

## Crime and Crime Control In Traditional Igbo Society Of Nigeria

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### Abstract

The paper examines the concept of crime and crime control in traditional Igbo society. Crime in traditional Igbo society consisted of serious violations of standardized ways of behaviour, custom and tradition of the people. Crime was said to be an ‘abomination’, which had far-reaching social consequences not only for the offender but also his immediate family and close relatives. These consequences include ill-luck, disease and death. As a result, people tried to conform to the norms, customs, and tradition of their society to avoid being sanctioned by their communities or being infected with terrible and incurable diseases by the gods. The impression that one gets is that crime control in traditional Igbo society appears to have been more effective than crime control in present-day society.

**Keywords:** Igbo traditional society, crime, social control theory, crime control

### Introduction

The Igbo constitute one of the three major ethno-linguistic groups in Nigeria. The people live in what is today known and referred to as the ‘South East geo-political zone’, which is one of the six geo-political zones in Nigeria. The South-East geo-political zone consists of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. These five states are the traditional home of the Igbo in present-day Nigeria. Apart from these five states, there are large populations of the Igbo in Delta and Rivers States of Nigeria.

Ifemesia (1979:16) had described the modus vivendi of traditional Igbo society as based on ‘humane living’. This refers to “a way of life emphatically centred upon human interests and values, a mode of living evidently characterized by empathy, consideration and compassion for human beings”. In other words, “the social order and character of traditional Igbo society guaranteed honest living and maximum security of life and property” (Ekwuru, 1999:7). However, British colonialism battered, disorganized and even dismantled this humane living and enthroned ‘the rule of the jungle’ with associated “modus vivendi of homo homini lupus (man being a wolf unto his fellow man)” (p.7).

A lot has been written about the Igbo (or ‘Ibo’) people of Southeast Nigeria (Isichei, 1976; Isichei, 1977; Basden, 1921). However, not much has been written about them on the issue of crime and crime control. As in any other African society before the contact with the European cultural influence, the Igbo society had their own patterned organization of social life. In a matter of behavioural control, there were certain conducts that were frowned at. These were conducts that violated some standardized norms and in which severe sanctions were usually applied (Igbo, 2007; Basden, 1921, 2006).

Before the advent of colonialism in Nigeria, the Igbo had in their tradition, an elaborate organizational structure in which their social life was anchored, and upon which their philosophies of life were propagated. Through this structure, the institutional arrangements aimed at regulating the conducts of the members of the society were operated. Aguene (1998) had rightly observed that in the traditional society, the absence of any organized system of public control does not imply that such a society had no form of social control in which their laws were enforced. He further maintained that, in those societies, all their institutions, patterns of social interactions, and customary practices served to regulate the relationship between the members of the society and thus, maintain law and order. The ideas here are in line with the views that the traditional Igbo society, before the contact with western civilization, had adequate institutional mechanisms that serviced their social life (Isichie, 1976; Basden, 1921). Against this background, the traditional Igbo society was well governed through their inherent traditional mechanisms.

The traditional Igbo people were basically 'republican' in nature because most of them had no centralized system of government. This is what Afigbo (1973: 15) refers to as "village republic" as against the "presidential monarchy" in the communities which share boundaries with the Bini or Igala Kingdoms. While there may be variations in traditional nomenclatures in different parts of Igboland, the philosophies, methodologies and the outcomes in achieving social order were always the same. The basic organizational unit in traditional Igbo government is the village administration which consisted of the oldest members of each family or lineage group as the representatives in the village government. In this regard, 'Igbo government has sometimes been called a gerontocracy' (Isichei, 1976:22). This is known as government by the 'council of the elders' ("ndi ichie" or "ndi okenye"). Titled men and traditional priests in some places constituted part of this council of elders, hence they were also regarded as "senior citizens" by virtue of the spiritual and social positions they occupy in the society. Most of the time, the council of elders performed the functions of the three arms of the government: the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. Given the republican and democratic disposition of traditional Igbo society, the council of elders were known not to be autocratic. Depending on the circumstances, the council sought the opinions or participation of some interest groups like the youth and women organizations before arriving at a decision on sensitive issues as a way of carrying people along.

