

## Imachi Nkwu among Ndi - Igbo: A Source of Capital Formation By

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### *Abstract*

*The inability of people to individually, and communally execute projects informed the need for **Imachi nkwu** in traditional Igbo society. When the people could not raise money to solve/acquire/sort out their needs, they turned to **Imachi Nkwu** as a source for capital. It is worthy to note that the people may not resort to communal palm cutting, if they were blessed with wealthy sons and daughters. The rich among them may ask the village not to stop the individuals from harvesting the palm fruits, thereby taking up the responsibility to execute the project for the people, either individually or with other wealthy men of same community. The work concluded that **imachi nkwu** was a veritable means of capital formation among the Igbo of the Southeast, Nigeria. The capital pooled was used exclusively to address the community need(s).*

### **Introduction**

**Imachi Nkwu, Ituchi Nkwu or Nkuchi Nkwu** as it was, and still is, severally called in Igbo land simply means the closing or restricting/limiting individual harvesting of the palm fruit, to enable organized communal harvesting of palm fruit for the benefit of every member of the community. It was a major source of raising capital in the traditional Igbo society. **Nkwu** (palm tree) abound in many parts of Igbo land. Fenske asserted that, "Generally, palm trees were not planted. Rather,

they grew wild on land that had been previously cleared, such as fallowed farmland[s] and near compound[s]" <sup>1</sup>.

Reacting to the question, how did palm trees and plantations abound in our area of study? Chief Emenike suggested that, it was most likely spread by rodents. Palm fruit is one of the favourite foods of **Osa/Uze** (squirrel), which plucks the palm fruit from their pod and throws away the nuts after eating the skin. Also, **Ewi** (Bush rabbit) enjoys eating palm fruits and used the palm kernels to build its house. Likely, it was through these means that the palm tree was spread throughout Igbo land <sup>2</sup>. Later, the economic benefits of palm oil made people to plant palm trees and also for the ritual ceremony of burial of umbilical cord, **Ili-ichi**.

The viability and acceptability of the project the people intend to do, and the inability of the people to individually finance such project, informed **Imachi nkwu** in traditional Igbo society. When the people could not raise money to solve/acquire/sort out their needs, they turned to **Imachi Nkwu** as a source for capital. It is worthy to note that the people may not resort to communal palm cutting, if they were blessed with wealthy sons and daughters. The rich among them may ask the village not to stop the individual palm cutting (**imachi nkwu**), thereby taking up the responsibility to execute the project for the people, either individually or with other wealthy men of same community. My informant mentioned some projects that had been individually executed by wealthy sons of the town to include among others village hall, church building, presbytery and others <sup>3</sup>.

### **The Process of Imachi Nkwu**

The project targeted and the financial capacity of the community influenced the process of **Imachi nkwu**. At the individual and family levels, the process may not be as elaborate as at the community project level. In the pre-colonial land tenure system in Igbo land, individuals did not own land; rather the community or the family owned lands. Likewise, the community or the family either exclusively owned the palm-trees within the land. In a

populated community or village, where lands had been shared out to different families, such families owned the palm trees within their lands, too. Nevertheless, not all lands in the community have wild palm trees, thus not all families owned palm trees. Even within families not all individually cultivated lands had palm trees. Hence, the overriding authority of the community over family/individual, or overriding authority of the family over individual, on the ownership of the palm trees within their domain.

**Imachi nkwu** at the community level could favour both the community and or individuals. It could be done once or more to enable the community achieve their goal. When it was done more than once, care was taken that it did not occur in sequence, rather at intervals. This was to avoid it being a burden to the owners of the palm trees. Nevertheless, the people could agree that the **Imachi Nkwu** should be done sequentially.

