

Politico-Administration and Judicial Structures of Iruekpen Community in Esan Society of Edo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study delves into the intricacies of the indigenous politico-administration and judicial structures of Iruekpen community in Esan society of Edo State Nigeria. By employing a qualitative research approach, this investigation examines the community's organizational framework, decision-making processes, and dispute resolution mechanisms. The research reveals a complex system of governance, characterized by the Onojie's leadership, Odionwele's leadership, the Edion's council and the punishment systems that underpinned the community's social order. Furthermore, this research highlights the cultural values and beliefs that shaped the community's politico-administrative and judicial structures, as well as the impact of external influences on these traditional systems. This study contributes to deeper understanding of the dynamics of indigenous governance and justice in Esan society, providing valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and community development.

Keywords: *Iruekpen Community, Esan Society, Traditional Governance, Politico-Administrative Structures, Judicial Structures, Customary Laws, Cultural Values*

Introduction

In the vast and culturally rich landscape of Nigeria, the Esan people of Edo State have maintained a distinct identity shaped by their history, language, and traditional institutions. Among the Esan communities, Iruekpen stands out as a unique example of a traditional society with a well-organized politico-administrative and judicial system. Despite the impact of colonialism, Western education, and modernization, Iruekpen community has managed to preserve its traditional systems, which continue to play a vital role in maintaining social order, resolving disputes, and promoting community development.

The study aims to explore the intricacies of Iruokpen's traditional politico-administrative and judicial system, examining its organizational structure, decision-making processes, and dispute resolution mechanisms. By shedding light on this traditional system, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of governance, justice, and social order in Iruokpen community, and to highlight the relevance of traditional institutions in contemporary Nigeria.

Iruokpen Traditions of Origin

a. The Ehiehinoseme Version of Iruokpen Theory of Origin

The people of Iruokpen are today about seventy kilometers north of Benin City, capital of Edo State. It is on a plateau with an altitude of 200 feet above sea level (Akinbode 5; Okojie 23). Ehiehinoseme Ehijie c. 1262 -1309 A.D. an Olokun priest from a far away land founded the Iruokpen kingdom by uniting all the various families he met together. His first capital was at Idumeke (Agbator's Diary 31-32; Esene's Diary 19).

Ehiehinoseme fled to Iruokpen when he had misunderstanding with his half brothers. He defeated in a wrestling bout the head of Iruokpen called Iseseelimin, the then greatest wrestler in the land and made himself the *Odionwele* (Community Head), and the kingdom since then adopted the title of *Odionwele* (Enato and Oseghale 22), that is, the oldest man in the kingdom as the kingdom's leader. How old he was at the time he ruled Iruokpen through the wrestling bout he had with Iseseelimin was unknown (Enato and Oseghale 22; Agbator's Diary 24; Esene's Diary 19; Eboigbe, Personal Communication; Odiagbe, Personal Communication).

Ehiehinoseme conquered the various stubborn families, whom were Idumegbede, Iklhin, Abia, Idumoza and Idumebo and made them united. He also defeated those stubborn families in wrestling contests. He eventually annexed them fully into an independent Iruokpen kingdom. He regrouped the various streets again into quarters after a thorough and careful study of the people's family traits and lineages. The name Iruokpen was already in existence when he arrived there and he did nothing to alter it (Agbator's Diary 43; Enato's Esene's Diary 11; Itolor, Personal Communication).

On Ehiehinoseme's arrival in Iruokpen Kingdom, he realized that religion was the opium of the people. He saw that the people of Iruokpen respects their various deities and rendered supplications to the Supreme Being called *Osenobulua* and in that wise, he submitted himself to the worship of the peoples' gods. He restructured the politico-administrative and socio-cultural polities by putting in place new ideological machineries of governance that were already partially in place, but not well implemented into practice prior his arrival (Agbator's Diary 51; Eboigbe, Personal Communication; Odiagbe, Personal Communication; Enato Esene's Diary). The machineries of governance and administration modified are the *Odionweleship*, *Edionnihilon*, *Agbama Notu*, *Igbama*, *Igene*, *Idianagbohan*, *Uduikhemen*, *Egbonughele* and the *Ikwawe* (Okojie 54; Enato Esene's Diary; Odiagbe, Personal Communication). He got himself a beautiful spirit filled wife called Iruikhidede who procreate him a mentally and psychologically balanced spiritual imbibed son. He named his son's *Ekpen*, and *Ekpen* became decades later the personified deity of Iruokpen Kingdom (Agbator's Diary 54).

Two decades after *Ekpen*'s birth, he became famous and revered due to his magical power and the power of seer he possessed. He saved Iruokpen from external enemies, silenced and conquered troublesome kingdoms of Ozalla, Ugbuyaya, Umokpe, and Ora amongst others. Leopards and lions in the forest accosted him several times but due to his tactical and dexterous skills in hunting and battlefield, he was able to triumph (Enato and Oseghale 22-23). On one

occasion in the forest of Ughodin, he encountered dangerous lions trying to kill the sacred leopard but for his magic spell, he saved the leopard and killed the lions. The leopard for the first time spoke, telling him, from henceforth, “you shall be called Iruokpen and you shall, after your time on earth be the deity of the land. Mortals shall worship you and acknowledge you as deity of *Ekpen*. The shrine of *Ekpen* shall rest its foundation in Idumeke. Your people from today shall see leopards as your totem, and leopards are not to be killed in Iruokpen Kingdom”. He automatically became the ancestors of the community while Iruikhidenoseme his virtuous supernaturally blessed wife became a sacred deity of her own.

b. The Magical Version of Iruokpen Theory of Origin

Another tradition of Iruokpen’s origin speculates that the community evolved from the mysterious and magical powers of Ehi Ehi Ehichioya, a powerful, mentally sound and supernaturally ordained man. According to tradition, he descended from the heaven with a glittering white gourd full of eggs, twelve precisely, in different shapes, colours and sizes with different names encrypted on each eggs – names that later became the twelve quarters of Iruokpen (Agbator’s Diary 32; Esene’s Diary 19; Enato Esene’s Diary 33; Enato and Oseghale 23).

