



## Bridging the Gap between the Rich and the Poor through Social Welfare: Learning from Esan-Nigeria Indigenous Models

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### **Abstract:**

*This article examines contemporary social welfare schemes in relation to the age-old communal living of the indigenous people of Esan in Edo State of Nigeria. It establishes through specific examples that right from time immemorial the people had established models of helping one another in every facet of their lives. The study used ethnographic method which includes the interview, observational technique and group discussion in eliciting data. It was found that modern living occasioned by Christianity and other forces of acculturation has impinged on their traditional lives which is fast eroding their collective lifestyles. While cultural dynamism cannot be ruled out or is it possible to halt cultural borrowing and adaptation of cultures, the speed at which Esan belief systems are fading is disturbing. Consequently, the core values of the people should be reenacted and preserved the government, its agencies and traditional rulers as custodians of the people's culture.*

**Keywords:** *Social welfare, Esan, Indigenous models, Collective living*

### **Introduction**

This paper adopts a simple style of presentation so that all will be carried along in a coherent form irrespective of social, cultural and geographical location. Basically, a salient set of questions will be raised to guide our focus. Contingent on this, we would within the ambit of this presentation ask the following questions: Who are the Esan people and how old are they? What is social welfare? What is indigenous knowledge system? What do we mean by indigenous models? Do we have such examples? if yes, could you tell of some? Are these practices still palpable in their everyday lives? If not, why is it so, and what should be done to

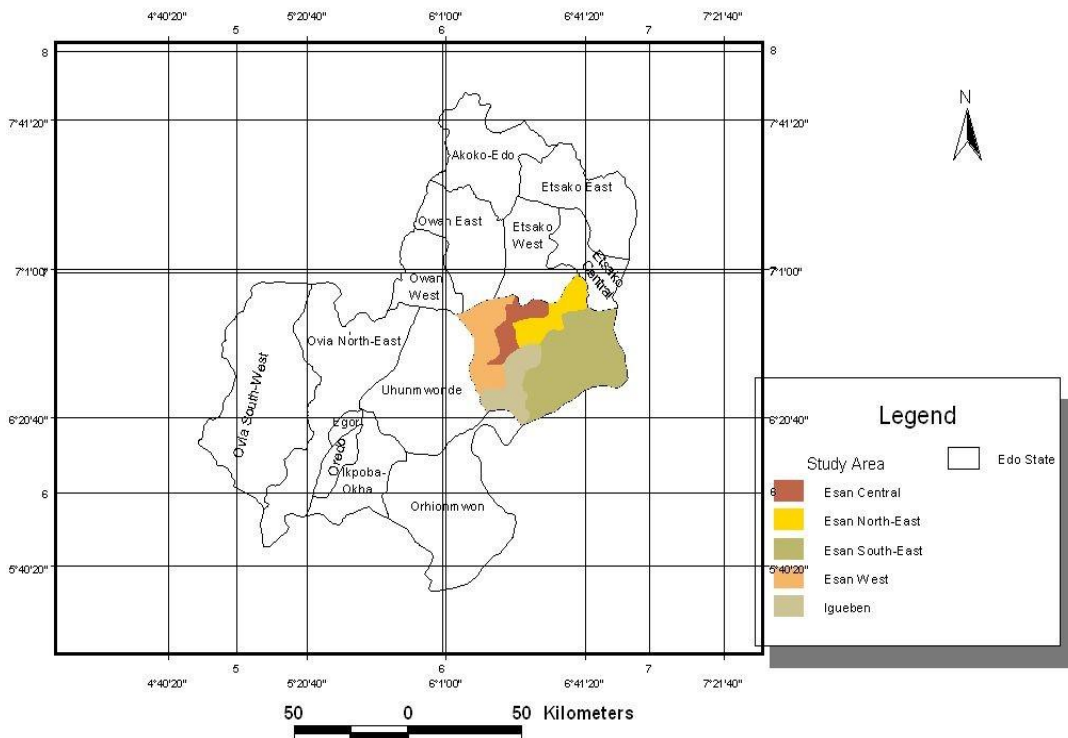


resuscitate them? How do we employ human resource application in preserving the people’s cultural construct? What if we apply the principle of progressive traditionalism in the development of Esan-sensed social welfare? These issues are what we intend to interrogate in this presentation.

