Redefining the Leadership Institutions in Igbo Society

John Chidubem Nwaogaidu

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Several leadership institutions abound in Igbo traditional society. These leadership institutions are not without benefits and perhaps challenges. The aim of this study is to evaluate the leadership institutions and the ways they could fill the administration gap in the modern institution. Using the transformational theory of leadership, the study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The instrument for data collection was questionnaire. The study found that traditional leadership institutions such as the traditional rulers (or community chiefs or *Igwe*), council of elders, *Onyishi* traditional institution, *Umuada* and age grades are very much active in the administrative roles they play. They have such benefits like enhancement of socio-economic life, maintenance of law and order, settlement of disputes, construction and maintenance of roads and markets, custodian of truth, equity and justice. The study found that some religious beliefs, greed and corruption are some of the challenges visible in the Igbo leadership institutions. The study recommended that the leadership administration in Igbo society should be redefined in such a way that any traditional leaders or title holders found guilty of greed and corruption should be relieved from their offices, and finally any obnoxious cultural practices should be abolished.

1. Introduction

Several leadership institutions abound in Igbo traditional society. These leadership institutions are not without benefits and perhaps challenges. The study examined these leadership institutions especially on the current quest to steal from the common wealth by leaders, which has become a symbol of status in Nigerian society and tells much on the country's development. The aim of the study is to evaluate the leadership institutions in Igboland with particular focus on traditional rulers and the ways they could fill the administration gap in the modern institution. Giving that Igbo is among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, Igbo system of leadership is quite distinct from other ethnic groups in Nigeria. For instance, the Yoruba leadership system is said to be monarchical, the Fulani/Hausa leadership system is centralized and oligarchy in nature, and the Igbo leadership system is said to be democratic (Chikendu, 2003).

There is a rich heritage of leadership that exists among the Igbo. Leadership has to do with someone who has commanding authority or influence within a group. On this, Nahavandi

(2002) is of the view that leadership is a group phenomenon that always involves interpersonal influence or persuasion; the presence of leaders assumes some form of hierarchy within a group; and that leaders use influence to guide groups of people through a certain course of actions or towards achievement of certain goals. In achieving such goals, leadership institutions in Igbo society integrate social, political and religious aspects in the exercise of authority. These aspects are interwoven with periodical rituals and ceremonies that link the leaders with the people for achievement of common goals.

There are several challenges in achieving common goals in leadership institutions in Igbo society. Olojede (2005) is of the view that the challenge of leadership is a catalyst of transformation of the society. This study however interrogated those areas of leadership conception by the Igbo people and how the situations have changed. According to Asaju et al (2014), it has become a situation where the failed leaders are celebrated instead of holding them accountable in their failures.

This study employed the transformational theory of leadership in order to understand the importance and value of designated outcomes and ways of achieving same, as well as transcending immediate self-interest for the sake of the mission and vision of the institution. The idea of transformational leadership according to Bass (1985) is based on four elements, namely idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration and inspirational motivation. The leader should have the ability to inspire the followers towards achieving specific goals. Burns (1978) identified transformational leadership as a process where one or more persons engage with others without bias, in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. Transformational leader motivates the followers to be more aware of the importance of task outcomes, inducing them to transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the organization or team and activating their higher-order needs. With this theoretical construct, the study interrogated the pre-existed leadership institutions with the current changes due to both external and internal influences that showed the present state of lack of leadership skills among the leaders. The interrogation also aided in bringing out the essential areas of strength for a sustainable leadership in Igbo society.

2. Understanding Leadership in Igbo Society

Leadership in Igboland cannot be understood without the general conceptual of leadership today as obtain in the modern world. We have to consider who leaders are, the meaning and styles of leadership, and then the Igbo consideration. The Igbo symbolism of *isi* (head), forming the root of leadership, is examined in relation to leadership (*ochichi*), which has a political character (Ezenagu, 2017). Conceptualizing leadership in Igbo society involves the 'head' that stands out in the service of the others. The head stands not on its own but in the name of others. By implication, the leader cannot leader him/herself. The contribution of the followers must be taken into consideration. The leader and the followers must work together in order to achieve positive results.

