FROM WARRANT CHIEFS TO EZESHIP: A DISTORTION OF TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN IGBOLAND?

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about ‘Warrant Chiefs’ and the nature of colonial administration in Eastern Nigeria. The Warrant Chief system, anchored on the colonial Native Court of Equity, was a creation of colonial administration and owed its authority to its creator. This warrant not only made the individual chief a member of the Native Court, but also recognised him as the de facto and de jure ruler of his community. This paper interrogates the metamorphosis of traditional institutions in Igboland from the phenomenon of ‘Warrant Chiefs’ to ‘Ezeship’ or ‘Igweship.’ It explores pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial chieftaincy practices in Igboland. The paper investigates the veracity or otherwise of the claims in certain quarters, that the pre-colonial Igbo society had no centralised administration and so, the question of Eze or Igwe (King) could not have arisen. It examines the argument that a number of the current Ezes and Igwes of Igboland have their positions today essentially because their fathers or their grandfathers were Warrant Chiefs. And, if ‘the position of the newly created Warrant Chiefs was the direct reverse of that of the indigenous chiefs,’ and the former did not enjoy traditional approval because they were arbitrary creation of colonial administration, the paper wonders at what stage of the development of Ezeship or Igweship did these offspring of ‘Warrant Chiefs’ acquire traditional legitimacy and acceptability by the society which saw some of them as impostors. The paper also examines the gradual erosion of traditional mores among predominantly segmentary peoples, whose political institution was rooted in village republicanism and the principle of Igbo-Enwe-Eze (the Igbo have no kings). It concludes by looking at the ferocity with which Igbo people clamour and fight for the
creation of autonomous communities and views it as a by-product of the bastardisation of traditional institutions in Igboland.

**Introduction**

Discussions on ‘Warrant Chiefs’ and indeed, the nature of colonial administration in Igboland, are not new. The novelty of the idea and perhaps, the consequences of the phenomena engendered a lot of interest which did not escape the attention of scholars with intellectual anxiety.¹ What probably is little explored is the component of ‘tradition’ in ‘Traditional’ ruler ship in Igboland. The curiosity of this paper therefore, stems from the notion of Igbo Village republicanism which hinges on the principle of the popular aphorism that, Igbo-enwe-Eze – the Igbo have no king.

It is against the backdrop of the above that this paper sets out on a voyage of exploring the metamorphosis that have taken place in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Igbo traditional ruler ship. Moreso, as it is believed in certain quarters that the Igbo traditional institutions while passing through these metamorphoses became tainted and bastardised.²

**Igbo Traditional Institutions in Pre-Colonial Period: A Review**

Many accounts of Igbo society have described it as prototypical ‘stateless,’ ‘acephalous,’ or ‘segmentary,’³ consisting of autonomous villages and village groups (obodo, ‘town’) ruled by ‘diffused’ authority without formalised, permanent, or hereditary leadership positions. In fact, Uchendu described the prototypical Igbo traditional local political

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organisation as ‘an exercise in direct democracy’ on the village level, with a ‘representative assembly’ on the level of the village group.⁴ However, there were exceptions to this general picture: some Igbo communities, especially trading cities along the Niger, like Onitsha, Oguta, Arochukwu, Ossomari⁵ and the ‘holy city’ of Nri⁶ had elaborated chieftaincy institutions in pre-colonial times. Perhaps the case of Nri is instructive here. It has fuelled both academic and popular imagination by stirring archaeological findings at Igbo-Ukwu which seem to suggest to certain author the existence of a one thousand year-old tradition of Nri sacral kingship and ‘hegemony’ over large parts of Igboland.⁷ Perhaps this is a germane theory in current popular and political debates among Igbo chieftaincy, since it seems to be able to prove the traditional character of some contemporary Igbo Traditional Rulers’ titles. Nonetheless, many still believe in the village republicanism and ‘democratic’ principles of the Igbo society, as expressed in the common aphorism Igbo enwe (ghi) eze – the Igbo have no king. However ‘democratic,’ some believe that inner structures of pre-colonial Igbo communities were anything but egalitarian. Igbo society, they argue, had its ‘slaves’ (ohu) and ‘cult slaves’ (osu) on the one hand, and it had leaders on the other.⁸ Depending on what sub-cultural area of Igboland we are discussing, there were lineage headships, influential age groups, and powerful titled and secret societies. There were also individuals carrying the title eze or obi, indicating a special degree of influence and power, though not independent of the person and, especially, the wealth it could mobilise.⁹

A common feature is conspicuously noticeable in these various leadership positions – their high degree of local diversity. This can be viewed in two ways: First, the rules by which an individual obtained a position differed from place to place. Second, while

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⁹ Personal interview with Professor G. Emerole, Head, Department of Natural Sciences, Redeemer’s University, Mowe, 24/11/10.
certain Igbo communities (especially Nri and Arochukwu) exerted a certain wide-range commercial or ritual influence, the leaders even of these communities did not exert direct power outside their own community.

