

ABOUT THE BOOK

The book discusses various aspects of Igbo culture, Igbo origin, political systems, organization, traditional economy, religious beliefs and social practices such as divination, oath taking, sharing and breaking of Kola nuts, birth and naming ceremonies, circumcision, various aspects of marriage, deaths and burial systems. The book therefore offers insight into the culture and socio-political lives of the people before the arrival of Europeans. The book also attempts to unravel the enigma that is the Igbo man, and how understanding him will create better relationship with other Nigerian groups.

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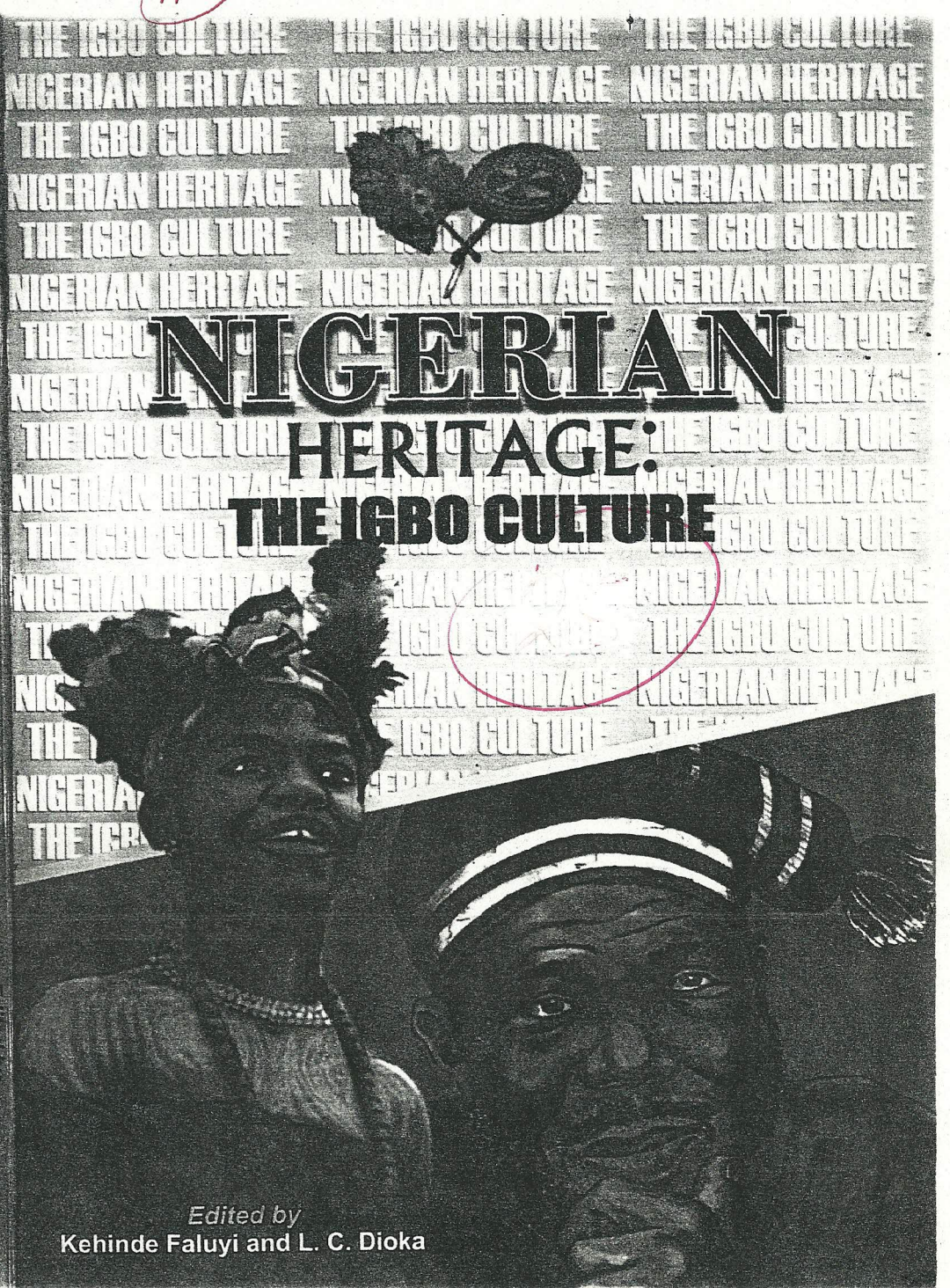


NIGERIAN HERITAGE: THE IGBO CULTURE

Edited by
Kehinde Faluyi and L. C. Dioka

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Table of Contents

	Page
Titlei
All rightsii
Table of Contentsiii
Preface	
List of Contributors	
Introductioniv
Chapter One: An Introduction to Igbo Cultural Heritage..	1-10
<i>By L. C. Dioka</i>	
Chapter Two: The Traditional Economy	11-32
<i>By Kehinde Faluyi</i>	
Chapter Three: The Political Systems	33-58
<i>by L. C. Dioka</i>	
Chapter Four: Religious Beliefs and Practices	59-70
<i>by Charles Ogbulugo</i>	
Chapter Five: The Kinship System	71-92
<i>by Iwu Ikwubuzo</i>	
Chapter Six: Social Practices	93-114
<i>by Funmi Bammeke</i>	
Chapter Seven: The Adjudication Processes	15-122
<i>by Paul Obiyo Mbaneso Njemanze</i>	
Chapter Eight: Community and Individual in the Igbo World	123-135
<i>by O.I.C. Ikechukwu</i>	
Chapter Nine: Summary and Conclusion	135-139

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chapter 5

THE KINSHIP SYSTEM

Dr. Iwu Ikwubuzo

5.0 Introduction

In this paper, we shall first make a brief exposition of the two key concepts in the title, namely, the Igbo and kinship, and secondly, examine the nature of kinship relations that exist in Igbo society.

