RECIPROCAL LABOUR IN AN AGRARIAN SOCIETY: '*IGBA ONWE ORU*' AMONG THE IGBO OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. However, at the centre of their agricultural practice is an enduring supply of labour, which practically involves everybody, so much that in the pre-colonial times it even influenced the composition of families. Labour was commonly exchanged among the people in what was called "*Igba Onwe Oru*". In fact, in the traditional and colonial societies, up to the period immediately after independence, exchange of labour was common among families and friends. Reciprocal labour exchange or "*Igba Onwe Oru*" was indeed at the centre of the people's farming practice. Using historical methodology, which relies heavily on primary and secondary sources of information, the paper discusses the place of reciprocal labour in the people's agricultural practice. It draws strength from two socio-economic theories - reciprocity and communitarianism - and argues that reciprocal labour is an integral part of the peoples communal living tradition. The paper concludes that although reciprocal labour may have gone through transformations, it will subsist considering the important role it plays in the people's agricultural nay economic life.

Keywords: Igbo, Labour Exchange, Reciprocal, Southeast, Nigeria.

Introduction

The Igbo are the predominant ethnic group in Southeastern Nigeria. Their territory cuts across the equatorial forest in the South and the Savannah in the North, covering areas east and west of the River Niger. West of the Niger, the Igbo territory includes parts of Aboh, Asaba and Agbor Divisions in what is now Delta State, while in the East; it includes the whole of Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, Imo and Abia States. It also includes parts of Ogoja in Cross River State and Ikwerre in Rivers State. In spite of this, majority of Igbo people presently live in the five Southeastern States of Nigeria - Imo, Abia, Ebonyi, Anambra and Enugu - which is considered to be the Igbo heartland (Iwuagwu, 1998).

The Igbo are primarily an agrarian people, though trade, manufacturing and craft making, also form part of their occupation. In spite of the fact that agricultural land is hardly sufficient, owing to the region's dense population and geographical location, the little that exists is effectively utilized but continually under cultivation. This obviously impacts negatively on productivity levels. In terms of population density, Igboland has one of the highest in Nigeria, and possibly Africa. The settlement pattern of the area in most cases is characterized by the agglomeration of population within specific areas considered to be viable. It is therefore not surprising that most parts of Igboland are thickly populated. The people are frequently faced with shortage of arable land and poor soil fertility due to constant usage of available land. Perhaps, as a survival strategy, it is mostly crops that thrive on the available land that are cultivated.

A significant population of the Igbo are farmers and this over the years has had tremendous influence on labour supply (Iwuagwu, 1998). Labour for agricultural purposes is primarily derived from multiple sources including household and the extended family, slaves (mainly during the precolonial period), clientele, and hired/paid labour. Nevertheless, the role of labour in the people's

agricultural economy still needs to be emphasized. Labour as we just noted, could be sourced from multiple sources. But in practically all cases, labour could either be exchanged or financially rewarded. Whereas from the earliest times reciprocal labour was more popular, recent years have seen people tending towards financial rewards. It was acceptable for instance, to get the entire family to work together. To this end, it was common-place, particularly in low density areas where agricultural practice was intense, for men to marry more than one wife or even to marry early as a way to increase the size of the family in order to meet the labour requirements of their family. Indeed, it was largely because each family did its own farm work, that the Igbo came to value large families (Isidienu 2015). Thus, a man who wanted to prosper as a farmer obviously had to marry many wives, who expectedly would give him several children. These children eventually add up to the labour available to him for farm work.

More importantly, there was reciprocal labour, which is the subject matter of this discuss. Men and women, family units, friends, as well as members of age groups, frequently formed themselves into labour groups essentially for the purposes of working for each other on rotatory/reciprocal basis (Uzozie, 1979). Among several ethnic groups of Nigeria, reciprocal labour was common especially in the precolonial, colonial, and up to the early post-independence period. Olukoju and Momodu (2023) informed that among the Yoruba it is called "*Aro*" and it is predominantly undertaken for the purposes of farming, ranging from planting, weeding to harvesting. The Hausas of Northern Nigeria call it *"Gaya" (Boyede, 2023),* while among the Tiv of Central Nigeria it is called "*Ihyumbe" (Ibi, 2023).* In all cases, reciprocal labour is undertaken free of charge, while the host is under obligation to feed the group (Iwuagwu, 2022) and this is mostly done in the farm.