**Igbo Traditional Institutions in Colonial Era and the Rise of the Warrant Chiefs**

The story of how British colonialism attempted to create ‘Traditional Rulers’ by introducing the so-called ‘Warrant Chiefs’ in Igboland is well known.\(^{10}\)

However, this section is crucial to this paper as it lays the foundation for its main argument about the authenticity or otherwise of Igbo traditional rulership. Besides, it has been argued in certain quarters that the establishment of British colonial administration in Igboland led to the demise of political independence of Igbo towns.\(^{11}\) Uzoigwe argues that the towns were brought under the control of the British imperial power, to facilitate both administrative and imperial necessity. ‘Politically, economically and socially they were progressively integrated into the larger Nigerian State.’\(^{12}\)

In their occupation in Igboland (the 1890s to about 1917),\(^{13}\) the British instituted Native Courts and installed chiefs by warrant (hence the name) who controlled them. Frequently, Warrant Chiefs were installed arbitrarily. In some cases, personalities were installed who actually had been local leaders before, but more often than not it was an accidental affair. Sometimes, the villagers forwarded people of little standing in the community to the British, on the periphery of Igboland, sometimes even persons of external origin were installed. This action is understandable in a society where the white-skinned individuals were perceived as strange and every move they made suspicious, even the values they were introducing were seen as anathema. Therefore, apportioning ‘evil forests’ to their agents for religious services and volunteering undesirable elements in the society to them as followers, were viewed as good riddance to bad rubbish. These Warrant Chiefs were

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\(^{10}\) Afigbo, *The Warrant Chief* …


\(^{12}\) Uzoigwe, ‘Evolution …,’ p. 9.

\(^{13}\) Harneit-Sievers, ‘Igbo ‘Traditional Rulers,’ …, p. 60.
thus installed without much recourse to local traditions or hierarchy and status, without taking into account the details of pre-colonial local political structures. This arbitrariness stemmed from the fact that the British knew next to nothing about the pre-colonial organisation of the communities which they had coerced into submission. And since they were too arrogant to learn anyway, they erroneously assumed that African people had to be governed by chiefs, somehow. This was a very crude version of indirect rule. To this extent, many Warrant Chiefs solely constituted colonially-backed usurpers of power and had little or no legitimacy beyond the fact of their being installed by the colonial state. Without any pedigree and claim to traditional legitimacy, they held power and used it for their own parochial ends. Their main source of power was the control of Native Courts and of Labour, for example, for colonial road and waterway construction.14 Enugu Warrant Chief Onyema, was an ‘African God’ to his grandson15 and controlled the flows of labour to the emerging coal mining industry and established himself as a powerful ruler, combining wealth with terror and magical power over his people. By the 1920s, the Warrant Chief institution had, in many places, become synonymous with greed, avarice and corruption, and British administrative officers were increasingly aware of this. This was because, as Uzoigwe puts it, ‘he (the Warrant Chief) was the errand boy of the colonial administration and the people were essentially ‘guinea pigs,’ used by the British colonial government to try out its fanciful ideas of local governance in a society like Igbo that did not have centralised authorities as was the case in the Emirate system of Northern Nigeria.’16 The dilemma created by this novel political arrangement was immense: For a people who were formerly answerable to a ‘democratic’ ideal based on local governance, the impact of the transformation was great. For the new chief who was not used to the exercise of the authority he was now called upon to exercise without any precedent or training whatsoever, the situation was, to say the least, confusing. He simply carried out his functions – obeying the dictates of his inordinate desires – according to his ability.

16 Uzoigwe, ‘Evolution and Relevance …’, p. 4.
Even though the degree of territorial extent of the Warrant Chiefs’ authority was alien to the Igbo, their mode and method of operation reflected their determination to endorse government policy and undermine the interests of civil society organisations and the people they represent. It has been observed that because the Warrant Chiefs were not accountable to their kith and kin, this was proof to the people that the chiefs, like the court messengers, the police, the soldiers, court clerks and the like, were civil servants. Interestingly, many ambitious Warrant Chiefs schemed, unsuccessfully, to be elevated as ‘Chief of Chiefs,’ something akin to the status of an Emir in the North or an Oba in Yorubaland. However, Afigbo dismissed such chiefs as ‘artificial tyrants,’ who were behaving like Emirs even before they were officially given the responsibility. Thus, the Warrant Chiefs could be regarded as the outcome of a vagrant search by the colonial masters for a political system that would serve their dictatorial and exploitative model for governance. Consequently, the resultant conflict between the government representatives and the town unions destabilised the socio-political equanimity prevalent in the pre-colonial Igbo society.

The logical corollary from the above analysis is that there were no centralised traditional authorities like Eze institution in Igboland before the colonialists came. However, parts of Igboland that could be said to establish the equivalent of ‘Village Kingdoms’ with their concomitant ‘traditional’ authority vested in the monarchs were Nri, Arochukwu, Asaba, Agbor, Issele-Ukwu, Issele-Azagba, and Issele-Mkpituime. Others are Oguta, Onitsha, Ossomari and Aboh. Ejiyor has argued that: ‘The traditional Igbo systems may be divided into two major types, namely, the democratic and monarchical.’ He continued: ‘West of the Niger, village kingdoms are the rule rather than the exception in the communities.’ Furthermore, he observed that even the democratic model did not have chiefs, but ‘they were at best symbolic heads of village groups … and their primacy was honorific rather than jurisdictional.’ Of this class of chiefs, Jones noted thus:

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… Chiefs of the type envisaged … as ‘strong chiefs’ (except) with a few exceptions (did) not exist in this region. The people who are usually referred to as chiefs, and there can be any number of them today, have no executive, judicial or legislative powers vested solely in their office.\textsuperscript{20}

