

Avuncular Mediation and Reconciliation over Kingship Tussles in Uhueze-Nenwe Autonomous Community of Southeastern Nigeria

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<p><i>By early December 2023, an ominous cloud of uncertainty, tension, danger and trepidation crept into the horizon of Uhueze-Nenwe Autonomous Community and settled discomfortingly. The Community which is located in the present Aninri Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria lies along the Enugu-Port Harcourt trunk A Road; about 169km North of Port Harcourt and 47km South of the coal city of Enugu. It is located East of Enugu-Okigwe hills on a topography of low lying plain with a vast and productive agricultural land. Right from the ancient times, the community has been one of the most peaceful in the area. But an unsettling darkness was now gradually creeping in to the dismay of many concerned citizens. The trees trembled as the ground shook at the tension which had gripped the hearts of her inhabitants – the descendants of the first offspring of Mazi Joku Onwe, the great hunter from Nenwenta and progenitor of Nenwe. The ominous cloud was birthed by a scheduled December 20, 2023 Igweship election that would produce the second traditional ruler of the Community eight years after the demise of the first one. It had been a difficult and rancorous journey finding a successor to the throne of the Community with a virile republican spirit characteristic of communities in Igboland of Southeastern Nigeria. Against the wishes of a vast majority of the citizens to select the next Igwe of the Community through the principle of rotation in order of seniority of the villages as enshrined in the Town Union's gazetted constitution, and most importantly, as it had already been done during the selection of the first Igwe, the Town Union's executive led by a certain character had insisted on an election predicated on an ungazetted constitution believed to be doctored to serve selfish ends. The Community has been held hostage by this sort of insistence for several years. The difference now was that the leadership was daring enough to fix an election date against the desires and expectations of an overwhelming majority of the citizens. In foreseeing the imminent harvest of danger the situation would most likely produce, many wailing voices rose to the high heavens; calling upon the elders and prominent personalities of the Community to intervene before it was too late – before a pregnant goat suffers the pains of childbirth while an elder watches idly, a situation considered both as a sign of gross irresponsibility on the part of the elder as well as a sacrilege. While the storm raged and the danger loomed, a prominent son of the Community – a general of the Nigerian Air Force rose to the challenge and mobilized other notable figures from the Community, giving birth to a team known as Uhueze Elders and Senior Stakeholders Group (UESSG). With determination and patriotic courage, the group fashioned a blueprint – a model which effectively averted the impending conflagration. In examining this situation, this paper also evaluates kingship institutions in Igboland in the context of the widely acclaimed Igbo republicanism.</i></p> <p>Keywords: Community, Constitution, Republicanism, Election, Tension.</p>
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1.0 Introduction

In his widely discussed book *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983), the legendary Igbo literary icon and scholar, Professor Albert Chinualumogu Achebe lamented that

“The bankrupt state of Igbo leadership is best illustrated in the alacrity with which they had jettisoned their traditional republicanism in favour of mushroom kingships. From having no kings in their recent past, the Igbo swung round

to set an all-time record of four hundred 'kings' in Imo and four hundred kings in Anambra! (Achebe, 1983, p. 61). Achebe's lamentation in this regard emphasized on major issue which is considered germane in this discourse, which is the "traditional republicanism" of Igbo leadership and administrative structure which actually predates colonial Nigeria. As a political cum administrative governance system, the lexical item 'republicanism' implies a system in which ultimate power resides with the people or a body of individuals elected or selected by the people to represent them. This is the natural or traditional Igbo leadership pattern as often expressed in the common apothegm that the Igbo had no kings (*Igbo enweghi eze*), unlike their Hausa and Yoruba compatriots who have established emirate and Oba monarchical systems long before British colonialism in Nigeria. A variety of documented history have presented Igbo traditional institutions and society as 'acephalous,' 'segmentary,' 'stateless' and even 'prototypical' – a society made up of village groups (obodo) and autonomous communities governed by decentralized leadership which cannot lay any claims to their positions as being either permanent or hereditary. A few communities in Igboland, particularly trading cities located along the River Niger such as Ossomari, Arochukwu, Onitsha, Asaba, Agbor, Aboh, Iselle-Ukwu, Iselle-Azagba, Iselle-Mkpituime and the Nri Ancient Kingdom are however observed to have rich and complex chieftaincy establishments in precolonial Nigeria. This is why Ejiofor (1982, p. 22) has averred that "the traditional Igbo systems may be divided into two major types, namely, the democratic and the monarchical. West of the Niger, village kingdoms are the rule rather than the exception in the communities. In reference to the democratic model, Isichie (1976, p. 22) observed that "one of the things that struck the first Western visitors to Igboland was the extent to which democracy was practiced." Nenwe Community from which Uhueze Autonomous Community was carved out in the First Republic by the then Executive Governor of Enugu State, Dr Chimaroke Nnamani did not have elaborate kingship or chieftaincy institution at precolonial era. Therefore, governance structure at that period can only be said to be reflective of the typical Igbo traditional republicanism as were found in most communities in Igboland. And like most communities, equally had their experiences with a British-imposed Warrant Chief named Okoro Eleke. With a deliberate programme of mobilization and creation of autonomous communities from the late 1970s equally came the creation of the Igwe or Eze institution in those communities with their associated challenges. This is actually the crux of this treatise, especially as it relates to Uhueze-Nenwe Autonomous Community.

