

# A Philosophical Exposition of Kinship in Igbo African Ontology

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**Abstract:** Ndigbo have a peculiar way of being as a people. They have a peculiar way of relating among themselves and establishing social affinities; they have their unique idea of relatedness. This peculiar sense of relatedness bound them together as a people despite the absence of a central government in the pre-colonial era. Kinship was cherished and was in some situations elevated to the sacred. It was the sacred bond that established as well as defined social relations among Ndigbo. The Igbo social web of relatedness generally revolved around the father. Patriarchy was ubiquitous in the Igbo society. The mother was important but was not the pivot of kinship relations among Ndigbo. However, Afikpo, Ohafia and Abiriba stand out as notable exceptions due to their matrifocal kinship practices. Although kinship is generally expressed by proximity and consanguinity, Ndigbo have their peculiar ways of interpreting and expressing consanguinity in their cultural milieu. Ndigbo express certain levels of relatedness with people in their proximity but definitely do not ipso facto see such people as kith and kin. Although, Igbo kinship is mostly patrilineal, it certainly does have significant bi-lineal components. This work showcases Igbo kinship system in philosophical formations. It is essentially a philosophical investigation of the Igbo idea and practice of kinship using the analytic method of inquiry. The work will systematically explore the subject matter in logical formation.

**Keywords:** Kinship, Igbo, Consanguinity, Affinity, Patrilineal

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## 1. Introduction

The world is one. It is huge. The enormity of the universe could easily consign an individual to bottomless anonymity. Our galaxy, the Milky Way is but one of the so many galaxies out there. Our solar system is one out the numerous solar systems in our galaxy. The earth is one out of the ascertained planets in our solar system. It pales into insignificance in comparison to the rest of the universe. The earth itself is no mean structure. It spans five continents and a few subcontinents. It is to a greater extent covered by large expanse of water bodies. The organisms that dwell on the earth are beyond counting. Man is but one of the numerous species of animals that inhabit the ecosystem. The human race counts in billions. The individual would be lost in the anonymity of the multibillion crowds that people the universe if there were no kinship groupings. He would be lost in aloneness.

To maintain identity and uniqueness, people bond in geographical demarcations and biological groupings. The

earth is geographically demarcated into continents and countries. Biologically, it is grouped into races, tribes and nationalities. These demarcations and groupings serve to ameliorate the intimidating anonymity of the universe. The human person is ontologically a social animal. Ipso facto, the human person abhors aloneness. Ndigbo though do not constitute a country, are among the nations of the universe. They relate to the rest of the world through Nigeria as Ndigbo, found in about thirteen states in Nigeria. Still among Ndigbo the cosmic anonymity threat to the individual persists as Ndigbo number in tens of millions. They still had to be divided into states, zones and towns. The kinship demarcations trickled down to village and kindred levels where kinship activities are most pronounced in the Igbo-African society. Although proximity is acknowledged among Ndigbo, kinship among Ndigbo runs in consanguinity with both the father's and the mother's bloodlines but in significantly varying degrees. It is never about geographical proximity. Ndigbo say in one of their proverbs that, "one's neighbor is family". But this is only to emphasize the

importance of good neighborliness, as they believe that the good neighbors can be of swifter help in moment of dangers much faster than kin because their proximity. However, Ndigbo never consider neighbors to be relatives just for being neighbors.

Not much had been previously written about the Igbo kinship system. This work aims at filling that important literary gap. Ndigbo need to tell their story not just by themselves but also in philosophic formations. This work will add to the body of available literature on the Igbo race. It centers on the Igbo idea of relatedness.

Kinship is perhaps the strongest bond that reinforces relatedness among Ndigbo. It is extended and significantly reckoned with. It imposes strong cultural bonds that keep Ndigbo so united despite heavy decentralization of government and strongly egalitarianism sociopolitical formations.

