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The Igbo Philosophy of Ubuntu: Building Lives Together

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Abstract

This article explores the pre-colonial Igbo tradition of house-building within age grades, highlighting its philosophical underpinnings and societal benefits. The concept is in line with the South African philosophy of Ubuntu – "I am because we are." Traditionally, upon reaching a specific age, men in Igboland would have their house built by their age grade, a group of individuals who had undergone coming-of-age rituals together. This system functioned on the principle of reciprocity, with the beneficiary contributing to building houses for others within the age grade when the time came. More than a transactional system, this practice embodied Ubuntu. The well-being of each member was seen as vital to the entire community. The article explores how this tradition fostered a strong social fabric through collective responsibility, joyful contribution, and a sense of duty towards community development. The underlying philosophy is one of an interconnected self, where an individual's prosperity is linked to the community's prosperity. The Igbo proverb, "Ònye kwe, chi ya ekwe" (If one flourishes, their chi [personal spirit] flourishes), exemplifies this belief. By examining this Igbo tradition, the article offers valuable insights for contemporary societies grappling with homelessness and social isolation. While directly replicating the system might be challenging, the philosophy of Ubuntu – of shared responsibility and collective well-being – remains profoundly relevant. By fostering a sense of community and encouraging acts of mutual support, we can strive to create societies where everyone has a place to call home.

Keywords: Igbo Age Grades, Ubuntu, Communal House-Building, Pre-colonial Igbo Society, Reciprocity.

1. Introduction

Igboland, the historical homeland of the Igbo people in Nigeria, offers a fascinating glimpse into a communal past. Here, the concept of homelessness was largely absent due to a deeply ingrained philosophy – a philosophy that is synonymous with the African concept of Ubuntu: "I am because we are."

Imagine a society where homelessness is virtually absent. Not because of government programmes or shelters, but because a fundamental principle binds people together: the belief that everyone deserves a place to call home. This was the reality in Igboland, the southeastern region of Nigeria, in the era before

colonialism (Uchendu, 1965). Here, a unique tradition flourished – the collective building of houses within age grades.

This article delves into this fascinating aspect of Igbo social life. We shall explore how age groups, individuals who shared coming-of-age rituals (Ottenberg, 1971), came together not just for celebration, but for a crucial act of solidarity (Isichei, 1976): building a house for one of their peers. We shall see how this practice transcended mere construction, fostering a robust social fabric built on reciprocity, communal responsibility, and a deep-seated belief in the interconnectedness of the self.

Through the examination of Igbo house-building tradition, we can gain valuable insights applicable even today. As societies grapple with issues of homelessness and social isolation, the Igbo concept is in line with the South African philosophy of Ubuntu – "I am because we are" (Mogodijane, 2001). Perhaps, by understanding the Igbo approach to communal living, we can discover ways to cultivate a stronger sense of community and build societies where everyone has a secure foundation, a roof not just over their heads, but over a shared sense of belonging (Okafor, 2018).

This article, therefore, explores the Igbo tradition of house-building within age grades, highlighting its philosophical underpinnings and the societal benefits it fostered.

2. Ubuntu in Action: Reciprocity and Collective Responsibility

In Igboland, a region in southeastern Nigeria, the concept of Ubuntu isn't merely an abstract philosophy; it is woven into the fabric of social life. The age grade system, centered around the crucial event of "ipu obi" (having one's homestead), exemplifies this beautifully (Achebe, 1994).

2.1 Coming of Age and the Call to Solidarity

Upon reaching a designated age, young men in Igboland undergo "ipu obi" – a rite of passage signifying their readiness to establish their own households. This milestone, however, isn't solely an individual achievement. It triggers a powerful act of communal support (Uzoukwu, 1996).

2.2 Building Together (Beyond Celebration)

The age group, composed of individuals who have shared the "ipu obi" experience, doesn't simply gather for celebratory festivities. They embark on a collective endeavour that strengthens the entire community: building a house for their newly independent peer (Njoku, 2012).