On the exact spot he was directed to by the supernatural forces from the moon, he spat fire and water out of his mouth to the bare earth and took dance steps that lasted for twelve minutes and twelve seconds. He smashed the twelve eggs at twelve different spots on the earth, where immediately, humans sprang out of the smashed eggs (Agbator’s Diary 32; Esene’s Diary 19; Enato Esene’s Diary 33; Enato and Oseghale 23). At first the humans came in two’s, and later increased in numbers to twenty each within space of twelve hours. He smiled and danced seeing his good work yielding results and cried out “Oh my Sender! Oh my Maker! Oh my soul Keeper! I have fulfilled that which you sent me to do!” Hmm! I have fulfilled my mission of bringing into fruition your heavenly instructions. So you souls of Heavens and of the Moons spring forth into multiple blessings. Be peaceful, humble and love yourselves. Love yourselves oh you brothers and sisters of one Maker! Be the peace and joy of your world! (Agbator’s Diary 33; Esene’s Diary 20; Enato Esene’s Diary 34; Enato and Oseghale 24).

The twelve smashed eggs on the bare earth became until date the twelve quarters of Iruokpen community. The mysterious Ehi Ehi Ehichioys tapped twelve times on the bare earth with his staff and laughed for twelve days without stoppage. He blessed Iruokpen and wad away enmity from amongst them. He cried out on the twelfth day saying, “Oh Iruokpen, hear me my sons and daughters of one parentage. Unity is oneness, unity made the throne of your parents and so embrace unity until the end of time (Agbator’s Diary 34; Esene’s Diary 21; Enato Esene’s Diary 34; Enato and Oseghale 25).

He established the political, religious, socio-cultural and administrative institutions, which the present Iruokpen community and Esan society still upholds. He rained rain upon the land and blessed crop yield. He cursed famine and drought and blessed the entire twelve quarters for abundance of everything. Idumeke became the headquarters of Iruokpen simply because it was it, which produced the oldest man when the eggs were first, smashed to the bare earth (Enato and Oseghale 24; Enato “Iruokpen Traditions of Origin and Evolution” 3). Ehi Ehi Ehichioya humbly and prayerfully remained with the people for 72 days before eventually ascending to the heavens, the Moon precisely, to meet with his father and mother who sent him (Agbator’s Diary 32; Esene’s Diary 19; Enato Esene’s Diary 33; Enato and Oseghale 24). Other theories of Iruokpen origins such as; the biblical and creation version, the migration version, the Agbor version, and the Benin version of Iruokpen theory of origin abounds, but for the purpose of focus and precise, the paper

shall narrow on the above two discussed versions (Enato “Myths, Legends and Folklores in Ancient” 8).

From speculation, it is believe that other Esan communities and chiefdoms, especially Ekpoma politically and socially sprang out of Iruokpen, however, this controversial theory is under criticisms waiting for more Esan scholars to unravel the truth. It is seen that the origin of Iruokpen is shrouded in myths and legends (Enato “The Hamitic, Diffusionist and Conquest Theories” 12). To pin point it to a particular direction is academically bias. Overall, some comments are relevant here; Iruokpen had been peopled right from and before the 8th century A.D., and ever since, migrations from different directions had increased the population of the community (Enato “The Migration Theories and Settlement Patterns” 21). In addition, since its foundation, administrative machinery had evolved which sustained the stability of the land.

Of great importance, a prelude towards a plausible study of Iruokpen origin must embrace both the various migration theories and aboriginal factors. In addition, each available evidence and documents must be meticulously weighed and popular traditions, which propounded only version, rather than being considered in isolation, must be complemented not only by linguistic studies but also by totemic practices and general cultural peculiarities of the Iruokpen and probably other Esan people. Archaeology and other applications of interdisciplinary approach must be indelible assets (Okoduwa 7; Oseghale “Issues in Esan History and Relations” 23).

Geographical Location

Iruokpen is located along the Southern tip of Ekpoma chiefdom. It shares boundaries with Ehor in Uhumwode Local Government Area. From geographical view, Iruokpen is bounded in the West of Ozalla in Owan West Local Government Area, and in the East by Uhumwode River, traditionally known as ‘*Ede Ibiekumah*’, the deliverer of *Ekunma* now known as Ekpoma (Intelligence Reports of Ishan Division 12). To the North of Iruokpen is her sister and friendly neighbours in nomenclatures such as; Ujemen, Idumebo and Ihumudunmu.