2.0 The Experience of the Igbo People with Warrant Chiefs

The introduction and imposition of Warrant Chiefs in Igboland between 1891 and 1929 was entirely an invention of British colonial administration under Sir Fredrick Lord Lugard. In his account of the governance structure in a typical Igbo Community before the advent of the British, using Nenwe as typical example, Chukwubike (1984, p. 20) states:

Before the British came, the town was administered by the Ali deity priests, council of elders and village assembly. When a report was made to any of the deity priests, he gathered elders from that particular village for adjudication and amicable settlement. More often than not, their decisions were final. In minor cases, the village assembly met, heard both parties, held consultations and delivered judgement. If any of the two parties rejected the decision, they were referred to a soothsayer for verification, or for one of the parties to swear on a Juju as proof of his or her truthfulness or innocence.

Further, he highlights the reason for the introduction of the indirect rule system by the colonialists through the warrant chiefs: "The British needed some middlemen through whom they would deal with the natives, and feeling that all Africans were ruled by chiefs, they introduced chieftaincy institution, appointed some people chiefs and gave them warrants (Chukwubike, 1983, p.21). Forsyth (1977, p.18) corroborates this factual account when he states that "the British were so concerned with the idea of regional chiefs that where there were not any, they tried to impose them."

Simply put, Warrant Chiefs were introduced in Igboland for the British administrative convenience and necessity. But the Indirect Rule system did not turn out as successful as it was in both Northern and Western parts of the country which already had established Oba and emirate monarchical and administrative structures. So, the Indirect Rule system operated seamlessly in those regions which were already accustomed to implicit submissions to monarchical order and even dictatorship. The entire traditional leadership structure in Igboland made it difficult for one person to lord it over others in the name of Warrant Chief, even with the backing and support of the British colonial administration under a determined and powerful figure as Sir Fredrick Lord Lugard, who had in 1914 effectively amalgamated the Southern and Northern protectorates of his jurisdiction and named it Nigeria (Niger area) as coined by his mistress, Flora Shaw. It has been widely debated by many scholars that the introduction of

Warrant Chiefs in Igboland by the British colonial administration resulted to the loss of true political independence in many Igbo towns and communities.

The Warrant Chiefs controlled the native courts and collected taxes in line with the warrants they received from the British. Their instalment in many communities were quite arbitrary and did not follow any laid down traditional protocol for ascensions to positions of authority in Igboland. Although in just a few situations, some individuals installed as Warrant Chiefs in their communities were actually notable men, many were men of little or no standing (slaves and slave masters), even people considered to be inconsequential in their domains before, and in certain rare cases, people from other communities were installed as Warrant Chiefs. Generally speaking, Warrant Chiefs were installed without any cognizance to precolonial leadership and administrative structures in Igboland. In sending undesirable or inconsequential individuals to be in the service of the Whiteman as Warrant Chiefs, the locals reasoned that the Whiteman with all his suspicious moves and purported manipulations did not actually deserve the best of their citizens in terms of manpower. This position is quite logical in an achievement-oriented society as traditional Igbo society. Such achievements were mainly tailored towards the optimal actualization of the customs, cultures and traditions of the land. In Igbo traditional society, the size of a man's barn which he was capable of filling up with the proceeds of his hard-earned harvest (mostly yams), the size of his residence, the number of wives he married and was quite capable of feeding with their retinue of children, his prowess in wrestling, warfare, palm wine tapping, hunting, as well as the number and prestige of his traditional titles were the essential indices of his success. Men who had solid reputations in one or more of these areas were hardly sent or allowed into the service of the Whiteman as Warrant Chiefs, etc. The people believed that the Whiteman did not deserve them, and that allowing them into such a service was a total waste of potential.

In Nenwe, Chief Okoro Eleke from Okpome, Agbada-Nenwe became the first and only British-appointed Warrant Chief. In describing his warrant chieftaincy, Chukwubike (1984, p. 22) states that he "manipulated other chiefs from the town, continued his rule of terror, exploitation, extortion and humiliation." He was murdered in 1917 by the locals for his high-handedness, usurpation and, worse still, monumental corruption. Like Chief Okoro Eleke, many Warrant Chiefs in Igboland became increasingly tyrannical, oppressive and vitiated. They imposed taxes on the people arbitrarily and extorted them for their selfish aggrandizements. With regards to the attitude of Warrant Chiefs, Adegbulu (2011, p. 5) maintains that "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." The people perceived them largely as dictatorial stooges of the colonial masters who appointed them, and as rulers who were neither answerable nor accountable to the masses and therefore without legitimacy.

