

SOCIO- RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF IGBO LAWS AND JUSTICE

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Abstract

The ideas of law and justice are inseparable. While law can easily be defined as a whole system of rules that everybody in a society has to obey, justice presents a whole array of meaning that bothers on the fair treatment of people necessitated by the need to enforce the law. Largely justice necessitates the law which helps to achieve a just society. This is also the ground they share in Igbo Traditional Religion and culture. However, there is a serious misconception and attempt by some scholars to divest Igbo laws and the entire Justice system of their religio- moral character. These posit Coercion and Fear as their Foundations. In this paper, the researcher employs the research method to explore the origins, meanings, practice and implications of Igbo law and justice in their individual consciousness and organization of her communities. We therefore discovered that for the Igbo, like other Africans whose lives are religiously organized, the promulgation and observance or practice of these two disciplines go beyond the material world because they are intrinsically related to the Divine. Thus the Igbo recognize man as one of the beings in her worldview whose interactions with other beings shape his existence in the material world and beyond. God, the Deities and Ancestors especially regulate his morality and have to be fully represented in their individual lives and communities for their own survival. Here comes the use of Ofo and masquerade society (with the age grades) in both the enactment and practice of the Law and Justice respectively. This paper therefore recommends the better appreciation and adoption of some of the transcendental aspects of the Igbo legal system to mitigate the inefficiencies on the current western practices in Africa.

Keywords: Igbo, African, Laws, Justice, Jurisprudence

Introduction: Igbo World View

Uchendu (1965) rightly states that,

To know how a people view the world around them is to understand how they evaluate life; and a people's evaluation of life, both temporal and nontemporal, provides them with a charter of action, a guide to behavior (p.11).

This is very true of the Igbo worldview with its strong belief in the existence of two worlds: the visible world of men and the invisible world of spirits that can be subdivided into two: The world of God and the gods situated somewhere above the firmament, and the underworld, somewhere beneath the earth surface. So the Igbo world comprises of Elu-Igwe, Ala-mmadu, and Ala-Mmuo all inhabited by beings. Igbo world-view also holds that these worlds and the beings that inhabit them are not mutually exclusive. Hence according to Metuh (1999),

There is a continuous exchange between all the beings In the Igbo world-view, irrespective of the class of being (visible or invisible) to which they belong. Men can be possessed by the spirits and spirits sometimes incarnate themselves in visible form. Men can influence the deities and the spirit through sacrifices, prayers and spells (p.84).

It is also true that as with all Africans, Igbo world view is characterized by the principles of hierarchy and communion of beings. In this structure, the Supreme Being (Chukwu or Chineke) is the highest reality, followed by the divinities, the Spirit forces and the disembodied spirits, then man and the lower material beings. Yet Ejizu (1986) rightly observes that man is “pre-eminently the focus of the Igbo vision of the universe and the main pivot of the traditional network” (p.136). This Metuh (1999) argues is because “the visible world which is the world of man and human institutions is the world of daily experience” (p. 84) and for Madu (1996) because “man forms the bridge between the spiritual beings and other cosmic realities” (p.6). His life is therefore of prime value in Igbo world-view such that every other thing is supposed to be created and arranged for his sake. This is why the Igbo world-view like most other Africans’ has been described as heavily anthropocentric.

However, because he is subordinated to the spiritual beings man depends on them for his sustenance and must do everything possible to maintain a harmonious relationship with them and other realities. Man therefore says Ejizu (1986) has “a lot of forces to contend with; especially the myriads of spirits which are thought to be highly dynamic, ferocious, and malevolent” (p.140). Yet for Uchendu (1965), “the Igbo believe that these social calamities and cosmic forces which disturb their world are controllable and should be manipulated by them for their own purposes” (p.13).

Igbo Political Structure

Here we will be discussing the more general non-kingship Igbo governmental structure which has its basic, central or pivotal unit as the Umunna. The Umunna unit, in the words of Ekei (2001),

Comprises a group of patrilineal relatives who share a common fore-father or great ancestor and may live together in close association. Often each Igbo kindred unit (umunna) is identified with the name of such common fore-father, preceded by a prefix- "umu...", or "sons of ..." "descendants of..." (p.27).