Reciprocal labour as a subject has received considerable mention in scholarly literature. Foremost among these are the works of Nwosu (2020), who examined the economy of Mgbidi, a community in Imo State, Southeast Nigeria in the pre-colonial period. While situating the place of agriculture as the primary economic activity among the people, he identified the various sources of labour supply, including what he called cooperative or reciprocal labour, which according to him normally takes place between families linked by marriage. Writing on the traditional economic relations of the Mbano another community in Imo State up to 1906, Mbalisi (2022) mentioned reciprocal labour exchange, as something that usually takes place among groups of young boys and girls, age groups or even communities. This he says, has been with the people even before the colonial times. Uzozie (1979) on his part, defines reciprocal labour as a "system in which a group of farmers of similar sex enter into moral agreement to exchange their labour in rotation". This according to him is given the fact that the individual may not adequately cope with the extent of the work required. For Chukwu (2015), people of the same age bracket could form cooperatives to work in their parents' farms, this according to him, is what reciprocal labour exchange represents.

The essence of the reciprocal labour exchange according to Natcher et al (2018) is mainly to help each other, and this is considering that there are people who were either incapable of working in their farms or did not have the time to do so. Nwachukwu (2014) sees reciprocal labour exchange from the perspective of the series of linkages and networks of cooperatives that exist among people. The locals, he suggests, depend on such linkages and exchange for their livelihood and support in the communities. Of course, this is similar to what is regarded as traditional humane living among the Igbo (Ifemesia, 1979). For Elijah (2020), labour was mobilized cooperatively or through reciprocal exchange especially in the pre-colonial times to tap the benefits that come from synergy. Moreover, this form of labour according to him, usually comes with other exciting and enjoyable attributes, thus making it fun for young farmers to participate. Suarez et al (2020) see reciprocity as a pure learning process that enables unrelated individuals to evolve, while for Gibson (2020) reciprocal labour exchange is usually adopted for a labour-intensive task that ordinarily cannot be achieved by a single person such as harvesting or house construction.

It could be said, in spite of the foregoing, that among the Igbo, the role of reciprocal labour as a primary contributor of labour supply, has unfortunately not been given the considerable mention it truly deserves, neither has the role it plays in the success of different agricultural efforts ever been underrated. It is this lacuna that the present effort is out to address. Majority of the comments on reciprocal labour in Igbo literature, have been in passing. It has largely been highlighted as one of the many sources of labour supply for agricultural work. The aim of this study therefore, is to discuss reciprocal labour among the Igbo in greater details and rightly position it as the primary source of labour for agriculture as well as other needs for the Igbo since the precolonial periods.

It is self-evident that reciprocal labour up to the 1980s was indeed the primary source of labour supply among several communities in Igboland. However, though it was mainly for farming purposes, it was also frequently channeled to other economic uses. It is indeed what the host desired that the group would do for him/her. Reciprocal labour could for instance be used in building construction (e.g. for block moulding, fetching water, collecting sand, thatching etc.); farming, loading among others (Anyanwu, 2023). Little wonder why reciprocal labour, according to Gibson-Graham (2020), is a non-monetized exchange of group work done by community members for the benefit of one member, and this normally involved a labour-intensive task that ordinarily cannot be achieved by one single person. The expenditure for group work, he argues, is rewarded by reciprocation, that is, the practice of group work on another member's task at a later date. Those who benefit at one point participate, knowing that they will be called upon to also benefit at a later date. The rules of reciprocity vary and are differently enforced according to contexts (Gibson-Graham, 2020).

This paper therefore hopes to explain how reciprocal labour otherwise called *"Igba Onwe Oru"* among the Igbo works. It will discuss its historical context and situate it within the people's economic life. The paper will demonstrate its link with relevant socioeconomic theories, and further explain the change and continuity that have occurred within the practice overtime. It will finally hazard a guess into the future as to its sustainability especially in the light of recent developments in the people's agricultural nay economic life.

Theoretical Perspective

Reciprocal labour draws strength from two socioeconomic theories, reciprocity and communitarianism.