Like any other society, traditional Igbo society has various mechanisms by which it regulated the behaviour of human beings in the society. This is what is generally referred to as "social control". Social control focuses on "those various means (or mechanisms) by which a society exercises its authority over its members and enforces conformity to its norms" (Otite and Ogionwo, 1979:374). Belief systems, rather than specific laws, guide what people do and universally serve to control behaviour (Ross, cited in Adler, Mueller, and Laufer, 1995:160). In short, social control aims at preventing deviant behaviour by human beings in society (Schaefer, 2005). Put simply, it is a general term that involves the prevention and control of both criminal and non-criminal behaviour.

As we had indicated earlier, a lot has been written about the Igbo traditional society by early missionaries and anthropologists as well as historians and researchers. However, not much has been written specifically about crime and crime control in traditional Igbo society. This paper is a modest attempt toward addressing this gap. More specifically, the paper examines the concept of crime and crime control in traditional Igbo society. It also examines the agents and mechanisms of crime control in the traditional society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is based on social control theory, which assumes that human beings can be induced to behave in conformity with societal standards and expectations (Haskell and Yablonsky, 1970). It was Reckless (1967), who developed the "containment" version of control theory by arguing that individuals are differentially immunized against the urge to engage in criminal behaviour and that this immunity depends largely on the control exercised by their communities or society.

For Reckless, there are two levels of containment: the 'outer' or external containment, and the 'inner' or internal containment. The outer containment concerns the social pressures that impinge on the individual and cause him to disobey the norms or laws of his/her group or community, while the inner or internal containment has to do with the individual's self-control or self-discipline. According to control theorists, "what causes conformity is social control over the individual, and therefore the absence of social control causes deviance" (Thio, 2001: 27).

The other version of control theory that is relevant in this study is Hirschi's (1969) "social bond" perspective which focuses on the individual's self control. The argument here is that when people's social bond with intimate groups (eg. family, church, school) are strong, it ensures conformity, whereas when they are weak, the result will be deviant acts. According to Hirschi, conformity depends on the degree to which people are attached and committed to, and involved and believe in, conventional people and institutions (Thio, 2001: 28). Put simply, one would not like to disappoint or embarrass one's family, church, or school by misbehaving or getting involved in anti-social or criminal conducts. This was particularly true of traditional Igbo society that had all the trappings of a close-knit group.

The next version of control theory relevant to this study is Braithwaite's (1989) shaming theory, which is designed to show social disapproval and humiliation of the individual offender. According to Braithwaite, there are two types of shaming. These are: reintegrative' shaming, which is imposed on the offender as a corrective measure, and 'disintegrative' shaming which has to do with disowning and rejecting the offender.

This paper is based generally on the control theory of Reckless and more specifically on a combination of Hirschi's social bond theory and Braithwaite's shaming theory. Traditional Igbo society was based on strong social bonds or solidarity with the nuclear and extended family, as well as the kin group and community. This is because the people prided themselves as "being their brothers' keepers", in sickness and in health, no matter the

circumstances (except perhaps in crime). In reintegrative shaming, offenders who committed abominable offences against the gods and the ancestors were, in most cases, required to make necessary sacrifices to appease the gods and undergo some ritual cleansing and purification. Thereafter, the offender was accepted back into the society, with all his/her rights and privileges restored. This is an aspect of restorative justice.

Disintegrative shaming, following the commission of abominable acts, has to do with denouncing or disowning the offender. Sometimes, the offender's house was burnt down and this was usually followed by banishment or sending the person on exile. This was the worst type of humiliation and rejection of an individual with strong social bonds to his family and community.

In some cases, punishment meted out to an offender was extended to their families and close relatives, as in cases of murder, theft, rape and incest. In suicide, for example, the victim was "punished" by not according him/her the customary burial and mourning rites. Any family that violated the injunctions was in danger of being fined and ostracized until necessary reparations and cleansing rituals were carried out. In this way, the family, including the extended family, kept a close watch over the activities of their members to ensure that no individual member was allowed to drag the good name and reputation of the family into the mud for selfish reasons. Consequently, people tried as much as possible not to shame, and incur the wrath of, their families, close relatives and community through criminal and other anti-social behaviours.

