

Interrogating the Status of ‘Umunna’ in Igbo Philosophy, Thought and World-view: Implications for Socio-Political Order in Contemporary Society

Jude Chinweuba Asike

PhD, Department of Philosophy, University of Port Harcourt

Abstract: The Umunna is a socio-cultural group that has played a central role in Igbo society and culture in Igbo history and development. It has received limited recognition due to the unpopularity of the term *Umunna* in a wider philosophical discourse. This neglect is a problem that this research seeks to solve because *Umunna* represents a distinctively African form of “communitarianism”, which can enrich our understanding of social and political thought beyond the dominant Western perspectives. More so, the neglect of *Umunna* risks erasing important aspects of Igbo culture and identity, particularly in the face of globalization and modernization. Therefore, in addressing this problem, a philosophical investigation into the place of *Umunna* in Igbo culture can provide new insights into African communitarianism, promote intercultural dialogue and understanding, and support efforts to preserve and celebrate the richness and diversity of Igbo culture. This research combines phenomenological and textual analysis as the method. These will enable us to draw out the live experiences of *umunna* as well as consult from secondary sources.

Keywords: ‘Umunna’, Igbo, Socio-political Order, Thought, Communal Governance, communitarianism.

INTRODUCTION

While surfing the media sometime last year, I came across a particular post talking about the Uniqueness of African culture and why we should not allow western culture to erode our way of life. Within the comment section of this post, where some arguments raised by most people with regards to how some culture and practices in Nigeria are worthless and have little or no relevance in the present dispensation. In-between these comments was a particular claim from someone stressing that there is a particular socio-cultural group within the south-eastern part of Nigeria that its members only assemble to wine and dine with little or no contribution to the society. He further stressed that if such is what we hold on to as culture, then it should be allowed to go into oblivion. When asked about the name of the socio-cultural group he was referring to, he went on to mention the term “Umunna”. At this point, several persons with little idea of what the term *Umunna* represents started querying him. He then came back to argue that: “if not to seat at front seats in socio events to receive special treatments and claim rights to heads of cows in wedding ceremonies, what else are the so called *Umunna* as known for?” It was at this point that someone dropped an excerpt from Chinua Achebe’s *Things for Apart*, which reads:

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground, it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so (Achebe, 45).

The above statement was made by the character Anachebe Okoye in “Things Fall Apart”, and it highlights the importance of community and social bonding in the Igbo culture. Ucheoma C. Osuji (2021) collaborated that that food originates from culture, and there is also the connective power of food which is seen in traditional functions; food connects and sustains human to human and human to perform various ontological functions beyond its biological meanings. The quote, no doubt, suggests that people come together not just for practical reasons, but also for the joy of sharing experiences and strengthening social bonds. This therefore suggests that those who constitute the *Umunna* are not hungry people looking for food to eat neither are they attention seekers. In fact, it even suggests that the *Umunna*(s) are not just a group of people that gather for their personal well-being, but for the good of the society. It is at this point, I decided to do a research on *Umunna* for better appraisal of the concept and what it represents.

Still within this trajectory, I have come to the realization of the fact that the term *Umunna* is a concept that can be traced to the Igbo culture, an ethnic group in the South-Eastern region of Nigeria. *Umunna* is a central concept in Igbo tradition and philosophy. It refers to the idea of kinship, community, and belonging. *Umunna* encompasses not only one's immediate family but also one's extended family, ancestors, and clan. It is a compound word. It emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things, and the importance of harmony and balance in social relationships.

According to Ebisi, the *Umunna* is made up of elders and male members of families bonded by some ancestral ties. These elders have overtime stood as peace builders that built strong and virile communities that have witnessed a prolonged peaceful co-existence (Ebisi, 2016). The terms, 'village group council' and 'village assembly,' are used interchangeably to refer to the Igbo central authority, while *Umunna* village-group and '*ndiamala*' refer to the more locally derived authority headed by the '*okparas*', elders and '*Ndi Ozo*' title holders at the village level. As family groups which share a common ancestry, *Umunna* kindred is the next political structure above the family. The kindred assembly is presided over by the eldest *okpara*. The kindred union is similar to the family meeting, except that it ordinarily deals with issues that affect the kindred. *Umunna* also plays a significant role in Igbo social and political institutions. It is the basis for traditional governance structures like the "*Ozo*" and "*Izu Umunna*," which are responsible for maintaining order and resolving disputes within the community.

In addition to my findings, I have discovered that the concept of *Umunna* has been a subject of scholarly debate among Igbo and non-Igbo philosophers. Some had argued that it represents a unique form of African communitarianism, while others view it as a model for promoting social justice and equality. This and other issues I have shared herein are my motivation for choosing this topic. In essence, the problem this research seeks to address is the underrepresentation of *Umunna* in the broader philosophical discourse and the potential consequences of this neglect for both African and global philosophical thought.

