

## NEW INSIGHTS INTO KINGSHIP IN IGBOLAND

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### Abstract

*For many years, owing to the scarce attention given to Igbo studies, the predominant narrative is that of a people without kings. This paper seeks a reinterpretation of that idea, with a counter narrative, that in pre-colonial Igboland, kings had existed in some communities, exercised imperial control and jurisdiction side by side with other societies with acephalous leadership. The paper contends that the seamless transition to a full blown institutionalisation of monarchical administration in almost all communities in Igboland is in part, a confirmation of the existence of Chiefs in previous epochs before the arrival of colonialism. The paper argues that in the case of the Igbo, the title of Eze is not arbitrary, and tyrannical or despotic, but one that grew out of the egalitarian and republican orientation of the Igbo people.*

**Keywords:** Acephalous, Centralised, *Igbo enwe Eze*, *Igbo nwere Eze*, Republicanism and Stateless

### Introduction

The history of Igbo kingship is replete with different perspectives which could be summarized along two main opposing themes, namely (a) the Igbo in their traditional setting were seen as stateless (Horton, 1976) or acephalous, a people without kings (Henderson, 1977), and (b) a people who had very rich history of kingship as epitomized in the *Nri* Monarchy (Onwuejeogwu, 1981). Much of the historical narratives tended to suggest that the Igbo existed without having kings as symbol of authority, but a further probing of these presentations point clearly to something else as Basden had observed about *Nri* in his concise work in 1921, "Among the Ibos of Nigeria". The latter certainly is a name well known over a considerable portion of the Ibo country. It is the name of a small town which is the headquarters of a priestly cult whose special functions are associated with the coronation of kings, hence "Nri" men (priests) being travelers, were met with frequently" (p.27). This lends credence to the assertions of Onwuejeogwu that kings had existed several centuries before the coming of the European explorers, and lately the British Colonial Administration". Our task therefore is to properly situate the different trajectories of Igbo kingship. The reference to the Igbo as acephalous and stateless without kings by European writers, may not be correct, as their description only matched what they saw in a given epoch, but which reflected indigenous socio-political units that emerged from ancient Igbo kingdoms and states (Umeh, 1999).

## **The Igbo People**

The questions 'Who are the Igbo?', and 'Where did they originate from?' have always instigated different emotional responses. Isichei, (1996) in one of the earliest works on the Igbo had this to say in response, 'no historical question arouses more interest among present day Igbo than the preceding inquiry'. There is therefore no unanimity of opinions or views among historians and anthropologists on the origin of the Igbo, as some claimed that they sprouted from the ground, or dropped from heaven (Onwuejeogwu, 1981). Amongst the Awka people, it is common to hear them eulogize their origin by saying that their forefathers came from nowhere, but rather sprouted from the ground. This difficulty in strictly pinpointing the exact source of Igbo origin has been attributed to the scant attention given to it by scholars. Afigbo (1981) contended that the Igbo are perhaps the least studied of any African people with same size and spread. In the beginning of the last century, Basden (1982) had put the Igbo population more than four million people, which indeed constituted more than half of the population of Southern Nigeria. Being largely preliterate then, not having any documentation except through oral tradition, much of Igbo history did not survive the vicious mesh of traditions (Imoagene, 1990) or the migrations and dispersals.