Iruokpen is about seventy kilometers north of Benin City in the present day capital of Edo State. It is the first part of Esan West Local Government Area as well as Esan speaking community along the Benin/Auchi highway from the East. It is on a plateau with an altitude of 200 feet above sea level (Akinbode 4). It is a community assumed to have been founded during Oba Ewuare the Great era of the 15th century after the mass migration from Benin Kingdom. From a geographical view, Iruokpen is the largest of all the communities within Ekpoma chiefdom in terms of its both landscape and landmark, including population density (Enato “The Migration Theories and Settlement Patterns” 22). Out of the 22,193 people said to be in Ekpoma chiefdom by the 1953 and 1963 census figures, Iruokpen was 5,200 (Okojie 23). Still on the present day population estimates, Iruokpen is still on the high side.

Iruokpen has two major climatic seasons, as is the case throughout the rain forest belt. These are the wet (rainy) and the dry harmattan (*Okhuakhua*) seasons. The former normally lasts from the month of March to October in the same year (Akinbode 2). There is, however, a brief dry spell, which usually occurs about a month the month of August, known as ‘August Break’. The dry season, on the other hand begins roughly in November (though there occurs intermittent drizzling throughout the month) till February or early March. In the mid-dry season, a harsh dry and cold wind called the harmattan or ‘*Okhuakhua*’ in Iruokpen community sets in. a dry effect is felt throughout and during the dry season while the chill sets in at dusk and throughout the night to late morning (Akinbode 5).

As regards the pattern of settlement, there are twelve quarters in Iruékpen community and these until present day include Abia, Idumehonlen, Idumebo, Ebokpe, Idumeke, Ikhin, Idumegbede, Idumoza, Idumogo, Idumemalua, Ogbomoide and Ughodin (Enato “The Migration Theories” 11; Odiagbe, Personal Communication; Eboigbe, Personal Communication; Irabor, Personal Communication). Since the early times, the people of this harmonious, friendly and brotherly quarters have lived and still living in oneness and mutual understanding as they believed to have evolved from the same ancestral parentage.

Within these quarters, there exist sub-divisions, which are mini-quarters. The origin of each of these quarters traced to ancestors who are highly venerated as the people’s intermediary with the Almighty God ‘*Osenobulua*’ (Odiagbe “God’s, gods and Deities” 15). These ancestors act as the spiritual protectors and occupy a permanent place in the spiritual and religious lives of the people. The evolution and development of these twelve quarters is indeed interesting and in which fresh researches are critically advice to examine

In Display, is list of the Twelve Quarters and their various Deities

Quarters	Deity
Abia	Ohanibhie
Ebhokpe	Okpe
Idumebo	Oghonokpe
Idumeke	Ekpen
Ikhin	Ovia
Idumegbede	Ohanmhen
Idumoza	Oto
Idumehonlen	Ibiekumah
Idumugo	Ibiekumah
Idumemalua	Uda
Ogbomoide	Iserumun
Ughodin	Ojoli

Sources: Excerpt from the diary of Agbator Agbator, an Ohen (priest) of Ibiekumah Deity, in Iruékpen Community, 1998

Politico-Administrative Structures in Iruékpen

Going back to one of the tradition of origins that the founder of Iruékpen community emigrated from Benin (Oseghale “Issues in Esan History and Relations” 23-24), one would automatically expect that Iruékpen’s political and administrative structures would have a perfect resemblance of that of the Benin. At the helm of affairs was the great *Onojie* (King) of Ekpoma, whose position of governmental power, might and authority was and is synonymous to the great Oba of Benin (24).

The *Onojie* was the Supreme, if not absolute Head of State in the indigenous Ekpoma Chiefdom, consisting of communities/villages such as Iruékpen, Ujemen, Uke, Idumebo, Ihunmudumu, and Emaudo (Intelligence Report on the Ekpoma 12). His office was that of a perfect and respected constitutional system of monarchy, which was protected with wisely planned and structured indigenous laws governing succession installation and death of the holder (Enato “Religious Belief as Instrument” 23-24). The story of the origin of the *Onojieship* title was as old and ancient as the story of the origin of Ekpoma chiefdom and Iruékpen community itself. The *Onojie* lives in Eguare, the administrative headquarters of the chiefdoms where he presided over

crucial matters affecting the community of Iruékpen and other communities under his domain. His court was the Supreme as well as the final court of judgmental appeal (Enato “Traditional System of Governance” 13-14). In addition, like the Benin system after the Ogiiso dynasty, the system of succession to the throne of the *Onojieship* automatically became effective through the primogeniture principle after the coming king would have performed the burial rite of the late father (Egharevba 16). In addition, the *Onojie*, by virtue of his position had political, judicial, economic, and spiritual rights over his people as the Oba of Benin exercised in Benin Kingdom (Oseghale “Issues in Esan History and Relations” 31).

Next to the *Onojie* in the administrative hierarchy were the *Ekhaemon*, meaning subordinate chiefs. They were the *Onojie*’s representatives drawn from the different villages, which make up Ekpoma. They supported the *Onojie* in presiding over the matters that affect the whole chieftom of Ekpoma. Inside this class were two categories named the hereditary and the non-hereditary titles (Enato “Traditional System of Governance” 28). The hereditary titles and the *Onojie* formed the State Executive Council and these titled men obtained and held their positions by right of birth rather than at the pleasure of the *Onojie* and tended to be more independent than the class of non-hereditary chiefs. The non-hereditary titles were merely to enhance status and practice and these titles were given as reward for good performance or services at the state level (Eboigbe, Personal Communication; Irabor, Personal Communication). Unlike the hereditary titles, the *Onojie* could appoint and dismiss them at will because they were not made by tradition. Since the *Ekhaemon* were the intermediary between the *Onojie* and the elders in the villages, they however, played an important part in the administration. In fact, the *Ekhaemon* could humiliate the *Odionwele* (Head of a village/community) in the name of the *Onojie* and got away with it (Isokun 31-32).