### **The Esan in Historical and Geographic Sense**

The term Esan conjures two meanings. It is nomenclatural for a territory occupied by a people found in a landmass of about 2,814 square kilometres (Oseghale, 2019), that are found in the Edo Central Senatorial District, whose neighbours are the Benins, Owans, Etsakos and Igbos of Delta State and across the river Niger. Esan is also a language spoken in the locale already delineated above. From a historical perspective, the Esan is generally believed to be of Edoid extraction (Okojie 1994 and Okoduwa, 1997). They are said to have migrated from Benin Empire at different periods and the first batch of such migrations which may have happened in 1025BC met some inhabitants at Egbelle in Uromi (Ojiefoh, 2002). Below is a map showing the study area.

**Map of Edo State Showing the Study Area**



**A map of Esanland-The Study Area**



## **Methods and Materials**

This study benefits greatly from the ethnographic method of data gathering. It was found appropriate for use considering the main objectives that we intended to achieve. Thus, the interview, observational technique and group discussion were employed in eliciting data that was subsumed in this work. The study area was stratified into five areas in consonance with the five Local Government Areas (LGAs). Esan which is made up of thirty- five autonomous kingdoms are administered by their kings. Four towns each were selected from the local government areas and each administrative headquarters were chosen along three other kingdoms for investigation. Informants were drawn from a widespread spectrum of some monarchs, chiefs, elderly (males and females), youths (males and females). Armed with audio recorder and already prepared questions to guide interactions on the field, a total of twenty towns were investigated. Of the twenty towns, five were urban and the rest fifteen were rural. In the opinion of the researcher 20 out of 35 towns forms 57% coverage of the field. These towns were selected based on specific factors such as areas that were safe to visit considering the current security challenges in the locale of investigation and areas where indigenous cultural practices could still be gleaned. Furthermore, a review of relevant literature was done to corroborate findings from the field and to strengthen the study.

## **What is Social Welfare?**

Put simply, the Merriam Webster English dictionary defines social welfare as: organized public or private social services for the assistance of disadvantaged groups. In a strict sense, Social welfare could be defined as the many programs that are designed to help people in need of goods and services that they are unable to provide for themselves. Local, state, and federal government programs are available. There are also organizations that are operated by volunteers, many of which are non-profit agencies. Additionally, there are charitable institutions that are formed by religious organizations, like churches.

## **Why Social welfare?**

With social welfare, individuals and communities are able to survive and poverty is broken. People will then have access to food, shelter, good healthcare that would have been over and above their reach. According to Hall (2021), Currently in America, there are major welfare



programs and they are: Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicaid, housing assistance, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EIC). These programs provide income, food, housing assistance for people in need of help.

Put differently, Social welfare includes healthcare, empowerment, housing and other programs geared towards assisting the poor, unemployed and marginalized in society. Such programs include Medicaid, AFDC (Aid for families with dependent children), WIC (women, infants and children) programs, veteran programs and others.

(<https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/library/socialwelfarepolicy>).

Looking at the Nigerian scenario one would easily observe that not much has been achieved at the various tiers of government. Ekpe (1983) observed that ‘at present, social welfare services are provided by (1) the family system, (2) voluntary agencies (missionaries and international agencies) and (3) government. Individually or collectively, these three systems provide social welfare services to Nigerians’. The degree of government involvement in social welfarism is quite unclear. From Sure-P, N-power to trader money, all we see is perfunctory handling of a matter so delicate in nature.

Even in this epoch, what we read is: Social welfare activities in Nigeria are largely undeveloped, poorly funded, and neglected and that the services available are grossly inadequate. Beyond poor funding and inadequacy of funds is lack of transparency in its management.

### **Definition of Indigenous Knowledge and Its Scope**

To Mushi (2009), African indigenous education is a process of passing among the tribal members and from one generation to another the inherited knowledge, skills, cultural traditions norms and values of the tribe. Today, not much is appreciated of IKS because we feel that it is inferior to standard practices of the west. This is of course why Bruce and Baloyi (2017) remarked that “for a very long time, indigenous knowledge systems have suffered a high measure of neglect”. It may be normal as our constant apologia to blame the missionaries, imperial and other forces of acculturation for the wilt of IKS. This judgement may be hasty because even the indigenes under whose watch the people’s collective art has vanished into oblivion have questions to answer for this grave ineptitude (Aluede 2023). A lot of people



believe that indigenous knowledge is nothing but the conjuration of ancient mysticism and everything profane. Anyone in this class needs to learn from Emeagwali (2014:1), who opined that, Indigenous Knowledge Systems are not confined to the material sphere but are often interconnected with spiritual and non-material realms of existence. The duo, Emeagwali & Shizha (2016:6) observe that:

Scientific knowledge in whatever form, definition and cultural context it may exist, is found in all societies. Each society has its own way of categorizing and labelling types of knowledge. However, in African indigenous communities, knowledge is often treated as a holistic body of knowledge. African indigenous knowledge systems which are based on the natural environment and human practices for human sustainable development, are intrinsically interrelated.