Dine (2007) is of the view that a leader is commonly described as one who goes out, ahead, to show the way. A leader positions itself as guide, director, manager, administrator, the head, because these words imply either one who maintains order (keeping things going as they are), one who uses coercion (sanctions or threat of sanctions to enforce one's will), or manipulator (one who guides others into thoughts or actions that they may not understand). With this view, one assumes that a leader exercises authority on his own but that cannot be said in Igbo traditional society where a leader acts in the name of others and a custodian of the supernatural authority.

However, leadership seems to be very elusive in the sense that it is deceptively easy to use in everyday conversation. The word 'leadership' is a universal phenomenon used in different aspects of human endeavour such as politics, businesses, academics, social works, organizations, management etc. Hence, leadership is a process through which a leader influences his followers in an effort to achieve stated objective. This process according to Khan (2010) is vital for effective implementation of total quality management initiatives. In order words, leadership is a social influence process in which the leader seeks the voluntary participation of subordinates in an effort to reach organization goal (Omolayo, 2007). The successful accomplishment of set objectives in following Bass (1989) view involves the application of leadership attributes, such as belief, values, ethics, character, knowledge and skills. For an effective leadership, the leader must possess well defined personality, qualities and capabilities to lead. With the absence of these traits, societies or organizations may lose focus, stagnate, and eventually suffer the consequences of collapse.

According to Uchendu (1965), Igbo traditional leadership system is an exercise in direct democracy on the village level, with a representative assembly on the level of the village group. Apart from the representative assembly, some Igbo communities in the pre-colonial period according to Nzimiro (1972) and Afigbo (1981) had elaborate chieftaincy institutions. In all, Igbo leadership system comprises of established ranks and positions of honour. It encompasses the service to the community as well as the representative of the gods of the land. It means both *onye-ndu* (one who leads) and *onye-isi* (one who heads). It implies that leadership assumes a double role – one who leads the community and then functions according to the minds of the people in accordance with the cosmological order of being.

Igbo understanding of leadership is that every Igbo community strives to elect 'collective' leaders who function as partners and colleagues of the other members are themselves called to do something to function actively as partners and colleagues with set objectives. Membership and leadership are organic whole, which have influence on each other. Leadership in the Igbo understanding resides in the person the members elect, and it resides also in the members who elected the leader. Meek (1937), Green (1947), Forde and Jones (1950), Uchendu (1965), Isichei (1976) among several other authors describe the Igbo traditional leadership as acephalous, decentralized, segmentary or stateless. These classifications were based on the fact that Igbo society in pre-colonial era consisted of autonomous villages and village groups ruled through diffused authority without any sort of formalized, permanent or hereditary leadership systems.

3. Method of Research

The study used a descriptive survey research design to bring out those areas of deficit and strength in Igbo leadership institutions. The research approach was to engage with different groups on the challenges and prospects of leadership in Igbo society. This method helped to bring out relevant information needed for the study. The following questions informed the bases of the research: what are the leadership institutions in the Igbo traditional society? What are the major strengths of these leadership institutions, especially traditional rulers? How can these strengths fill the administrative gap in the modern leadership institutions?

Interviews were administered to twenty traditional rulers drawn from different areas of Igboland. Participants for the questionnaire were selected among different age grades from different towns consisting of males and females. The sample size used for the study was 200 respondents. Demographically, 15% of the respondents were between the ages of 18 years – 30 years; 60% respondents were between ages 31 years – 50 years; 20% respondents were between ages 51 years – 70 years; and 5% respondents were between ages 71 years – 90

years. This implies that majority of the respondents were between the ages of 31 years – 50 years. Also 78% of respondents were males, while 22% respondents were females. Important data were collected as response to the survey. They were systematically organized and analyzed in giving a reasonable backing to the study. Both the interviews and questionnaire addressed the specific objective of the study, which was to determine what has changed in the leadership institution between the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras. The focus was on identifying the leadership practices of the past and present. While some studies have provided the reality of the challenges in leadership skills, this study has redefined those challenges for effective leadership and improved capabilities in leadership style in Igbo society.

