

ORIGIN OF KINGSHIP INSTITUTION, AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF IKA PEOPLE BEFORE 1900

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Abstract

The Ika people, located in the northwest of Delta State and extending into parts of Edo State, exhibit a distinct cultural identity shaped by a fusion of Bini (Edo) and Igbo elements, resulting from long-term migration and intercultural interaction. The foundation of the kingship institution, known as Obishop, in Ika territory is predominantly associated with Benin customs. Numerous clans assert ancestral migration from the Benin Empire and attribute the founding of their royal lineages to the Oba of Benin, who granted titles such as Obi and presented ceremonial regalia, including the Ada and Ebeni swords. Although Edo influence is strongly evident in the monarchical frameworks of major Ika communities such as Agbor, Owa, and Abavo, the indigenous populations also displayed affinities with their Western Igbo neighbors, culminating in a distinctive hybrid society. Scholarly examination of the political and kingship structures has been limited, with existing studies on Ika society providing only fragmented accounts of kingship's historical development. This paper aims to present a comprehensive analysis of the origins and evolution of the unique Ika kingship and political system, tracing its roots to the earliest formation of the Ika people. It further explores how the diverse political strata within the Ika nation interacted to develop a distinctive democratic framework characterized by broad citizen participation. Employing a historical research methodology, the study adopts qualitative analysis of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. The significance of this work lies in its detailed exploration of the intricate Ika kingship and political system, elucidating the pre-colonial governance structures and the enduring practice of this unique system across Ika clans for centuries prior to colonial influence.

Keywords: Origin, Kingship system, Political structure, Ika people, Precolonial

Introduction

The Ika-speaking population, located in the Northwestern region of Delta State and certain areas of Edo State, exhibits a distinct cultural identity shaped by a fusion of Bini (Edo) and Igbo elements, resulting from long-term migration and intercultural engagement. The establishment of the kingship institution (Obishop) in Ika territory is predominantly associated with Benin customs, as numerous clans assert ancestral migration from the Benin Empire and attribute the foundation of their royal seats to the Oba of Benin, who granted titles such as Obi and presented ceremonial swords (Ada and Eben). Although Edo influence is significant in the monarchical frameworks of many Ika communities, especially Agbor, Owa, and Abavo, the indigenous populations also exhibited traits similar to their Western Igbo neighbors, leading to a distinctive hybrid culture.¹

In the pre-colonial era, the Ika political system was primarily composed of independent, self-governing kingdoms and clans, each led by an Obi (king) or a council of elders. This political arrangement changed in the early twentieth century, particularly between 1901 and 1945, when British colonial administration merged these autonomous entities into the Agbor District, later renamed it to the Ika District Council, fostering a more cohesive, modern political identity. Despite this consolidation, the eleven principal clans, including Agbor, Owa, Abavo, and Umunede, have preserved their unique traditional ruler systems. The modern political framework was formally acknowledged through the Ika Traditional Rulers Council and functions within the Ika North-East and Ika South Local Government Areas.²

Scholarly research has largely overlooked the Ika political and kingship system, with existing studies on Ika history providing only fragmentary accounts of the full historical development of kingship in Ika land. This paper will offer a comprehensive examination of the origins of the Ika kingship and political system, tracing it back to the origins of the Ika people. It also explores how the various political layers within the Ika communities interacted to develop a unique form of democracy that involved the participation of all community members. The significance of this paper lies in its detailed exploration of the intricate Ika political system, providing insights into the nature of governance among the Ika people prior to colonialism and how different Ika clans practiced this distinctive system for centuries before colonial influence. Literature on the pre-1900 origins of the Ika kingship system indicates a complex development influenced by both West Niger Igbo, Nri, and Benin (Edo) influences. Before 1900, Ika land was not a unified entity but rather a collection of autonomous, independent

kingdoms, such as Agbor, Owa, Abavo, and Umunede, that shared cultural and linguistic similarities but operated independently.

Geographical Overview of Ika Land

The sociocultural group known today as the Ika nation extends beyond Delta State into parts of Edo State, primarily the Orhionmwon local government area. It encompasses eleven clans in Delta State and several communities in present-day Edo State, with an estimated population of about 560,000 Ika language speakers as of the year 2000. Ika South alone had a projected population of over 229,000 as of 2022. Each clan represents a distinct sub-cultural and historical entity that migrated to and established control over the territory. The eleven clans constituting the Ika people in Delta State are: Abavo, Agbor, Akumazi, Idumuesah, Igbodo, Mbiri, Otolokpo, Owa, Umunede, Ute-Gbeje, and Ute-Okpu. Ika communities in Edo State include Ekpon, Igbanke, Iduwagbor, Igbogiri, Owa-Iru, Ute-Oheze, Obagie No-Oheze, Otobaye 1 & 2, and Urohoniḡbe Urhonmehe, among others.³