#### **Method**

This paper derived from both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary sources were based on unstructured oral interviews and conversation with a number of Igbo elders from Nsukka and Owerri areas of the South-East geo-political zone. The secondary sources, on the other hand, derived from documented accounts of the oral tradition of the people by historians, anthropologists and other researchers.

#### **Crime in Traditional Igbo Society**

Unlike the present English legal system in use in Nigeria today, what constituted crime in traditional Igbo society was not codified. In short, any act or conduct that violated the cherished norms and values of the community or group, and which was visited with severe sanction, can be referred to as a crime. A crime or an offence could be minor or serious depending on the circumstances. However, there were some major offences which amounted to serious crimes. These were referred to as 'abominations', due to their propensity to arouse strong indignation and condemnation among the people. The most serious offences in traditional Igbo society were also seen the same way in most other societies. Igbo (2007:143) has explained that 'traditional crimes or offences, which were generally regarded as abominations, include murder, theft, adultery, rape, incest and suicide'. He identified three major types of offences or crimes in traditional Igbo society as offences against individuals, offences against the community, and offences against the gods or spirit world.

'Offences against individuals' include assault, stealing of one's property, murder and serious breaches of trust. In these offences, the victims and their relatives took appropriate measures in seeking redress or revenge. Such measures often led to an endless cycle of offences and retaliations, including killings and counter killings (blood-feuds) between families and communities.

'Offences against the community' include acts of sabotage, like aiding and abetting enemies of the community, witchcraft, murder, adultery and incest, which were believed to bring about terrible consequences and woes to both the offender and the entire community. Offences against the community also attracted severe punishment. In this regard, Oputa (1975:11-12) has noted that in traditional Igbo society, notorious evil-doers were usually got rid of, like we now get rid of insanity nuisance, by removing it. He stated that these evil men were removed either publicly, or put to death, usually by burning, in the case of notorious witches, or by being thrown into a ditch in the case of notorious thieves. According to him, such killing today would amount to murder. But in traditional Igbo jurisprudence, it was justifiable homicide and crude justice, and an effective deterrent to evil-doing.

'Offences against the gods or spirit world' were actions and conducts that were believed to offend the gods and ancestors of the land, with serious consequences for the living. These include many of the offences against the community, as well as the desecration of sacred places and shrines, and the killing of sacred animals associated with shrines and the earth goddess. According to Ifemesia (1979), "the concept of Mmo (or Mmuo) was based on the idea that the long-dead ancestors continued to take an active interest in the affairs of their living descendants". The author further pointed out that "offences against 'muo' were not private matters but public issues, which provided one of those rare occasions on which an assembly of the whole village... and beyond, was convened; and the consequences could be dreadful for the offender" (p. 78). Offenders in this category of offences were either killed, ostracized, or banished from the community in order to placate the gods and ancestors so as to avoid a general evil vengeance being unleashed on the whole community by the offended

forces in the spirit world. These sanctions remain in force until the offenders perform certain purification rites to appease the gods and ancestors. If these were not done, any misfortune in the family or community would be attributed to the anger of the gods and the spirit world against the actions of the offenders. Basden (1921:177), in his own observation, equally noted that certain offences such as murder, theft and adultery were offences against God, as well as against man. The Igbo people, in his view, hold that in committing such offences, a man was acting contrary to the will of God.

Apart from the above offences mentioned against the gods and the ancestors, there were other less serious offences like the violation of sacred period. Ugwuoke (1999), observed that there were some periods, especially during some traditional festivals, which were regarded as 'sacred periods' during which tranquility was expected to prevail. During such periods, people were expected to go about their activities in a state of extreme peace in which any act of quarreling or unnecessary raising of alarm or noise were not tolerated by the community. Such sacred periods were times when the community usually observed peace as a mark of honour to the gods of the land and their agents from the spirit world who were believed to be around and close to the people. The people endeavoured to avoid anything that would amount to disturbing the peace of the gods and their agents which might distract them from preparing the packages of 'blessings' intended for the community for their good behaviour. This was believed to turn to misfortune against the community, if the peace of the gods and ancestors were disturbed by way of quarreling, fighting or spilling of the blood of the innocent.

