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## Individual Rights and Social Responsibilities in Pre-Colonial Ibibioland

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### **Abstract**

*The concepts of Individual Rights and Corporate Social Responsibility are concepts that are in the front burner of international discourse in this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Notably, they were concepts that formed major part of academic debate in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century following Eurocentric postulations that these concepts were alien to the African traditions. The basis of their argument is founded on the perception that the African cultural traits could hardly be equated with the Western notions of government and governance since they (Africans) were largely regarded as primitive and uncivilized. The Ibibio area in particular was considered as stateless chiefless, acephalous, or segmentary and lacking paraphernalia of legitimate government and governance. This study there argues that Individual Rights, Social Responsibility, democratic principles are not foreign concepts to Africa in general and Ibibio in particular. They existed and were practiced even before the coming of the Europeans and also played significant roles in the stabilization of British colonial policies. This article seeks to examine how these concepts of government were practiced in Ibibioland.*

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**Key words:** *Individual Rights; Social Responsibilities; Democratic values; Ibibioland*

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### **Introduction**

There have been series of misrepresentation and distortions about pre-colonial governmental system in the South Eastern and South-South geo-political regions in Nigeria. Ibibioland which had been part of the former region and now lies with the latter zone has not been spared the damaging consequence of this wholesale generalization which has been carried to the extreme especially by what Uya described as “outside” authors of the Eurocentric school<sup>1</sup>- colonial administrators, explorers, missionaries, European anthropologists, travelers, politicians, traders, and merchants, among others. In most parts of Ibibioland such as Ikono Ibom, Iman Ibom, Ikpa Ibom, Asutan Ekpe, Oku, Offot Ukwa Ibom, Oku Iboku, Mbiabong, Ayadehe, Itam, Ikot EKpene, Eastern Obolo, Eket, Ubium and others, studies have revealed that organized political structures and states prevailed. Notable scholars like Noah<sup>2</sup>; Udo<sup>3</sup>; Uya<sup>4</sup>; Abasiattai<sup>5</sup>; Esen<sup>6</sup>;

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<sup>1</sup>E.O. Uya, *African History: Some Problems in Methodology and Perspectives*. Calabar: Cats Publishers, 2004, p.4.

<sup>2</sup>M.E. Noah. *Ibibio Pioneers in Modern Nigerian History*. Cambridge: Scholars Press, 1980.

<sup>3</sup>Udo, E. A. *Who are the Ibibio?* Onitsha: Africana/Feb Publishers, 1983.

<sup>4</sup>O.E. Uya. *A History of Oron People of the Lower Cross River Basin*. Oron: Manson Publishing Company, 1984.

Ekong<sup>7</sup>; Abia<sup>8</sup>; and Ukpong<sup>9</sup> to name a few, are prominent in this regard. However, quite unlike the case in Northern Emirates, Western Obaship and the famous Benin Empire, the dearth of documentations hindered available indigenous governmental or political systems from advertised to the outside world.

According to these scholars, prior to the arrival of Europeans in Ibibioland, these places (clans in Ibibioland) had evolved well-organized systems of traditional governance which emphasized the promotion and maintenance of law and order, a just, equitable and egalitarian society where every citizen had enjoyed the rights, privileges and benefits of citizenship and were also allowed to have a sense of belonging. According to Abia<sup>10</sup>, this patterns of government originated from the family (*idip, ufok, atung and ekpuk*) as primary unit of administration in the socio-economic, political, and religious lives of the people. The pattern was also maintained the secondary<sup>11</sup> and tertiary levels<sup>12</sup> of Ibibio political structure.

Given the Afro-centric interpretations by recent African scholars on Ibibio traditional governmental system, this study, using the Ibibio as a microcosm of pre-colonial African society especially Southern Eastern and South-South geo-political regions asserts that the pre-colonial Ibibio hand organized and well-defined political structures albeit experienced historical changes with the coming of the Europeans.

## Concept of Individual Rights and Social Responsibilities

### Individuals Rights

The concept of a right relates to the freedom from interference by other individuals or the government. Individual rights, according to Garner<sup>13</sup>, refer to the liberties of each individuals or the government. He gave examples of individual rights to include the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, etc. He further argued that the Right to the pursuit of happiness means man's right to live for himself, to choose what constitutes his own private, personal and individual happiness and to work for its achievement, so long as he respects the same right in others.<sup>14</sup> This, thus, means that man cannot be forced to devote his life to the happiness of another man nor of any number of other men. It further means that the collective cannot decide

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<sup>5</sup>M.B. Abasiattai. (Ed.). *A History of the Cross River Region of Nigeria*. Enugu: Harris Publishers Limited, 1990.