## 2. The Igbo Nation

Ndigbo are part of the ethnic nationalities that make up Nigeria. They are considered to be one of the three most populous tribes in Nigeria. Ndigbo are autochthonous Black Africans who belong among the Kwa language groupings [1, 2]. Ndigbo can be found as indigenous people in thirteen out of the thirty-six states that make up the Nigerian federation. They are found in Benue and Kogi states in the northern part of Nigeria. Although they are minorities in both states, they have sizeable number of communities notwithstanding, especially in Benue State. The Umuezekoha clan in Benue has over three hundred indigenous Igbo villages. These are Ndigbo in language and civilization. Igbo communities exist in Igalamela/Odolu council area of Kogi State. Same obtains in Ibaji local council area also in Kogi State. Like the Umuezekoha Ndigbo of Benue, the Ibaji Ndigbo of Kogi are indigenous people.

Ndigbo are also found as minorities in southern states of Akwa Ibom and Cross River. Ohaobu clan in Akwa Ibom State is peopled by indigenous Ndigbo [3]. This community until 1987 was part of the old Imo State. However, it was ceded into Akwa Ibom State by the National Boundaries Commission which chose to use the Blue River as the natural boundary between Abia and Akwa Ibom states. The community's Igbo heritage was further defaced by the Akwa Ibom State government which chose to gazette the name of the community as Ikot Iyang Udo II much to the chagrin of the inhabitants who insist that the name of the community be recognized as Ohaobu which it has always been instead of Iyang Udo II, an acronym suggested by their neighbors. The insertion of the community into Akwa Ibom State notwithstanding, it remains an indigenous Igbo community [4].

In Obubura council area of Cross River State, the Isobo communities are distinctly indigenous Ndigbo. They use the traditional Igbo four days market week system. They are of the same stock of Ndigbo as the Ikwo clan of Ebonyi State. Agbo communities in Cross River State are also distinct Ndigbo with close affinity to the Izzi clan of Ebonyi State.

Like the Izzi, they speak the Legbo dialect of the Igbo language [5].

Rivers State in the Niger Delta also has a significant indigenous Igbo population. The Ikwerre clan and the Ndoni clan are indigenous Ndigbo. However, after the Nigerian Civil War, many indigenous Igbo communities in Rivers State attempted to dissociate themselves from the Igbo heritage. Ndigbo who constituted the bulwark of Biafra lost the war and were subsequently marginalized in many ways. Being an Igbo person became very unattractive in post civil war Nigeria. The Rivers State Ndigbo understandably jettisoned their Igbo identity. The Biafran experiment had failed. Ndigbo were defeated and cowed. Being an Igbo person was burdensome. It meant cashing out only 20 pounds irrespective of how much one had in the bank before the war [6]. It also meant losing one's landed property in Rivers State under the Abandoned Property Decree [7]. The Rivers Ndigbo were subtly and overtly encouraged by the government to deny their Igbo identity. Ken Sarowiwa who was the mayor of Port Harcourt then de-Igbonized numerous Igbo communities around Port Harcourt City by prefixing the names with the letter "R". Thus, Umuomasi became Rumuomasi, and Umuokoro became Rumuokoro. Where prefixing an "R" would not completely de-Igboize the community, the name was entirely modified. Hence, Obigbo became Oyibo. So many Igbo families in these communities de-Igboized and changed their names to obliterate their Igbo identity.

The elites of these communities further attempted to completely erase their Igbo identity by claiming Bini descent. They made spirited efforts to rewrite history and to be seen as a branch of the Bini ethnic stock rather than Ndigbo. However, the Bini Kingdom recently wrote the Ikwerre to deny any cultural affiliation or consanguinity between the Bini and the Ikwerre [8]. This rejection by the Bini has forced the Ikwerre to embrace their Igbo identity.

To the west of the Niger, the Anioma people of Delta State are bona fide Ndigbo. They suffered the same fate with the rest of Ndigbo during the Nigerian Civil War. The attempt to de-Igbonize them was futile. Although a few still dillydally, the Anioma elites proudly embrace their Igbo identity. The elites of the Ika in the same Delta state continue to deny their Igbo identity and continue to de-Igbonize themselves. They have no other native language apart from the Igbo language. They do not bear any other native name apart from Igbo names. Yet the historical revisionism among them persists. The Ika can speak fluently with fellow Ndigbo over two hundred miles apart but they cannot communicate with their nearest neighbors, the Ishan except they speak Ishan or some other language [9]. Yet their indigenous homes might just be a few meters apart.