5.1 The Igbo

The name 'Igbo', according to Ugonna (1989:1), derives from the *Kwa* word, 'Igbo' or 'ugbo' meaning "bush, forest, or farmland". The *Kwa* group of languages is found in West and Central Africa and spoken by the Negro races. The Igbo and their neighbours: Yoruba, Edo, Igala, Idoma, Ijo, etc., speak languages that belong to this linguistic family. To Onwuejeogwu (1972:24), the word "Igbo" means "the community of people". The word, 'Igbo' therefore, refers to the people as well as their language.

The Igbo are believed to be the first to inhabit the forest region of West Africa. Their aboriginal inhabitation of West Africa is even confirmed by the oral tradition of one of their neighbours, the Yoruba. The Moremi legend, according to Akinyemi (1991:5) has it that "in the olden days, the people of Ile-Ife were harassed and invaded by their hostile neighbours, the Igbo" (sic).

The Igbo are a people unified by a common language, Igbo, irrespective of the dialectal variations observed in the different localities or communities that speak the language. They form one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria and have an estimated population of over 15 million people. The geographical location of what we know as Igboland is manifest in what Onwuejeogwu (1975:1-3) refers to as the Igbo culture areas. *The Igbo culture area is an area delimitable by an imaginary line running outside the settlements of Agbor, Kwale, Obinaruku, Ebu (West Niger Igbo Area), Ahoada, Diobu, Umuagbayi (Port Harcourt area),*

Arochukwu, Afikpo, Nainioafu, Isiogo (Abakaliki area) and Enugu Ezike (Nsukka area) and Nzam.

This imaginary line encloses an area in which the people not only speak the various dialects of Igbo language but also share typical and significant culture traits and patterns up to or above 50%. In the Igbo culture area, Awka, Nri, Ihiala and Owerri are in the culture center while Agbor and Ebu (west Niger Igbo), and Enugu-Ezike, Afikpo and Azumiri and Ikwerre (East Igbo) are in the culture margin.

The areas enumerated by Onwuejogwu here are found in what are today known as Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Imo, Ebonyi, Delta and Rivers States of Nigeria. The Igbo alone constitute Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi and Imo and share Delta and Rivers states with other ethnic groups.

The Igbo like other people in the world have myths and legends that contain some account of their origin or at least their earliest relation and interaction as a group. We shall make reference to two myths that will serve our purpose. One of the myths has it that when God (Chukwu) created the world in the beginning, he put in it only one man, Igbo, with whom he usually interacted. Igbo later had three sons. One day, Chukwu sent a message that the three sons of Igbo should come and have a bath in a mysterious river. The first son (*Diokpara*) was not at home the time the message came. The second son was not also at home. The last son who was around went and had a bath in the river and his complexion changed to white. When the second one came back and got the message, he ran to the river but because the river was no longer as clean as it was earlier, he did not have a neat wash. He had a yellow colour. At last, the *Diokpara* returned home and when he received the message, he rushed to the river. As at the time he got there, the river was on the verge of drying up. As he put his hands to bath with what was left, the water dried up completely. As a result, it was only his underfeet and palms which touched the water that changed colour while his entire body remained black. He was said to have got annoyed and quarreled with his younger brothers. He was so enraged that he drove them away from their home. The youngest one who turned white after the miraculous bath is believed to be the progenitor of all the white people found in Europe. All the yellow-complexioned people found in Asia are the progeny of the second son of Igbo whereas the first son is the father of all the black race on earth.

This myth portrays the primordial Igbo family as the origin of the entire

humanity.

According to another myth recorded by Ugonna (1989:1), it is held that the Igbo migrated to the forestlands of West Africa "from the desiccating sahara about ten thousand years ago at the same time as other peoples of the earth including the ancient Egyptians and Greeks were migrating to their own regions". After the migratory trips that led them to different camping sites, they finally settled in Igboetiti between the Olu and Okigwe highlands where they developed their unique culture.

The myth has it that at this time Igbo had five sons namely, Njoku, Isu, Osu, Nkalu and Oru and an undisclosed number of daughters. Their population grew steadily and eventually there was great famine which threatened to exterminate the Igbo family. Igbo complained to *Chukwu Okike* (the Creator) who then told him that their redemption lay in the immolation of his first son, Njoku, and first daughter, Ada. Consequently, *Chukwu's* instruction was carried out and the flesh of Njoku and Ada were cut into pieces and buried in mounds. Tender shoots of yam and cocoyam later sprang up from the mounds where Njoku and Ada were buried respectively. With the crops harvested, the famine ceased, and the Igbo till today celebrate *Ahiajoku* Festival in commemoration of Njoku, the sacrificed son of Igbo. As the people continued to increase and multiply, scarcity of land set in, and then migrations started. The progeny of the five sons of Igbo migrated out in companies according to their fathers' name, settled and consolidated in the different areas that can now be delineated as Igbo culture area.

The aim of these references is not to provide data for historical exegesis of the Igbo migrations and settlements but rather to give insight into the structure of the primordial Igbo family which we think is the beginning of kinship relations in Igbo society.

5.2 Kinship

Bradbury et al (1992:640) define kinship as "the relationship between members of the same family" to whom their ties of kinship mean a lot. The members' recognition that they possess the same blood is the strongest factor in which this relationship is based.

The origin of the Igbo is invariably the origin of their kinship relations. This means that the origin of kinship in Igboland can be traced to the first Igbo family on earth. The first myth narrated above portrays Igbo as a father and his three sons as brothers. The second myth gives the picture

of the Igbo race at the time they settled in Igboetiti as that of one family whose membership was constituted by Igbo, the father, his five sons and daughters. The indication given here is that at a time, Igbo and his children lived and moved together as one family. As they increased and multiplied, each of the five sons is portrayed to be having his own children. Their subsequent migrations and settlements were carried out on the basis of close kinship ties the children of each of the five sons of Igbo left as a group. This implies that when people consider themselves as being more closely related, they interact more closely. It is the features and structures of this kind of relationship in Igboland that we wish to consider in more detail in this paper.

