

## INDIGENOUS MANAGEMENT THOUGHTS, CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES: The Case of the Igbos of Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines core values and practices of traditional Igbo culture which have semblance with the modern management approaches and theories. The paper adopted the matching concept method and developed a model of relationship. It argues that the Igbo societies managed their affairs effectively in a manner similar to selected scientific principles and practices of the West even though it was not documented. It also submits that native management structures in advance encouraged the successful adoption of management practices from the western culture. In this paper, Human relations, Teams, Motivation, Management Functions and Decision Making are posited as African and core values of Ndigbo (the Igbos) which supported the movement of management theories in useful direction.*

**Keywords:** Ndigbo, Umunna, Management, Human Relations, Teams, Decision Making

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

To a large extent, the style or method used in managing an organization at any given time reflects the general level of development of the society in which that organization operates. Expectedly, as a society progresses, the organizations existing within it improve or grow by way of capacity, performance and general efficiency (Duke II, 2008).

Western management concepts and writings dominated the thinking of academics and managers in Africa for a long time, and such writings did not show how culture may be taken into account in managerial practices (Gbadamosi, 2003). This portrayed Africans as people without root or contribution as far as managerial practices were concerned.

It has been argued that the application of Western management methods often proves less effective when transplanted elsewhere, hence, every nation, culture and setting is rooted in its contextual value system and culture (Ahiauzu, 1999; Adeleye, 2011; Zoogah, 2009). This underscores the existence of African leadership styles which have their roots in African culture. Mintzberg (2010) captures the African management practices when he reiterated one of Kofi Anan's advisor impression of his leadership style thus:

*"...he runs the UN like an old fashioned African village with long discussions among the elders, periods of reflections and eventually a decision".*

In Africa and Nigeria, the indigenous peoples had their own management philosophies and practices before the advent of colonialism and they were indeed able to survive a very tortuous past-slavery, colonialism, brutal economic exploitation and attempted cultural annihilation- through these philosophies and strategies (Muo and Oghojafor, 2012).

Some African authors have advocated the integration of African traditional thinking with the strengths of the scientific and rational approach in order to accommodate and use some often irrational desires and behaviours

for better organizational performance (Mbigi, 2002). His concept of “*Ubuntu*” advances the rhetoric of African humanism and peculiarity by favouring harmony of interest instead of secluded intervention. It stipulates “I am because we are; I can only be a person through others” (April & Ephraim, 2010; Nussbaum, 2003). This underscores the culture and belief of “Unity is strength” largely practiced by Africans. Mbigi outlines some of the key values of African leadership as follows: Respect for the dignity of others; Group solidarity – an injury to one is an injury to all; Teamwork – none of us is greater than all of us; Services to others in the spirit of harmony; Interdependence – each one of us needs all of us.

It is noted that the traditional African society’s leadership styles are broadly classified into two: decentralized (consensus-based) systems in which law making, social control and allocation of resources are managed by entities like village groups, ‘Umunna’ (a wide group of kinsman), age-grades; and centralized (chieftaincy-based) systems (ECA, 2007). The decentralized (fragmented) traditional states supports techniques of control which revolves around the dynamics of clanship; a normative scheme that consisted of elaborate bodies of well established rules of conduct usually enforced by heads of fragmented segments and in more serious cases, by spontaneous community action (Otumfuo, 2004 in Muo and Oghojafor, 2012). He identified two major features as:

- Existence of well defined norms despite the absence of a hierarchical sovereign head.
- Direct and pronounced participation of the people in decision making, assuring visible democratic process.

On the other hand, centralised traditional states are organized under well entrenched highly structured political authority, a political sovereign backed by law enforcement agency and habitually obeyed by the people.

Traditional African societies were run consensually in spite of the apparent authoritarianism of some of the kingdoms. Consensus was the norm in acephalous and so-called stateless societies (Osuntokun, 2000).

The pre-colonial Igbo society of Nigeria practiced a decentralized system of leadership, which had the objectives of living together in peace (udo), love (ihunanya), oneness (idi na otu), justice (ikpe ziri ezi), ensuring equity (egbe bere ugo bere), fairness (onye rie onye rie ma ogbu emena), and above all the progress of all (Co-prosperity, Onye aghala nwanne ya) through its leadership practices. It also believes in the slogan of “Unity is strength” (Igwe bu Ike).