By 1929, the resentment against Warrant Chiefs in many Southeastern communities had already reached its zenith and a popular revolt and protestation known as Aba Women's Riot was staged. The women's riot took place in vast areas of southern Igboland and also in Ibibio speaking areas further southeast. During the riot, thousands of angry women besieged the residences of Warrant Chiefs and also attacked native courts in order to demonstrate their disenchantment with their exploitative style of rulership. After the riots, the colonial administrators formally removed Warrant Chiefs from their positions of authority. Thus, "the British began to reform local administration in order to create a proper Indirect Rule system" (Adegbulu, 2011, p. 8). It was indeed the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 that led to the abolition of the warrant chief system of indirect rule in Southeastern Nigeria. On the basis of intelligence report gathered and submitted by its field officers, the colonial administrators established a new brand of Native Authority Councils and courts operated mainly by elders and local elites (Ishi-ani).

3.0 The Emergence of the Igwe or Eze Institution

While the Igbo lexical item "eze" as it relates to leadership simply means "king," "Igwe" is a derivative of "Igwekala" or "eluigwekala," meaning that "the sky or heaven beyond the sky is indeed bigger or higher than the land." This, therefore, implies that the Eze or Igwe is an elevated or higher servant of the masses. Igwe and Eze, in the context of kingship, are often used synonymously in many parts of Igboland. Obi refers to the central building – structure or substructure where guests are usually received in the homestead of an Igbo man. It also often serves as a place of rest or relaxation, especially for the man and his male offsprings. But when used as a title of honour for a king, Obi implies "the person who occupies the throne house or heart of the kingdom." Depending on the pronunciation, obi can as well mean "heart." Igwe, Eze and Obi are all Igbo lexical items referring to kingship or traditional leadership in Igboland.

With the failure and consequent abolition of the Warrant Chief system after the 1929 Aba Women's Riot, the colonial administrators began a formal inquiry on the type of local governance structure that would be suitable to the people. Relying on intelligence report submitted by its field officers as earlier stated, a reform of local administrative

structure was ordered and decisively embarked on in order to create what they believed would be an appropriate Indirect Rule. This resulted to the creation of New Native Authority Councils in the 1930s; a system made up of mostly community elders and members of the community elite known as Ishi-Ani in local parlance. Again, as it was the case with the Warrant Chiefs, the Native Authority Councils were criticized and denounced for corruption and for what Eze ((2015, p. 4) described as their “non-traditional character.” This implies that the system was not considered to have conformed with the traditional local administrative structure of Igbo society. The Native Authorities were viewed to be bulkier units than the earlier known communal settings in Igbo precolonial society. There was no representation of women in the Councils and this was also considered an abnormality at this period.

As pressure mounted for the representation of the gradually increasing number of educated elites in local politics, the colonial authority in the 1940s introduced what was known as “Best Man Policy” or “Okacha Mma” in Igbo. In implementing this policy, the colonial administration ensured that community elders were not the only representatives in the councils but also educated younger persons from villages and communities that make up each council. Clearly, the focus was on a democratic reform of the local administrative structure as a primary necessity for independent democratic governance at higher levels of governmental administration. Again, in the words of Adegbulu (2011, p. 8), “there was a conscious move in the field of local administration away from the legitimizing principle of ‘tradition’ towards the legitimizing principle of democracy: both principles were perceived to be contradictory at the time.” No formal roles were assigned to chiefs at this period, and regional governments were perceived to be constantly interfering in the activities of the New Native Councils thereby contradicting democratic ideals.

By mid 1950s, the three regions (East, West and North) created by the 1946 Richards Constitution had achieved a considerable level of internal self-governance. Apart from having parliamentarians who emerged via elections, the West and the North also established ‘House of Chiefs’ patterned in the Westminster form as their second legislative chambers. It was precisely in 1950 that the MacPherson Constitution provided for regional autonomy and a federal union. In order not to lose out of any opportunity and also stand at equal level with the other two regions – the Western and the Northern Regions which now inaugurated ‘House of Chiefs’ in addition to their well-established kingship institutions, the Government of Eastern Region established the ‘Eastern House of Chiefs.’ This resulted to a number of chiefs being recognized by the

government. In the case of Nenwe, Chukwubike (1984, p. 30) states that “In the year 1956, Chief D. O. Udeh of Obulorum Amorji-Nenwe was unanimously selected and presented to the Government of the then Eastern Region of Nigeria by the whole people of Nenwe Community and was recognized as the traditional ruler of the town. His tenure of office was marked with peace and progress. He died in March 1976.” It is however noteworthy that the development in chieftaincy institution at this period in the nation’s political history was not a colonial-imposed idea but a Nigerian concept and agreement as a matter of suitability and adjustment.

