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## **Aladinma as Local Peacebuilding**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates Aladinma, a traditional mechanism for conflict resolution in Aboh Mbaise, IMO State. This research establishes Aladinma as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism that enhances peace and social co-existence. This study adopted a qualitative approach of which both primary and secondary sources have been utilized. Oral sources, written records, and other materials necessary for the reconstruction of the people's past have been utilized. Oral sources were also derived from both individuals and group interviews of knowledgeable informant of Igbo history, leaders and members of Aladinma. Journals, book chapters, articles were also consulted. The target

audience in the oral sources includes male and female married women. The study used descriptive methods of research analysis to interpret and present facts collected in the field. The study found out that societies in Igbo land built different institutions to serve different purposes. Among these institutions are the ones that have to do with conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes. However, it is germane to state that some of these institutions, although, still in use in this contemporary period has lost some fervor for which it was known for. As recommended by both authors, there is a need for leaders to be objective in their discharge of duties and the need to educate members on what Aladinma entails: its purpose, vision and mission.

**Keywords:** *Local Peacebuilding, Igboland, Aladinma, Conflict Resolution, etc.*

## **Introduction**

Igboland and societies in Africa in time past, before colonial rule, devised several means to maintain peaceful human coexistence. This is because man, according to Abraham Maslow, is a wanting being (Sharma, Sadana & Kaur, 2012). That is, man's needs are insatiable, which has created competition, often leading to a clash of interests, which, as a result, has endangered human existence. In Igboland, as in other African societies, the maintain societal harmony necessitated the need to creation of institutions and structures in this regard. In Igboland, as might be applicable to different Igbo communities, traditional institutions known for maintaining law and order were in place and were highly respected and revered by the people. Some of these institutions include the Council of Elders, Age Grade System, Umuada, Ozo Title Holders, etc. As earlier stated, some of these institutions had different names as may be applicable to different societies in Igbo land. However, one thing that is important is that their roles and functions were similar. One of such examples is the Aladinma system of peacebuilding that was peculiar to the people of Aboh Mbaise in present-day Imo State, Nigeria.

Aboh Mbaise is a vast area consisting of various villages and communities. The people living in this area comprise both indigenous and non-indigenous people with diverse historical backgrounds. Like other towns in Mbaise, Aboh Mbaise also practices or has over the years adopted the Aladinma institution as a means of resolving disputes among members of her community.

To a large extent, the institution was highly respected and effective in the communities and promoted peace, orderliness, unity and tranquility in Aboh Mbaise. Aladinma is believed to have been in existence before the colonial period and was known as *Vote* during the colonial period. The system has passed through modifications over the years, especially with the outbreak of the civil war, which disrupted social and economic activities in southeastern states. There are those who hold the view that Aladinma came into existence during the colonial period. Aladinma was not headed by kings in Aboh Mbaise; it was in existence before the installation of *ezeship* in Igboland. However, in the absence of kings, the communities were able to appoint men of noble character who sat over cases in the court. The only settled disputes that arose were within their communities. Peacebuilding and conflict resolution were not limited to Aladinma. There were also other institutions like *Umuada*, *Ofo* title holders, *Umunna* (kindred men), *Amala* (villagers), *ndi opara*, and age grades. It is crucial to state that none of these institutions has played key and major roles in peacebuilding, and none of them has authentic or legal backing from the government to resolve conflicts. It is therefore important to know that while membership to all the other peacebuilding institutions was limited to some group of persons, membership in Aladinma was open to every member of the community, and as such, everyone must attend Aladinma. According to Innocent Egege (interviewed), Aladinma has over the years been an instrument of change and promotion of peace. The waning of Aladinma's authority has led to high levels of misconduct and disunity in various communities. This study will point out the relevance of Aladinma, its successes, challenges, and reasons behind its gradual collapse in the various communities it had earlier thrived in. It will also explore possible ways to revitalize and incorporate the institution into our present-day communities.