In Igbo society, kinship ties go beyond the confines of the immediate family. There are networks of relationship. The three types of kinship in Yoruba society identified by Fadipe (1970: 18-19) also exist in Igbo society. These are: (1) blood kinship which refers to "all those to whom relationship by blood can be traced both in the paternal line as well as in the maternal; (2) kinship by marriage is that which extends to the most distant relations of the man or woman to whom one is married or betrothed; and, (3) non-legal secondary kinship which is a relationship that is not based on blood connection or marriage "but by the choice of either both or of one with the tacit concurrence of the other". Fadipe says that the example of this last one is adoption or assimilation of redeemed slaves. It should be pointed out that 'adoption' is not a feature of Igbo traditional society. An Igboman, even in the contemporary time, seldom considers the option of adopting a child into his home, not minding whether a case of impotence or infertility has been established as responsible for his childlessness. An Igboman would always prefer to have his own baby (his own 'blood'). This is why it is common to find a man going for a second wife if his first wife is not able to give him a child, or a wife abandoning her husband and remarrying. In the olden days, when men kept slaves as members of their household, a slave, upon his redemption might opt to remain with his master permanently. In that situation, he might be assimilated into his master's lineage. Nzimiro (1972) in his study of the social structure of the Niger Igbo tells us that the population of most of the communities consists of a considerable number of slaves, strangers or autochthonous people. Here, the slaves are regarded as members or part of their master or former master's lineage. Today, however, the tradition of keeping slaves is almost extinct in Igbo

society. So, the third type of kinship identified by Fadipe cannot be said to be pronounced in Igbo society.

The Igbo have an organized kinship system that sustains both individual and collective existence in their society. In the people's cultural, religious and political organization, the kinship system provides a secure environment of existence. This is because their cultural and socio-political interactions are mainly based on and sustained by strong kinship affiliation. Ejiofor (1981:207) is right when he stresses that "the strongest guarantee of stability in their political system is the concept of brotherhood".

There are some sayings and names the Igbo use to stress the importance of kinship relations. One of the sayings is *nwanne di uto* which literally translates 'kinship is sweet'. No word can be more apt than 'sweetness' to convey the Igboman's conception of kinship. The consciousness that one has a brother or a sister elicits some kind of pleasure while one considers the death of a brother or sister an irreparable loss and grieves over it. There is another saying that *ozu sibe isi, enyi ka nwanne alaa* (when a corpse begins to stink a greater-than-relation-friend leaves for his own home). When a man who, perhaps, in his lifetime abandoned his relations in preference to his friend dies, such an intimate friend may hang around in sympathy expecting some action from the 'owners'. If nothing is done to bury the corpse, and it begins to stink, the friend is most likely to abandon the corpse. He may say that after all, he is not the dead man's kinsman and therefore abandons him for his relations. But the dead man's relations, no matter the degree of acrimony they must have had for him, cannot exhibit the stranger's attitude. This depicts the insincerity and unreliability of man, the irony of life where great expectations can fail and the opposite, achieved. This statement is made by the Igbo to stress the importance of kinship. Kinship tie, in Igbo perception, is by far stronger than friendship tie. The Igbo believe that when a person is confronted with an excruciating situation, he can be abandoned by the one he considers to be his most intimate and trusted friend but he cannot be treated as such by his own blood relation whom he may have even been keeping at arms length. A name like *Nwanne wu ihe* meaning "kinship-is-something" is also borne by the Igbo. "Something" in this sense carries an imperative tone. It means a thing whose importance has to be recognized, a thing that should not be neglected or ignored. These few examples give some insight into how

the Igbo regard and esteem kinships.

One important feature of the Igbo kinship system is the fact that an individual is a product of both his father and mother's consanguinity. This is why Onwuejeogwu (1975:4), in his discussion of the social theme common to all peoples in Igbo culture area identified these two concepts as important: the *Umu nna* and the *Nna m ochie* or *Ikwu nne*. The *umu nna* concept is 'a system of patrilineal organisation which not only determines one's membership of a patrilineage but also determines one's rights and duties accruing from such memberships'. The *nna m ochie* or *ikwu nne* concepts on the other hand "are based on the cultural and biological realities that an individual is held from both his father and mother". When a marriage is contracted between two families that were not originally blood relations, by virtue of that marriage, a relationship is established as the offsprings consider themselves as not only the members of their father's family but also of their mother's. Ilogu (1974:13) corroborates this when he says that one has some claims and shares to certain extent in the membership of his mother's family as *nwa di ala* (child of our daughter). If a man's life is threatened by his kinsmen from his father's line, the first place he considers to escape to for protection is his mother's family. We would recall that in Achebe's (1958:86-91) *Things Fall Apart* when Okonkwo's gun killed Ezeudu's sixteen-year old son, he went into exile among his mother's kinsmen. He is said to be well received by his mother's younger brother and helped to resettle. The Igbo kinship system is built around these patrilineage and matrilineage concepts. As Onwuejeogwu rightly points out, *the institutions of marriage and age-grades, the political, economic and ritual organizations, as well as the moral and value system of the East and West of the Niger are built around these two major concepts.*

The more predominant of the two is the patrilineage because the different levels of kinship grouping in Igboland, which we shall consider shortly, rest and operate on paternal reckoning. It is also on it that the structuring and determination of the Igbo political power and authority is based.

