

**TABLE AND TRUST: THE AFRICAN CULTURE OF COMMUNALISM IN OGBA, EGENNI AND IKWERRE TRADITIONS**

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**Abstract**

*Communalism is a characteristic feature of the African culture. Africans celebrate everything together. They rejoice together, mourn together and share things together in the spirit of African brotherhood. In the same spirit of oneness, the Ogba, Egene and Ikwerre ethnic nationalities of the central Niger Delta in Rivers State of Nigeria share many cultural practices together. Some of these include: the kinship system, land and other property inheritance customs as well as mortuary rites. These three heterogeneous traditional ethnic nationalities trace their descent to the ancient Benin kingdom. This ancestry bond over time and space has been weakened by several factors, such as: migration, cross cultural contact, modernization and globalization. The research observes that no African nation is without challenges which has changed the African coloration of communalism. This paper, therefore, examines the concept of communalism and the associated challenges in Ogba, Egene and Ikwerre traditions. The paper adopts the historical and sociological approaches in the*

*discussion. The challenges include; religion education and politics. This paper concludes that the said ethnic nationalities (Ogba, Egene and Ikwerre), which had earlier practiced communalism, are gradually shifting to individualism. The study recommends a revival and renaissance of African traditional heritage to avoid a complete collapse of the culture of communalism in the area of our discussion.*

## **Introduction**

The Ogba, Egenni and Ikwerre philosophy of communism is togetherness. Here, to be is to be with others. According to Martin Heidegger (2011), "Being with" refers to the ontological feature of mankind being always with its kind. Therefore, in the structures of its 'being-in-the-world', he realizes his implicit reference to other humans around him. No one is an island; every human lives with others, either in the nuclear family, extended family, community or clan, and anything to the contrary diminishes the true essence of man in society. From the inception of man from birth, he is brought into the communion with others and realizes his being and life in the complex network of the living and spiritual members of the community. This sense of 'being with' properly typifies the sense of community in Ogba, Egenni and Ikwerre traditional societies which is demonstrated in welfare and care given to members in order to ensure a continuous enhancement of life and its sustainability.

The African traditional society is replete with rich cultures that are uniquely African and expressed by the people themselves through established institutions that reflect their thought pattern. The African by nature is homo-religious, enjoys communal existence and celebrates virtually everything, including childbirth, naming ceremony, puberty, marriage, age grade and chieftancy coronation, as well as death and funerals. Thus, anything that threatens her corporate existence attracts some level of resistance which often results in either external or internal conflicts that interrupt the peace of the traditional society.

This paper, therefore, examines the concept of communalism and the associated challenges in Ogba, Egene and Ikwerre traditions. The paper adopts the historical and sociological approaches in the discussion. The challenges include: religion, education and politics. This paper concludes that the said ethnic nationalities (Ogba, Egene and Ikwerre) which had earlier practised communalism are gradually shifting to individualism. The study recommends a revival and renaissance of African traditional heritage to avoid a complete collapse of the culture of communalism in the area of our discussion.

Theoretical lens: Pitzer's (2019) developmental communalism is both a theory and a process. As a theory, it focuses on movements that choose the communal method of organizing and the adjustments they make to their organizational structures, beliefs and practices to insure the survival and expansion of the movements. Developmental communalism theory contends that communal living is a universally available social mechanism at all times to all peoples, governments and movements. Secular as well as religious movements employ communal living, often at a vulnerable early stage, because it promises security, solidarity and survival. In another respect, communalism presents communitarianism as a method of social change with both positive and negative impacts, compared to individualism. Communitarianism is immediate, voluntary, collective, non-violent and experimental, but it can be isolating, authoritarian, and especially difficult, if it involves communities that require all the elements of a social microcosm.

As a process, developmental communalism is an adaptive continuum in both individual communities and the larger movements that found them. To survive over long periods of time, communal groups and their founding movements must adapt to changing realities within and without. The process of developmental communalism poses a double-jeopardy threat to both communal groups and their movements. If communal living becomes an unchangeable commitment, the founding movement may fail to make necessary adjustments, stagnate,

and die, thus causing the death of its communal groups. If the founding movement is dynamic enough to make changes away from the restrictions of communal living, the movement may expand while its communes become unnecessary or abandoned. In view of the arguments advanced in this theory, the following discussion diligently builds on its suppositions.