## **Concept**

Aladinma is an old-age dispute settlement institution in Igbo land. According to Ogbonna Festus (interviewed), Aladinma has been in existence before his birth. This system was created in the absence of any system to settle land disputes, cases of theft, incest, and desecration of the land. It is important to note that Aboh Mbaise

was among the parts of Igboland that did not have a kingship institution; the system of rule in Mbaise was acephalous. In Mbaise, Aladinma was taken seriously and was attended by men and women in the community. It was an organized institution that served the needs of the people to build a peaceful society. Aladinma in simple terms means 'let the land be good,' and it was believed that if the land was good, prosperity, peace, and love would be evident in the community (Gabriel Agwuonu interviewed). Disputes over land boundaries or ownership of land were very common in the period because of the lack of proper demarcation, and this type of case is settled by the village Aladinma as it is the best local institution for the settlement of disputes in the village. According to Ogbonna Festus (interviewed), it was called the vote when he was young, and its concept was to promote peace, end stealing, and corruption. In the past, fear gripped anyone who heard that their name was mentioned in Aladinma, and that fear reduced corrupt activities in the community. Aladinma has been in existence before colonization and was headed by titled men and family heads. It has survived up to the present time and is seen as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism. It is important to note that every community has its own Aladinma, and as such, they do not extend their authority to another community; they only intervene in cases within their community. Cases relating to armed robbery, going against government laws and policies, embezzlement of government property or stealing from another village were not handled in Aladinma but by government officials (Peter Onwumere interviewed). But in a situation whereby a particular village takes a member of another village to the Aladinma court for an offense committed outside of their community, they will look into such matters and sometimes discipline the person who has been found guilty of such an offense for bringing disgrace to their community. Aladinma meetings were not just the gathering of men and women but an organized system through which authority flowed and punishment was enforced. The leadership of Aladinma consisted of the chairman, vice chairman, secretary, soldier vote (nwa Okoro oha), ofo holders, and each group played a great role in the settlement of disputes and ensuring that offenders were punished (Chidi Interviewed). The executives of Aladinma were men of noble character and were trusted to make just judgments and not pervert justice. The executives of Aladinma made the final decision

on every matter. However, there was also room for community men to dispute any judgment that they felt was unjust and most times suggested that the case be investigated again.

### **Institutions/Organisational Structure Of Aladinma**

The Aladinma juridical process treats traditional and culturally related cases that are in line with the laws, customs, norms, values, and aspirations of the village as a socio-cultural entity (Iheanacho, 2015). In achieving these goals, several bodies were set up for the administration of the Aladinma court. The chairman of Aladinma leads the Aladinma in his community and is elected to the position by members of his community. He is known as a man of good repute and indisputable character, and he must be a member of the community. In the modern-day court, he can be likened to the chief judge and he works hand in hand with his secretary. Following the chairman, is the vice chairman who presides over the meetings when the chairman is not available. He is also a major signatory on the document issued after the proceedings. The secretary (ode akwukwuo) has the duty to document events, organize meetings, file cases, properly keep the court documents, and is also a major signatory to the documents given out after court proceedings. It is his duty to take note of events or happenings at the meeting and ensure that the minutes of the meeting are properly documented and that the meeting days and time are duly passed across. The soldier's vote (nwa Okoro oha) (Peter Onwumere interviewed) is an important instrument in the Aladinma meetings. It is their responsibility to ensure that offenders appear at the meeting, there is orderliness in the meetings, and punishment meted out to the offender is carried out. In situations whereby the offender refuses to appear before the court, the soldier's vote is being sent out to ensure that the punishment is carried out. They also ensure that members of Aladinma are in attendance at the meeting. The ofo holders and titled men also played prominent roles in Aladinma and were given special recognition at the meeting. They were usually consulted in critical situations. It is believed that when an accused person denies the charges laid against him, members of Aladinma show their disapproval by stamping their feet on the ground, and this is also seen as a curse. According to Gabriel Agwuonu (interviewed), OFO was an

instrument used in apprehending offenders who refused to obey the punishment given to them. Ofo holders were trusted because it was believed to be a symbolic object that has the power to kill the holder who does not tell the truth (see also Celestine 2009). It is therefore pertinent to note that there was a collective effort by the people to promote peace and orderliness. It was not the sole duty of the executives. In a situation where an offense was committed and the offender was being protected by his family or friends, when the offense was made known, all those who knew about the issue and did not expose it would be punished alongside the offender.