5.3 Kinship Formation

As we pointed out earlier, there are various kinship networks among the Igbo. Within the different levels of kinship, varying degrees of intimacy, interaction and solidarity are expressed by the members depending on the

acknowledged degree of affinity. At some levels where there is allegiance to a father or ancestor, one shrine, common land ownership and other characteristics that are commonly shared, the bond of kinship is so strong that there can be no intermarriage among the members; but where the members that constitute a group do not lay claim to ultimate common descent or where their common descent dates to a very remote past, they may intermarry.

Growth and expansion are the major factors that encourage the constitution of the various divisions or levels of kinship in Igbo society. As members of the community who were originally members of a family continue to increase and multiply, the degree of intimacy begins to reduce (as indicated in the case of the primordial Igbo family highlighted earlier). Ejiofor (1981:46) sees it, with reference to *Umu nna*, as 'an historical kinship development of the extended family to the point where blood relationship loses its quickening sentiment and emotion'. As the people grow numerically and their settlement begin to expand into new areas, one begins to notice some inability among the members to give accurate account of their initial relationship.

Kinship groups are usually identified by their names which usually betray them as having a common progenitor. This is what Nwala (1985:166) has in mind when he writes that:

Many towns, villages, lineages, etc., have prefix 'umu' (children of) followed by the name of the founder. This is a thorough emphasis on kinship and blood relationship as the historical foundation of political unity.

Different scholars who have written about the Igbo kinship system identify various kinship groupings in Igboland. There are however some variations of terms used by them to designate the groups.

Ilogu points this out when he notes that several names such as 'Ebe', 'Ebo', 'Ogbe' and 'Ama' are used to describe group of villages. Ejiofor (1981:46) also highlights that *umunna* which he calls 'ward' (minimal lineage) is variously called 'quarter' (Okafor-Omali, 1965), 'localized lineage' (Anene, 1966), 'localized patrilineage' (Gailey, 1971) and 'kindred' (Olisa, 1971). Just as the scholars use different nomenclatures to describe the kinship units, various Igbo terms are used for them in different parts of Igboland. Our primary aim here, notwithstanding the

observed variations, is to expose that Igbo society is one that is held by bond of kinship at different levels, and this is manifested in their social structure and organization.

Nzimiro (1972: 21-23) illustrating with four riverine Igbo communities: Onitsha, Abo, Oguta and Osomari, identifies the following kinship groups: extended family → compound (mkpu uno) → patrilineage (Ogbe) → quarter (Ebo) → town (Obodo). Ilogu (1974:11 14) illustrating with Ihiala town in Anambra State, identifies the following: extended family → minor sub-lineage (smallest unit or *umunna*) major sub-lineage (smaller unit of *umunna*) → lineage (the highest unit of *umunna*) → sub-clans (cluster of villages) → town (or clan or village groups). Onwuejeogwu (1975:5), who defines the kinship system in terms of the concepts of *umunna* and *ikwunne* (earlier highlighted) identifies within the former's organization, three levels of operation observable in most Igbo settlements. These are, in ascending hierarchy, the minimal level which is the smallest named segment, the major level which is another named segments that is the next after the minimal one in terms of size, and the maximal level which is the highest named segment. This one, according to him, represents the village in most cases. Then after the maximal lineage a village level, there is a federation or confederation of villages to form what he calls 'village towns' e.g. Ibusa and Mbaise.

Ejiofor's (1981, 35-57) study of politics in Aguiyi clan in Anambra state reveals the following levels of kinship relations: the family the extended family → the ward (*minimal* lineage, *umunna*) → the village (minimal and major units) the town (strong federation of village unites → the clan.

In Ekwe, a town in Isu Local Government Area of Imo state, the following units are identifiable: the family (*ezinaulo*) → the extended family (*imeulo*) the minor patrilineage (*isiobi* or *ezi*) → the major patrilineage (*umunna*) → village (*onumara* or *obiukwu*) → town (*obodo*).

These examples portray that there is a hierarchical structure of kinship formations within a given community in Igboland. The nuclear or immediate family is at the base followed by a number of other units in ascending order till the apex of the hierarchy is reached.

The Igbo society is a complex one and part of its complexity is demonstrable by the complex network of kinship relationships in most communities. Some Igbo communities are larger than others. The larger the size, the more complex the social structure and organization. In Ihiala, for instance, as revealed by Ilogu, there are three distinct units or levels that regard themselves as *umunna* the minor sublineage which he describes as the smallest unit, the major sublineage, which is the smaller unit and the lineage which is the highest unit. These subdivisions are based on the consciousness, by each unit, of a more intimate relationship. The extended families that constitute the minor sublineage have one father who in turn is one of the sons of a man whose progeny make up the major sublineage. The members that form the major sublineage also have a common father at the lineage level and so on till the town level is reached. The *Èkwè*, the members of the family and the extended family units regard themselves more as *umu nne*: (children of the same mother) whereas those of the minor patrilineage (*isiobi*, *ezi*) and major patrilineage (*umunna*) regard themselves as *umunna* (children of the same father). In some cases, one *isiobi* can subdivide into two minimal groups each of which is regarded by its members as "*ezi nke anyi*" (our own compound). Here, the emphasis, 'ours' indicates that the level of intimacy which the members maintain among themselves is stronger than that which they have with the other minimal group. Let us examine the nature of kinship ties and groupings in more details, adopting Ejiofor's terms apart from the 'ward': the family, the extended family, the patrilineage, the village, the town and the clan.