Awolowo similarly observed that ‘save in very few places there were no natural rulers in Eastern Nigeria of the stature and jurisdiction of those in the North, West or Midwest’ (Benin areas).\textsuperscript{21} So, when Lord Laggard decided to ‘manufacture’ chiefs by warrant, and imposed them on the Igbo society, he dealt a debilitating blow on the heart of Igbo culture. This was done in total negation of the true age-old Igbo political and social scenario described by Isichie. Hear her: ‘One of the things that struck the first western visitors to Igboland was the extent to which democracy was truly practised.’ According to her, ‘an early visitor to a Niger Igbo town said that he felt he was in a free land, among a free people.’\textsuperscript{22} Elsewhere, another French visitor observed of the people that ‘indeed true liberty existed in Igboland, although its name was not inscribed in any monument.’

In spite of all its inadequacies, the system did not break down before the famous 1929 Women’s War which took place in large areas of Southern Igboland and of the Ibibio-speaking areas further southeast. Thousands of women attacked Native Courts and besieged Warrant Chiefs. The Women’s War made unmistakably clear the little legitimacy of Warrant Chief rule, which since then has become paradigmatic for the errors about African societies and their traditions and rulers, committed by British colonialism.\textsuperscript{23}

After 1929, Warrant Chiefs were removed from their positions of power, although some of them remained local big men who themselves or their descendants, even regained chieftaincy positions later on. The British began to reform local administration in order to create a ‘proper’ indirect rule. By means of writing Intelligence Reports, the colonial


\textsuperscript{21} See details in Nnamani, ‘Chieftaincy and Security ….,’ p. 9.

\textsuperscript{22} Isichie, A History of the Igbo People, 1976, p. 62.

\textsuperscript{23} The reasons behind the riots were more multifaceted; the immediate critical issue was the rumour that, after the introduction of direct tax on men in 1928, women would also be taxed; at the same time, the fall in palm produce prices due to the world-wide recession aroused much anger and was attributed to manipulations by the European trading firms, the premises of which were also attacked in several places.
administration began a more systematic survey of what it believed were traditional local African political and judicial institutions. These reports revealed the existence of a considerable variety of pre-colonial local political institutions and jurisdiction.

Based to some extent on these reports, on the 1930s new local Native Authority Councils and Courts composed of the elders and other members of the local elite were created (ishi ani). They were believed to resemble traditional structures of local government closely. In reality, however, many of them hardly did so, not the least because the councils were based on large-scale ‘clans,’ ‘federations’ and other units which were much larger than communal units in pre-colonial Igbo society. The councils soon received much local criticism, both for what was seen as their non-traditional character and, again, because of corruption.

The system of the new Native Authority Councils remained in flux; the newly emerging educated elite increasingly exerted pressure to be represented in local politics. By the 1940s, the British administration followed what was called the ‘Best Man Policy’ (Okaoha mma), by not anymore insisting on elders as representatives in the councils, but encouraging communities to chose younger educated representatives. This seems to fit well into the early years of British West African decolonisation policy after 1947, with its stress on local government reform and democracy as a first step towards self-government on higher levels. Thus, at the end of the period of direct British colonial influence in Nigeria in the late 1940s and early 1950s, for the first time, there was a conscious move in the field of local administration away from the legitimising principle of ‘tradition’ towards the legitimising principle of ‘democracy’: both principles were perceived to be contradictory at the time. Chiefs played no formal role anymore in this system. The democratic reality, however, seemed to have been little encouraging, as is, for example, shown by frequent regional government intervention into the system of elected local councils.

Igbo Traditional Institutions in the 1950s

In fact, the sub-title of this section can as well be tagged: ‘The Return of the Chiefs.’ This is because it was during this period that chieftaincy returned as an important political issue, not only in the East, but in Nigeria as a whole. But much as it could be regarded as a non-issue in other parts of the country that were already used to the system, it became a major political arrangement, adjustment and an adaptational issue in Igboland. The only difference here is that this return was not at the instance of the British, but a political arrangement based on Nigerian initiative. To understand this return therefore, reference must be made to the wider political framework of Nigeria. By the mid-1950s, the three Regions of Nigeria had more or less achieved internal self-government. Besides the elected parliaments, the Northern and Western Regions established ‘Houses of Chiefs’ (on the Westminster model) as second parliamentary chambers. In the Eastern Region, strong demands emerged to establish an Eastern House of Chiefs as well, because otherwise, it was argued, one would forego an opportunity to stand equally with the other regions. Furthermore, the regionally dominant party (National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons – NCNC) saw an opportunity to increase its local standing by allying itself with local power elites.

The creation of the Eastern House of Chiefs in the 1950s and the insistence that new chiefs be literate further undermined the Warrant Chief system, which by this time, was evolving into hereditary regimes. As the older chiefs passed away, some of their successors, now fairly literate and some wealthy in addition, were no longer drawn from the families of the departed traditional ruler. This development continued without major changes until after the Nigerian Civil War in 1967 to 1970. The result was a gradual domination of the authority of traditional rulers and a corresponding rise in the influence of the Town Development Unions.

