

**THE INDIGENOUS TRADITIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEM OF THE  
OHAFIA PEOPLE: A REVIEW**

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***ABSTRACT***

This research paper is concerned principally with the indigenous traditional political system of Ohafia people. The various structures and institutions in the Ohafia society perform political functions. It is aimed at exposing and underscoring patterns of traditional administration of the people with a view of unraveling and highlighting its indigenous republican nature in juxtaposition with Western democracy. Thus, the data source for this research emphasizes primary data, including information from eyewitness accounts and personal notes. It also used data from secondary sources such as books, monographs, memoirs, articles, and research findings such as dissertations, national daily newspapers, and journals. In its value, this paper contributes to a large extent to similar ones already accomplished or underway as concerns Ohafia people. It is observed that the indigenous Ohafia political system of administration involved a republican traditional system of government based on kinship lineage and age grade system. In contrast, her political institutions acted independently and supported each other in the general village interest. A key finding of the paper is that there exists a strong republican attractiveness of leadership style in the indigenous traditional political system of the Ohafia people, which enviably could be a model for the quest for leadership in contemporary times.

**Keywords:** Age Grade, Leadership, Ohafia, Political Institution.

**INTRODUCTION**

The political institution has significantly continued to undergo political changes in magnitude proportions concerning governance systems. In Nigeria, the governance or leadership question has been on the front burner to such an extent that of all the issues confronting Nigeria since independence, leadership is not the least in seriousness. Thus, it could be safe to allude to a fact that suggest that Western democracy as is practiced in Nigeria in contemporary times is an authoritarian assumption of the West and, as far as my contemplation could go, a strong Western stereotype. The aforementioned is predicated on the fact that contemporary African societies in general, and Nigeria's communities, in particular, had to adjust to Western models of governance as witnessed during Colonial rule and in Post-colonial Nigeria and unarguably is viewed as it often conflicted with indigenous models which to a significant extent was autonomous and self-sufficient models and served extensively in providing leadership needs for the people as at that time.

The stance above with regards to the indigenous model of leadership style providing effective and efficient leadership through its somewhat kind of republican or village democracy can be said to have creditably underscored by the fact that despite the wide acceptance of Western democracy in Western and any other societies, the post-colonial Nigerian State has not been able to establish a system of governance which has the capability

to fostering nation-building and economic development, which till today eludes Nigeria as a nation. This incapability is deeply rooted in the belief that there is significantly no application of features of democracy by the Nigerian political hierarchy, not to talk of its manifestations. Dominant considered approaches to the consequential outcome of no-application of the elements of Western democracy is well documented by scholars. It is manifest in the lethal prevalence of endemic poverty, political instability, widespread ethnopolitical conflict, electoral conflict, lack of integrity and accountability in governance, massive corruption, embezzlement of the public treasury, alienation of the public from the government, decayed infrastructure, insecurity of lives and property, winner-takes-all syndrome among other vices.

It is pertinent to note that the vices mentioned above are unknown to the Ohafia indigenous political leadership system. Instead, is the manifest prevalence of the listed vices as the consequential outcome of the considered no-application of the elements of Western liberal democracy to a large extent has led to the interrogation of whether these vices are not the fall-outs of an unfamiliar system of western liberal democracy which to a large area still displays traces of the colonial attributes of extortion and exploitation (Aforika & Habeeb, 1994; Achebe, 2000; Bedford, 2003; Olayinka & David, 2022).

The contemplations of most scholars, as seen above, seem to allude to the fact that the problems of the modern Nigerian state is rooted in the adjustment of indigenous leadership models to the Western conception of democracy. This stance aligns with the postulation of Ake to the effect that the indigenous bourgeoisie which took over power at independence were mere stooges. This indigenous bourgeoisie inherited power simply to further the interests of Western capitalism (Ake, 1981) to the detriment of Nigerians. According to Ake's postulations, "the trend has continued today even though the interest being served has transformed from being that of western capitalism to that of a handful of private cabals who decide who governs and in whose interests the actions and inactions of the government will be channeled. This scenario has plunged the Nigerian State into a developmental dilemma occasioned by the governance crisis.