This corresponds to Meek's kindred or extended family which Forde and Jones (1950/67) could also be understood as "a small unit of male siblings and their children which with their wives, often constitute a compound household group" (p.15). In its widest connotation says Uchendu (1965), "the umunna refers to the patrilineal members, real or putative, whom one cannot marry" (p.4). Nwala (1985) is also right to call this simply "the family from which state and government in ancient and traditional communities seem to emerge" (p.165). This is as stated by Uchendu (1965) and Okafor (1992) because members here are subject to an Okpala, the kindred head who is usually the eldest male of the kindred/ household. He holds the family ofo, the symbol of authority, truth and family ancestry because he wields both moral, religious and political rights and obligations over the family members. Consequently, all the householders and their dependants recognize his full authority that even though he does not interfere in their internal affairs, they are expected to consult him before taking any major political decision because he must give his opinion on the conflict with custom and tradition. He also offers sacrifice for the welfare of the family members and confers special names on each child born into the family. He settles their internal disputes and represents them in external relations with other kindreds and groups. He is also invested with the power to punish by cursing offenders with the ofo. Because of his position, the Okpala is entitled to periodic tributes and gifts from the family members.

However, the main layers of political structure in Igbo society has be identified as the village and the village- group. Here real politics is observed with some community peculiarities. For Okafor (1992) "the village is a social unit comprising the (patri)lineages while the village group involves the coming together of the individual villages to form what is better known today in most areas as the town" (p. 5).

In the villages, government is by direct democracy whereby all the mature male members of the family gather to discuss issues pertaining to the group with a high level of autonomy that admits of no interference or dictation from any other group.

The Village-group is the largest political structure. It however has no well defined powers except in matters affecting the earth-goddess and the common market places. Government here is by representation of the villages and the decisions are not binding on any village that is not represented or disagrees with the decisions. Uchendu (1965) observes that each village is therefore supposed to send her delegates to the gatherings according to their ability to present their point of view, which must have been agreed on or ratified by them. There are therefore no permanent members to the meetings of the village-group. In the words of Okafor(1992) "rights and responsibilities are shared equally by the component villages based on the principle of equal sharing of kola and equal distribution of material resources for the upkeep of the community" (p.5).

What is today known/ observed as the town unions and its authorities had obviously originated with modern civilization and urbanization when the welfare of the people could not be met by the villages alone. It was then that people started coming together to provide such facilities as schools, pipe borne water, electricity, good roads and the likes.

Isichei (1976) is also right to say that,

Igbo government has sometimes been called a gerontocracy, but not all elderly men had an equal say. A successful man, who was prosperous, with numerous descendants would, as it were, register and legitimize his success by taking a title (p. 22).

Thus the roles and influences of titled men and sometimes women in the society are recognized. They are a group of freeborn of good conduct who could provide the necessary fees and feasts. However where titles are graded in terms of their prestige, privilege and ritual status, they are normally taken in their proper order. And a man may not take a title equal to or higher than one held by his father in his lifetime. On their influences and roles, Forde and Jones (1950/67) observe that,

The initiative, including the formation of policy and the debate in the public meetings, was controlled by the leading members of the

title society, who discussed affairs at their society meetings and secured the support of other titleholders (p.19).

Other groups with some perceived roles in Igbo political framework include priests, diviners, medicine men, age grades, members of secret societies. Some of these will be seen in our subsequent discussions.

Classical Notions Of Igbo Law And Justice

1. The Law

Laws 'Iwu' in Igbo tradition are to be distinguished from mere customary rules by the fact that they are enforceable. They are also of two discernible types; those considered as offences to the supernatural forces and those that are not so considered. Green (1964) puts it thus:

Legal rules are of two main classes and are recognized as such. There are those which might be called ordinary human laws and those whose breach is held to be not only illegal but also an offence against a supernatural power and particularly against Ala, the land. Of the perpetrators of such an offence it would be said: "Omeruru ala" - " he polluted the land" (Ps. 99-100).

The later offences are called taboos "Nso" and will be discussed immediately.

Divine Laws

For Green (1964) the divine laws are meant to cover the most serious (albeit criminal) offences in the Igbo traditional society. Like every other aspect of Igbo culture, these laws are written in the consciousness of the people educated by their families and immediate social groups. In summary, Okafor (1992) says that these laws can be characterized by the fact that they are not man-made but carry heavy penalties; "they attract divine wrath or acts of justice, and punishments for them demand propitiatory rites or sacrifices" (p.35). Basden (1966) includes all offences against Ala: Incest, homicide, and other supposed abnormal behaviours or occurrences among animals and birds in this category (ps.259-263).