4. Findings on the Strength and Weakness of Leadership Institutions

The study discovered that various leadership institutions exist in Igbo society such as the traditional rulers (or community chiefs or *Igwe*), council of elders, *Onyishi* traditional institution, *Umuada* and age grades. They are very much active in the administrative roles they play in the society. They have such benefits like enhancement of socio-economic life, maintenance of law and order, settlement of disputes, construction and maintenance of roads and markets, custodian of truth, equity, and justice (Amechi & Muoh, 2018). According to Afigbo (1972), leadership institutions are founded on age grade. Age often determines basically the social and religious status of individuals and the groups they should belong to in the community. The judgement of a person's progress or retrogression in life is based on what members of that person's age grade have started to achieve (Dine, 2007). Age grades are identified by the service they render to the people – they regulate cultural activities and serve as police against socio-moral offenders in the community. Even the elders can be brought to order by the age grades if they adopt undue control over the community. Council of Elders are the controller of village politics and made up of elders; the titled men (men of status), the leaders of families, leaders of age grades. For Dine (2007), the council of elders constitutes the highest court of justice to which families, individuals and associations sue for their rights. It is the custodian and teacher of tradition. The leadership role of this council is directed towards guiding, directing, instructing the people to follow the traditional ways of doing things. *Umuada* and *Iyom-Di* also exercise influence in community leadership. The former is the group of married women in a particular village or married daughters of a village and the latter is the group of women married into a particular village. This study however dwelt specifically on the traditional rulers. This is because of the fact they are the bone of contention in maintaining societies' ideals on the one hand and on the other hand the root of community disorders.

Fundamentally, the constitution of traditional rulers in Igboland is considered not based on seniority but rather on economic prowess, hereditary composition and the ability to influence changes in the local community. Due to diverse ethnic and cultural formations in Nigeria, there is hardly harmonious configuration of traditional rulers. However, this work did not bother to address the differential patterns of traditional institutions, because each region or ethnic group has its own formative processes. But one basic principle is that the traditional institutions in Igbo society are predominantly and deeply structured, and as such constitute two major classes: ruling class at the highest echelons and the subordinate class. The traditional rulers are among the ruling class in the local context. More emphasis is laid on the general notion of this composition and the role of traditional rulers in the society formation.

On the strengths of the traditional rulers, though not well spelt by the Nigerian constitution, yet they played vital roles and continued to influence local communities. Blench et al (2006) note that Nigeria has traditionally had a large number of traditional authorities and rulers who

had played an important role in community coherence and traditional systems in Nigeria. As such, they opine that;

> It has been observed that in parts of Nigeria, because traditional rulers' long establishment and the respect in which they are held makes them more effective in conflict resolution than 'official' mechanisms. They are also able to take pre-emptive action through their familiarity with the different sections of the community, where the government has been observed to be reactive. Even some traditional rulers work extremely hard with little official recognition of their efforts (p. 1).

Historically, the existence of the traditional rulers in the pre-colonial times was significantly marked with ideological and juridical responsibilities, as a traditional institution for order and progress, where cases of deviance were referred to for punishment and settlement. As a result, the traditional rulers mostly encouraged the community towards public engagement, collective responsibility and protection of the local customs. However, the findings indicated that the dominant nature of the institution as it is today was majorly created during the colonial era where the traditional rulers were used as agents for slave-trade and an institution of indirect rule by colonial hegemony.

At the time of colonialism, the statutes of traditional authorities were recognized; including the creation of new more chiefs to harmonize the existing political system. In that instance, local rulers had to be co-opted to act for the British authorities, hence the use of 'indirect rule', the governance of a region or district through existing institutions. Blench et al, (2006) note that it was a unique factor in Nigeria when compared with other sub-Saharan African countries. Indirect rule thus made a certain kind of impact, and many of its features persisted long after it has formally ended with colonialism. Such that, it implanted in the minds of most political elites to the extent that they could maintain power and use their source of power to mime and intimidate their opponents. These positions of power and their influence were carried over to the new political construction of the modern state.

Against this backdrop, Sklar (2003) states that;

> Any serious inventory of African contributions to the theory and practice of government in our time would necessarily include the modernized indigenous institutions […]. The durability of traditional authority in Africa cannot be explained away as a relic of colonial rule. African agency in the construction of colonial institutions was largely responsible for the adaptation of traditional authorities to modern systems of government and the legitimacy they continue to enjoy among ordinary people (p. 4).