5.4 The Family (*Ezinaulo*)

The family is the basic kinship unit of Igbo society. It is made up of the father, mother and children. Family members usually live together in a walled compound. The father, called *dibuulo* (the husband carrying the household) is the head of the family. He is in the words of Ejiofor (1981: 37), "the voice of his family and the cornerstone of the compound... the bastion of security who absorbs all shocks and feuds coming on the family form outside". The mother plays the role of a caretaker in the family, and in conjunction with the father works for the upkeep of their children, shouldering all the responsibilities of their education. The family has been described in the sociological parlance as the bedrock of the society. As the base of kinship relations, the family can be likened to an original

plant stock from which branches grow. In other words, other levels or units of kinship relations within the Igbo society are offshoots of the basic unit, the family. Writing about the family, Gailey (1971: 22), quoted by Ejiofor (p.37) remarked that "the family household, although, not in itself a political unit, was the foundation on which all more complex Igbo institutions were based".

The degree of intimacy within the family cycle can be seen in the way the members address themselves. Within the community, members of the same family, as Ejiofor rightly noted, are designated *nna m* (my father), *nne m* (my mother) *nwanne m nwoke* (my brother), *nwanne m nwaanyị* (my sister) or *nwa m* (my child). This shows that identification of one another by members of the immediate family is characterized by absolute sense of personal possession. The ultimate claim of belonging indicates that the affinity and closeness is at the highest degree. The relationship between parents and children, and among the children themselves is that of possession. Thus, the child regards the father and mother as "my father" and "my mother" respectively while each of the parents regards the child as 'my child'. The male child of the family regards his sister as *nwanne m nwaanyị* (my sister) and the female sees her brother as *nwanne m nwoke* (my brother). The sense of kinship makes the family maintain a strong attachment to one another.

5.5 The Extended Family

As we said earlier, the kinship ties go beyond the confines of the family cycle. Another kinship level recognized after the family unit is the extended family, which, in size, is larger than the family. Most of the scholars do not identify this as a distinct group from the family. Attitudinally, the Igbo themselves seldom make such distinction. Ejiofor describes the extended family as a patrilineage group comprising a man, his brothers and their immediate families. These families have a claim to common descent which they can trace to fourth generation. We do not agree with his view of tracing the common descent of the extended family to fourth generation. We believe that members of the extended family do not have to trace the beginning of their relationship to such a long time. In most cases, they may live together in a very large walled compound or apart from one another, where they do not have continuous large expanse of land. Their father may have died only few years back. Nzimiro (1972:22) gives the description of what we think

is the structure of the extended family. He does not however appear to make a clear distinction between the immediate family and the extended one. He explains that members of the extended family are found within what he calls *mkpu uno* (compound). To him, the *mkpu uno* is the smallest residential unit which is made up of 'a number of rooms joined together and facing inward into cloister-like veranda which runs around a quadrangular open space.' He says that in the case of Abo, Oguta and Osomari people, these rooms which inhabit the various people living in a compound consist of a single extended family (minimal lineage) or a number of extended families (a minor lineage). In Onitsha, each family is differentiated by its compound. A group of such compounds have inhabitants that constitute an extended family. The compounds, linked with one another within the enclosure of a large wall that surrounds them, are each occupied by a wife, her family and other person attached to her. As we said earlier, unavailability of enough land to accommodate all the members of an extended family may force some of them to live elsewhere. At the level of extended family, relationship among the constituent members is still intimate and the level of their interaction, very high.

Another outstanding character is that they are called by the same family name. As would be expected, there is a very strong solidarity among all the members of the extended family because, no matter where they live and how separated their component units are, they regard themselves as *umunne* (children of the same mother). They easily rally round one another in the event of emergency. Births, marriage, worships and family meetings are some of the occasions that afford them the opportunity to express their solidarity and promote their unity. They share their joy and sorrow together. If a baby is born to any of the families, it is expected that members of related families would pay visits to the parents and share in their joy. Money or other presents may be given to the mother of the new baby. In the event of death in any of the families, every member of the extended family shows a sense of bereavement and feels personally affected to the point that every engagement: business, framework, intended journey, etc., is suspended until after the dead is buried and the funeral rites performed. The eldest male of the brothers that constitute the extended family is the overall head of the group. He is called *di?kpara nna anyị* (the first son of our father) by others. In the politics within the unit, he is neither a

dictator nor an oppressor because it is the collective decision of all that gives weight to his authority. He is expected to be just and firm in handling matters that affect all of them.

5.6 The Patrilineage (*umunna*) called 'localised patrilineage' by Forde and Jones (1950), and Ilogu (1974), 'patrilineage' by Onwuejeogwu (1975), and 'ward' by Ejiofor (1981), is another level of kinship ties. At its bottom, in Ilogu's view, are families made up of men, their wives, children and sometimes cousins "living in homesteads surrounded by a mud wall". According to him, some of these families are extended ones that live within one walled compound.

Following Forde and Jones, Ilogu (1974:11) sees the patrilineage as "the central or basic unit of Ibo (*sic*) society" and says that it is constituted by the descendants in the male line of the founding ancestor by whose name the group is sometimes called. Ejiofor's (1981:46) view is that *umunna* which literally means "children of one father" is composed of a group of related extended families who trace their common ancestry to a common father, about six or more generations back". We do not quite agree with the length of time to which this common ancestry can be traced. It might not be traced to such a remote past. Their common ancestry can be traced to a shorter length of time. To Nwala (1985:166), the term *umunna* is not a label for a particular political unit but rather it designates "people belonging to one ancestor or father or rather people belonging to one blood" including married daughters into other political units. Their unifying material base for this kinship tie is the land which the community owns in common. An observation made by Forde and Jones is also relevant to mention here. They point out that the size of the group designated by this term, *umunna*, varies according to context. The term may refer to a small unit of male siblings and their children including their wives" which often constitutes a compound what Meek calls extended family. It may also refer to "larger groups embracing several such units related patrilineally" or what Meek calls kindred. (p.15) *Umunna* can be segmented into major and minor siblineages and often "occupy a single hamlet of scattered homesteads" (Ilogu, p.11). As Nzimiro (1972), points out, the patrilineal descent in *umunna* is defined by rule of exogamy.