To have a near-good idea of African indigenous knowledge, and indeed the indigenous knowledge as it is in Esan, we need to basically grow in the understanding that as the world is spherical so is the Esan construct of knowledge and this reasoning enables us not to dichotomize or demarcate boundaries in holistic knowledge acquisition.

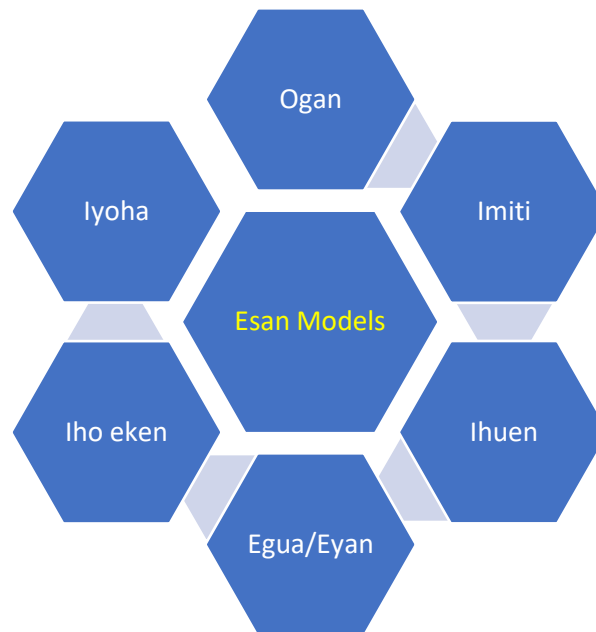
### **The Strands of Indigenous Knowledge in Esanland and Some Lessons for the Day**

The contribution of Abah, Mashebe and Denuga (2015) is quite insightful when they acknowledge that indigenous knowledge systems constitute the core of community–development processes in agriculture, the preservation of food, collection and storage of water, animal husbandry and ethnic veterinary medicine. It also forms the basis of indigenous interpretation of meteorological and climatic phenomena, orientation and navigation on land and sea as well as in the management of natural resources. The Esan of old thrived on the basic principles of *Oya -i de ughele mhan* (poverty will neither come near nor overtake our land), *Anegbemun* (let's help one another), *Akugbe -Ahu* (unity/togetherness is power) to mention a few. These principles are acknowledged in their age-old proverbs like- *Oboria i sa re kpi ikeke no sen* (one's hand cannot wash one's back perfectly) and *Obo bha so okhun, aki ha ti aden to obhio oria* (when one's hand is unable to pluck fruits from a tall tree, the services of go to hell, the good companion of a farmer will be sought) to mention a few. To buttress this point is the often-told story of the Ighalan angler and the big fish which alludes to the fact that collective family and communal living has been the underlying factor responsible for mutual



coexistence in Esan<sup>1</sup>. Thus, there were mechanisms to reduce destitution, infertility, and other social dysfunctional issues to the minimum.

By Esan social welfare indigenous models (EISWM), we mean some of the indigenous practices carved out by Esan ancestors which are aimed at solving social, economic, cultural, religious and ethnomedical issues. These are what we intend to further discuss in this section below.



**Figure 2: A Diagram of Esan Indigenous Social Welfare Models (EISWM)**

***Ogan/ Anegbemu***

In some parts of Esan, *Ogan*, could mean net and in some others *Ogan* is also known as *Anegbemu* which is a local manual cooperative effort where a group of persons could come together to work in concert for themselves on rotational bases. It is the latter that we are

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<sup>1</sup> An Ighalan angler was said to have caught a big fish in one of his fishing expeditions. While he was trying to pull the fish out of the water, the fish was also forcefully pulling him into the river. At that point, he then raised an alarm telling his people that they should come to his aid because if the fish should elude him, it will be a great loss to the entire Ighalan people. And so his people actually came to his rescue and the big fish was caught and brought home.



currently concerned with. This model is hinged on mutuality. The members of the group may not be of the same energy capacity but the evolution of the group is borne out of the drive to survive.

### ***Imiti amun ne gbe***

If translated *verbatim et literatim* it means a traditional thrift where a loan is given to members based on immediate needs. This meeting is a form of local economic cooperative effort where members identify those in critical need for financial aid who are first given such contributions to mitigate their wants. This shows that everyone was concerned about one another.

