

## **The Pre-Colonial Traditional Governance Structures in Igboland: A Framework for Effecting Efficacy, Representation, and Accountability of Modern Public Administration in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores the pre-colonial governance structures of Igboland and their potential application to modern public administration in Nigeria. By examining the decentralized authority, the roles of age grades, and the influence of secret societies, the study reveals how these traditional systems promoted efficacy, representation, and accountability within their communities. The decentralized nature of Igbo society, characterized by autonomous villages and collective leadership, offers valuable insights into enhancing local governance and public participation in contemporary Nigeria. The age grade system, with its emphasis on civic responsibility and mentorship, provides a model for engaging citizens and fostering social responsibility. Additionally, the roles of secret societies in governance and conflict resolution underscore the importance of integrating traditional institutions into modern administrative frameworks. The article argues that adapting these traditional governance practices can address current challenges in Nigerian public administration, such as inefficiency, corruption, and lack of community involvement, ultimately leading to more effective and accountable governance.*

**Keywords:** *Pre-colonial Governance, Igboland, Public Administration, History*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The study of pre-colonial governance structures in Igboland presents a compelling opportunity to re-imagine and improve modern public administration in Nigeria. Before the advent of colonial rule, the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria had developed a unique and highly effective system of governance characterized by decentralization, inclusivity, and communal participation. Unlike other regions in Nigeria that were ruled by centralized kingdoms or empires, Igboland was known for its stateless society, where governance was organized at the village level with a strong emphasis on collective decision-making and accountability. This decentralized and consensus-driven approach to governance not only ensured that the needs and voices of every member of the community were considered, but it also fostered a system of checks and balances that prevented the concentration of power in the hands of a few. The involvement of various groups, such as councils of elders, age grades, and secret societies, further strengthened the accountability of leaders and ensured that governance was aligned with the values and traditions of the people. In modern Nigeria, where the challenges of governance include issues of corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of representation, the principles underpinning pre-colonial Igbo governance offer valuable insights. By examining these traditional governance structures, contemporary public administration can learn how to better integrate local traditions and practices, promote greater community involvement, and establish more robust mechanisms for accountability and transparency.

This exploration is not just a historical exercise; it is a practical endeavour aimed at identifying ways in which the strengths of traditional governance can be harnessed to address the shortcomings of the modern state. The potential for these traditional structures to inform and enhance modern governance is immense, offering a pathway to more effective, representative, and accountable public administration in Nigeria.

## **THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE IGBOS AND THEIR PRE-COLONIAL TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE**

Before the British colonial era arrived in Nigeria, several ethnic groups had set up independent administrations based on their customary political structures. Over 250 ethnic groups made up the Western and Mid-Western Regions of Nigeria (South West and partially South-South Geopolitical Zones), the Eastern Region of Nigeria (South-East and primarily South-South Geopolitical Zones), and the former Northern Region of Nigeria (North West, North Central, and North East Geopolitical Zones) of the territory that later came to be known as Nigeria since the British colonial era (Jadesola & Jayeoba, 2023).

The early history of the Igbo people is based on contradictory sources, just like the histories of other ethnic groups. A portion of the Igbo people claim orally that their ancestors came from somewhere in the north, possibly Egypt, according to certain historians. But the exact site of their initial dwellings is not mentioned in the tales (Ofoegbu, 1999). As we approach historical times, Igbo customs preserve that the awka and orlu were the Igbo people's first settlements in modern-day Nigeria. They are thought to have become significant in this region about the start of the fourteenth century, if not before (Njoku, 1990).

The Igbo left their initial regions of residence and travelled in diverse directions as their population grew. They proceeded southward as far as the Niger Delta, where they were successful in driving away the Ibibio who needed to locate housing (Nwankwo, 2002). The renowned Igbo ibini temple was taken over by the southern Igbo. In spite of the fragmented

structure of the Igbo political organization, it also comes to represent the unity of the Igbo people. Subsequently, such shrines were erected across Igboland. Among them were the Amadioha oracle at Ozuzu and the Agballa at Akwa, the Igweke oracle of Umunora (Forde & Jones, 1950).