The Age Grade (*Otu*) system was an important instrument in the political structure in Iruékpen community in the pre-literate, literate and post-colonial era and up till date. Every individual belonged to several overlapping groups, which provided the frames of references for his daily life (Intelligence Report on the Ekpoma 12). The *Otu* was a key concept in understanding Iruékpen social organization, which played important part in the indigenous administrative system. In the system, membership was not voluntary and it carried with it both obligations and privileges. Migrating from one age-grade into the next was ritually celebrated. There were the upper (elder) age grade who were fifty-one years and above, the middle age grade who were sixteen to fifty years, and the lower (junior) age grade who were one to fifteen years (Odiagbe, Personal Communication; Oseghale 56; Enato and Oseghale 158-159).

The highest grade in the community of Iruékpen in the upper age grade was the *Odionwele*, the oldest man and he headed all matters that affect the community politically, economically, socio-culturally and religiously. Meeting that affect the elders (*Edions*) alone was held in the *Odionwele*’s house while bigger meetings were held in the village square at the *Okuoghele* (village hut) (Okojie 50).

The *Edionihilon*’s group was next to the *Odionwele* in the upper (elder) age grade. The members of this group were seventy-one years and above. By virtue of their ages, they were traditionally regarded as fathers of the community. As a higher decision making body, their decision were subject to the approval of the *Odionwele* (Okojie 56; Egharevba 15).

Next to the ladder of seniority in the elder age grade was the group known as the *Igbama Notu*. Their ages were between sixty-six to seventy years. they were also in the power of making decisions. Their decisions were largely and equally subject to the approval of the *Edionnihilon* and *Odionwele*. When matters get out of their control, they refer such group to the *Edionnihilon* for

their contribution (Intelligence Report on the Ekpoma 13; Eboigbe, Personal Communication; Odiagbe, Personal Communication; Enato and Oseghale 55-56).

Last in the rank of the upper age grade was the *Igbama*, which consisted of the ages between fifty-one to sixty-five years. This group supervised the *Igene* in the indigenous political administration, but the action taken in their group had to be approved by those groups above them. The members of all the elders (*Edions*) dealt with criminal act against the traditional laws and customs (Isokun 36; Odiagbe, Personal Communication). Such crimes included adultery, rape and murder, which could disrupt the community orderliness. However, their decisions to condemn criminal found guilty were subject to the approval of the *Onojie* before final execution (Eboigbe, Personal Communication; Okojie 56).

In the Middle Age Grade, the *Igene* group was the uppermost. The ages of members of this group were subject to the approval of the *Igbama* group. They were those who went to war and did the supervision of the communal works carried out by the *Idianagbohan*, a group next to theirs. When the *Idianagbohan* failed in their duty, the *Igene* took up such matters because of their years of experiences (Eboigbe, Personal Communication). Before initiation into the *Igene* and other age grade above, one must have performed the clothing ceremony (*Irhuen*) which showed that, one was already a man (Odiagbe, Personal Communication). Next to this group was the *Idianagbohan*, which consisted of the ages between twenty-five to forty years. this group was essentially trained for war; hence, they formed the bulk of the warrior. This body also acted as a disciplinary body more or else the traditional police of the community (Enato and Oseghale 45).

The last in the ladder of the middle age grade was the group of *Eduikhuemen*, meaning the fearless ones. This group consisted between the ages of sixteen to twenty-four years. they supervised the *Egbonughele*, the street sweepers. They also acted as security guards of the community during the daytime and soldiers in the real sense during wars. The role performed by this group was great and well valued by the community (Okojie 59, Enato "Traditional System of Governance" 28).

The first in the lower (junior) age grade was the *Egbonughele*, the sweepers of the major streets, including the village square of the community. The ages of members of this group were drawn from the ages of ten to fifteen years. They also participated in minor jobs. The strongest among them during wrestling contests organized by the elders received enlistment as soldiers in the reserve during wars.

The second group in the lower age grade and of course, in the last in all the age grade in the community was the *Ikowe*. The members of this group were mostly children from the ages of one to nine years. The oldest among this group occasionally went to help the women who had put to bed. They also prayed for married women who were sterile (Aibanegbe, Personal Communication; Ediale 19-22).

In the indigenous administration *Ikhuo* that is women were not correctly involved. The oldest married woman was declared as the *Odionwele*. Whenever there was an epidemic in the community, suspected to be caused by an unknown person. Such utterances included '*Ekwe gbo le din gbe le*', meaning unknown person suspected to be the cause of the epidemic would perish or die after sexual intercourse (Aibanegbe, Personal Communication; numerous and Experienced Irukep Women).

In terms of military organization, which was an arm of its administration, there was no standing army amongst Irukep people; every bodied man from *Uduikhuemen* up to *Igene* was already source for military requirement. (Edetanlen, Personal Communication; Enato and Oseghale, 65; Okojie 72). Aside these age grades, every man capable of handling weapons had a

fight when the need arose. The leader of the warrior was *Okakulo*, who was not only a physically strong man, but also a dreaded medicine man (Ediale 332-37). Through this military organization, there was security in the village and people went about their jobs without the slightest molestation (Intelligence Report on the Ekpoma 17). Thus, Iruokpen's political structure embodied the pattern of their culture, which laid the basis for their integration and success in their traditional system of administration.