During the Civil War years (1967-1970), holders of chieftaincy titles played little role politically. The post-Civil War administration of the East-Central State (comprising the Igbo-speaking areas of the old Eastern Region) under Ukpabi Asika (1970-75) followed a

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programme of mobilisation for reconstruction and development – as did the federal military government under General Yakubu Gowon at that time. Local participation in development was understood purely in ‘modern’ terms: it was believed to mean mobilisation partly by a strong state, partly through self-help by Town (Development) Unions and other communal associations. This concept left little room for a formal inclusion of holders of chieftaincy titles in local government, and customary courts disappeared. Thus, during the post-colonial ‘developmentalist’ military regime of the early 1970s, for a second time the principle of ‘tradition’ was driven into oblivion in local administration; this time not against the competing principle of ‘democracy,’ but of ‘development.’

And again, as in the early 1950s, the results were not encouraging, as a political scientist who studied the local situation noted: ‘The masses of the people were convinced that those who went into council work as councillors did so for purely mercenary purposes.’

‘Traditional’ Institutions and the Emergence of Autonomous Communities in Igboland

Official recognition of and political backing for chieftaincy institutions returned in the course of the Nigeria-wide local government reforms of 1976 which created structures still existing today. The military governors created by fiat, autonomous communities as constituencies for the would-be chiefs and passed the 1978 Chieftaincy Edict creating the Eze or chieftaincy institution in each autonomous community. As Ogboagu noted: ‘Since Nigeria gained political independence from Britain, the foundation on which the traditional system stands has shifted many times; traditional ruler ship in Igboland has become a creature of, and sustained by, statutes particularly that of the constitution of the land.’

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Thus, the Eze institution emerged in Igboland through the military administration with Edict No. 22 of 1978 titled Chieftaincy Edict No. 22 of 1978 titled Chieftaincy Edict 1978. Although Article 3.1 of the Chieftaincy Edict required the autonomous communities to select their own chiefs, the same article of the edict asked the people to present the selected chief (or Eze in Igboland) to the chief executive of their local government, who is to present the Eze with the staff of office. Thus, the Eze institution was juxtaposed between the local government and the community, where the town union already existed as the apex institution of local governance. The point being made clear here is that even though the Ezes are referred to as ‘traditional’ rulers, they are artificial creation – having been midwifed by the military edict. Besides, the Ezes or chieftaincy institutions were not created by the tradition and cultural mores of the people. And, since there were no laid down traditions and indigenous methods for selecting the Ezes, the Chieftaincy Edict of 1978 would appear to be a contemporary extension of the colonial attempt to create kingship institution in Igboland. This scenario looks more like a resurgence of the warrant chiefs, because the families and descendants of the colonial warrant chiefs saw the edict as an ample opportunity to grab, once more, what had slipped off their hands. Therefore, it was not uncommon to see a parade of some members of the families of warrant chiefs claiming that the expired warrant chiefs were the people’s ‘last Ezes.’ In more places than one, the various households of the colonial warrant chiefs assume the status of ruling houses claiming hereditary right of succession to the Eze stool of the created autonomous communities.  

However, that is not to say that there are no surviving households or descendants of warrant chiefs that have succeeded their fathers or grandfathers. Besides, published ‘hagiographies’ and studies about individual Traditional Rulers provide examples for both types of legitimacy on which the position of Traditional Rulers may be based: either on descent and tradition, or on popular consent. Both Eze (Dr.) Onu Egwunwoke, Oha 1 of Ihitaoha Uratta, Owerri, Imo and Eze Patrick I. Acholonu, Igwe X of Orlu, Imo are sons of colonial warrant chiefs, received a good education and (at least judging from their

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30 My interview with Professor Emerole reveals that even though some of these new Ezes lack ‘traditional’ roots, knowing very little or nothing about their people’s cultures, they are declared Ezes. This scenarios often lead to friction, interview date, 2010.

biographies) seem to have been able to take over the titles from their fathers without serious challenges. Unsurprisingly, they claim a hereditary character of their titles, as is otherwise common only among communities like Onitsha, Nri and Awka in Anambra. Also, their hagiographies argue most consistently that the Igbo used to have chieftaincy institutions in the pre-colonial period. Furthermore, Egwunwoke’s hagiography indicates tensions between him and the Town Union.32

A marked different picture emerges from the cases of Nathaniel Ogbonna, Obi 1 of Nkpologwu, Anamba,33 Eze Justus O. Ugochukwu, Eshi II of Nkwerre, Imo,34 Igwe Edward Nnaji, Odezuligbo II of Nike, Enugu, and Lawrence N. Ukah, Ohaire I of Mgbowo, Enugu. Whereas Ugochukwu is a son of a lower colonial chief and went to school, Ogbonna, Nnaji and Ukah do not claim any ‘royal’ background. The latter two have little education. Ukah’s life-story is that of a successful businessman making his career from a very poor family background. Ogbonna stems from an early Christian convert family and received university education abroad. All these Traditional Rulers acknowledge their communities’ active support, especially by their respective Town Unions, in their gaining the title. With such support, Ukah even succeeding against a competitor who was a descendant of a warrant chief. All of these Traditional Rulers characterise their titles as consensual and non-hereditary. Cases also abound of certain nouveau-riche who, with their money and influence, de throne existing Traditional Rulers with ‘royal’ pedigree – as grandsons of colonial warrant chiefs.35