The objective of this paper is to articulate, identify, and define features of some management thoughts and practices that have similarity with the indigenous practices of Igbo people of Nigeria. The paper will attempt to answer the following questions - Is the human relations school in any way similar to the Igbo practice of Njiko ka (consensus), Onye aghala nwanne ya (co-prosperity), and igwe bu ike (esprit de corps, unity is strength)? Does the concept of Teams have any likely bearing with the features of the age grade system practices by the Igbos? Is there a relationship between the modern practice of motivation, recognition and reward with that of the “Title system” in Igbo land? Does the functions of management and decision making processes have any semblance with the “Umunna and Ndi Ichie approach” of the Igbo people? The study is divided into five parts: introduction, literature/conceptual reviews, methodology, results and discussions and conclusions.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Every management theory is a result of an effort to solve a management or business problem through the application of the management research process (Asika, 2007). Theories are perspectives with which people make sense of their world experiences (Stoner et al, 1995 in Olum, 2004). Theory is a systematic grouping of interdependent concepts and principles (generalizations or hypotheses that are tested for accuracy and appear to be true to reflect or explain reality) that gives a framework to, or ties together, a significant area of knowledge (Olum, 2004).

Management theories, principles and thoughts refer to a range of management, industrial relations, leadership, accounting, finance, marketing, insurance, public relations approaches which are claimed to improve business or organizational performance in some measurable or otherwise provable ways (Asika, 2007). Management, put succinctly, means matching resources with manpower to achieve a beneficial goal for society (Osuntokun, 2000).

Management science being a behavioural science from the social sciences is replete with scholars from backgrounds other than management who visualized management practices from their primary academic backgrounds; and thus all kinds of thinkers were offered a haven to practise their envisaged idea of management thoughts (Asika, 2007).

This chaos in thinking prompted what Koontz (1961) termed “the jungle of management theory” which brought with them sharp conflicts, contradictions and apparent confusion (Asika, 1981). Koontz attempted to classify the various “schools of management theory”, identified what he believed to be the major sources of differences and tried offering some suggestions for disentangling the jungle. He classified the schools as the ‘Management Process School’, the ‘Empirical School’, the ‘Human Behavior School’, the ‘Social System School’, the ‘Decision theory school’ and the ‘Mathematical School’. Some other contemporary schools of thought have also emerged such as the ‘System school’, the ‘Contingency approach’, the ‘total quality management’ approach among others. These various schools of thought were developed for the purpose of solving organizational problems and enabling them achieve their objectives.

## **2.1 Selected Management thoughts and Practices**

### **2.1.1 Human Behaviour/Relations School**

This approach to the analysis of management is based on the central thesis that, since managing involves getting things done with and through people, the study of management must be centered on interpersonal relations (Koontz, 1961). Various called the "human relations", "leadership", or "behavioural sciences" approach, this school brings to bear "existing and newly developed theories, methods, and techniques of the relevant social sciences upon the study of inter- and intrapersonal phenomena, ranging fully from the personality dynamics of individuals at one extreme to the relations of cultures at the other" (Tannenbaum, Weschler, and Massarik, 1961). In other words, this school concentrates on the "people" part of management and rests on the principle that, since people work together as groups in order to accomplish objectives, "people should understand people."

Halloran (1978) defines human relations as all the interactions that can occur among people, whether they are conflicts or co-operative behaviour. Obisi (2003) posits that the study of human relations in business and industry is the study of people who can work effectively in groups in order to satisfy both organizational goals and personal needs. Stan (1978) also observes that human relations are concerned with the “why” of the people and their groups. Thus, human relations is an encompassing body of knowledge or concept through which workers, groups and management get things done through each other. Philosophy of human relations according to McGregor (1960) emphasizes three basic dimensions as follows:

1. The loyalty and cooperation of the individual in the organization must be earned, won and deserved ( Consensus “Njiko Ka” )
2. The individual employee, in respect of his status, prospects for advancement and his economic well-being is linked with the success of the enterprise (all) by which he is employed ( Co-prosperity “Onye aghala nwanne ya”)
3. The basic relationship of the individual should not be jeopardized by government, union and management ( Espirit De Corps “Igwe Bu Ike” -Unity is strength).

