

## KINSHIP AND KINSHIP TERMS AMONG THE IGBO: An Expository Study

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### Abstract

In recent time, the value placed on kinship ties are phasing out just like any other aspect of the Igbo culture. Language goes with culture and the two cannot be separated. As the culture is dying, so also the language with which the culture is interpreted. The aim of this paper is to expose the kinship ties and the terms in Igbo. In doing this, the researcher made use of observation and recorded materials in collecting his data. The researcher observed that both the value placed on kinship ties and the terms are dying off and this paper is a means of recording the people's value.

**Keywords: Culture, Family, Kinship, Relationship, Terms.**

### Introduction

Kinship institution results from the close relationship of some members of a community who trace their decent to a particular parents. Kinship provides the framework for a closer relationship. Among the Igbo, in a kinship, what befalls one befalls others. The statement *O nuru ube nwanne agbala oso* (He that hear of a brother or a sister should not run away) suffice here. This statement still holds way to some extents today, although not as before. The system of kinship among the Igbo refers to the network of people in a household and extended family members having the same decent. Kinship is actually relationship of the people with others as a result of marriage affiliation, adoption or by birth. Bisilki(2017) using Likpakpaln in Ghana as example divided kinship terms as follows: '*Agnatic, matrilateral and affinal kinship address forms, of which matrilateral and affinal kinship addresses are by complimentary filiation*'. In Igbo land, kinship is a strong and powerful bond and it originates from the family which is father, mother and children. According to Socrates (2022:95) 'A few Igbo communities are matrilineal while a community practices a bilineal kinship system. These notwithstanding, the generality of Ndigbo are decisively patrilineal

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in their kinship practices'. The origin and the base of kinship is from the parents and the children and moves to extended family members. The above is referred to as Nne, Nna, Nwanne, or Umunne. They are referred to as Ezi. This is where the foundation of other kinship relationships among Igbo people of South Eastern Nigeria is laid. Among the Igbo, it is a social relationship that cannot be interfered with by an outsider. Kinship is extra familial organization where moral learning takes place. It is relevant to traditional societies and cannot be fully replaced by anything even in this modern time in Igbo land. The needs of members are provided within the kinship circle in Igbo. Igbo is rich in culture and social structure. This paper exposes kinship among the Igbo, the social structure and kinship terms.

### **The Concept of Kinship**

Aroh (2011) refers to kinship as 'the relationship between individuals based on blood ties or marriage, adoption or any other means by which a given society recognized such. Salawu (2007) gave two aspects of kinship which are biological and socio-cultural. He explained that biological is gotten through blood relation or descent. From the above, one can say that the two are the same in that descent and blood relations cannot be differentiated. The biological means that the people involved have the same fore-fathers. They descended from one ancestor. Kinship through the mother's lineage is not common among the Igbo but exists in some parts of Igbo.

The second according to Salawu is the socio-cultural aspect which he referred to as man-made. To him, it is the society that determines the make-up of a kinship in their domain. This aspect means that kinship is not only through biological means in Igbo land but also as may be determined by the society. This is true in that we have *ikwunne*, *ikwunna*, *ibe* and *agbataobi*. The power and authority these people have over someone is determined by the people of that area. This is so in many parts of Igbo land especially when it comes to marriage issue.

Onwuka (2009), agreeing with Salawu (2007) states that 'this is why one's brother-in-law, mother-in-law and sister-in-law are one's kinsmen.' Among the Igbo, adopted children are welcomed and incorporated into a kinship. However, unlike the free born he is restricted to the inheritance of the person who adopted him. Uwakwe (2003) listed such relations as follows:

- (a) Parallel cousins
- (b) Sibling and
- (c) Uterine.