However, we observe that the Igbo are a conglomeration of perhaps disparate people from two main sources or directions, one from Nri-Awka axis, while the other came from the Benin axis. These two sources are not exhaustive, but they fall into the mainstream of commentaries by historians on the subject matter. It is possible, and reasonable to hypothesize that the seemingly bipolar migratory directions informed the different political governance structures, or systems like centralized and uncentralized political systems which gave birth to corresponding social organization. Amongst an ethnic or racial group, it is however possible to observe a coexistence of centralized and uncentralized political systems, as seen among the Igbo. Therefore, Levine's (1966) lumping or categorization of the Igbo as having no centralized political system may be farther from the truth. It is meet to highlight further three of the myths that have been used to support the different orientations of Igbo origin. One of them which had been identified earlier, traced the Igbo origin to Nri-Awka-Orlu Complex as being the epicentre from which the Igbo dispersed. The Nri people traced their progenitor to Gad, son of Zilpah, maidservant of Jacob's wife Leah, who also gave birth to Eri, the founder of Nri clan. Talbott and Mulhall (1962), Onwuejeogwu (1981) reiterated the view that Nri-Awka axis was the original dominant place of abode for Igbo, from where they spread to other places. Isichei (1976) also believed that the Igbo did not come from any other place than his present abode. The Igbo, according to Talbott have no tradition of migration from anywhere else, as they appear to have settled in the thickly populated parts of Nri-Awka for a very long period, and must have spread from there. They are not known to have come from elsewhere to Awka, and this may have informed the opinions of several leading writers like Jones to make reference to the Awka area as the core or centre from where the Igbo dispersed to Udi Highlands, and to the riverine coastal areas (Imoagene, 1970).

Some other commentators led by Afigbo (1981) were of the view that given the disparate characteristics of different Igbo communities, it is more reasonable to suggest a mix grill of origins, where different groups came into what is today the Igbo territory from

different migratory routes and directions. The other narrative is the eastward movement from Benin to the bank of River Niger, and from the Northern frontiers of Igboland (Eluwa, 2008). Achufusi, another historian tried to trace the source of Igbo origin to the Lake Chad region, while some others have tried to link it with the lost tribe of Judah (Eluwa, 2008).

...that migrations from either Egypt or Canaan into what is now Nigeria were very likely to pass through the Lake Chad region. Therefore, a possible settlement there of remnants of the migration would account for the characteristics of the people in that area which might have inspired the suggestion about it being a possible place of Igbo origin" (Eluwa, 2008:54).

Concerted efforts have been made by many perhaps for emotive attachments to the JudeoChristian religion, and its dominance to try to link, even forcibly claim, that the Igbo are the direct descendants of the Israeli Jews. They point to some cultural similarities, circumcision and others as evidence of affinal relationships and genealogical ties. Recently, attempts have been made by Igbo living in Israel to obtain judicial affirmation of the Jewishness of the Igbo, even though the court failed to grant that order. This effort was considered laughable by Osagie Jacobs, as a vainglorious attempt at making up (cited by Chukwuokolo, 2019). This viewpoint is buttressed by Eluwa (2008:66) who highlighted that there are two Middle East related elements in Igbo culture, particularly the Hebraic element as epitomized in the circumcision of Igbo male children on the eighth day. It is therefore possible to trace the Igbo origin to Canaan, a land that was described as flowing with milk and honey, which inevitably attracted successive wars from different peoples and communities. These were Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians and Babylonians leading to the massive dispersals down to the lower Niger region. It was also a period which coincided with development in iron technology, which these migratory groups had mastered and which helped them in their journey down the lower Nile region. Eluwa therefore concludes that most probably, the Igbo had taken off from the Egyptian region which in those days around the period 4,000 BCE (Eluwa, 2008) embodied areas around Palestine, for the Igbo to have also benefitted from the Hebrew culture.

Given the above description and the variety of sources, I am persuaded to believe that there is no single unilineal direction of Igbo ancestry, and that the Igbo people today may have come from different directions, cohabiting and assimilating cultural patterns and practices that became mutually intelligible. This explains why till date there is hardly univocality as to who was the arch patriarch of the Igbo (Chukwuokolo, 2019:3). This is particularly so, given that the Igbo may have arrived in this present abode long, and far in time, that memories may have receded, or become very dim, against the backdrop of a reinforced oral and preliterate history.

### **Methodology**

The paper is largely a qualitative historical research derived largely from secondary sources including government documents, archival sources, and oral traditions. A review of historic and ethnographic records (Lancy, 2012) are used to unearth critical materials that are very relevant to the study.