<sup>6</sup>A.J. Esen. *Ibibio Profile*. Lagos: Paico Press, 1982.

<sup>7</sup>E.E. Ekong. *Sociology of the Ibibio: A Study of Social Organization and Change*. Calabar: Scholar Press Ltd, 1983.

<sup>8</sup> O.T. Abia. "Nigerian Traditional System of Government: A Case Study of Ibion Ibom". *The Calabar Historical Journal*, Vol 4, No. 1, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Ukpong, E. A. *An Enquiry into Culture: Ibibio Names*. Uyo: Dorand Publishers, 2007.

<sup>10</sup>O.T. Abia. "Nigerian Traditional System of Government..."

<sup>11</sup>The secondary unit was made up of the village which is known in Ibibio as Idung/Obio/Udung

<sup>12</sup>The tertiary unit was made up of the sub-clan or lineage group known in Ibibio as (Aduuk). This tertiary level stretched further terminating at the clanship level known as (Essioon or Ikpaisong). The clanship unit of the Tertiary level was the level of administration in Ibibioland. Despite colonial intervention in the politics of the people of Ibibioland, the Ibibioland patterns of governance was maintained even after Donald Cameron's reforms of the Native Court System under the Native Administration system in the 1930s.

<sup>13</sup>J.W. Gardner. *Living, Leading and the American Dream*. New York: Jossey Bass,

2003.

<sup>14</sup>*ibid*

what is to be the purpose of a man's existence or prescribe his choice of happiness. Individual rights, it should be noted, is different from collective, group and civil rights.

Carla Manosa contends that Individual Rights are those equality rights that can be fought on an individual basis.<sup>15</sup> It means certain inalienable rights which come from God, not from government. For Ayn Rand, since man has inalienable individual rights, it means that the same rights are held, individually by every man, by all men, at all times. Therefore, the rights of one man cannot and must not violate the rights of another.<sup>16</sup> For instance, a man has the right to live, but he has no right to take the life of another. He has the right to be free, but no right to enslave another. He has the right to choose his own happiness, but no right to decide that his happiness lies in the misery (or murder or robbery or enslavement) of another. The very right upon which he acts defines the same right of another man, and serves as a guide to tell him what he may or may not do.

From the examination of the positions of Garner, Manos and Rand, it means that individual rights are guaranteed certain inalienable freedom by nature as an individual to pursue life and goals without interference from other individual to act on individual basis, no one individual make up a community. In a community of individuals made up of people of different backgrounds, orientations and in pursuit of diverse interests and goals, the need to harmonize, in a collective sense, the goals and aspirations of such community for peaceful coexistence bequeaths to the individuals a sense of social responsibilities.

#### Social Responsibility

Social responsibility, according to Haynes refers to ethical responsibilities and suggests that an entity, be it a group or individual, has an obligation to act for the benefit of society at large<sup>17</sup>. Ethical responsibilities here are seen as embracing the emerging values and norms that society expects of citizens of indigenes even if not expressly stated by law. These responsibilities can be thought of as things the group "should do". Thus, social responsibility is a duty every individual has to perform so as to maintain a balance between the economy and the socio-political systems. It is sometimes referred to as group responsibility, collective responsibility, communal responsibility or in a more recent usage, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSO).

In the early stages of human civilization, the concept of individual rights thrived on the basis of a sizeable and manageable groups or communities in the absence of antagonism from marauding tribes or invading enemies. With the evolution of a more complex and increasingly human and natural disasters in place, the ideas of individual rights became increasingly dependent on corporate social responsibility. In Ibibioland, the pattern of indigenous governmental systems created room for both concepts of individual rights and social responsibility to develop. This will be considered in details.

### **Individual Rights and Social Responsibilities in Ibibioland**

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<sup>15</sup>C.C. Marnosa. "Group Rights and Individual Rights: Can they Coexist? Available at <http://erpic.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Group-Rights-and-Individual-Rights-Can-They-Coexist.pdf>. Accessed June 20, 2016.