If the sacred period being observed was the one which had to do with the celebration of masquerades or deity ceremonies, the offenders were made to perform certain sacrifices to appease the gods of the land. But if it was the one that violated normal community festivals, the offenders were penalized on the basis of serious fines for embarrassment caused the people before their gods and ancestors. If an offender in this situation failed to obey the sanctions by the community, the ultimate punishment was ostracism. The affected community ostracized such offenders as a way of washing off their hands before the gods. There were also various sanctions by which non-fulfillment or breach of any recognized custom was penalized or followed automatically by evil results, without any direct interference on the part of the community. The breaking of a taboo, for instance, was held to produce serious consequences, such as death or disease or ill-luck (Aguene, 1998:16).

According to Oputa (1975: 9), 'under Igbo ancient customary law, homicide was considered a very serious, as well as a very heinous offence and, under that law, homicide never went unpunished'. He observed that in Igbo society, the killing of human being was called ochu, literally meaning murder, and the Igbo had no difficulty in drawing the distinction between 'accidental killing', during a fight, and 'deliberate or willful murder', which had their different treatments as regards trials and punishments. According to him, in the traditional Igbo society, some 'evil-doers' were regarded as a menace to the entire community and were even disowned by their immediate relatives. This category of criminals included notorious thieves, wicked or bad medicine men, those who engaged in the nefarious practice of witchcraft, those who betrayed and sold out community secrets, those who were unruly and who refused to submit to the protests of relatives or who acted in such a manner that placed the family or the village in jeopardy.

#### **Agents of Crime Control in Traditional Igbo Society**

Before the advent of colonial rule, there was rudimentary formal and informal policing in traditional Nigerian societies. Law and order was maintained by militant village youths constituted by the council of elders (amala), and investigation of criminal matters was done through sooth sayers, oath swearing and sorcerers (Iyamagba 1998). In short, in traditional Igbo society, there were several agents of crime control. These include the family, the council of elders, vigilantes, age grades and militant youth groups. Others are traditional priests and diviners, deities and secret societies, among others. For lack of space, only the vigilante, the institution of deities, and secret societies will be discussed here because of their unique nature.

#### **The Vigilante**

The use of vigilante is not new in Igboland. In pre-colonial time, different Igbo communities organized night-watch parties with the aim of securing and protecting their communities from thieves and other undesirable elements. Vigilante groups were made up of able-bodied men who participated effectively in the fight against internal and external break-down of law and order. In those days, enemies usually took advantage of the night to invade their target communities with many atrocities, including head-hunting, kidnapping for rituals or slavery, raping of the womenfolk, and vandalism. Ordinarily, the traditional setting was homogenous with strong, close, face-to-face relationship and solidarity among the village inhabitants and these provided a kind of self-watch mechanism that was not conducive to criminal tendencies (Oputa, 1975).

The age grades, sometimes referred to as 'age groups' or 'age sets', and other militant youth groups were the major participants in the vigilante system across most parts of the traditional Igbo society. They carried

out several public duties, some of which were “the execution of the laws and decisions of the council of elders and the lineage or village assembly, including the collection of dues and fines and punishment of crime...” (Ifemesia, 1979: 81).

### **The Institution of Deities**

Some villages had powerful deities which, according to their beliefs, could disorganize internal and external enemies against possible mischief. In traditional Igbo society, people feared community deities because of their belief that such deities were capable of mirroring people’s mind and could punish people for mere bad intention, with or without anti-social or criminal conducts. Some misfortunes that happened to some individuals or groups in those days were seen as havoc brought upon them by deities as punishment for their bad deeds. From this background, the influence of deities and their priests or messengers in Igbo traditional society was so widespread that it impinged on the psyche of people and constrained their inclination to engage on serious misconduct, thereby working for the community as a potent deterrence against crime. Deities were also used in those days to resolve allegations and claims pertaining to criminal conducts, including fraudulent claims to land ownership.

