

Age: the linchpin of Traditional Protocol among *NdiIgbo*

Chieke E. Ihejirika Ph. D.

Associate Professor of Political Science

History and Political Science Department

Abstract

Different societies have different ways of according status. For instance, in monarchic or aristocratic societies, wealth, title and other acquirable distinctions define one's position in society. They also determine the custodianship of fame and veneration. Traditional monarchies like Britain they have kings, queens, princes and princesses, dukes, duchesses, lords, earls, and other titles that distinguish members of society. Such classes or order of veneration are accorded primacy above all else. Similarly, many traditional African societies have monarchies and other kinds of aristocracies. Examples are the hierarchical Buganda of Uganda with their *Kabaka* or the pyramidal Yoruba and their *Obas*. These titles represent the seats of respect and veneration among the peoples.

However, among *NdiIgbo*, who are republican and without permanent keepers of power or fame, the only natural location of honor and respect or even authority was age. Traditionally, age was accorded the primary position in the qualification for authority. It gave the individual in Igbo society a privilege that could neither be reduced nor removed.

This paper explores why *NdiIgbo* put so much credence on age over and above all other states of being and explains how things were, how they changed as well as how to restore normalcy for posterity and the integrity of *NdiIgbo*.

Introduction

From the outset, it is important to establish that what is known as Igbo land today was never a unified whole politically speaking. There was never a general or universal authority structure in the entire region. Instead there were independent autonomous communities all over the place practicing nuances of a fundamentally similar culture, the most prominent of which are a common language and largely republican systems of governance. Significant differences existed only in very few places such as Oguta and Onitsha kingdoms and these were rather aberrations. Overall, the existence of these autonomous communities localized many aspects of Igbo life. This gave credence to the Igbo saying that: “*Okwa mba na achi na olu na olu*”, that is, that different people do things differently, or as the Latin say: “*Alli alia, facunt*”. This is why we must be wary of imposing one particular value system over the generality of *NdiIgbo*, except when such judgments are based on the few indubitable values for which there is consensus among *NdiIgbo*.

In all human societies, the natural always supersedes the artificial, and *NdiIgbo* are no exception to this rule. Nothing exemplifies this better than how

NdiIgbo revere age over man-made statuses. Among *Ndigbo*, age is the primus or master status to which all others are subordinated. Every other human condition is secondary to it, and age is the only condition that is from nature clearly considered a privilege from God. No one can attain old age except by virtues of divine grace or providence. Unlike title, wealth, education and other acquirable statuses, old age cannot be acquired by human efforts. *NdiIgbo* say: “*Nwata kwopu aka ya esoro okenye rie nri.*” *Ikwopu aka* is achievement, which is always dependent on personal efforts. Since achievement, especially wealth, can sometimes come from dubious means, *NdiIgbo* do discriminate between legitimate and fraudulent wealth. They also discriminate about how someone acquired oratorical skill or valor, but they never question age. Old age is a privilege and a natural endowment that only God bestows.

The oldest man enjoys deference all the time, and he can never be sidelined in a community event. For that reason, no one abuses an elderly person. *Nwa tuo nna ya n’elu ogo do awuchie ya anya.* When a child throws his father up, he is blinded by his loin cloth. “Throwing up”, is a metaphor for abuse and disrespect, and “father” is also generic term for the elderly who is usually called *nnanyi*. Among *NdiIgbo*, the eldest is uniquely referred to as *onye isi ala* or the head of the land. *Etu obula nwa opara ha, obu ya ga eke aku nna ya. Anaghi ara nwunye nwa mbe maka na utu esighi ya nne.*

The primacy of age among *NdiIgbo* was clearly predicated on their fundamental rejection of monarchy and other forms of permanent political and economic hierarchies. For those who have a problem understanding this deference to age, they should understand that for *NdiIgbo*, it is the only hierarchy created and sanctioned by nature. *NdiIgbo enweghi eze, mana Ndigbo nwere ndichie na omenala*. Although *NdiIgbo* have no kings, they have ancestors and traditions. The eldest is usually the custodian of *ndichie*. The eldest is the natural leader. Among the *NdiIgbo* the oldest is usually the head of the household.