Reciprocity Theory

The reciprocity theory is anchored on the belief that human beings are more prone to reciprocate positive actions. This is against the background that humans operate in an interdependent environment, where labour is divided, so that people may be more efficient with the understanding that things are usually exchanged, thus enabling mutual benefit. Reciprocity it is argued, is a behavioural response to perceived kindness or unkindness, where kindness comprises distributional fairness as well as fairness intentions (Falk and Fischbacher 2001). If someone does something good to another person, the other person will certainly be obligated to return such favour. The whole idea is that humans have the tendency to be more likely to give something in return for something received, whether it is favour, gift or invitation.

According to Adam Smith (1759), 'kindness is the parent of kindness'. Rabin (1993) was however, one of the first to formalize the concept of reciprocity. Using the psychological game theory, Rabin argued that 'people may care not only about their own well-being, but also that of others. Other scholars like Leakey and Lewin (1978) have equally attributed the very nature of human beings to reciprocity. They suggest that the attribute of humans to repay gifts and favours is a unique aspect of human nature. Against this background, they further posit that reciprocity makes it possible to build sustainable and continuing relationships with reciprocal exchanges among people. Molm

(2010) in fact, puts it succinctly. According to him, taking care of others helps human species to survive. Reciprocity to all intents and purposes allows people to get things done, which ordinarily they would not have been able to accomplish on their own. By collaborating with others in the form of exchange of services, human beings are now enabled to achieve more than they would have ordinarily accomplished as individuals. To this extent, reciprocity is a source of strength to the individual considering that it encourages him to collaborate with others. It then follows to say that what the Igbo call "*Igba Onwe Oru*" or reciprocal labour agrees with the natural instinct of man trying to help his neighbor or friend, which is what the reciprocity theory advocates.

Concept of Communitarianism

Similar to the Reciprocity Theory is Communitarianism, which also emphasizes the interests of the community over and above that of the individual. This clearly contrasts with liberalism, which primarily advocates the interest of the individual. Available evidence suggests that the term *communitarian* was coined in 1841 by John Goodwyn Barmby, a leader of the British Chartist movement, who used it to refer to utopian socialists and others who experimented with unusual communal lifestyles (Etzioni, 2024). However, the Communitarian philosophy could be said to have fully evolved in the 20th Century. Even before then, communitarianism was the hallmark of the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their 1848 Communist Manifesto. Marx for instance, in the second Volume of the Communist Manifesto, emphatically stated that in a truly socialist society, "the condition for the free development of each is the free development of all".

Proponents of communitarianism critically object to extreme individualism. They equally criticize laissez-faire capitalism. In place of these, they preach the right of the individual to respect the common good of the community. Writing in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Bell (2024) posits that man lives most of his life in communities, which shape, and ought to shape, his moral and political judgments. These communities also enable him to have a strong obligation to support and nourish them given that they provide meaning to his life, and without which he would be disoriented, deeply lonely, and incapable of informed moral and political judgment (Bell, 2024).

It was however, the works of eminent political philosophers like Ferdinand Tonnies, Amitai Etzioni and Dorothy Day, that popularized the communitarian philosophy and economic theory especially from the 20th century (Etzioni, 1994). This theory has been used to explain the interdependency of humans as well as their tendency to function better when they relate with one another. The Communitarian theory therefore shows that the individual usually fares better when he/she relates with others, which indeed is what reciprocal labour among the Igbo represents.

Considered together, the theories of Reciprocity and Communitarianism represent the essence of reciprocal labour, which promotes togetherness, community spirit and free exchange, over and above the individuals myopic/selfish interests especially in a society where all hands are not equal. Of course, some people are certainly luckier than others or even better placed given the opportunities available to them, which enables them to acquire greater wealth and property. In such circumstance, reciprocal labour tries to close the gap between the rich and the poor, haves and have-not etc.

Reciprocal Labour Among the Igbo

"*Igba Onwe Oru*" is the exchange of working days in different farms among people, who could be friends, relations, families or members of an age group. Such a group usually entered into moral agreements to exchange their labour in rotation. Reciprocal labour is mostly organized at the peak of farming seasons, with each group working on members plots in turns until the first round is completed, after which they now decide whether or not to admit new members, or drop less energetic and inefficient ones before starting another round (Uzozie, 1979). According to Chukwu (2015), people of the same age bracket could enter into a reciprocal labour arrangement to work in turns in their father or mother's farm. Similarly, young girls or boys could form reciprocal groups for the sole purpose of exchanging their labour.

