are settled and fines and other punishment such as sanctions are imposed on those found guilty. In settling dispute in Afikpo, the participatory, consensus and restorative principles in conflict resolution are adopted. Like we stated earlier in this work the rights of the citizens of Afikpo community like in other African Igbo communities are given adequate consideration. Major indigenous institutions of conflict resolution in Afikpo would be discussed here.

The Age-grade System

The most important and prominent indigenous social and political institution in Afikpo community is age grade system. The age grade system is well pronounced in other Igbo societies such as Abriba, Ohafia, Edda, Amasiri, etc. Major social and political activities are organized through the age grade system. The age grade is a main channel for conflict settlement and enforcement of obedience to native laws and social norms. Age grade system operates on a principle that group together people that fall within the same age bracket, people born almost at three-year intervals, beginning at the ward level. Various villages have their own wards and age groupings. Each village age grouping identify and collaborate with other age groupings in other villages to form a formidable force that would play the roles that impact the entire community group. Ottenberg (1971, 67) stated thus: "the age-set arrangements permeate Afikpo life. Age ranking is of considerable significance, as can be seen most clearly in the deferential behaviour of members of younger sets toward those older ones, and in the rewards to the senior ones of food, drink, and money in various ceremonies". Greater percentage of all Afikpo adults participate in the age grade system. Hardly should any social and political function be exercised in Afikpo without the age grade. Recall that the Afikpo political republican system cannot be carried out without the age grade system. Assignments, tasks, duties are classified, distributed and executed through age grade system.

Age grade system originated in the past, it is believed to be as old as Igbo people and culture. Age grade system is to some extent secular in nature but there are rituals attached to the system. Though, age grade system has no shrine or cult house like other social institutions in Afikpo which are connected to religious practice and ritual. There are no shrines that would connect the age grade system with the past tradition, and no history of common origin (Ottenberg 1971, 52).

Age grade system involves all descent and class lines. As Ottenberg (1971, 52) postulates, "ascribed status at Afikpo is mainly based on the principles of organization by descent and age: these two features create the groundwork of village life". Social class division and consciousness is not given much recognition in Afikpo society, this is as a result of age grade that brings together men of different socio-economic status. The only social division recognized in Afikpo society is the one that has to do with age. As a matter of fact

gender and wealth play significant role in the community but hardly can wealth give any man political power in Afikpo society. Leadership in Afikpo is through age groupings. This practice is widely recognized in African-Igbo society. Uchendu (1965, 85) notes, "In one context, the distinction between child and adult superficially overrides other status considerations in Igbo society. An Igbo child remains a child, no matter what his other status distinctions are. His senior who is less distinguished socially loses no time in reminding him of his age".

Age groupings formally starts from 17 to 20 years. This set is the most junior, and their primary assignment involves keeping the villages clean and forcing citizens to respect one another in their social relationship. In the words of Ottenberg (1971, 52), "there are usually between fifteen and twenty age sets in the community, each one covering a span of approximately three years". Although, registration of age grade members start from thirty years of age and a name is adopted and as long as the members of the age set live on planet earth, they shall be known with the name. Their functions within the community change with the age. That is as the members advance in age their function or role change also.

The underlisted are the hierarchical order of age grade system in Afikpo community:

- i. the junior elders consist of men between the ages of fifties and early sixties recognized as "Ekpuké Eto" age grades.
- ii. the middle and senior sub-grade falls within the age bracket of those in their mid sixties and beyond and they are recognized as the "Ekpuké Essa" age grade.

The traditional government of Afikpo community is constituted by the "Ekpuké Eto" and "Ekpuké Esa" age grades. They are the authority in Afikpo society. The "Ekpuké Etos" in particular play executive roles and also they mobilize the junior age grades in security, labour, sanitation matters. They also oversee the execution of projects in the community.

The women engage in social and political activities in Afikpo but operate separately from their male folks. Women have their own age grades but they are limited to married women, widows, and divorces. Most times they collaborate with the male age grades to execute community projects such as hospitals, schools, roads and bridges.

Members of age grade enjoy some social benefits. As an agrarian community, the people depend to a large extent on the labour of the age grade members. Housing projects were carried out through cooperative efforts packaged by active age grades. Also age grades assist their members to bury their dead parents or family members.