### **Pre-Colonial Igbo Political Worldview/Theoretical Orientation**

The political behaviour of any ethnic or racial group in contemporary African nation states, must be situated in the dynamic of precolonial society and its evolution over time (Nwankwo, 1993). Nwankwo goes further to argue that the tradition of political governance of any constituent social group even in modern political systems is to be understood and evaluated within the confines of history as well as limitations engendered by environmental requirements, or demands. The material character, or mode of production is the fundamental base of power relations in any society, and that informs to a great deal the way political governance is perceived and practiced. There is however a dialectical relationship between politics, and prevalent set of values. In other words, cultural values produce behaviour patterns which shape political institutions and, in turn, the institutions determine both political values and political behaviour. Thus, values in Igbo tradition of politics are embedded in Igbo culture (Kalu, 1993).

Igbo socio-political organization stemmed from the families, extended family structures, lineages, clans and village groups to whole communities. As pointed out earlier, the Igbo have been seen in the mold of village democracies or egalitarian societies, where every son of the soil (free born) had almost equal rights like the other. Although social inequality was not as intense as it is presently, there is no doubt that in traditional Igbo societies, there were also clear and distinct stratification types that tended to exclude some persons from having a voice, talk less being included in the political sphere. Green (1964) had asserted that beneath the façade of Igbo egalitarianism, are located the outcasts or *Osu*, a caste system that precludes the freeborn from having any relationship whatsoever with an *Osu*. In ranking, the *Oru* is on a higher pedestal than the *Osu* which till date is still observed in some communities even with the missionary resistance offered by Christianity.

In understanding Igbo political worldview, it is pertinent to consider the typologies presented by Ogbu Kalu which include (a) those with a monarchical state system (Onitsha, Oguta, Nri, Ossomari, Arochukwu, etc). The king had a graded cabinet and often used a secret society as an executive arm. Ozo titled men were not automatically advisers, (b) those in which the village chiefs ruled with titled people (*nze na ozo*) as advisers, often consulting the people and the women (*Umuada*) and using some secret societies as enforcement agencies, (c) those in which the village chiefs ruled with representatives of family heads members of a key secret society, and (d) those in which the village chiefs ruled with representatives of the autochthonous families and with the oldest age grade. The next two age grades acted as the executive arm while the populace and women shared in decision making (Kalu, 1993). To all intents and purposes, there are in reality amongst Igbo communities' different complexions of these patterns, and even more. The origin of the Igbo is however not the central point of concern here, but rather the route of kingship in Igboland, and the consolidation of monarchic rule.

The institution of the traditional ruler is given impetus by the notion of patriarchy. Patriarchy is defined by Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as a social system in which men have all the power. In patriarchal societies, inheritance is usually through the male line, to the total exclusion of the womenfolk. Women's exclusion from the

traditional stool is amplified by the very idea of patriarchy and what it represents, a system of social order, initiated, organized and dominated by men. In patriarchal societies, men supposedly are the custodians and executors of political power and privileges. It is founded on the premise that men, traditionally are heads of the households, given directives and direction as to the course of society, while women are generally seen as subordinate or *oliaku* (one who enjoys the wealth of the spouse or specifically husband). The *Eze* stool in Igboland is an extension of patriarchy or its physical manifestation. Patriarchy existed side by side with the issue of fatherhood, and in Igboland has continued to enjoy currency and preeminence.

The theory of patriarchy is reinforced by the political economy perspective (O'Connory, 1976) in its persuasive insights on the nature of power and authority, how it is wielded, and to what purpose. It is seen that those who have acquired traditional authority in Igboland are those with immense material resources that they have used to get initiated into the different titles and societies that entitle them to take a shot at the coveted stool.