Therefore, this paper sets out to evaluate the indigenous traditional political system of Ohafia people, beaming the searchlight on the option of Ohacracy in Ohafia area of South East Nigeria to unravel how it suits the peculiarities of Nigeria as a state with regards to how the indigenous system of leadership in Ohafia could offer alternatives to the leadership question in Nigeria.

### **THE GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF OHAFIA**

Ohafia is one of the ancient warlike groups in Igboland, East of Nigeria. The Ohafia community is presently situated in Ohafia Local Government Area of Abia State in Nigeria (Nsugbe, 1974). In contemporary times twenty-six villages, which are groups of autonomous communities, makes up Ohafia. Ohafia, according to (Otternberg, 1971), is one of the autonomous village groups in Igbo communities spread over a large territory. In a collaborative stance, Oyeoku

(2006) reports that Ohafia comprised 26 autonomous villages and towns, and these towns and villages were already highly organized entities by the time the British intruded directly into their

history in the first decade of the 20th century. Even so, in terms of administrative convenience, Ohafia Local Government Area is blended with Nkporo and Abiriba communities. By the 2006 population census, Ohafia had a population of 225, 144. The Ohafia community covers an area of about 1,050 square kilometers. It is bounded on the north by Nkporo, on the south by Arochukwu, Abam and on the west by Abiriba, to the east by Edda in Afikpo South Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, and on the Northeast by Erei in Akampa Local Government Area of Cross River State (Nsugbe, 1974).

### **UNDERSTANDING THE OHAFIA INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE:**

Understanding the Ohafia indigenous governance structure and how it can offer alternatives for contemporary western democracy takes a point of departure from Thomas Hobbes' philosophic contemplations. In his contemplation, Hobbes inferred the importance of a strong central authority in governance concerning communal life. Thomas Hobbes' proposition in his book *Leviathan* suggests that there is a "state of nature" which is a rudderless state where everyone acts in the way they like, where there is no independent authority to adjudicate or intervene in disputes, as everyone is a judge, jury, and executioner in their own cause; where social institutions such as like family and other relationships including love affairs and contracts, are not protected and thus do not exist. (Hobbes, 2008) Further to the Hobbesian proposition is the postulation that everyone lives in "continual fear and danger of violent death in such social institutions. Thus, man's life becomes solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." According to Hobbes, personal appetite will be supreme if there is no common good. Apparently, this abstract state of continuous conflict should make one think of how our life could be at a busy road intersection with no one to direct traffic flow. The preceding scenario thus brings to the fore the observation that the boundless right of an individual naturally invites preemptive strikes to repel anticipated aggression. Thus, the absence of a common authority to allocate scarce opportunities or determine what is right or wrong or resolve conflict often creates a state of war of all against all, bringing out the worst in humanity. The general proposition that emerges from Thomas Hobbes' argument is that in such a state of war, rationality is thrown overboard, and people tend to sacrifice long-term benefits for present gains.

As Aristotle contends, man is a socio-political animal (Aristotle's *Politics*, 1905). Thus, in the shadow of Aristotle's proposition, the socio-political nature of man imposes many challenges and implications, as could be inferred from earlier stated Thomas Hobbes' thesis. Hence, as a social animal, man must evolve and learn ways and means of living harmoniously with other men and his environment. Therefore, in this direction, this paper takes a point of departure to contemplate and situate the indigenous and traditional political system within the prism of *Ohacracy* as an option.

*Ohacracy* as an option is deeply rooted in the practical concept that implies "society is based and rooted on projects, programs, and plans which does not lose sight of God, the ultimate principle and designer of all essences and existents in existence. Iroegbu, attempt to explain this *Ohacracy* concept situated within an ethno –

political theory” (Iroegbu, 1997). Ohacarcy, in Iroegbu's contemplation, is seen as a community-centered system of governance and is capable of solving the long dilemma situation of African countries in terms of governance and indeed the whole lot of human society. He proceeded to report that:

“*Ohacarcy*” is a compound word derived from two words – “oha”(Igbo) and “Crazy” (Greek). From their different etymologies, “Oha” (Igbo word) means "community," "society," "an assembly or gathering of people, while "Crazy" (From Greek word "Kratos") literally means "the rule of." Thus, from an etymological perspective, *Ohacarcy* can be defined as the rule of the people or community over themselves for integral existential welfare. (Iroegbu, 1997:3).