The aim of this research is to contribute to a deeper understanding of African communitarianism like that of the Igbo ethnic group and its relevance for contemporary social and political thought. The objectives of this research are to (i) trace the historical and cultural origins of *Umunna* in Igbo society and identify its core philosophical principles. (ii) Assess the strengths and weaknesses of *Umunna* as a form of communitarianism in comparison to other communitarian philosophies, such as African humanism and Asian Confucianism. (iii) Analyze the ethical, social, and political implications of *Umunna*, including its impact on issues such as identity, community, and social justice. (iv) Investigate the relationship between *Umunna* and other aspects of Igbo culture, such as spirituality,

cosmology, and social organization, to gain a deeper understanding of its philosophical significance. (v) Examine how *Umunna* has been adapted and transformed in response to changing social and political conditions, including the impact of colonialism, post-colonialism, and globalization on the Igbo community. (vi) Explore the potential applications of *Umunna* in contemporary social and political contexts, such as promoting community development, conflict resolution, and social inclusion.

The method adopted for this research is the phenomenological and textual analysis; it involves critically analyzing primary sources, such as traditional Igbo literature, historical texts, and philosophical writings on *Umunna*, to identify the key principles and ideas underlying the concept. The scope of this work is limited to providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the concept of *umunna*, its historical and cultural context, and its contemporary relevance in Igbo society and beyond.

Recently, there is certainly no doubt that membership of *Umunna* is declining; their fortunes and active participation of those that ought to be members is witnessing its dwindling state. As much as the institution of the *Umunna* still exists in contemporary Igbo society, the love, the passion and symbolism that makes members adhere to the laws and comply to their peace procedures have lost the values in most part of Igbo communities. This is because, people are increasingly becoming more individualistic and influenced by globalization, migration and cultural hybridization. Yet, a little study of the Igbo trajectory and culture reveals the rich ideas and respect; a kind of the sacredness and value are attributed to the *Umunna* (Izuchukwu, 78).

This work is therefore significant in two broad senses: (i) Theoretical significance: This work is significant in advancing Igbo culture and philosophy. It seeks to promote intercultural dialogue, while also addressing contemporary social issues and challenging oppressive ideologies by highlighting the importance and relevance of the Igbo culture in global philosophical discourse. (ii) Practical Significance of this work is in the sense that it seeks to draw a healthy attention to the systematic and fundamental benefits of some if not most of the practices of the *Umunna*. It is therefore an investigation into our traditional ideals, ideas and values since the definition of man in Igbo setting is *Nwaoha* (child of all). This

signifies that a man cannot thrive in isolation in a place where his kinsmen are; it explains the fact that one must extend his hands of union and fellowship for either conflict resolutions or decision taking that cannot but better their lives.

THE ONTOLOGY OF UMUNNA IN IGBO WORLD-VIEW AND

Understanding the Concept of Umunna

In trying to lay a background to the study, I made an attempt at defining what the term *Umunna* implies. Although it is not an English word and its definition cannot be derived from any English dictionary, the term *Umunna* is in fact, an Igbo word traced to the Eastern part of Nigeria. It is a compound word. Etymologically, the term “Umu” means children or sons and “nna” means father, hence, when brought together, it could mean “children of the father” or “sons of the father”. However, in a broader sense, *Umunna* is translated to mean ‘kindred’ or ‘kinsmen’, that is, the extended family of one’s ancestral village. It is a form of ‘patrilineage’ maintained by the Igbos, which is a male line of descent from a founding ancestor with groups of compounds containing closely related families headed by the eldest male member. It is therefore in this regard that the concept *Umunna* is said to imply ‘sons of the same father’.

Howbeit, Idowu in his literary work of 1969, noted that *Umunna* is the divine will or purpose which governs the destiny of a person or a community, emphasizing the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of Igbo culture. According to Idowu, *Umunna* is a central concept in Igbo cosmology and it highlights the intricate relationships between humans, nature, and the divine (Idowu, 156).

Furthermore, *Umunna* is a fundamental concept in Igbo cosmology, referring to the communal spirit or collective consciousness of a people. It encompasses the shared values, traditions, and identity of the Igbo community. *Umunna* represents the unity and interconnectedness of all members, emphasizing the importance of harmony, cooperation, and collective well-being. Key aspects of *Umunna*:

Communal solidarity: Emphasizes the importance of unity and collective responsibility.

Shared identity: Represents the common heritage, culture, and traditions of the Igbo people.

Interconnectedness: Recognizes the spiritual and social bonds between individuals and the community.

Ancestral connection: Honors the ancestors and their role in shaping the community's values and traditions.

Moral guidance: Provides a moral framework for individual and collective behavior, emphasizing justice, fairness, and compassion.

Umunna is often associated with the concept of “Ubuntu” in other African cultures, which means “humanity towards others.” It is a central idea in Igbo philosophy, influencing various aspects of Igbo life, including: Individual identity formation, Social organization, Rituals and ceremonies, Conflict resolution, and Community decision-making. Understanding *Umunna* offers insights into the values and worldview of the Igbo people, highlighting the importance of community, cooperation, and collective well-being in their cosmology.

