Power of Space, Space of Power: The Sociocultural Complexities in the Institutionalization of "Ezeship" in Non-Igbo States in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article looks at the social and cultural complexities that the institutionalization of "ezeship" in non-Igbo states in Nigeria generated and the home-diaspora intersections of power that underlay, contended with, and intersected the sociocultural formation and that eventually contributed to its dissolution. It also investigates the implications of the current scenario on the coordination of disparate Igbo migrant groups in non-Igbo states in Nigeria on one hand and the Igbo sociocultural development on the other. Empirical evidence was employed to generate data for this study. Methods include observation, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions.

One of the landmark consequences of colonial encounter in Africa is the destabilization of the indigenous sociopolitical institutions and/or the imposition of

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sociopolitical systems that were previously nonexistent in the people's culture. In Igbo land, this development found expression in the emergence of a chieftaincy system in communities where this was previously unknown. This later metamorphosed into the form of "traditional rulers" of autonomous Igbo communities. In most Igbo communities, these traditional leaders, often misrepresented in the literature as "kings," are known as *eze*, *igwe*, *obi*, and so on. The phenomenon of "ezeship" in the past few decades became a common occurrence among the Igbo living in the cities outside the southeastern region, leading, at times, to leadership tussles or clamoring for political power in these urban centers. Many home-based Igbo indigenes, political scientists, and cultural experts view this development with mix feelings. Besides, the ezeship phenomenon engenders social and cultural complexities; spaces became contested arenas, reinforcing the "foreignness" of the phenomenon in most communities in Igbo land. This development, complicated by the clamor for power and leadership for to the esteemed position of *eze* among the Igbo urban dwellers in non-Igbo states finally led to the dissolution of the ezeship system outside the southeastern region in 2009 by the Royal Council of Igbo Traditional Rulers, based in southeastern Nigeria. Using two states (Oyo and Ogun states) in southwest Nigeria as a case study, this article employs ethnographic methods to attempt a look at the ezeship phenomenon in non-Igbo states in Nigeria, tracing the historical antecedents of the chieftaincy or kingship system in Igbo land. Techniques for data generation include key informant interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions.

There are five sections to this article. The first, Introduction, sets the direction of the argument in this article. This is followed by a look at the Igbo cultural landscape in eastern Nigeria. The section notes that scholars such as Forde and Jones (1950) and Onwuejeogwu (1981) have divided Igbo culture areas into five and six culture zones, respectively. This section also identifies areas of divergences and convergences in Igbo cultural practices. The third section examines the historical antecedents to the emergence of ezeship (kingship) in Igbo land. It argues that prior to colonial contact, most Igbo communities never had traditional rulers, as obtained today. The fourth part of the article examines the attempted institutionalization of ezeship in non-Igbo states in Nigeria, using southwest Nigeria as a case, pointing out the political tussles and clamor for power that ensued in the process. The process engendered various kinds of tensions whereby space became a contested arena, as exemplified in the home-diaspora power contestations. Consequently, clashes of interest emerged, leading to transgression of boundaries, presence, and authority both in Igbo land and, at times, at the urban centers. The concluding section examines the implications of the dissolution of ezeship in non-Igbo states on

the coordination of disparate Igbo people in urban Nigeria and on the socio-cultural development of the Igbo people.

Homogeneity and Divergences in the Igbo Cultural Landscape

The Igbo people are predominantly located in southeastern Nigeria, an area of about 41,000 km (Okpoko, 1996, p. 82). It has a total population of about 30 million (Nwankwo, 1993). The River Niger divided the Igbo land into two unequal parts: the eastern Igbo, which is the larger part, on the eastern bank of the River Niger, and western Igbo, the smaller portion, on the western bank of the Niger. These two portions make up Igbo territory. The two sections, nevertheless, share many cultural affinities. Today, the word *Igbo* is used in three senses, namely, the Igbo territory, the native speakers of the language, and finally, a language group (Uchendu, 1965). The Igbo language belongs to the *kwa* language group of Greenberg's (1956) Niger Congo language.

The Igbo do not have a homogeneous cultural entity. In other words, there are different subcultures of the ethnic group with significant differences. The five culture areas of the Igbo land, following Forde and Jones (1950), are as follows:

1. Northern or Onitsha Igbo includes towns such as Awka, Udi, Enugu, Enugu Ukwu, Nsukka, Aro Ndizeogu, Onitsha, Agukwu Nri, Igboukwu, Nanka, and Ihiala.
2. Southern or Owerri Igbo includes towns such as Aba, Umuahia, Owerri, Ahoada, Okigwe, and Orlu.
3. Western Igbo is the part of Igbo land in Delta State, and the towns include Asaba, Agbor, Kwalle, Ilah, and Aboh.
4. Eastern or Cross River Igbo includes towns such as Abam, Ohafia, Afikpo, Arochukwu, and Abriba.
5. Northeastern Igbo includes towns such as Ezza, Uburu, Okposi, and Abakkaliki.