<sup>16</sup>Ayn Rand. The Ayn Rand Column. Available at [http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/individual\\_rights.html](http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/individual_rights.html). Accessed June 20, 2018.

<sup>17</sup>T. Haynes. "Social Responsibility and Organization Ethics". Available at <http://www.answers.com/topic/social-responsibility-and-organizational-ethics>. Accessed June 20, 2018.

Oyovbaire had noted that the problem of democracy revolves around how to forge a developmental process which is simultaneously participatory for individual citizens, sensitive to and protective of individual rights, freedoms and liberties, accommodative of social and communal pluralisms, nationally and socially integrative of multiple and competing loyalties, and generative of economic growth and distributive justice.<sup>18</sup> In the same vein, Iwe<sup>19</sup> asserted that the true test of a nation's adherence and commitment to human rights is its attitude to the principle of the integrity of human liberty. Iwe stressed that this democratic principle requires that the liberty of citizens be promoted as much as possible and restricted only when it is necessary. He concluded that for effective socialization of the citizens in the culture of human rights, the efforts and contributions of such institutions as the family are indispensable. Similarly, Ihejiamaizu and Egbe contended that the purpose of society and government in a democratic environment should be to provide an ordered, stable society which guarantees security for lives and property of citizens; the inculcation in the citizenry of a democratic culture and an attitude of service and trusteeship and of commitment to the welfare of the people and a sense of responsibility.<sup>20</sup> Their argument is that both the society and government should aim at promoting a spirit of fair play and tolerance of her people than arrogance and arbitrariness, a sense of honest, faithful, selfless, disintegrated, impartial and objective service.<sup>21</sup> They advocated that a dedicated selfless disciplined, patriotic, honest and highly motivated leadership free from the cancer of social indiscipline, ethnic hatreds and jealousies, religious bigotry as well as tendency to personalize rulership and power as the goal of any society and government.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, report of the Political Bureau, 1987, also lent support to the fact that in all pre-colonial systems, the purpose of society and governance were clearly articulated and understood by both the ruler and the ruled. It wrote:

The promotion of the welfare of the populace was the most fundamental reasons for government. Thus, in some communities when harvest failed, the rulers often forfeited their mandate to rule and this led to loss of power. Each polity operated with a basic minimum sense of fairness and justice for each members of the community<sup>23</sup>.

The Ibibio indigenous political system possessed an in-built moral order that regulated its affairs. This moral order was predicated on the welfare and well-being of the entire community, promoted a feeling of patriotism, a sense of belonging and equality of all among the people and enabled the citizens to cope with crises, manage conflicts and confront internal and external

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<sup>18</sup>S. Oyovbaire. "Political Developments in Nigeria" In: O.E. Uya, *Contemporary Nigeria: Essays in Society, Politics and Economy*. Buenos Aires: Edupulis, S.A, 1992

<sup>19</sup>N.S.S Iwe. *The Dignity of Man as the Foundation of Human Rights: A Message for Nigerians*. Calabar: Sacs Print Publishers, 2000.

<sup>20</sup>O. Ihejiamaizu and B.O. Egbe. *The Sociology of Traditional and Modern Political Administrative Systems and Some Contentious Issues in Contemporary Nigeria*. Calabar: African Scholars Publishing Company, 2001.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Report of Etinan Village Headship Dispute. Unpublished Report of Etinan Traditional Rulers Council, Etinan Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, 1980, 1980

pressure.<sup>24</sup> Every adult male had to belong to Ekpo in Iman Ibom area. The women had to belong to *abre* and *iban ison*. The youths had *nka iwaad* or *mkparawa* in addition to being initiated into *Ekpo ntok eyen* (children's order of *Ekpo Anyohko*).

In all Ibibio clans, oral evidences revealed unanimity on the view that children were regarded as belonging to everybody; and were usually corrected by all when they went astray. It was the responsibility of every elderly person to reprimand an erring younger person. This ranged from scolding to flogging. For instance, if two children were fighting or quarrelling or struggling over an object or issue, the sight or arrival of an elderly person at the scene marked the cessation of contest, and all to order. It was a serious mark of disrespect and dishonor for any of the parties to insist on exacting vengeance from the other in the presence of the elderly person. This was an act of *uson anyen*. In a literal sense, the act of having 'strong eyes' by a younger person in the presence of an elder. This act was strongly condemned. On the other hand, the senior could order them to continue in the fight until the winner emerged. In that case, the defeated party will respect his superior peer and the elder will order them to shake hands, as a token of reconciliation but warned them very seriously not to engage in conflict again. But he would take note of these revealed potentials in the champion chap and as a responsive fighter to be recruited for the community in the event of warfare or inter-village wrestling competitions where were common in the precolonial era.