A critical examination of the legal procedures involved in the creation of the autonomous communities and their ‘traditional’ Rulers reveals the artificiality of these Ezes. For instance, a ‘Traditional’ Ruler must be able to prove ‘popular support’ by being formally presented to the Governor. Besides, an autonomous community has to provide a written ‘constitution’ and a ‘code of conduct’ for the ‘Traditional’ Ruler. However, the law makes little provision to define how, in detail, these documents emerge, and who writes

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35 Interview with Maazi Victor Ukaogo Ph.D. is an expose of how certain money-bags hijack ‘royalty’ and carve out autonomous communities, and they becoming Eze ‘A’ and ‘Z’ the 1st.
them – except by a rather vague reference to ‘customary law.’ The question then can be asked: Can the legal instrument which coerces communities to put into a fixed, written form what they regard as their tradition, pass for the people’s tradition? Should tradition be revolutionary or evolutionary? Some communities even went beyond this and published book-sized accounts of their local history and culture.36

The civilian government of Governor Sam Mbakwe of Imo State passed into law the Traditional Rulers and Autonomous Communities Laws of 1981 as Imo State Law No. 11. This law was particularly important because it seems to represent the wish of the representatives of Imo people. The law transformed the chiefs into ‘Ezes.’ It defined an Eze as ‘a traditional or other head of an autonomous community who has been identified, selected, appointed and installed by his people according to their own tradition and usages, and presented to the government for recognition.37 It also defines an ‘autonomous community’ as ‘a group of people inhabiting an identifiable geographical area or areas, comprising one or more communities and bound by a traditional and cultural way of life with a common historical heritage and recognised and approved as an autonomous community by the government.’38

It is important to note that since no Eze or autonomous community has legal legitimacy without governmental recognition; it follows then that the same government can abolish a community or depose its Eze at will, if it deems it necessary; or simply withdraw its recognition. This means that the whole institutions of Ezeship and autonomous community are subject to abuse. A government can abolish a community on political grounds or depose an Eze who belongs to an opposition party. Here again, the question of ‘tradition’ arises. The fact that the existence of an Eze is subject to the whims and caprices of political vagaries and not the culture and traditions of the people, confirms the artificiality of Traditional Ruler ship in Igboland. This also brings to the fore the question of legitimacy of the autonomous communities and their Ezes.

38 Imo State Government; Traditional Rulers and Autonomous Communities Law 81.
Location of Power

Perhaps at this juncture, the question of what is ‘autonomous’ about this type of autonomous community needs be asked. If the word autonomous means independent and self-governing, then it implies that an autonomous town or community is subject only to its own laws. In essence, it is a self-governing community. On the contrary, the 1981 Law conceded no such independence. It essentially defines an autonomous community as a creation of the edicts and laws of the state government and of the decree and laws (subject to abolition) of the federal government. In this regard, the term ‘autonomous’ as applied to Nigerian contemporary towns or village-groups, in Uzoigwe’s view, is a misnomer. If the so-called autonomous community is not independent in its relationship to the local government, the state and the central government, where is its sovereignty located? This is the crux of the problem that has faced Nigerian contemporary autonomous communities. If Eze, too, is the ‘Traditional Ruler’ of his community as well as the ‘custodian of (its) culture, custom and tradition,’ the implication is that he is sovereign in traditional and cultural matters. Of course, even in these matters he is advised by the Eze-in-Council. Refusal to abide by the traditions of his people inevitably leads to conflict and disharmony in the council. And if these are not effectively contained, they have fissiparous effect on other communities with their concomitant destabilisation. An Eze may reject his council’s advice on the grounds that it conflicts with his Christian beliefs. In the context of such a scenario, a real crisis arises. If he wins the contest, he soon discovers that he has won a pyrrhic victory. Undermining the fundamental basis of his legitimacy –omenala – results in the gradual erosion of his authority and power.

Local Roles, Borrowed Symbols, Public Perception

Most functions of Igbo Traditional Rulers, it must be noted, lie within the autonomous community. For example, the role of the ‘impartial father’ involves peace-making

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39 Uzoigwe, ‘Evolution and Relevance …,’ p. 9
40 It should be noted that such councils were also influential in traditional Igbo societies, especially those whose kingship traditions predate the colonial period. The Eze, Igwe or Obi is expected to seek the advice of his Council of Chiefs, the Ozo priesthood and the Dibia Council, and several others. A traditional ruler who contends often with these advisors invariably finds his rule difficult.
functions within the community in conflicts with neighbours. A ‘Traditional Ruler’ should also promote local development, and achievements in this field play a major role in most documents where Traditional Rulers present themselves publicly. A Traditional Ruler should organise local consensus, by consulting with his ‘cabinet,’ a council of local representatives and elders. Inability to perform some of these functions has plunged many autonomous communities into chaos.\(^\text{41}\)

At the same time, Traditional Rulers act as instruments of state control on the local level. They are frequently (though not ex-officio) members of the customary courts reconstituted since the late 1970s.\(^\text{42}\) They should not only ‘co-operate with the local government council,’ but also ‘assist … in the collection of taxes.’\(^\text{43}\) In Anambra State, those Traditional Rulers who successfully manage the tax collection effort, receive a commission on the proceeds.\(^\text{44}\) Government like to see Traditional Rulers as transmission belts for promoting their policies, for example, the ‘War Against Indiscipline’ of the Buhari years, into the local sphere.