### **Igbo Kingship in Pre-Colonial Era**

The often-touted statement, "traditional Igbo communities do not have kings (*Igbo enwe eze*) is seen by many commentators in Igbo culture, tradition and governance, as a misrepresentation of the Igbo worldview, and more precisely, an extension of the carryover of the colonial mentality of culturally defrocking the Igbo. Evidence abounds of established, thriving kingdoms in several communities in Igboland before the encounter with the white man. Onumonu (2016) argues persuasively that in some parts of Igboland, kingship system, or even monarchic tradition is an imperishable heritage right from pre-colonial to the post-colonial eras. This was particularly seen among the Olu-Igbo communities who by 1461, more than Five hundred and fifty years ago had established flourishing monarchies. These communities lived on both sides of the banks of the River Niger. Established monarchies were seen in Onitsha, Ogbaru, Oguta, Osammala, etc. For the Olu-Igbo, the defining feature of their historiography, is not in its attractive arquefact and rich ecology, but majorly on the sacred institution of royalty. The Olu-Igbo had traditional heads (Obis) that commanded respect and obeisance from their subjects, although they were not dictators and tyrants, they could not have been, against the backdrop of the freedom loving, republican oriented subjects that populated their domains. The Onitsha Royalty, where Obi Nnaemeka Achebe (Agbogidi) currently sits atop the throne has been on for more than Five hundred years.

In Igbo hinterland, the Nri dynasty which has been traced to have lasted more than a thousand years (Onwuejeogwu, 1981; Isichei, 1976) is another classic example of thriving monarchies before the arrival of the colonialists. Nwanunobi (1992:117) had this to say about Nri

Specifically, the Nri society in Eastern Nigeria is an example of a Chiefdom with powerful central authority and a widespread influence that enabled it to intervene even in areas beyond its borders" ...He further emphasized "Chiefdoms are most

often marked by sedentary horticulture, mixed pastoralism, and even by productive and organized hunting. They are also characterized by the existence of separate and almost fulltime craft villages or craft households. There is in Chiefdoms a careful ranking of clans, descent groups and sometimes ranking of lineages into older and younger branches as the basis for dispensing patronage. Not only is there job or craft differentiation, but there is also individual differentiation and inequality.

It is clear that given the existence of established monarchical rule in Nri and other communities in Igboland, lumping the Igbo and describing them as stateless or acephalous is somewhat fallacious. As Horton (1976) had incisively pointed out in his definition of stateless, it is clear that Nri type societies cannot be grouped under that category. Horton's four-point definition of stateless is illustrative to wit:

- (i) "In a stateless society there is little concentration of authority. It is difficult to point to any individual or limited group of men as the ruler or rulers of the society,
- (ii) Such authority roles as exist affect a rather limited section of the lives of those subject to them. (iii) The wielding of authority as a specialized, fulltime occupation is virtually unknown. (iv) The unit within which people feel an obligation to settle their disputes according to agreed rules, and without recourse to force tends to be relatively small" (p.72).

Although the precolonial Nri monarchy did not enslave their subjects, but whether it exercised considerable influence over its subjects and impacted on their lives and social organization is not in doubt. It is possible that the Agbala oracle of Awka which was feared and dreaded across Igboland, just like Ibino Ukpabi oracle of Arochukwu, may have received impetus from the Nri monarchy for Nri's source of strength was not premised on control over coercive instruments of violence, but on the spiritual. For the maintenance of chiefly authority, the claim of supernatural support rather than the use of actual force (Nwanunobi, 1992) provides the motif force for cohesion and integration.

Nwanunobi's (1992) argument that in chiefdoms, there is a decline of sodalities, as well as the importance of clans, and more so, that chiefdoms are inherently unstable, cannot be said to be true with respect to the well-known longevity of Nri dynasty. What has rather been observed is the resilience of most of the chiefdoms in Igboland before colonial rule, as no evidence existed as to their conquest or dismemberment. At least it was not rife. What is clear is that with chiefdoms, there was a growing rise of male authority, or patriarchy as it is commonly called, increasing significance of kingship and a consequential decline of feminine power.