It is true that new things have been added to the Igbo culture, for better or for worse, since the modern era. But old age is so fundamental and natural that no artificial or fanciful condition can legitimately supersede it. It remains paramount. Ironically, even for those who would like to question the primacy of age among *NdiIgbo*, one still sees the deference to age even in their dealings with the new phenomenon of *ezi odinala*. Traditionally, *onye ezi odinala* still defers to or at least acknowledges his elder relatives when presenting *kolanut* to his visitors. He also must look for the eldest among his visitors. Even when Igbo traditional rulers, *ndi eze odi n'ala*, come together, they usually look for the oldest among them and accord him special reverence. As they proceed in the 'showing' of traditional *kolanut*, it is usually done in order of proximity to the host and the provider of the *kolanut*. This is to avoid any mistake in discerning the appropriate age hierarchy

within the group. It is to ensure that age is accorded the premier status it deserves. Using proximity, the nearest neighbor is shown the kola first, and then extending outwardly from the current locale. This prominence given to geographical closeness is because one must operate from one's most familiar territory in order to truly and rightly recognize who is who in the gathering. Who is who begins with age and ends with age! The name for the oldest is *Nnaanyi ukwu*, our great father. He gets the greatest attention and offers blessing to all by right or request. If you do otherwise, *NdiIgbo* Igbo usually reject it and say that it is like *ihapu omenala meebe ome n'elu*. It is called *iri omaworo oke*.

NdiIgbo believe that the eldest is the closest to the ancestors and must be the natural custodians of the truth and even culture as a result of his longer experience on earth. Since the acquisition of wealth and title is not dependent on age, any fellow of any age can get these. But age must be venerated by all. Honoring old age is regarded as invoking divine blessing on oneself to also reach old age. *Onye sopuru okenye, okenye eruo ya aka*.

On the one hand, death, and especially premature death, was the worst thing for *NdiIgbo*. They never really understood death especially premature death. For them premature death signaled that something must be wrong somewhere. There must have been a crime or taboo somewhere in the lineage that prompted the sudden and premature demise of the individual. They cherish prosperity, but it has

to be accompanied by long life. Curses such as *Baa ta nwuo echi*; that is, get rich today and die tomorrow, and *Onwu ike kpokwa ya ihu*, that is, may he meet a violent death are abominable curses.

On the other hand, the best blessing are, *kaa nka, mee ruo emeruo, na anwuchula* all of which mean long life. The most valuable thing among the Igbo is life and procreation, *ndu na omumu*. Procreation is life the giving process because *Ndubuisi; ndukaku; ndubueze; ndulaka*, et cetera. Among *Ndigbo*, long life is believed to be the reward for virtuous life or a special blessing or privilege from God. Monsignor Theophilus Okere in his 1997 *Odenigbo* lecture titled: *Chibundu* posits that it is their superlative love for life that attracted *NdiIgbo* to Christianity. This is especially true because Christianity promised not just life but everlasting life. He went further to reiterate what Christ said that He is the truth and the life. That He is the bread of life, and that he who eats bread shall never die. *O biara k'anyi nile wee nwee ndu ebighi ebi nwebiga ya oke*. He came that all may have life abundantly. The empirical evidence of long is old age. This is why it is respected and valued greatly among *NdiIgbo*, and attaining a ripe old age is the one single value sought after by all and sundry.