The ‘House of Chiefs’ remained in place until the outbreak of the Nigeria-Biafra War in July 1967. Okwesili (2023, p.105) has noted that “After the war, the administration of Eastern Region led by Ukpabi Asika was hesitant to recognize the traditional rulers in Igboland due to the alleged fear of their role during the war.” This perception is also corroborated by Eze (2015, pp. 4-5) when he states that:

At the end of the Civil War in 1970, Mr Ukpabi Asika, who was appointed the administrator of the East Central State, where majority of the Igbo belong, was more concerned with rebuilding the war-ravaged areas of the state than sparing any thought for the institution of traditional chieftaincy. Even when the East Central State was split into about fifty-four divisional administrative units and a Divisional Administrative Department (DAD) put in place to superintend over their affairs, Mr Asika did not still think that chiefs could play much role in his administration. Instead, he encouraged the formation of strong town unions to drive development down the grassroots, while relegating the chiefs to the background.

Asika’s unenthusiastic approach and behavior with regards to chieftaincy institution was informed by his disgust of the role played by the chiefs in the creation and declaration of the Republic of Biafra. Most of the chiefs at that time were actually members of the Eastern Nigeria Consultative Forum which advised the late Biafran leader, Chief Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu to declare Biafra as an independent sovereign state. Thus, ab initio, Mr Ukpabi Asika never supported the creation of the Biafran Nation, hence his acceptance his appointment as administrator of the East Central State by General Yakubu Gowon’s Federal Military Government at its creation on 27th May, 1967. Mr Asika was appointed its administrator in October 1967. He remained in office until July 1976. Anthony Ukpabi Asika (28 June 1936 – September 14, 2004) was an Igbo

academic, civil servant and political scientist of the Ijelekpé Dynasty in Ogbeoza Community of Onitsha North Local Government Area of the present-day Anambra State. His post-civil war efforts as administrator of East Central State mainly focused on the Federal Military Government's initiative of rebuilding the devastations of the Civil War – a programme popularly known as General Gowon's 3Rs – Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation. Again, Okwesili (2023, p.105) observes that "The non-fulfilment of the promise by the Federal Government occasioned the flowering of local participation and formation of various town unions with pockets of projects to heal the wounds and ravages of the war."

A Local Government Reform Committee with Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki as its head was set up in 1976 by the Federal Government to produce a general yardstick in the entire nation on how Local Government should be organized and governed. It was the Committee's report that gave the definition of Local Government as "the third tier of government" with a focus to bring governance nearer to the grassroots. It was on the basis of this report that the Federal Government directed State Governments to use the same method to create Local Government Areas within their domains. In East Central State which was subsequently divided into Anambra and Imo States, a committee chaired by Professor Adiele Afigbo was inaugurated to advise the government on how best to implement the Dasuki Committee's report as directed by the Federal Government. The Afigbo Committee, among other things, recommended the creation of Autonomous Communities to be headed by traditional rulers with government recognition. In response to that, the Anambra State Government on September 2, 1976 introduced the Chieftaincy Edict No 8 which was gazette on 25th November, 1976. Thus, in the words of Adegbulu (2011, p. 11), "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 government created by fiat autonomous communities as constituencies for the would-be chiefs and ..."

Also, in response to the popular demands of the people, just as it was earlier done in Anambra State, the Second Republic Governor of Imo State, Sam Mbakwe, in 1981 passed into law the Traditional Rulers and Autonomous Communities Laws known as Imo State Law No 11. It was this law that made many notable community chiefs Ezes. Specifically, the law states that an Eze is "a traditional ruler 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" (In Adegbulu, 2011, p.

13). Therefore, with the enactment of Anambra State Chieftaincy Edict No 8 of 1976 and subsequently Imo State Law No 11 of 1981, the Igwe or Eze institution in Igboland effectively emerged in many communities. Ogboagu (1995) has, however, observed that 'Since Nigeria gained political independence from Britain, the foundation on which the traditional system stands has shifted many times; traditional rulership in Igboland has become a creature of, and sustained by, statutes particularly that of the constitution of the land.'

4.0 Proliferation of Autonomous Communities and Tussles for Igweship

Following the creation of the Local Government System in 1976 with the primary purpose of bringing governance nearer to the governed, the military governor of East Central State (now Abia, Imo, Enugu, Anambra and Ebonyi), by executive fiat, equally created autonomous communities, although communities in Igboland have always been autonomous, having originally existed independent of one another with their respective independent leaderships comprising of council of elders. So, autonomous communities can be said to be in tandem with the afore-discussed Igbo republicanism. The creation of autonomous communities resulted to the re-establishment of chieftaincy institution or traditional ruler institution. Thus, the traditional ruler of an autonomous community once recognized by the State Government automatically becomes the highest authority in his community and superintends over all vital functions therein when he is in attendance. Both the laws of old Anambra and Imo States recognize an autonomous community as one that inhabit a specific geographical space with villages knit together by common traditions, customs and cultural ways of life. In addition to all these, the Imo State law of 1981 equally specifies that villages that constitute an autonomous community must have a common historical antecedent or heritage.