Consequently, the traditional chieftaincy institution has paradoxically been integrated into the political system either as an adversary body or internal regulative unite of the government. The formalization of this institution in Nigeria has re-opened the debate on its constitutional relevance. Though some of the rulers enjoy the legitimacy as the traditional authorities aiding in promoting their traditional communities as well as in representing the interests of the people they serve before the government, yet the system has become another class formation and a quasi-political institution meant for the exploitation of the community and the people (Nwaogaidu, 2013).

The interaction between the traditional institutions and the state bureaucratic institutions constitutes a fundamental niche for a fragmented society, class conflicts and the increased struggle for regional and ethnic interests. In fact, Vaughan (2000) contends that;

> The main concern of regional political classes has been to protect their interests by seeking refuge behind traditional structures, themes and symbols that are summoned to validate local aspirations. In this context, state structures are hardly used as effective institutions of administration and governance. Rather, they function largely as mechanisms for allocating patronage and ensuring political domination. Thus, chieftaincy structures – as communal and ethnic-based institutions – partly reinforce a rentier state dominated by ethno-regional commercial and bureaucratic classes (pp. 12-13).

It follows that the traditional institutions functioned in such a way that they aided in mobilization of ethno-regional struggle, which gave the political elites more ground to control the power of the state. It is not surprising to observe that the role of the traditional authorities and what they represent appeals to the political elites who use them just like the colonial masters, in achieving their personal feats.

Findings showed that one fundamental area which made the traditional institution so appealing to the political elites was the prestigious honorary traditional titles it conferred. The rate of increase in the quest for chieftaincy titles in Nigeria especially in Igboland has assumed another dimension, in the sense that it has become another form of status symbol (Blench et al, 2006). Paradoxically, it has turned out to be not necessarily a meritorial conferment, but the question of who could afford the bidding cost with the traditional rulers. It has also initiated an avenue for the traditional rulers to reward wealthy donors in order to attract more donors. In fact, the conferment provided the political elites the leverage to use the awarded title to legitimize their positions in the society. On the other hand, the relationship between the traditional rulers and the political elites manifests especially during electioneering. Hence, during the elections, the political parties tend to use the traditional rulers for their political purposes especially in voters mobilization. This however put a question mark on their non-partisan role in the political affairs and their traditional statute. Therefore, the traditional rulers were relevant as long as their services were required by the political rulers and they could also be deposed by the political rulers when their bids were not met. This has weakened the serenity in which the institution of traditional rulers had formerly enjoyed as a reputable social force in the local communities especially during the pre-colonial periods.

5. On the Challenges of Leadership Institutions in Igbo Society

In the pre-colonial times, traditional societies selected their leaders based on certain confirmed striking qualities possessed by the person(s) being selected, while in some cases, selection was done based on hereditary. Today the reverse has become the case. Traditional rulers in Igbo society now emerge through the consideration of the one who captures the interest of the state government either by influence or by design. Eventually, the selected traditional ruler worked for the state government and ruled his people according to whelms and caprices of the state government. This situation has watered down the legitimacy, sovereignty and the integrity of traditional leadership institutions in most of the Igbo societies.

Consequently, the colonial administration according to Njoku (2006) introduced what is referred to as the 'system of unbalanced socio-political landscape' in the polity:

> Placing the public officers over their communities and reducing the power of the people to exercise a meaningful pressure on their public figures or calling them to order. The warrant chieftaincy which was introduced by the British in South Eastern Nigeria as an administrative apparatus, is an example of how

colonialism fundamentally altered not only the perception of public office in an African community but also destroyed the local dynamics of checks and balances (p. 80).

It followed that the warrant chiefs were invested with authorities over the local communities, which gave them the feeling that they were above the community and were there to serve the colonial masters than to protect the community interests. It was at this point according to Okere (2005) that the leadership became a full time job for the leaders because of the benefits accruing to their imposition to community by the colonial masters. There were no standing criteria in their appointments; only those the colonialists felt could function as their 'eye' in the community. This practice mainly in the Igbo society (because of the difficult nature of its traditional society that was not so open for a centralized political system) became more of a deal between the traditional chiefs and the colonialists (Nwaogaidu 2013). On the one hand, protecting the colonial political and economic interests and on the other hand, protecting the warrant chiefs against the community attacks (because of their exploitations) and sustaining their positions (because only the colonial authorities have the power to depose them).