Linguistically, the Ika nation borders speakers of the West Benin language to the west, Esan to the north, Aniocha to the east, and Ukwuani to the south. Ika land is situated between latitudes 6°00' and 6°24' North of the equator and longitudes 6°05' and 6°24' East of the Greenwich Meridian, covering an area of approximately 564 square kilometers (218 square miles). A national population census recorded the Ika population as at 1991 to be 349,879 people. The region lies within the tropical rainforest zone, characterized by a hot, humid sub-equatorial climate with temperatures ranging from 27 to 30 degrees Celsius from November to March, and high rainfall from May to October (a bimodal pattern), with annual precipitation reaching about 2255 mm in some areas. The geology consists of sedimentary sandstone (Bini formation). The terrain features gently undulating plains and steep slopes, with significant erosion in vulnerable areas, necessitating careful land management and conservation planning for its rainforest vegetation and agricultural soil.⁴

Historical Origins of the Ika People Before 1900

The traditional origins of the Ika people trace back thousands of years before European contact and the introduction of Christianity. Indeed, the historical origins of the Ika people date to prehistoric times, prior to the advent of written records. Like other ancient societies, early Ika people were primarily gatherers and hunters, as indicated by oral traditions discussed later in this study. Their diet included tubers, animals, and vegetables; to this day, Ika people consume yam tubers, notable among vegetables, seeds, nuts, and roasted or boiled meat, unlike in earlier periods before the discovery of fire. Economically, the ancient Ika people were industrious, surviving through hunting and farming with rudimentary tools made of wooden spears and arrows. Early Ika people likely resembled other primitive groups, being partially clothed, with unkempt hair, bushy beards, discolored teeth, and thick, soiled skin, and exhibiting behaviors typical of ancient societies worldwide.⁵

The historical origins of the Ika people, like many other ethnic groups in Nigeria, are diverse. It is widely recognized that no single source can fully explain the formation of any tribe or ethnic group. This holds true for the Ika people, whose origins are linked to various ethnic backgrounds, supported not only by oral narratives but also by evidence related to their kingship system, naming conventions for places and individuals, and particularly the development of the Ika language. In examining the historical origins of the Ika people, two major ethnic groups, the Binis and the Igbos, play a prominent role, although some also cite influences from the Esan and Ora people from Owan local government area in Edo State.

Little was known about the Ika people by outsiders before the arrival of British colonial authorities. Previously, Ika was merely a collection of rural settlements inhabited by people who spoke a similar language and shared comparable values, customs, and traditions, but did not possess a unified identity or historical background. With the advent of British colonial rule, Ika was administratively consolidated as a colonial unit under the Agbor division of Asaba province. Under British control, Ika clans were organized into larger kinship groups known as clans and kingdoms, which eventually evolved into a cohesive body sharing a common language, history, and national identity. This unification has endured to the present day under the Ika brotherhood.⁶

A careful examination of Ika clans reveals the complexity of the Ika ethnic group, stemming from the diverse historical backgrounds of its constituent clans. Several factors must be considered when addressing the historical origins of the Ika people, including Bini, Igbo, and other influences, as discussed below.

The Bini factor is significant; among the eleven clans constituting Ika land in Delta state, seven claimed to have migrated from Benin, these includes, Abavo, Agbor, Akumazi, Mbiri, Otolokpo, Umunede, and Ute-Gbeje, claim origin from Benin. Additionally, Owa, Igbodo, and Ute-Okpu acknowledge Bini presence in the formation of some quarters and villages. Clans like Umunede, Abavo, and Akumazi, while claiming Bini origins, also

recognize the involvement of other ethnic groups in their development. From this, it can be inferred that Bini influences constitute the majority in the founding and formation of Ika clans.⁷

Igbo factors also contribute to the founding of clans in Ika land. Some clans assert historical origins from Igbo people in Eastern Nigeria. Specifically, Ute-Okpu and Owa clans firmly claim migration from Nri in present-day Anambra State. Although traces of Igbo influence exist in all eleven clans, only Owa and Ute-Okpu explicitly claim Igbo origins. It is important to note that other sources, besides Bini and Nri, contribute to the formation of some Ika clans. For example, the Idumuesah kingdom claims migration from Esan, Ora, Aniocha, and Ukwuani, further illustrating the complexity of Ika historical origins.⁸ Having established these undeniable facts, it is pertinent to discuss the historical origins of the kingship system and political structure in Ika communities.

Origin of the Kingship System Before 1900

In most pre-colonial societies, governmental structures and political institutions evolved from family systems, expanding into larger-scale versions of kinship organization. From the family to village and clan levels, institutions such as age grades system, common across pre-colonial Nigerian societies, along with advisory councils and kings, chiefs, or community leaders became prevalent. Some societies practiced decentralized systems, while others were highly centralized. Pre-colonial Ika society, prior to Bini contact, was often described by historians and scholars as an age-grade system, indicating a decentralized structure in pre-monarchical times. This allowed each loosely connected town and village to develop independently. Although these villages and towns across Ika land interacted through trade, festivals, marriages, diplomacy, and conflicts, they never united under a single authority. Over time, individual clans developed monarchical systems, leading to the evolution of kingship in Ika land.⁹

Before 1900, the political structure of Ika land was characterized by a blend of autonomous monarchical kingdoms with a strong tradition of gerontocracy and participatory village democracy. Although located within the largely stateless society of Igboland, many Ika communities, such as Agbor, Owa, and Abavo, developed centralized kingship institutions known as Obishop (the monarchy), influenced by the ancient Benin Empire to the west, while retaining Igbo cultural, linguistic, and kinship practices.