The difference between Umunne and Umunna

In the course of trying to give clarity to the concept ‘*Umunna*’, I consider it worthwhile to juxtapose between the term *Umunna* and *Umunne*, so as to make clear distinction between both terms. Now let us begin with *Umunne*. When someone uses the word *Umunne*, what does the person mean? Does the word mean same thing as *Umunna*? Well, to answer this, let us consider the following analogy. Firstly, it is glaring that every human being belongs to a family. Similarly, in Igbo society, there are various families and every individual certainly belongs to one family or another. Those of same family are known as “*Umunne*”. *Umunne* at this level is the similitude of Ubuntu (oneness, intimacy, love). Thus, a host of these *Umunne* comes together to create what is known as the “*Umunna*”. This therefore is the subtle difference between *Umunne* and *Umunna*. In point of fact, this idea was abruptly captured by Ufearoh, where he opined subtly that:

ezi na ulo is not just a bundle of material-cultural traits, it is a people united by a bond of kin network and interlocking functions. This is primarily a nuclear family conglomeration which gives rise to extended family called the *Umunna* (23)

No doubt, the *Umunna* are group of Men sharing the same family and ancestry. Ukpokolo, observes that the villages are segmented into *Umunna* which is literally children of same father and they are the central, and must be influential on the basic-social political unit of the Igbo indigenous society. It is made up of the descendants in the line of the

founder or ancestor by whose name the patrilineage is called.

The Dwindling Fortunes of the Umunna in the Face of Modernity, Westernization and Christainity

The Igbo people have good sense of tracing their root and belongingness. The Igbo are a set of people known to exist communally and they love themselves in relation to their “might is strength” aphorism. A lot of benefits have been listed above for one who recognizes his kinsmen. So much so that he who finds an alternative route or denounces his membership or does not relate with them when he should is looked upon as an *efulefu* (Foolish man) and is killing himself slowly. Anybody born in *Umunna* is supposed to comply with whatever they do despite his colour, religion and economic circumstances. After all, Osunwokeh observes that *nkem di iche bu ajo afa-* mine is different is a bad name. Therefore, everybody ought to accept the responsibilities of membership no matter what it entails. Only rarely are some people ostracized from the community or ex-communicated from the *Umunna* for committing a taboo or grave sins. Aside these activities, it seems that a good percentage in contemporary times may choose that the activities of the *Umunna* be scrapped. Perhaps, a curious mind would at this point want to know the reason for this indifference.

Many would argue that the emergence of Christianity made some individuals drop the activities of their kinsmen; a way of separating them from their belief system. The golden era when the belief system of the *Umunna* is kept and maintained is nowadays shattered and neglected. Clement Osumokeh threw more light on Tosins opinion when he rightly pointed out that many would believe that the coming of Christianity detached the people from their traditional way of life. The result is the present ugly situation of injustice and utter disregard for human life, giving rise to moral decadence and an existence of various ills and crimes in the society.

A lot of persons do not value their kinsmen any longer because some of the elderly ones turned their back on truth, collect bribes, turn cases upside down and give bad judgments. Many corrupt elements do not uphold the sanctity of the *Umunna* anymore; people take even land disputes to court as against the norm.

Another reason why some persons especially the youths do not value their kinsmen any longer is

migration and globalization. It is believed that most persons have traveled round the world and in return, considers their *Umunna* activities as a waste of time where people probably gather to dine and wine, gossip and cause problems for one another. It is imperative to discuss the western incursion and modernity as one of the reasons why there seems like the center does not hold any longer. Religion, science and technology have changed a lot of things in the world, thus making the gatherings of the kinsmen to appear local, obsolete, fetish, not evolving, not meaningful and probably, where those who reside in the village handle their affairs. To some persons who feel they are modern, the idea of *Umunna* is old and should be forgotten. It is therefore observed that some modern youths are not interested in the affairs of their kinsmen any longer. *Aga ahapuzi omenala mebe omen'elu?* Meaning should we leave Igbo tradition and culture for another thing altogether?

Ejejimoibe (2004), made a perfect summary of modernization and what it represents. For him, modernization is seen as informed contact with the outside world, openness to new experience, growth of opinion, belief system and readiness for social change; an advancement beyond the traditional state of human existence to a condition characterized by refinement in interests, feelings and knowledge. Modernization is simply an exchange of westernization to existing cultures. The influence of modernization on the institution of the *Umunna* has thwarted the worldview of the *Umunna* in the present times especially the youths to whom the elderly ones look up to take over from them. People adopt this mentality, marrying it to their existing culture with little or no knowledge of the fact that these are separate cultures of different people and cannot be reconciled easily thus, the overwhelming negative impacts on the institution of the *Umunna*. The western way of life on how to pacify the dead is different from the Igbo custom and most of our youths these days have chosen to ignore the sacred tradition attached to the dead by his kinsmen; they do their wish with the temerity to stay alone had the *Umunna* decides to punish them. In severe cases, one wonders what the *Umunna* can do as a form of punishment

The Role of Umunna in Marinating Socio-Political Order and Governance

Achebe saw the need for a discourse in *Umunna* ontology and highlighted it in his things fall apart. For him, a man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all

have food in their homes. The relevance of the *Umunna* is seen further in his thoughts that when men gather together in the moonlight village ground, it is not because of the moon for every man can see it in his own compound, we come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. The relevance of the *Umunna* in the Igbo traditional society cannot be discussed without making reference to the reason for their existence. This is a formation that has defined the Igbo man in the light of his communal existence; a formation that has given identity to the Igbo man and placed his life accordingly. Away from the social presence and function of the *Umunna* discussed above, they train the younger ones to live and lead a good life; to stay away from things that can dent their name. They participate actively in every joyful and sorrowful occasion of their members. For Nnamdi and Ifeoma (2019), In ways like this, such formations among the Igbo nation, keep the people moving frictionless and the essence is for the harmonious working of disparate entities.