### **2.1.2 Teams**

A Team is a collection of people who interact with one another, work towards a common purpose and perceive themselves to be a group (Ikemefuna 2005). A team can be described as a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. A team is not a bunch of people with job titles, but a congregation of individuals, each of whom has a role understood by other members (Belbin, 1981). Nine team roles were identified by Belbin as Plant, Monitor evaluator, Coordinator, Resource investigators, Implementers, Completer finishers, Team workers, Shaper, and Specialists. Team members seek out certain roles and they perform most effectively in the ones that are most natural to them (Belbin, 1981). Organizations are increasingly employing teams as their fundamental organizing unit (Fiore & Salas, 2004); Teams have also been found to be effective, the combination of skills, expertise and resources of team members enable the team to potentially optimize the speed and efficiency in which complex tasks can be completed (McComb, Green & Compton 1999). Some teams are created to solve problems such as quality circles (Weilrich, Cannice & Koontz, 2008). A critical team process is “team socialization” because teams need to be cohesive to perform well and be committed to the team’s objectives (House & Shamir, 1993). Another key team process is leadership (Sivasubramaniam, Murry, Avolio & Jung, 2002), without leadership team members are unlikely to identify with team objectives. In addition, shared leadership represents teams whose members are empowered to share the tasks and responsibilities of leadership. Thus, self managed teams have the autonomy to make important decisions concerning their team processes (Katzenbach & Smith 1993).

### 2.1.3 Motivation - Reward and Recognition

Motivation is the willingness to exert high levels of effort towards organizational goals, conditioned by the effort's ability to satisfy some individual needs (Robbins 1991). A more practical approach to motivation theory which identifies the lower level needs as hygiene or dissatisfiers and the higher level needs as motivators or satisfiers was introduced by Herzberg (1968). According to him, the higher level needs are the rewards which give inner joy to the individual but cannot be measured and quantified in terms of money. These non-monetary rewards are: recognition and sense of belonging, more responsibility and authority, and achievement and individual growth. Rewards and recognition can be powerful tools for employee motivation and performance improvement. These "non-monetary" rewards include formal and informal acknowledgement, assignment of more enjoyable job duties, opportunities for training, and an increased role in decision-making (Ryan, 2013).

### 2.1.4 Management Functions and Decision making

Different experts have classified functions of management. Fayol (1949) opines that to manage is to forecast and plan, to organize, to command and to control. Gullick in Wikipedia (2013) gave a keyword 'POSDCORB' which stands for Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, Co-ordination, Reporting and Budgeting. The assumed most widely accepted functions of management are those given by Koontz and O'Donnel (1976) which are Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing and Controlling. In like manner, Ferrell, Hirt and Ferrell (2008) opine that management functions entail managers coordinating the use of resources so that business can develop, make, and sell products. These they do through series of activities of planning, organizing, staffing, directing and controlling. Decision making on the other hand, is important in all management functions and levels whether strategic, tactical, or operational.

## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

The matching concept method was adopted in this study. The concept simply has to do with identifying and comparing the similarities in the selected management practices against the indigenous leadership practices of the Igbos of Nigeria and in the process develop a relationship model. It is historical in nature and employed mainly secondary sources of data. There were also some unstructured interviews with some leaders and elders from the Igbo community.

## 4.0 RESULTS

### 4.1. Human Relations Approach

A look at the Human relations approach in management shows it is not totally alien to African culture and the Igbo culture specifically. McGregor's three basic dimensions to human relations explain some of the Igbo cultural values and are used as a building block for the comparison. Consensus (Njiko Ka), Co-prosperity (Onye aghala Nwanne ya) and Espirit De Corps (Igwe bu ike).