Within this group, there is a considerable degree of interaction because the members regard themselves as children of the same father. They also express high level of solidarity which in the words by Ejiofor (p.47) "is

kept up by informal meeting held in an atmosphere of rural conviviality at marriages, birth and occasional windfall of achievement". Should the death of a kinsman occur, the members of *umunna* rally round one another, making personal contribution of gallons of wine, and in some cases, money, to facilitate the funeral ceremony. The members also hold their festival in a common ground.

Any of the occasions mentioned above can afford them an opportunity to discuss their social problems. Like in the extended family set up, the eldest male of the family that is regarded as the senior in *umunna* is recognized as the overall head of *umunna* unit. He is the custodian of the ancestral *ofo* stick which is a symbol of justice, legitimacy and authority.

5.7 The Village

Another unit of kinship relation in Igbo society is the village which in size is above the *umunna*, that is, the patrilineage. As we pointed out earlier, Ilogu says that it is designated with such names as 'Ebe', 'Ebo', 'Ogbe' and 'Ama'. Nwala (p.165) calls it 'obodo', a term which most of the writers have used to designate 'town'. Following the hierarchy in Nzimiro's grouping, it corresponds to what he calls quarter (Ebo). Ejiofor designates it 'Asa', 'Ogbe' and 'Nkpu' (*sic*). It is agreed by most scholars that the village is compound of a number of *umunna*.

Forde and Jones (1950:16) see the village as a territorial unit constituted by a number of lineages which may or may not claim ultimate common descent and usually occupy a cluster of hamlets. Ilogu (p.11) in agreement with Forde and Jones identifies two types of villages: one made up of various homesteads or compounds whose members are constituted by *umunna* that claim common descent, and one whose occupants are members of various *umunna* that do not claim a common descent and intermarry. Here, according to him, what we have is a geographical unit that provides "some considerable solidarity" that is "based on neighborhood rather than immediate blood relationship". To Forde and Jones this solidarity the members enjoy is not only based on neighborhood but also on the fact that "the farmlands of the various lineages or their subdivision occupy contiguous areas". In Nzimiro's view as we indicated earlier, the village or what he calls the maximal lineage is one of the levels of operation into which *umunna* is organized. Ejiofor (p.28) sees the village as the level at which the "citizens begin to feel a sense of corporate independence and security which would be

strong enough to challenge the authority and solidarity of a weak town". He agrees with Gailey (1971) that it is the strongest political unit among the Igbo and identifies about four features of the village: (1) its population is big enough to sustain its rural economy; (2) there is distant blood relationship which permits intermarriages and self perpetuation between its members and units; (3) the development of component villages brings about the development of the town; and (4) the elite-members of the villages who cannot exercise their political interest within town due to some inhibitions can do so in the village which provides freer and acceptable environment. The practice of endogamy within the village, which Ejiofor is talking about may be obtainable in some areas, but it should not be generalized for it is not definitely the case in all areas of Igboland. In villages where the component *umunna* do not claim an ultimate descent, endogamy may be permitted, but where otherwise, the rule of exogamy prevails. The former may possess the features which Ejiofor enumerates and the size of that type of village would be relatively larger than what is regarded as the village in most areas of Igboland. In later case, the solidarity which the people express is based to a large extent on the consciousness of a common descent.

The village unit may have a union or meeting to which every adult member is expected to belong. There are usually two groups one belonging to the men and the other to the women. The men's union usually provides the rallying point where major decisions that affect the villages are taken. The size of project undertaken by the village unit depends on the size of the village. It may construct or improve upon an existing market place and roads depending on its capability. It may establish scholarship scheme to encourage educational pursuit among its youths. In most cases, the functions of road and market constructions are undertaken by the town because of their common use. The villages can handle maintenance works on regular basis along the roads that run through it.

At the village level, just as it is with the other levels below it, the head of the lineage considered the most senior is the *Okpara*. But as Igbo society is characteristically democratic, absolute authority does not reside in the *Okpara*. He holds the village *ofò* and his function include arbitrating in the internal disputes among the members of his group, interceding at the shrine of the founder of the village, among others. He carries out this functions along with the heads of the other members of *umunna* unit.

5.8 The Town

The town is called by various Igbo names: Obodo, Ala, and Mba but 'Obodo' is more generally used than others. These days, some people prefer the use of the term, 'Autonomous Community' to 'town'. What Forde and Jones (1950:16) call 'village group' appears to be referring to 'town'. They see it as the highest political unit among the Northern and Southern Igbo. It is according to them formed by a cluster of villages having a common place where members express their ties in traditions of common descent and in possession of common shrine.

Ilogu (1974:12) is in agreement with Forde and Jones in their use of the term 'village group' to describe the various villages that grouped together to form the town (*obodo, mba*), and in seeing it as the highest political unit. To him, 'Clan' is an optimal term for the 'village group'. He explains that the term 'village group' is preferable to 'town' because, in Igbo society which is predominantly agricultural, various homesteads are separated by farms and gardens, making it difficult for the term 'town' to be applied to such a unit. By this explanation, it is obvious that Ilogu's understanding of a 'town' is in the light of its usage in the Nigerian context which gives the impression that a place so designated cannot have any rural trappings, but must boast of full development. Our use of the term town is not strictly in the sense that it must have all the modern infrastructures or technological developments that are features of urban centers in Nigeria. Nzimiro (1972:21) recognizes that "a typical Ibo (sic) community, although, it is often referred to as a town, actually consists of a federation of dispersed villages". He explains that the four riverine communities: Onitsha, Abo, Oguta and Osomali whose social structure he studies, however, fashion their settlement after Bini and Yoruba residential pattern, and live in compact towns. What constitute the kind of town he is talking about are quarters (*ebo*). Nzimiro's 'quarter' corresponds to what others call village.

