

**IGBO TRADITIONAL POLITICAL GOVERNMENT IN THE LIGHT OF  
JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: A  
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

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**Abstract**

*No history of mankind has been distorted like that of Africa and the Africans. The distorted picture about Africa suited human trade and Justified colonialism magnificently in the eyes of invading Europeans. Through abnegation of our history, the European was able to rape and exploit Africans. Hence, anything we had before the European contact was seen as primitive and unworthy to be counted. This research adopted a comparative analysis between the Igbo traditional political government and Jean Jacques Rousseau's political philosophy. Thus, the aim of study is to show a tremendous similarity between the Igbo traditional political government which was called an ordered anarchy and that of Jean Jacques Rousseau; a political ideal society. Thus, no nation is devoid of political thought and as such, our findings show that what the Europeans thought they gave to us was initially with us from the beginning. In conclusion, the work recommends that what the Africans need is freedom from mental slavery so that they can see the inherent beautiful values in Africa.*

**Keywords:** Igbo, Traditional Politics, Government, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Freedom

**Introduction**

Democratic system of government has been with Igbo Africa before the European invasion and this is evident in our political system of government. However, there is a conscious realization that the white colonialist sense of superiority has practically eliminated African's identity. What is the best way to show this identity? Africans are understood through their history and that is nothing but their experiences comprising of events, actions and inaction. Thus, one cannot deny the significant role of oral tradition in the reconstruction of African history.

Furthermore, one may still ask: Does any political system exist in Africa prior to European Invasion? If yes, then what is the nature of this political system in Igbo

land? This work is preoccupied with task of finding out and establishing with facts that political government existed in Igbo society before the advent of the colonialist and as such is similar to Jean Jacques Rousseau's political society. Hence, the urge to uphold comparatively the similarities of Igbo traditional political government prior to European invasion and the highly held Jean Jacques Rousseau's political society to show that both are almost the same.

For the Igbo, the most important element is community or any political unit is the human element. Prof. Onwuejeogwu once said that the word "Igbo" itself means (to the Igbo themselves) "a community of people". The colonial masters can try as much as they can to deny this relationship of which is based on the dialects of understanding between the community and individual. As Mulumba Obiajulu (2009) asserted:

The intention here is neither to deny the existence of government among the Igbo prior to Colonialism nor to suggest that it was completely imported as foreign. Igbo society recognizes the concept of government and Ipso facto, the individual who form the membership of the government that is government of people (p.13).

Therefore, the Igbo land before the advent of British was characterized by aspect of culture and distinct political institutions that flourished and contributed in the Maintenance of orderliness in various Igbo communities.

The territory of their political unit (whether it is a sub-lineage, a lineage, a village, village group or clan) is usually in terms of the people who make it up. The people are in turn defined as people belonging to one ancestor or father (Umunna) or rather people belonging to one blood. This inclusiveness in extreme, inculcate even their daughters married into other political unit.

The pre-colonial Igbo traditional form of government is Traditional Republicanism, in true sense the egalitarian nature of it gave equal rights and privilege to all. Hence, the Igbo government was never by one person. It was government by a body of elders (council of elders) village assembly made up of all adult males, secret societies, age groups and diviners. It was a type of direct democracy that encouraged collective responsibility, Individual participation and collective decision-making. It was democracy where decision was taken through dialogue and consensus, to convince and seek agreement from everyone involved, thus, demonstrating the type of respect the society had for every individual.

This was the state of the Igbo society before their contact with the colonial masters. The European could not understand their system of government 'Indirect rule', hence, they called it an ordered anarchy. The external force of an Imposition and political dominion by forceful means which was christened colonialism, were the means through which our European imperialist has tried to bastardize our culture. Nevertheless, all that has happened is that changes have occurred here and there but the basic political culture will appear to have merely adapted itself to the changing times. As Simon Ottenberg (1963) aptly observed:

...the Igbos (SIC) has probably changed the least while changing the most. ...Social, religion, economic etc has been modified through cultural contact, but many of the basic patterns of social behavior such as the emphasis on alternative choice and goals, achievement and competition, and the lack of strong autocratic authority, have survived and are part of the newly developing culture (p.142).