The origins of these kingdoms are often traced to migrations from Benin, where founders frequently princes or leaders established dynasties adopting the Obi title, as seen in Agbor-Obi. These kings received their authority and insignia (the Ada and Eben) from the Oba of Benin, serving as rulers while functioning alongside councils of elders (Ndichie) and village assemblies that regulated daily life, suggesting a system combining inherited authority with participatory democracy. Before British colonial consolidation in 1901, these communities operated as distinct, independent units under their respective Obis, maintaining close ties to Benin but largely functioning as an independent, Igbo-speaking cultural region.¹⁰

Studying the origin of the kingship system and political structure of the Ika nation provides significant insight into the political landscape of the Ika people. Before colonial rule, the Ika people had developed a robust political structure comparable to that of Benin. Agbor's traditional political administration was an ancient system whose territories extended into present-day Edo State. The Ika people had established a participatory democratic system of government, shared among the quarters that constituted each clan, ensuring an inclusive political framework. Although they practiced an absolute monarchical system, it was highly inclusive, with substantial community participation.¹¹

Over time, the Ika people developed a unique political administrative structure evolving from family units to Idumu and Ogbe, eventually forming clans as civilization advanced. According to Obi Efeizomor, African civilization involved an indispensable structural aspect of life existing in clusters of hamlets, villages, towns, and cities, now referred to as traditions and customs. He further explained that the core of African custom centers on its kingship institutions. Most kingdoms formed through peaceful confederations, conquest, migration, trade, and religious movements. Additional causes of migration included natural factors such as the pursuit of well-being, freedom from slavery, and tyranny.¹²

Although the origin of the kingship system in Ika land remains debated due to the complexity of their historical origins, some attribute the emergence of the kingship or Obi system to contact with Benin. This was based on the historical claims of most Ika clans to have migrated from the great Benin Empire, as discussed earlier. Exceptions include Ute-Okpu and Owa clans, which claim migration from Nri in present-day Anambra State. Obi Efeizomor contests the notion that Ika kingship dynasties solely originated from Benin contact, arguing that kingdom formation resulted from peaceful confederations, conquest, migration, the desire for freedom, land scarcity, famine, epidemics, and forced labor. These factors contributed to human instability and insecurity,

necessitating protection and leadership. Natural instincts led to the selection of leaders capable of providing security, thus shaping leadership in pre-colonial Ika land. The emergence of the Ika kingship system, influenced by unpredictable circumstances, led to the acceptance of leadership as a way of life.¹³

According to Joyful Obolo and Robbins, the institution of kingship emerged naturally in the evolution of human societies in Africa and elsewhere, as centralized governance became necessary. They argue that its genesis may have stem from the inclination of certain groups, perceiving themselves as uniquely qualified, to establish and maintain dominance over others, hence the emergence of kingship system. Due to the inherent courage and wisdom associated with kingship, the monarch served as the representative of his people in the pre-colonial period. As the progenitor of his traditional realm, the monarch fulfilled multiple roles, including military, judicial, executive, cultural, religious, administrative, economic, and legislative functions.¹⁴

F.A. Onyekpeze contends that the Benin system of principal chieftaincy orders shares common characteristics with those in Ika Kingdoms. Similar to the ten kingdoms within the Ika people, the Benin Kingdom features distinct chieftaincy categories. The Councilors of State, or Kingmakers, known as Uzama Nihinron, hereditary in nature, originated in Benin around 1200 AD during the reign of Oba Eweka I, and have direct counterparts in Ika Kingdoms. Additional groups, such as Clan Chiefs and Palace Chiefs, the latter appointed by Obis for specific palace duties, are integral to both Ika and Benin chieftaincy structures. Onyekpeze asserts that the Uzama Nihinron category exists in many Ika Kingdoms, often with nearly identical names and functions, indicating Benin origins. For instance, in Abavo, the Ndichen Awu perform roles analogous to the Uzama Nihinron, while in Ute-Okpu, the Wuzama, a variation of Uzama Nihinron, serve similar purposes. Olihe, who leads the Uzama Nihinron in Benin, similarly heads the Ndichen Awu in Abavo and the Wuzama in Ute-Okpu, and crowns both the Oba of Benin and the Obis of Abavo and Ute-Okpu. Titles such as Uzama, Ighaigho, and Ifiorkpo are found in the Agbor Kingdom, where Ovia substitutes for Olihe, presiding over Uzama and crowning the Dein of Agbor and the Obi of Owa, respectively.¹⁵