The imprint of the colonial influence still remained on the life-wire of the society especially on the political elites, who inherited authoritative means of exercising political powers. Certain laws were imposed on the communities and individuals against their wishes. The crucial implication of the impositions accounted for the enthronement of corruption and nepotism in the political system, which also implanted unpatriotic attitudes upon the Nigerian elites. Succinctly put, the political elites schooled by the colonizers' imperialistic formations and attitudes (a way of teaching African elites how to be Africans in European clothes), later used their acquired powers to corruptly amass their own personal wealth, land, and establish their own patronage networks of sustenance. In effect, they tried to emulate the European way of life, which Paul (2008) rightly described as learning about the cultural superiority of the Europeans and acting in that capacity. These phenomena brought in cultural debasement and alienated Africans and their elites from their indigenous cultures (Paris, 1995), devalued their local traditional customs and fundamentally upturned the traditional societal network structures. As a result, emphasis was laid on wealth at the expense of morals which opposed the Igbo traditional belief systems.

6. Redefining the Traditional Institutions to suit the Emerging Challenges

Traditional Igbo society has ideal leadership values that are essential to the way of living in accommodating every level of social groups both male and female. These has been a major debase to the ideals of Igbo traditional institutions due to modern influence implicit in cultural contacts. In traditional Igbo society, leadership is based on the supernatural. Power belongs to *Chukwu* (Supreme Being) and exercised by the people. Power does not reside on individuals because in actual sense, individuals according to Mbiti, (1989) are subsumed in the community. The Supreme Being oversees the affairs of the community and the intermediaries maintain the cosmological order of leadership. More often than not, traditional rulers are torn between the options of advancing self-interest at the expense of that of the community or to curb the self-interest of the individual members of the community in order to promote the community interests. The Igbo traditional rulers are however expected to live above primordial sentiments by putting the interests of the community over and above that of any individual member (Agunwa, 1993). This ideal will serve in promoting harmony in the society when embraced in the modern institution of leadership in order to accommodate every group in decision making (Rahman 2016).

Legitimacy is the major stake in transformational leadership theory that should be applied to leadership in Igbo society. Legitimacy plays a crucial role in the usefulness of a traditional leader in Igbo society, which could be advanced to other areas of leadership in modern institutions. A leader without legitimacy will be made to face the opprobrium of the society. In order to maintain a leadership position in the Igbo traditional society, any person in leadership position must be found to be above suspicion. Any leader found wanting in meddling with the society's ideals should be deposed immediately. In other words, if questions are raised over the integrity of the leader, such leader should step aside. Therefore, any leader that actually has the interests of his/her followers at heart has integrity. Such leaders may not be lacking in the traditional leadership system in Igbo society. Awori (2022) is of the view that stories of the modern traditional rulers as corrupt, authoritarian did not mean that there were not leaders who were empowering and transforming the space they serve.

Following the ideals of transformational leadership, the need to maintain one's integrity and self-preservation is likely one reason that should propel leaders in Igbo traditional society to serve as agents for the advancement of local interest, which in turn will inadvertently coincide with the promotion of development and democratic governance in Nigeria. In that case, the three variables of leadership (leader, followers, and the situational conditions according to Bahreinian et al, 2012) will be kept in check. It implies that the transformation of traditional leadership will enhance development. In other words, Igbo traditional society has the capacity to redefine the modern institution of leadership in Nigeria if adequately harnessed. Therefore, Igbo leaders can contribute to the empowerment of their communities, and the more empowered the rural communities become, the more likely traditional authorities are pushed to become agents of development and democratic governance.

7. Conclusion

Leadership institutions in Igbo society has shown to have strong impact in effectiveness and development of the community. The study has proffered measures for the sustenance of good leadership institutions in Igbo society. Such measures include upholding of truth, legitimacy and service to the people. The priority of the traditional rulers should be to lead without sentiments in harmonizing the minds of their followers. The more the leaders are closer to their people, the more they are morally bound to the interest of one another. The study also recommended that the leadership administration in Igbo society should be redefined in such a way that any traditional leaders or title holders found guilty of greed and corruption should be relieved from their offices, and any obnoxious cultural practices should be abolished. And finally, increased interference by the government agents in the traditional institution should be well checked to enhance a more cohesive society.

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