Chapter 12 An African Background to the Concept of Open Society: Ikenga and Ofo Cultic Figures as Structural Representations of the Enterprising Spirit of the Igbo of Nigeria

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AN AFRICAN BACKGROUND TO THE CONCEPT OF OPEN SOCIETY: IKENGA AND OFO CULTIC FIGURES AS STRUCTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ENTERPRISING SPIRIT OF THE IGBO OF NIGERIA

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Introduction

The concept of open society in its characteristic form as a society founded on “a flexible structure, freedom of belief, and wide dissemination of information” (Oxford Lexico) and a high degree of social mobility (Popper 2020) is not alien to most traditional African societies, especially the non-centralized polities where the traditional political authority is not autocratic but dispersed among the people. Although the holistic nature of these societies in which political authority is often blended with religious sanctions and socio-economic obligations, might appear contradictory to contemporary notions of open society, but a detailed analysis of the dynamic nature of the society reveals their complementary rather than conflicting roles in the making of the open society character of the polity.

The Igbo of Nigeria represent this category of holistic traditional polity where authority is not only dispersed but where there is no barrier to freedom or opportunities for mobility at different levels of the society both vertical and horizontal sub-structures. Indeed among the Igbo, what acts as the guardian of their open society phenomenon is their social control mechanism which is anchored on their characteristic traditional belief system expressed through tangible and intangible spiritual mediums. This belief system is anchored in a generative life force which recognizes that every individual is born with a distinct destiny made manifest through his associated talent, with talent in turn leading to enterprise and enterprise to advancement and advancement to privilege. This could explain why the Igbo are one of the most distinctly enterprising groups of African extraction with conspicuous presence in all the continents.

The Igbo of Nigeria are one of the most dispersed and highly enterprising ethnic nations in Africa. They are located in the south-eastern part of Nigeria; and form one of the three largest ethnic groups in the country; the other two being the Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba. Mainly located in the present five south-eastern
states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo, they are dominantly found in the two Niger-Delta states of Delta and Rivers, with considerable numbers found in the present Edo and Benue states.

The Igbo propensity to always migrate from their homeland to other places in search of greener pastures, their associated enterprising spirit, and the resulting successes, have often led to envy from their host communities; leading to hostilities and in some extreme cases, to outright anti-Igbo riots, particularly in the Muslim-dominated northern states of Nigeria. This characteristic enterprising spirit coupled with bitter experiences in the hands of their host communities has led some people to describe them in different characteristic terms, of which the most popular is their description as the Jews of Africa.

They are markedly the dominant entrepreneurs in small- and medium-scale industrial and commercial activities in the Nigerian nation today. In fact over 70 percent of Nigeria’s commercial activities are carried out by people of Igbo ethnic extraction. In other words every major market in every major Nigerian city is under the economic grip of the members of the Igbo ethnic group. Associated with Igbo commercial enterprise is their propensity to travel far beyond the confines of their ethnic boundaries. Hence it is not mistaken evidence that even beyond the confines of the Nigerian nation, prominent Igbo communities have become common features in most African countries, including the Americas, Asia, and Europe, where they represent the conspicuous African population.

**Demographic Questions on Igbo Migration**

The Igbo have characteristically been compared to the Jews and Irish, as well as such people as the Kikuyu of Kenya, the Chagga of Tanzania, the Ewe of Ghana and Togo, and the Bamileke of Cameroon. LeVine (1966, 7) described these groups as the “examples of groups noted for their opportunism and industry in response to the new situation created by Western institutions in this century.” In comparing the Igbo with the Irish, Niven (1970, 18) wrote:

> The Ibo have the same courage and intelligence as the Irish and they had not come under any greater authority than the village nor had they encountered an outsider in the war-path. Every man has always been for himself and has usually done well himself.

The general trend however was for some scholars to associate the Igbo economic adventurism with ecological disadvantages. Coleman (1958, 69) one of the major apologists of this hypothesis writes:

> Ibo land is one of the most densely populated rural areas in the world. In some places the density is more than 1000 persons to the square mile. Moreover, the soil is comparatively poor. As a result, in the past
the Ibo expanded territorially and exported to other areas large numbers of seasonal laborers and even semi-permanent residents. In fact, the Ibo were expanding territorially in many directions at the time of the British intrusion. Since then this outward thrust has continued and has been the source of anti-Igbo feeling among the tribes bordering Iboland.