All the movements above have proved beyond doubt that we have political structure before the European invasion and no one can deny the fact that we have history to call our own.

### **Igbo Traditional Political Institutions**

Having X-rayed the Igbo people as being generally associated with Traditional Republicanism, hence, it is one that is replete with Democratic principles. The above assertion is corroborated by Theophilus Okere, (2005:173) thus, "in the light of the above, one can say that in pre-colonial Nigeria, when government was village based and small scale in Igbo land, there was important democratic principles at work. He mentioned that they are direct participation in open parliamentary debate, either in the village or town level, consensus etc. In inclusion also is the means of sanction and social control of these democratic principles.

Moreover, we are going to expose the Igbo traditional political institutions and also its means of sanction and social control will be outlined.

#### *The Town Assembly*

At the top of Igbo traditional political institution is the town assembly. This is because as Godalex Ezeani (2003) would put it:

The Igbo nation, structurally, was not a republic. But within the Igbo nation were many republics, each being autonomous in its organization vis-à-vis the others. It is clear from history that the entirety of the Igbo people has no recognized single ruler or leader. Rather, the obodo (Town) represented the highest political unit; one compatible to say Nigeria, Ghana, Togo etc (pp.38-39).

However, these different towns enjoyed their respective autonomy within their territories structurally, the town is a collection of village which as we are going to see, are themselves collection of kindreds, so that the town is the largest single collection of lineages which share several things in common. The strongest common interest which keeps the Igbo together is attachments to one ALA.

Anozie Onyema (1999) recognized this governing body (Town) as “Ndi Oji Ofo” – according to him “At the town level a number of the “Oji ofo” gather to form what is generally called “Ndi Oji Ofo” (custodians of ofo). This is the highest governing arm in the town ...”.(176)

The town assembly is an informal body and not a regular constituted executive authority. Thus, in case of a meeting, the town announcer (each town has one) goes around at night and announce the place, time and the main subject of the meeting. In the general gathering of all, the Ofo bearer plays the leading role through directing the debates and announcing final decision. The important factor here is that issues are discussed openly and everyone especially the adult male has right to participate in the deliberation. In recent times, our political leaders and representatives have adopted the same structure in the name of town hall meeting.

#### *The Village Assembly*

Next to the town assembly is the village assembly. This is composed of different kindred families or clusters of hamlets or maximal lineages. Just as explicated in town assembly, the village assembly is made up of the eldest man from the different families that constitute the village. This governing body is called village council or council of elders (IzundiIchie). Matters of village interest are deliberated upon in the village assembly and participation is open to even adult male. But matters or issues that could not be resolved at this level are taken to the town council. The venue of this discussion of issues and decision making is known as village square or as called “Ogbakoro”. Every activity whether legislative, judicial or festive was carried out in this place. Decision are made (usually on consensus there and the decision were expected to be carried home to the families

that made up the village by the member of this body. Nevertheless, it must not always be the eldest as the representative. Occasions might arise for the family to send a junior person to the meeting. However, the eldest must be aware of such decision.

### *The Kindred (Umunna)*

The African family is the foundation upon which the continuity of the African race resides. Having the family at the root of Igbo political organization, it is generally constituted by members of the partitineage called Umunna (male fork).

Umunna is a group of families that has claim to common descent. Thus, these families are related in the sense that they have common great grandfathers. Hence, a village is compendium of three or more kindred; and a kindred is the basic unit of Igbo traditional political institution. As Okafor (1992:39) rightly observed, each Igbo family is the original or of its own conduct. Each kindred are allowed in the village council-just like in the town assembly and village assembly, the participation to the discussion of issues and decision-making in matters affecting the kindred is open to every male adults and everyone has the right to be heard the meeting of the members of the kindred is presided over by "Okpala". Kindred (family) deliberates on issues in family level before presenting them during the general assembly of village.

### *Umuokpu*

The Igbo's popular or general participation in politics has no room for abrogative stance towards the female. Although there is more emphasis on men in Igbo culture or in traditional society, however the women are forces to be reckoned with when it comes to political issues in Igbo traditional political set-up. In matters of communal interest, woman just like men are allowed to air their views. The above is based on the principles of extensive consultation in decision-making as a mark of community consciousness of the African (Igbo) culture.