### **Aladinma's Conflict Resolution And Peacebuilding Strategies**

We have earlier stated that Aladinma had been in existence before the present time and was established in time past by those who desired the prosperity, peace, and harmony of their community. The standard and application of justice, however, were primarily based on the culture and tradition of the people. Aladinma handled traditionally and culturally related cases which are in line with the laws, customs, values, and aspirations of the village (Iheanacho, 2015). The beauty of it was that both the judges, litigants, and the respondents knew the common proceedings, the integrity of the judge, and what tradition demands in case one loses a suit or wins. Aladinma adopted her own strategies on how to promote peaceful coexistence, ensure that adequate punishments are meted out to offenders, and that they carried out their punishment. These strategies have gone a long way in maintaining peace and promoting tranquility. It is important to note that Aladinma has gone through years of changes, and with the prominence of Christianity in Aboh Mbaise, people began to reject the traditional methods of resolving conflict. However, the traditional method was still used from the 1980s to 2015 because of those who still practice African traditional religion.

Igbandu (oath taking) was one of the mechanisms adopted. It was used basically for the settlement of disputes and also in preventing two conflicting parties who had come to an agreement from engaging back in conflict. This was achieved by making the two parties swear an oath not to infringe on each other's rights. This was mainly in cases of land dispute, and the parties involved

took an oath not to trespass one's boundary. This was done by bringing a kolanut, breaking it, and putting it into a dish with water mixed with salt and backed by prayers or incantations. The participants were expected to dip their hands inside the dish, collect kolanut, and eat. This was done in the presence of their kinsmen (Cecilia Onwumere interviewed). The fear of being ostracized was a major deterrent in the community. Many people who were ostracized were given bad images and were avoided by their kinsmen. They were also barred from going to the market, using the community stream, and were usually not attended to in the market. A fine was also imposed on any member of the community who tried to relate or associate himself with them. Ostracism was usually done in very serious and grievous situations and when other alternatives to avert the problem from continuing failed. The mention of one's name in Aladinma meetings brought cold shivers to the individual. Aladinma was very effective, and people deliberately avoided problems in order to avoid public disgrace. Their method of punishment was embarrassing in that most times, the offender would be flogged naked on top of a table during their meetings, bringing shame and ridicule to the individual and his family (Iheanacho, 2015). In cases of fornication, the young lady and man were expected to appease the gods. Some of the items used in this process were one female sheep, male and female fowl, hot, a jar of palm wine, and kola nuts. These items accompanied the sacrifice that was made. This came into play when individuals from the same community were caught in the act of fornication. Open punishment of offenders, irrespective of their position or status in the community, discouraged highly placed men from committing crimes. The laws were already made, and the punishment attributed to every offense was also known, and this prevented the executives from perverting justice. Punishments were not limited to the offenders but also the accomplices and those who knew about the crime and refused to report the case to Aladinma. Aladinma's principle is to promote peace and deter anything that would hinder peace, so members of the community were expected to report anything that would hinder that peace from being achieved. For instance, the majority of their life was attributed to their gods, so they believed that crimes such as sleeping with a lady in the bush would reduce the yield of their farm produce; such matters were not treated lightly. An offender was also asked to pay fines. The