Obong Enoch Eno Udofia recalled that secret societies were so powerful and awe-inspiring that even as a school principal in Edem Urua in Ibibiono Ibom local government area, he had to be initiated into *Ekoon*, *Nkemba* and *Ataad* which were so powerful and influential in Ibiono Ibom area so as to guarantee free movements for himself. This was in 1980. Obong Udofia argued that self-interest and additional fear ensured that administration of justice throughout Ibibioland. Udofia said:

With regards to self-interest, the leader knew that he was competing with other communities so he did the best he could to organize and mobilize his community hence the saying in Ibibio land "*Obong Isibono ikpong*", the leader knew this and ensured that his community was carried along with him and he was more careful to avoid contravening the norms of the society concerning sacred commandments in the traditional religion of the land- *mbet Abasi ukot*, *mbet Abasi Imaan* and "*mbet Abasi ayeyen*". The need to uphold the sanctity of these sacred laws provided the additional fear that ensured that the leader administered justice in a very strict and precise manner, otherwise he must pay dearly with his life. It is a matter of "*Adue Ukot Akpa iton*". That is tit-for-tat<sup>25</sup>.

Law and order, especially in Southern Iman area, had straight severe injunctions as anybody who contravened the customs of his village and failed to pay the required fines may be punished with *etuan* (ostracization). This was an outright isolation of the offender to force him to mend his ways or live in some sort of margin of the society. This was a rare practice in northern Imaan. In Itam,

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<sup>24</sup>E.A. Ukpong. "The Indigenous Judicial System of the Ibibio". *Ibom Journal of History and International Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Oral interview with Obong Enoch Eno Udofia, 70+, Traditional Prime Minister of Imaan Ibom, Etinan Town, March 18, 2009 and October 19, 2009.

Ibiono Ibom, Ubium, Uruan, Ibesikpo, Nsit areas, Ikpa Ibom, Ikot Abasi, Mkpat Enin and other parts of Akwa Ibom area, this practice was not different.

According to Ukpong, the maintenance of law and order was a religious as well as civic responsibility. The author argued that there was the ever present danger that the gods and ancestors, who were the originators of the customs and traditions, would react unfavourably if they were ever violated. When there was such violation, they had to be appeased by way of sacrifice. Ukpong<sup>26</sup> concluded that there was very little or no scope for bribery in the olden days as justice was speedy, transparently free and fair.

A member of the community who was alleged to have committed an offence had the right to appeal to his mother's relatives to be present when the case was determined. The "*nung mme eka*" or "*edemeka*" were bound to accord him this right of protection and his village authorities must not act in any manner that would suggest the denial of the alleged offender such inalienable right. This goes to show that despite the strict and precise nature of justice, due process was allowed to avert the miscarriage of justice. In the same vein a prominent father-in-law or chief from another village could declare interest in matter involving his son-in-law or an accused person who solicited such intervention based on their conviction that they were innocent if the charges against them. The point to note is that the acceptance of outsiders to witness the trial procedure endorsed that the jury live above board in the discharge of their responsibility, while the citizens enjoyed their fundamental rights as human beings irrespective of their status or class. Any big chief could accept to defend and secure just for the weak without demanding any fee. There was absolutely no scope for bribery and corruption as the rule was strictly followed and the penalties exacted without fear or favour.

Family heads had the responsibility to protect and defend members of their families at all times and the members owed the heads respects and reverence. In traditional Ibibio society, truth was embraced with passion hence children were trained to embrace the philosophy that "honesty is the best policy"<sup>27</sup> so that their leaders would not be misled to be disgraced on matters that affect members of the family at the other or higher levels of governance involving the other families, the village and another village. As an extension of these principles, members of the family were entitled to family land held in trust by the family heads.