In other places in Igbo hinterland such as Ihiala, Oluoha, the paramount ruler of Ihiala people was on the throne when the British colonial officials arrived the scene. Also, there were traditional monarchies in different places like Arochukwu, Agbor, Issele-Ukwu, Akwu-Ukwu, IsselleAzagbu, Aboh, etc. In these communities, the traditional ruler, known traditionally as Obi, Eze, Igwe, etc was the undisputed head, who however administered their communities in consultation with titled officials and elders (*Ndi nze na ozo*), who acted

as advisers to the *Eze* to forestall overconcentration of power in one individual, leading to monarchical absolutism or tyranny which the Igbo, by their very nature, given their republican spirit and upbringing were averse to. The Igbo traditional rulers in those days were not totally receptive to the new colonial masters, who devised other means to supplant and undermine them. The point needs to be restated for the sake of emphasis that there were more than Sixty-four kingdoms existing in Igbo culture area, between AD 900 – 1900 (Onwuejeogwu, 1981) which the British met when they arrived, and this clearly shows that the Igbo were not without kings as they were erroneously depicted by the British.

### **Igbo Kingship During the Colonial Period**

Pursuant to the policy of indirect rule (official policy of British colonial administration) given the obvious shortage of manpower, and in a bid to replicate what was being practiced in Northern and Western Regions of Nigeria, the British Colonial Government created and appointed new chiefs, known as warrant chiefs to superintend over the different communities in Igboland. Without any iota of nobility, both in blood, lineage and conduct, not having any experience or training, the warrant chiefs acted like fish out of water, behaved in ways unbecoming of traditional heads, and totally at variance with customs, traditions and mores of the communities. The contradictions inherent in the authority of the warrant chiefs were highlighted by Afigbo (2001:17) who surmised the expectations and criteria precedent to crowning someone with titular responsibilities as *Eze*, *Obi* or *Igwe*. Thus “Headship or traditional authority as in Igbo kingship derives from one’s proper location through descent from the blood line. Such a position is given spiritual impetus by the Gods, ancestors, or *Ofo*. The *Eze* is seen as “*Aka ji ofo*”, “*Onye ishi ala*”, “*Onye nwe ala*”, which roughly translates to signify that the *Eze* is the custodian of not only the culture, but the head of the community, the trustee of the land.

The warrant chiefs were therefore not heads in any real sense, except as puppeteers of colonial administration, were not seen as *Eze* of their communities, and therefore could not command the obedience, loyalty and respect of the members of the communities. Most of them were held in contempt and largely derided. Rather than lead to consolidation of monarchical institution, the warrant chiefs were to all intents and purposes a negation, as their emergence was seen as usurpation of traditional authorities.

Whatever modicum of respect, that the warrant chiefs enjoyed, was in awe of the colonial authorities. They were overzealous, corrupt, as greedy and avarice characterized their daily conduct (Adegbulu, 2011). Given this scenario, it was not long before resentment and resistance mounted against the warrant chiefs culminating in their destooling, or dethronement, if ever there was a throne, in the first place.

### **Kingship in Post-Colonial Period**

Just before independence in 1960, with the achievement of internal self-government by the regions, the Eastern Nigeria, like the two other regions, Western and Northern, created a second legislative chamber, the House of Chiefs. The Government had sought the opinion of a renowned Anthropologist G. I. Jones who advised that in view of the existence of some traditional institutions, even among the minorities, a Regional House of Chiefs is desirable and should be created. On the basis of this recommendation, the Eastern Regional

government established the Eastern House of Chiefs, categorizing, although haphazardly, in an arbitrary manner, some first class, second class, etc without following any known laid criteria. The situation continued until the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War. All through the Civil War, and even after, outside the exigency of the war, no effort was made by the Ukpabi Administration to deepen and develop traditional chieftaincy institution, what was rather seen is an encouragement of Town Unions to pursue grassroots development (Eze, 2015). The government merely indicated interest or readiness to use chiefs in local government administration (Report of Committee on Chieftaincy Matters, 1976).