majority of the time, they were asked to pay a stipulated amount that would equate to the damage caused. It is important to note that the payment of fines was not limited to offenders but also included absentees from meetings and those who tried to cause nuisance during the meetings. Payment of fines was one of the major approaches used at the present time due to the prevalence of Christianity in this area (Celestine Ajuzieogu interviewed). The chairman was at the apex of the meeting, and decisions were primarily taken by the executives. However, the decision of the executives can be countered by the Aladinma participants. When an agreement was reached, those in support of such decisions were asked to affirm it by raising their hands or making some exclamation, while those who were not in favor of it were also expected to do so as well. In a situation whereby those not in favour of the decision were greater in number, the matter would be looked at again. The establishment of the modern-day court has given many people the leverage to contest the decisions of Aladinma. However, when such opposition arises, the executives of Aladinma go to court in defense of the person who has been sued, and also provide evidence that has been gathered by them to the court. It is important to note that Aladinma was legally recognized, though it has its limitations based on the cases it was allowed to handle.

Swearing an oath (*inyu iyi*) was adopted in cases where neither of the parties agreed to give up. In cases of land disputes where both parties were determined to acquire the land, intervals of a year or six months were given to them after swearing an oath. Events such as death or misfortune befalling one party were used to determine the rightful owner of the land. So, in a situation where one of the parties died, the land was given to the person who was still alive. Finally, every disciplinary measure, whether payment of a fine, flogging, ostracism, or banning a person from possessing a property, was implemented by the soldier vote. They played a prominent role in ensuring who had the punishments were being carried out by those that been found guilty. Kindred heads also ensured that the punishments meted out to their kindred men were duly carried out, and they were to report back to the leaders of Aladinma.

## **Success And Impacts**



The effort of Aladinma towards peacebuilding cannot be overemphasized. It has been a unifying factor and has also sought to resolve issues and prevent its escalation. It has, through its objectivity in dealing with issues, secured great respect from the people and has also been able to survive years after its establishment. Through this year as well, it was able to impact the community positively. Aladinma is a grassroots dispute resolution system. Unlike the modern-day court, which is expensive and unapproachable, Aladinma, through its administration system, has been able to resolve issues before they escalate into major problems. Members of the community were expected to report to Aladinma cases of injustice, rape, incest, stealing, and disrespect, so it made the community function well with fewer vices. Land disputes were one of the major cases that were settled in Aladinma. For instance, she was able to settle the land dispute between Innocent Egege and Mrs. Anthonia Egege (Innocent Egege Interviewed) The decision to hand over the land to Innocent Egege was the result of proper investigations and evidence that were brought before them. Also, members of the community who knew about the land testified in favour of Innocent Egege, who they believed was the rightful owner of the piece of land. Further clarifications were made to ensure that the piece of land would no longer constitute a problem in the society. Aladinma emphasizes good morals and culture. Every society is known for its culture and tradition. These cultures are held in high esteem, but when there are no institutions to check the abuses of those cultures, it begins to erode. Aladinma, on its part, had also, at the time where modernization had taken over and was eroding community life, been able to maintain the cultures and traditions of Aboh Mbaise. An example of such a culture is respect for those in authority. For instance, when Aladinma decides to harvest palm fruit for community development or any other project, members of the community come together to harvest the palm produce, and any defaulter is punished. Also, disrespect of elders was also punishable in Aladinma, and as a result, the culture of respect for elders was maintained. An elderly person was addressed as *ded*, *dada*, *daa-nne*, *dedd ne*, *de*, *da* (Celestine, 2009). Great importance was laid on greetings, and failure to greet a person was usually a sign that there was a strain in their relationship. Cases of fornication amongst brothers and sisters or two people from the same community were brought to a minimal point as the offenders were