However, while migration arising from expansion could readily be linked with pressure of the population on the available resources, it is unlikely that such could bring about the culture of high enterprising spirit. To say the least, scarcity of land is not a uniform feature in Igbo land. Most peripheral Igbo sub-groups have relative expansive portions of arable land enough to sustain viable agricultural communities. Linking migration with scarcity of farming lands seems therefore ridiculous in the case of these Igbo sub-groups.

This is evident in the cases of the north-east or Ogu-ukwu Igbo sub-group, and communities within the Niger and Anambra River Basins. Apart from possessing enough farmlands relative to their population, and producing enough foodstuffs particularly rice and yams in commercial quantities, they paradoxically constitute the bulk of seasonal migrant farm laborers in Igbo land. How then can this be explained in terms of scarcity of land arising from population pressure?

Lee (1966, 48) working in concert with Ravenstein’s theory of migration lists factors which account for economic-related migrations, the introduction of bad or oppressive laws, heavy taxations, an unattractive climate, un congenial social surroundings, as well as compulsion which may arise from either slave trade or transportation. He however went further to opine that none of the above-mentioned factors “can compare in volume with that which arises from the desire inherent in most men to ‘better’ themselves in material respects.”

There is no doubt, as Lee rightly puts it, that it is the desire for better economic attainments more than other motives that pushes the Igbo out of their traditional home base. Yet, it has to be made known that neither the desire for better economic needs nor the propensity to migrate from one’s home base is exclusive to the Igbo. Every group of people is imbued naturally with such desires. What then is the uniqueness of the Igbo experience which made them the most shrewd and remarkable in these matters of economic quest and expansion among their neighbors? In their study of Venezuela, Brown and Goetz (1987, 49) stated: “Migration in third world settings as elsewhere, results when opportunities provided by geographic places are not commensurate with the personal need(s) or capabilities of their resident.” In the same vein, they attribute outward migration “as a function of both personal attributes and places of contextual characteristics related to development.”

Relating the Igbo circumstance to the position of Brown and Goetz, Ottenberg (1959, 130) links the force behind the Igbo tendency to expand beyond their traditional borders to their receptivity to culture change. He goes further to
associate this attribute to four major factors. These include: the influence of the European slave trade on them; the nature of direct European contact following the slave trade; the nature and organization of Igbo society and; the Igbo population density. While the first and second factors cannot be exclusive to the Igbo, and the fourth factor—“population density,” having been resolved, the third—“the nature and organization of Igbo cultures,” appears to particularly agree with the dynamic character of Igbo open society and its inherent enterprising spirit.

**Socio-political Structure of Igbo Open Society as the Catalyst to Adventurism**

Igboland in its most unadulterated indigenous form shows a markedly high level of political democratization. There is a marked lack of strong centralization of authority on any individual or group of individuals. This situation has often led some scholars to describe the Igbo as forming part of the territorial political complex popularly, but in certain circumstances erroneously, known as “stateless societies” (Horton, 1972).

Horton (1972) in defining a stateless society has identified the following grounds as forming the basis of his classification: firstly, that in a stateless society there is little concentration of authority in which case there exists the difficulty of identifying any individual or limited group of men as the rulers of the society. Secondly, that such authority roles as exist affect a rather limited sector of the lives of those subject to them; while thirdly, the wielding of authority as a specialized full-time occupation is virtually unknown, and finally, that the unit within which people feel an obligation to settle their disputes according to agreed rules and without resort to force tends to be relatively small.

Vansina, Mauny, and Thomas (1964, 87), on the other hand, in defining a state system describes a political structure as one with differentiated status between rulers and ruled, which is founded not only on kinship relations, but also on a territorial basis, with the presence of political offices as an important index of classification. The following episode from Achebe’s (1969, 105) iconic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, provides a clear picture of the character of political decentralization among the Igbo, which by extension expresses its inclusive character of open society:

The missionaries spend their first four or five nights in the marketplace, and went into the village in the morning to preach the gospel. They asked who the king of the village was, but the villagers told them that there was no king. ‘We have men of high title and the chief priest and the elders’, they said.