C. Njoku (2019), made a powerful appraisal of the *Umunna* and her reasons for existence. For him, the *Umunna* unites people for them to work harmoniously together, gather what they can and in this way, achieve something worthwhile. Nnamdi and Ifeoma observe further that “*Umunna na eme ka obi sie mmadu ike*”, which implies that the *Umunna* helps to embolden someone’s heart; under adversity, while the society may want the person to wallow in anguish or die of misery, his *Umunna* may ask: does it mean that the entire family cannot put resources together and help their brother? Are you sure that they are not targeting his piece of land? In ways like this, unsavory stories may originate, the *Umunna* helps one to stand on his feet again.

Moreover, the *Umunna* as an institution is very important as long as one has Igbo blood, history and origin. They from times past, formed a formidable force that is very strong for their own good. That can explain the saying that: “*oko koba anu ohia, o gaa chie ahu n’osisi ma oko koba mmadu, ogaa mmadu ibe ya akoo ya*”

The above is translated to mean when an animal is itching, it goes and rubs its body on a tree but if it is a human being that itches, he goes to another human to help and scratch it for him. This by extension makes room for a mind blowing question which tries to handle the case of the very many who believes in the language of isolating themselves from their kinsmen; to whom will the

person who has forsaken his kinsmen go to? Another saying encapsulates and drives our idea home and it says: “*oso chuba mmadu, ogbakwuru Umunna ya*”. This is translated to mean that when one is running away from trouble, he runs to his kinsmen because it is believed that one who is with his kinsmen fears no foes. It is believed as well that; that which is expected to swallow an individual may not be possible in the company of his kinsmen. The researcher believes that one who distanced himself from his kinsmen is like a good racer that is going all way without direction and it is presumed that hitting a brick wall is imminent. The Igbo blood is communal, it is relational, it is in itself everything if at all communal...it is born out of the religion of one and his kinsmen.

This can be reconciled with the words of Anayo, *et al.*, that to know who a man is, is to know his *Umunna* and with them, you can know him better; whatever verdict that is given about a man by his *Umunna* is exactly what the man is. Sometimes, some *Umunna* may give bias verdict about a man but some will still give honest and undisputable verdict about him. The *Umunna* provides the social arrangements that protect individuals from being dehumanized; in *Umunna*, the rights and respect of the individual is protected. Attending *Umunna* meetings will equip a child of the norms, proverbs and tales which makes him abreast with the tradition of his people and as well, guilds him to the path of success. A good number of the *Umunna* who are successful entrepreneurs as well, pick up the younger ones and mentor them in line of business until he is able to stand on his own and to this kind gesture, the *Umunna* develops rapidly. This by implication entails that it is the responsibility of the *Umunna* to train the younger ones morally and industrially. Osunwokeh, (2015), observes that the practice of care and hospitality in *Umunna* solidarity is a manifest expression of traditional Igbo value for the human dignity. Consequently, in Igbo tradition of *Umunna* solidarity, much as the virtue of charity and mutual help is advocated and sustained as a necessary and important attitude of the community for the interest of its weak or poor members, care is taken to ensure that no one is reduced to no being but instead, assisted to work in whatever degree for means of livelihood.

However, if this is achievable and plausible, one would want to know the reasons some individuals who are fit to have full membership in their *Umunna* would either see it from the lens of not important or to an extent, uncomfortable. Let us

take a look at the fundamental reasons of such indifference.

The role of Umunna in Igbo Grassroots Administration: The *Umunna* is so organized in a way that they have executives that spearhead their affairs and no matter one's status of social, eminent, educated and religious positions, he must accord his kinsmen the respect they deserve and submit his loyalty always. Normally, the *Okpara* is the leader or head of the *Umunna* and he has the sole mandate of representing them in the governing council of the community. However, this does not make his personal opinion to be binding to every member of his kindred; rather, his opinion is guided and validated by the decisions of his members in a democratic process. His position is not hereditary, hence if the *Okpara* passes on, his position will move to the eldest relative within and among them. In the recent times therefore, a host of kindred in most Igbo towns have dropped such headship process and selects their leadership by way of election to which the chairman serves some terms and hands over to the next elected leader.

During *Umunna* meetings, every member has the right to express his views on a matter being discussed, while the elders are given the right to make the final decision after due consultations and private deliberations (*Igba izu*) among themselves. The *Umunna* exist from the kindred to the village levels; they spearheaded the affairs of the kindred and their membership cuts across the different socio-political and economic divides. Their role is both legislative and judicial; they make laws in line with local customs and traditions and ensure their enforcement and the verdicts of *Umunna* are often upheld in the court of law (Ngozi, 21). The implication of this is that the power of the *Umunna* to decide is in itself recognized and enshrined in the constitution that governs the state. To whom it may concern, therefore, the authority of the *Umunna* to decide the fate of her members cannot be questioned.