These offences are also considered unnatural and able to bring disaster on the whole community. Since only the supernatural tribunal could dispense justice in these cases and before such repercussions could affect others, the culprit is normally isolated and punished accordingly. Most times the immediate family is

also seriously affected as happened to Okonkwo in Achebe (1958/84, p.87). Even when the cases are difficult to detect, the culprit is made to swear under oath which serves as an appeal to the Supernatural forces who are asked to revenge the course if the accused is guilty. After a certain number of days and nothing happens, the person is declared innocent of the particular offence.

Similarly, most notorious evil men and women are known to make public confessions on their death beds, recalling all the evil they had committed even in secret before they die. They hope to be pardoned for their confessions and for fears of the consequences of carrying their guilt to the other world. This is because punishments for these offences do not always end here. They may extend to the next incarnated life if the criminal has not been adequately punished, or he/she may not be allowed to incarnate at all.

Igbo Positive Laws

These are the ordinary human laws which breach does not amount to any offence against the supernatural but are considered wrong all the same because they do not conform to the Omenala. Unlike the latter, they are man-made laws and could differ from one community to the other. Isichei (1976) and Okafor (1992) opine that they are normally made on a variety of subjects; economic, social, and political like land and debt disputes, cases of theft, market regulations and so on.

They have also rightly observed that the Igbo have no permanent legislative body as in Western civilizations of today, rather the village and indeed any group of people meeting in an ad hoc assembly for economic or other social purposes can use the opportunity to discuss public matters and make laws to guide peoples conducts in that respect, provided they have a strong support. Some of these major groups include; the age grade society, dibia fraternity, titled men and the mmanwu group.

However, because of its fundamental and more permanent nature, legislative processes in the villages appear more pronounced. Here adult males meet in an ad hoc general assembly called Oha, mostly in the village square. Here every villager that can contribute to the discussion is given a hearing in the order of their seniority or adjudged capacity. When the matter has been thoroughly discussed, the leaders from each lineage in the village retire for 'izuzu'. This right is reserved to men of weight and prestige who have the wisdom to understand

and appreciate all schools of thought and achieve a compromise which the assembly will accept. The decision is finally to be announced by the spokesperson of the community so designated for his oratory. However, the decision may or may not be accepted by the others. When accepted it has also to be passed into law.

Promulgation of the law is the prerogative of all the ofo holders present who declares thus: 'This law is in accordance with our custom and must be obeyed and respected. Those who refuse to obey it, may ofo kill them'. This is normally done four times hitting the ofo stick to the ground, while the people respond 'Ise'.

After this, it is the duty of each adult male and house holder to explain the legislation to his household and see that they respect the law. Okafor (1992) is indeed right to have observed the legislative processes of the Igbo positive laws are generally characterized by their legitimacy; promulgation; rationality; interests of the common good and their conformity to the custom of the people.

Lastly, to initiate a legislative proceeding, the complainant is expected to choose the group which he thinks will represent his interest better. Yet in keeping with the Principle of Subsidiarity, most complaints go through the hands of the family heads of the offended to those of the offender (if they are not the same).

Meaning Of Justice

Though not often defined, the Igbo sees justice as one of the fundamental problems of morality. It is also an urgent concern of all and a necessary condition for peace in the society. Justice can therefore be seen as the resultant effect of a good law truly enforced and has both spiritual and physical implications. It is conformity with the Laws of the land with all the human and supernatural elements involved. For Nzomiwu (1999) states:

A man who fulfils the injunctions of Omenala, which contains the duties of a citizen in both vertical and horizontal directions is regarded as a just man. In the same way the word Ikpe nkwu-moto came to mean judgement that is in harmony with the tradition (p. 41).

The moral injunctions of Justice like the Omenala itself, is however not found in any written treatise but in the Igbo oral traditions: myths, proverbs, wise sayings and others. Hence the Igbo idea of Justice is classically rendered in the Igbo

expression of Ikwuba aka oto (Lit. Straightening of the hand, making/ keeping the hand straight) or Ikpe nkwumoto (a straight or correct judgement) in a proper juridical context.