A reciprocal labour group is usually made up of people from the same community with the only qualification being one's ability to cope with the strength of the other cooperating members. This is because work on the farm site was usually shared equitably among members as each person was expected to finish his/her own task at the same time with the others. Members of a reciprocal labour group could also decide to work for the aged and poor members of their community with or without asking for rewards (Chukwu, 2015), but this had to be agreed by the entire group.

Reciprocal labour from the precolonial up to the early post-colonial period, was a primary feature of the Igbo farming culture. Indeed, it was seen in several communities as a way of helping one another especially during farming seasons, and it comes with numerous advantages. Many for instance, argue that only one person cannot effectively do all the work required in the farm, hence, it will be easier and more beneficial to share such tasks among friends, groups etc. on a reciprocal/complimentary basis.
There is also the belief by the people that reciprocal labour takes care of the interests of the poor and weak in the society (Nnabuihe, 2023). This is given that individuals are not equally gifted. Whereas some are poor, others are rich, while some are strong, and others are weak. Reciprocal labour, therefore bridges this gap by providing avenue for individuals, friends and families to complement one another especially in agricultural work and by so doing, nobody is left to suffer any hardship due to his/her inherent inadequacies. More so, there are people who either cannot work in their farms or would not have the time to do so. For such people, reciprocal labour equally fills the gap.

Furthermore, and from purely economic considerations, it is believed that reciprocal labour encourages greater productivity, reduces labour cost and saves time. Of course, combined labour would achieve more in terms of productivity than individual labour, even as the group will obviously spend lesser time to accomplish more, than the individual. More so, the economic cost of individual labour will no doubt be more than that of the group. All of these certainly make reciprocal labour all the more attractive than other sources of labour in Igboland.

Above all, by cementing relationships among friends, reciprocal labour promotes harmonious living among families, villages and communities. Proponents of this argument believe that reciprocal labour is in furtherance with the Igbo spirit of "*nwanne di n'mba*" (brotherly association in numbers), which is the hallmark of Igbo humane living. Moreover, the cultural practice represented by it, indirectly reinforces the bond of unity, support, and solidarity among people, who though do not share blood ties are connected by their relationship through labour. To this end, reciprocal labour fosters unity, promotes collaboration, and facilitates mutual support among friends, even as it enhances shared experiences among members of the same community.

Change and Continuity
The system of reciprocal labour has been sustained over the years, although it has also gone through several transformations. To say that it has been affected by time and circumstance will amount to restating the obvious. In spite of the fact that it has persevered as a major source of labour supply among the Igbo, the system may have lost its pride of place as the primary source of labour for farming among the people. Aside from this, available evidence suggests that reciprocal labour has also gone through several modifications.

To start with, it is self-evident that agriculture and in particular farming, has lost its foremost position as the primary occupation of the Igbo. This is considering that majority of Igbo youths are no longer attracted to it, as most of them would rather migrate to the cities in search of white-collar jobs or even become artisans and apprentice traders (Okafor 1979). As a result, the friends and age mates who would have ordinarily come together to form reciprocal labour groups are no longer available, thereby ensuring that the system losses its place as the foremost source of labour. This seems to be the situation in the several farming communities of Igboland.

As a way to fill the vacuum created by the constant migration of youths to the urban cities, there has also been the emergence of paid labour as an alternative source of labour supply in Igboland. Popularly called "*Ndi Anam acho Oru*" or "*Ndi Job*" (people who sale their labour), these people openly advertise their services for a fee. In fact, this type of labour over the years seems to have almost completely taken over as the primary source of labour supply especially for farming in Igboland. Some believe that the services of '*Ndi Job*', are usually faster and cheaper than reciprocal labour. This is because the group involved will always strive to complete each assignment to enable them to move on to another one. Moreover, to remain competitive, they always strive to charge low fees (Anyanwu, 2023). This notwithstanding, the increasing population of Hausa youths all over Igboland, in recent years, who may have left their homelands due to climate change and other issues, into southern and other parts of Nigeria, is also known to have further increased the population of paid labourers in Igboland. Likewise, several youths from other farming communities in northeast Igboland including the Ezza and Izzi, Abakiliki, Okposi, Edda, Nsukka, Ohaji/Egbema/Oguta and Okigwe commonly referred to as "*Ndi Ogu Ukwu*" (people with the big hoe primarily because of the nature and size of their hoes) are equally known to have migrated to other parts of Igboland, where they hired out their labour to those who needed them for a fee. The services of these people are sometimes cheaper, even as they are known to be more efficient, and doing more given that majority of them come from known farming communities.