not left without tangible punishments or public disgrace. In some of the communities, like Mbutu, such cases were settled with appeasement of the gods. For instance, in August 2012, the Aladinma of Isiala Mbutu-ukwu issued a reminder to the parents of the two parties who had been caught in the act of fornication to appease the gods and cleanse the land according to tradition. Also, on the 28th of August 2012, they also warned their youths to desist from indulging in smoking, raping, and other negative activities, or they would hand those involved to NAFDAC - National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (Minutes of UPA declaration with the people of Umunocha, dated 17/8/2012-19/9/2015). Some of the items required for appeasing the gods include one sheep, one female chicken, and one male chicken (Okuko Igbo), four kola nuts, and one jar of palm wine. The appeasement is conducted by the chief priest (Eze Ala). These led to the peaceful coexistence of the different groups in Aboh Mbaise. This is as it helped to maintain law and order in Aboh Mbaise. Thus, instead of individuals taking laws into their hands, they sought a peaceful way to resolve the problem. The Aladinma system provided an avenue for voiceless in the society to seek redress. Thus, there was little or no room for people to buy justice or bribe those in charge of delivering judgments.

Beyond the settlement of disputes, Aladinma also engaged in community development projects. They were able to achieve the strides through fines, rents on their halls, palm fruit harvest, and also general levies. With all these, Aladinma of Mbutu, which is known as Umunocha People's Assembly (UPA), was able to realize an income of ₦948,939 (nine hundred and forty-eight thousand, nine hundred and thirty naira) from 2012 to 2015 (Minutes of UPA declaration with the people of Umunocha, dated 17/8/2012-19/9/2015). The money was used for the electricity project, road project, rebuilding of the town hall, and market. This helped move the community forward and made life in the community easy.

## **Challenges And Decline**

Aladinma was established to maintain peace in Aboh. However, in order to fulfill its mandate, there have been obstacles to its actualization if lasting peace in Aboh Mbaise should be achieved. Therefore, in this present society, its authority has waned and as a

result, it has lost the full ability to carry out this duty. Corruption has been noted as one of the major reasons hindering peaceful resolutions. Elders or executives of Aladinma were known to be upright, sincere, and not take sides, and as a result, people accepted their judgments. However, people no longer trust the judgment of Aladinma because most of the executives have been bought over, making them take sides in disputes (Jude Chukwuegu, interviewed). In recent times, there have been cases, of people taking their cases that which were handled by Aladinma, to court because they felt dissatisfied with the way the issue was handled. Not being attendance in at the meeting was one of the major factors mitigating the success of Aladinma. Urban migration and the establishment of different industries and institutions had left its key members busy at work, and as such, they were not able to attend the meetings. Also, the majority of the time, Aladinma's meetings are scheduled in the early hours of the day and primarily on the first day of the week. As a result, there are few people remaining to attend the meeting. It is also a notable fact that whenever the Aladinma meeting fell on the community market day, there was a high tendency for the people to patronize the market while being absent in the meeting. In one of the Aladinma I attended, the meeting was meant to start at 9 AM, but by 11 AM, the only people present were the executives. In such a situation, the meeting was denied the general consensus that was needed and also the testimony of the community men. This article is about the dissolution of Aladinma in Umuamadi Nguru, where the Aladinma had to stop meeting because of the tussle for kingship between two participants in the community. It is important to note that under Umuamadi was Oshichoko and Abalinaohe, which made up Umuamadi, and the two came together for the Aladinma meeting. Umuamadi was supposed to present a candidate for the kingship, but the parties that lost felt dissatisfied with the outcome of the election. The election was a tussle and almost a do-or-die affair. Due to during the strain in the relationship between the two groups the election that took place in 2014, the Aladinma of Umuamadi went into extinction and has not surfaced since then (Desmond Ameachi, interviewed). This has left the community without a true judicial system. I also discovered during the course of my research that most of the documents were not properly managed, leading therefore to their damage. Aladinma has been in existence before the installation of ezes. However, the