Onwuejeogwu (1975:4) also does not use the term 'town' but "village towns" which according to him is a federation or confederation of villages. He cites Ibusa (West Igbo) and Mbaise (Southern Igbo) as examples of village towns, Ejiofor (1981:52) describes the town as "a social unit embracing a number of villages which generally claim common descent and kinship". It means that at the town level in Igbo society, a bond of kinship is still recognized. What Nwala (1985:165) calls 'village' appears to correspond to what we refer to as a 'town', since

he uses the term *obodo* as its Igbo name. The assumption is strengthened by his explanation that the village can be seen as a state which exercises supreme authority over its population and territory. This status, in our thinking is one that is enjoyed by a town in Igboland.

At the town level in Igbo society, there is usually a claim, by all members, of a common ancestor believed to have founded it. The sons of such a founding father have a common deity or shrine and have a dialect of Igbo generally spoken by all members. It has also been observed that sometimes groups from outside the related villages may be absorbed and integrated into the town complex.

An important feature of a town in Igbo society is mentioned by Olisa as quoted by Ejiofor (1981:53):

Every Igbo town jealously cherishes and maintains a high degree of autonomy and therefore behaves as a self contained entity with internal affairs and general relationship with the neighbouring communities.

Every town in Igboland is independent, irrespective of the size. None considers itself superior or inferior to another one. There is always a well-defined boundary demarcating one town from another.

Though the members see themselves as one held by kinship tie that is based on distant ancestry, the level of interaction among them is less intimate vis-à-vis what obtains at the village level. It is the issues of general welfare, development projects, security among others that bring them together. Town union or what is often referred to as 'Development Union' provides the forum where these issues are articulated and pursued. As rightly observed by Ejiofor (1981:54), "it is to the town union that major problems of social life are sent". Every town in Igboland has a town union which though is regarded as a cultural association provides the base through which the town functions politically.

The Igbo kinship ties are so strong that their cultural political or social activities outside their home base are organized in such a way that a very close link is still maintained with home which is usually seen as the 'National Headquarter'. Nwala (1985:166) articulates this kinship consciousness among the Igbo when he notes that "settlements of villages 'abroad' are usually governed from the home bases indicating the importance of this primordial kinship base".

Members of a town union living in urban centers are usually called 'abroadians'. They constitute what is popularly called the "Abroadian Wing" or "Branch" of their town union with the main objective of

promoting the welfare of its members and general development of their town. While abroad, the home town remains the centerpiece of their developmental plan of action. Spurred by the sense of kinship, every member endeavours to identify with the branch union by being a financial member. The members, though they hail from different villages, see themselves as members of one large family. To foster high level of unity, every effort is made to discourage the formation of unions along village divides because of the perception that this, if encouraged, might threaten the unity of the town union. When greater allegiance is shown to the village groups, the central body tends to be weak. In some cases, members of the village units can be allowed to operate insofar as their interest does not threaten the cooperate existence of the union constituted by member villages. Ejiofor (1981:55) notes that "loyalty to the town is absolute". What happens is that the sub-unions or meetings will not be formally recognized by the town union. What they meet for and what they stand to achieve remain their internal affairs.

The reason usually advanced for the formation of these sub-associations in the cities is that it affords the groups the opportunity of interacting more intimately in order to identify the members' needs and problems that need collective assistance. This means that even though the kinship relation is recognized at the town level through the people's effort to pursue common welfare programmes, there is still a feeling that such relation is a distant one and members therefore desire to identify with those that can call their closer kith and kin, those who are regarded as blood relations. It is this kinship consciousness of trying to identify with a group that is considered to be more related by blood that often leads to formations of meetings along village, patrilineage and extended family lines. This does not in any way suggest the disintegration of the town union which is considered superior to all the others. It only portrays that among the Igbo the kinship tie is stronger when the blood relationship of a group cannot be traced to a distant time when they are directly called the progeny of their progenitor. As the people increase and expand their territory, the kinship ties begin to weaken. It would not be as strong as when the group is still small. At the town level, because of its size, it is the town union that mostly brings the people together and provides a forum for them to express their solidarity and promote their unity. Relationship among individual members may be casual and lack the aura of seriousness or attachment that characterized the relationship at other

lower levels. It is more common for a people from component villages to regard themselves as friends than brothers except circumstances compel closer identification or a recognition of common descent. This means that though there are identifiable features that bind the people together as one, the degree of intimacy among them is not as close-knit as what is observable in the preceding groups. Indeed, the closer knitted the relationship, the stronger the interaction and solidarity among the people in Igbo society. The town is not exogamous because inter-village marriages are permitted.

5.9 The Clan

Nzimiro (1972) and Ejiofor (1981) identify the clan as yet another unit of social organization where kinship can still be acknowledged in Igbo society. Ejiofor tells us that Nzimiro sees the clan as the highest social unit and describes it as "a group of towns occupying the same geographical area" which trace descent from a common founding ancestor and have certain ritual, exogamous or totemic indices in common". Ejiofor (p.56) himself believes that a clan designated by 'agu' or 'umu' denotes a unilineal descent group' pointing out that some scholars are of the view that 'it must be corporate, exogamous, totemic and localized', while others like Julius Gould and William Kolb do not see it as being necessarily so. In his opinion, what the Igbo mean by 'clan in normal parlance is "a group of related towns which trace their origin to a common genealogy or long-standing associations". For Ilogu as we pointed out earlier, the term 'clan' is only an optional term for town or 'village group'. He does not see it as a distinct kinship level.

Nwala (1985:165) who also uses the term clan as an option for 'village-groups' says that it is in modern political term, a confederation of independent states. Ejiofor cites Mbaise as an example of a clan which in his analysis is a group of independent towns who related in politics on the basis of equality and are held together by kinship or covenant.