A major transformation has also occurred within the system of reciprocal labour. As against the original format of providing their services free of charge, many now use it to make money. Available evidence suggests that among the different farming communities of Igboland, two forms of reciprocal labour seem to have emerged – the free type and the paid service (Anyanwu 2023). In the case of the free service, the group provides its service strictly on a reciprocal basis as in the old system, devoid of any payments whatsoever, although the group will have to be fed by the host. But for the paid service, a member of the group could secure a job opportunity and decide to use the entire group to prosecute it. In this case, the group would do the job and, in the end, also share the proceeds, with the member who secured it getting the lions share. In fact, the paid service has become a major source of fund, for pupils and students in schools, who now use it to make money to pay their school fees particularly during the holidays (Iwuagwu, 2022). Owing to these changes, some have suggested that the reciprocal labour system may not last for too long in the future because of the increasing popularity of paid labour with its obvious advantages and the fact that several people are no longer interested in farming as an occupation (Ujagbo, 2023).

In spite of the foregoing, it is self-evident that reciprocal labour has persevered as a major source of labour supply in Igboland, and this is mainly because of its inherent advantages. For instance, many still believe that unlike the paid labour, work done with reciprocal labour is usually thorough, less expensive, productive and more fulfilling. This is considering that the group is not usually in a hurry for another job, hence, it will take its time to do a good job for whosoever invited them. In spite of this, some still insist that reciprocal labour is time consuming and less productive, and as a result may not be able to withstand the increased competition from other sources of labour supply in the future.

Sustainability

Life is dynamic and about progress even as change is a constant phenomenon in the affairs of human beings. Hence, reciprocal labour or '*Igba Onwe Oru*' among the Igbo has undergone, and is still undergoing metamorphoses same with aspect of the people's customs and tradition. Nevertheless, Vitalis Nwulu, who hails from Ohaji/Egbema/Oguta, a major agricultural zone in Imo State, fervently believes that 'so long as farming remains the primary occupation of his people, for so long shall reciprocal labour persist as a major source of labour supply' (Nwulu, 2023). This is

because of his conviction that there are still many people in the society, who cannot afford the astronomical costs usually charged by people who offer paid labour, and for such people therefore, reciprocal labour will always remain an alternative or a fall-back option. The implication of this is that although reciprocal labour among the Igbo, will continue to change and transform as it is presently doing, it will never die completely. And this is because of the numerous advantages associated with it and the fact that not everybody in the society can afford paid labour.

In spite of the changes that may have occurred within it, there is no doubt that reciprocal labour over the years met the wishes and aspirations of the people especially during the time that it held sway. But as the society became increasingly urbanized and monetized, paid labour was introduced and gradually began to compete with it. For Uzozie (1979), the disruption of the system in recent years was as a result of the introduction of western education, the migration of able-bodied men and women to the towns, and not forgetting the alien concept of wage labour, all of which dealt major blows to the indigenous food crop production economy. And looking into the future, it does seem as if that reciprocal labour would continue to endure. In spite of the competition, it is likely to continue to exist pari passu with other sources of labour, and in particular wage labour. This is considering that it would always be attractive considering that it meets the needs of the segment of population, who may not be able to afford the price of wage labour. What is in fact intriguing about reciprocal labour is the way in which it combines relations of collective sharing with individual benefit (Gibson 2020).

Conclusion

As long as agriculture and in particular farming remains the primary occupation of the Igbo, what happens to labour supply will continue to be an issue of public discourse, and this is given that it is a major component of agricultural practice. The age long practice of '*Igba Onwe Oru*', although having gone through and is still undergoing transformations will forever remain part and parcel of the people's agricultural practice. "*Igba Onwe Oru*" is firmly rooted in the people's culture and tradition and indeed has numerous advantages as have been highlighted above. It is a sure way to mobilize a large workforce that also guarantees efficient work even as it encourages economics of scale, while emphasizing division of labour. It will for a long time hold great promise both for the farming communities of the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria in particular and Nigeria in general.

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