The Igbo people are naturally republican. They continued to live in a cephalous and dispersed civilization. It is more certain that the Igbo people were not traditionally ruled by kings or chiefs. They governed in a democratic manner. The administrative, legislative, and judicial powers were assigned to the Oha-na-eze, the council of elders; the holders of the Ofo title; the family; the holders of the Ozo title; the Age - Grades; the Umuada; and the "Ala," or Earth's goddess represented by a Chief Priest. In general, the political and social organization of the Igbo people was segmented (Eze, 2013).

The structural organisation of Igbo political system was based on the following:

1. Village Administration: A village is seen as inhabited by a group of related families. Each family head held the Ofo title and all of them put together formed the council of elder. The council governed the village. Among the council of elders, one was recognized as the most senior to others. He was the 'Okpara'. Major disagreements were handled by the council of elders, or "Amala," while minor issues were resolved by the family. The gods made the ultimate decision on each case. The affairs of the village are discussed from time to time by family head.
2. The Age Grade: The age – grade are people of the same age group; they perform the following functions:
  - a. Perform the public duties such as: - clearing the paths, construction of roads, and markets etc.
  - b. They were involved in the administration of the villages
  - c. They served as army for the defence of the villages against external enemy.
  - d. They acted as the police force for the maintenance of law and order.
  - e. They helped in the implementation of policies made by the council of elders.
  - f. They assisted in checking abuse of powers by the paramount rulers and the council of elders.
  - g. They also perform ceremonial and cultural functions during important ceremonies in the village or communities.

The villagers make laws for themselves and even the age-grades can enact a law which the elders would accept. Succession to leadership position was not hereditary in Igbo political system.

Wealthy and influential men in the community or village are given the Ozo title holders. This title makes the holder to be recognised in the society and could then preside over meetings about issues affecting the community with elders.

Minor disputes were resolved using the age-grade system. The earth goddess Ala is very important to the functioning of the legal system; for instance, offences against Ala include murder, homicide, and the birth of abnormal offspring. The community as a whole may organize into a court to resolve conflicts, and the chief participates in judicial resolution. Dibia, the local physician, was also skilled at mediating conflicts amongst individuals.

## **KEY FEATURES OF PRE-COLONIAL IGBO GOVERNANCE**

### **1. Decentralized Authority in Pre-Colonial Igboland**

The concept of decentralized authority was a defining characteristic of governance in pre-colonial Igboland. Unlike many other societies in pre-colonial Africa, which were organized under centralized monarchies or empires, the Igbo people operated a stateless society with a

unique form of political organization (Eze, 2013). This system was marked by the absence of a single, overarching authority figure like a king or emperor. Instead, power was distributed across various levels of society, particularly at the village and clan levels (Nwaezeigwe, 2007). This decentralized structure had several key features that contributed to the effectiveness and stability of Igbo society.

- **Autonomous Villages**

**Village Republics:** Each village in Igboland functioned as an independent political unit, often referred to as a "village republic." These villages were largely self-governing, with their own systems of leadership, decision-making, and conflict resolution. The autonomy of these villages was a cornerstone of the decentralized system, allowing them to operate without interference from external authorities (Okpalaobi, 2010).

**Collective Leadership:** Leadership within these villages was typically vested in a council of elders, known as the "Ama-ala" or "Ndichie." This council was composed of respected members of the community, usually older men (and sometimes women) who had demonstrated wisdom, integrity, and a deep understanding of the community's customs and laws. The council made decisions on behalf of the village, but always with the consensus of the community (Onwuejeogwu, 1987).

- **Power Distribution and Shared Governance**

**Absence of a Centralized King:** Unlike the centralized kingdoms of the Yoruba or the empires of the Hausa-Fulani, the Igbo did not have kings or paramount rulers. The Igbo concept of kingship was foreign to most of the region, with the exception of a few areas where titles such as "Obi" or "Eze" emerged later under external influences. Instead, authority was diffused among various groups and institutions within the village (Nwaezeigwe, 2007).

**Shared Power Among Institutions:** Governance in Igboland involved multiple institutions, each with distinct roles and responsibilities. These included the council of elders, the age grades (groups of men and women of similar age), and various secret societies such as the "Ekpe" or "Nze na Ozo." Each institution had specific duties, such as maintaining law and order, overseeing communal projects, and enforcing social norms. This distribution of power ensured that no single group could dominate the political landscape, fostering a balance of power that was crucial for social stability (Nwaezeigwe, 2007).