### **Age Grade (OtuOgbo)**

The communal living of the Igbo was such that all individual within the community were one way or the other integrated to the main stream of the society. Ezenwaji Ifeinwa (2002:206) rightly remarked that the Igbo society is so organized

that every individual has a role and a responsibility as well as his place in the society, without one feeling that he is maltreated or discriminated against.

This is group formed by men of about the same age- it is an important political institution in the traditional Igbo society in the sense that it helps in the maintenance of Law and order. Egboh (1987:15) held that one of the sole objective of the age grade is to develop the consciousness and a strong sense of membership of oneness among the Igbo community.

Just like woman wing (Umuada), they are consulted in matters that concerns them like war, clearing of environment, making a pathway etc. their views or opinion in matters of communal interest are freely expressed and heard. The admission into this group is accompanied by some rites known as initiation rites which are one of the rites of passage in Africa.

### **Sanctions and Social Control**

M.S Olisa (2005) was of the opinion as regards the social control that - "The maintenance of law and order in Igbo traditional society, as well as the enforcement of political decisions or political authority, rest on various categories of sanctions which can be applied on different occasion"(p.7). These sanctions are means through which the societal control can be possible. Paul Brown (2002:150) in her analysis of patterns of authority among West African communities identified three broad categories of which are moral, ritual and legal sanctions. Among the Igbo all these categories of sanctions exist and operate side by side, depending on the situation which has arisen. One cannot deny the communalist life of the Igbo. Hence, the moral sanctions refer to the strength of public opinion which can subject approved acts to praise and unapproved acts to ridicule. This ridicule is poured out on notorious characters or outright offenders through gossip of woman, satiric songs of right masquerades (MmuoAnyasi) and of dancing groups, proverbs etc.

Ritual Sanctions according to M.S. Olisa are applied in Igbo society when abominations or pollution of the land (ALU or IMERU ALA). These atrocities are seen as direct provocation of the earth goddess; the function arise who handle the purification rituals are usually the Ezeala (priests of the earth goddess).

And finally, the legal sanctions. One might be thrown on awareness by the mention of legal. Legality in traditional Igbo society comes as the end judgment of subsequent deliberation by the assembly (people). The Oath swearing of

contemporary courts worldwide either through bible, Koran or traditional object has been in existence in Igbo traditional society from ages. Ostracism was regarded as the severest of all legal sanctions in Igbo society because to alleviate one from his community is a very great calamity on the person. There is no funeral for anyone ostracized. Thus, the individual in Igbo society must meticulously avoid any situation that could lead him or her to ostracism.

These three sanctions are means through which the executive arm controls and operates the decision of the assembly.

### **Popular Participation (Ohacracy)**

The acme of Igbo political society is their Ohacracy. According to Glodalex Ezeani, “participatory democracy fully described and characterized the Igbo mans political life issues were discussed collectively, with even (male) adult free to participate as actively as he was capable of (p.12).

Ohacracy is a compound word derived from two words- “Oha” (Igbo) and “Cracy” (Greek) from their different etymologies. “Oha” (Igbo word) means “community”, “society” an assembly or gathering of people” While *Cracy* (Greek word) gotten form ‘*Kratos*’. It literally means “the rule of”. Thus, from Etymological perspective, Ohacracy can conveniently be defined as the rule by the people or community over themselves for their integral existential welfare.

The Sovereignty of Igbo political society resides with the people (Oha), they dictate their affairs of the community during the village assembly meeting. The Oha is integral in both legislatives and executive powers and function. Any decision enacted by the people becomes an unwritten law binding to all. These principles in our Igbo traditional institution allowed more participants as a result of the communalistic nature of this African culture that sees everyone as important as other. Hence, One’s social status play no determining factors in this participation. Since the sovereign is the “Oha” every adult is given the opportunity to participate actively in decision making concerning any issue.

According to Mr. Mulumba Obiajulu, among the Igbo, this sovereignty resides with “Oha”, the people on whose mutual and judicial agreement rests the understanding of laws. Hence, we have concepts like Oha-na-ekwu according to popular opinion or by representation we have Onunaekwuruoha” the mouth piece of the people (p.19).

