



The smallest unit in the segmentary political system was the extended family with a common lineage; several extended families constituted a ward; and many wards formed a village. The affairs of a village community were controlled by four major institutions: the general assembly of all citizens, the council of elders, the age grades, and the secret societies, that acted as instruments of social control.

There was also the Umuada, a parallel body of women either married into the village or born there. The Umuada played a key role in decision making and implementation processes, as well as in maintaining the social values of the society. It was impossible, for instance, to make a decision on an issue that directly affected women or children without the consent of the Umuada.

Members of the council of elders were usually heads of extended families and were sometimes required to perform priestly functions. To this day, general assemblies of all citizens are a common feature of Igbo society. It is the duty of the town crier, wielding his gong, to go around the village in the evening after villagers have returned from their farms to summon everyone to the village square at a specified time. The purpose of the assembly is often tersely stated. At the village square, elders outline an issue in detail and the people are expected to air their views as forthrightly as possible, until a consensus is achieved. Neither the elders, the secret societies, nor the age grades could drag the village into a war or armed conflict without first consulting a general assembly for a decision. The small scale of Igbo social institutions made true democracy possible. According to historian Isichei, "one of the things that struck the first Western visitors to Igboland was the extent to which democracy was truly practiced. An early visitor to a Niger Igbo town said that he felt he was in a free land, among a free people." Another visitor, a Frenchman, said that true liberty existed in Igboland, though its name was not inscribed on any monument.

Despite the segmentary lineage system of the Igbo, there existed links which brought several groups together as one people. Chief among these links were marriage and trade. [West Africa in general is known for its tradition of women traders — Ed.] Igbo custom and tradition encouraged intervillage marriage. Of the greatest importance in forging bonds of unity among the Igbo were the oracles, who served to bring them together to common shrines.

Being forest-dwelling people, Igbos grew enough food to feed themselves, using communal labor provided by both the age grade and extended family systems. Igbo social organization, like that of the Niger Delta people, Tiv, and Tallensi, manifested a definite inclination toward leadership as opposed to authority. Yet there were a few exceptions in Igboland, like the Onitsha and Nri communities, that had their own chiefs.