### **Communalism in Ogba**

Ogba practice of communalism is based on consanguineal affinity. In Ogba, it is held that anyone who shares a similar gene with someone is automatically a relative. In this regard, every community has certain traditional features in common. These include common ancestry, ritual staff, farm land and kindred relationship. Once any of these is established, the person is automatically a relative.

In Ogba culture, the strength of the community is typified with the indestructible nature of the broom when held together. Ogba people hold that the broom can only be broken when it is scattered. Based on the above, the community is always stronger than any matter, especially those that concern well-being, existence and continuity.

According to Obodoegbulam (2019), Ogba people live in compounds. The head in each compound is usually the eldest male. He also doubles as the administrative officer. Every compound usually hosts a compound meeting hall known as “Ibra kran” (translated as living room of the forebears). The ibra-kran in Ogba is called Obokoro in Ikwerre, and Obi in Egenni. This is where all matters concerning the compound are anchored. Properties like land (Ali), lakes (Avran), economic trees like iroko (Oji), cotton (Akpun), oil palm trees (Eku), are held on trust. No individual exercises right of ownership over them. Here, the compound or lineage or kindred head is the custodian. However, he exercises no over-riding authority to devolve them without the consent of his kins.

The philosophy of communalism is demonstrated in certain wise sayings such as Na bu kaoha (the child belongs to the community),

Iku ya ibe (friends and relatives) ohu, gbuu ya biri ka gbuga uka (come closer does not result to quarrels).

Politically, insinuations such as katan (owned in common), je kata (move together), bia kata (come together) and re kata (eat together) express greater acceptability. Once togetherness is expressed on any instance, dissension is reduced.

### **The Ikwerre experience**

Ikwerre people see themselves as one indivisible and indissoluble community living interdependently, with communal responsibility to its members, rather than an individual living independently. The value and sense of community is hence marked by belongingness and cooperation. The identity of the individual is not emphasized at the expense of his community identity. It is in this regard that Onwubiko (1991) submits that the sense of human identity, social security and their values are premixed on individual identification with and in the communal fold. Individualism as an ideology and principle of life, however, is not encouraged in Ikwerre society, even though it is not destroyed because none can live in isolation.

To this end, Steve Biko avers that,

We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do we always place man first and hence all our action is usually joint community-oriented action rather than the individualism.

Every individual is identified with and in a community, which offers them the psychological and ultimate security, as it gives its members both physical and ideological identity. It must be noted that in the African mentality in general, the community as an entity remains, while individuals, as persons, come and go. Therefore, the Ikwerre

society emphasizes communalism as a living principle of which the basic ideology is community-identity. The community fashions and molds the individuals and censors the execution of such ideas through the family or clan. Its aim is to produce and present an individual as a community culture bearer (Kanu, 2015), sustaining and transmitting same to future generations. Emeakaroha (2002) identified the communalism in Africa, as in Ikwerre, as a system that is suprasensible and material in nature and both are found in a society that is believed by the people to be originally "god-made", since it transcends the people who live in it now. It is also "man-made" to the extent that it cannot be culturally understood independent of those who live in it here and now. It is for this reason that an authentic African (Ikwerre) is known and identified in, by and through his community. The individual, as noted earlier, does not exist without the community, and as such must go the way of the community. In the material term of reference, Emeakaroha notes that the individual must go to the "community centre" (Ihu ezi/Obiri or Obokoro), which is the social, political, judicial and religious centre. It is the communal meeting place for political discussions, communal tribunals, and games. It is, therefore, a traditional place of congregation for the entire community. In this sense, the community is "man-made" because, at the community centre, their tutelary deity often has a shrine; the centres, therefore become also the centre of communal religious worship, sacrifices and festivities. In this sense, the community there gathered becomes "god-made." For this reason, the transcendental term of reference obviously becomes the custodian of the individual's ideas. Besides, without the community - the clan - the ancestrally chartered system stands the void in strong and ever-present contrast, making real life impossible, since a man without lineage is a man without citizenship, identity and, to say the least, without community.