He went further to assert the disparity between the representative form of leadership that was gotten from European and Igbo unadulterated form of representative. He held that Onunaekwuruoha – the mouth piece does not speak his opinions, rather he says what the people wants him to say with special oratorical skills garnished with legal and philosophical esotericism peculiar to or characteristic of inactive in it.

Ohaneze connotes that people are the ruler of their fate, or can be seen as the people in whose hands lies sovereignty. The Oha during their village assembly holds with consensus on topic in question. The universal suffrage was not comprehensive to the European because they operate a highly limited suffrage as of that time. This was what made them to iron in the use of warrant chief. This warrant chief problem caused the Aba woman riot of 1929. The Europeans were looking for a single authority that will help them to perpetrate their evil plan but they don't know that our system was built on the people.

### **Comparative Analysis Of Jean Jacques Rousseau Political Philosophy And Igbo Traditional Political Government**

There has been lots of myth and propaganda about African Traditional Political culture. Missionary, colonial officials and their intellectuals who were also called anthropologists, they had an interest on portraying the continent as a barbaric and brutal culture characterized by intense inter-tribal warfare, murder of twins and of pagan rites. Nevertheless, this was the constant picture presented by the colonial masters of which up to this moment gave rise to lots of Africans who by training lost his Africannes and yet not European because a new political thought have been inculcated into us. Since the Europeans have claimed monopoly of civilization and at the same time deluded our historical background because they strongly believe that we had no history prior to European encounter.

This denial of our historical background can be found in the work of a Scottish philosopher "David Hume" earlier in 1768 had written about Africa and its people in the following words. "I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be Naturally Inferior to the white. There never was a criticized nation of any other complexion than white... No ingenious manufacturers among them, no arts, no science" (Erim et al, 1984: 1-2).

Yet again in the nineteenth century, a German philosopher of history, George Hegel (Erim et al, 1984) was apt to say this about Africa



...it is manifest that want of self-control distinguishes the character of Negroes (African). This condition is capable of no development or cut time ... At this point, we leave Africa, not even to mention it again for it has no historical part for the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit (pp.1-2)

This section (enters) into the terrain of our history prior to European contact so as to unveil and also compare that our traditional political thought, is of the same category with Jean Rousseau's political philosophy. Subsequently, this comparative analysis will be done on the similarity between their concepts and as well some perceived differences.

### **Direct Democracy**

The political organization of the Igbo (Africa) traditional society is essentially on Non-party basis. GodalexEzeani posits that "the existences of classified political parties or opposition camps was an abnormality. There was no party formation, more so of rival nature". As Mulumba opined as well that "In Igbo Community assembly, the individual contributes ideas to the assembly, as choosing for himself and the assembly, takes decision through the contributions of the members of the community assembly...(p.20).

This form of Direct Democracy is also high obtainable in the doctrine of Jean Jacque Rousseau political philosophy. As the Igbo political thought is divided into two of which consist of Assemblies and Elders, so is Rousseau's thought divided into sovereign and legislators. The Sovereign is one who has supremacy of the legislator is to carry out the decision reached by the sovereign. The sovereign which is the people, air their view directly and not through and representative. Hence, during any assembly, the people are heard and not their representative this was the ideal proposal of Rousseau for Guava.

The political unit as G. Ezeani (pp.38-39) posited functioned as a team, and as a team, every person had his or her role to play, all geared towards achieving a common goal. Kolawole Owolabi (2004:438) corroborated Godalex assertion above by paraphrasing Kwasi Wiredu's view that "African Traditional democracy according to him, does not emphasize the victory of a party since the party system and voting are rather strange to the system

In summation, in direct democracy, all decision are rather taken by all the members of society through consensus. Hence, due to the communalistic nature

and the principle of solidarity in these two political societies, partisan politics was lacking. Everyone contributes in the pursuance of the common goal, hence, the communal interest is emphasized over the individual or group interest.

### **Consensus**

Due to the importance both Rousseau and Igbo political society placed on the individual and his contributions as a follow up to the non-party system and popular participation in decision making, Decisions are taken based on consensus, that is, the agreement of all the participants on a decision concerning an issue. Thus, in a situation whereby a consensus is not guaranteed, actions are suspended till further notice Godalex Ezeani in support of the above assertion, posits that “Matters were discussed until consensus were reached (p.39).