2.3 Reciprocity (A Circle of Support, Not Transactions)

This system is underpinned by the principle of reciprocity. The individual who benefits from having their house constructed is not simply receiving a gift. They are entering a reciprocal cycle. When the opportunity arises, they will actively participate in building houses for others within their age grade (Mezie, 2000).

2.4 Ubuntu in Action (From Individual to Collective Well-being)

The Igbo age grade system transcends mere transactional reciprocity. It embodies the essence of Ubuntu – emphasizing our interconnectedness and shared humanity (Onwuatuegwu, 2024). The well-being of each member is not seen as an isolated concern; it is inextricably linked to the well-being of the entire community. By supporting each other in building their homesteads, the age group fosters a sense of shared responsibility and ensures a strong foundation for every member to thrive (Nwosu, 1994).

2.5 Beyond Bricks and Mortar (The Enduring Impact)

The communal house construction is not just about the physical structure. It serves as a potent symbol of unity and interdependence. It signifies the commitment of the age grade to stand with each other through life's challenges. This fosters a sense of belonging and security, knowing that one's peers will be there to lend a hand when needed (Hodgkin, 2013).

2.6 A Model for the Modern World

The Igbo age grade system offers valuable insights for societies grappling with issues of individualism and social isolation. It demonstrates the power of collective action and the importance of fostering a sense of shared responsibility. In this regard, therefore, Onwuatuegwu opines that the Igbo sense of communalism has affected or influenced their general attitude to life. Hence, the social tie with community members is so much cherished by the Igbo that nothing whatsoever is allowed to tamper with this belongingness (Onwuatuegwu, 2022). Through the recognition of the interconnectedness of human well-being, communities can create a more supportive and resilient environment for all their members (Mbembe, 2017).

3. Building a Social Fabric

The Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria have a rich tradition of house-building that goes far beyond simply creating structures of shelter. For the Igbo, the house-building process was a powerful tool for weaving a strong social fabric, binding the community together through collective responsibility, joyful contribution, and a deep sense of shared duty (Mgbado & Mgbado, 2019).

Igbo house-building was not a solitary endeavour. Houses were constructed through the collective effort of the community. Individuals contributed their time, skills, and materials to the building process, not just for their own homes, but for the homes of their peers as well (Ogbu, 2012). This was not just about helping out a neighbour; it was about recognizing that a secure and stable community member strengthens the entire social unit. In this regard, investing in each other's homes, the Igbo were essentially investing in the future of their collective well-being.

The Igbo house-building tradition was not characterized by a sense of obligation or burden. There was a strong emphasis on shared meals and communal effort during the construction process. These gatherings fostered a spirit of camaraderie and joy in helping others. People did not just contribute labour; they contributed their positive energy and sense of purpose (Achebe, 1994). This created a sense of belonging and connection within the community, reminding everyone that they were part of something larger than themselves. The Igbo culture, therefore emphasizes a strong communal living and social cohesion (Onwuatuegwu & Nwagu, 2023).

Building houses was not seen as a favour or a charitable act in Igbo society. It was considered a societal duty, a responsibility shared by all members of the community (Ogbu, 2012). This instilled a deep sense of collective responsibility for the well-being of everyone. People understood that their own prosperity and security were intricately linked to the prosperity and security of those around them. Working together to build secure homes, the Igbo nurtured the common good and ensured a strong foundation for their entire social fabric.

Invariably, the Igbo house-building tradition transcended the creation of physical structures. It served as a powerful tool for

building a strong social fabric, emphasizing collective responsibility, joyful contribution, and a shared sense of duty. This approach to house-building offers valuable insights into the importance of community and the power of collective action in creating a thriving social environment. Igbo people are shaped by this philosophical worldview, which emphasizes the importance of the individual will, communalism, and the interconnectedness of all things in the universe (Onwuaturgwu, 2023).