The elders of the land activated the process of '**Imachi nkwu**' when the community need it. They also decided when it should start, the period it would last and the penalty for defaulters. It usually took place between two to three months. Before commencement of the exercise, the intentions and decisions of the elders were communicated to the people via local means of communication, the Town Crier. The period of the year was mostly between January and March or February and April. This was the peak period palm fruits yield, as confirmed by Fenske "Palm fruits could be harvested year around, though the greatest yields were achieved between January and May" <sup>4</sup>.

On the agreed date, the ban on individual cutting of the palm fruit was lifted. The community summoned her members that could harvest the palm fruit. If they were not up to the required number, the community augmented by hiring more hands from neighbouring communities. The sounding of the wooden gong (**ekwe**), usually enunciated the lifting of the ban and harvesting of palm trees by harvester. As they were cutting down the bunch of palm fruits, the people would be carrying them to the village square or other designated place. The bunch of palm fruits may be packed in twenties and sold to interested buyers within and outside the community

at agreed prices. The proceeds after expenses was gathered and used for the project that informed the **Imachi nkwu**, or kept in the custody of a trusted elder of the community for safe keeping until the fund was needed.

### The Relevance of Imachi Nkwu

The relevance of **imachi nkwu** among the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria is well known. One of the informants said that it was during his tenure as the Chairman of Umuneke Village in Anara Local Government Area, Imo State that the community embarked on the town-hall building project called 'Umuneke Gburugburu Hall'. He said that from the foundation of the hall to its decking was financed by the whole village through **Ituchi Ukwu**. To achieve that height, the community agreed to **Ituchi Nkwu**, which has been done twice, and the proceeds were judiciously used to build the hall from foundation to deck level for the project<sup>5</sup>. It is worthy to note here that not much has been achieved several years (more than a decade) since subsequent community administrations introduced contributions and donations as the means of forming capital for the project, in place of the indigenous institution of **Imachi Nkwu**. All efforts made through contributions have only taken the Hall building to the lintel level. The significance of **Imachi Nkwu** in the building of this hall, therefore, cannot be overemphasized.

The community can use the same system to pursue individual members' benefit, and not the community project. The aim was to assist poor members who did not have means of sourcing for fund. It took the same process of the community's ban on individual palm harvesting, irrespective of the owner. My informant participated in one, termed '**Imachi Nkwu Umuakwukwo**' in Olokoro, Umuahia, Abia State, in 1972. The aim was to enable parents and young adults to pool capital to pay school fees for their children and themselves, respectively. The procedure was that the community stopped everybody from harvesting palm fruits for about three months. At the agreed date to lift the ban, at the signal of the drum, everybody in the community competitively harvested palm

fruits. Those who could not climb the palm tree hired professionals to assist them. Unlike that for community projects, members kept to themselves as much as the bunches they could harvest and carry. At the end individuals either sold the bunches or milled it to sell the palm oil and kernel. The proceeds were used to pay the children school fees<sup>6</sup>.

Another means through which the community forms capital was Palm Estates. The pre-colonial palm estates are not estates in the modern forms. Rather, these palm estates grew in the wild and have become appropriated by the community for harvests and sales. The palm estates is locally called **Ofia Nkwu** among the Abam of the Cross River Igbo area, Abia State, it has become a veritable source of revenue for the community. The community could either lease the palm estate out, for a period of time – between six months and one year, to interested members for a fee, or harvest the palm fruits for sale. The money earned through either of these means was used to solve the challenges the community faced<sup>7</sup>.

In the early decades of the twentieth (20<sup>th</sup>) century (in the 1930s and 1940s), the Abam were able to execute several projects, such as the construction of schools, hospitals and the award of scholarships to deserving sons and daughters. Late Mr. Agwu Ukakwu Agwu, was the first person to benefit from the Abam Development Union Scholarship Scheme and graduated from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1964. Also, many sons and daughters benefited from the proceeds from **Ofia Nkwu**, which enabled them to access capital to fund their different endeavours. It is important we state here that the major source of revenue for the Abam Development Union was the **Ofia nkwu**<sup>8</sup>. The Ebunwana community, Ebonyi State, ran a similar palm estate, which was controlled by the community<sup>9</sup>.