He further argues that Benin influence is particularly evident in the hierarchical arrangement of hereditary and non-hereditary officials and chiefs surrounding the Obi. In Ika, this collective of nobles is termed Ihaime (singular Ohaime). Each Ohaime holds specific ceremonial responsibilities in the daily administration of the palace and the Obi's affairs. Beyond these duties, every Ohaime serves as an ex-officio member of the inner council, functioning similarly to a Privy Councillor. Through the Ihaime, the Obi or Okparan-Ukwu governs his kingdom, mirroring the administrative approach of the Oba of Benin. All traditional chiefs in Ika Kingdoms share similar names and functions with their Benin counterparts. Excluding recently established Social Chieftaincy titles in Ika, the following titles within Ika Kingdoms trace their origins to Benin: Olihe, Iyase, Obasogie, Obanyagbon, Ovia, Unwague, Oweh, Ojeba, Isogban, Orodu, Ohefi, Ozomor, Okem (Ononwun), Osula, Eribo, Osume, Osho Ise, Ihaza, Osazejobu, Ihama, Nobore, Asuen, Osehen, Adolor, Tigun, Obazuaye, Obazuniyi, Eleme, Obaraisiagbon, Obaseki, Ruejetor, Ogene, Obamedo, Obanedo, among others. Furthermore, historically Obis of Ute-Okpu, Owa, Abavo, and Agbor Kingdoms bore Bini names, providing clear evidence of Benin lineage. It is noteworthy that many ancient names are abbreviated forms of their original versions; for example, Awu is a shortened form of Avbavbo, the original name for Abavo. Additionally, many such names are currently undergoing Igboization.¹⁶

In summary, kingship in Nigeria emerged from ancient societal needs for centralized governance, evolving differently across regions, from established monarchies (Yoruba, Benin, Agbor) to republican structures (Igbo). Some Ika/Urhobo areas adopted kingship later or through specific priestly cults like Nri, while British colonialism introduced "Warrant Chiefs" to administer areas lacking traditional rulers, fundamentally shaping modern traditional rulership. Essentially, Ika kingship system was not a single narrative but a mosaic of indigenous political evolution, adaptation, and imposed systems, creating the rich tapestry of traditional authority seen today. The emergence of kingship in Ika land was characterized by a strong desire for centralized government to provide peace and security, functioning as the representative of the people and the gods. Early interactions with the Benin Kingdom established kingship dynasties in some Ika areas, merging with local Igbo traditions of gerontocracy and social organization.

Political Administration of Ika Land Before 1900

Pre-colonial political administration among the Ika people was characterized by autonomous, self-governing villages and towns, each led by councils of elders known as Ama-Ala and Ndichie. These councils, based on participatory democracy, held significant authority in decision-making, maintaining law and order, and administering justice, always through community consultation and consensus. Leadership within these councils was typically based on age, experience, wisdom, and proven integrity.¹⁷

The formation of the Ika people did not occur overnight; it resulted from centuries of historical evolution influenced by human desire for progress, driven by internal and external dynamic forces, particularly the emergence of human civilization. Onu Ika noted that what was known today as the Ika people, was a cluster of independent towns and villages operating as autonomous communities with their own systems of governance and cultural practices. These communities including, Agbor, Abavo, Ute-Okpu, Owa, Umunede, and others. Among the eleven clans were largely isolated from one another despite similarities in language, cultural values, and practices.¹⁸

Onyekpeze observed that the existence of organized societies in Ika land with comparable populations maintaining law and order impressed European observers, particularly the extent to which democracy was genuinely practiced in pre-colonial Ika communities. True liberty and participatory democracy existed across all Ika clans. Traditional institutions emphasized the role of parents, especially the oldest man in the family, who served as the family head. The family head, typically the eldest surviving male, settled disputes and commanded respect and reverence as he controlled communication with ancestors. The political structure of the Ika people was gerontocracy, with communities governed by elderly men, though not all elders had equal influence. Politics in each clan was conducted by elderly men and often included successful individuals with prosperity and numerous descendants.¹⁹

Political Structure of the Ika People

Regarding the evolution of the political structure of the Agbor clan, it is assumed that political development stemmed from the nuclear family, comprising a man, his wife or wives, and children. A combination of related biological families formed the extended family (Ebon), also known as Ijogbe. As the Ebon population grew after 1000 BC and new habitats were discovered, larger lineage groups emerged. Leadership of the Ebon was always held by the oldest male member. Family meetings were regularly held at the Ogwa (home) of the oldest man, with decisions reached by consensus. Elders handled all matters affecting inter-family relationships, including judicial, social, and political issues, and disciplined offending members according to agreed sanctions.