Ladder of Iruokpen Age-Grade (*Otu*) System

A. Upper Age Grade

Odionwele	100+
Edionnihilon	71 and above
Igbama Notu	66-70
Igbama	51-65

B. Middle Age Grade

Igene	41-50
Idianagbohan	25-40
Uduikhuemen	10-21

C. Lower Age-Grade

Egbonughele	10-15
Ikwowe	1-9

Ladder of Iruokpen Traditional Political Stratification

Onojie (King) of Ekpoma



Okhaemon (Plural Ekhaemon)



Odionwele



Edionnihilon



Igbama Notu

Igbama



Igene



Idianagbohan



Oduikhuemen



Egbonughele



Ikwawe

Source: Excerpt from Ediale, P.O. "Iruokpen and Her Neighbours up to 1900", B.A. Essay, Bendel State University, 1990.

Traditional Jurisprudence in Irukepken

In Irukepken, the interpretation of the indigenous laws and customs was the prerogative of the *Egbonughele*, *Uduikhuemen*, *Idianagbohan*, *Igene*, and the Council of Elders that consisted of the *Igbama Notu*, *Igbama*, *Edionnihilon* and the *Odionwele*. This group of people tried cases ranging from crimes such as arson, adultery, theft cases, witchcraft just to mention a few after which their recommendations were made to the *Onojie* (King) in Eguare, the traditional headquarter of Ekpoma for a final verdict. At the end, appropriate punishment ranging from public ridicule, banishment to execution was enforced. For instance, if a woman was found guilty of adultery, her public hair was shaved to humiliate her (Aibanegbe, Personal Communication; Itolor, Personal Communication; Airoboman, Personal Communication; Airidu, Personal Communication; Okojie 62)

The guilty woman/offender was stripped of all her clothes and was rubbed with a terrible stinging nettle leaves all over her body to make her appearance irritating. She was then made to carry a heavy object on her head and was paraded round the community with much hooting and light flogging with sticks, a way to ridicule her and make her remorseful which in turn served as an object of lesson to others (Okojie, 64; Aidede, Personal Communication; Akhimien, Personal Communication). At the end of the show, she was allowed to her husband's house after having appeased their ancestors to avenge their anger on the evil doers. The appeasement was with a sacrificial he-goat (Aidede, Personal Communication; Esene's Diary; Agbator's Diary; Odiagbe, Personal Communication).

The people of Irukepken traditionally believed in the existence of witchcraft. To define witchcraft, it is the manifestation of these mystical forces, which may be born in a person, inherited, or acquired in various ways (Agbator's Diary; Esene's Diary; Odedenobhi, Personal Communication). For some people, it functions without their being aware of it, or having control over it. More often witchcraft and magic are combined and work evil together whether deliberately or involuntarily on the part of the witch or magician (Mbiti 166). While we may look for a clear academic distinction between the two words, we have to bear in mind that in the village there is often no such distinction. For our consideration here, we shall treat the two terms, witchcraft and evil magic, as if there was no distinction between them.

Irukepken inhabitants from the earliest times traditionally and customarily believed in the efficacy of and existence of witchcraft activities, which they humbly and respectfully regarded as being a spiritual offence and a crime (Itolor, Personal Communication; Airoboman, Personal Communication). In this act of evil practice, the women were mostly involved in this act of evil perpetration in this theatre of heinous display. All types of trouble emanating out of barrenness in human beings to a bad harvest are usually attributed to the menace of witches (Okojie 78; Itolor, Personal Communication). Hence, Irukepken community treated witchcraft activities as a serious community offence (Enato "Traditional Jurisprudence in Irukepken" 1-3).

A suspected witch or wizard was usually arraigned before the native court of the *Idianagbonhan* for minor interrogation, and if the response from the suspected offenders unsatisfactorily appeared to the court, the so-called offender would again be immediately referred to the Council of Elders for a major trial. The suspect in this court of the Council of Elders would be given *Ohakin* – a portion brewed from seaweed plant – to drink in order to prove his or her innocence (Okojie 59; Agbator's Diary; Esene's Diary; Odiagbe, Personal Communication; Enato "The Leopard People of Irukepken" 21). When the suspect fell down (*Odabhamon*) after drinking this portion, he or she would either be killed in the open market square by hanging or banished from the village. In most cases, death sentences were usually passed on such delinquent because

no village would accept a banished person who was found guilty of witchcraft (Okojie 63; Intelligence Report on the Ekpoma 18).

A witch uses incantations, words, rituals and magical objects to inflict harm on the victim. To do this, she may use nails, hairs, clothes, or other possessions of the victim, which she burns, pricks or wishes evil to. The belief is that by inflicting harm on what once belonged to a person, that person is automatically harmed (Mbiti 164). Another method is to dig objects into the ground across the path where the intended victim is likely to pass, at his gate, or in his fields. It is also believed that the witch may send flies, bees, other insects and certain birds or animals, to take harm to the victim so that when they touch him or he sees them he will fall sick or meet with the intended misfortune (Numerous Female Informants in Iruokpen; Mbiti 166). Sometimes people in Iruokpen may wish simply to get rid of others for the fun of it, to benefit by inheriting their property, or to take revenge for some wrong done to them (Enato "Ibiekumah Nojie" 11, 23, 32; Eboigbe, Personal Communication).