The implication of the above definitive postulation for the search for viable governance option is, therefore that governance of human society should begin and end with people to such extent that the existential survival of the human society depends solely on a community and its people with regards to the value chain of leadership and followership.

### **THE TRADITIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEM OF THE OHAFIA PEOPLE**

The Ohafia clan is a cultural group with lineage ties and religious associations, common dialect, customs and traditions which distinguish them from other clans or cultural groups. There was no definite centralized government as a kingdom except certain institutions, which permeates and intersects the whole clan, for instance the kinship linear relationship, shared cultures and living arrangements. Like the other Igbo tribes, family in Ohafia is the elementary structure of the Ohafia indigenous political organistaion. The family is a merger of both the immediate and extended family. It contains the original leadership base, ascribed and the accomplished elite groups; the family is known as Ulué Nna (Father's House) in Ohafia.

From here, the second stagecalled “ezi” (compound) comprises Umunna(Children from the same father) kinship lineage. The fusion of families develops into kindred. It is a chain of descent, and like the family, its leadership reverts to the oldest member of the first original family, acknowledged as “Ezie Ezi or Okwara (Compound head). In a seeming horizontal view, the observation above presents the Ohafia indigenous political systemin a sense as a village democracy when viewed with regards to the fact that settlements and leadership are formed from related or unrelated families and political leadership is vested in Elders, who are selected, elected or appointed by birthright, age, ranks, and accomplishments. They act as leaders and spokespeople of the villages in the broader horizon of the area.

### **THE KINSHIP LINEAGE SYSTEM: A SUB-BASE OF THE INDIGENOUS POLITICAL SYSTEM OF OHAFIA PEOPLE**

The kinship lineage in Ohafia is bilinear. The descent is traced and associated with patrilineal and matrilineal ancestors. According to Nsugbe, the Ohafia indigenous political system is undoubtedly a double descent system of social organization (Nsugbe, 1974). According to him, a double descent system of social organization is that communal system in which an individual can claim descent both from his father’s people (his patrilineage) and

his mother's people (his matrilineage); from each of these lineages, he expects to inherit certain specified types of property or rights. This double decent implies that an Ohafia person can claim both the patrilineal ancestors and the mothers' matrilineal ancestries and, therefore, may claim full rights, privileges, immunities, responsibilities, and liabilities. The bilinear kingship system unites Ohafia clan as follows: its patrilineal side, "umu nna,," provides the living arrangements and owning of farmland. The living arrangement is patrilocal in compounds (Ezi), and the compound collection forms the enlarged community known as Ogo or Mba. In light of the preceding, Igbe Awa Oke Uma submitted, "the rating of affinity to one enlarged community is so high to such extent that even if a man migrates to another Ohafia town or village, he or his descendants will still maintain some patrilineal links with his compound in his former homeland and in case of an eventuality. The kindred take very significant active part in one's birth and burial rites". (I, A. Uma, personal communication, June 10, 2022)

The Ohafia kinship lineage also provides a sort of leadership in political organization of each village. The clan's Chieftaincy in Ohafia, can only emerge from particular lineage, kindred or relationships. This right to leadership or rulership is ascribed due to birthrights to such privileged kinship which inherited such rights from that of ancestors through first occupancy, foundation membership or special leadership in warfare. For example, in Amaekpu village in Ohafia, Eke Ukoha affirmed thus:

"The right to chieftaincy or rulership is derived from patrilineal descent. The Chieftain must come from certain group, known as "ikwu abuo" patrilineage. (Umu okwara and Ibe obobi family sects). Whenever the kingship stool is vacant, a fit and proper person, a member from such relationship may be chosen, elected or appointed by kingmakers, presented and approved by the council of elders".