### ***Ihuen***

Food stamp which is synonymous with American hospitality (Isaacs, 2018), has its variant in Esan. Although this idea is not institutionalized in the American way, as our neighbor's keepers, kind-hearted and prosperous farmers in most communities give out gift of yams to widows and the aged. Beyond this, other ebullient farmers clear, burn and clear off every debris on the fields and then give them to widow, the weak and feeble to cultivate.

### ***Ine e gua nu re eyan mhen re hon***

*Let me help you harvest your yams that you may give me yams to plant in my farm.*

It is a matter of fact that money has never been enough in the hands of humans. For want of money to buy yam seedlings people provide services to other prosperous farmers for which they are paid by being given seedlings on a given ratio. More interesting is that some people who may have had health issues within a given year often had their farms tended by the agnatic kinsmen. These are apt examples of being a brother's keeper.

### ***Iho eken/ Iyan uwa***

Communal house building schemes where kinsmen in an agnatic family setup come together to help match laterite soil to erect houses for community dwellers once they have evidence of having bought corrugated iron sheets to immediately roof their structures as soon as they are erected.

### ***Iyoha***

Pawning system where people do not sell their properties or economic crops outrightly but could be reclaimed at any time once the borrowed amount is repaid was the hallmark of Esan identity and civilization.



If asked whether such models are still palpable in Esan contemporary communities, an affirmative answer may be difficult to get. They are wilting away rapidly. There are a couple of reasons why these models and age-old practices are eclipsing. Some of such reasons are:

1. The displacement of traditional structures by missionaries who were in a hurry to replace the people's religious, social and cultural mechanisms they knew<sup>2</sup> little about.
2. The unreserved embracement of modern living by the natives which was characterized by thinking of self above the collective whole.
3. The introduction of a competitive educational system which then shaded into all other facets- a system which strived to identify the sharp and the dull, the strong and the weak as against the people- oriented format and ways of doing things. This is however not to say that there has never been inequality in Esan. But the dimension which it has assumed in today's Esan has the finger of personalized reasoning associated with the Western culture.
4. The general impression that traditional ways of doing things are inferior to the modern ways and so everything about the former should be discarded in favor of the latter has a catastrophic effect on Esan belief system.

The above points notwithstanding, it will be wrong to say that the situation is either totally hopeless or in a state of irreversible paralysis. Quite a lot can still be done to remedy the situation. For example, the principal actors which we would ordinarily like to blame for our current quagmire have since put in place working social welfare mechanisms for their people- a model that other nations now struggle to emulate. The situation is not entirely hapless. Modifying or enhancing the indigenous models through the application of progressive traditionalism may be helpful. Emielu (2018), challenged the notion of rigidity and fixity by showing how dance bands are redefining traditional music through innovations. So, these traditional models could be renovated or at best improved upon. This could be achieved through human resources application. This principle has to do with certain individuals who may have studied in faraway lands and who were taught using examples that are not tangential to their situation. But the onus is therefore on those individuals to reterritorialize and domesticate their thinking in the service of their homelands. This is certainly why we are here gathered today as

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<sup>2</sup> They abolished polygyny but did not provide alternatives to what that tradition was meant for and only recently have they started thinking of old people's homes when indeed their aged shepherds have been enjoying such for many decades.





the story we are set to tell is that of giving back to the land, paying attention to the level of identifying one's people's challenge, supporting one's people and providing a sholder for another to lean on.

### **Conclusion:**

In this lecture, we examined social welfare as it is in some other lands, we also interrogated indigenous knowledge systems, Esan social welfare concept and models. We discovered that although there are available records of communality in the day to day Esan living in the past which has almost been asphyxiated by multiplicity of variables already identified above. To retrace our steps and be on the path of rectitude in Esan sense, some decisive steps need to be taken. Local government authorities, traditional rulers, community heads, elders and Esan patriots should come together to formulate or develop achievable/workable models that are Esan-sensed which will incorporate the Esan indigenous social welfare models. Such models should be of benefit to all. Immediately after the Nigerian civil war of 1966-1970, came the mantra: To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done. In the past decade, we have been told frequently that the issue of security is the business of every body and today, we are waking up to the realization that the government can not do it all. It is therefore very instructive and important that we do a rethink and emulate the initiative of our forebears by giving back to one's community. In all that we do we should be reminded by that our candle loses nothing when it lights another (Maxwell) and that a society is not poor because they do not have but because they do not care for each other (Fr. Angelo Chidi Unuegbu, 2023).



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