Having specified the various criteria for creating autonomous communities and of recognizing anyone as Igwe, Eze or Obi in the various State laws, the clamour for autonomous communities and the tussles for kingship intensified. It is in view of these that Okwesili (2023, p.106) states that:

The criteria for the creation of an autonomous community as set by the State laws hold that any community or group of community seeking autonomy shall have among others, a common tradition, common identity and at least a population of notable adults. The community shall indicate in writing through the ministry of Rural

Development and Chieftaincy matter to the State House of Assembly. As required, a copy of the constitution of the autonomous community has to be forwarded to the Ministry of Rural Development. The constitution shall also contain the customary laws of the community. The written constitution also contains a code of conduct for the traditional ruler. This was necessary for orderly selection of the traditional ruler. The definition of the criteria for creating of autonomous communities and recognition of traditional rulers created a floodgate of requests and later abuse that led to the proliferation of the autonomous communities.

It is actually this abuse, consequent proliferations and tussles that have led to a myriad of crises that have brought violence and destruction to many communities in Igboland. Of course, a number of reasons can be adduced for autonomous communities' proliferation and Igweship tussles. One is the ambition and struggles to become kings at all costs by quite a number of individuals in many communities. This inordinate desire for Igweship and power by moneybags and unscrupulous politicians has brought so much crises to many communities. The situation is so bad that in some cases the Igweship stool is sold to the highest bidder, thereby sacrificing merit. This is why all sorts of characters now occupy the highly respected seats of Igwes, Obis or Ezes in Igboland, with protracted tussles and violence being the consequence, especially from the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999. Also, the overpoliticization of Igweship positions through the imposition of wrong candidates to communities by state governors for their selfish political interests. In the long run, mainly those who know how to press the right button in governmental systems succeed in becoming kings in their communities. Such kind of imposition breeds rancor and bitterness because the people are denied their legitimate traditional rights and processes of selecting their own kings by themselves. The governors impose their own candidates as a way of rewarding or placating their political loyalists, hence many communities have resorted to the law courts to decide who becomes their Igwes.

Although Uhueze-Nenwe had not experienced any catastrophes on account of Igweship tussles, it almost occurred in December 2023 but for the timely, avuncular, dutiful and patriotic intervention of Uhueze Elders and Senior Stakeholders Group (UESSG). But many autonomous communities both in the past and contemporary times are not as fortunate as Uhueze-Nenwe in this regard. Eno-Abasi (2025) has observed that "the selection of monarchs had become so contentious that it was the number one divisive problem in the five Igbo states.

Like the popular Oluwale Market in Lagos State, where all types of fake certificates are printed and sold to would-be buyers, traditional rulership in Igboland has been so bastardized that known criminals now bear the certificates." It is also a known fact that many notable figures have been killed across the five Southeastern states on account of kingship struggles.

In Oruku Community of Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu State, Igwe Emmanuel Chidiebere Mbah was gunned down like a common criminal on Sunday, December 26, 2020 by a rampaging gang associated with Kingship struggles in the Community. It was on the occasion to mark the first anniversary of his inauguration as Igwe of Oruku by the Enugu State Government. The occasion venue was filled to capacity and Igwe Mbah was addressing the people when the armed gang invaded and unleashed mayhem; shooting the Igwe and seizing another indigene of the Community identified as Chigozie Ani – a younger brother to Ejike Ani – a former Chairman of Nkanu East LGA. The crowd dispersed in panic and pandemonium as the invading gang shot sporadically into the air. Other communities witnessing serious tensions arising from Igweship tussles in Enugu State include Nkerefi, Umuode, Mburumbu, etc. In Imo State, the narrative is the same about rising demands for the creation of autonomous communities and heightened tensions arising from ambitions to become traditional ruler at all costs. Communities which witnessed serious crisis arising from Ezeship issues both in the past and present times include Ngor Okpalla, Obinugwu, Izombe, Orodo, etc. Eze Basil Njoku of Amanze Obowo Community was assassinated in 2022 while Eze Joe Ochulue of Ezinihite Mbaise was equally abducted and killed in 2023. The same fate met Eze J. N. Nnamdi and Eze Phillip O. Anyanwu of Nguru Nweke and Orsu Obodo Autonomous Communities respectively. The cases are as numerous as their casualties.

In Anambra State, the situation is not different at all. Some Autonomous Communities enmeshed in internecine strife in both past and present times on account of kingship tussles include Azia, Ojoto, Ajali, Oba, Umuona, Umuoji, Awka-Etiti, Nkwelle-Ezunaka, Obosi, etc. Igwe Amobi IV of Ogidi was assassinated in his home at Enugu in 1998. Peace has also eluded Adazi-Nnukwu on account of the selection process and crises associated with their kingship institutions. In Abia State, the situation has not changed, rather, it has been observed that the struggle for Ezeship has actually intensified from the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999. Notable Communities entangled in serious kingship altercations in the past and present times include Arochukwu, Umuako Nsirim in Abia South Local Government Area, and Lodu Umuimenyi of Bende LGA which has kingship contentions lasting for many years. In

Ebonyi State, disputes and controversies surrounded Igweship matters in Autonomous Communities like Ishiagu, Uburu, etc. The case of Uburu was known to have lasted for ten whole years until the intervention of Governor Dave Umahi which resulted to the installation of Eze Laz Nweze Umahi as the king of the Autonomous Community.