In general, it seems that the compound Ezi is the dynamic entity in the political system especially as the community is based on patrilocal setting. Each compound has a leader or head man called "Ezie Ezi" or 'Okpara in other Igbo communities. Once chosen, he becomes the compound traditional representative in all the important deliberations of the town socially, culturally and politically irrespective of his age or achievements and accomplishment.

## **AGE GRADE SYSTEM AS A SUB SYSTEM OF OHAFIA INDIGENOUS POLITICAL SYSTEM**

One could submit at this juncture that the most powerful agent of socialization and indigenous political system of Ohafia is the age-grade system. Though, the age grade system exists in many other cultural areas of Igbo land but with varying degrees (Nsugbe, 1974) implicitly reported that the regulation of political relations in the Ohafia community is the responsibility of age-based associations. According to him, the associations are constituted on the two principles of age and selection. By the age principle, boys and girls are grouped into age sets when they are about three years old.

According to (Azuonye, 2000) there are two age-grade systems in Ohafia; Uke and Ukeji Ogo. They are the two most junior age grades, with age of 16- 25 and 26-35 respectively and as he also observed it was from these two grades that the fighting forces of the communities are drawn. Nonetheless, According to Azuonye, communal labour was assigned to some other age groups through ‘Ndi Ichin’ and ‘Ezie Ogo. Considering the foregoing, Michael Okpo in a collaborative stance, confirmed thus:

“They were made up of young and able bodied men, who were either sent to track down wild animals for food or those that endangered their lives. They were also sent to fight enemy tribes while the old men were not left out, as they acted as advisers and planners to the whole group. These young men by degrees formed themselves into formidable group now called agegrades. The combined efforts of each group made for greater measure of success in obtaining the means of subsistence and so the output improved. However, the formation of the institution of age grades groups and subsequent grading of the people according to ages of those born between a pace of two, three to four years into a single respective groups was not an accidental occurrence, it is a discovery based on the common historical experience and development of the people”.

Today, the age grades are critical in the communities' development discourse. Okwu (1984) underscored that fact that in the villages, developmental projects are assigned to the age grades of which members execute during different stages of their growth unto maturity. The stages include: their naming ceremony stage and outing ceremony, that is “Iza Afa” and Igba Uche or Otomu (Traditional retirement). In Amaekpu, Ohafia for instance, projects executed by agegrades ranges from people oriented projects such as secondary school, a tower, a community hall and a sun treasury office to mention but a few.

### **THE CHIEFTAINCY INSTITUTION IN OHAFIA**

Each town has a chieftain. Chieftaincy ranges from paramount to minor heads of community. Thus, the clan head was vested in the Chief of Elu Ohafia ‘Ezie Elu’ before the advent of the European cum colonial administration. He was the first amongst all the village’s chief. According (Eze Uma, personal communication, June 10, 2000), the Ezie Elu retained this position because of the traditional rights of the founding father Uduma Ezema Attita. But in contemporary Ohafia society, this status has evolved to that of Uduma Eze of Ohafia and the present incumbent is Chief Onuoha Uma, the Udumaeze 5. In precolonial Ohafia society, the udumaeze represents Ohafia administratively and ceremonially as a symbol and helps to settle some customary delicate disputes between Ohafia towns.

### **THE TRADITIONAL HEAD: “EZIE OGO”**

The traditional town head or chief “Ezie Ogo’ presides over all town council or assembly including the cabinet and the elders meetings. Whenever, the town council or assembly deliberates on political, judicial social and ceremonial issues, the Ezie Ogo features prominently. He is the first among the other minor heads known as the traditional standing

committees, known as the Amaala. These are drawn from the compounds, lineages, kindred and major sectional leaders of the town. These leaders also are among the traditional leaders whose post is never acquired with money, wealth or influence but only by birthright. For instance, belonging to particular lineal kinship or kindred is an advantage.