The sense of community is perceivable in the ordinary everyday life of the people in their struggle for survival. The traditional economy which is mainly based on farming and fishing is co-operative in nature. Among the Ikwerre families and communities, friends and kin come together to assist in doing farm work on rotational basis at no

cost (Ogba ngwuota), but because they will gain the same favour subsequently. Children in the family are seen to provide the main labour force for which reason men take pride in having many of them, especially males. The synergetic nature of the Ikwerre society is what makes two or more individuals to pull their resources together and uplift each other economically through the system of contributions called *otu*. This cooperation and solidarity extend to even building of houses and doing other things for their fellow and indigent members of the community. When any of them is in difficulty or experiences misfortune, all members rally around and help sharing in the burden. Kinship ties and love are what characterize the traditional Ikwerre society. It is only this sense of identity and belongingness that would make a community to tax themselves through the sale of the products of cash crops, like oil palm and other economic trees, and use the proceeds to sponsor the education of a brilliant or indigent child, even overseas. In this respect, the synergetic nature of Ikwerre communities is what makes the society very amiable.

Marriage as a social phenomenon is a duty and requirement which involves both the individual and the community. Marriage is a socio-cultural factor intrinsically woven with Ikwerre sense of community. In this regard, it is given an ontological and social significance as it is integrally bound to making possible a realization of the past, present and future, and even embedded in the birth of a new child. The union of the man and woman points to the order of creation, thereby giving real expression to the existence of the visible and the invisible (*hne be hu anya*) and the invisible (*hne be huo anya*) communities. It serves, therefore, as the meeting point where the living-dead and the unborn converge and manifest the end of marriage which is procreation for the continuity of the community (Agbokwuo, 2013).

Marriage relationship is guided by societal norms and values. Essentially, it is this cultural norm that defines certain prohibitions to marriage or otherwise and so the need for the community involvement. Ikwerre people practise exogamy and a patrilineal

system. Each family and lineage, minor or major, is related by blood. Marriage within a certain degree of consanguinity is not only strongly prohibited but tabooed. It is the more reason why marriage is not defined as an isolated matter but a collective responsibility of the immediate and extended families, in fact, the community. Mate selection or choice of spouse rests largely on the family and kinsmen after due diligence has been observed. Egelege, cited in Otonnaa (1993), observes that when a man identified a girl he wished to marry, he first reported to his parents who immediately undertook the study of the girl's family history. The enquiry was conducted under caution and tact, while maintaining some degree of confidentiality. In order to maintain a high degree of sanity in the family lineage, the enquiry sought to find out whether the family had any hereditary diseases, like leprosy, epilepsy, tuberculosis, etc., or any criminal tendencies. It sought also to know if the family was prone to barrenness and the tendencies to promiscuity in marriage, among others.

The culture of communalism is further entrenched in land ownership practice among Ikwerre people. Although land is a scarce resource, Ikwerre societies are relatively blessed with vast expanse of arable land for habitation and for agricultural purposes. It means everything, as their whole existence, spiritual and material, is tied to land and its ownership. According to Wabara (1992) and corroborated by Tassie (2020), land is held with so much reverence, since it is the foundation of community life and is held as the property of the community and of all family groups which include the living persons, the unborn and the ancestors. Hence, land carries with it the symbol of the family and community continuity. The unit of ownership of land is by lineage and the greater part of ownership of land tenure rules is concerned with defining the rights of family members and the limits to which those who are not bona fide members or strangers can go in matters of lineage land (Kasumu, et al, 1966, cited in Omereji, 2003). According to Akinpelu "the allocation was strictly according to need and the ability of the individual to develop" (1990).



A good human relationship in Ikwerre society is guided by the enduring principle of ‘live and let’s live’ which is centered on interpersonal communication and community relationship as its focal point. Hence, in an African community, everyone is accommodated. This African sense of accommodation, in the words Festus Okafor, accounts for why, “In traditional African culture, the weak and the aged; the incurable, the helpless, the sick were affectionately taken care of in the comforting family atmosphere” (1974).

Death and funeral bring community members as well as near and distant friends together. Before the commencement of funeral rites, information is first given to the members of the immediate family. The kindred is informed, followed by the maternal family of the deceased, then, the in-laws and other friends and acquaintances, and lastly to the entire community, which ushers in the commencement of the burial arrangements. The arrangement for the burial is followed by the invitation to all members of the family, immediate and extended, in-laws and acquaintance; the burial date is fixed; and duties and responsibilities are assigned in line with the norms and customs. At burial, the whole community is involved, which is a clear manifestation of the communal spirit of Ikwerre people. Death brings people together, giving people the opportunity to share their grief and condole with the bereaved family. Beyond the belief in the metaphysical connectedness between the living and the dead, the importance accorded to burial rites goes to show the strong notion attached to community belongingness. In this wise, the kinsmen, community people and friends pull their resources together in solidarity to ensure a proper rite of passage.