Traditional Rulers have to be men of considerable own means, as government ‘stipends’ have not been consistent; only some well-connected Traditional Rulers seem to receive government funds on a larger scale.\(^\text{45}\) In contrast to many areas in Africa, Igbo Traditional Rulers do not receive a regular income from land rents; in fact, the Federal Land use Decree of 1978, by which control over land was vested in the government, deprived Traditional Rulers of a potential source of income. One important and much-deplored source is the income which Traditional Rulers realise from the conferment of honorary chieftaincy titles. Although this is a phenomenon common throughout Nigeria, but it fits, as Afigbo has argued, into the Igbo tradition of taking honorary praise-names.\(^\text{46}\)

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\(^{41}\) Interview with Professor Emerole, November 2010.

\(^{42}\) Customary Courts were abolished by the Post-Civil War Asika administration (Awa 1992: 47), but reconstituted in the late 1970s, see Anambra State Customary Courts Edict 1977, Imo State Customary Court Law 1981.

\(^{43}\) Anambra State Traditional Rulers Law 1981, Para 15.

\(^{44}\) V. C. Amene, Chude Akus, Anambra State Government and Recognised Traditional Rulers, Comments, Pictorial and Biographical Notes, Onitsha, Innosco Press, 1985, pp. 2-3.


However, many people (including the writer) perceive this practice as a process of distortion of chieftaincy titles that seem to have become easily purchasable.

Igbo Traditional Rulers’ role as ‘embodiment of local custom’ an important aspect of their ceremonial role – is highly ambiguous. Much of what might be regarded as a genuine local tradition in Igbo society is connected with traditional religion – its shrines, practices and rituals. However, already many Warrant Chiefs of the colonial period supported Christianity, even if the alliance with the missions remained shaky. Among contemporary Igbo Traditional Rulers, there is hardly anybody not professing to be a Christian. However, contradictions between the Christian precept of monogamy and the polygamy generally expected from a chief are sometimes obvious. Under these conditions, Igbo Traditional Rulers regard themselves as ceremonial overseers and keepers of the culture, as represented by specific local festivals, masquerades and other customs, though without too much public reference to the religious meaning of these practices.

Igbo Traditional Rulers present themselves to the public with symbols borrowed from various sources. For example, Nike Traditional Ruler Edward Nnaji’s ‘chamber’ in his ‘multi-million naira ultra-modern palace’ (photographs in Nnamani) contains an assortment of throne, tables and chairs, the decoration of which reminds of 18th century French absolutist court interiors. At the same time, he surrounds himself with (possibly artificial) elephant tusks, a symbol of power in pre-colonial Benin. At the same time, Christian imagery is present as well. Furthermore, the idea of the chieftaincy ‘stool’ (throne) as embodiment of local history and tradition, perceived to some degree as independent of the particular office-holder, seem to gain currency in Igboland, similar to the symbolism employed in Ashanti (Ghana) or Bamum (Cameroon Grassland). Thus,

48 With regard to polygyny, the public self-representation of Igbo Traditional Rulers (in the published directories) is not consistent. Some Traditional Rulers freely provide information on this topic, while others seem to hide their marriage status behind terms like ‘married with children.’
51 Nnamani, presents a photograph of the ‘stool’ (without the holder) on the front page; see also, P. S. A. Okoye, Chieftaincy Stool in Igboland and Rulers of Yester-years (sic) in Nigeria, 1582-1993, Enugu, Paso & Co., 1993.
Igbo Traditional Rulers self-confidently borrow cultural elements derived from European, African, and Christian origins – thereby demonstrating the superficiality of Igbo traditional institutions. They appropriate local and alien symbols of power by means of bricolage, and thus prove their potency as representatives of a culture which is, despite all public references to tradition, far from purely locally-based.

Igbo Traditional Rulers remain contentious, among intellectuals as well as among the general populace. For intellectuals, Traditional Rulers are frequently objects of ridicule and harsh critique. Already during the Second Republic, Chinua Achebe, arguably the most famous South eastern Nigerian writer, mocked at Igbo Traditional Rulers as ‘traders in their stall by day and monarchs at night; city dwellers five days a week and traditional village rulers on Saturdays and Sundays. They adopt ‘traditional’ robes from every land, including, I am told, the ceremonial regalia of the Lord Mayor of London.’\(^{52}\) Arthur Nwankwo, a prominent pro-democracy activist and publisher, criticised the ‘wanton prostitution of Igbo republican, cultural and political heritage by new apostles of pseudo-traditionalism,’\(^{53}\) which, in effect, helped to stabilise military rule. Igbo intellectuals who used to take for granted the ‘democratic’ character of Igbo tradition, in recent years find themselves engaged in debates about the ‘republican’ versus the ‘monarchical’ principle in Igbo culture and society.