Citizens were expected to take part in community development projects such road maintenance, clearing the stream to ensure proper sanitary environment; and payment of levies. All the leaders beginning from the nuclear family thus: *Obong Ufok, Obong Ekpuk, Obong Idung or Ette Idun, Obong Aduuk, Obong Ession*- held offices for life subject to good behavior. They and others that aspired to succeed them were expected to be people of transparent honesty, impeccable integrity, and uprightness and possess the capacity to service the basic needs of the communities.<sup>28</sup>

Succession to offices was peaceful and done in accordance with established traditional rules. There were methods of making the rulers aware of the displeasure of the ruled. Ette or Obong who misbehaved were withdrawn from office. For instance, in Etinan village in about 1830, the 13<sup>th</sup> village head, Obong Idem Ekong Umo Etukudo Ofon Nte Akpan Edok Eti Inan

<sup>26</sup>E.A. Ukpong, E.A. "The Indigenous Judicial System of the Ibibio"...p. 193.

<sup>27</sup>N.D. Edemekong. "Changing Patterns of the Indigenous Governmental Systems in Ibibioland, 1900 – 1987". Ph.D Thesis, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria, 2010, p. 156.

<sup>28</sup>*ibid.*, p.176.

was deposed from office. According to tradition as gleaned from the Report of Etinan village headship dispute:

Idem Ekong Umo Etukudo came to the throne and ruled for seven years. He misbehaved during the pre-farming season hunting by going for a snail instead of all the slaughtered animals before him. For this punishment, he was dethroned and the staff of office was taken from him and given to Akpan Nsek Etukudo Ofon Nte Akpan Edok Eti Inan from the same family.<sup>29</sup>

All the foregoing are evidences that individual rights and social responsibilities were governed by the sacred principle of law of “*unen*”. *Unen* connotes the legitimate rights and social responsibilities of the citizens as imposed by customs and tradition. These rights and social responsibilities are fundamental and inalienable to the citizens. Social relationships and responsibilities were very strong.

In matters of enforcement of discipline among minors, the rule as was noted above was that any male adult had the right to enforce discipline on erring youth without necessarily reporting the matter to the father. Discipline was a collective responsibility of every adult in the Ibibioland. Women were not left out. They also enforced discipline in their groups like *Abre* where they could use injunctions to keep certain people out.

The true test of a typical adherence and commitment to human rights was the Ibibio attitude to the principle of the integrity of human liberty. This was a democratic principle which required that the liberty of the citizens should be promoted as much as possible and restricted in the example of Idem Ekong Umo Etukudo of Etinan in about 1830. It is in the light of such evidences as the above the Udo<sup>30</sup> correctly observed that the traditional law recognized the rights of citizens. These included right to life, property, and individual freedom; right to religion; right to security and right to protect and defend the political system. These were the pre-existing rights before we began to talk of the arrival of the Europeans and imposition of the Christian religion. Udo<sup>31</sup> further argued that the Ibibio citizens had rights of ownership of property, right to occupy and possess landed property, right to have a family and take responsibility of the family. He concluded that “these rights were genuine, legal and natural”<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, when one talks of Human Rights in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is a repetition of the Ibibio traditional political behavior. The enactment of the Human Rights Law is not a novelty to the African political system.

Ibibio traditional political system was a typical democracy. Uya<sup>33</sup> strongly supported this view when he asserted that African societies regardless of their size, sophistication or simplicity of their political organizations and structures, shared several things in common. Uya further noted:

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<sup>29</sup>Report of Etinan Village Headship Dispute. Unpublished Report of Etinan Traditional Rulers Council, Etinan Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, 1980, 1980.

<sup>30</sup> Udo, E. A. *Who are the Ibibio?* Onitsha: Africana/Feb Publishers, 1983.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>E.O. Uya, E.O. “Nigerian Intellectuals and the Challenge of Nation Building”. A Convocation Lecture delivered at the University of Uyo, Nigeria, April 24, 2009, p.13.