Another benefit enjoyed by members of age grades is loan facility. When a member of an age grade run into financial difficulty the age grade rescues such person by giving loan with low interest. For instance, when a member could not pay hospital bills of a family member or unable to pay school fees of a ward, or could not fund a business, such member could run to the age grade he belong and request for loan.

The Duties of Age Grades

In Afikpo society the age grades from ancient time have authority to carry out several functions the same as emir or oba has in a centralized society. They have powers to run all social political activities in the community. Before the coming of the colonial imperialists, the

age grades played the role of the reserve army of the state, ready to be sent to battle field in times of conflict, dispute or war with other communities. In the contemporary times, the age grades function as local police for the indigenous authority or government. The age grades collect fines and compel the citizens to obey the laws of the land. They collectively or jointly construct and maintain the market buildings, schools, indigenous “Ogo” cult buildings, hospitals, town hall, borehole, farm and market paths, etc. Also the age grades instill discipline into their members and the society in general. They take upon themselves to make sure that the human rights of the citizens are respected in the community. The age grades do not tolerate bad behaviours, they frown at drug abuse, they punish members for drunkenness. The age grades also settle conflicts within their membership and outside.

The Role of the Age Grade in Conflict Resolution

Afikpo is double-lineal society, that is a man or woman in Afikpo is attached to patrilineal “umunna” or “umudi” and matrilineal “ikwu” families. Patrilineage is the extended family with linkage to the father while matrilineage is extended family with linkage to the mother. When it comes to problem solving or settlement of conflict age grades play vital roles because age grades are highly recognized and respected at compound, village and town levels. Even matters that should be treated within patrilineal or matrilineal level the age grades manage the situation. It is important to recall that the age grade groupings play administrative, judicial and religious roles but our interest falls within the judiciary because conflict resolution is within the framework of judiciary.

“Ekpuke Essa” age grade is the highest traditional decision making body in Afikpo. All the members are men. The “eto” age grade system is the second highest traditional law making and dispute or conflict settlement body in Afikpo (Egwu 2020, 1191). Land dispute is a daily occurrence in Afikpo, the people are always quarrelling over farm land or over building sites. In this case of land matter the “essa” age grade members have the exclusive right of handling and resolving the conflict arising over land. The “eto” age grade members are not permitted under Afikpo traditional law to handle land matters at compound, village and town level. But cases of stealing, debt, fighting, indiscipline, assault, etc. members of “eto” age grade and other junior age grades could handle such.

When any of these age grade settle any case between conflicting parties, any party that is not satisfied with the verdict can appeal to a high body. That is when a party is not satisfied with the ruling of the age grades at compound level or village the party can appeal to the “Essa” at the town level or village level as the case may be or even take the matter to police or court. The Age grades do not force anybody or party to accept their verdict or judgement. When the researcher asked Ichie Eluu Azu Ewa, a senior member of “essa” age grade, whether it is mandatory for the parties in a conflict or case to accept the resolution of the age grades in traditional council in response to the question he said that “any person or persons who are not comfortable with the ruling of the “etos” or the “essas” can take the matter to police or courts.

The Role Matrilineal Groupings Play in Conflict Resolution

There is no true born of Afikpo community that does not belong to one matrilineal group. There are many matrilineal groups in Afikpo, some of them are “Ibe Udu”, “Ibe Ezeke”, “Ibe Uri”, “Ibe Ogbagi”, “Ibe Anuma”, “Imete”, “Ibe Awo”, etc. There are about thirty-five matrilineal clans “ikwu” that are officially recognized in Afikpo (Ottenberg 1971, 18). A group can trace their “ikwu” descent to between four and seven generations. One group can number up to one thousand persons and above. The members of matrilineal groupings do not settle in one area or location as in the case of patrilineal groupings, they live in different parts of the community and beyond. A man or woman from Afikpo could trace his or her matrilineal relation to Nkporo, Ohafia, Edda, Abriba, Amasiri, Unwana, Akpoha and Oziza.