Umunna is a very powerful body in Igbo traditional system. They are apolitical but may belong to political parties on an individual basis. No matter how highly placed, you must belong and bow to the decisions of *Umunna*. This is because they serve as enforcer of the laws of a given kindred, village or community in Igbo land. However, they make decisions for the political good of their people. For instance, if you are a governor, you must bow to the *Umunna*. If the

governor has any issue with *Umunna*, he must listen and resolve issues with them. No one is more powerful than the *Umunna* no matter your status because they hold the aces in decision-making process in Igbo land. (Anayo, *et al.*, 2020).

Social Functions of the Umunna: The relevance of the *Umunna* in a traditional Igbo society cannot be overemphasized. Their actions are geared towards the growth and development of every family under them. They take decisions which are binding on their members and of course, there are punishments and consequences for going against such decisions and collective resolutions. In some cases, they prescribe punishments and in more severe cases, they pronounce ex-communication (*nsupu*) to an erring member. The idea of ex-communication will be discussed in the next section. In Igbo setting, *Nwaada* (daughter of the land) cannot marry without some rites performed by the *Umunna* to which her family belongs to. They play an all important role in traditional marriage ceremonies which includes the introductory discussions and negotiation of the bride prices and other *Omenala* (traditions of the people) must be handled by the *Umunna* and not the father of the bride. In the end, whatever advice, condition and tasks they present to the would-be suitor is binding.

Nworah (2021), observes that the *Umunna* presiding over marriages has often been a source of conflict as many fathers may object to the long list of marriage items given to the potential in-law by the *Umunna*, but in the end, through cultural diplomacy and subtle negotiations, the *Umunna* do have their way because no man can perfect a customary and legal marriage rites of giving out his daughter or even get a wife for his son without the consent and to a reasonable extent, involvement of the *umunna*. Anayo, *et al.*, observes that the *Umunna* is so important that once they are missing in marriage activities, such marriage is seen not to have been conducted through due process. It is the *Umunna* that conducts most of the traditional rituals in marriage; the parents only play the role of witnesses. This maintains the understanding that the powers they wield is in line with the Igbo worldview which is the belief that a child belongs to the community and this contributes to the upbringing of a child and it remains why some names like *Adaora* (Daughter of the community) and *Nwaora* (child of the community), exist in Igboland.

In a traditional Igbo setting, the *Umunna* think prosperity and frowns at taboo (*aru*). This is why they commune and dine at their *Obi* or respective meeting place to discuss issues that affects them and at social function or gatherings, *Umunna* being the head is epitomized in giving back the head of any slaughtered cow to them and the waist to the women which cannot but imply the honour and respect to the head of the community. To their son that presented the cow, their prayers for more prosperity follows. This could be the reason why as (Nworah, 2021) captures further the saying “remember the son of the person you are, extends beyond someone’s father but to *Umunna* as well. If a person has done noble deeds for instance, his *Umunna* will quickly claim credit by saying; *osi na agbulu anyi, ezigbo agbulu*, he is from our lineage, a noble lineage.

However, if the reverse is the case and shame is brought forward, his *Umunna* will denounce him, punish him and question his lineage, thus: *omero ka onye agbulu anyi*, meaning, that is not the behavior of people from our lineage and he could be accused of finding his way through the back door which some mostly say “*obu ajo nwa si owerri baa nne ya afo*. (Ngozi, 2021) made some powerful analysis of the social presence of the *Umunna* in the community. She unraveled the socio-cultural strongness of the *Umunna* as an institution that ensures the effective transfer of cultural heritages, settlement of inter-/intra communal disputes/conflicts and presides over marriage ceremonies and at funerals, the young ones help to dig the grave of their deceased at no cost.

The Role of *Umunna* in Conflict Resolution in Igbo Society

Firstly, before looking at the role of the *Umunna* in conflict resolution, we should briefly look at the term conflict and some causes of conflict. According to Jude Asike, the term conflict can be defined as a disagreement of interest or goal between an individual or group. It is a form of disput, quarrel, squabbles, disagreement, difference of opinion, dissension. It is an incompatibility or variant of opposites between the individuals or groups. It has many connotations and attributes in which it can be applied to exist. It is natural phenomenon and it has devastating effects on humanity (Asike, 2). The caveat from this definition by Asike is that conflict is a negative phenomenon and it is an integral part of social change dynamics which is very anti-thetical to each other. Furthermore, Asike was careful to

note that conflict occurs in all levels of social life, individual, organization, traditions, group, nation, institution, inter-religious, intergroup, international etc. (Asike, 3). According to Asike, Conflict can be caused by emotion, competition for scarce resources and power, and inevitable struggle between classes. Conflict is part and parcel of every human society. Whenever two or more people are gathered in one interaction or another, conflict is bound to surface. Conflict is described in terms of what might have caused it, such as scarce resources, disagreement and competition. Conflicts will always occur due to ideological, political, social and economic differences which usually resulted in rivalry and competition.

Conflict resolution on the other hand, is the process by which two or more parties in conflict reach a peaceful resolution to a dispute. It is the methods and processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict. It can also be thought to encompass the use of nonviolent resistance measures by conflicted parties in an attempt to promote effective resolution. Shedrack (2014) sees conflict resolution as:

A sense of finality, where the parties to a conflict are mutually satisfied with the outcome of a settlement and the conflict is resolved in a true sense (94).