Critical views like that of Achebe and Nwankwo may not be representative for the majority of the population. But even to people not belonging to the intellectual elite, Igbo Traditional Rulers hardly appear as ‘natural’ superiors – a marked contrast to the situation in some other areas of Nigeria. This is reflected in the consensual character of many chieftaincy positions, already mentioned. Lamenting over the denigration suffered by ‘Traditional’ Rulers in some parts of Igboland, Igwe Peter Ezenwa, said: ‘The traditional rulers here are not enjoying the desired respect and recognition from their people … they don’t even give us the support we really need.’ Reason, according to Ezenwa, is because ‘the institution has been politicised with the unnecessary creation of

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autonomous communities,’ which according to him, ‘is splitting the people.’\textsuperscript{54} This insatiable desire to create autonomous communities by those who are hell bent on having their own monarchs, no doubt, rather than achieving its objective of cohesion for local development, further divide the people and push rural development away.

In spite of this, Traditional Rulers are widely perceived as belonging to an elite which often enough, is corrupt and does not fulfil the function expected from it. This explains outbursts of public violence directed against Traditional Rulers in recent years. When in September 1996 riots erupted in Owerri after cases of ritual murders had become public, the ‘outstanding’ palace\textsuperscript{55} of Eze Onu Egwunwoke, chairman of the Imo State Council of Ndi-Eze and ‘a close ally of the ruling military junta,’ was among the many buildings attacked in town.\textsuperscript{56} In July 1997, traders rioted in Aba after the police had turned out unable or unwilling to protect them against a series of armed robberies, and burned the palace of Eze Isaac Ajouonu Ikonne, Enyi 1 of Aba, also a member of the Imo State Council of Ndi Eze.\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{‘Eze Igbo’: Offshore Chieftaincy}

Another evidence of the bastardisation of Traditional Rulership in Igboland is the ubiquitous chieftaincies beyond the autonomous communities. Legally, the roles of Igbo Traditional Rulers are largely restricted to the local sphere. Law and government policy want them to be a symbolic embodiment of the locality they ‘rule.’ However, there are concepts of chieftaincy going beyond the autonomous communities, referring to the various Igbo diasporas outside of the Nigerian Southeast, or even attempting to represent the entire Igbo ethnic group. It appears that those who lose out in the contest of Ezeship in their communities back home, now attempt to use their money and influence to purchase and claim Ezeship title in any city they reside in.

\textsuperscript{54} See The Nigerian Compass, ‘Don’t Politicise Autonomous Communities’ Creation, Monarch Warns,’ Friday, 13 February, 2009.

\textsuperscript{55} See, H. K. Ofonry, \textit{Royal Eagle Eze Onu Egwunwoke}, for a full description of the palace.


\textsuperscript{57} See, CLO Human Rights Update, ‘Extra-Judicial Killings in Aba, August 18, 1997.'
One of these concepts of offshore chieftaincy (beyond the autonomous community) is what Osagbæ\textsuperscript{58} has termed ‘migrant ethnic empire building.’ A considerable part of the Igbo population spends the major part of their lives as migrants ‘abroad,’ i.e., outside their communities of origin (to which they continue to keep strong ties). Igbo migrants, like migrants of other ethnic groups, have begun to create their own chieftaincy institutions ‘abroad,’ in order to forward their interests at the places where they live and work. Perhaps, the question should be asked: Why ‘traditional’ title? Why not political or social, such as ‘president,’ ‘co-ordinator’ or ‘leader?’ In Kano, an Eze Igbo was installed in 1986, and other Northern Nigerian cities have followed suit. There are ‘Eze Igbo’ in Lagos, Ibadan and other cities in Nigeria. These chiefs/ezes represent migrants not from one particular Igbo community, but of Igbo origin in general, in some cases even including migrants from neighbouring south-eastern Nigerian ethnic groups. One would have thought that the fact that the people who come under the control of their Ezeship are not of the same ethnic origin, would necessitate the adoption of a political or social title rather than traditional. The influence of the Eze Igbo in Kano depends largely on the consent of the local Igbo ethnic associations (which are, again, organised on the basis of communities of origin, but federated into an Igbo Community Association). His area of influence is strictly limited to Kano. He does not possess any comparable status in the Igbo ethnic home area.

A second concept of Igbo offshore chieftaincy uses the same title – Eze Igbo – but with a very different meaning. On May 4, 1996, the former Biafran Head of State, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, who returned from exile in 1982, received this title from a Nri Chief (the Eze Nri himself was not prepared to confer such a title). Therewith he laid claim to the status of a ‘King of the Igbo’ in their very homeland (obodo). This act, widely perceived as presumptuous, aroused a major conflict between Ojukwu and other influential Igbo political leaders, especially those within the powerful conservative lobby group, Ohaneze,\textsuperscript{59} which later split on this issue. It remains doubtful whether


Ojukwu’s ambitious attempt to overcome the factional conflicts in Igbo politics, by once again establishing a singular leadership position for himself, will succeed. Besides power politics, much of the conflict is about the true meaning of Igbo tradition – they certainly still form a majority – standing against a growing public presence of the ‘monarchical’ principle, as represented by Nri.

**Conclusion**

This paper has discussed aspects of the history of chieftaincy institutions in South eastern Nigerian Igbo society in the 20th century – a society widely perceived to be ‘democratic’ by tradition, where chieftaincy institutions played little role in the pre-colonial era. To a large extent, especially in the area discussed, chiefs in Igboland were artificial creation of the colonial and post-colonial states. But their history was more complex and changing than is often assumed. Besides, the state also defined their role in local administration and politics.