Etymologically, Ikwuba aka oto is said to have originated from the pre-literate agrarian Igbo society where the continuous need to share the farm land without tapes (measuring instruments) saw the selection of trustworthy young men to walk the length and breadth of the land. These were often instructed to keep their hands straight (kwuba nu aka oto) so as not to make crooked lines and cheat anybody by so doing. Other expressions of justice among the Igbo by Ekei (2001) include Justice as Co- Existence; Co-responsibility; Equality; Care; and Justice as Concern because of the popular African value of Communalism in which man is supposed to be a member of a community and to share in her rights and responsibilities. Hence the Igbo religiously state: *Onye biri ibe ya biri* (- Live and let live) as adapted from her wise counsel: *Egbe bere Ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebena, nku kwaa ya* (the kite perch, the eagle perch, which ever does not want its neighbor to perch should lose its wings).

Implications Of Igbo Socio- Religious Legal System

Our discussion so far leads us to the present sub- theme. Having proved that Igbo notion of justice is derived from the law (both divine and positive) which are basically religious. We shall NOW try to expose the full implications of these associations.

1. Divine Law And Justice

As we have already pointed out, the Igbo have a very strong understanding of crimes against the supernatural, which punishment is inescapable. Achebe, (1958/84) and Okafor (1992) suggest that these punishments are simply acts or aspects of divine justice which is believed to be absolute, impartial, immutable, and eternal; failure of which also means disharmony and death in the human society. The beings which are directly offended and whose acts of justice are evident here include God and the Deities as God's emanations and ambassadors. Divine justice according to Basden (1966) and Metuh (1999) is primarily predicated on the facts of God's Supremacy, Benevolence and Omniscience. The Igbo believe in the existence of one Supreme Being ever before the coming of the missionaries. He created all and holds them in being 'Olisa buluwa'. He is above all therefore, even the deities who are His emanations and Ambassadors. God's creation also necessitates his benevolence; hence the popular Igbo saying that

Chukwu selu aka uwa agwu- If God removes His hands, the world will end. People therefore depend on and approach him for their needs. He is also omniscient- knowing everything through and through. For all these sublime attributes of the Supreme Being says Nzomiwu (1999), “the Igbo believe that justice in its most perfect form exists in God and that all other beings are just according to their degree of propinquity to God” (p.77).

The Igbo therefore believe that God is the perfect judge and will judge every good and evil deed in the universe. This is because they are aware of the incidents of miscarriage of justice among humans and by the deities. Thus one who is misjudged in these instances always has recourse to God for he says: Chukwu ga ekpe- God will judge; Chukwu ma obim-God knows the secrets of my heart. The ability of God to dispense perfect justice is also expressed in such Igbo names as Onukwube - Let the mouth talk and Chiegeonu- God does not listen to gossips, and so on.

Next are the Deities who are believed to be very powerful because of their special relationship with God and their perceived roles in the governance of the world. Two of such deities feature more prominently in the Igbo understanding of Law and Justice. They are Ala and Igwe.

Ala has been touted to be the most important deity in Igbo politics and private cults because it is the owner of men, alive and dead. Metuh (1999) says that “she is also the custodian of Igbo morality, the great mother, who is believed to preside over the deities below just as Chukwu does over the sky deities” (p.94). Hence all serious criminal offences (Nso) in Igbo society are also offences against Ala which sanctions include propitiatory sacrifices to/ through her. New laws are also made in her name. Little wonder, Nzomiwu (1999), Ala is therefore worshipped as “the sustainer of life and champion of justice and defender of the weak and innocent. It is greatly due to her influence, respect and fear that fairness and justice are upheld in Igbo community” (p.82).

Thus one often has to appeal to Ala to show that he is saying the truth or wants justice. Should the opposite turn out to be case, Ala is believed to punish or act to save the community and punishments may not end with death; the offender may also be denied full burial rites and the opportunity of reincarnating.

But Uchendu (1965) also calls her a merciful mother because,

She intercedes for her children with other spirits. Minor deities may not take action against Igbo without asking ala to 'warn' her children, but no spirit may intercede or intervene when ala has decided to punish. But she does not punish in haste; she gives many signals of her displeasure (p. 96).