A typical example of these dreaded deities was the “Ibinukpabi” oracle, popularly known and referred to as the “Long Juju” of Arochukwu by early European writers. This was the “highest court of appeal” and the supreme religious and judicial institution among the Igbo in the Niger and Cross River basins (Dike and Ekejiuba, 1990:130). The ‘Igwe ka Ala’ of Umunoha in present day Mbaitoli local government area of Imo State and the ‘Agballa of Awka’, the ‘Onyili-Ora’ near Nri and the Ogba Ogbunike’ were other dreaded deities or oracles where people prayed not to be summoned to appear for crime-related issues (p. 131).

Apart from the village deities, some individuals engaged the services of the ‘medicine men’ to conjure the means of protecting them from criminal victimization and other related harms from criminals and ‘bad people’. The magic of the medicine-men were believed to have the power to confuse the criminals from locating their targets or to make them vulnerable to easy apprehension.

### **Secret Societies**

One of the most prominent agents of social and crime control in traditional Igbo society was the ‘secret society’. The members of secret societies generally appeared at night, under the cover of darkness and often wore masks to hide their identities. They played the role of supernatural beings or spirits, with the mission of denouncing or attacking offenders. “The anonymity of the members, and their supernatural aura, made the society a potent sanction against crime” (Isichei, 1976:23). They were generally “powerful factors in the observance of law and order” (Ifemesia, 1979: 80) and also detected crime, penalized culprits and enforced harmony in the community (Njoku, in Ifemesia 1979:80). Consequently, people behaved themselves and tried not to incur their wrath.

The ‘Ekpe’ (for men), and the ‘Iyamba’ (for women), for example, were outstanding for crime control in traditional Aro society in Igboland. The Ekpe, named after the leopard, the King of beasts, required that members take an oath of secrecy, obedience and loyalty to their leaders. They beat up and coerced members and non-members alike and placed some offenders under ‘interdiction’, thus preventing other people from trading and having dealings with such offenders. “The Ekpe could also seal off the person’s property, arrest, detain, fine or kill the offender” (Dike and Ekejiuba, 1990:288).

The ‘Iyamba’ was a secret association for Aro women, with the head in every ward exercising quasi-judicial functions. The head could invoke ill-luck on an offender through the supernatural force of the Iyamba cult objects, or call the senior women of the ward to punish collectively any wrong doer. Even married women who committed adultery were punished while erring men could be placed under ‘ritual ban’ (Dike and Ekejiuba, 1990:190).

Outside the Aro society, other secret societies included the ‘Odo’ and ‘Omabe’ in the Nsukka areas, the masquerade or ‘spirit mask’ (Mmuo or Mmanwu) among the northern Igbo, and ‘Egbele’ in the Afikpo area, the ‘Oshereji’ of Oguta, and the ‘Okonko’ of Ngwa (Ifemesia 1979:79). These were all agents of social and crime control in traditional Igbo society.

### **Mechanisms of Crime Investigation and Control in Traditional Igbo Jurisprudence**

It was not in all cases that a criminal was caught while on the act, which would then eliminate the question or the necessity of looking for an evidence against him/her. In traditional Igbo society, there existed some mechanisms in which proof could be demonstrated either in favour of, or against a person, or group of persons, who refused to admit or “plead guilty” to the allegations of crime leveled against them. The mechanism of proof revolves around myths based on traditional religious belief. While it is not possible to enumerate all

proofing methods in traditional Igbo jurisprudence in this work, some methods which were applied in most Igbo villages include: divination, invocation of the gods and trial by ordeal.

**Divination:** This refers to the practice of consulting oracles and supernatural forces to explain what happened in the past or what will happen in future. In most Igbo villages in pre-colonial days, the method of divination was believed to be the supernatural means to unearth any mystery surrounding crime. In those days, there existed 'reliable' diviners who were used in the events of unclear circumstances to unravel the puzzles surrounding unexplained crimes and wrong doings. Diviners were highly respected and were known for their high level of discipline in their lifestyle. It was not possible to have diviners in all the Igbo villages. The notable ones were hired and they went to distant places as professionals in the practice of their arts. It should be noted that in the process of divine practices in Igboland, the methods applied by diviners in their services varied from person to person, and from place to place. In this method, a diviner could unearth a criminal at large, give clue to the recovery of missing goods, and establish the innocence or the guilt of the accused persons. His verdicts were usually accepted by the people.