While the people of Iruokpen may rightly condemn evil magic, sorcery and witchcraft, they see some positive points about them. Belief in the mystical powers helps people to find explanations when things go wrong. They are not satisfied with knowing only how misfortunes occurs or diseases are caused, they want to know also who caused them to happen as they did, when they did, and to whom they dis. By putting the blame on the practice of magic or sorcery or witchcraft by someone in the community, people are able to reach an answer, which appears to them satisfactorily. Such an answer harmonizes with the view of the universe, which recognizes that there are many invisible forces at work and that some of them are available to human beings (Mbiti 168; Uche-Oseghale, Personal Communication).

One other positive aspect of the belief is that once people fear that their neighbour or relative may apply magic or witchcraft against them, they are likely to refrain from certain offences like stealing, rudeness, committing crimes, or deliberately offending their neighbours or relatives. Thus, the belief becomes a factor for stabilizing relations among relatives, neighbours, and members of the community (Selected Male Elders of Iruokpen; Selected Female Elders of Iruokpen; Mbiti 168). Death sentence was passed on all theft cases. Due to death sentences passed on all theft cases by Iruokpen, other communities regarded her as Iruokpen Nomoidan – Iruokpen who don't spare her children if found guilty of theft. As such person caught stealing goat, fowl, and yam seedling or in any form of theft cases, whether murder was involved in it or not was tried and subsequently hung at the market place. This definitely may have enhanced discipline in the community (Okojie 82).

In Iruokpen, incest was highly regarded as a huge abominable crime. Incest cases were when a man had carnal knowledge with his mother, in-law (sister and mother), aunt, sisters, paternal and maternal cousins in the community. The same was applicable to the women. If the people involved were caught, women punished them. They were punished by being made to sacrifice a matured goat (*Udewe*) to the ancestors to aid avert their punitive measures in the shrine (Odiagbe, Personal Communication; Agbator's Diary). Up till the 21st century Iruokpen community, incest is regarded as a huge taboo in the community.

In this sin of incest, the woman suffered the heavier punishment and shame. In theory, the two sinners had to provide the goat, but in practice the man paid a nominal amount of anything from a few cowries to half the cost of a goat. All that were required of him for the appeasement of the disapproving dead ancestors was that he must pay something towards the cost of a goat (Esene's Diary; Eboigbe, Personal Communication; Aibanegbe, Personal Communication).

A case in point was a woman, say a mother whose lustful and immoral emotional desire lured her into having sexual and carnal affair with her biological son in Iruokpen, precisely in Abia quarter. The immoral and abominable affair had long been ongoing since the year 2000 till the tail of 2012 when both were caught in the act. The people and community frowned against the taboo. The woman and son were exposed to the public and were made to go round the community nude after which fines were imposed on them. Of recent too, several adulterous Iruokpen married mothers, women were made to parade round the market and the community nude; booed, flogged, jeered, mocked, later fined and cleansed to avert ancestral and generational curses upon their families and community at large (Odiagbe, Personal Communication, Eboigbe, Personal Communication; Enato and Oseghale 166-168).

Iruokpen Indigenous Beliefs as Instrument of Politico-Administration

From the historical and socio-cultural angle, religion has played a particularly important role in ethical philosophy all down the ages because it has been an imperative instrument for enforcing moral codes (Agbator's Diary; Esene's Diary; Intelligence Reports on Ishan Division of Benin 17). Iruokpen had its own religious beliefs, which were used in the day-to-day administration of the community. Like the Binis (Benins), Iruokpen believed in life after death of their departed ones – father, mother, founder of the community, heroes and others who had died after living exemplary life on earth and had joined the council of ancestors in the invincible world. From the world beyond, they joined and helped in the administration of the community (Agbator's Diary; Esene's Diary).

In addition, even when they had passed into the spiritual world beyond as a continuation of their functions, they exercised disciplines, enforced penalties, promoted peace and prosperity, warned of impending danger, rebuked those who had failed to follow their special duties and in some cases caused adversity to the community (Enato "Ibiekumah Nojie" 11, 23). As factor of cohesion in Iruokpen community, sacrifices were made to the ancestors to make them more active (Odiagbe, Personal Communication; Enato and Oseghale 168). The ancestors of Iruokpen community were regarded as divinities because of their titanic contributions and achievements in the community while they were on earth. One of such defied ancestors was *Ekipen*, whose cult is still formidable at Idumeke in Iruokpen (Intelligence Report on the Ekpoma 21).

Historically, *Ekipen* was assumed the first son of the founder of Iruokpen called 'Eken' by virtue of his extra-ordinary contribution as a warrior who brought military fame to the community. The inhabitants of Iruokpen deified him thus began the *Ekipen* religious cult (Uche-Oseghale, Personal Communication). Every individual went there to worship and seek the aid of Ekipen. In some cases, the individual to seek the help of *Ekipen* against hostile neighbours did the worship. The entire community carried out occasional worship of the divinity during the new yam festival, otherwise known as Ihioban, which took place in the month of September, and the end of year festival, otherwise known as *Ikukpe*, which came up in December (Benard, Personal Communication).

During these aforementioned festivals, *Ekipen* was thanked for the blessings and protections of the past years and more blessings and protections were asked for during the incoming years. Another divinity generally worshipped by the people of Iruokpen and the people of Orhua – a community North-West of Iruokpen was *Iruikhide* (Aibanegbe, Personal Communication; Itolor, Personal Communication). The reason for this joint worship was based on the historical fact that *Iruikhide* was assumed to be the mother of both Eken and Orhua. And both

usually worshipped together at the Northern outskirt of Iruokpen (Information from Numerous Elders; Agbator's Diary; Esene's Diary, Odiagbe, Personal Communication).