Although some believed that the creation of autonomous communities in Igboland will result to development, peace, unity and stability, the situations and expectations have not always been so in the over 2000 autonomous communities already in existence in the region, and the demands for more is incremental, even astronomical.

4.0 How the Intervention of Uhueze Elders and Senior Stakeholders Group (UESSG) Saved the Community from Violence over the Selection of the Second Igwe

After the sudden demise of the traditional ruler of Uhueze-Nenwe, His Royal Highness, Igwe Dr. Emmanuel Nwachukwu in 2016 and his funeral and mourning period, series of controversies and disputes trailed various efforts to choose his successor. The disputes principally hinged on settling on the method of making that vital selection due to two versions of Uhueze-Nenwe Town Union (UNTU) constitutional frameworks presented to the citizens at the same time. One was gazetted by the Enugu State Government through the Ministry of Local Government Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs in 2003, and has the principle of rotation in the order of seniority of the villages enshrined in it, the other was ungazetted, with the method of election as its cardinal thrust. Those who peddled the ungazetted constitution insisted that it was the original UNTU Constitution and not the one already gazetted by the State Government which they claimed was concocted, doctored and hastily submitted to the Government for such recognition. On the other hand, those who supported the principle of rotation in the order of seniority of the villages equally accused those clamoring for election as the rightful method of selecting the Igwe as peddlers of a document which they altered or falsified for their selfish aggrandizement. The storms and controversies raged from these two opposing camps.

As the arguments lingered, those who canvassed for the adoption of the already gazetted constitution as the authentic document and therefore the rightful means of selecting the Igwe further averred that allocating portions or choosing things in the order of seniority has always been the natural pattern of handling or distributing things in Uhueze from time immemorial, beginning from the progenitors of the six villages that make up the Autonomous Community, and that following such a pattern would bring lasting peace, stability and progress for the

entire Uhueze-Nenwe. Further along this line of reasoning, it was viewed that following the principle of the order of seniority would not only largely insulate the process from the vagaries of overpoliticization but also the kingship stool both now and in posterity. On the other hand, those who are in favour of an electoral process involving all willing contestants were equally vehement in their own line of the argument. They stated that the emergence of an Igwe through a democratic electoral process would elicit popular support for the throne and also ensure that a credible candidate who enjoys the vital support of the majority will always occupy the throne.

The controversies lasted throughout the tenure of some President Generals (PGs) of the Community including the late Architect Augustine Udeh and Mr Ikechukwu Ejim. When Mr Emmanuel Uchenna Nworie took over as PG, the situation persisted and even worsened. Those pushing for election at this point were seen to be mainly members of the UNTU Exco led by Mr Emmanuel Uchenna Nworie - a serving police officer.

Since the demise of the late Igwe Dr Emmanuel Nwachukwu, the Community has lost a number of allocations and opportunities, especially from the State Government, because of the vacant stool of an Igwe, and many citizens were not happy about it, hence the consistent clamor to amicably resolve the selection controversies as soon as possible. At a time when a referendum indicated that five out of the six villages opted for rotation in the order of seniority and Mr Emmanuel Uchenna Nworie led Exco was still insistent on election, many began to accuse them of a grand plot to manipulate the process in favour of a particular candidate said to be their benefactor.

By early December, 2023, the leadership of UNTU lead by Mr Emmanuel Uchenna Nworie informed the people of Uhueze of an Igweship election slated for 20th December that same year. This prompted the Igweship aspirants from the various communities to take to the fields to canvass for votes and supports in various forms and dimensions. The accusation of an underground plot by the UNTU Exco to manipulate the process in favour of their preferred candidate spread like wild fire and intensified. Those who were in favour of rotation in the order of seniority strengthened their opposition to the election and tension rose to its elastic limit in the entire Community in view of an impending showdown and catastrophe on account of the slated election.

As a result of these, well-meaning individuals from the Community – both home and abroad began to call for the intervention of elders and prominent citizens of the Community in order to avert the looming danger. Both

UNTU and Nkoro Uhueze WhatsApp platforms were literally set on fire with accusations and counter accusations, insinuations and counter insinuations, threats and counter threats from vociferous individuals from both sides of the divide. Consequently, the platforms were locked up on a number of occasions by their administrators. Litigations were instituted by different people for different reasons, and there was confusion everywhere in the Community. It was obvious to every discerning heart that December 2023 was not going to be a peaceful one in Uhueze if any election for Igweship was allowed to hold on the 20th as earlier scheduled.