The matrilineal grouping recognize one another through uterine ancestry “nhileho”. This is represented by eathen pot shrine known as “nja” always kept in the compound or house of the oldest male member of the group (Elechi 1999, 193). When a particular matrilineal group notices that something is wrong within their group, that is calamity or disaster of frequent death, bareness, etc. the elders of that group consult a juju priest native doctor who profers solution by directing them on the kind of sacrifice they should make to the gods.

It is important to recall that land is the major source of power matrilineal groupings have, therefore, the quantity of land a group has determines how powerful that group is in the community. Because of the importance of land the world over, land dispute is always arising amongst members and it behoove the elders to settle the dispute. The oldest male of these matrilineal groupings have so much power and authority because they control farm land. In the words of Simon Ottenberg, “matrilineal descent plays a significant role in Afikpo, where some 85 percent of the land is controlled by uterine groups, as well as some stream areas and groves” (Ottenberg 1971, 17). The heads of these matrilineal grouping must be tactful and diplomatic in handling the affairs of their members especially the judicial matters (Ottenberg 1971, 20). The heads or leaders of these groups are expected to be objective in resolving conflicts that arise concerning land matters and other issues that require settlement. Though other elders of the group are always there before cases are resolved.

The Role of Patrilineage Grouping in Resolving Conflicts

Patrilineage “Umunna”/ “Umudi” grouping is well recognized in Afikpo likewise in other parts of Igbo-land. The members live in one compound. All members of Afikpo community belong to one particular patrilineage group. Each compound has a specific number of “Umunna”/ “Umudi” depending on the size of the compound, some have four, some five, some may have 10 or more as the case maybe. Simon Ottenberg postulated thus: “major patrilineage Umudi (Children-husband), is a name, corporate, nonexogamous descent group claiming descent from a male ancestor, from whom it usually takes its name; its genealogical dept is approximately five to seven generations” (Otetnberg 1971, 9). He further stated that patrilineages have different sizes in terms of population.

Elders are the leaders of patrilineage groups. Every adult member of patrilineage group participates in decision making in issues concerning the group. When a problem is being tackled everybody is allowed to make contribution at the time of decision making, this process is applicable in dispute settlement.

Just like matrilineal groupings, the patrilineage groupings are incharge of residential lands and farmlands. Land for residential building are plotted and distributed among members. The elders of the groups are the holders of the land and all adult members must get their portions.

Furthermore, settlement of dispute will require the coming together of adult members of the “Umunna” and they would listen to the case and the conflicting parties or persons would be listened to before making decision. These conflicts at times are between other men from the minor patrilineage, and between wives and co-wives of members (Ottenberg 1971, 17). Any dispute that is not resolved at this “Umudi” or “Umunna” level is referred to the village circles or any of the village-group traditional courts for settlement.

Recall that Afikpo is double descent society, that is matrilineal and patrilineal are recognized and accepted by the people. Therefore it is mandatory to every Afikpo person to belong to both matrilineal and patrilineal groupings. Patrilineal and matrilineal groupings play significant roles in conflict resolution in Afikpo community and both help in moulding the character of an Afikpo person (Elechi 1999, 195).

Family Groupings’ Role in Conflict Resolution

The extended family is practiced in Afikpo community. Children are socialized from their family and are trained to have moral values and respect, also they are made to live responsible lives. Age remains the major instrument used for ranking among the wives or children of the extended family. Age is the sole determinant for social ranking in all aspects of social and political life of Afikpo people (Elechi 1999, 196). Authority at this family level lies on elderly men, the old men have authority over younger persons. Likewise the older boys have authority over the younger boys. Therefore, the older ones can order the younger ones to obey or carry out duties. As a matter of fact, age is highly respected at family, compound, village and town levels.

As the case maybe, the oldest and the head of the family has the authority to settle all disputes that emerge within the family circle. Extended family is made up with large number of men with their wives and children who live the same large compound, the oldest man is the family head. The responsibility of controlling the assets of the extended family lies on his shoulder. The family lands both for farm and building are shared by the head. When lands are shared the older people choose before the younger people.