Soon after, the Federal Government of Nigeria set up Local Government Reform Committee, headed by Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki, to draw up modalities and guidelines for local government administration in the country. The East Central State Government constituted its own committee headed by renowned historian Prof Adiele Afigbo to advise government on the best way to implement the committee's recommendation. Prominent in the recommendations of the Afigbo Committee is the proposal for a fourth tier of Government, identified as autonomous communities with an officially recognized traditional ruler. This led to the promulgation by the State Government of Chieftaincy Edict No. 8 of Sept. 1976, published in the official gazette, No. 31, Vol. I of 25<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1976 (Eze, 2015).

The new edict tried to resolve some of the pitfalls inherent in the last chieftaincy policies including but not limited to designation of Traditional Ruler or Head as Traditional Office Holder – a vague term, and a recognition by the Administrator of only three traditional rulers in the entire East Central State, namely Obi of Onitsha, Eze Igwe of Oguta, and Eze Aro of Arochukwu, and lastly, the neglect or de-emphasis of tradition, customs in the appointment of chiefs, or more appropriately traditional heads (Harniet – Sievers, 1999). This neglect of the traditional institution was roundly condemned by the then new Head of State, General Murtala Mohammed, who cautioned that the “easiest way of accelerating our cultural decadence is to permit the decadence of chieftaincy institution”. He further maintained that traditional rulers are the custodians of our culture and the repositories of our folk wisdom (Report of the Committee on Chieftaincy, 1976).

The Afigbo Committee quickly settled down to work traversing the length and breadth of the state, interacting with stakeholders and finally presented a detailed report to the state government. To make its presentation lucid, it defined traditional ruler as a traditional head of an autonomous community, identified and selected by his people according to their own tradition, and usages, and recognized as such by the government (Report of the Committee on Chieftaincy Matters, 1976:8). The report also identified some fundamental facts that are necessary for proper selection of traditional rulers, which previous governments had failed to incorporate. These include: (a) that anybody recognized and addressed as chief by government must be chief of an identifiable autonomous group of people; (b) that the largest autonomous unit in indigenous Igbo political and administrative tradition is the town, at times called village group, and therefore that no chief should be made to exercise or be allowed to claim to exercise influence beyond the territorial confines of his town; (c) that a chief should be identified and selected by his people according to their traditional usages and custom. In this regard,

there was a widespread and passionate demand that government should ensure that the newly rich do not use their money to sweep traditional claims underground, and install themselves as chiefs; (d) that anybody selected as chief should enjoy the broad support of his people; (e) that a chief is not necessarily a leader or the type who can be elected chairman of a community council, or the President General of the Town Union. He is first and foremost a ceremonial figure symbolizing the unity of his people and their cultural identity (Report of the Committee on Chieftaincy, 1976: 8).

The 1976 Chieftaincy Edict also provided that autonomous communities should develop and submit a written Constitution and a Code of Conduct for the Traditional Ruler. The 1976 Chieftaincy Edict was a watershed, a revolutionary paradigm shift in the annals of traditional rulership in Igboland. It marked a turning point in Igbo cultural evolution. For the first time, in one fell swoop, all communities embraced the Ezeship with both hands. One may ask at this juncture, if the Igbo were stateless, and by extension headless, why was there no resistance to this development? Or even more contrarily, why did it take governmental fiat, or decree to mobilize the communities across the length and breadth of Igboland? The answer to this lies in the vacuum of contemporary governance in emerging Nigerian nation where the competing rivals, Yoruba and Hausa Fulani had similar establishments, and the fact that even in the people's history and consciousness, the Ezeship occupied interesting memories. One immediate outcome of this edict was a flurry of activities simultaneously in all communities, with many jostling for coveted positions of traditional head, *Igwe Obodo, Eze, Obi*. These positions were hotly contested, sometimes acrimoniously. In some communities, the strife, bitterness that developed left the communities divided, some still nursing the wounds of the chieftaincy tussle. Part of the problem came from the provisions of the edict, where the aspirant is expected to, and should, have popular appeal, the support of a broad spectrum of the people. In some communities, the traditional head was decided by election, often organized by the town union or the council of kingmakers. A traditional ruler that should be insulated from partisan politics is now thrown cruelly into the arena, a demystification of the embryonic coveted stool, with its attendant desecration of its sacredness and sanctity.