**Consensus (Njiko ka)** refers to the method of reaching agreement where resolution can be supported and accepted by all even if not the "favourite" of each individual. It is against the principle of "Njiko ka" literally meaning "agreeing or staying together is great". It is a process that seeks the consent of all participants. The council of elders deliberates on critical issues and endeavour to reach a decision by consensus. It is evidenced by dispute resolution mechanisms used in societies with "Umunna" institutions and principles. Decision making is participatory and democratic at council of elders. Ifechukwu (2010) also noted that consensual approach to resolving issues by Africans was demonstrated by the recall of President Thabo Mbeki by ANC in 2008. The ANC's National Executive Committee debated Mr. Mbeki's fate. In the end, there was no need for a vote, and then decision was taken to recall the president. In Igbo land, decision making is consensual. When conflicts and misunderstanding occur, brotherly love guarantees reconciliation.

**Co-prosperity (Onye aghala nwanne ya):** African culture stresses relationship or kinship. The African tends to see mankind as members of the same community; hence the extended family system is widespread in the African continent. The Igbo people believe that each person should be his or her brothers' keeper; a case of one for all, all for one. The concept of "Onye Aghala Nwanne Ya" emphasizes rendering of mutual assistance with a view to promoting the advancement of the well-being and prosperity of all concerned. For the modern enterprise, the success of the organization should also translate to the success of the individuals within the organization. In pre-colonial Igbo, it is not surprising to find a rich yam farmer giving some seedlings and farmland to his brother to start his own yam farm. Among the Igbo, the extended family is not simply made up of father, mother and children. It comprises a whole group of persons. The head of the family with his wife or wives, his children and grand children and also his brothers and sisters with their wives and children, his nephews and nieces, all those persons who descend from a common ancestor. In Igbo language, there are no separate words for cousins or nephews or nieces, every person is either a brother or a sister. It is not how large this family is that is important but what role it plays in keeping together the members. The concept of co-

prosperity (onye aghala nwanneya) emphasizes mutual concern on the principle that every person descends from a common ancestor, hence brothers and sisters.

**Espirit De Corps (Igwebuike - Unity is strength)** as a principle of management according to Fayol (1949) promotes team spirit and gives the organization sense of unity. For McGregor, the basic relationship of the individual should not be jeopardized by government, union and indeed management. This in essence is realizing the importance of unity as strength in organization. Mbigi (2005) in Nwagbara (2012) outlined some of the crucial components of African leadership as - Respect for the dignity of others, Group solidarity (an injury to one is an injury to all), Teamwork (none of us is greater than all of us), Service to others in the spirit of harmony, Interdependence (each one of us needs all of us). It is widely believed that the Igbo world is an integrated one in which all created beings, the living and the dead are in communion through symbolic interactions and other communication channels. The inter-connectedness of the individual and the community stems much from the extended family system that serves as the frame work on which the community is built. The extended family system gives rise to kinship, which is one of the most fundamental constituents of all human societies. The above inter-connectedness also underscores the spirit of unity and oneness that is obtained in the community. The spirit of oneness is not limited to the nuclear family; it extends beyond the group from the same ancestral tree to a clan, village or town. The individual is not alone in the world; he is surrounded by members of his community. A person is said to be complete only if so far as he is part of his community. An African, right from birth learns to believe that "I am because I belong". Hence, the principle of Espirit De Corps is similar to igwe bu ike (unity is strength) which has been in practice before the adoption of management principles from the western culture.

#### **4.2 Teams (Age grade – Otu Ọgbọ)**

In many African societies there exist such institutions as age grades (Otu Ọgbọ) . The age grade is made up of people within the same age (Ọgbọ) bracket usually within three to five years from each other and is a means to create peer group, foster unity and responsibility, acting mainly as a socio-cultural institution (Widjaja 2001). The Igbos' of Nigeria have a culture of segmenting into different age grades which can be likened to teams in Management. Among members of these different age grades can be found members with different roles which fits into Belbin's description of roles for teams. As years pass by the younger groups ascend the ladder and take over the role of older grades. Age grade system serves as avenues for social interaction among members and agents of development. Usually, there is a competition between age grades in terms of development projects they sponsor or execute in their various communities (Ifechukwu 2010). In the olden days the newly formed group had to prove themselves for maturity by defending the community against hostile neighbours or enemies (Widjaja 2001). The newly formed group can only be accepted to adulthood and honoured with a name if she performs her task meaningfully with success. A newly initiated age grade is expected to choose a well-respected elder who performs leadership role for the group by facilitating the recognition of the group among elders.