However powerful or weak the rulers were, decision were, more often than not, based on real consensus. Those who disagreed with decisions commonly reached could migrate to other areas<sup>34</sup>

But the West tried to de-emphasize the genuine qualities of original African democracy as practiced in Ibibio families, villages and clans. This they did to show that they invented democracy. Ibibio traditional political system also provided for social responsibilities in the sense that it encouraged the citizens to protect their own political system. Again, Uya insisted that:

In the ethos of governance (to be placed) on a balance between power and authority, on the one hand, and service, accountability, and responsibility, on the other, rulers were judged, and continued in power on the basis of the extent to which they served the public good<sup>35</sup>

The consequences of this, naturally, was that citizens were recognized in the provision of indigenous leadership from *ufok*, *ekpuk*, *idung*, or *obio*, *aduuk* and *ession* or *afaha*. This kind of arrangement was a sign of the fact that they had to be responsible. Here also, Uya correctly submitted:

There was a common acceptance, within the pre-colonial political system, by the ruler and the ruled, that promotion of the welfare of the populace was the most fundamental *raison d'être* for government. This gave governance a moral anchor<sup>36</sup>

The next aspect of the social responsibility is the recognition of the rule of law in the system. This rule of law had equally received the author's attention as Uya had earlier written:

Even in states where rulership was hereditary, those who wielded authority were judged by the characteristics expected of the incumbents of their offices- obliged honesty, integrity, uprightness and so on<sup>37</sup>

This rule of law which could only be exercised by morally sound leaders who possessed the above qualities among others, was not a new thing.

There was also economic aspects of social responsibility. The indigenous governmental system recognized self-help through such economic institutions as *afe etibe* or *Osusu*. Any person who was in need could consult the ruler and easily receive some kind of assistance or support. Everybody had something to do. There was no destitution. Laziness was not encouraged as even those who had no means could attach themselves to a big man and work for him. Through such ways (working for the big men), they could be established to be self-reliant. The Ibibio man was taught from childhood to embrace the philosophy of hard work and "dignity in labour.

The soil was always available to be worked on hence the saying "*inwan atan akpanikoakan udua*". Throughout Ibibioland, it is common to hear of "*nnanga*" or "*utom*". This refers to either a voluntary undertaking or cooperate farming activities for the family head, village head or some big man in the family or village as the case may be.

Sometimes this big man can be one's *akpongo* (namesake), or a family friend or relative-in-law from another village. This big man would be obliged to refresh and entertain such

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<sup>34</sup> Uya, E.O. *African Diaspora and the Black Experience in the New World Slavery*. Lagos: Third Press Limited, 1992, p.13.

<sup>35</sup> E.O. Uya. *A History of Oron People of the Lower Cross River Basin*. Oron: Manson Publishers Company, 1984, p.39.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*



workmen with assorted sumptuous means and “take home” items. It is worthy to note that in Ibibioland, the “take-away” or “take-home” tradition, known as *Ekuu* was reciprocal from the big man or woman to his or her workmen. The “take home” items were not paid for. They were usually offered free and these items consisted of some food items and parts of animals slaughtered to feast the workmen or a visiting son-in-law, friend or relative.

This tradition is a validation of the Ibibio saying that “*ubok anam utom ikpaha abio*” meaning that “a laboring hand does not die of hunger”. Ibibio society had no room for lazy people. This political system did not want those kinds of people. Because of the culture of hard work, everybody struggled to participate in one economic activity or the other. Throughout Ibibioland, it is common to hear that “*Etokayen ama akam akamba awuo utom, uduaan ayoho idip*”. That is to say when a child runs errands willingly for the elders, he would have enough to eat and spare, “*ubok anam utom, inua adia nkpo*”- meaning, when the hands release the ingenuity of their labour, the mouth will be filled with sumptuous delicacies. All these wise sayings portend that the village heads, family heads, and other elders in the households were always ready to give to willing people all the support to work hard and survive. There was surplus land that could be given out to people to farm and return to the custodian authority after harvest. This was known as “*Nto nwuo ikod*” (temporal farmland). Sometimes, a relative-in-law or grandson who was in trouble at home with his family could approach his parents-in-law or mother’s kindred as the case may be and they could not hesitate to receive, accommodate and rehabilitate him. Some Ibibio sayings which support the traditional practice are: *Mkpo ama adiok ayen ke edem ette, asenyon edem eka*: This means that when the fortunes of a child fail at home, he naturally turns to his mother’s kindred. *Ukod isinnoho ukod ifen ayo atie*: This translates literally that it is forbidden of any man to issue or offer a bunch of oil palm fruit for a stool to an in-law. This was illustrative of the requirement of the spirit of goodwill, support, cooperation, solidarity and brotherhood from in-laws relationship.