The next stage in political administration evolution was the Idumu, composed of several Ebons. Idumus might be based on blood relations or common historical experiences such as migration. The same leadership system applicable at the Ebon stage persisted at the Idumu stage. Two or more related Idumus or units formed a compendium known as Ogbe or quarter, with the oldest man of the Ogbe serving as the Onyeisi-Ogbe or Onyechen-Ogbe. Most quarter meetings were held at the Ogbe village square. Alongside the Onyechen-Ogbe sat the heads of the Idumus, known as chiefs, as well as the heads of Ebons, whose roles included maintaining peace and the corporate existence of the kindred through rituals and periodic propitiation to the gods and ancestors for the welfare of the land and people. Over time, several Ogbe grew and merged to form villages for easier administration.²⁰

As noted earlier, pre-colonial political administration among the Ika people was a blend of Benin and Igbo influences, characterized by clan-based structures with village heads (Diokpa), councils of elders, and a strong emphasis on community consensus rather than centralized authority. While specific structures varied by clan and origin, a common theme was a decentralized system where leadership was vested in elders and respected community figures, with governance often managed through councils and assemblies. It is pertinent to outline some peculiarities according to specific Ika clan political arrangements.

Denton's Intelligence Reports on the Igbodo Clan classified the age-grade system into three groups: Umuaka (children), Ikoro (able-bodied young men), and Ndichie (elders). Promotion from the first group to the next required attaining 20 years of age in Igbodo. A man remained in the Ikoro grade until age 50 before entering the Ndichie grade.²¹ This age-grade system was similar across all Ika clans, with slight variations in age brackets. The structural arrangement of the Ika people was based on the following:

Clan Administration: The head of a clan was known as the Obi, except in Idumuesah, which does not operate a monarchical system; there, the head is referred to as Okpara-Ukwu, signifying a paramount ruler. Succession is hereditary, except in Idumuesah, which operates an age-grade system. The Obi was not only the clan head but also the symbol of clan unity, regarded as the direct representative of the people and ancestors. Accepted practices involved participatory democracy, a system that has survived to the present. At the town and clan level, a collective representative system was in place, maintaining equality among villagers through the principle of equitable distribution and contribution of resources for clan development. The clan is ruled by the Obi or Okpara-Ukwu, assisted by the Obi-in-Council and Chiefs-in-Council, who help in day-to-day administration. Chiefs are appointed by the Obi from all villages constituting the clan.²²

Each village or quarter were represented either via hereditary or through selection by the Obi, ensuring equitable distribution of power among the various communities. The government of each clan in Ika land was vested in the Obi or Okpara-Ukwu, assisted by chiefs-in-council, with each town or village exercising autonomous local authority. The power of the Obi or Okpara-Ukwu and his chiefs-in-council was regulated by custom and tradition. According to Mr. Jeff Uti and Chief Enuabo, the Obi of Ika clans cannot be removed from the throne, even if he violates customs and traditions or is found guilty of a crime. He holds office for life, as he is considered the direct representative of the gods and ancestors.²³

However, his actions can be checked if he violates established customs and traditions or commits crimes against the people or the throne. If the Obi or Okpara-Ukwu errs, a meeting of the traditional council is convened where all chiefs-in-council or Nneche Ukpoko impose fines for his actions, serving as a mechanism to curb excesses.²⁴

Village: In pre-colonial Ika land, villages comprised combinations of Ogbe (communities). The political head of a village was known as Okpara or Onyeisi Ukwu or Onyechen Ukwu, depending on the village structure. They were assisted by various Onyeisi/Ndichie, typically the heads of each village or quarter, with the most senior among them automatically becoming the village head. In some villages, particularly certain Ogbe or quarters, the position of Okpara or Onyechen Ukwu was exclusively reserved; for example, in Ute-Oheze, elders from Idumu Obonwen could not become Okpara as they were considered maternal cousins to Ogie and thus could not rule over Ogie's descendants. The right to be Okpara was exclusively reserved for the Idumu Ogie quarter.²⁵ This practice also applied in other parts of Ika land.

Ogbe: This refers to a combination of different Idumus within a particular community. Members of the same Ogbe are considered to share the same ancestral lineage. The eldest man in the Ogbe becomes its head, and all meetings are held at his Ogwa or Ogbe town hall. He is supported by the heads of Idumus in day-to-day administration and dispute resolution. In Ogbe meetings, seating arrangements exist for Ndichie Idumu (elders of Idumu), Ndichie Ebon (family elders), and adult male youths. The Ogwa serves as the executive, judicial, and legislative council for the entire Ogbe. The political system in Ogbe is participatory democracy, involving all Idumus constituting the Ogbe and requiring the participation of all adult male youths. Onyekpeze further explains that Ogbe in Ika traditional communities are autonomous in their affairs without undue interference, especially on matters affecting them alone.²⁶

Idumu: In Ika land, Idumu refers to a group of people within an Ogbe area, composed of families with the same ancestral origin. An Idumu consists of several Ebons, which may be based on blood relations or common historical experiences like migration. Thus, Idumu people might not share a common ancestral lineage but share historical experiences, occupy a defined geographical enclave, and perform certain rites together, such as marriage, burial, reciprocal farming, and house-building in pre-colonial Ika nation.²⁷ The same leadership system obtainable in pre-colonial Ika Ogbe applied to Idumu quarters. The head of the Idumu was the oldest man, with each eldest man from Ebon/family units contributing to the administrative structure. Elders are known as Nneche or Ndichie, depending on pronunciation in various Ika communities. Adult youths also played a crucial role in maintaining law and order, effectively serving as community police in pre-colonial Ika land.