Uwakwe (2003) described Parallel cousins as children born of same sex siblings. This can be of two brothers or two sisters. They are referred to as *Umunne* among the Igbo. Each refers to the other as *nwanne m*. However, this does not mean that they are of the same mother as the name sounds, rather it simply means they are relations. Sibling is the second and they are people of the same parents. In Igbo they are referred to as *otu nne otu nna* but in a situation where they are same mother but not the same father they are referred to *otu nne* known as maternal half siblings in sociology. At the same time where they have the same father but not the same mother they are

referred to as *otu nna known as* paternal half-siblings in Sociology. Distance relations from the mother's side is referred to as *ikwunne* while those from the father's side is referred as *Umunna*. The last in the list given by Uwakwe (2003) is Uterine which he defined as kinship in which descent is reckoned through females. Eteng (2008) states that it is not every need that immediate family can handle rather some are taken to kinship level. Issues like security, provision of social amenities are regarded as issues to be handled in conjunction with the other relations beyond the immediate family.

Aniche and Onyia (2008) see kinship system as institution that serves the needs of the members. The issue of kinship no doubt is no longer what it was in the twentieth century. The European influence and urbanization have affected Igbo culture drastically and selfish live style has become the order of the day. Separatist type of life has taken over the cherished kinship institution that was inherited from our ancestors.

### **Theoretical Framework**

When we talk about terms, we are at the same time discussing semantics. The theory of semantics was formalized by Trier (1930) cited in Chimaobi et.al (2021:98) as an approach to meaning which is based on the understanding that words that have related meanings can be grouped under a larger conceptual field or domain. Chimaobi et. al (2021:98) further describe the semantic property or meaning property, as parts of a linguistic unit such as morphemes, words or phrases that help in determining the meaning of that unit. To them, it is concerned with being meaningful or meaningless. This theory is chosen because the research is dealing with kinship terms and we have stated that whenever we are talking of terms, we are at the same time talking about meaning.

### **Methodology**

The method used in collecting data in this research is by observation and archival materials, especially articles written by earlier researchers on the related field. Libraries were consulted and oral information was also applied in data collection. Documentation of data collected was also made.

### **Social Structure**

The social structure among the Igbo communities according into Ejiofor (1981) are highly similar. The kinship in Igbo land is based on the following as listed below:

- i. *Otu agburu* (one ancestor),
- ii. *Alumaalu* (marriage link)
- iii. *Nnabata*(adoption).

*Otu agburu* (common ancestor), can also be referred to as *Umunna* in parts of Igbo like Opi in Nsukka Igbo of Enugu State Nigeria. We should also note that among the Igbo, kinship has unit structure which is based on the immediate family.

### **Family (Ezinuḷo)**

According to Akubukwe (1997), 'A person is born or adopted into a family that makes the person a member of the family. This family is the basic unit structure of the Igbo kinship

Brian Siegel (1996) observed that African societies had rulers, subjects, and slaves, but did not pay attention to material possession which made class distinction impossible. Due to this, no much demarcation on where and who to marry. In the case of Igbo, we should note that there are still restrictions for example, Amadi cannot marry an Osu or Ume among the Igbo. Ume is also forbidden in many families or families known to have been dying early in life characters. Brian Siegel (1996), observed that Africans do not marry for the purpose of position seeking or material possession rather child bearing is seen as the main purpose of marriage. Taking Igbo for example, this is the main aim of marriage. This is so among the Igbo of South Eastern Nigeria. They in '*Igwe bu ike*' meaning, *there is strength in large population*.

Among the Igbo tradition celibacy is not permitted and premarital sex is referred to as immoral act and frowned at. Infertility is a terrible personal tragedy and infant mortality which is sometimes seen as *ogbanje* is also unfortunate havoc to a family where it is found. This is because children are desired, loved and are the hope of continuity for the family. Children today are the adults of tomorrow. Therefore, all normal adults are expected to marry for immortality of their names. For this, all Igbo communities encourage their children to get married and even permit polygamy although frowned at by Christian religion. This is applicable to many other African nations.

Family, according to Ejiofor (1981:35) comprises the father, mother and children. The family is predominantly monogamous. Polygamy among the Igbo is culturally accepted; however, it is a fast dying practice. Polygamy is speedily phasing out because of Christianity and westernization and Ejiofor noted that it is as a result of Christianity, monetized economy and improved social security. According to him, in the past, security is the concern of a large family group who would join forces where to guarantee safety of members.