Be that as it may, there is more to the characteristic enterprising spirit of the Igbo than the mere lack of central political authority. This is because most other
ethnic groups with similar political structure do not possess similar or equal enterprising spirit with the Igbo. Thus, one may ask, what are the forces that propel the characteristic enterprising spirit of the Igbo, as well as their expansionist tenacity outside their traditional homeland?

Relating to the nature and organization of Igbo culture as impetus to their achievement-oriented drive, Ottenberg (1959, 130) believed that its strength lies on, firstly, the emphasis on individual achievement and initiative; secondly, alternatives prestige goals and paths of action; thirdly, a tendency toward equalitarian leadership; fourthly, considerable incorporation of other peoples and cultures; fifthly, a great deal of settlement and resettlement of individuals and small groups; and sixthly, considerable cultural variations.

The foregoing factors, although seemingly evident, are not exclusive to the Igbo. Take for instance, the emphasis on individual achievement and initiative. How could it be explained that no other ethnic group except the Igbo has a sense of individual achievement motivation and initiative? Again, looking at the issue of equalitarian leadership and bringing it alongside the Tiv of Benue State, and even the Ekoi groups of Cross River State of Nigeria, it becomes difficult to define it in exclusive terms in the context of the Igbo impetus for achievement. The same goes with the other factors.

However, that is not to say that these factors do not on their own, to varying degrees, play important roles in shaping the Igbo achievement drive. In actual fact, among the Igbo they form the outward indicators of an inner ideological drive which is not shared with the other groups. This inner ideological drive is expressed by one unique characteristic which the Igbo do not share with the other groups except to some extent the Jews and, this is their sentimental attachment to their traditional homeland.

This Igbo sentimental attachment to their ancestral homeland is cosmologically propelled by a momentum spirit which induces a pattern of habitual but regulated outward migration in search of greener pastures and subsequent home-coming during which one is expected to assess his progress in life. What then is this momentum spirit that seems to have defied all external linkages to exclusively impel the Igbo to a habitual enterprising spirit and adventurism?

This momentum spirit is cosmologically anchored on the belief in a generative life force known as Ikenga and structurally represented by a cultic artistic symbolism defined by a ram-headed human figure with a cutlass in the right hand and a booty often represented by a human head on the left hand. Ikenga otherwise known as the “cult of the right hand” is believed to be the source of Igbo enterprising instinct and migratory propensity. The Ikenga thus is the cosmological basis of Igbo belief in open society, which recognizes that talent leads to enterprise and enterprise to achievement, and achievement to customary privileges. Hence, the Igbo society with its characteristic republicanism is engrossed in a highly competitive personal achievement-driven motivation, which is anchored in Ikenga. Allied with Ikenga and acting as a spiritual
counterbalance is the Ofo—another cultic objective defined variously as the ancestral staff of office and staff of justice.

Indeed while Ikenga is dictated by a go-getter centrifugal force, the Ofo on the other hand is driven by a stock-taking centripetal force with both acting within a complimentary spiritual orbit that defines the essence and character of traditional African open society. It is against the background of the interplay of these two centrifugal and centripetal cosmological forces that the nexus of Igbo enterprise spirit could be well explained in the context of open society. Allied with this interplay is Igbo socio-political structure which is rooted in their pattern of inheritance and by extension succession to and exercise of political power.

Conceptualizing Ofo and Ikenga as Open Society Phenomena in the Contest for Political and Economic Powers

The Ofo and Ikenga when viewed in the context of Igbo cosmology embody the ideological fulcrum on which the Igbo society rests. In other words, a better understanding of the basic character of Igbo way of life explained through their pattern of political behavior and economic enterprise can only be properly understood from the position of the two cosmological concepts of Ofo and Ikenga in the body of Igbo belief system.

The Ofo is the staff of customary authority conferred on the political head of a defined patrilineal level of an Igbo society by right ancestral heirloom generally determined through age ascendency. It is symbolized by the twig of a tree known among the Igbo by the name, but botanically known as Detarium senegalense. Its branches fall off naturally on drying. It is this branch that symbolizes the authority of its holder. Since the Ofo cannot be cut or broken off by the agency of human activities, but falls off by natural means, it is thus believed that its inherent authority cannot be acquired by the act of human ability or effort but by the commission of transcendental forces defined in this context by Chukwu-Okike (God the Creator) through the mediation of Deified Ancestors.