On the other hand, Igwe (the sky deity which cult is not widespread though), is regarded as the counterpart of the Ala and fertilizes it in the form of rain. Metuh (1999) and Green (1964) also state that Igwe is regarded as the agent of Chineke against undetected criminals and that it expresses his power and anger in thunderbolts and lightening. He is also called upon to arbitrate in such difficult circumstances and to strike offenders dead afterwards. The offenders are never mourned, because they have been punished by God. Perhaps Igwe is feared more because she is believed to punish both the guilty and those who may have benefitted from them inadvertently.

2. The Role Of The Ancestors

Madu (1996) characterizes the Ancestors in Igbo traditional religion (otherwise called the living dead) as members of the human family who are known to have lived good moral lives, died at good old age, left male offsprings, and received full/ proper burial rites. These are indeed believed to still maintain both visible and spiritual link with their human families here, living in their families and clans.

In spite of all we have already said about God and the deities, the role of the Igbo ancestors in maintaining law and justice in the Igbo society are also very fundamental. This is because of their nature and position in the Igbo cosmology on which their judicial authority and other mediatory roles are based. Thus according to Nzomiwu (1999),

Igbo morality and demands of justice are not enforced by purely human members of the community but as has been mentioned above by other deities such as Ala (the earthgoddess). But it is most properly the function of the Igbo ancestors to uphold the social order and enforce justice and Omenala - (the Igbo unwritten moral code) (p. 87).

First of all, the ancestors have the closest link with their living families in whose life they share. Just because they have been human beings, they are in the

position to appreciate human strengths and weaknesses, possibilities and needs. This is the quality they share with the human leaders of the community more than the deities. But they have other added advantages of being proved good and of staying closer to God like the deities more than the human leaders. Thus any breach of the moral code affects them and is punished not only by the living but, and especially by, these departed members of the community.

Secondly, ancestors are indeed regarded as the custodians of the traditions-Omenala, as well as rulers of these communities owing to their proximity to the Supreme Being and the earth-goddess, while the living persons are considered leaders only because of their proximity to these ancestors. Justice by the ancestors is therefore believed to be more just, impartial and unmistakable, and the Igbo are in the habit of swearing by their ancestors in difficult circumstances. Punishments by the ancestors are also believed to come in form of thunderbolts, deadly diseases like leprosy and small pox, and other misfortunes, but are meted out to unrepentant sons and daughters who would not heed the persistent pleas of these rather benevolent ancestors.

Among the Igbo, the month of August is dedicated to the celebration of ancestors when they are most remembered, recognised and their influences believed to be better felt. Arinze (1970) calls this "'Alom Mmuo' or 'Otute'" (p. 20).

It is said that because the ancestors are believed to take over judicial power during this period, the whole village is usually enveloped in fear while those who die then are believed to have been killed by the ancestors and so not given full funeral rites and/ or are cast into the evil forest.

The Ofo And Masquerades As Symbols Of Ancestral Authority

The Masquerades as Mma-nwu (short for Mmadu Nwuru anwu; a dead human being) in Igbo life and culture, have a spiritual denotation. These human spirits for the Igbo approximate the ancestors as distinct from other human spirits that may portend evil. The appearance of the masquerades is therefore seen as the visitation of the ancestors to their human families on earth. This is why it is preceded by the appropriate rituals believed to mysteriously imbue the masks with the qualities and powers of these ancestors. These qualities and powers include sanctity and justice. Nzomiwu (1999) clearly states that the masquerades are believed to be,

Sent by the earth-goddess to enact or execute justice where the execution is very difficult for mere human beings. In their assumed

character they carry out far reaching judicial decision without fear, a thing they would have confessed themselves powerless to do as mere human beings (ps.95-6).

Principally, the enforcement of the positive laws of the communities rests on the youth through their age grades and especially the secret societies, which are agents of social control. The age grades besides serving as social indicators between seniors and juniors are means of allocating public duties, seeing to the right conduct and well beings of her members. They also collect levies, keep surveillance over the village properties and run her errands.

Isichei (1976) observes that secret societies in their roles as supernatural beings and the anonymity of her members could attack offenders. The activities of these masquerades are therefore believed to be unquestionably just because they are closer to divine justice than any ordinary human being. Finally, like the age grade society, they equally guard the community against thieves, reveal those guilty of religious offences as well as collect debts and fines from offenders. A classical example is the Egwugwu masquerade in Achebe (1958/ 84, p. 84).