Traditional Igbo family members live together in a compound until the children grow and begin to build their own houses and create their own families. Each house in a well-established compound comprises more than one house; one for the father of the family, the other or others for the wife or wives. For the male youths, their own house is built close to their father's house while the girls share with their mothers until they get married. The men's house, usually one room apartment, is referred to as *Uloegala* or *uloikorobia* 'bachelor's room'. The sons live with their father as soon as they have outgrown immediate and sustained maternal care. From the age of eighteen years, they go to *uloikorobia*. The daughters too live with their mothers. The father is the head of the family who is always supported by the wife who is also the mother in the family. He controls the family and always has the advice of the wife. Ejiofor (1981) describes the mother as the heart of

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the home. However, for all dependence, an Igbo mother is a well-established woman in the family. She has very little fear of divorce, as this was not common. The pride of a man has always been his ability to run a family and the husband and wife confide on each other on every matter.

The children are brought up in love but strict discipline from their parents. They learn obedience and submission to their parents, elders and other constituted authority in the community. They have to acquire qualities that guarantee them relative self-sustenance and happiness. The immediate family members are designated as indicated in Table 1 below:

Nna	Father
Nne	Mother
Nwanne nwoke	Brother
Nwanne nwaanyi	Sister
Nwa	Child

Figure 1: Designation of Immediate Family Members

We have extended family members. This treated fully under kinship terms.

### Extended Family Members

These are extended relations which can only be traced from father's lineage. This comprises a man, his siblings and their family members who can trace common ancestors even up to sixth generations. The members answer the same family name as their surname. Brian Siegel (1996:2) while comparing African marriage and Family with the European said,

Families take different forms and are invested with different meanings. Whereas we in the United States typically conceive of family as conjugal, or nuclear, that composed of a married couple and their children, Africans generally use the term to denote the extended family, several generations of relatives living at home and away.

In most cases, the component families do not live in one continuous land area, or environment rather they are often found mixed with other family groups. Sometimes, a family lives in a place more than miles away from other related families but now people travel far and near. Now we say *ndi puru mba na ndi no na ama* meaning home and abroad. The limit is the village land area and not everywhere as is obtainable now. Their common grandfather or great grandfather might have acquired land far away from his home; in this case, one or more members of the family live on the site. The final and strongest proof of ownership of land is habitation on that land.

Unity, oneness and support for one another have always been the watch word among members of an extended family. All members of the family are referred to as Umunne (Children of the same mother). At the demise of a parent, an uncle usually the eldest culturally and automatically

becomes the ‘Nna anyi’ (our father) to the orphans. Here, the uncle assumes the position of the father to the children of the diseased person. He takes over the wife if the woman accepts and the man is willing. He is thus need not to pay another dowry but must perform a little ceremony to take over the wife of the late brother.

Although as noticed by Ejiofor (1981:39) ‘this practice is being seriously threatened by economic independence, social security as well as disputes over property and land.’ According to him, the rising cost of living is also a threat to solidarity since one would have to be economically stabilised before any family member could be taken care of. The extended family is the first formal division in village politics. Although the immediate family performs a political role, the extended family is the first to be called a unit by its structure and institution. The eldest male of the lineage is the overall head, a position he enjoys as a personal prerogative and which rotates according to seniority.

The Igbo people generally call the extended family’s eldest man ‘Okpara’. He holds the collective authority of the extended family. He is the eldest among the men and by no means holds the ofo of the family. The Okpara’s leadership is essentially a moral one for he cannot take any decision alone and in some parts of Igbo he cannot enforce the decisions taken by his people with any form of coercion. He presides over any deliberation in the family. He is referred to as Onyishi in some parts of Igbo land like Nsukka.

The Okpara can be corrected with respect by the members of his group in the event of his misbehaviour or failing to measure up to his people’s expectation in the village or the community. The ‘ofọ’ which is seen as symbol of justice is highly respected as well as the Okpara who holds the village ‘ofọ’. The Okpara retains the ‘ofọ’, the sacred wood which is the symbol of authority; it is a symbol of justice and innocence, legitimacy and authority. The holder of ‘ofọ’ is expected to be harmless and speaks the truth for the fear of ‘Ndi Ushi’ the ancestors. The ‘ofọ’ is the family emblem and cannot be surrendered to an outsider. No member of the family will accept to surrender their family emblem to outsiders rather, the members would defend and fight to retain it.