The position of the custodian of the Ofo which is defined as Okpala (Diokpala) cannot be contested but emerges by right primogeniture as symbolized by the manner the twigs of the Ofo tree fall off the branches at appointed time. As Ilogu (1974, 18) observed:

The characteristic falling off of the Ofo twigs symbolizes the process of establishing new family and lineage branches among the Igbo. In his words: No cutting of the Ofo branch is done. It is believed that Chukwu (the Great God) purposely created this tree to be sacred, and by manner its branches fell unbroken, he (Chukwu) symbolizes the way families and lineages grow up and established new extended families and lineages. Therefore the Ofo made out of these branches is the abode of the spirit of dead ancestors, hence the authority and the sacredness of the
Ofo as well as the special place given to it as the emblem of unity, truth and indestructibility for the individual or group possessing the Ofo.

For an Ofo to be traditionally functional, it must first be consecrated. This consecration often takes place on the day a man leaves his father’s homestead to establish his own branch of the family by taking a wife. Although having become independent of his father’s house by establishing his household, he and his other equally independent brothers continue to maintain a collective allegiance to the authority of their father, which is symbolized by their father’s Ofo.

On the death of their father, the eldest among the male children inherits their fathers homestead and by extension his Ofo, which subsequently signifies the transfer of their father’s authority to him. By having custody of the Ofo, the eldest son holds every aspect of their father’s assets principally his living house, and such others as land and economic trees which he holds in trust on behalf of the others or shares with them afterwards as the case may be. Where the situation concerns a father with many wives, he is equally obliged to take over the responsibility of the widows’ maintenance and welfare.

In return, the other sons are expected to transfer the allegiance due to their late father to the first son, who then assumes the role of the political, religious, and juridical head of what becomes the minimal lineage or Umunna of their late father who automatically transforms into the class of Deified Ancestors. Thus cosmologically, Ofo symbolizes both the Igbo belief in continuity of life after death and unbroken chain of interactions between the living and the dead.

The Ikenga on the other hand, symbolizes Igbo adventurism and enterprising spirit. It is the go-getter spirit of the Igbo associated with good fortune, personal ability, war, and general success in life. It is ideologically associated with a man’s right hand. Since a man’s right hand in Igbo cosmology symbolizes positivism, his ability to utilize it most effectively for a considered goal puts him on the saddle of success and recognition. Among the Igbo, a man’s basic strength is believed to be found in his right hand; as Afigbo (1986, 2) aptly describes it as the “cult of the right hand with which a man hacks his way through the jungles of sweat and bitter experiences known as life.”

Beyond the authority provided by the Ofo, which is only restricted to an individual within a selected kindred group, the Ikenga provides a level-playing ground for all the male members of the group, based on their individual abilities to achieve the material goals of their lives. Both the Ofo and Ikenga are therefore based on two mutually opposed, yet complementary patterns of acquisition and exercise of socio-political and economic influences. How then dose this situation act as a lever for the extraordinary enterprising spirit of the Igbo? The answer lies, as earlier pointed out, in the pattern of inheritance among the Igbo, which leaves nearly everything at the disposal of the first son, including his father’s liabilities.

Often, in a typical Igbo family, the eldest male child inherits, in strict traditional sense, his father’s homestead, the Ofo and the ancestral shrine which
houses the Ofo. These three objects of inheritance represent the most potent evidence of a family’s unbroken link with the ancestors. By this unquestionable right of inheritance, the other male children become extended branches of the family, seeking alternative locations for their homesteads. When the eldest son dies, while the homestead often remains within the custody of his first son, the Ofo and the ancestral shrine however shift to the custody of the next eldest surviving son among as younger brothers, while his son in establishing another lineage branch with his siblings transfers the allegiance due his father to his uncle.

Thus, within each lineage level, the position of the eldest surviving male child, commonly referred to as Okpala or Diokpa, remains constant over time. However, as one moves up to the maximal stage and eventually to the village-group level, his authority gradually diminishes, although not actually in importance but in effectiveness. At these upper levels, what accounts most is the evidence of one’s achievements in life, which in traditional Igbo society was measured not only in material acquisitions, but the number of scalps brought home.

However, it was in the acquisition of social titles that in most instances one’s socio-political influence is measured in his community. If a man has all the things that constitute the status of a wealthy man, but fails to acquire the necessary titles which his level of wealth demands, such a person remains an Ofekes, a commoner of no social significant worth in the society. As LeVine (1966), 21) puts it, “among the Igbo the social title system is the one potent means by which a man’s wealth could be translated into social and political statuses.”