The idea of consensus is critical to an understanding of the political philosophy of Rousseau. Indeed, it was for him the “heart” of the society as he would posit that it must be held in the heart of each and every man within the society. Its importance is indicated by the form in which he presented the basic question facing man.

In Wiredu’s view, he holds that decisions are only reached after careful deliberations and painstaking effort to convince the dissenting people. On all issues in traditional society the elders must take until they agree from the foregoing, it is a fact that the idea of consensus surrounds decision making in African (Igbo) traditional society as a result of its communalistic nature which is all involving as against the idea of majority – rule of the contemporary African society. The same is obtainable in Rousseau’s political thought.

### **Ohacracy and General Will**

According to Ekwenche Research Institute, Ohacracy is the progenitor of democratic system of governance. “Oha” meaning people in Igbo Language and “Cracy” which meant the system of ruling or governance that governs a particular set of people. Iroegbu (2012:188) went further to define Ohacracy as an ethico-political theory which is community cantered and is capable of solving the long difficult situation of Africans, the Ohacracy is gotten form Oha-na-eze which can be as the upliftment of Sovereignty which resides on the people.

Moreover, the General Will is considered to be the heart of Jean Jacques Rousseau's work on politics. Since the General Will directs all spheres of his political endeavor, Sabines (1973) says: "the body politics, therefore is also a moral being possessed of a will, and this general will, which tends always to the preservation and welfare of the whole and of every part and is the source of Law, constitute for all ... the rule of what is just or unjust" (p.53). Thus for Rousseau, as observed by Weldon (1962:18), the general will is "what is willed by a community as a whole. It is a common will for a common interest... different from and may be opposed to the particular interests of individuals. In Rousseau's thought, the general must embrace every aspect of its generality and should be particular in more. And in order to ensure this, Rousseau (1947:23) distinguishes between the "general will" and the will of all". There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will; the later considers only the common interest, while he former takes private interest into account and so, no more than a sum of particular wills.

Ohacracy on the other hand is expressed as well within the popular phrase "the people have spoken", the people have agreed together". However, the people which are the solid foundation of Ohacracy which is by sheer extension the government of the Igbo people, by the Igbo people regardless of status and for the common good of the Igbo. Hence, the leadership series of Ekwenuch Research Institute has it that in Igbo society, power belongs to the people. Ndi Igbo elects their own leaders and tell their leaders what to do and how to lead them. Ndigbo have never accepted rulers not even when British imposed warrant chiefs on them. Therefore, Ohacracy is the unanimous decision of the people and it's the Igbo model that is thousands of years old.

A comparative study on these two concepts will unveil the Universality in "Oha" and "general". They believe that the sovereign lies on the people who dictate everything. Both of them become then a deliberator for common interest. Thus, an individual cannot be the sovereign. S.E. Stumpf (1994:296) affirmed this when he asserted that the general will of the sovereign is therefore the single will which reflect the sum of the will of all individual citizens can be considered one general will. This two concepts sums up idea of man and society in a communalistic background, Laws are made and perfected by the people.

### **Difference between Igbo and Rousseau's Political Thoughts**

Mulumba Obiajulu posited that the difference between the Igbo and Rousseau's political society is in nomenclature and structure but not in function.(p.27) the striking similarity between them cannot be over emphasized but nevertheless, some differences can still be pointed out.

The magistrates (Legislator) enforce the Laws passed by the Sovereign in Rousseau's political society. However, the sovereign holds election for the position of these legislators. This process is similar to the way current elections are held today. In our Igbo political society, the assembly does not hold election for the council of elders as we can see in Rousseau's notion of political society. Each family is headed by title holder called Okpara of who subsequently filled the council of elders. The Okpara (oldest) helps to control the gathering and as well enforce the laws through direct order to Age grades, Umuada etc.