### **Origin of Egene**

Egene is a group of people in the Ahoada West Local Government Area of Rivers State in the Niger Delta geo-political regional structure in Nigeria. The Egene people trace their historic descent from the old Benin Kingdom (James, 2004). Talbot (1932), cited in Alagoa and Kpone-Tonwe (2002), gave an autochthony account of divine

settlement of the Egene ancestors on the banks of the Orashi River. The Egene language belongs to the Edoid group of languages, as it is reflected in the Inedua, Ogua and the Ediro dialect groups that make up the Egene Ethnic Nationality (Kay Williamson and Ndimele cited in Alagoa and Derefaka, 2002 and Enemugwen, 2006). The Egene people live in cluster houses and communities situated along the southern axis of the Egene/Orashi River (Izeogu, 2018). The people predominantly engage in fishing and farming as their occupation. Her other subsistent occupations are hunting, lumbering craft and commerce which are influenced by the geography of the Equatorial rain forest and their association with neighboring communities, such as the Ogba, Ekpeye, Zarama, Biseni, Okordia and the far Kalabari traders in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Joel, 2019). According to Joel, the Egene people practise Egene religion, based on their strong belief in the Supreme God (Oniso) whom they worship and deities and ancestors whom they venerate. Every aspect of the Egene culture promotes communalism, which is strongly expressed in her funeral rites as discussed in this paper.

The Egene people are traditionally religious. Their religiosity is expressed in their recognition of the supreme God whom they call “Oniso” and worship. The evidence of His worship is expressed in the names given to their children such as:

Onisodemuya, meaning: God is great or big. Other names include:

Onisosueya, meaning: God is alive

Onisokietu, meaning: God has given

Onisokienyeme, meaning: God is my strength

Onisobuana, meaning: thank God

Onisodemeya, meaning: God is with me

Onisodumeza, meaning: God abide with me, etc.

In the same vein, they venerate their ancestors and deities still in the names given to their children, such as: Adebo, meaning: big father; Adeyin, meaning: father has come; Iyame or Onume, meaning: my mother; Iyabo, meaning: big mother, etc. These names refer to their earthy parents. They also bear the names of their deities or ancestors whose names they give to their children. For example, “Onyugu”, etc.

From these names, it is suggestive that the Egene people rarely refer to God as father. He is usually addressed as God (Oniso), except in the Lord's Prayer where God is referred to as father (Asume) as addressed in the Scriptures. In the light of this exception and may be a few others, a school of thought is of the opinion that the Egene names with Christian bias are translated into Egene after the incursion of Christianity. This argument, however, does not contradict the fact that the Egene people are religious. They live together and know one another. They virtually share everything together in the spirit and brotherhood of communalism, as expressed in their traditional funeral rites.

### **Funeral Rites**

The Egene funeral rite is a traditional and religious ceremony which the community performs when a member of the community dies. In Egene, an individual or family, no matter how wealthy they may be, does not bury their dead alone. I recall several incidents when some wealthy individuals and families felt that they could bury their dead without the extended families or community involvement. Such plans met with stiff resistance from the community members who argued that the deceased came from a biological family lineage and community, not from the wood. This attitude towards burying the departed is the same throughout the different cultures in the central Niger Delta. Thus, this influences the argument is the basis for cooperation in burial ceremonies and it strengthens communalism in all aspects of the people's engagement, from childhood to adulthood, unto death. A funeral rite actually starts before the burial, during the burial and after the burial.

Before the burial, at the incident of death, the bereaved family traditionally informs the maternal and paternal parents of the deceased about the death of their son or daughter, especially if the deceased is an adult. Such information is sent through a close member of the deceased family who is given a bottle of drink (usually alcohol) to announce the sad news. The drink is a symbol of respect and regret to

the maternal and paternal families of the deceased. It also conveys request and permission to conduct the funeral. If the drink is accepted by the bereaved family, preparations for the burial commence. Contrarily, a rejection of the drink could suggest a rejection of the information and demands that some explanations be made concerning the death, as the case may be. If all things remain equal, a date is fixed by the family and another bottle of drink is sent to inform the family of the bereaved about the burial date. In the early times, the deceased is preserved overnight locally or buried same day he/she died.