Furthermore, since these titles are graduated into levels of importance in ascending order, it means that as one acquires more titles so his influence in both social and political matters increases. This ascending order also means a corresponding high cost of initiation. This further means that for a man to move from one grade to the other, he must work towards accumulating enough money to cover the cost of initiation rites. Most significant is the fact that a man dies with his title, living his sons to work toward getting theirs. One striking thing about this however is the fact that one cannot acquire the upper levels of these titles in his father’s life-time. Thus putting limits as to the degree of one’s dependence on his father’s wealth.

Among the Igbo therefore, while age is highly respected, a man’s achievements based on his personal enterprises are revered. To the Igbo therefore, a man’s worth is not measured by his inheritance but by his personal enterprising efforts. The Igbo-born literary icon, Achebe (1969, 6) pictures this vividly through the dramatic rise of his main character, Okonkwo from the level of his father’s abject poverty to personal stardom:

When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him? Fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo was clearly cut out for
great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two bans full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elder.

It is in this realm of personal achievement that *Ikenga* takes precedence. Thus, for the greater population of those who were not privileged to exercise the authority offered by the possession of the *Ofo* by right age and by extension inherit the bulk of their father’s wealth which would enable them to begin a new life with considerable ease, the *Ikenga* becomes the motivating ideological force. As Boston (1977, 14) put it, “*Ikenga* symbolizes the person as a particular individual contrasting his personal achievements with those which can be ascribed to hereditary qualities or to some other external source.” Unlike the *Ofo*, the *Ikenga* is not inherited. Each man is expected to have his own *Ikenga* which ceases to exist on his death. The *Ikenga* is expected to direct his life ambitions and adventures. Whenever he meets with success, he is expected to celebrate victory, which he attributes to his *Ikenga*. On the other hand, if a man meets with repeated failures in the quest for his life objectives, he may re-consecrate his *Ikenga* on account of its ineffectiveness, or attribute the situation to his *Chi* (Personal Guardian Spirit). A man’s *Chi* is expected to save him from misfortunes. Thus an Igbo who escape dramatically from accident or an enemy attributes such feats to his Chi. Since someone’s *Chi* determines his *Akalaka* (Destiny), repeated efforts to make a breakthrough in life without commensurate results could then be attributed to one’s *Akalaka*. Among the Igbo therefore, while a man’s achievement, based on his personal ability is recognized and accorded the due respect, there is still a strong belief in the unseen hands of the Supreme God (Chukwu) offering every bit of protection through the man’s *Chi*.

The Igbo spirit of enterprise is strongly anchored on the premise that man is created by *Chukwu* (Almighty God) who dumps him with hands and feet in a world-like jungle, giving him the option of either conquering his environment to live or be conquered by his environment. The *Ikenga* in this case provides the impetus for a strong bargaining power. Hence, while intelligence and strength are recognized as natural gifts from *Chukwu*, the ability to harness them into tangible substance is attributed to the *Ikenga*.

This is the basis of the symbolism of ram head. In other words, just as the strength of the ram is its head so a man’s head should form the basis of his strength. This is conceptualized through the application of his intelligence in his confrontation with a given venture, which is then transferred to his right hand for execution, and then handed to the left hand for custody.
Jeffreys (1954, 34) explains this in these terms:

Even if a man is naturally strong and vigorous, this virility is attributed to the power of his *Ikenga*; furthermore, if a weak man by accident throws a stronger one or makes money more easily than others, people give the credit to his *Ikenga*.

This prominent role accorded to *Ikenga* in Igbo philosophy of life was clearly manifested by its widespread presence in Igbo households in the early periods before European influence. Commenting on this with respect to the Igbo spirit of enterprise, Basden (1966, 19) observed:

Each household contains many sacred objects, but they have not all equal significance, for among the ‘god’ many and lords many there are higher and lower degrees of importance. The most universal of these household gods, and that which is given first rank, is the *Ikenga*, and no house may be without one. It is the first god sought by a young man at the beginning of his career and it is the one to which he looks for good luck in all his enterprises.