Of course, with age comes greater responsibility. *Okenye anaghi ano na ulo ewu amuo nwa na ogbu*. The old does sit idly by while a goat gives birth in a tether. *NdiIgbo* insist that *Ada siri ndi okenye anwuchala ka umu aka ghara iri ya*

kpoo ya ebe. The dong beetle warned that elderly people must be around otherwise, children would mistakenly eat him, as an ordinary beetle. Besides, part of the myth and mystic of God is that He has always been there. He is the oldest of all things. He had to be there before He could create all things. Humanity has tended to imitate God and nature. The human family follows this natural model, and the entire society is also seen as such, a family. Therefore, just as the family has the oldest as the head, in Igbo cosmology, every human gathering must accord respect to the eldest as the natural head.

The extant neglect of age everywhere is the bane of modern society. In the West, people, now incarcerate their fathers and mothers and their grandparents in old-people's homes. In Africa, the new trend has been to silence the elderly by intimidation, bribe and impunity. The consequence is the loss of that grace and wisdom which the elderly usually possess. Humanity is now increasingly living in the age of anything goes. Everyone is now reading from whatever page he likes.

NdiIgbo believed that knowledge is power and experience is the best source of knowledge. Experience comes with age, so age can be said to be power. Hence, they deferred to the elderly as an authentic trough of knowledge. The possession of great knowledge about the history and culture of a society gives a man or woman a special status in the Igbo society.

The political system of *NdiIgbo* has been variously described. It has been called republican, stateless, and cephalous. If there is any kind of permanent order or structure among *NdiIgbo* it is that it is age-based, or a gerontocracy. Although the Igbo society is not thoroughly a gerontocracy, but nothing happens in the community without the clearance of the elders. They view the neglect of the elders as the neglect of the traditions and culture. *NdiIgbo* see the elders as the memory of the community. They are like presidents in their second and last term. They become apolitical and nonpartisan. They represent the ancestors, a privilege they must justify daily by being morally upright. The worst appellation among the Igbo is to be branded *Okenye aruru ala*, or a wicked elder. When one is described as a wicked elder, this invalidates any good he might have done in his life which underscores the disappointment the people necessarily feel about such uncharacteristic propensity. The oldest holds the *ofo na ogu*. He is the moral conscience of the people in the administration of the common good of the community. He is the father, and like a good father, in replication divine providence, must be seen to be fair to all. He is expected to defend the rights of the community and be the voice for the voiceless.

In recent a gathering of *NdiIgbo* here in the diaspora, the issue of who should bless the Kolanut has become a great polemic, and needlessly so. To my dismay, the hijacking of the culture in Igbo land by the new rich that has taken the

home front hostage is raising its ugly head. Of late, these *nouveau riches* seem to have managed to overshadow the silent majority, and those who should protest the anomaly are afraid of being accused of detesting the so-called title-holder. With regard to the blessing of kolanut among *NdiIgbo*, Fr. John Ukaegbu writes:

The blessing of kolanut, *igo oji*, is the right of the eldest person in any gathering or it may be that of the *Eze* (king) as the case may be. However, the oldest person is preferred in most cases because he is the custodian of truth and closer to the ancestors. In evolutionary trend of the tradition, an ordained minister or one consecrated to God now takes precedence in the blessing of the kola but the eldest person or the *Eze* who has the right will give or transfer it to the minister as a privilege, not a right (Ukaegbu, 2003).

Ukaegbu is correct. This author concurs, except as it related to *Eze*, which is still a polemic among *NdiIgbo*. *Igbo enweghe Eze*. *NdiIgbo* have no kings. Traditionally, it was also the belief among several Igbo communities that the head of each family is the natural leader and this is always based on age.

Unfortunately, there is a serious lack of philosophical analysis to determine what might happen when everyone is titled. Besides, given the diversity of Igbo communities that are largely autonomous and horizontal or non-hierarchical, which title would supersede which? This is why many have now resorted to calling

themselves higher chief and other kinds of artificial distinction, given that in its true essence a chief is a chief. Some believe they can claim to be more distinguished and whimsically so. One can just claim preeminence by calling himself the highest chief or *gburugburu*, or Traditional Prime Minister (TPM). Other called themselves major or similar innovations. This is why this exercise is of great relevance because it is attempting to extrapolate with extant philosophy to explain apparent confusion or self-serving interpretations that might hurt the integrity of the Igbo culture.