**Invocation of the gods of the Land:** A community could invoke the gods or force suspects to take an oath in the name of a dreaded juju, where suspects refused to own up to their alleged crimes. If the need arose, the community usually invoked the powers of the gods of the land with a petition to go after the perpetrator(s) of certain crimes, if the identity of the offender could not ordinarily be ascertained. In short, "if the facts of a case were not clear, the Igbo had recourse to an oracle or divination" to unravel the facts and the circumstances of the case (Ifemesia 1979:24). In a situation like this, any misfortune which befell such an individual or a household was seen as retribution from the spirit world for wrong doing. Sometimes, villages invoked the wrath of gods against the perpetrators of unknown crimes, if confessions were not forthcoming from the perpetrators. This was usually a traumatic experience for such offenders, as they would be quietly expecting to be struck down by some dreadful diseases or mysterious deaths.

**Trial by Ordeal:** Trial by ordeal was one form of proof system in traditional Igbo society designed to verify criminal accusation. The methods of trial by ordeal varied in different communities. In some communities, (eg. Nsukka area) certain concoctions were prepared and given to an accused person to drink. If the accused person developed signs of allergy to the concoction, it was assumed that he/she had a case to answer. But where the accused person failed to show any sign of being allergic to the concoction, that will imply that the accused person was innocent of the criminal allegation leveled against him or her. In some other places, accused persons were made to inhale herbal smoke which usually produced the same effect like in the case of the concoction. Trial by ordeal was used in settling criminal accusations, from minor cases of stealing firewood to more serious cases such as murder.

Oath-taking or Juju-swearing was a major component of trial by ordeal. If the identity of the criminal was not known and no suspect in place, the whole adult members of the village could also be subjected to juju-swearing or 'oath-taking', with the use of a dreaded oracle or charm, to prove their innocence or expose their guilt. Depending on the gravity of the offence, or variations in different communities, a period of seven Igbo native weeks (28 days) to one year was instituted as a test period during which the innocence or the guilt of the accused was determined. Should any serious misfortune occur to such a person during the period, then, the people would assume that the person was guilty as alleged. But if nothing happened to the person during the period, it was seen as proclamation of innocence.

In most parts of Igboland, there were serious checks against frivolous criminal allegations. Where a suspected malefactor was to take an oath, based on the accusation of a principal witness, such a person who raised the allegations will first of all, swear to invoke the wrath of the juju against himself or herself, should the allegation be false or a deliberate act to malign the accused. The principal witness had to take the oath first, and in good faith before the accused person took his or her turn.

The application of 'trial by ordeal' was specifically to determine a person's culpability in the offence, whatever might be the hazard on the accused person notwithstanding. Where an accused person was found 'guilty' through this method, the person will be sanctioned based on the prescribed punishments relative to the offence in question. But in a situation where the accused person was vindicated from the criminal accusation, it called for thanksgiving celebrations for the honour redeemed and for having escaped from possible stigmatization. The above methods of proof under traditional Igbo jurisprudence were popular across Igboland, in pre-colonial days, for purposes of crime investigation and control.

An eminent Igbo jurist, Oputa (1975) equally highlighted these methods when he stated that in Igbo jurisprudence, grave suspicion amounted to a prima facie proof. In the case of murder, and in accordance with the customary law, a period (usually twelve months) was agreed. If the suspected murderer died within that period, then his guilt would have been confirmed by the gods. But if he survived the trial period, then that was

evidence that even the gods had been satisfied of his innocence and had pronounced him 'not guilty'. Either way, the gods decided on the issue of the guilt or the innocence of the accused.. This implies that "a guilty man may die by sheer auto-suggestion or by qualms of conscience" (Oputa, 1975:11).

### **Discussion**

These three methods were socially potent traditional crime investigation and control mechanisms in Igbo society, in the sense that they helped the people to manage the problems of crime and proof as they cropped up in the process of determining the guilt or innocence of an accused person. However, to accuse a person and subject him or her through proof systems in traditional Igbo society places a scandalous stigma on the accused person and his family. As a result, people made deliberate efforts to avoid being subjected to these proofing methods. These were undoubtedly strong deterrence, since most people within the population tried to avoid anything that would entangle them with such psycho-traumatic and scandalous proofing processes, with associated gossip, ridicule and shame.