The bulk of Ndigbo are found in the five states of southeastern Nigeria. Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, Abia and Imo states are all peopled by indigenous Ndigbo. Some Igbo speaking people can be found in Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon. They obviously migrated from Nigeria. Ndigbo are a well travelled and enterprising people. They can be seen almost anywhere in the world.

### 3. Kinship in General

Kinship is a universal practice. It is in fact ontological to man since man is ontologically a social animal. That humans live in communities at all is because of the kinship practices of humans. There are many animals that are never found in groups. The desire to bond and to relate is innate to man. The sheer enormity of the human population makes kinship even more pressing an imperative. Cultures world over have kinship practices. There are no societies without kinship practices. A general examination of kinship practices all over the world shows certain patterns which classifies the practices into four categories: matrilineal, patrilineal, ambilineal and double kinship practices.

A kinship group is deemed to be to be matrilineal if descent is traced from the mother's lineage. The offspring of a matrilineal union traces his family line from his mother's bloodline. The child is never seen as a member of his father's family and often neither gets inheritance nor rights from the father's lineage. The mother's brother might in some matrilineal societies be required to pass inheritance or succession to the sister's children. The Abriba people of Abia State in Nigeria have such practices. The central male figure in the matrilineal lineage is the mother's brother rather than the husband.

In a patrilineal kinship practicing society on the other hand, the children trace their descent through the father's lineage. The children have succession rights to the father who is also required to pass inheritance to the children. Residence in patrilineal societies is generally patrifocal and the society generally has or expects high paternity certainty. Both matrilineal and patrilineal kinship systems are classified as unilineal kinship practices since the children trace their lineage from only one of the parents.

However, there are societies whose kinship practices permit the children to trace their lineage from both parents. Such societies are called bilineal societies. Some of these societies trace their kinship more or less equally from the lineages of both parents and do not bequeath greater importance to either of the bloodlines. A typical example is the Batek of Malaysia [10]. Most European societies have bilineal kinship practices [11]. Some societies curiously trace their kinship from both parents for special purposes only. Among the Afikpo of Nigeria, the children trace their kinship through the father's lineage for certain purposes while they trace their lineage to the mother's descent for some other purposes and functions [12].

Interestingly, in some societies, the child has to make a choice of which kinship lineage to belong between the father's and the mother's lineages. This is prevalent in Samoa [13]. The kinship pattern is classified as ambilineal kinship system.

Beyond the classifications made above, it has also been argued that apart from descent, kinship is sometimes based on affinity and proximity. People are also related by marriage. Beyond the couple who are married, members of their respective families also share a kind of relatedness by affinity.

There are also instances especially in Latin America where a godchild is more or less considered to be related to his godfather. There cannot be a marriage between a godparent and a child. In the past, such prohibition was also extended to the child's parents and the children of the godparent. They children of the godparent were not allowed to marry the godchild [14]. In some instances, people who do not share common decent but share residence can often share kinship. Adopted children become family members of the couple who adopt them.

### 4. Kinship Practices Among Ndigbo

Kinship is dominantly patrilineal among Ndigbo. The offspring traces its lineage from the father's bloodline. The Igbo society is a typical patriarchal society. The male figure plays a visibly dominant role among Ndigbo. The patriarchy is expected to preserve the family legacy from generation to generation. Consequently, Ndigbo place high premium on the male child. There is no doubt about the existence of other kinship practices among Ndigbo. A few Igbo communities are matrilineal while a community practices a bilineal kinship system. These notwithstanding, the generality of Ndigbo are decisively patrilineal in their kinship practices. But the fact that the overwhelming majority of Ndigbo practice the patrilineal system of kinship does not make other Igbo communities who practice other kinship systems less Igbo or less authentic.