The Role of the Elders Ad-hoc Tribunal in Resolving Conflict

In line with Afikpo tradition the elders could at any given time or situation constitute a tribunal to listen to a case, it could be land matter, remarriage, murder, theft, divorce, adultery, rape, etc. A plaintiff could appeal for the tribunal to be constituted, in some cases the elders could decide to judge or hear the matter. Because this arrangement is important in restoration of peace and tranquility in the community. In a situation where a case needs urgent attention a tribunal will convene, because traditional court don’t sit early enough and they do not sit always. In the words of Simon Ottenberg, “the elders’ special court is not part of the regular administrative machinery of the descent groupings or the villages. It has no formal structure even in the village-group; courts are created and disappear as cases are tried and ended”.

Where and when the elders ad-hoc courts convene is based on the type of case or circumstances surrounding such case. For instance, if a man young or old who has been initiated into “Ogo” cult should steal from any of the shrines, in such case the court would sit at the “Ogo” cult play ground. In the case of adultery case, the court would sit in the village where the adultery was committed.

The elders' special court does not waste time in handling or treating cases that come before it. Conflicts are settled without wasting time. It settles conflict faster than the regular courts.

The Role of “Ogo” Cult in Conflict Resolution

Social, political and cultural life of Afikpo society revolve around the “Ogo” cult, mostly where men are involved. It could be hard to point at any social or political institution that does not have link with “Ogo” cult. “Ogo” cult is better classified as a secret society, based on the fact that non initiates and women are not allowed access or information into “Ogo” institution. All the villages in Afikpo have their “Ogo” shrine and cult house. The “Ogo” institution is a world of its own in Afikpo environment, it is a movement, with its rituals, organisations and rules of order (Elechi 1999, 199). Not all the initiates know all the secrets of “Ogo” institution. There are other secret initiations and rituals that are for those who have taken higher titles within the system. The “Ogo” system is shrouded in secrecy. As a matter of fact only very few men alive today in Afikpo can boast of knowing all the secrets of “Ogo” cult.

Before the advent of colonial imperialists or before the coming of Europeans into Afikpo land, initiation process into “Ogo” cult could last up to seven years. In this modern era it takes a day for ordinary initiation but full initiation could take four months. A male child of about four years could be initiated into “Ogo” cult. The process of initiation into “Ogo” system is part of traditional education which has been automatically been replaced by western education. Number one lesson you learn as a new initiate into “Ogo” cult is keeping of secret and long suffering. Initiation process into “Ogo” system has so much in common with the contemporary para-military training. Commenting on the severity of initiation process, Ottenberg opined:

“The basic pattern of all the initiations is the same: they stress physical strength and the ability to endure hardships. Initiates go into a sacred bush area in the village where they undergo physical ordeals and are introduced to the society at its shrine. When they return, they are isolated from the normal life of the village for a period of time, during which they are instructed in the affairs of the society and are taught some of its secrets (Ottenberg 1971, 116)”.

It is an abomination and punishable offence for an Afikpo man to marry a wife or impregnate a girl or woman before initiation. Highlighting this point O. O. Elechi stated thus:

“Any Afikpo male not initiated into the Ogo-cult cannot marry. If he gets a girl pregnant before going through the initiation rites, he commits a crime against the land. This behaviour is also classified as an abomination for which the punishment is fines and ridicule. His family must offer sacrifices and perform certain rites to escape the wrath of the gods. A tiny part of his ear is also cut off to leave a permanent mark, and to deter others (Elechi 1999, 201)”.

In any case, the coming of Christianity and western education has put a stop to this ancient practice. Parents are held responsible for the failure of their male children not getting

initiated. Those who are not initiated into the “Ogo” system are not allowed to take part in any adult social, cultural and political activities in Afikpo community.

Furthermore, any time the initiates are carrying out their activities and rituals at the “Ogo” cult playground women and non initiates are not permitted to come near or pass that area whether in the day time or at night. In this our modern era this practice has been attracting condemnation from different quarters especially Christians. Activities such as masquerade, dancing, wrestling, whipping with cane, etc are carried out at “Ogo” playground. Problems that arise in the course of “Ogo” activities are handled and settled with immediate effect and kept secret. Violations and conflicts are quietly settled and fines are imposed on defaulters. At times offenders are sanctioned. The men in Afikpo have for a very long time used the “Ogo” system to control women in Afikpo society. Afikpo women in the modern times are complaining on how their male folks are influencing them. The complain comes from the educated and Christian women.