In addition, there was a strong belief among the people of these villages that whenever there was an impending danger or attack from their enemies, the spirit of Iruikhide would come to the aid of these communities (Agbator's Diary; Esene's Diary, Odiagbe, Personal Communication). another aspect of their religious belief was the consultation of oracles when faced with crisis. It was believed that oracle has the power to reveal the causes and solution for any crisis in the community. The *Onojie*, on his part also applied religion for the stare power. He was regarded as sacrosanct because of his priestly functions. Through these priestly functions, he was able to impose himself on his subject as the supreme religious authority in the land (Agbator's Diary; Esene's Diary, Odiagbe, Personal Communication; Enato and Oseghale 77-78). Overall, the religious belief of Iruokpen traditional administrative system was meant to engender in peace and harmony in the entire community.

Impact of Traditional Administration and Political Structures in Iruokpen

Here, it is explained how the traditional and political structures evolved, and how it was put into practices. Efforts will now be made to examine how these structures helped to sustain Iruokpen community over time, and how it made the community to grow from strength to strength and from might to might up to the first phase of the twentieth century at the period of colonial conquest.

The traditional administration and political structures ensured unity and cohesion among the people. This was because of the inbuilt checks and balances which ensured efficiency. The unity and cohesion which the system provided ensured a lot of continuity on the system up to the present day (Enato "Western Education and Socio-Economic Change" 11). By the first phase of the twentieth century when the British rule was already entrenched in Nigeria, there were changes in the politico-administrative structures in many traditional societies because of the invaded colonial values, norms and beliefs; including technology, racial pride and prejudice (12). Then, these changes were seldom noticeable in Iruokpen system of traditional administration. This was simply because the system was already deep rooted.

The political structure provided an acceptable traditional hierarchy wherein the King (*Onojie*) of Ekpoma chiefdom was at the helm of affairs while his subordinate chiefs closely followed him. The age grade system that was a corporate entity and whose members not only felt conscious of their role of duties, unity and of their distinctiveness, was next in the ladder of the traditional socio-political organization. This system, on its own, was monarchical. It was based on the principle that the proper companion for a person in the society where to be sought out among those in the same age of physical development (Isokun 23-224).

The system of traditional administration promoted orderliness, peace and harmony in the community. There were traditional laws and customs in the society, which contained the laid down 'dos' and 'don't' (Odiagbe, Personal Communication). Besides, these laws and customs contained the laid down policies for the day-to-day administration of the community. for instance, to each group in the age grade system was attached its rights and duties which must be observed at each stage and for every individual to be successful in life, he had to be sure of harmonious support of the age group to which he belonged. This was more, so that age-grade system was a convenient means of differentiating age-sets within the society where old age was a stupendous social importance. This at the same time connotes that a senior age-grade had the right to direct and

command a junior one if necessary. There was also the law of inheritance and property rights, which was orderly and peaceful (Numerous Elders of Irukep).

To buttress further, morality and sound informal education were imparted on the political institution through the firm administrative system. According to Eboigbe, “to offend the moral codes of the land as laid down in distant times by the ancestors is to offend the ancestral spirits. To this would be too foolhardy” (Personal Communication). In that sense, the traditional administration was used as a weapon of social control and solidarity. It was not uncommon for unusual action to be taken against people who committed an offence or behaved in a wrong manner. Besides, the ancestors also help to ensure morality in the community by inflicting punishments on those involved in all cases of incest (Intelligence Report on the Ekpoma 19; Numerous Elders of Irukep; Okojie 73). These delinquents were afflicted with different kinds of sickness, and not until the necessary sacrifices were offered to the ancestors, the patient would never be whole. The severity with which a case was normally dealt with was a deterrent to other members in future (Danoye 34)

Through this administrative system, the society tried to imbued the people with a sense that powerful protective qualities radiating through the system were best achieved by adhering to the conventional manner of life that the community believed to be right for its members. In line with this, everybody was sure of what was right and wrong. It is important to point out that the age-grade also carried out the educational policy of the society, for if any process of duty not known previously was assigned, the opportunity was taken to learn it. Every members of the group received some training in such a way that could make him/her to be able to do duty allocated to the group. This was an aspect of informal education (Enato “Western Education and Socio-Economic Change in Colonial Esan” 43-45).

Security and stability prevailed in the community because of the effectiveness of the administrative machinery. Irukep had no standing army, but then, there were able bodied, who were enlisted to fight and defend the community in times of insurrection and emergency (Oseghale “On Ideological Development” 26-27). The men were those who fought for the community during its turbulent times (Okojie 78; Enato and Oseghale 172). The efficiency of the army ensured both internal and external security in the community. Internally, people carried out their socio-cultural and economic activities without the slightest molestation due to the security situation (Olumese 45-48).

The people worshiped Irukhide, the defied ancestress, and this divinity acted as a spiritual informant as well as defender of Irukep community. The absence of chaos and confusion in the administrative system ensured stability, especially the pre-colonial and colonial times. According to Odiagbe, S.E:

The traditional administrative structure was functional and encouraged respectability and punctuality, and guarded against incompetence and indolence. Irukep was well-established, well organized, dynamic cum dramatic in its political and administrative frameworks, even more and richly structured than her other Esan sister communities and chiefdoms at the time and still in this Gen Zee dispensation (Personal Communication).