#### 4.1. Patrilineal Kinship Among Ndigbo

Patrilineal kinship system among Ndigbo is not an isolated phenomenon. There are so many practices and beliefs that made such kinship system imperative. These factors are nuances to relevant aspects of the Igbo cultural life. The convergence of these nuances culminated in the dominance of patrilineal kinship practices among the overwhelming majority of Igbo communities. It was not a singularly chosen custom. It is a way of life that comes naturally to the majority of Ndigbo, hence the general acceptability of the custom. Among the factors that make the Igbo society patrilineal are:

##### a. Traditionally Assigned Gender Roles in the Igbo Economy

Among Ndigbo the male gender are the drivers of the economy. The men are expected to provide all the needs of the family including the needs of the wife. Women are only expected to offer marginal assistance to their husbands. Such assistances are not mandatory hence they are culturally marginal. Another word for "wife" in Igbo language is "*oriaku*" which literally means "the one who is meant to consume wealth". As that word implies, the husband must create the wealth that is to be consumed by the wife. This puts the male gender at the center of socioeconomic relationships.

##### b. Igbo Marriage Practices

Among Ndigbo, the idea of a dowry is alien. The groom rather than the bride makes the transfer of property. He pays the bride price. He brings all the items listed by the bride's

kindred as a precondition for giving out their daughter in marriage. The groom literally funds the marriage ceremony. There are mercantile undertones in Igbo marriage rituals. The groom pays the bride price which is usually set by the bride's family after some haggling with the groom's family. The ritual of the payment of the bride price is what Ndigbo consider as the legal pact that makes a woman wife to a man. There is an inherent symbolism of purchase in the ritual. There is an exchange of values therein. The bride's family gives up their daughter in exchange for the bride price. There is a resultant symbol of ownership in that ritual. It would be unnatural for the groom or the resultant kids from the marriage to be acquired by the bride's family after the groom has paid price on the bride's head. The bride price practice predisposes Ndigbo to the patrilineal kinship system. The price of the union is paid by the man. There is no universal bride price. Whatever the bride's family demands is what the groom will pay. Of course after the traditional haggling over the amount. Once that is done, the woman is considered to have been acquired by the groom's family. The symbolism of purchase pervades the whole ritual.

#### c. High Paternity Certainty

Ndigbo place high premium on paternity. Although among Ndigbo, a biological father is not considered to be a parent of a child if he did not pay bride price on the mother's head, Ndigbo however, strongly disapproves the idea of a married woman having a baby for another man. The culture heavily frowns at infidelity by married women though it approves of polygamy. The insistence on maintaining the father's bloodline in a nuclear family tilts it towards patrilineal kinship. Paternity certainty in matrilineal societies is generally less stressed than it is in patrilineal societies.

#### d. Male Centered Socio-Political Order

The socio-political formation of the Igbo society is centered on adult males. Women generally have no formal political roles among Ndigbo. A queen rarely led an Igbo community. The leadership of the community from the kindred unit to community headship is dominated by adult males. Traditionally Ndigbo practice universal adult male suffrage. Women can neither vote nor be voted for in the leadership of the community. They are not members of the community representative assembly. Most of the important social functions in the community are generally led by the men.

From the foregoing, it appears that the Igbo society is culturally fated to be patrilineal by default. It is a male dominated society. The men generally take charge in executing the affairs of the community. They generally initiate the move to start families. They pay for the marriage ceremony. They are generally responsible for the upkeep of the family. It is only natural that they "own" the family. Thus, patrilineal kinship naturally comes to most of Ndigbo.

### 4.2. Matrilineal Kinship Among Ndigbo

Matrilineal kinship practices are not widespread among Ndigbo. However, Ohafia, Nkporo and Abiriba – in Ohafia local council area of Abia State are matrilineal communities among Ndigbo. The family is centered on the wife. The

husband focuses on his sister's children rather than his biological children. His children in turn are seen as the relatives of their mother's brother rather than his [15]. The children do not inherit their father's assets as they are not seen as the members of their father's bloodline. They do not bear their father's name. Instead, they bear their mother's family name. The children basically have no rights in their father's bloodline as no child can be in the same kinship group as his father. Land tenure system revolves around the mother's bloodline. These are basically mother centered societies.