- **Consensus-Based Decision-Making**

**Inclusive Governance:** Decision-making in Igboland was typically done through a process of consensus. The council of elders, for example, would engage in extensive discussions and debates, ensuring that all viewpoints were considered before arriving at a decision. This process of consensus-building was fundamental to the decentralized system, as it encouraged participation from all members of the community, regardless of status or wealth (Okpalaobi, 2010).

**Community Involvement:** The decentralized authority in Igboland also meant that governance was closely tied to the everyday lives of the people. The lack of a distant, centralized authority meant that decisions were made at the grassroots level, with direct input from those affected by them. This level of community involvement not only made the governance system more responsive but also ensured that leaders remained accountable to the people (Okpalaobi, 2010).

- **Flexibility and Adaptability**

**Adaptation to Local Needs:** The decentralized nature of Igbo governance allowed for a high degree of flexibility. Villages could adapt their governance structures to meet local needs and challenges, without being constrained by the dictates of a central authority. This adaptability

was crucial in a region characterized by diverse ecological zones, economic activities, and cultural practices .

**Evolution Over Time:** The system of decentralized authority was not static; it evolved over time in response to internal and external pressures. For example, the introduction of new titles and the formation of larger political units in some areas were responses to changes in trade, warfare, and contact with other cultures. This ability to evolve while maintaining core principles of decentralization and communal participation was key to the resilience of Igbo society (Eze, 2013).

- **Conflict Resolution and Justice**

**Localized Dispute Resolution:** The decentralized system also extended to the administration of justice. Disputes were typically resolved at the village level, with the council of elders or other local institutions acting as mediators. This localized approach to conflict resolution was effective in maintaining peace and order, as it was rooted in the customs and traditions of the community (Isichei, 1976).

**Restorative Justice:** The justice system in pre-colonial Igboland was primarily restorative rather than punitive. The focus was on restoring harmony within the community rather than on retribution. This approach was in line with the decentralized governance structure, which emphasized social cohesion and collective well-being (Eze, 2013).

## **2. Role of Age Grades and Secret Societies in Pre-Colonial Igboland**

In pre-colonial Igboland, the social structure and governance were deeply influenced by age grades and secret societies. These institutions played crucial roles in maintaining social order, governance, and cultural continuity. They were integral to the decentralized nature of Igbo society, where authority was distributed among various groups rather than concentrated in the hands of a single ruler (Uchendu, 1965). The roles of age grades and secret societies were multifaceted, involving responsibilities ranging from governance and conflict resolution to community development and the enforcement of social norms (Isichei, 1976).

In many Igbo communities, age grades were also tasked with providing security. Younger age grades often formed the village militia, responsible for defending the community from external threats and maintaining internal peace. They would be mobilized in times of conflict or war, and their readiness to protect the community was a key aspect of their identity and duty.

Age grades were responsible for various public works and community services. These could include constructing and maintaining roads, building and repairing community infrastructure such as markets, meeting halls, and shrines, and organizing communal labor for agricultural activities. Each age grade was assigned tasks based on their physical capabilities and the needs of the community at the time (Uchendu, 1965).

Secret societies in Igboland, such as the Ekpe, Nze na Ozo, and Okonko, were exclusive groups with restricted membership, usually composed of influential and respected members of the community. Membership in these societies was typically achieved through initiation, which involved rigorous rituals and the payment of substantial fees or offerings. These societies were "secret" in the sense that their internal workings, rituals, and codes were not disclosed to non-members (Uchendu, 1965).

Secret societies played significant roles in the administration of justice. They acted as arbiters in disputes, especially those that could not be resolved by the village council or age grades. The members of these societies were often considered the custodians of the community's laws and traditions, and their rulings were respected and enforced. The secrecy and authority of these societies added weight to their judgements, as they were believed to have access to spiritual and supernatural powers that could enforce their decisions (Uchendu, 1965).

Also, the secret societies were responsible for enforcing the community's moral and ethical standards. They could impose sanctions, fines, or even physical punishments on individuals who violated communal norms. Their authority was often unquestioned, as they were seen as the protectors of the community's spiritual and moral fabric (Isichei, 1976).