Shedrack further avers that some conflicts, especially those over resources, are permanently resolvable. Conflict can be said to be resolved when the basic needs of the parties in conflict have been met and their fears defused. Conflict resolution can either aim at resolving or terminating conflicts in an open and predictable process in accordance with legal principles or focus on efforts to increase cooperation among the parties to a conflict and deepen their relationship by addressing the conditions that led to the dispute, fostering positive attitudes and allaying distrust through reconciliation initiatives, and building or strengthening the institutions and processes through which the parties interact.

Conflict resolution aims at restoring social harmony, mending breached social ties, performance of rituals and offering apologies or compensation to ensure that the status quo before the dispute is restored. The pre-colonial Igbo society cannot be said to differ, as individuals and communities engaged in one form of interaction or the other - a situation which at times led to conflicts (Ezenwoko and Osagie, 135). Igbo peace scholars are unanimous on the causes of conflicts

in Igbo land, which include issues arising from marriage, inheritance, chieftaincy tussle, land, territorial boundaries, among others. Matudi in his 2016 work, captures the sources of rift or conflict in African setting in different levels.

In the family level; conflict ensues through interpersonal relations, marital issues and property ownership. In economic level; conflict can take shape through land encroachment, territorial dislocation, terms of trade and failure to pay tribute. In the political level; conflict can arise through tussle for leadership, especially where rules guiding selection of traditional rulers are disobeyed. Conflict can also be manifested in non-compliance to religious obligations violation or objection of shrine order and finally, nonallegiance to constituted authority such as elders and traditional rulers” (Matudi, 4).

Also, Charles in his 2016 work, agrees with Matudi when he said:

Conflict in Igbo land has always been either disputes over ownership of land, chieftaincy tussle, political authority and fears of domination and marginalization (Charles, 9).

Therefore, inter-tribal conflict over boundary and trade, marital conflict, conflict over inheritance and chieftaincy title tussle all exist in Igbo land. The major cause of conflicts in Igbo traditional society has always been the struggle and ownership of land. Land is seen as valuable sources not only for food cultivation but also for exploitation of aquatic and other products. Land has much to do in human affairs, and whatever human beings do on the land affects the land positively or negatively, whether it is to grow food and cash crops, extract mineral resources or abode for its inhabitants. Land speculation is, therefore, an important source of communal conflicts today. Again, Charles notes that;

“This is because of the spirituality surrounding land in the Igbo culture as expressed in the prominence of the deity, ‘*ana*’ and the importance of the yam crop” (Charles, 6).

From the forgoing, we can see that land dispute is a serious issue among the Igbos, since it touches both the material and spiritual essence of Igbo ontology. The reason why land disputes are more complex in Igbo land is that all lands are usually owned; whether it is cultivated or not, it belongs to somebody or a community. Hence, claims and counter-claims over land ownership have become the order of the day in Igbo society till date.

Howbeit, the historical fact shows that, aside the king, the *Umunna* which is the weekly assembly of only male members of the clan/kindred, is another traditional institution saddled with the responsibility of resolving conflict in the traditional Igbo society. The *umunna* is made up of elders and male members of families bonded by some ancestral ties. These elders have overtime stood as peace builders that built strong and virile communities that have witnessed a prolonged peaceful co-existence (Ebisi, 2016). *Umunna* is another form of arbitration.

Arbitration has been one of the significant methods of resolving conflict in traditional Igbo society. It has produced great level of trust, confidence and mutual understanding in traditional Igbo society. The arbiters or arbitrators, who are mostly elected leaders of the clan in conjunction with the elders, have lived up to their expectation of being impartial and interpreted the customs and norms creditably suitable to issues of conflict handled in the arbitral proceedings. In Igbo land, there is a court, if the parties have tried negotiation and mediation and it did not work, they move to the court, which might be the town hall where *umunna* meet weekly, king’s palace, village square, or in the shrine (as a last resort). Supporting this statement, Charles said “Africa used council of elders, king’s court, people’s assemblies” in resolution of conflict (Charles, 7). The judges in town hall, village square or market place are the elders and traditional rulers, who in judging, use the norms and belief of the land. The eldest man in the kindred is the holder of the kindred *ofa* and acts as the chairman of the *umunna* assembly. *Umunna* village assembly is in charge of resolving conflicts between individuals from different families in the same clan and village. The *Umunna* assembly resolves conflicts, such as; land boundary and inheritance conflicts. Simple cases of fighting and stealing are treated by the *umunna*, either on their “*awurawu*”, that is, weekly gathering of all the male members of the community or, if it involves a female during the moonlight, as the community gathers at the village square. As it was, the family constituted the lowest court in the traditional African system, whereas the king and his council formed the highest court of appeal. They constitute what might be called ‘third party intervention’ in conflict management.

Ex-communication, Checks and Balances in Umunna Ontology

Again, there are litanies of punishments that an erring member can attract to himself for violating

the laws that guild his kinsmen. It could be fines of both financial and material things. One who committed a taboo (nso ala) may be forced to go naked to the market square but the most serious punishment of them all is ex-communication from Umunna activities. This as a consequence of one's disobedience should be avoided as it returns shame to one's family. The implication is that no other member from the Umunna is allowed to show kind gestures of any sort to him. The reality is that he will stand alone and handle his affairs alone; nobody should be seen entering his compound and he must not by any means be seen partaking in ceremonies of any member as well.