On the contrary, the veneration of age is universal throughout all Igbo communities. The kolanut compels the tracing of seniority whenever it is presented. That is why it starts from the eldest to the youngest. *Nwata kwopu aka ya esoro okenye rie nri, not ya anara okenye nri ya*. When a young man proves himself worthy, he dines with elders; he does not usurp the food meant for the elders. Nwoye's mother, as Okonkwo's first wife was referred to in *Things Fall Apart*, was trying to question the decision of *Umuofia* on *Ikemefuna*, Okonkwo effectively silenced her by asking her when she became one of the *ndiches* of the clan, meaning that *ndiche* had the final say on the matter. This is not to justify their decision to kill *Ikemefuna*, but just an indication that the final authority rested with the elders. The *ndichie* is the council of elders.

We must also recall that chief is not a traditional position. It is an innovation to accommodate the modern success among *NdiIgbo*. This is why the chieftaincy title is more often than not conferred on Igbo sons and sometimes daughters who have made it and returned home to help the community. *Aku ruo ulo a guo ya aha!* That is what title is. Since *NdiIgbo* also give the chieftaincy title to women of honor and achievements, do we assume also that such women can also assume the prerogative of blessing kolanut and blessing the oldest men in any gatherings they find themselves? This would not be acceptable to most *NdiIgbo*. The traditional order belongs to *Ndi Nze na Ozo* title holders. The oldest man holds the *ndichie* symbol of authority of the family or clan. The *ndichie* hold the *ofa na ogu*, or the custodianship of truth and justice in Igbo society. This is irrefutable and uncontested. For a culture that is noted for its love for achievement, and where high achievers are ubiquitous, what is fundamental must be that which is truly privileged and rare. Ripe old age is that which is rare and unique. Living to a very ripe old age is considered a rare privilege and special blessing from God and that is fundamental.

Another critical area we must look into in determining the locus of authority among *NdiIgbo* is the *dibia* or the traditional healers or diviners. The Igbo society is conflicted about theocracy and gerontocracy. This is an analysis that needs proper and serious exegesis. The *dibia* is a special position that in some cases

acquired and sometime a calling. The *dibia* is a status that enabled the individual to become the go-between the divinities and the people. He is like a consultant among the people. The process of becoming a *dibia* is very hectic and prolonged. In the process the individual acquired special process and dispositions to deal with the supernatural. He usually acquires his skills and expertise through a long apprenticeship of the master *dibia*. As it is, the ultimate sacrifice is performed by the eldest in the family after the family has discerned what sacrifice had to be made. Sometimes it requires the guidance of the *dibia* due to his special skills.

More often than not, the *dibia*'s primary duty is to instruct on what to do and how to do it. The eldest of the clan usually performs the task. Again when many *dibias* gather, the oldest of them or the one that had been *dibia* the longest is accorded special status cognizant of time and experience accruing therefrom. One can compare this with the Jewish tradition which is also theocratic. Arguably, being a *dibia* is also more age directed, as very few very young men or women become *dibia*. I say arguably because in the absence of a written tradition, it is not easy to make a categorical statement about this age limitation to being a *dibia*. One thing is, however, incontestable, that is, that mostly the *dibia* was a fellow fairly advanced in age, and the older the *dibia* became, the greater his aura and mystique. In a situation of complete synergy and unity, the family must work inclusively. Only in a dysfunctional environment would the eldest not play a major part, which

means that the patriarch himself is seen as the problem, that is, *okenye aruruala*. Then he can be excluded, but the next in line becomes the natural leader.