### **UMUNNA (minimal lineage)**

Literally umunna means ‘children of one father’. The one father stands for extended family member but one ancestor. Ejiofor (1981) calls it ward but in Nigeria’s political division towards, umunna is smaller than a ward especially the ward division in Igbo land. This is composed of a group of related extended families who trace their common ancestry to a common father that may comprise even more than ten generations back. It is, in effect, an historical kinship development of the extended family to the point where blood relationship loses its quickening sentiment and emotions as Ejiofor (1981) puts it.

Umunna is differently called quarter by Okali Omali localized lineage by Anene localized patrilineage by Gailey and kindred by Olisa. Ejiofor (1981) explained that ward is the recent description that originated from the organizational needs of the local council government, and fits more to the amalgamation heterogeneous population of the cities.

### **The Village (Minimal and Major Unit)**

In some Igbo communities, the village is referred to as 'Ama', Obi, mkpu or Obodo. Villages are not independent, autonomous social units within the traditional system rather the communities or towns are. Villages are integral parts of a town and feeling of blood relation is more in village than the communities. Members of one village cannot marry from the same village because they believe that they are of the same blood. It is an abomination among the Igbo referred as *aru* in Igbo. It is regarded as 'aru' an abomination. A group of umunna constitutes the village 'As', 'Ogbe', 'Obi', 'Obodo' 'Nkpu' which Micheal Olisa again calls Ebo. A bond of kinship holds the member unit together. The 'Ezi' or 'Okoro' is the first (in ascent) followed by the village which is more corporate and viable social unit in Igbo communities. Village according to Giley is composed of a number of Umunna. It is seen as the strongest social and political unit among the Igbo. All valued title taking like the post of Eze, Isiwu, Onowu or Osayi begins from the village.

### **The Town (Strong Federation of Village Units)**

It is referred to as Obodo, mba, ala and so on. It is larger than villages because it is made up of villages. The town is the first full-fledged group because it is made up of village units in traditional Igbo setting. It is the largest unit of domestic group. This makes allowance for the associations among Igbo village units. The autonomy and unity of town are strongly supported by an identity or near identity of dialect spoken by all members.

It is a mystical kinship unit where a common ancestor is believed to have been the first to dwell in the town. His sons were considered the founders of the different villages that composed the town. Towns usually exist in clusters that do trace their origin to one father. Amidst them, there are elements and groups that turn up from other areas and are integrated into the life of the town group. Such a cluster is called a clan. They are sometimes named after the number of component towns, for example, Opi na ato, Mbaise, Ekwegbe, mkpunato Mbaano, Ebenase Mbaitoolu.

### **Kinship Terms**

One of the social roles played by language is the description of kin relationship. Igbo people like any other linguistic group have terms they use to refer to kin and kinship related. Chimaobi (2021), stated that one of the salient features of linguistic communities is the existence a set of lexical items that constitute a semantic field and establishes a network of relationships between its members often regarded as kinship terminology or terms. In sociolinguistics and linguistics in general, many have written on kinship as it concerns different languages. Kinship terminologies differ from language to language and from culture to culture. As we have mentioned earlier, the society concerned determines what makes their kin. Some factors are common in many groups of people. The most common among the Igbo are: blood relation, marriage and adoption.

As languages and culture differ so also the kinship terms. Igbo people believe that the base of kinship is the direct family which is the root of every extended family. That is to say that the base is the nuclear family. This also is the stand of the Universalists. The nuclear family is the foundation of kinship. This is against the stand of the relativists who believe that kinship terminologies are also structured in social forms and not only genealogically. However, looking deep into the social form, one will still discover that all have its root through the same genealogy or biological. The Igbo lay much emphasis on biological and marital relations referred to as *nwanne na ogo*.