#### **4.3 Motivation: Recognition/Reward (Itu Ugwu/Ichi echichi)**

The title system (Itu Ugwu/Ichi echichi), in Igbo land is a reflection of the concept of recognition and reward in motivation theory. The title system varies from community to community. The NZE or OZO title is given to persons in recognition of their contribution to the community. The title holder becomes an Ichie (Elder) and a part of Igwe's cabinet in a centralized system in Igbo land. Each title signifies certain achievement and comes with privilege and symbols of authority just like in an establishment when one is elevated and given higher responsibility. For instance, war heroes are different category of title holders; in some clan, they wear parrot's plumes in their hats as a mark of reward for their bravery. War heroes are the only ones who are allowed to dance the war dance. These titles serve as motivation to the title holders to do more for their community and to inspire others in the community. The various titles also serve as a benchmark for measuring ones contribution to and success in the community. Above all, it engenders competitive spirit among the young. Maslow in his theory of motivation ranked prestige, self esteem among the high order needs. Africans share the same psychological need for prestige and esteem. In Igbo society for example, the title Ogbuagu (a lion killer) is accorded to a person who killed a lion in recognition of his bravery and contribution to the security and safety of the society (Ifechukwu 2000). These titles are intended to motivate the young to aspire to greater heights and also used to recognize achievers and heroes. This underscores the fact that recognition of and rewards for achievement have been in existence in African society before colonization and the importation of the theory of motivation put forward by Maslow.

#### **4.4 Management Functions and Decision making**

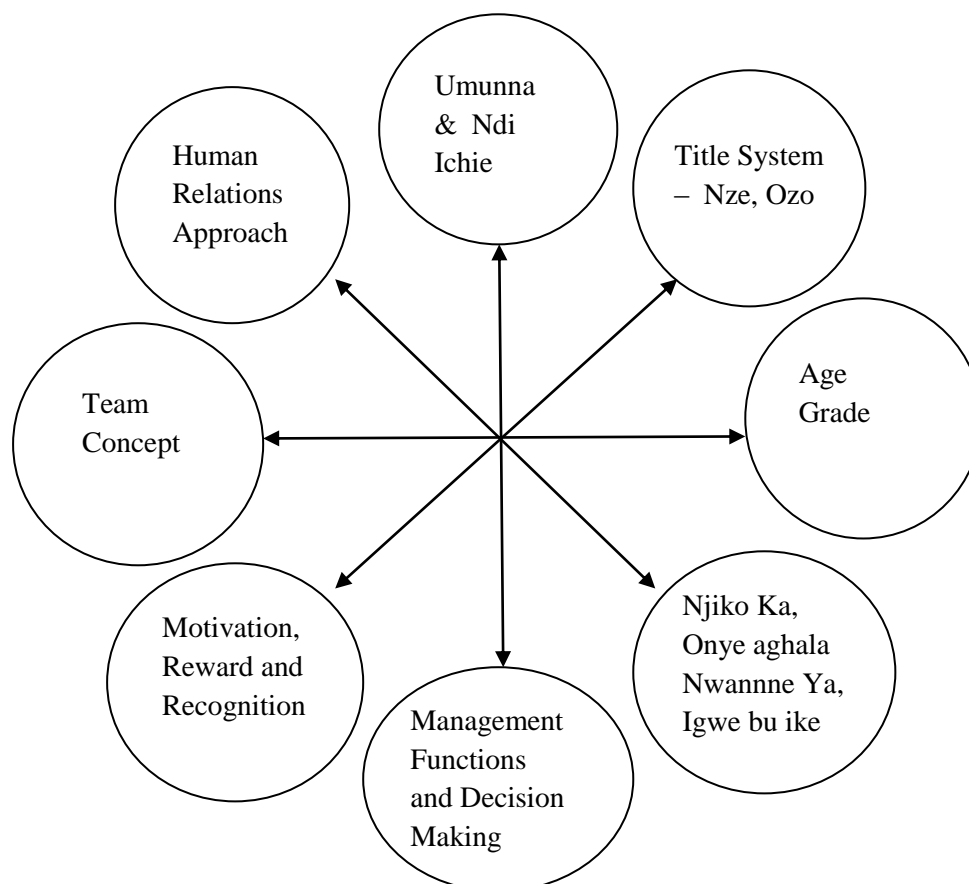
In Igbo land but specifically in towns within Owerri west and the municipal, the management functions of planning, organizing, directing and controlling rests on the shoulders of the "Umunna" or "Ndi ichie". For