The Ohafia local council area stands out among Ndigbo in their unique kinship system which differs from everywhere else. Afikpo people have nearly similar but decisively different kinship practices.

### 4.3. Double Descent Kinship Among Ndigbo

Afikpo community in Ebonyi State has a kinship system that is different from everywhere else among Ndigbo. It is a community that is located on the northeastern part of Igboland on the western bank of the Cross River. It is a community of twenty-two villages sitting on a hilly countryside in the climatic boundary area between the tropical rain forest and guinea savannah. It is an ancient town, and the second largest urban area in Ebonyi State. They share double descent lineage. A child is a member of both parent's lineages. The wife never becomes a member of her husband's lineage but her children do [16]. Among the Afikpo people, political rights are inherited from the father's lineage while land is inherited largely from the mother's lineage. The child defines himself in terms of these two lineages. The family resides at the patrilineal residence. However, traditionally, Afikpo women seldom live close to their husbands.

## 5. Non-Inheritance Based Extended Kinship System Among Ndigbo

Beyond the kinship ties surrounding the immediate family and inheritance, Ndigbo have very extended kinship practices that are not based on inheritance. Perhaps these practices were evolved to create bonds among clans, communities or even the entire Igbo race. It is possible also that they were evolved to counterbalance the strong patrilineal practices in the Igbo culture which are often tied to the inheritance of rights and property.

Among patrilineal Ndigbo, although the child is not a member of his mother's lineage, and has no inheritance or political rights there, the child however is seen as a relative of not just members of his mother's family but the entire kindred unit of the mother's family. To that end, an Igbo man cannot marry a member of his mother's nuclear family. He cannot marry a member of the mother's extended family neither can he marry from his mother's kindred unit because they are considered to be related. The same restrictions apply to his children. A man from a patrilineal Igbo community is expected to take refuge in his mother's family home in time of distress [17].

## 6. Loose Kinship Connections Among Ndigbo

Ndigbo also practice a sort of loosely connected kinship system that is not based on blood relations but to foster unity. A man defers to the entire male members of his mother's clan and calls "ancestral fathers" – *nna ochie* not because they are necessarily related by blood but because they are his mother's people. He gives the same respect to the women born in his mother's clan. He calls them "my ancestral mothers" – *nne m ochie*. In the same vein, a man defers to the entire members of his wife's clan as in-laws. They may not necessarily have blood relations with his wife.

In a wider scope, Ndigbo see members of the same kindred unit as brothers and sisters. They cannot marry. Ndigbo do not permit a marriage between a man and a woman born in the same kindred or marriage to the woman's daughter irrespective of which community the woman married to. The woman and her offspring are considered to be relatives of the kindred even if the woman married into another town. In the same village, Ndigbo loosely refer to themselves as brothers and sisters but they can marry provided they are not from the same kindred unit.

## 7. Intercommunity Kinship Among Ndigbo

Among Ndigbo, communities which share a history of common ancestry often see themselves as kiths and kin. They intermarry but most times they share some common cultural rituals that bind them together. These communities are usually believed to be children of common progenitor. They often align politically and culturally, and see themselves as a bloc in relation to other communities. There are lots of communities that trace their origin to Arochukwu. Among them are Arondizuogu, Ndikerionwu and Ndiowuu to mention but a few. These communities often see themselves as kith and kin. The same applies to the Umu nri bloc which includes, Nri, Aguleri, Umueri, Enugwukwu, Ogwashiuku to mention but a few. These communities share a sense of relatedness. Such blocs of communities abound all over Igboland. Perhaps, such widely shared intercommunity kinship relations helped to keep Ndigbo bonded despite the absence of a central authority.

## 8. Conclusion

Ndigbo like other nationalities have peculiar ways of expressing relatedness. They generally expressed it in patrilineal kinship systems. However two clans stand out in stark contrast from the rest of Igboland in their kinship practices: the Ohafia clan which practices the matrilineal kinship system and the Afikpo clan that practices the double descent kinship system. Beyond these, Ndigbo had notions of relatedness which they expressed in numerous cultural practices. This is the unique Igbo experience of being with others in the world.

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