Ejelinma (2012:83) rightly points out that “in Igbo land age is respected but achievement is very highly revered.” However, being highly revered did not mean that one could artificially rise against nature. Title is artificial but age is natural. Title is also geographically specific, while age is universally recognized. Hence, more ambitious title holders seek the “*gburugburu*” distinction. Be that as it may, the custodianship of *ndichie* is the ultimate authority in traditional Igbo society and only the oldest holds the *ndichie* staff of authority. The deference to the eldest in Igbo society is a mystical relationship rooted in the belief that the oldest is closest to the ancestors and, therefore, best suited to play the role of the go-between. The significance of this mystical relationship has been exposed in an earlier work where I stated that, “As Africans, the Igbo have a culture that is pregnant with symbolism where action is simply a rendition of the metaphysical, a worldview that reflects a constant union of here and the hereafter....” (Ihejirika, 1996). *Ndichie* holds the aged people responsible for all forms of propriety in society.

According to Ukaegbu (2003), the preference of the old man tradition in the blessing of kolanut is because the eldest holds the *ofo* and authority as the representative of the ancestors. There is also a religious dimension and ritual to this state of being since the first son of the family or the eldest in the family or

community is *ipso facto* priestly. In conclusion, *NdiIgbo* are naturalists. They operated according to the laws of nature. The veneration of age is the empirical manifestation of this philosophy, because nature or God is the only thing that guarantees old age. Thus, deferring to age is deferring to the law of nature.

The million dollar question is “When did things go wrong?” Many people may offer many reasons. Whereas, we are aware of the fallacy of uni-causality, it is easy to pin-point the Nigerian civil war as the primary cause of most of the ills in modern Igbo society. But of particular relevance is the deliberate policy of mass pauperization, which the Nigerian government implemented on the Igbo in 1970 during the immediate aftermath of the war. This was the single most important factor that undermined the Igbo cultures and traditions. The “twenty pounds” policy, created the level of economic desperation that turned the post-war Igbo man into a money seeking robot. That situation made money and its acquisition the primary goal among *NdiIgbo*. This disposition permeated the psyche of the people and took hold of it especially in a situation where the people did not control the institution of social engineering under a political system that primarily wanted to break the Igboness of *NdiIgbo*. Those who got money no matter how they did it in the era when there was general poverty, celebrated it and elevated, it over and above all else and this has been the bane of the Igbo ever since.

In this paper, I have explored the nature of age among *NdiIgbo* and its position as the primary locus of power and authority in Igbo cosmology. We have shown that *NdiIgbo* saw old age as a distinctive privilege that only God bestowed. They saw it as a state of being imbued with divine approval and favor that made it inherently legitimate in the community assembly and interactions. We have also explained that it is not an acquirable status. Hence it is not power dependent. Age is not *ike keta o rie* or survival of the fittest. It is not something that could be usurped by the most powerful in society. Instead, it is something universally sought after, but only a few are lucky to attain it. Part of the blessing of old age is that ideally it also comes with excellent mental and physical health which ensures that the individual is able to fully enjoy the privileges of the status. Old age plagued by sickness is not considered very lucky. Constant sickness brings misery and it undermines the desirable benefits of old age. It is *Odi ndu onwu ka nma* or life worse than death.

The main reason why we should be concerned about this is because it could lead to a permanent distortion of our culture. Our moral conscience behooves us to pass on our authentic culture to future generations. There should be no selfishness in preservation of culture, rather the common good. It cannot be the case of the survival of the fittest, a concept *NdiIgbo* have never had respect for. We do not

change cultures to suit ourselves and our current positions. Such practice would indeed leave nothing for the next generations.

The dialogue that this type of intellectual exercise is introducing is inevitable for the survival of Igbo culture. It is meant to forestall the repetition of the current problem because it is happening in an era when the true and accepted values of the people can be recorded unlike in the past when the Igbo culture was only oral. As we resolve the emerging issues and come to a consensus on what the real essentials of the Igbo culture are, we are at the same time preserving them for future generations by writing them down.

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