Ebon and Ezi Le Ulo: Ezi Le Ulo in Ika land comprises a man, his wife or wives, and children. Onyekpeze regards Ezi Le Ulo as the smallest unit in pre-colonial Ika political structure. Ebon, on the other hand, is the expansion of the immediate family to include uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, in-laws, and other maternal and paternal relations. Ebon is the extended family, while Ezi Le Ulo is the nuclear family. The head of Ebon is known as Onyesi, Diokpa, or Onyechen in various Ika communities. As the traditional authority, all family members recognize his authority. He functions as a mediator in family disputes, settles conflicts, imposes fines on offenders, oversees burial and marital arrangements, receives bride prices from in-laws, and leads his family in paying bride prices for male children marrying from other Ebons.²⁸

Ika People's Leadership Structure and Their Roles Before 1900

Before 1900, the Ika people operated under a decentralized, autonomous system of government characterized by a mix of monarchical elements and participatory democracy, heavily influenced by interactions with the Benin Empire and nearby Igbo communities. The structure was based on independent clans and kingdoms, with leadership centered around traditional rulers, titled men, and councils of elders. Core leadership was generally patriarchal, centered on traditional rulers (Obi), elder councils, and titled individuals. In communities lacking a central monarchical Obi system, like Idumuesah, the Okpara Uku (oldest man) served as the primary leader. He held the Ofo (symbol of authority), acting as the spiritual intermediary between the living and ancestors, managing communal land, and leading the council of elders.

The Obi/Okpara-Ukwu played crucial leadership roles in pre-colonial Ika land. The term Obi denotes a political, spiritual, and cultural leader of a clan. The Obi/Okpara-Ukwu serves as a central figure, presiding over rituals, upholding cultural traditions, and acting as the spiritual head of the clan's collective identity. His position is hereditary, except for the Okpara-Ukwu of Idumuesah, which practices gerontocracy. In Onyekpeze's words, the Obi/Okpara-Ukwu was regarded with religious awe, forming a link in the societal hierarchy from the Obi to the ancestors to the gods and the supreme being. The Obi is seen as the symbol of clan unity, unifying all political systems and the tenets of the clan's religion, customs, and traditions. He heads the native doctors' cult (Idibie), and all shrines in the clan are under his control.²⁹

Politically, the Obi/Okpara-Ukwu, as head of the traditional administration, pioneers developmental affairs, mediates disputes, ensures security, peace, and political stability among his subjects, settles conflicts between villages, serves as chief judge, and punishes offenders. His word is law, and he rules alongside the Obi-in-Council and Chiefs-in-Council. The Obi holds traditional political functions as a leader within his political clan. The Okpara-Ukwu and Obi are responsible for maintaining law and order, upholding cultural and customary practices, promoting and dispensing justice, often with the assistance of the Obi-in-Council.³⁰

Core political functions of the Obi/Okpara-Ukwu include: Leadership and administration: The Obi serves as the chief administrator, overseeing various facets of public life and administrative functions. Among the primary responsibilities are the maintenance of law and order and the assurance of peace and stability within the clan. Additionally, the Obi plays a vital role in upholding culture and custom by preserving and promoting the religious and traditional practices of the Ika people. Regarding social welfare, the position entails advancing the well-being and social interests of the clan. In dispensing justice, the Obi is expected to adjudicate fairly in accordance with equity and prevailing legal norms. In public relations and representation, the Obi or council acts as a spokesperson, addressing the public and advocating for the interests of the ruling Obi. Obi rule is firmly anchored in traditional institutions; within contemporary governmental frameworks, the Obi does not operate in isolation. The throne is regarded as sacred and inviolable; the Obi cannot be removed or dethroned, even in cases of violations of customs and traditions or convictions for criminal offenses, and holds the position for life.

Role of the Obi-in-Council and Chiefs-in-Council are numerous, the Obi-in-Council serves an advisory function to the Obi or Okpara-Ukwu, providing support in political, administrative, and judicial matters, and acting as their closest advisors and representatives. They also contribute to maintaining law and order and promoting social welfare within clans. The Obi-in-Council is composed of clan indigenes, often distinguished individuals of reputable character and conduct, who may reside either within or outside the clan. They play a role in fostering clan development. The Chief-in-Council is a body of chiefs that likewise advises the Obi and assists with day-to-day activities, addressing issues and conflicts, including boundary disputes among clan members. Chiefs receive their titles from the Obi and are selected from the various communities that constitute the clan, with each village having a chief who serves as a palace representative to ensure equitable distribution of power and representation.³¹

In Ika land, chiefs serve as custodians of culture, maintain law and order, and promote community development by representing the Obi/Okpara-Ukwu on various matters and ensuring peace. Their specific duties include serving on the traditional council, advising the Obi, and fulfilling legislative, administrative, and ceremonial roles within their communities.