From these explanations, we can see that it is still possible for towns demarcated from one another to talk of common ancestry, which can be traced to a remote past. Sometimes, neighbouring towns can talk of intimate association they had long ago. Such towns may preserve the account of this long-standing relationship in their oral tradition, like myths and legends. The people of Ekwe, for instance, regard Okwuudo, their neighbouring town, as the progeny of one of the sons of their

progenitor, Ekwe. The present location of Okwuudo is said to be originally covered by *udo* plant (*Urena lobata*). At that time, a certain Ekwe man used to cross over the *Njaba* river from Ekwe to fetch some of the plants for use. After some time, he felt that it would be more convenient to settle at the rich *udo* site and make maximum use of the raw material. Eventually, he built his house there and settled. Through procreation, growth and the concomitant expansion, the progeny of this man filled the land area known today as Okwuudo.

Ekwe and Okwuudo are two distinct towns in Isu and Njaaba Local Government Areas of Imo State respectively but this legend may be narrated by the people when the prevailing circumstances demand closer identification and association. This recognition of kinship relations, though distant can stimulate closer cooperation in politics if the need arises. It is also true, as Ejiofor observes, that political activities within the clan are carried out with a recognition of equality of member towns. At the clan level, meetings are rare, which means that there is usually no close interaction among component member towns. The kinship tie, because of the tendency of the component towns to act as independent entities, is reduced to mere memory.

Quest for autonomy amongst different components of a town has become a prominent feature of modern Igbo politics. Most of the towns we have today constituting a clan were a time in history part and parcel of a single town before they became autonomous. We have instances of this autonomy in different parts of Igboland.

In Igboland, we have in some areas, towns that exist in clusters which are named after the number of component towns. Ejiofor says that such a cluster constitutes a clan and gives the following as examples: Mbaise (5 towns), Mbanasaa (7 towns), and Mbaitolu (9 towns). We also have others like Mbaito (3 towns) and Mbano (4 towns). Because of their largeness, some of these clusters of towns have become Local Government Area. For example, Mbaitolu, is now a Local Government Areas in Imo State. Some have more than one. Mbaise, for instance, is divided into three Local Government Areas.

Conclusion

We have in this paper highlighted the nature of Igbo kinship system. Like other traditional African societies, the Igbo society is one that is organized along a web of kinship relations. Different levels of kinship relation, with varying degrees of intimacy and interaction are identified. This exposition reveals that a particular individual member of any community in Igboland has not only a sense of belonging but some rights and duties at the various levels of the kinship structure. As a baby born to his father, one in his life becomes a member of his immediate family and has right to all his father's belongings. He shares in the relationship of the family of his father. He also identifies with the members of his lineage and shares in the community life of his village. And above all, he is regarded as a full-fledged son of his town (obodo). At every level of this membership, he has some claims and responsibilities not only in his patrilineal base but to some extent also in his matrilineal family (*ikwunne*) as *nwadiala* (son of the soil). He 'belongs'; he is owned as he owns others. He does not live in solitude. Ilogu (.14) is right when he says that "owing to the network of relations within the various levels of the lineage, (and other kinship units) a man is always certain of belonging.

We pointed to that the origin of what is today known as the Igbo society or entire Igbo race can be traced back to a primordial family which according to myth, had just one man, Igbo, and his children. That was undoubtedly the origin of kinship in Igboland as the members of this primordial Igbo family always moved about and settled together, guided by the consciousness that they are of one blood. As the children of Igbo increased, multiplied and dispersed to different locations where they inhabit throughout Igboland, their movement and association were based on kinship consideration. As the population of the erstwhile single family continued to expand, their relationship started becoming distant and different levels of kinship began to develop.

At some levels, the relationship is considered close-knit and strong and therefore no intermarriage can be permitted on both the paternal and maternal sides. At some levels, it is considered distant and not very strong and marriages among members can be allowed. The degree of intimacy and interaction is determined by the size of the population and it varies according to the level of kinship.

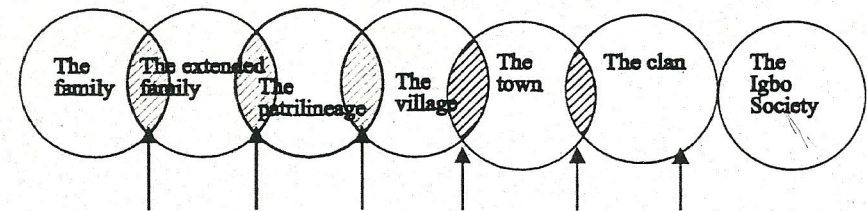
The various social structures we have discussed in this paper may not be

generalized for all areas in Igbo traditional society. The recognized levels and terms used to designate them may differ in various localities of Igboland. This fact can be noticed in the way some of the scholars differ in their terms used to designate some of the levels. What is obvious, however, is that the Igbo have an organized kinship system which is intricate and hierarchical in nature.

The network of the kinship relations is complex but very significant. Its significance lies in the fact that the Igbo cultural, religious, social and political organizations are based on kinship consideration. It is with this attribute that the pattern of living in Igbo society would be clearly understood. This point is made more elaborate in what Ilogu (1974: 13-14) says:

This intricate network of relationships involved in the concept of lineage structures of Ibo (sic) traditional life is the basis for understanding the Iboman's (sic) social consciousness, the structures of his political, religious and economic concerns and the means of bringing up children in the customs, ethos, and manners, that is to say, the culture of the people.

The diagram below which illustrates the network of Igbo kinship relations shows the degree of closeness between the various units or levels. After the family and the extended family units where there is the highest expression of bond of kinship, the closeness among the people begins to thin down due to expansion until we get to the entire Igbo society where the members simply see themselves as belonging to one race with a very distant history of close association.



The arrow indicates the degree of closeness between the different levels the wider the interlinking the closer the relationship recognized.