Allied to the individual *Ikenga* is the collective *Ikenga* associated with a group, usually a village or village group community. It is usually associated with the collective interest and advancement of the given community. Unlike personal *Ikenga*, which ceases to exist on the owner’s death, the group *Ikenga*, which is normally called *Ikenga-Oha* or the associated suffix, as the case may be, exists as long as the community concerned exists.

One inherent character of both the *Ikenga* and *Ofo* is their tendency to always draw the Igbo toward their ancestral homeland. The *Ofo* is fundamentally a centripetal force which quite often draws the individual Igbo closer to his ancestral home. For instance, in most Igbo communities, any man who attains the status of *Okpala* but is sojourning somewhere outside his ancestral territory is traditionally required to return home and assume the headship of his lineage. The reason being that no other person can occupy the position while such a man lives.

In like manner, a man who sets out for a business adventure needs to return home periodically to give account of his successes and failures whichever is applicable, before his people. Thus, for a man who goes out in search of fame and wealth, it is traditionally imperative for him to engage in periodic home-coming, in what appears to be occasional stock-taking vis-à-vis the virility of his *Ikenga*.

For the Igbo man who goes out in search of fortune, therefore, his occasional home-coming is driven by the following reasons: Firstly, to assure his people as well as his *Ikenga* at home, of his survival in the course of his adventure. Secondly, he is expected to reappraise his successes and failures in a ceremony.
that leads him to occasionally propitiate his *Ikenga*. Thirdly, he is required to pay periodic homage to his *Okpala* (Head of his lineage and custodian of lineage *Ofo*) who acts as both the guardian of the home front and his link with his ancestors. It is therefore this desire to always keep in touch with one’s ancestral home that explains why, in spite of their widely traveled character, the Igbo remain the most active yearly home returnees during occasions of either traditional festival or the modern Christian celebrations such as Easter, Christmas, and New Year.

From all indications therefore, while the *Ofo* emphasizes ancestral linkage, the *Ikenga*, although diametrically opposed to it, especially in matters of mode of status acquisition, complements it by creating alternative means of status acquisition, which lays more emphasis on personal ability. This readily accounts for the seemingly habitual Igbo tendency towards individualism, which in effect produces their characteristic culture of competitiveness, industry, and expansionism.

This is aided by the nature of Igbo socio-political organization which does not recognize classes based on right of birth. Rather it maintains that every free-born has equal opportunities to attain the highest position in the community like any other person. If God grants you the privilege of long life you automatically become the head of your lineage by virtue of age. Similarly, if you work hard you can become a prominent member of the titled political class through the dint of hard work. From the point of adolescence the individual begins to bear his share of the responsibilities concerning the welfare of his community. These responsibilities which are allotted through the medium of age-grade system became de facto platforms for peer-group competitions and subsequent drive for achieved status.

**Conclusion**

Such has been the ideology which over the centuries molded the Igbo personality; a personality founded on individualism, go-getter spirit, and close kinship that radiate from the orbit of their characteristic open society. It therefore follows that if the Igbo are seen to be distinct in their struggles to achieve status in such areas as education, politics, business and the modern professional fields against the pace of their neighbors, it has little to do with population explosion or dearth of farmlands.

It is equally obvious that even the socio-political framework of the society cannot by itself provide the needed impetus for their inherent habitual enterprising drive. The force of Igbo spirit of enterprise is therefore deep and powerful, operating from within, and not merely the response to external factors.

It further explains the instinctive republican character of the Igbo, their individualistic orientation, and propensity to change and adapt to new situations without changing their basic primordial character.
In general, the traditional Igbo pattern of status acquisition, which invariably provides the impetus to economic adventurism, tends to maintain a balance between the right of primogeniture explained by the possession of the Ofo and the drive for achieved status which is guided by Ikenga.

Thus, while Ofo as a patrimonial instrument of authority represents continuity, the Ikenga on the other hand depicts change as a fundamental element of man’s process of achieving his destiny on earth, through the dint of his personal efforts. This spiritual force further accounts for the inherent Igbo protestant spirit, their disdain for monarchical and authoritarian institutions, and subsequent tendency towards democratic principles.

From the foregoing, one can agree that open society is not an exclusive Western concept as generally believed. It is a concept primordially rooted in African society with its unique characteristics founded on the holistic foundation of the society, yet operating with a pattern of flexibility that provides ample allowance for change over time. In essence, the African idea of open society should be seen as a model for the reinterpretation of the concept in Western society.

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