newly installed eze, which started work in 1970 and with the creation of different clans in 1979, which led to the installation of more ezes to oversee the communities, began to take up the duty of Aladinma. It is important to note that their existence initially did not constitute a threat to Aladinma, but as time went on, people referred their cases to the eze rather than Aladinma. The kings now take up the responsibility of settling disputes among their clan members. Aladinma was built on openness as it was the collective effort of community men to ensure that there was peace in the society. However, there is less enthusiasm on the part of the people to expose evil, especially in cases relating to their children or friends. Another challenge to the Aladinma system was that gender roles were not factored into it. Although women's cases were entered and their opinions counted during the peace process, it is pertinent to note that women were not allowed to hold any high-ranking leadership positions in the system. Thus, this hindered the system from having the leadership impact of women. Corrupted elites who are bent on changing the rules to favor them have sought a crooked means of justice. Thus, since the members of the Aladinma system are hardly bought over, most of the elites seek to patronize the modern court system to seek and obtain justice. Equally, the presence of other alternative peacebuilding institutions such as Umuada, Ozo Title Holders, Council of Elders, etc., has hindered the patronage of this system. These institutions are patronized more often by its members since Aladinma is not membership-based. Other peacebuilding institutions try as much as possible to promote peace among their members, reducing the rate of patronage of the Aladinma system. Equally, Aboh Mbaise people's embracement of Christianity has imparted the system. Most Christian churches have different association domiciles in them. These groups represent different genders in society and equally seek to promote peaceful coexistence among its neighbors. Some members of the Christian faith prefer taking their matters to their pastors or priests based on the belief that the latter hears from God. Equally, some church doctrines are against some of the practices of Aladinma. Chief among them is the swearing of an oath and offering sacrifices for appeasement. Equally, the introduction of Western systems such as prisons, police, courts, etc., has hindered the progress of Aladinma in the contemporary period. Most people prefer patronizing this system of peacebuilding institutions rather than the local one. Here, issues are

handled by those who are professional in the discharge of their duties. Aladinma has equally suffered from the absence of an enforcement authority that is obtainable in the Western systems. Most of the time, pronouncements are not fully pursued to the end, thereby affecting people's ability to use them to seek redress.

## **Conclusions And Recommendations**

All over the world, the desire for sustainable peace and development has been the major reason for the establishment of institutions in order to curtail level of violence in the society. Right from the colonial period in Africa down to the post-colonial era, there have been institutions for the promotion of peace. Aladinma, as has been established, is one of the institutions that promote peace and development, and since its existence in Aboh Mbaise, it has strived to ensure tranquility in the community. Aladinma peace initiatives in Aboh were not only limited to reconciliation and conflict resolution but also included development that would ensure and promote good living. This was displayed in Aladinma's ability to embark on developmental projects like building markets, electricity projects, and road building. However, in a bid to achieve this peace, there have been factors militating against the promotion of peace in Aboh Mbaise, some of which result from changes in the society. Aladinma heads need to in response to these challenges. Aladinma is very relevant, and its restructuring would necessarily need to be of great benefit to the people of Aboh who may not be able to afford to take their cases to court and also for resolving minor issues which would not be taken to court. Its impacts in times past have proven that when restructured, it would serve the people effectively. Therefore, it is the duty of the leaders of Aladinma and members of the community to ensure the sustenance of Aladinma. The following recommendations have been made based on the findings of the research work.

- The leaders of Aladinma should strategize on how to effectively punish offenders. They should not let an offender go free without carrying out the punishment given to them because when such a room is created, it creates in the mind of the other community a picture that they could do anything and get away with it.

- The leaders should also ensure that they are objective in carrying out judgments that are not biased. This would encourage community members to patronize the local court. Having noticed that the meetings are scheduled for Monday mornings, the time and day could be shifted to weekends, when it would not interrupt the jobs of community white-collar workers. This has been used as an excuse not to attend meetings. Members of the communities also need to be educated on the need to expose evil and corrupt practices that have hindered the actualization of peace and development.
- There is a need to factor in gender roles in the leadership of the Aladinma system.
- Need to incorporate some modern peacebuilding strategies that will allow for the optimal operation of the Aladinma system. Thus, if well managed, the Aladinma system can provide an alternative to the modern court, which is filled with loads of cases that take years to be attended to.

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