The Igbo have no separate arm called the judiciary as a zone in their political sphere. One can deduce that only two arms are obtainable in Igbo political arena and they are executive and legislative body. In Rousseau's political society, he exhibits three arms of which are Executive, Legislative and Judiciary. However, that judiciary is not an independent arm in Igbo political sphere does not remove the fact of it's existence. The Igbo judiciary is cocooned inside its executive body.

### **Evaluation**

It is J.O. Oguejiofor who opined that any system of government that does not consider the human nature would never workout. In this case, JJ Rousseau purpose fully considered the human nature in trying to draft out a political system that will be suitable for the people of "Geneva". In the case of African political system, our traditional model of administration creditably flourished before the advent of colonial masters.

Having juxtaposed between the Igbo political government and Rousseau's political society, it is the conviction of this work that if lots of relevant concepts are applied in practice again, Igbo and African society would be guaranteed sustainability. These concepts include communalism, consensus, non-party politics etc. concepts that gave us the similarity like non-party politics will lay to rest the ethnic interest since there will be no formation of political parties that are normally formed around ethnic and regional differences, given African's multi-ethnic nature. Hence, non-party politics will close the gap of ethnic differences

rather than widen it and the common good will be everyone's interest. The problem of NCNC (Igbo), AG (Yoruba) and NPC (Hausa/Fulani) during the first republic cannot be forgotten in a hurry. These parties are sometimes structured to exist on ethnic line.

Wiredu affirmed this when he asserts that: "when politics of party conflicts are introduced into the multi ethnic nation-state of Africa, the situation is predictable. Parties will operate along ethnic lines and the traditional ethnic rivalry and antagonism would be revised (Oguejiofor:464).

The emphasis on their consensus nature in the process of decision making will solve the problem of permanent division between the majority and the minority. This issue quickly fossilizes into ethnic majority or minority division giving rise to what Okere enumerated as ethnic arrogance and riots. However, consensus on decision making will solve this predicament because everyone will be motivated by the communal interest rather than ethnic interest.

The general will and ohacracy can be referred to as the will or voice of the "Sovereign", where the sovereign or assembly stands for the total number of citizens of a given society. Such being the case, the general will of the sovereign is the single will, which reflects the sum of the wills of all the individual citizens. It holds the same with ohacracy.

Now, the thought espoused by Rousseau and our Igbo traditional political government has some affinity with the principles of democracy, especially in the concept of Ohacracy and General will. These principles of democracy are distinctly shown in the definition of democracy, given by the Chambers Twenty-first Century Dictionary as 'a form of government in which the people govern themselves or elect representatives to govern them. Obviously democracy means rule by the people, the common people. A state of society where freedom for the people, justice and equality of rights and privileges; both political, social or legal equality are recognized.

However, the factual experience of the Nigerian democratic practice for three good republics now, betrays the fact and makes the constitutionalized principle a huge hoax. The principles of democracy have been completely distorted and misrepresented. It was as if Franklin Roosevelt had Nigeria in mind when he talked about people being fed up with a democracy that breeds unemployment, insecurity, hunger and hopelessness. Nigerians have continued to wait to no avail

for the dividends of democracy. The present dispensation leaves no light at the end of the tunnel. Moreover, our contemporary political system which took after the Western pattern never considered the African characteristic of communalism, hence the difficulty in sustaining democracy in contemporary African society.

According to A.O. Echekwube, (2004:464) "Colonialism brought with it, the complete imposition of foreign ideas on the aborigines, seeking to blot out anything that they possessed by way of alienation from their own culture." Hence, one cannot cover the fact that there is need to revitalize some of our African principles in order to give democracy an African foundation. This explains the reason why leadership in African is in state of war of all against all as can be found in Hobbesian state of nature because this hybrid imposition upon us by colonial masters caused us a fortune.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this nexus should not be seen as a mere academic endeavor but a two-way practical work as well. Firstly, it will liberate the Africans to know and acknowledge their history and secondly, there is need to extrapolate the vital points of convergence between Rousseau and Igbo political government order, and inculcate them within the modern political structure, I believe that our Nation shall be much better for that. More still, the praise attributed by scholars to the doctrine of Rousseau political philosophy should as well be extended to the Igbo for holding such articulated system of government. Thus, what the Europeans thought they gave to us was with us even before their mission of exploitation clothed with colonialism.

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