As earlier said, people who worked hard could align themselves with important personalities, curry their favour and support to the extent that such personalities could even marry wives for them and give them plots of land to build their own houses and farm on. That is to say, “a nobody” can attach himself to a big man in Ibibio society and become “somebody”.

There was also provision of health care facilities. Ibibio traditional political system had provision for social amenities. In Ibibioland, each family used to have a family doctor. The family medicine man (*Abia Ibok*) was responsible for the family healthcare delivery. From time to time, he would visit the family to find out how the children were faring. They used herbs and barks of trees to cure such ailments as abscess, small pox, and *akpasak* or *ikiim*, *ikpakub*, *adiitipbe* (immunization against witchcraft –*ifod* and *uben*). The kind of facilities they had had been considerable.

Another fundamental aspect of the social responsibility was in the area of security. Collective method of maintaining peace and security was practiced. This was observed in three phases namely: family level (*ufok* and *ekpuk*), village level (*idung* or *obio*) controlled by the village head and the senior chiefs who worked together to maintain peace; and the clan level (*Essioon* or *Ikpaison*) where the clan head (*Etebom* or *Nkuku* or *Obong Afaha*) in conjunction with village heads, titled chiefs and elders of the clan worked to maintain peace and security at the clan level.

The result of the combination of all these social responsibilities helped to establish a solid foundation for democracy and emphasized stability in the political system. This in effect gave rise to patriotism and self-realization, hence the saying, “*Idun Nyin*” (our village). These were

the kind of things Ibibio people generally appreciated and would readily return home to celebrate, no matter where they are. Indeed, the primacy of the village in the person's scheme of things is illustrated by the Ibibio proverb that: *Se anwuo anie ke idun awuo idoho inie, ibohokhe uma ukoono inie mfo uduwo ufok*. This literally means that "No matter the volume or amount of wealth acquired in a foreign land, such cannot be validated until they are safely repatriated home.

### **Democratic and Participatory Values in Ibibioland**

Ibibioland was a highly democratic society. It is a truism that a democratic environment is a very highly regulated environment.<sup>38</sup> To that extent, it was a very highly disciplined society. It lacked the attributes of a feudal state of the ancient regimes which placed emphasis on service without commensurate reward. Rather it was committed to cater for the welfare of all its members. The leadership at whatever level derived its power from the will of the people, and the leaders were fully aware that the strength of the family (*ufok*), extended family (*ekpuk*), village (*idun*), village groups (*aduuk*), and clan (*ession or ikpaison*) depended on how well the people were organized and governed. The leadership was also aware that the maintenance of law and order, adequate security system of laws, and properly organized systems of leadership selection, succession and revenue collection constituted the hallmarks of a well-organized society.<sup>39</sup> Ibibio citizens were guided on the ideal principle, which affirms that change is progress, that the evolution of its society was one of transition to greater age of development, not of stagnation. Available evidences confirm that in Ibesikpo in the 1930s, Abak and Ikot Ekpene in the latter 1940s, the chiefs and leaders of the Ibibio areas spearheaded the invitation of missionaries who brought Qua Iboe, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic and Lutheran churches to their areas. This was majorly a by-product of democracy and the consequence of this was the complete transformation of Ibibio society as we can see today.

Emphasizing the democratic and participatory values as features of the Ibibio traditional political system, Ibibio State Union in its Memorandum for the establishment of the House of Chiefs in the Eastern Region of Nigeria in 1957 stated that:

Ibibio are had always had traditional rulers as part of their practice of democracy of the highest order, that such democracy had its embryo in the grassroot which was the village community with its Council of Elders usually presided over by the village head known in the Ibibio language as Obong Idung or Obong Obio, and from thence the democratic institution expanded and over flowed to Ikpa Isong with its Esop Ikpa Isong usually presided over by Obong Ikpa Isong<sup>40</sup>

It is noteworthy that the practice of village democracy was common throughout Ibibio territory. This usually took place at the village shed (*Afe idung/Efe Obio*). All adult citizens freely participated and expressed opinions on village affairs. Essien aptly summed up the practice thus:

The village shed exhibited and encouraged a high degree of democracy and individualism as all members were allowed to express their opinions

<sup>38</sup> G.A.I. Nwogu. "Democracy: Its Meaning and Dissenting Opinions of the Political Class in Nigeria: A Philosophical Approach", *Journal of Education and Practice*, Vol.6, No.4, 2015, p.131.