When the controversies and contentions got to the peak, Air Vice Marshal Christian Ndubuisi Chukwu, a former Chief of Administration of the Nigerian Air Force, took the bull by the horn. He mobilized other prominent citizens of the Community like Professor Michael Maduagwu – a former lecturer at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, Kuru, Jos, Group Captain Joseph Iloabanafor Orji – first Military Governor of Gombe State, Engr Magnus Nnaemeka Ede – member representing Aninri State Constituency in the Enugu State House of Assembly, etc., to begin to douse the tensions that had already reached its elastic limit. This bold initiative gave birth to Uhueze Elders and Senior Stakeholders Group (UESSG).

The group held several meetings in December 2023, during which it determined that the best line of action at the moment was to ensure that the scheduled December 20 Igweship election was cancelled. Although they verbally advised the President General of the Community to suspend the planned election in the interest of peace, he refused. The refusal prompted the UESSG to appeal to the Enugu State Honourable Commissioner for Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs, Deacon Okey Ogbodo, precisely on 18th December 2023 to intervene in ensuring that the election was suspended, and he did. Having officially suspended the election by the State Government, the UESSG called for memoranda on how to determine the way forward on the Igweship imbroglio. In a short space of time, they received a total of eighteen memoranda in which all but one memo favoured the rotation in the order of seniority option. This again reinforced the widespread perception that majority of Uhuezerians actually preferred the rotation in the order of seniority option. Consequently, the UESSG issued a communique detailing its findings and resolution that the best way for the selection of the Igwe of the Community would be by rotation in the order of seniority across the six villages of Uhueze-Nenwe, and that since Eziecho the most senior village produced the last Igwe, it was now the turn of Umuewo the next most senior village to make nomination (s) for the throne.

On 20th January, 2024, on the invitation of the President General of Uhueze, the UESSG attended a general meeting of the entire Uhueze Community during which it formally presented its communique to the generality of the people. The group was represented in the meeting by some of its members including Group Captain J. I. Orji (Rtd), AVM C. N. Chukwu, Barrister Samuel Orji and Chief Mark Mbah. The resolutions of the UESSG were presented by AVM C. N. Chukwu on behalf of the group, and it was received with a resounding ovation by majority of Uhuezerians present in the meeting. But the Present General, Mr Emmanuel Uchenna Nworie and his leadership indefinitely suspended its implementation against the wishes and desires of a vast majority of Uhuezerians. After a long delay, the PG on 10th February 2024, during a general meeting subjected the UESSG resolutions, which were earlier accepted by the people, to village voting. Despite this development, the outcome of the voting was that four villages namely Eziecho, Umuewo, Enugunato and Umueze clearly voted in favour of rotation in the order of seniority while two villages – Obeagu and Umualugwoyi voted for a general election. A few months later, Obeagu which had previously voted against rotation dramatically changed their position and supported the rotation option for the selection of the Igwe of Uhueze. Yet the PG continued to delay the implementation resolutions. This scenario, again, started building up tensions similar to the one earlier experienced as a result of the December 20, 2023 scheduled but later suspended Igweship election. And there was indeed no justifiable reason by the PG for delaying the implementation of the resolutions of the UESSG as accepted and lauded by Uhuezerians. Again, the various community WhatsApp platforms began to rattle and explode with vociferous criticisms of the actions and inactions of the PG and his leadership with respect to a sensitive matter as the Igwe selection process, and most importantly the genuine wishes of Uhuezerians. It is on account of this that many people now concluded that the PG has been substantially bribed by a particular candidate with whom he had planned to manipulate his preferred electoral process in his favour. These accusations were now no longer overt but covert and vociferous from various directions. The verbal confrontation of the PG's audacity in trying to subvert the will of a clear majority of the people were really enormous at this stage.

On 26th March, 2024, the Honourable Commissioner for Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs convened a meeting of all stakeholders of Uhueze-Nenwe on the Igweship matter. The meeting was attended by the UNTU Executives, members of the UESSG, chairmen and secretaries of the six villages that make up Uhueze, as well as other notable individuals from the Community. During the meeting, the Honourable

Commissioner reinforced the position of the UESSG and went further to notify the attendees that the Community has a gazetted constitution with the Enugu State Government dated January 2023 which stipulates that the Igwe shall be chosen by rotation in the order of seniority of the six villages. Consequently, he affirmed that the next Igwe shall be chosen from Umuewo village which is the next most senior village after Eziecho which had already had their turn during the reign of the late HRH Igwe Dr Emmanuel Nwachukwu. The UESSG was represented in that meeting by Hon. Engr Magnus Nnaemeka Ede and Dr Dominic C. Onwe. Even after the meeting, the PG disregarded the executive directive of the Hon. Commissioner, the prudent counsel of the UESSG and the desire of the people to stop the electoral process and adopt the option of rotation in the order of seniority in choosing the next traditional ruler of Uhueze.