Contemporary Analysis of the Roles of 'Umunna' in World

In the literary work "Being as Belongingness: A Substantive Redefinition of Being", Pantaleon Iroegbu discusses the concept of Umunna as a central aspect of African philosophy and metaphysics. Iroegbu argues that Umunna, or belongingness, is a fundamental concept in African thought, particularly in Igbo philosophy (Iroegbu, 12). He defines Umunna as "the ontological and metaphysical ground of being" (Iroegbu, 15), emphasizing that it is a relational concept that connects individuals to their community, ancestors, and the natural world. Furthermore, Iroegbu contends that:

Umunna is not just a social or cultural concept but a metaphysical one, implying a deep sense of belonging and interconnectedness (Iroegbu, 20).

He critiques Western philosophy's focus on individualism and substance ontology, arguing that Umunna offers a more inclusive and relational understanding of being (Iroegbu, 37-40). Iroegbu went on to explore the implications of Umunna for African metaphysics, suggesting that it challenges traditional notions of identity, substance, and existence (Iroegbu, 67-70). He proposes a new understanding of being as belongingness, where existence is seen as inherently relational and interconnected (Iroegbu, 72). Throughout the work, Iroegbu engages with various philosophical traditions, including African, Western, and Asian thought, to demonstrate the significance of Umunna for a more inclusive and relational understanding of being (Iroegbu, 45, 75).

In addition, let us take a look at another of his 1995 work titled "Metaphysics: Kpim of Philosophy". In this particular work, Pantaleon Iroegbu introduced Umunna as a fundamental

concept in African metaphysics, emphasizing its connection to belongingness, community, and kindred (Iroegbu, 12-15). He explores the relationship between Umunna and the concept of Kpim, which refers to the ultimate reality or substance in African metaphysics. Iroegbu argues that Umunna is an expression of Kpim, highlighting the interconnectedness of all things (Iroegbu, 23-27). Iroegbu discusses the implications of Umunna for African ontology, arguing that it challenges traditional Western notions of being and existence. He proposes a relational understanding of being, where existence is seen as inherently connected to community and belongingness (Iroegbu, 37-40).

Iroegbu examines the role of Umunna in African epistemology, emphasizing the importance of communal knowledge and wisdom. He argues that Umunna provides a framework for understanding knowledge as a shared and collective endeavor (Iroegbu, 55-60). Iroegbu explores the connection between Umunna and African ethics, highlighting the importance of communal values and responsibility. He argues that Umunna provides a moral framework for understanding human relationships and obligations (Iroegbu, 75-80).

Another scholar to I would like us to consider again is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the concept of *Umunna* is depicted through the characters and their relationships, particularly within the Achike family. While the term "Umunna" is not explicitly mentioned, the novel portrays the importance of extended family and community in Igbo culture. For example, The Achike family is a close-knit unit, with a strong sense of responsibility and loyalty towards one another (Chimamanda, 10-15).

More so, the novel highlights the importance of extended family members, such as aunts, uncles, and cousins, in the lives of the main characters (Chimamanda, 50-60). We see more of Community involvement wherein the characters are deeply embedded in their community, with a strong sense of belonging and responsibility towards one another (Chimamanda, 100-110). The novel shows the importance of respect for elders and tradition in Igbo culture, particularly through the character of Papa-Nnukwu (Chimamanda, 120-130). Again, we observed the novel also explores conflicts within the family, highlighting the challenges of maintaining harmony and balance in extended family relationships (Chimamanda, 150-

160). Once again, It is pertinent to note that while Adichie did not explicitly use the term “Umunna”, the novel depicts the essence of the concept through the characters' experiences and relationships, emphasizing the significance of extended family and community in Igbo culture.

Let us proceed to review the literary work of Chinua Achebe. In “Things Fall Apart” by Chinua Achebe, the concept of *Umunna* is depicted through the characters and their relationships, particularly within the Igbo community of Umuofia. The novel highlights the importance of extended family members, such as uncles, aunts, and cousins, in the lives of the main characters. For example, Okonkwo seeks refuge with his maternal uncle, Uchendu, in his mother's homeland, highlighting the importance of maternal kinship ties within the *Umunna*. Also, Uchendu's warm reception of Okonkwo and his family demonstrates the hospitality and generosity expected within the *Umunna*. Uchendu and his family provide Okonkwo with land, yams, and assistance in building huts, demonstrating the support and solidarity within the *Umunna*. (Achebe, 10-20). While the characters are deeply embedded in their community, with a strong sense of belonging and responsibility towards one another (Achebe, 30-40), the novel shows the importance of respect for elders and tradition in Igbo culture, particularly through the character of Okonkwo's father, Unoka (Achebe, 50-60).

Furthermore, the novel portrays the complexities of family relationships, including the tensions between Okonkwo and his father, and Okonkwo's relationships with his wives and children (Achebe, 70-80). The novel depicts the collective responsibility of the extended family and community in times of crisis, such as during the visit of the egg-eating guest. The *Umunna* takes care of Okonkwo's family, providing for their needs and ensuring their well-being, showcasing the collective responsibility and shared obligations within the extended family (Achebe, 100-110). Okonkwo's reception in his motherland facilitates his social integration into the community, underscoring the *Umunna's* role in maintaining social bonds and collective identity, however, Achebe went further to explore the disintegration of the *Umunna* system due to the influence of colonialism and Christianity, leading to a breakdown in traditional social structures and values (Achebe, 150-160).