Types of chiefs in Ika land include: The Obi-in-Council comprises traditional chiefs responsible for overseeing clan governance. Clan Chiefs lead specific clans and communities within the wider Ika Kingdom. Palace Chiefs, appointed by the Obi, perform duties within the royal palace, with certain positions reflecting structures akin to Benin chieftaincy formations. Ndichie refers to a distinct group of chiefs in Umunede who hold the staff of office known as Okpukpu and are seated according to the seniority of their office.

In Ika-speaking areas, age grades differ primarily in age range, nomenclature, and the specific community roles and responsibilities assigned to each group. Although age grades generally form within defined age brackets, distinctions also arise from the unique sociocultural and economic functions each group undertakes. Their characteristics include the following: age-based grouping, whereby members share a common age bracket spanning three to five years depending on the community; distinct names and roles, with each age grade possessing a unique designation and assigned societal duties such as maintaining security, enforcing laws, executing community projects, or contributing to cultural events like festivals; social cohesion, as age grades foster unity and mutual support among members, encouraging collaboration toward shared developmental objectives; community contribution, since age grades are essential to community development, with members

pooling resources, establishing businesses, and supporting cultural festivals; differentiation by gender, as in some communities female wings of age grades operate independently from their male counterparts; variation across clans, given that although the general system is consistent, specific names and regulations of age grades differ among Ika clans; and historical and cultural significance, as age grades are deeply embedded in the sociocultural life of numerous Ika communities. Age grades have been described as integral to African life, constituting important institutions in social structures. Each age set is clearly distinguished and has distinctive social, cultural, economic, and political roles performed at community and individual levels.³²

Since pre-colonial times, the age-grade system has been a crucial element in Ika life, central to all community activities, serving as an effective tool for checking social vices and building capacity. The system emphasizes the significance of age and its relevance in society. Onyekpeze outlines age grades in Ika Kingdoms according to different names and functions associated with each clan:

Abavo: Three age-grade systems: Okwa-Ukpo (most senior men), Okwa-son-Okwa, and Okwa-Ebo. For youths (Ikoro): Okwa Ikogbe/Okwa Agbeise (eldest), Ikoro, Nnono, and Itu Ikenye/Ikpele (youngest).

Agbor: Okwa-Ukpo (most senior elders), Okwa Obodo and Okwa Obeto (Ndichie age grade), and Ikoro (junior age grade).

Akumazi: Okwa Umundechen (most senior), Okwa Uhu, Okwa-Asasa, and Otuniyili (Ndichie age grade); Ikoro-Uku/Ogbe and Ikoro Nte/Eziza (youngest Ikoro grade).

Idumesa: Okwa Ibuzor (eldest age grade). Ikoro has eight groups, highest Okwa-Olotu, lowest Okwa-Nta. Ndichie age grade has three groups: Okwa-Ukpo (highest), Okwa Esi Ukpo, and Okwa Ukpali or Okwa Nta Ndichie (least).

Igbodo: Highest Ndichie, next Okorobia. Okorobia age grade includes Ikoro and Ndiaza Ogbe grades.

Mbiri: Ndichie (elders), Ikenyen (middle age), Otu Ikoro or ogelle. Ndichie age grade: Ndichie (highest), Ikenyen, Ikoro kani.

Otolokpo: Ndichie (most senior), Okpara Ndichie (elders), Eziza Ogbe (youths).

Owa: Ndichie (leader Okparan) for senior age grades; head of Ikoro age grade is Okaigbogbo. Ikoro has up to five grades: Inere (top), Okwa Ukpo (highest), Okwa Esi Ukpo, Okwa Ukpali (lowest).

Umunede: Ndichie (eldest), Okwa oboh, Okwa Odogwu, Okwa Ihienhie (senior age grade); Okwa Ikoro Umu-Eziza (young males).

Ute-Ogbeje: Ndichie (elders), Ikoro-Uku and Ikoro-Ebuo (middle age), Asasakolo (youth).

Ute Okpu: Ndichie (elders: Ukpo, Ndichie, Okwa-uku, Okwa-Nta); Ikoro, Okwa-Ibuzor, Okwa Ikoro, Okwa Sososa, Okwa Obiliyor.³³

Checks and Balances on the Role of the Obi/Okparan-Ukwu

Before 1900, the Ika political structure, led by the Obi (king) or Okparan-Ukwu (senior elder), functioned as a constitutional monarchy influenced by Benin's governance models, not as an absolute rule. It relied on an intricate system of checks and balances, emphasizing consensus, religious authority, and organized institutional oversight to curb autocratic power.

Key mechanisms restraining the Obi/Okparan-Ukwu included:

Council of Chiefs (Inotu/Ndichie) & Village Heads: The Obi governed collectively with the Inotu (cabinet) and other chiefs. The Council of Chiefs, representing various districts or villages, held advisory and veto powers over royal decisions.

The Ihame (Ehaivbo) and other Palace Officials: Mirroring Benin's practices, Ika governance included Ihame and other high-ranking palace officials providing oversight, particularly in administrative matters.

The Ndichen Ogbe (Village Representatives): Elders and leaders from different villages (Ogbe) wielded significant influence, serving as a counterbalance to central authority and advocating for local interests.