During the burial proper, very early on the burial day, the first daughter or any other chosen to do so will lead the women women of the community in a dance procession round the community, chanting the good virtues of the deceased. The bereaved family has its roles and the community has its roles to play in the funeral, both complement each other. The bereaved family provides one male goat that is used to entertain the community in addition to the entertainment that is made by family members for their friends and visitors who attend the funeral. Plantain and yam are the usual food during the funeral. The first daughter of the deceased is usually expected to coordinate this aspect of the funeral. When the general food is provided, tradition requires that the chief mourner tastes the food first in a ceremony referred to as “Oboeda”, interpreted to mean “hand of the witch”, to certify that the food is safe for eating by elders of the family. Another aspect of the eating ceremony is referred to as “Ude-esan”, interpreted to mean pepper drink, presented at the family hall called “Obi”, as a dessert after the main food had been served and eaten.

When the corpse of the deceased is brought, it is taken to the family house where it is laid in state for family members and sympathizers to pay their last respect. The children of the deceased file round the corpse in turn to make parting presentations to the dead. Such presentations include: wrappers, usually white or George wrapper, biscuits, soft drinks, cash, etc. The cash is used in buying items to entertain the women who stay around the corpse, who are called “Igburu Ivuram”, meaning womenfolk. Still on the burial day, the

bereaved family is expected to open a place where sympathizers and close family members are expected to make their contributions towards the burial. Money realized at the Obi is used to buy drinks, groundnut, garden eggs, etc., to entertain people at the Obi (family hall). At the end of the burial, another goat is presented by the bereaved family to the community to indicate that the burial is over, in a ceremony called “Okò Kpeyam”, meaning washing the canoe, which is usually the means of transportation during the funeral runs. Also indicating the end of the funeral is the sharing of the property of the deceased. This ceremony is necessary because it is the belief of the people that when the property of the deceased is shared and worn by the family members that are living, the dead also is clothed. The procedure for sharing the property requires members to pick any cloth of their choice that is spread on the floor. They are called in particular order of seniority, starting from the immediate family to the extended family. Those who choose a property are required to give a token amount that is used in buying drinks, groundnut, etc., to entertain themselves. The funeral ceremony usually lasts for seven days, and in each of the days, the family feeds visitors and members of the community within the period. The visitors engage in different dances, eating and exchange of pleasantries. The cost of doing all these is enormous and this informs the need for communal support to lessen the burden on the immediate family. So funeral rites in Egene are a communal engagement

The influence of modernity: Apart from the roles attributable to Christian missions and the corollary agents of colonialism, modernity also plays its part in the changes which are ongoing. Urbanization and industrialization in the central Niger Delta cultures of Ogba, Egenni and Ikwerre are some of the contending factors that are undermining the culture of communalism among the people. They disturb the traditional sense of solidarity in such a way that some people lose their sense of community and cultural ethos, thereby leaving them with little or no foundation in their traditional setting (Mbiti, 1969). In the urban centers, people develop alternative ways of living that betray

the traditional anchorage, which are open to the new Western-oriented structures in the web of change and modernization. This gives rise to a shift in socio-cultural views which manifest in a vastly increased range of choices confronting individuals (Gutkind, 1969). This whole new perception is sometimes very inimical to the welfare and solidarity of the community.

### **Conclusion**

Funeral rites in the central Niger Delta communities are a communal responsibility, because members of the community show full presence and participation. They are not expected to engage in any farming, fishing or occupational activity. Those who may in error (or forget and) go for other businesses are expected to return by the invitation of a talking drum announcing the beginning of the funeral or the death of a member of the community. Funeral rites in Ogba, Egenni and Ikwerre are ceremonies that unite the people, and give them a sense of belonging and an identity. This sense of communalism is enhanced by the settlement pattern of the community which is cluster living, where everybody is a brother's keeper in every ramification, including security and food production. This culture is eroding because of cross-cultural contact and globalization, but it needs to be revitalized to sustain and preserve the rich cultural heritage of the people.

On the final note, the concept of communalism is gradually being eroded among the different cultures in the central Niger Delta societies, with the increasing wave of globalization and Christianity cutting across Africa and changing the people's worldview.

Recommendations: Considering the arguments above, this paper wishes to recommend as follows:

- (i) The basic ideas behind the culture of communalism should be taught to the younger generation.
- (ii) Those issues which discourage communalism in these modern times should be changed.
- (iii) Owing to the need for a better life, individuals should give birth to fewer children so that nobody will be a liability, which is one of the arguments against communalism.
- (iv) Every member of the society should endeavour to acquire a means of livelihood.

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