### **APPLICATION TO MODERN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

The governance structures of pre-colonial Igboland, particularly the decentralized authority, the roles of age grades, and secret societies, offer valuable lessons for modern public administration in Nigeria. The traditional practices of communal decision-making, shared governance, and localized authority can be adapted to address some of the critical challenges facing contemporary public administration, such as inefficiency, lack of representation, and accountability.

#### **1. Decentralization and Local Governance**

**Strengthening Local Government Autonomy:** The decentralized authority in pre-colonial Igboland, where each village functioned as an independent political unit, highlights the importance of local autonomy. Modern public administration in Nigeria could benefit from enhancing the autonomy of local governments, allowing them to make decisions that directly affect their communities without excessive interference from the central government. This would align with the principles of federalism, where local governments have the authority to manage local resources, plan development projects, and address the specific needs of their communities .

**Community-Based Decision-Making:** The consensus-based decision-making process in traditional Igbo society can be applied to modern local governance. Involving community members in decision-making processes through town hall meetings, public consultations, and participatory budgeting can ensure that the voices of the people are heard and considered in public administration. This would enhance the legitimacy of decisions and increase public trust in government institutions .

#### **2. Age Grades as a Model for Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility**

**Civic Participation and Youth Engagement:** The age grade system in pre-colonial Igboland, which organized individuals into groups based on age and assigned them specific community responsibilities, can be adapted as a model for civic engagement in modern Nigeria. By establishing structured civic programs that engage different age groups in community service, local development projects, and governance, the government can foster a sense of responsibility and ownership among citizens. This could be particularly effective in addressing youth unemployment and encouraging young people to participate in nation-building .

**Mentorship and Leadership Development:** The mentorship roles played by senior age grades in guiding younger members can be integrated into modern public administration. Establishing mentorship programs within government institutions, where experienced public servants mentor younger employees, can help transfer knowledge, build capacity, and ensure continuity in public service. This would also help to bridge the gap between generations and create a more cohesive and efficient public sector .

#### **3. Secret Societies and Traditional Institutions in Modern Governance**

**Incorporating Traditional Leaders into Governance:** The roles of secret societies in governance and conflict resolution in pre-colonial Igboland demonstrate the potential of integrating traditional institutions into modern public administration. Traditional leaders, who command respect and authority in their communities, can play a significant role in local governance by mediating disputes, enforcing communal norms, and contributing to decision-making

processes. This integration can help bridge the gap between formal government structures and indigenous governance systems, leading to more effective governance at the grassroots level .  
**Promoting Ethical Standards and Accountability:** The secret societies' role in enforcing ethical standards and punishing transgressions offers a model for promoting accountability in modern public administration. Establishing independent bodies with the authority to oversee the conduct of public officials, similar to the secret societies' oversight functions, can help curb corruption and ensure that public servants adhere to ethical standards. These bodies could be empowered to investigate and sanction unethical behavior, thus promoting transparency and accountability within the public sector .

#### **4. Restorative Justice and Conflict Resolution**

**Community-Based Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:** The traditional Igbo approach to justice, which emphasized restorative rather than punitive measures, can be adapted to modern public administration to improve conflict resolution and justice delivery. Community-based dispute resolution mechanisms, involving respected elders and traditional leaders, can be established to handle minor conflicts, land disputes, and communal issues. This would reduce the burden on formal courts, promote reconciliation, and maintain social harmony .

**Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR):** The principles of ADR, which are already gaining traction in Nigeria, resonate with the traditional Igbo practices of mediation and consensus. Incorporating traditional dispute resolution mechanisms into the formal legal system as part of ADR can enhance access to justice, particularly in rural areas where formal legal structures may be less accessible. This would create a hybrid system that draws on both modern legal practices and indigenous knowledge .

#### **CONCLUSION**

The governance structures of pre-colonial Igboland provide a rich source of ideas for improving modern public administration in Nigeria. By decentralizing authority, fostering civic engagement through age-grade-like structures, integrating traditional leaders into governance, and adopting restorative justice practices, Nigeria can create a more effective, inclusive, and accountable public administration system. These traditional concepts, when adapted to the modern context, offer practical solutions to some of the most pressing challenges facing Nigeria today.

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