Ofo: Is considered to be the central, most important symbol of Igbo tradition religion, hence Njaka (1974) and Okafor (1992) adopt Ofoism as an alternative name for Igbo traditional religion.

THE Ofo is made from the branch of the peculiar *Detarium elastica* or *Detarium senegalensis* tree. Since these branches are naturally divided into segments which fall off on its own when grown, this club-like material is not cut, but collected only by chief priests for religious purposes. Nor does the tree appear to be useful for any other purposes since it cannot be climbed nor used as firewood. This is why the Igbo believe that Chukwu, from whose compound it originates, purposely gave it to man for ritual activities. Ejizu(1986) further summarises Ofo when he says that,

It is Chukwu himself who gave Ofo to man-kind to serve as a medium of contact between man and the Spirit-world, and to signify God's truth among men. Every ritual use of Ofo by us is a repetition of actions done in the beginning. It is continuation of a tradition that is rooted in the ancestors. It is efficacious (p. 122).

In spite of these beliefs, a piece of Ofo is believed to acquire its spiritual efficiency only after its consecration.

Most importantly therefore, Ofo is commonly associated with the Igbo ancestors who are the primogenitors and rulers of the human societies, living now with Chukwu, while still overseeing the affairs of these societies. It is therefore the exclusive right of every adult male in the society who is believed to carry on the family lineage. On this, Okafor (1992) clearly states that “acquiring the Ofo raises him to a new social and religious status and confers on him the authority to communicate with Chukwu and his ancestors from whom the unborn come” (p. 30).

Yet this individual Ofo is different from and less important than the ancestral Ofo which is handed down from one generation to another. The Igbo further believe that as long as an Ofo continues to pass from one person to another and from generation to generation, the person who first handed it down remains alive and influential.

Nzomiwu (1999) and Okafor (1992) equally observe that Ofo is the symbol of truth and justice in the Igbo society because it approximates Chukwu and the ancestors who possess these qualities to the greatest degree. This explains why it features prominently in such rather defining religious, social and political activities of the Igbo as the ratification or promulgation of the law(earlier stated), oath-taking in its various forms, and an instrument of cursing.

Evaluation And Conclusion

We have tried to explore the Igbo notions of Law and Justice which are real issues in the people’s ethics and political philosophy. That they lead to order and apparent peace in the society is indeed no news since they have exactly the same functions as in any known community or nation. What may be news to some however is that they are fundamentally and actively religious because of the presence and influence of God, the Deities and the ancestors on human consciousness and their communities. Njaka (1974) therefore states that; “Law and order are maintained because the ancestors so desire and oha so command. And the ancestors so desire law and order because Chukwu must have approved them” (p. 46).

To situate them any other place would be a parody of the truth as some authors have attempted, may be for fear of being branded primitive and irrational. On this Ekei (2001) for instance sees Igbo Traditional law as unethical because it uses coercion as against the sense of oughtness. He therefore advances that Igbo moral evaluations can also be distinguished from religious evaluations. His is a consistent effort to disrupt the wholistic view of Igbo reality. He therefore fails to understand Igbo morality as an aspect of her religion which has both vertical and horizontal dimensions.

The opposite therefore appears to be the case: With Peschke (2001) law and justice are seen as aspects of morality, which is an important aspect of all religions; natural and rational. Igbo postulations on law and justice cannot therefore be arbitrary. Little wonder the wisdom of the Igbo in the developments and practice of these themes.

The Igbo therefore appear to make a good blend of the traditions of faith and reason, a further pointer to harmony in their social and religious lives. Thus, while everything stems from God whose preoccupation is the good of man, Igbo laws and idea of justice tend towards man's temporal and supernatural ends. Here are the distinctive values of these traditional practices to the society as against their legalistic and sometimes arbitrary western counterparts.

Nevertheless, Igbo law and justice seem to suffer from the traditional limitations of the basic understanding of man as one who can only live in and contribute to his community; a pragmatic yet closed community that tends to value nothing beyond her boundaries. With this Igbo aspects of law and justice appear to slack from those transcendental values it purports to uphold. A little touch here and there can take it back to a complete path of relevance. This should be the focus of contemporary Igbo societies.

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AKU: AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

ISSN: 26814-0761 (Print) 2814-0753 (e). Vol. 2 No. 1. 2021

A Publication of the Association for the Promotion of African Studies

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