At a point, the PG in connivance with some Igwe aspirants who opted for election went to court and obtained an injunction to restrain himself (the PG) and the UESSG from amending the ungazetted constitution in order to ensure that the principle of rotation in the order of seniority did not apply in the Igwe selection process. It was also widely rumored in late November 2024 that the PG took his preferred Igwe aspirant to meet some government officials and lobbied them to present this same preferred candidate to the State Government for the issuance of certificate as the Igwe of Uhueze-Nenwe.

Despite these intrigues, the UESSG remained focused and determined to work with the people of Uhueze to ensure that the Igwe selection process was constitutional, peaceful and credible. Having taken into account the decisions and desires of Uhueze people, as well as the constitutional directive of the Enugu State Commissioner for Local Government, Rural Development and Chieftaincy Affairs, the UESSG maintained that the selection of Igwe Uhueze shall be by rotation in the order of seniority of the six villages, and that the next Igwe shall be rightfully selected from Umuewo village.

Due to the unwillingness of the PG to implement the necessary decisions and resolutions, the UESSG requested for the CV and credentials of the two Igweship aspirants from Umuewo in the persons of Chief Anthony Azubuike Nwanze and Barrister (Dr) Godwin Chijioke Nwobodo, fdc, DIG (Rtd), and called for a delegate meeting of people from all the villages of the Community at Enugu precisely on 18th December, 2024. The meeting was attended by over thirty persons from home and abroad. Many were physically present while others joined via zoom. After the assessment of the CVs and credentials of the aspirants and rigorous oral interviews, the attendees in their wisdom,

through a voice vote, unanimously adopted Barrister (Dr) Godwin Chijioke Nwobodo, fdc, DIG (Rtd) to be the Igwe of Uhueze-Nenwe Autonomous Community and proceeded to present him to the Governor of Enugu State through the executive Chairman of Aninri Local Government Area. When this was done, tensions rose again from some individuals who felt that the Enugu delegates were not properly constituted to reflect the actual representatives of the six villages of the Community.

However, with the newly selected Igwe promptly launching out in various ways for peace, harmony, and reconciliation, tensions gradually began to die down and Uhueze became stable again. The embracing of Chief Anthony Azubuike Nwanze and Barrister (Dr) Godwin Chijioke Nwobodo - the new Igwe designate on 7th January, 2025 at Obodo Umuewoagbo when the later led a reconciliatory delegation and mission to the hamlet of the former signifies the tranquility prevalent in the Community this regard. It was indeed heartwarming and worthy of emulation that Chief Nwanze not only raised Barrister Nwobodo's right hand to the sky to the admiration of everyone present at the meeting but also proceeded to glue his heart to his in a warm brotherly embrace.

5.0 Conclusion

Although the kingship selection process of Uhueze-Nenwe Autonomous Community was successfully concluded on the 18th December, 2024 with the emergence of Igwe Egbeleri II, Barrister (Dr) Godwin Chijioke Nwobodo, fdc, DIG (Rtd), after eight years of interregnum, the intrigues, controversies and contentions it generated and, most importantly, the amicable and avuncular resolutions and logical reconciliations through the noble efforts and determination of non-partisan elders and eminent personalities of the Community are issues that hold a million lessons in contemporary Africa. Similar situations and cases in diverse climes in Nigeria and indeed the continent have resulted to monumental catastrophes in several communities. But the situation of Uhueze-Nenwe has glaringly demonstrated that when elders and eminent personalities of a community sincerely and altruistically deploy their social capitals, wealth of experiences and capacities for the good and interest of their communities, a lot can be achieved in any given situation without resorting to violence. The people of Uhueze equally deserve kudos for submitting to the resolutions of their patriotic elders and eminent personalities under the noble umbrella of Uhueze Elders and Senior Stakeholders Group (UESSG). Several months after the December 18, 2024 resolutions, all rancor and litigations over the Igweship selection process have completely ceased, and there is tranquility in the Community. The Community WhatsApp platforms which

hitherto exploded and was set ablaze with altercations resulting from individual and group ambitions to occupy the throne of Uhueze-Nenwe kingdom is now filled and flooded with brotherly conversations and healthy laughter; conversations devoid of bitterness, threats and acrimony. Citizens now advertise their goods and services with joy and peace, and with eager expectation of progressive patronage from their compatriots. An all-inclusive kingship coronation committee has just been formed for inauguration on August 27, 2024 at Umuewo Community Town Hall. That critical committee is headed by His Excellency, Group Captain Joseph Iloabanafor Orji – a retired Nigerian Airforce Aircraft Maintenance/Electrical Engineer and former Military Governor of Gombe State, Nigeria; an Uhuezerian from another village different from where the Igwe emerged from. All hands are now on deck as all well-meaning citizens are both willing and ready to support in various ways for a successful coronation ceremony slated for 27th December, 2025. Indeed, the UESSG approach and model in restoring harmony to the Community is a yardstick that should be further studied by researchers in the fields of Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology, etc. It is indeed a model that should be further developed, copied and applied to several similar situations in diverse communities in Nigeria, Africa and even globally.

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