However, this paper agrees, to a large extent, with Haneit-Sievers’ conclusion and that since the mid-1970s, the presence of the chieftaincy institution in public life of the Igbo society has considerably expanded. Traditional Rulers are officially recognised, in a somewhat standardised form. They are regarded as embodiment of local custom in administratively-defined autonomous communities; they act as patrons and mediators within the community and serve as transmission belt for government policies into the local sphere. This paper has shown a considerable variance in the social reality behind the term ‘Traditional Ruler’ in Igboland: Among them there are numerous wealthy businessmen with official connections, but also a few Traditional Rulers who describe themselves just as ‘successful farmers.’ Then there are descendants of colonial Warrant Chiefs claiming a hereditary character for their position. But there also are numerous Traditional Rulers whose selection was based on support by Town Unions, and who seem to view their office in more humble terms, as a honour given by the community.

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60 Personal interview with Maazi Victor Ukaogo, Ph.D, who in his capacity (as a chief) participated in the installation of HRM, Eze Mark Mbonu, Ochiogo 1 of Eluogo. (This man has no royal antecedents but was selected by the community, based on his personal merit as he is seen as a team player and had a cross-generational appeal. See also Harneit-Sievers, ‘Igbo Traditional Rulers,’ p. 67.
This paper has also looked at the roles of Igbo Traditional Rulers in local society, at the symbolism employed by them, and at current debates about the character of traditional Igbo society, increasingly developing along the opposition between ‘republican’ and ‘monarchical’ principles.

To understand contemporary Igbo Traditional Rulers, this paper reveals the futility of trusting the rhetoric of ‘tradition’ in the sense of historical roots from pre-colonial days – which they employ in order to legitimise their titles. Most Igbo Traditional Rulers have few such credentials, even if a more thorough historical study might reveal that Igbo pre-colonial chieftaincy institutions were stronger than functionalist social anthropology (which has dominated Igbo studies for a long time) has been ready to accept in the past. Most Igbo Traditional Rulers can base their claims to office to a rather recent tradition, if any at all. Igbo Traditional Rulers are usually firmly based in private business or in the civil service; they have received formal school or even university education and are adherents of the Christian religion. They creatively combine local legitimacy, local and foreign symbolism, and modern business spirit in order to assert their positions. Without doubt, they are first and foremost dwellers of a contemporary, modern, and not of any traditional world. Their ‘rule’ has, in most cases, no ‘traditional’ (in the sense of ‘pre-colonial) roots. However, they may be said to rule a sphere called ‘tradition,’ in so far as they preside over some of the cultural symbols and events which are widely perceived today as constituting ‘local custom’ or ‘local culture.’

This paper believes that the lack of traditional control of chieftaincy institutions in Igboland has opened it to series of manipulation and bastardisation. It allows the charlatans, nouveau-riche (many of whom are of questionable character) who know little or nothing about their culture and tradition, to buy sacred traditional stools (where they exist) which should be the exclusive preserves of those traditionally entitled to them as dictated perhaps, by the ancestors and gods of the land.

This lack of traditional foundation has also led to a situation where some Ezes seek to encroach into the town union’s areas of jurisdiction. Some seek to dissolve the town unions, thereby instigating conflicts which have manifested in several court cases all over Igbo land.
The trend since the 1970s has been for government to use Traditional Rulers to legitimise their power. Under the military regime of General Sani Abacha, this practice expanded into outright manipulation. Igbo Traditional Rulers have not been left out. In early 1998, Traditional Rulers all over the country were carried to the capital, Abuja. Here they watched videos which allegedly proved the involvement of a number of senior military officers in a coup attempt against the incumbent government. After being shown the videos, and before any tribunal had taken place, they (with a few exceptions) publicly declared that the officers detained were indeed guilty of the alleged offence. Among them was Igwe Emeka Nnaji, the Atakata Abusie of Amagunze, chairman of the Enugu State Council of Traditional Rulers, described to have ‘elevated political robbery to higher arts.’ Shortly afterwards, on Tuesday, January 27, 1998, while on a ‘courtesy call’ to the presidency, he died in a suit of the Nicon Noga Hilton Hotel in Abuja. What a way for a ‘Traditional Ruler’ to join his ancestors!

Today, not a few illustrious individuals of Igbo extraction are miffed at the way eze Nd’Igbo in diasporas are being created ubiquitously. They blame their ‘royal’ fathers for tacitly contributing to the emergence of offshore eze Nd’Igbo. According to Okechukwu Ibeto (a chief priest), ‘most of our royal fathers have supported the overzealous Christians to wipe away what is left of our traditional institution,’ by desecrating all the holy places in Igboland. ‘They have sold our artefacts to the white men.’ He then wonders how the ‘royal’ fathers who cannot preserve and protect Igbo historical objects, protect their traditional institutions that are being increasingly distorted.

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61 Only the Egba monarchs refused to pass any judgmental comments on the alleged coup plotters.
62 As most of the coup suspects were of Yoruba ethnic origin, especially the Yoruba Traditional Rulers (many of whom should have known better) were strongly criticised for their unguarded, compromising statements (‘Royalty for Sale,’ Tell Magazine, January 19, 1998, pp. 12-22.
64 Ozo Okechukwu Ibeto, Chief Priest. Udo-Eke, Nnokwa, Anambra State, see his views in Nigerian Compass Newspaper, Friday 13th February, 2009, p. 2
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