4. Philosophical Underpinnings (The Interconnected Self)

The Igbo house-building tradition transcends mere construction techniques. It embodies a deep-seated philosophical concept – the interconnected self. This philosophy emphasizes the inherent link between an individual's well-being and the collective prosperity of the community. In other words, an individual's prosperity is intrinsically linked to the prosperity of the community. By ensuring everyone has a roof over their heads, the community itself flourishes (Igwebuike, 2011).

The Igbo proverb, "Ònye kwe, chi ya ekwe," provides a potent illustration of this interconnectedness (Mkparu, 2018). Here, "chi" refers to a personal spirit, a guiding force in one's life (an image of God in man). The proverb translates to "If one flourishes, their chi flourishes." On the surface, it suggests individual success leads to a stronger personal spirit. But it delves deeper.

The proverb implies that an individual's prosperity is not achieved in isolation. It is contingent upon a thriving community. When basic needs like shelter are met for all, a collective sense of well-being emerges. This, in turn, strengthens the overall chi of the community, creating a positive feedback loop that benefits everyone.

Igbo house-building tradition reflects this philosophy. By ensuring everyone has a secure dwelling, the community itself flourishes. Houses become more than just physical structures; they become symbols of interconnectedness. Building a home becomes an act of strengthening the collective chi, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and mutual well-being.

This interconnectedness extends beyond the physical act of construction. The Igbo house-building process often involves communal participation. Neighbours lend expertise, offering their skills and labour in a spirit of cooperation. This reinforces social bonds, fostering a sense of unity and collective purpose.

Hence, the Igbo house-building tradition isn't merely about bricks and mortar. It's a manifestation of a profound societal belief. By prioritizing the well-being of each member, the community as a whole flourishes. This philosophy of the interconnected self ensures not just individual shelter, but a shared prosperity that strengthens the collective chi of the Igbo people.

5. Conclusion

The Igbo tradition of house-building within age grades offers a powerful lens through which to examine contemporary issues of social welfare and community development. While a direct replication of this system in modern societies might be impractical, the underlying philosophical core – Ubuntu, the interconnectedness of self and community – holds profound relevance.

The Igbo system fostered a strong social fabric. By contributing to a peer's home, individuals invested not just in bricks and mortar,

but in the future of their collective well-being. The emphasis on shared meals and communal effort fostered a sense of belonging and purpose, reminding individuals that their success was intertwined with the success of the community (Uzuegbunam, 2012). Furthermore, the act of building houses was not a favour, but a societal duty. This instilled a sense of shared responsibility, ensuring everyone played a part in creating a secure and stable environment for all (Afigbo, 1981).

However, it would be remiss to ignore the limitations of this system. The focus on male age grades should not overshadow the experiences of women, who equally played a significant role in house construction and community life. For instance, women usually supply water and do the preparation of food for the other workers (Jegede, 1997). Additionally, the societal structures of pre-colonial Igboland might not be easily translated to the complexities of modern nation-states (Meek, 1977).

Despite these limitations, the Igbo tradition offers valuable lessons. In societies grappling with homelessness and social isolation, fostering a sense of Ubuntu can be a powerful tool. By encouraging acts of mutual support, we can create a safety net where individuals are not left to fend for themselves (Mda, 2005). Initiatives that promote community involvement in housing projects, encourage mentorship programs, and cultivate a sense of collective responsibility can all be steps towards a more inclusive and supportive society.

Obviously, the Igbo tradition reminds us that the well-being of each member is integral to the well-being of the whole (Mbiti, 1969). By embracing the spirit of Ubuntu and fostering a sense of interconnectedness, we can strive to create societies where everyone has a secure foundation, not just of shelter, but of belonging. The echoes of the Igbo approach to communal living offer a powerful reminder that building a strong community starts not with bricks and mortar, but with a deep-seated belief in the value of shared humanity.

In conclusion, therefore, the Igbo tradition of communal house-building offers valuable insights for contemporary societies grappling with issues of homelessness and social isolation. While replicating the exact system might not be feasible, the underlying philosophy of Ubuntu – of shared responsibility and collective well-being – remains relevant. By fostering a sense of community and encouraging acts of mutual support, perhaps we can create societies where everyone has a place to call home.

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