Age Grades (Otu): Age grades maintained law and order, functioning as security and enforcement bodies for communal rulings, ensuring the Obi's actions complied with community norms.

Religious Sanctions and the Ofo Title: The Ofo, a symbol of authority, legitimized leadership. An Obi was required to adhere to custom; any breach was considered a religious transgression, risking divine retribution.

The Ndanike (Military Commander): The Ndanike possessed autonomous authority in military affairs, preventing the Obi from exercising sole control over the army, especially if royal actions conflicted with state interests.

Public Opinion and Customary Law: Society operated largely through consensus. An oppressive Obi or one who disregarded traditional laws risked losing public support, which could lead to social instability or even removal from power.

Relationship with Benin: For many Ika clans, especially Agbor, the Obi's installation required the approval of the Oba of Benin. This relationship acted as a supreme external check on the Obi's local authority and conduct before the 19th century.³⁴

Summary of Constraints on Authority

No Absolute Power: Though highly respected, the Obi could not impose taxes or tolls arbitrarily and was bound by established customs.

Appellate Role: The Obi's court primarily served as an appellate body for cases from other officials' courts, restricting direct royal involvement in everyday judicial affairs.

Respect for Tradition: The Obi's fundamental duty was to preserve law and order; an incompetent or irresponsible ruler could be restrained by the chiefs or the council of elders.

Summary and Conclusion

Before the twentieth century, the Ika people were not a unified political entity; they were a collection of autonomous clans and kingdoms. These communities were formed primarily through successive waves of migration from the Benin Kingdom between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, with additional cultural influences from the Ishan and Igbo areas. Their monarchical systems were largely patterned after Benin's royal customs, while their wider political framework depended on governance by councils of elders. Although some clans may have existed earlier, the acknowledged ruling lineages generally trace their legitimacy to historical involvement of Benin royalty. Major clans such as Agbor, Owa, and Umunede assert that their founders were descendants of migrants from Benin or Ishan. The establishment of the Dein dynasty, which initiated the Agbor monarchy around 1260 AD, serves as a clear example of Benin's influence in the region.³⁵

While some rulers bear the title Obi, others use the Bini titles Ovie or Onogie. Succession to the Obishop is mainly hereditary, usually passing to the eldest son. A crucial ritual for confirming a new king was the presentation of an Ada, a ceremonial sword, by the Oba of Benin, as recorded in the origins of the Mbiri and Umunede kingships. Thus, although the thrones often originated in Benin, the people they ruled were commonly Igbo-speaking, producing a unique, blended culture.

Pre-colonial Ika political organization was decentralized and republican, with each clan enjoying substantial autonomy. Ika-land consisted of distinct, self-governing communities—such as Agbor, Owa, Abavo, and Umunede—that lacked a central, overarching authority despite sharing linguistic and cultural connections. Primary governance was exercised by councils of elders (Ndichen), who held considerable judicial authority. In some clans, the Okpara-Uku, or eldest male, acted as the administrative head. In clans with established monarchies, the Obi ruled in consultation with both the council of elders and titled chiefs, operating within a participatory democratic system.

Political administration was organized around Ogbe (villages) as separate administrative units. These were subdivided into Idumu (quarters), each managed by a subordinate chief (Onye-chen Idumu). The Ihaim system, or age-grade organization, was essential for community security and public works, and it often traced its roots to Benin. This structure included accountability measures that prevented the Obi from wielding absolute power by requiring consensus for significant decisions, thereby establishing a system of checks and balances.

However, the transformation of the Ika from independent communities into a cohesive political unit occurred distinctly during British colonial rule. Before colonial influence, the Ika did not see themselves as a unified group. Individual villages or towns considered themselves separate settlements, communities, or kingdoms, despite sharing linguistic and cultural traits. The term "Ika" functioned mainly as an identifier for the people and was largely adopted as a practical administrative label by British authorities, who grouped them together based on linguistic similarities and their residence within a defined geographic area for administrative convenience.³⁶ British colonial administration played a key role in fostering a unified political identity among the Ika. In 1901, Captain M.O.S. Crewe-Reed designated Agbor as the administrative center for the Ika nation, forming the Agbor District. This colonial decision set the Ika on a course toward political development. The newly created district encompassed many towns and villages that gradually began to see themselves as part of a larger, single political entity. The boundaries imposed by the colonial government forced previously isolated communities to interact more regularly, leading to the emergence of a new social and political structure.³⁷

Following the establishment of colonial governance in Ika territory, the administration of the Ika nation underwent several phases of reorganization, beginning with the Agbor District Council. The creation of the Agbor District was proposed by the Assistant District Officer in Agbor, as noted in his letter No. 319/29/1927 of August 15, 1927, to the Division Officer of the Asaba Division in Ogwashi-Uku. The first meeting of the Agbor District Council was held on March 24, 1928, chaired by Assistant District Officer F.G. Pyke Nott. This step signaled a shift from a "traditional Ika" society to a "modern Ika" one, integrating certain changes while retaining elements of the ancestral way of life still valued by the people.³⁸

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