Consider the examples of kin terms in Igbo, starting from the nuclear to the extended family.

**Di +Nwunye**

↓

**Ụmụ**

↓

**Ụmụụmụ**

↓

**Ụmụkwurụ ụmụ**

‘Di’ and ‘Nwunye’ are the common ancestors of the family. ‘Ụmụ’ are their children comprising sons and daughters. Therefore,, ‘Di’ and ‘Nwunye’ are the parents of Ụmụ. Ụmụụmụ are the grandchildren of ‘Di’ and ‘Nwunye’ and correspondingly, ‘Di’ and ‘Nwunye’ are the grandparents of Ụmụụmụ. The children of the Ụmụụmụ that is the great grandchildren. This structure represents the basic kin relation by blood in the Igbo family system. Aside the basic structure, there are other extensions. These include uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces etc.

## **UNCLE & AUNT**

There are standard terms for collateral relationships where neither person is directly descended from the other. In other words, collateral relationships are indirect relationship; the use of a generic term to refer to uncles and aunts without distinguishing them by gender.

Examples

- Paternal uncle - Nwannenna
- Maternal uncle- Nnamochienne
- Paternal aunt - Nneochie/ Nwannenna



Maternal aunt - Nneochie/ Nwannanne

### COUNSINS, NIECE, NEPHEW

The children of one's aunt or uncle are the cousins while the children of one's brother/sister are the nieces/nephews. However, while generic forms are used to describe paternal cousins, nephews or nieces, the maternal are given culturally for special signification.

Examples:

Paternal	Cousin -	Nwanwannenna
	Nephew-	Nwanwanne
	Niece-	Nwanwanne
Paternal grandmother		Nnenna
Maternal Cousin -		Nnaochie
		Nneochie
		Nwadiala

In most cases, the word 'Nwanne' (my sister or brother) is used to connote anyone from the same village. In extended family meeting, we use 'Anyị bụ ụmụ nne' to mean we are the same kinship.

### IN-LAWS

There are several relations to which the term in-law refers in the Igbo culture. However, most of them give little difficulty to the native speakers. Any such relationship indicates that the link is by marriage and not by blood; in other words, one of us is the blood relative of the other's spouse. In Igbo, if one wants to refer collectively to the blood relatives of his spouse, he can call them 'ndịọgọ m (my in-laws).

Sometimes, the term means just one's spouse's nuclear family; other times, it can mean any group of one's spouse's relatives. Specifically, we have the following referents as in-laws in Igbo:

Father of one's wife	-	Ọgọwoke
Mother of one's wife	-	Ọgọwaanyị
Husband of the first daughter	-	Ogodiada

This also applies to one's wife's sisters and brothers.

Sometimes, 'Ọgọ' is used connote anyone from the village of one's wife.

Father of one's husband	-	Nna di
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Mother of one's husband - Nne di

Apart from these basics, there are extensions of 'Ogõwoke' & 'Ogõwaanyi' in Igbo. Example:

Ogõwoke- Husband of one's daughter/sister

Ogõdiada - Husband of one's first daughter or first daughter of one's parents.

Brother of one's wife, cousin, uncle, nephew of one's wife.

Ogõwaanyi -Sister of one's wife/sister, cousins, aunts, nieces.

It is evident here that in the Igbo society, a wife does not call her husband's relations (brothers, sisters, uncles etc.) as her in-laws (ndi di m). This is essentially because she has become a member of her husband's family. In the same vein, a man may refer to his daughter's husband as his 'son-in-law' 'Ogõwoke' but he does not refer to his son's wife as 'Ogõwaanyi' rather he refers to his son's wife as his wife – nwunyenwa m. This is because the son's wife has become one with his family and has become part of the husband's lineage.

### Conclusion

We have elaborated kinship terms in Igbo in this research. Past literatures on the related topic has been reviewed. From the research, it was discovered that kinship ties which was very strong among the Igbo is now becoming weak. Modernity and religion have interfered with Igbo culture especially in the area of kinship. The paper succeeded in exposing the terms in Igbo kinship for preservation purpose.

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