<sup>39</sup> N.D. Edemekong. "Changing Patterns of the Indigenous Governmental Systems in Ibibioland, 1900 – 1987". Ph.D Thesis, University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria, 2010, p. 156.

<sup>40</sup> N. D. Edemekong and B. J. Edet: "Continuity and Change: Indigenous Governmental System in Ibibioland, 1900 – 1987" African Update, Vol. XXVII. Issue 4. 2020.

on village affairs. This had the effect of mellowing...the authoritarian venom of decision making by pushing the settlements (of issues) towards common and shared values<sup>41</sup>

The ultimate aim of Ibibio village democracy, the author argued, was to ensure that any decision reached by *Isong* was a decision by consensus incorporating the 'general will'. However, the authors further posited that some views expressed at the General Assembly carried more weight than others<sup>42</sup>. First, the words of the village and family heads bore the greatest weight. Second, the operation of seniority principle ensured that the closer a man was in age and descent to the founding father, the greater the weight of his opinions. Third, as regards the General Assembly discussions, all the usual reasons why different individuals wield influence over a group come to play- competence, eloquence, wisdom, wealth, intelligence and experience. Finally, a procedure which intended to reduce the influence of the ordinary citizens in decision-making, according to Jones and Forde<sup>43</sup>, was that:

After a general discussion, the elders retire to consult and when they return, a spokesman announces the decision to the meeting who either accepts it by general acclamation or refuses it.

The point to note here is that despite the seeming democratic and participatory values embedded in the features of the indigenous political system in Ibibioland, the structures of power do not operate like the proverbial periwinkle republic, where there is no distinction between the leader and the led as (*afid awuo edo mfi, eyara itam ukem ukem*): All the periwinkles dress in the same fashion and the style and size of their caps are similar. There is always first among equals. For instance, the appointment of village heads was never by resolution of Town Council or General Assembly but by selection or popular demand. In the case of Etinan village headship dispute between Chief Sampson Usen Mbek and Mr. James Udo Inyang which lasted from 1971-1980, the latter was popularly elected by eight out of the nine families that constituted Etinan, through a town council resolution. Despite his popularity amongst the villagers (the remaining eight families), Nung Umo Etukudo vehemently opposed his choice and the procedure that led to his selection as "a travesty of our tradition and void".<sup>44</sup> Consequently, Mr. James Udo Inyang lost the dispute to the superior claim and evidence of the 'minority' ruling family of Nung Umo Etukudo. According to Eteidung J.J. Nsek:

Etinan custom is akin to the Jewish practice where minority opinions always supersede those of the masses who have no business in the selection, anointing and installation of the kings<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

This study has examined the concepts of Individual Rights and Social Responsibilities in Ibibioland as practiced in pre-colonial Ibibioland till date. The research had made known the fact

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<sup>41</sup>O.E. Essien. "The Ibibio Language: Classification and Dialects" In: Abasiattai, M.B. (Ed.), *The Ibibio: An Introduction to the People, the Land and their Culture*. Calabar: Alphonsus Akpan Printers, 1991.

<sup>42</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>G.I. Jones and Daryl Forde. *The Ibo and Ibibio – Speaking Peoples of South Eastern Nigeria*. London: International African Institute, 1967.

<sup>44</sup> Report of Etinan Village Headship Dispute. Unpublished Report of Etinan Traditional Rulers Council, Etinan Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, 1980, 1980.

<sup>45</sup>Oral Interview with Eteidung J.J. Nsek, 60+, at Afaha Ibesikpo, May 21, 2010.

that the people of Ibibio had well-established governmental principles and democratic ideals that regulated the day to day activities of the people. The coming of the Europeans to the scene of Africa and the Ibibio frontiers did not play any part in the evolution of governmental institutions or principles as wrongfully popularized by Eurocentric scholars. In fact, Ibibio governmental systems largely facilitated the British policy of indirect rule by giving it the necessary support and at the same time vehemently opposing obnoxious policies when necessary. It therefore goes that Ibibio, like in the modern state system, had elements of democratic principles that gave priority to the welfare of the people in state governance. In other words, whether one is examining democratic ideals, individual rights or social responsibilities as associated with the modern world and contemporary Nigerian state; their equivalents existed and still exist in Ibibioland.

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