Another impact of the traditional administration on the people of Irukep was the merriment, which it provided. Religiously, festivals such as *Ikukpe* and *Ihioban* provided a worshipping avenue whereby *Ekpen*, a deified ancestor of the community was offered thanks for his protections and blessings during the year (Enato “The Significance of Religious Festivals” 21-23). These festivals were celebrated with pomp and pageantry and with much gusto because the

devotees of *Ekpen* believed that he was the source of peace. People visited and entertained one another during the festivals (26).

The traditional administration equally provided a base for the establishment of good political, economic, socio-cultural, and moral relations between Iruokpen and her neighbours. The fact is that the type of administration, which operated in Iruokpen, is obtained almost simultaneously and alike in the neighbouring communities. As such, there were bound to be cordial relations between her and its friendly neighbours. There was the traditional administrative method known as *Okoven* – which was used to work out boundary line from time to time between Iruokpen and her neighbours (Olumese 55; Intelligence Report on the Ekpoma 21). *Okoven* was sworn to for two fundamental reasons, either to put a halt to existing or imminent hostilities between communities or to guarantee continuous peaceful co-existence in Iruokpen and other Esan communities (55). The elders and *Enebo* or diviners representing the affected communities traditionally swore to *Okoven* oath. *Okoven* oath cements relationship; promote friendship, kinship and non-aggression between the affected communities. The spot on which the oath was taken constituted the *Alo Okoven* altar (56). A citizen who contravened its tenets made atonement here. The ancestors were regarded by the people as the custodians of the *Okoven* oath while the spirits were held to be omnipotent and the oath was most binding (Olumese 57; Odiagbe, Personal Communication; Eboigbe, Personal Communication).

The traditional administration that was based through the continuous loyalty to the king (Onojie) of Ekpoma by his subjects was a secured one. His court was the head of the administration. His court was supreme as well as being the final court of appeal. His use of religion for state power made him an important public figure of respectable character and magnanimity in the chieftom. It was through this administrative structure that their welfare was kept intact in preventing any devastating influence. Their culture itself was the totality of their ideas, and values that characterizes their society and held the people together. These cultural elements were manifested in their religious, socio-economic and political institutions. These cultural elements, which were evolved over hundreds of years, represented the people of Iruokpen's growth and development, or some degree of growth and development in integrating themselves in their environment (Odiagbe, Personal Communication; Enato "Western Education and Socio-Economic Change in Colonial Esan" 23; Intelligence Report on the Ekpoma 24).

Thus, the potency of the traditional administration of Iruokpen as depicted from the perspective of its impact on the community actually put the community on the path of well-structured development. Stretched further, the sound and robust traditional administrative and political machineries were the source of its strength and progress.

In all, the system in no small measure held the people together until the British colonial Authority imposed her rule on the people and Esan society and Nigeria in general, officially in 1914 (Intelligence Report on Ishan Division 11).

Significance and Benefits of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to a deeper understanding of the traditional governance and justice systems of Iruokpen community, which can inform policy decisions, community development initiatives, and cultural preservation efforts. The benefits of this research are multifaceted:

1. **Cultural Preservation:** This study helps to document and preserve the cultural heritage of Iruokpen community, ensuring that its traditional systems and practices are not lost to future generations.

2. **Community Development:** By understanding the community's traditional governance and justice systems, development practitioners can design more effective and culturally sensitive interventions that build on existing social structures.
3. **Policy Reforms:** The research can inform policy reforms aimed at promoting decentralized governance, community participation, and access justice, particularly in rural areas.
4. **Conflict Resolution:** The Study's findings on traditional dispute resolution mechanisms can provide valuable insights for conflict resolution initiatives in Iruokpen community and beyond.
5. **Academic Contributions:** This research contributes to the broader literature on traditional governance, justice, and social order, providing a unique case study that can inform comparative analyses and theoretical debates.

Contemporary Relevance

In contemporary Nigeria, this study's findings have significant implications for:

1. **Decentralization and Local Governance:** The research highlights the importance of decentralized governance and community participation in decision-making processes.
2. **Access to Justice:** The study's findings on traditional justice systems can inform initiatives aimed at increasing access to justice, particularly in rural areas.
3. **Cultural Revitalization:** The research demonstrates the importance of preserving cultural heritage and promoting cultural revitalization efforts in Nigeria's diverse communities.

The traditional politico-administrative and judicial structures in Iruokpen community, such as the *Odionwele* judge's role in adjudicating witchcraft cases, have a lasting impact on the community's governance and justice systems. To this day, these traditional practices continue to influence decision-making processes and dispute resolution mechanisms in Iruokpen community. For instance, the contemporary council of elders in Iruokpen community still draws on traditional customs and norms when resolving conflicts and making decisions. This blending of traditional and modern practices has significant implications for community development initiatives and social justice in Iruokpen community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the complexities of traditional politico-administrative and judicial structures in Iruokpen community. Notably, these practices continue to shape the community's governance and justice systems to this day. As Iruokpen community and Esan society navigates the challenges of modernization and development, understanding and appreciating its traditional heritage is crucial. This research highlights the importance of preserving cultural knowledge and promoting culturally sensitive development initiatives in Iruokpen community and beyond. Finally, this study has provided a nuanced understanding of the traditional politico-administrative and judicial structures of Iruokpen community, highlighting their significance and relevance to contemporary Nigeria.

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