The process of **Imachi Nkwu** at the family level was simple. The family could decide to raise money via **Imachi Nkwu** to enable them marry a wife for a member, train or start-up trade for another, and other reasons. To achieve this, members met and decided on the period within which individual cutting of palm fruit would be closed. Within the period, no

member of the family would harvest the palm fruit, whether the palm tree grew in his farm or not. At the expiration of the period, the family would collectively harvest the palm fruit. They made use of harvesters within their fold, and when they lacked enough manpower, they hired from outside the family. After the harvest, they could decide to sell the bunch of the palm fruits or mill it. After taking care of the expenses, the proceeds were used for the desired family project.

Besides, the people used the example **Imachi Nkwu** to checkmate indiscriminate harvesting of other economic trees, which led to their deterioration. This was applied to the benefit of the **Ube** (local pear), called '**Ituchi Ube**'. This helped safeguard these fruits from being plucked immaturely. Through this means, the owners of such were giving opportunity wait/relax as their fruits were harvested at maturity. **Ituchi Ube** took similar processes like **Imachi Nkwu**, especially regarding banning, lifting of ban and harvesting. Within the stipulated period, no member of the community would climb or pluck the **ube**. At the expiration of the period, owners of the pear tree could pluck and sale same to raise fund. The gain was to safeguard the pear fruits from thieves, who would have plucked them prematurely and indiscriminately. Besides, through this means the fruits were plucked at maturity giving room for owners to gain from them. And it helped curtail accidents among kids that indiscriminately climbed the trees to steal pear fruits, **ube**<sup>10</sup>.

**Imachi Nkwu** among Ngwa people played a similar role like **Ituchi ube**. The main aim of this particular process was to limit indiscriminate harvesting and the deterioration of the palm trees, thus their preservation. Chubb explained the process thus:

*... In order that each member of the community shall receive an equal benefit, and to prevent deterioration of the trees through continual cutting, a certain day is set apart generally once in 20 days, when every member of the community may cut as much produce as he desires. On this day a drum (Nkwa Nkwu) is*

*beaten.... Until this drum has been beaten any member of the community who takes produce from communal palm trees is guilty of an offence for which he may be fined one goat, or the equivalent ...<sup>11</sup>.*

Also, **imachi nkwu** among the Ngwa people can be linked to the **ofia nkwu** practiced in Abam, discussed earlier in this work.

## Conclusion

The work examined '**Imachi Nkwu**' as an indigenous institution for capital formation among the Igbo of Southeast, Nigeria. It traced the origin/spread of palm trees in our area of study. The importance of palm trees and **imachi nkwu** were emphasized. Also, the paper discussed in detail the processes of **imachi nkwu**, both at the community and family levels. Besides, the relevance of **imachi nkwu** to the people was discussed in detail.

The findings of this paper underscore the importance of **imachi nkwu** as a veritable means of capital formation among the Igbo, before, during and after the coming of the colonial lords. Till date (2018), some communities still practice **imachi nkwu**. For instance, in Abam, Abia State, the community sustained their **imachi nkwu** system (**ofia nkwu**). Today (2018), the Abam Development Union, controls the **ofia nkwu** for the benefit of the whole community. The union either harvest palm fruit, mill and sale processed oil/palm kernel, or sale the **ofia nkwu** (palm bush), that is, the unharvest palm fruits to interested individuals. The capital accessed via either method is lodged into the community's bank account, and are used for the community projects<sup>12</sup>.

## End Notes

James Fenske, "Imachi Nkwu: Trade and the commons", Sourced from-  
[www.mpra.ub.uni.muenchen.de/48810/1/MPRA-paper](http://www.mpra.ub.uni.muenchen.de/48810/1/MPRA-paper), 6/10/2013.

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Quoted by James Fenske, "Imachi Nkwu: Trade and the commons",  
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