Sooner than later, it became an open sesame where the nouveau riche, urban contractors, and well to do traders, used the influence of money to railroad themselves into cornering the positions of Igweship. The usual refrain is "*Ana agba aka echi eze*", "*Onyi ubiam ona echi Eze*" roughly translated to mean that traditional leadership is not for the poor. In some other communities, however, restraint and reasoning prevailed and the community relying on culture, custom and usages of the people were able to enlist the best to mount the throne, some instances sending emissaries to the chosen one, pleading with him to accept to serve his people, for as Awka people would say *Eze fu ikpo afifia*. In other places, governments (military/civilian) have tried to influence the process, or abort it completely if they fail to enthrone their preferred choice of candidates. It is trite to say that the history of a people has a direct bearing on their indigenous political system and by extension social organization (Imoagene, 1990:19).

By 1979, just few years after the promulgation of the edict in the Old Anambra State, four hundred and five traditional rulers were given government recognition (Okeke, 1994). By 1981, the Chieftaincy Edict was amended by the State House of Assembly as the

Anambra State of Nigeria Traditional Rulers Law 1981. This law only permitted persons so recognized by the government to bear the title Igwe or Obi. With the creation of Anambra and Ebonyi States from the Old Anambra State, the kingship institution is brought further down, and closer to the people. In Imo and Abia States, the proliferation of traditional institution following the creation of several autonomous communities has tended to diminish the status and respect accorded to traditional institution. Every village, or clan, or extended family that satisfies the liberal conditions for having an autonomous community and a ruler is encouraged. In Anambra State, there are about 179 autonomous communities each with its own traditional head. An autonomous community refers to “a group of people inhabiting an identifiable geographical area or areas, comprising one or more communities and bound by a tradition and cultural way of life with a common historical heritage and recognized and approved as an autonomous community by the Government (Traditional Rulers and Autonomous Communities Law 1981, Imo State, cited in Inyama, 1993:223). The law stipulates that the identification, selection, appointment, and installation of the traditional ruler are exclusively the responsibility of the community. The community informs the local government chairman in writing, and presents publicly the candidate to him, after which the Council shall cause a letter to be sent to the Governor through the Commissioner of Local Government (Inyama, 1993). Thereafter, the onus rests on the Governor to issue staff of office and certificate of recognition. Once capped, the traditional ruler is supposed to conduct himself with decorum, and panache and royal splendor. “*Onye chi ozo, oso fva ifve da na ana*” which means that a titled man should abstain from dishonourable conduct. His duties have also been clearly spelt out in the Edict: (a) Representation of his community on ceremonial occasions (b) Receiving important visitors to the community (c) Presiding at cultural festivals in the community; (d) Acting as the custodian of culture, custom and tradition and advising the community on them; (e) Assisting in the maintenance of law and order; (f) Taking steps to reconcile disputing parties in civic matters whether or not such matters with the disputing parties brought to him for reconciliation are matters governed by law of the community; (g) Encouraging developmental projects in the community (h) Assisting the state and local governments in the collection of taxes (i) Promoting stability and peace in the community (j) Attending meetings summoned by the Chairman of the Local Government Area from time to time for the purpose of consultation and advise (Inyama, 1998: 224).