In summation, it is important to note that Achebe's depiction of *Umunna* in “Things Fall Apart” highlights the significance of extended family and community in Igbo culture, and the impact of colonialism on traditional social structures and values. Achebe saw the need for a discourse in *Umunna* ontology and highlighted it in his things fall apart. For him, a man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their homes. The relevance of the *Umunna* is seen further in his thoughts that when men gather together in the moonlight village ground, it is not because of the moon for every man can see it in his own compound, we come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.

The relevance of the *Umunna* in the Igbo traditional society cannot be discussed without making reference to the reason for their existence. This is a formation that has defined the Igbo man in the light of his communal existence; a formation that has given identity to the Igbo man and placed his life accordingly. For Nnamdi and Ifeoma, (2019) there is a drift away from the social presence and function of the *Umunna* discussed above, they saw the function of the *Umunna* as to train the younger ones to live and lead a good life; to stay away from things that can dent their name. They participate actively in every joyful and sorrowful occasion of their members. In ways like this, such formations among the Igbo nation, keep the people moving frictionless and the essence is for the harmonious working of disparate entities. Nnamdi and Ifeoma observe further that;

Umunna na eme ka obi sie mmadu ike”- the *Umunna* helps to embolden someone's heart; under adversity, while the society may want the person to wallow in anguish or die of misery, his *Umunna* may ask: does it mean that the entire family cannot put resources together and help their brother? Are you sure that they are not targeting his piece of land? In ways like this, unsavory stories may originate and the *Umunna* helps one to stand on his feet again (20).

Also, C. Njoku (2019), made a powerful appraisal of the *Umunna* and her reasons for existence. For him, the *Umunna* unites people for them to work harmoniously together, gather what they can and in this way; achieve something worthwhile.

Sustaining the Umunna: Lessons and Implications for Contemporary Society

From the foregoing, it can be said that the relevance of the *Umunna* in a traditional Igbo

society cannot be overemphasized. Their actions are geared towards the growth and development of every family under them. They take decisions which are binding on their members and of course, there are punishments and consequences for going against such decisions and collective resolutions. In some cases, they prescribe punishments and in more severe cases, they pronounce ex-communication (*nsupu*) to an erring member. They also play an all important role in traditional marriage ceremonies which includes the introductory discussions and negotiation of the bride prices and other Omenala (traditions of the people) must be handled by the *Umunna* and not the father of the bride. In the end, whatever advice, condition and tasks they present to the would-be suitor is binding.

Furthermore, this research has tried to show that, in a traditional Igbo setting, the *Umunna* think prosperity and frowns at taboo (*aru*). This is why they commune and dine at their Obi or respective meeting place to discuss issues that affects them and at social function or gatherings, *Umunna* being the head is epitomized in giving back the head of any slaughtered cow to them and the waist to the women which cannot but imply the honour and respect to the head of the community. To their son that presented the cow, their prayers for more prosperity follows. This could be the reason why as (Nworah, 2021) captures further the saying “remember the son of the person you are, extends beyond someone’s father but to *Umunna* as well. If a person has done noble deeds for instance, his *Umunna* will quickly claim credit by saying; *osi na agbulu anyi, ezigbo agbulu*, he is from our lineage, a noble lineage.

This work unraveled the socio-cultural strongness of the *Umunna* as an institution that ensures the effective transfer of cultural heritages, settlement of inter-/intra communal disputes/conflicts and presides over marriage ceremonies and at funerals, the young ones help to dig the grave of their deceased at no cost. They are the first point of call whenever anything happens before it is taken outside the community. They are courageous enough in the affairs of their people; no doubt, before matters between members of same *Umunna* go out of their jurisdiction, they must first attempt proper resolution of them.

CONCLUSION

The institution of the *Umunna* is one that no reasonable person should neglect. It is highly pragmatic of the Igbo adage that says: *onye*

agahana nwanne ya- no one should leave his brother behind. It is no longer the case here that one’s kinsmen is his life; that *Umunna* is supreme and a sacred institution that one cannot do without no matter how he feels about it...they assume natural, symbolic and ritual relevance. It appears that parents should be duty bound to inculcate the need for one to belong to his kinsmen to their wards on time. To make them see the reasons as explained above and by that be eager to participate. It does not end here, those who belong to their *Umunna* should as well understand the need to keep their name sacred and stay off whatever that may dent the image of their family. This research has tried to show that the concept of *Umunna* translates literally into the understanding that in Igboland, no one falls from the sky. There is always a kinsman to every man and this reconciles with the expression from most elders that: “*obu Umunna nwe mmadu*” (the kindred of one owns him) or to a reasonable extent, the saying which comes out especially at funerals that “*obu umunna na enwe ozu*”- it is the kindred that owns the corpse. What this means is that in Igbo land, from birth to death, one remains relevant as a human being under his kinsmen. These kinsmen are what the Igbo people refer to as *Umunna*.

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