The members of “Ogo” cult are schooled on how to handle conflicts that arise within their organization. Some of these conflicts are assaults, and abuse of masquerade exhibition rules and regulations (Elechi 1999, 201).

The Role of “Okpota” General Assembly in Conflict Resolution

The “Okpota” General Assembly is the highest court in Afikpo community. It serves as supreme court. The final appeal is made there, at “Okpota” laws of the land are made and changed. For instance, it is at that assembly that the amount of money to be paid on a bride’s head is fixed and changed. O. O. Elechi pointed out the type of cases handled in “Okpota”:

Cases of political or constitutional significance are also addressed at “Okpota” meeting place at Amaizu village. Other matters addressed at the Okpota include inter-communal or group disputes, murder cases (especially when it involves neighbouring towns), and cases of corruption involving traditional court judges. Cases tried at “Okpota” could originate at the traditional courts and are transferred to “Okpota” if they are of a very sensitive nature and deeply affect the culture of Afikpo (Elechi 1999, 202).

All male adults who have passed through initiation into “Ogo” cult are qualified to participate in the meeting at “Okpota”. Women are not allowed to participate in the “Okpota” general assembly. Roll call is usually made before the commencement of meeting to ensure that all the villages in Afikpo have equal representation. The idea is that any village not represented at the meeting will not be held responsible for not obeying the resolution or outcome of the meeting. Mbe Ewa said that the meeting at “Okpota” cannot hold if any village is not represented. The arrangement is according to seniority, the old sit before the junior age grades. There is a place reserved for the parties in dispute and visitors. There is usually long debate before resolution is made. In some cases adjournment is made and a new sitting date is fixed when a case is not concluded. Sometimes the conflicting parties are sent out for members of the court to take decision without looking at their faces. In his words Ottenberg stated thus:

“General agreement is usually necessary before a matter is settled. Again, the verbal quality of the Afikpo is evident: there

is much talk and argument, and debate is likely to be lively and skillful. When a decision is reached, those who were asked to leave can return, and the elders' spokesman, frequently the oldest man present, gives the decision. If he does not wish to do so, he may ask another to spell it out, or let the elders select a person, sometimes the spokesman of the middle subgrade (Ottenberg 1971, 2276-7)".

Second to "Okpota" general assembly is Amamgbala village general assembly which takes place at Amamgbala village "Ogo" playground. This particular assembly is where matters of political and cultural nature are treated. At "Ogo" Amachi playground is another location for Afikpo general assembly. The Amachi general assembly is specifically for ceremonial activities, like the crowning of traditional rulers. The Amamgbala and Amachi General Assemblies could handle cases involving women but the entire meeting ground would not be used. These General Assemblies allow democratic and egalitarian principles to apply like experienced in all African Igbo societies.

Conclusion

Afikpo is a good example of stateless or decentralized society which most European scholars see or perceive as not organized. These Eurocentric scholars see Igbo societies as societies that do not have access to justice par excellence and could not govern themselves. That is the more reason the British colonial government preferred handing over political power to Hausa-Fulani people who have been operating a centralized system before their contact with them. But the truth is that Igbos have a unique system of governance and justice system which we used Afikpo as a case study. Afikpo like other Igbos has access to justice par excellence. By its conflict resolution structure, processes and procedures as in its egalitarian and republican policy and political had a chance to justice (Okoro 2015, 93). There was little material cost attached to justice. The poor obtained it. The rich had it. The communalistic spirit and cultural dispositions provided for everybody. Before the advent of the advent of the native courts of the colonial master, the people of Afikpo and other Igbos had very simple and straightforward ways of resolving conflicts. Most disputes were settled at "Ogo", "Umudi", "Ekpuke Essa", "Ekpuke Eto", "Okpota" general assembly and others. At these levels the process can be best described as appropriate dispute resolution.

In sum, the major feature that made Afikpo indigenous system of conflict resolution effective and successful is the compact and well organized structure of the villages. Because of the huge success recorded in this type of conflict resolution, the researcher recommends that both state and federal governments should adopt the some aspect of the system in resolving conflict.

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