About three decades ago, an erudite historian of Igbo extraction observed that: "social disputes are still being settled by swearing by a local divinity, or by divination, or by appeal to an oracle; illnesses are still being explained in terms of offences committed against the land..." (Ifemesia 1979:33). Today, not much has changed, in spite of modernization and the increasing utilization of western legal system in Igboland (and other ethnic areas of Nigeria). Put simply, among the Igbo, many people still believe in the potency of the gods and ancestors and sometimes invoke them, when necessary. This is particularly so in the rural countryside. Only recently, in neighbouring Delta State, which has similar culture to that of the Igbo, a young man attempted to kill his blood-sister with a sledgehammer, on the allegation that she bewitched him and was responsible for his life travails of over ten years. After battering his sister's head with the sledgehammer, he escaped, in the hope that the sister was going to die and in order not to be suspected for the killing. A senior member of the family later told the press that: "with his action, the young man has invoked the anger of our ancestors and should be ready to pay the price. We are little concerned about whatever the law has to say about him" (Oyeleye 2013:50).

It was, and still is, an abomination for an individual to 'spill the blood' of, or kill, an innocent person. When one ignites the anger of the gods and ancestors, "the price" to be paid consist of ill-luck, incurable diseases, and even death. Before the gods and ancestors strike, the offender would be subjected to stigmatization by his family and kinsmen in order to re-assure the gods and ancestors that the family had no hand whatsoever in the 'abomination' and would not dare to support the embattled offender. In doing so, they would have completely exonerated themselves or 'washed-off their hands from the blood' of the innocent.

Casual discussions and conversation with many elders of Igbo extraction indicate that crime investigation and control in traditional Igbo society were more effective than what obtains in present-day society. References are made to 'the good old days' when people went about at day-time without 'watching their backs', and at night 'slept like babies'. During the period, there were crimes, no doubt, but they were few and isolated and did not constitute serious security problems as is the case today.

What is more, not many serious crimes in traditional Igbo society went unresolved and unpunished. Today, many crimes that occur in our society are not resolved because the offenders "are not known to the police" (Sutherland and Cressey 1978:31) –the so-called "dark figures". Some others 'known to the police' are closed for want of evidence or proof, and for corrupt, incompetent or compounded investigation. In addition, a good number are declared to be "under investigation" on end, or until they fizzle out. These conditions were non-existent in traditional Igbo society where most people lived in small, isolated and scattered settlements with sparse populations.

### **Conclusion**

In traditional Igbo society, an elaborate western style organized criminal justice system, as we have in Nigeria today, was not in operation. Crime as a social injury had no hiding place in the traditional setting. The Igbo in pre-colonial days frowned seriously at misconducts that appeared to negate the standardized norms of the people. However, the people did not lack appropriate mechanisms through which they sought to combat serious misconducts like crime. People who violated serious moral codes never went unpunished. Like in any other society or time, punishment served as a way of doing justice, inflicting pains on the offender, acting as a deterrence, and shaming the offender.

Traditional Igbo society had their moral codes, customs and tradition which constituted the body of their laws. The function of the 'laws' in the traditional setting was both pro-active and reactive. It was pro-active in the sense that the awareness of the laws and the consequences of violating them served as deterrence. On the other hand, it was reactive since it was on the basis of these laws that those who violated them were sanctioned. Naturally, there was no vacuum as to whose responsibility it was to enforce the laws and get justice done.

In summary, various segments of the society like the council of elders, secret societies, masquerades, diviners, age grades, women groups, traditional priests, and medicine men were all part of the enforcement agents. Depending on the nature of the offence, each group participated at one stage or the other in the enforcement of the law and dispensation of justice in traditional Igbo society. It should be noted that, the council of elders was, and still is, the highest policy-making body in traditional Igbo society while other groups mentioned above remained effective appendages in which all constituted the traditional justice machinery as enforcement agents.

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