### **THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS” NZUKO ‘NDI ICHIN OGO”**

Another level of leadership is the Council of Elders. They are commonly referred to as ‘ndi ichin ogo. For the fact that there was/is need for helping hands in the area of governance, the Ezie ogo implores some Elders Ndi Ichin who forms the council of elders. The Ezie Ogo’s need for helping hands of elders is deeply rooted in the supposition of the positive believe that wisdom comes with age. In this direction, (Nsugbe, 1974) proceeded to argue that prestige and influence of ndi ichin derives from the fact that amongst the wisdom and knowledge of local traditions are associated with age amongst the Igbo’s. Thus, they chiefly act as advisers who at times when there are societal disputes are consulted and their advice sought.

### **THE AKPAN POLITICAL INSTITUTION**

The *Akpan* political institution is geared towards compelling obedience and enforcement of laws as well as sanction of deviant members of the town. Akpan as a political system is said to have been adopted by Ohafia people through cultural contact in their heroic age. It is a royal dance in all Ohafia villages’and towns. It is also known as a system that exonerates neither its active members nor rulers from punishments when guilty of any offence when it is established. The children among them act as the communication link, assembling and dispersing information. It holds cultural displays seasonally. It uses individual member or group in performing its functions and instills fear of punishment on members of the community as it is reputed to be no respecter of even well placed personalities, for example, you cannot cross the road or path when its members are approaching in groups. If its masquerade wounds you while on a display, you are bound to pay some penalty despite the injury, you may have sustained. The sound of its drums or gong arouses speculations as to the cause, whether for important announcement especially regarding collection of tax or rates, compulsory stay at home.

### **THE UMUAKA/IKPERIKPE**

The Umuaka/Ikperikpe is quite a complimentary political institution of the Ohafia people. Whereas the Umuaka is generally for peace making in disputes from funeral, more especially as it concerns the origin of persons and properties and their declarations is supreme, the Ikperikpe political institution evolved as a female counterpart to Umuaka. It was from the sensitization of women to pursue and defend their societal rights. It is the only body that deals with offences committed by women folk. (Umuaka can punish the male but powerless over the women).

## **CONCLUSION**

The Ohafia political system reveals a polity that is segmentary, intermittent and diffused. The traditional government is decentralized and government functions were carried out by various structures, which fulfilled the vital requirement of the polity: principal amongst such structures as discussed are the kinship and age-grade sub system of the traditional polity. The chieftaincy institution, council of elders (Ndi Ichin), the Akpan and others does permeate the Ohafia town.

It is the contention of this study that the traditional Ohafia polity as discussed in the foregoing has governmental structures that predated the European model. The aforementioned stance is predicated on the belief that the vital requirement of any polity ought to be the maintenance of law and order in the society and the indigenous political system of the Ohafia people meets the standard beyond consideration. According to Almond, it is to a large extent established that the vital requirement of a political system is that of maintaining the integration of a society, adapting and changing elements of the kinship, religious and economic system not excluding the protection of the integrity of a political system from outside threats (Almond, 1961). What is clear on the other hand, when gleaned from the stance of Almond is that Western democracy is often found in climes such as Africa to miss the elements of integration of a society.

Thus, the indigenous Ohafia political system possesses insightful persuasion which could offer a model to the problematic discourse of good governance, development and peace building. This is because of the belief that Western democracy option has not quite answered so much of our socio-political problems in climes such as is found in Africa. The option of the people-centered structure of “*Ohacracy*” model is apparently an alternative for sustainable sociopolitical development in our clime and intimates like these.

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| <b>Names</b>   | <b>Sex</b> | <b>Community</b> | <b>Occupation</b> | <b>Date</b> |
|----------------|------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------|
| Eke Ukoha      | Male       | Amaekpu          | Farmer            | 2/3/2000    |
| Michael Okpo   | Male       | Amaekpu          | Retired           | 2/3/2000    |
| Eze Onuoha Uma | Male       | Amaekpu          | Traditional Ruler | 2/6/2000    |