The functions given to traditional rulers are without doubt a mouthful. In some instances, traditional rulers are expected to identify, name, shame and arrest criminals, and social deviants in their communities. They are the Chief Security Officers in their domain. The position of traditional ruler is unarguably, the single most important position in any community. However, contemporarily, the traditional rulers rule with the Igwe in Council, or with the Cabinet, where different quarters/villages nominate representatives who are chosen as chiefs to work in league with the traditional ruler. The cabinet is headed by the *Onowu* or Prime Minister, who exercises authority on behalf of the *Igwe*, although some power hungry *Onowus* are beginning to see themselves as the alternate *Igwe*, or *Igwe* in waiting. The Town Union, home and abroad is also a major governance traditional centre.

In some communities, the titled men like Ozo Society, Age grades, women groups are involved in the administration of the community.

### ***Igbo Nwere Eze (Igbo Have Kings)***

Although there is no evidence of one all-encompassing powerful, centralized, hegemonic traditional institution holding sway all over the Igbo landscape, there is no doubt from historical facts and archaeological findings that a mixed grill of traditional governance existed in Igboland during different epochs. In some parts, well defined and established monarchical institutions presented a governance option well accepted by the people. The dynamics of the interplay of social forces within the context of a social formation, as thrown up by the dominant mode of production may be an explanatory route to the nature of Igbo chieftaincy which has consolidated over the years from a fledgling traditional institution. Speaking broadly, the kingship institution has grown tremendously, become very persuasive, that today, it seems inconceivable, or unthinkable to have an Igbo community without traditional ruler. The syncretic attachment to the traditional institution is such now, that wherever the Igbo are gathered, resident, or live, there is usually an *Eze Igbo* even as far flung as Western

Hemisphere, Australia and Asia. Some of these “Eze Igbo” in diaspora are loathed at home, for not having performed the expected rites and purification precedent to mounting the exalted office. Some even are recognized by the local Obas, Emirs where they reside as the mouthpiece of Igbo settlers given their itinerant lifestyle. They are gradually taking over the functions and activities of the town unions, having their own cabinet and conferring chieftaincy titles. I am aware that this practice has roundly been condemned by the traditional rulers of known autonomous communities as destruction of the Igbo kingship. It is however a new development that needs to be urgently curtailed. It is a mimicking of the *Seriki Hausawa* as seen in most areas where the Hausa Fulani live in Nigeria. Whether this is a mimicking of the traditional stool, or not, the point remains that the Igbo sentimental attachment to Igbo kingship is growing and becoming very strong. It is such attachment that the Igbo scout for different traditional rulers in different communities to cap them with chieftaincy titles as a mark of social standing, social arrival and acceptance. Against this background, and given the foretasted presentation, the term *Igbo enwe Eze* is therefore a misnomer, patently false and misleading. Nothing in Igbo republican spirit, or individualism rejects traditional institutions. Much of Igbo history rests on the collective consciousness, communal solidarity, and group pride. We can therefore conclude by saying *Igbo nwere Eze*, as the option of not having traditional institutions no longer exists. It is deeply engrained in the social structure of the Igbo people, and it is an institution that has come to stay.

### **Conclusion**

The ubiquity of the institution of Ezeship in Igboland contemporaneously with other known ethnic groupings in Nigeria with renowned monarchies (Emirs and Chiefs) tends to underlie the fact that traditional chieftaincy institution has come to stay in Igboland, and has become embedded in the social structure of the people. The Nri dynasty, and many other kingdoms in Igboland which predated the onslaught of colonial penetration in

Igboland with its concomitant effects are eloquent testimonies to the existence of *Ndi eze* in Igboland.

The trajectory of the development of kingship institution has gone through various routes like a “coat of many colours”, but its current manifestation today, and general acceptance fueled by the underlying currents of patriarchy is a reincarnation of the ancient regime of *Eze* in Igboland. Most societies today are being torn asunder following the contests among the different factions of the traditional elites for the exalted office of the traditional ruler. There is no gainsaying the fact that these contests are in large measure a reflection of the centrality of the traditional institution to development, welfare of the people, and preservation of the peoples’ cultural heritage.

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