instance on the issue of farming which is largely what the communities were noted for, were carried out by the “Umunna” (Kinsmen). The communal parcels of land for farming were planned in such a way that by law the farm lands were preserved and allowed to fallow for certain number of years before it could be ripe for a farming season, this was to make for bumper harvest. It is the duty of the Umunna to direct and delegate elders and male adults who ensure that these farmlands are shared proportionately to all the qualified male adults within the family for that farming season. Each family unit can hire laborers to work on their farmlands and pay them as agreed or do the work themselves. The Umunna is also responsible for planning the festivals, if any, on a yearly basis for their community. The “Umunna” also engages in dispute resolution when the need arises. The Umunna handles all kinds of disputes including civil and criminal acts (land disputes, theft, personal quarrels, marital disputes, commercial disputes, fights, defamation) with the exception of cases of murder. The case of murder considered the worst case in Igbo society which attracts banishment was handled by Ndi Ichie (the council of elders made up of Nze and Ozo title holders)(Ifechukwu, 2000). Decision making and settling of disputes in Igbo land is institutionally hierarchical. It starts from the nuclear family, to ikwu na ibe (extended family), to Umunna or the Umuada (a family gathering of daughters, for which the female kinsfolk return to their village of origin) and finally to Ndi Ichie (council of elders and apex decision making body). This is likened to an organization where decision making could pass through different levels of management and finally to the board or top management which is the highest decision making body of every organization. In traditional pre-colonial Igbo society, members of the extended family play a very important role in the life of every member of the family. These include taking part in the upbringing of the young, choosing the spouse and careers for members (Ifechukwu, 2000), and also settling of disputes between members of the family. For instance resolution of disputes involving people from two different villages are referred to the Ndi ichie directly. A dispute involving two people from the same Umunna will first be judged by the Umunna after which it is taken to the Ndi Ichie if the case was unresolved. If for any reason such a case is taken to the Ndi Ichie when not looked first by the Umunna, such case will be rejected by them.

#### 4.5 The Relationship Model

Fig. 1: The Relationship Model



Source: Author (2013).

## 5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

From the study, there are indications that the practice of Njiko ka, onye aghala nwanne ya and igwe bu ike are similar to the practice of the human relations school, though applicable to industries and organizations in modern management.

Teams, as seen in modern management practices and especially as proposed by Belbin (1981), specifies that team roles involve identifying people's behavioural strengths and weaknesses in the workplace or any environment where they are set up; and the use of such strengths to advantage and to manage weaknesses as best as possible. The age grade being a collection of people within certain age brackets have members who meet the nine team roles highlighted by Belbin, because in every age grade one can easily locate a Plant, Monitor evaluator, Coordinator, Resource investigators, Implementers, Completer finishers, Team workers, Shaper, and Specialists.

Recognition and reward as part of motivation in modern management practices is similar to that of the Title system in Igbo land. Reward and Recognition is typically used either to reward an employee for a behaviour or recognize an employee for results (Prudden, 2013). For instance when organizations reward and recognize, they promote one, offer higher responsibility to the person. Results show that in Igbo land individuals are recognized and rewarded with titles befitting their disposition. A man who leads others to war and comes back successfully could be given title such as "Ochiagha" (Leader of war), "Odokara Olua" (One who says it and makes it happen), "Ikemba" (The power house of his people) etc. and is elevated to an elder and given an exalted position.

In like manner, just as management function and decision making process lies in the hands of managers and top management of organizations, so do the practice of planning, organizing, directing, controlling fall on the laps of the Umunna (kinsmen) and the Ndi Ichie (council of elders) the supposed managers of the communities. They take decisions concerning individuals, groups and the community at large.

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