Various reasons account for cultural differences noticeable among the Igbo. Afigbo, for instance, noted that these divergences are a result of issues such as historical contacts with their neighbors as well as migration. The Cross River Igbo (eastern Igbo), for instance, are assumed to have adopted their specialized age set and double descent systems from their Ibibio neighbors. The western Igbo are assumed to have adopted the kingship system from their

Benin neighbor. A closer study of the Igbo subgroups reveals even further differences within each subgroup. Consequently, Isichei (1977) notes, "The Igbo world is profoundly local and particular, and that no works of general synthesis can do full justice to this particularity" (p. 1). Variation, therefore, is an important element of the culture of the Igbo people.

Despite the significant differences, there are still overwhelming cultural uniformities common to all the subgroups. Among these, Onwuejeogwu (1981, p. 12) identifies certain cultural institutions besides the Igbo language as parts of these similarities. Others are *kolanut* (hospitality), white chalk customs, the vigor of Igbo music and dance movements, highly developed arts of wall decoration and delicate body paintings, pottery designs, *mmuo* (masquerade) institution, the age grade system, and *umunna* (patrilineage) groupings. These core cultural elements of Igbo society, in spite of its diversity, tend to overshadow the differences, particularly when the Igbo find themselves in the urban centers in non-Igbo societies.

Today, the Igbo are found mainly in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, and parts of Bayelsa, Delta, and River states of Nigeria. These groupings, including other microgroups within them, such as local government groupings and towns, are represented in associational life in the urban centers wherever the Igbo are found in Nigeria.

Emergence of Ezeship on the Igbo Sociopolitical Landscape

Scholars from various disciplinary orientations have continued to articulate the place of traditional political institutions in Africa. In doing this, attention has been given to the political institutions in both the precolonial and the postcolonial period and the changing sociopolitical formations that emerged following colonial contact (see Abubakar, 2010; Ashiru, 2010; Osaghae, 1989; Vaughan, 2003). In most African societies, the institution of kingship dates beyond colonial contact. Among the Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria, for instance, a well-established monarchical system had been in existence prior to colonial contact. There were hierarchically placed chieftaincy groups known as *baale*s (head chiefs) and chiefs as the case may be, which functioned as checks and balances to the authority of the *Ooni*, *Alaafin*, or the *Oba* (Yoruba monarchs). According to Barber (2007, p. 126), the *Oba* ruled in conjunction with the council of chiefs drawn from the various exogenous lineages that made up the town. Otunbanjo (1989, p. 32) posits that the processes of succession in the kingship system was based on primogeniture and were well established and that limited conflict of succession to

the barest minimum, although within the kin groups entitled to a kingship position, competition was fierce (Barber, 2007, p. 126). The colonial administrators used the existing political structures in Yoruba land for the purpose of administering the people although not without much contestation and conflicts generated by British attempts to distort the indigenous Yoruba political structures and order of supremacy in the process of fostering the indirect rule system in the land. Thus, Vaughan (2003, p. 283) noted that indirect rule reshaped and redefined the meaning of traditional leadership in Yoruba land by transforming the meaning of traditional authorities and by encouraging recurring controversies among traditional and modern elites who claimed to represent competing local constituencies. Subjective interpretations of traditional authorities generated serious contestations of power among *Oba*s, chiefs, educated elites (the new men), and local people (Vaughan, 2003, p. 285). A typical example is what the British administrators did in Yoruba land by raising the power of the *Alaafin* of Oyo to the detriment of other Yoruba traditional rulers in a bid to recognize a king in the Oyo province.

Among the Igbo people, the situation is drastically different. Except for a few communities, such as Asaba of western Igbo, the Onitsha of eastern Igbo, and few other Igbo communities, most Igbo communities lacked a monarchical structure of governance prior to colonial contact. Igbo culture historians are of the opinion that the western Igbo got their kingship structure from their Benin neighbor. For most Igbo communities, like many other African societies, the origin of kingship and chieftaincy dates to colonial contact and the need for the colonial administration to reach the grass roots of its subjects. In Igbo land, where governance was highly diffused in the body polity, to resolve the apparent political vacuum, which the British believed was evident, the British administrator appointed chiefs to whom they gave certificates "warrants," hence "warrant chief," to function as the link connecting the British administration with the people. Their role was to deliver to the people the White man's instructions rather than to represent the voices of their people. A closer observation reveals that two categories of people were appointed as warrant chiefs in Igbo land: (a) those the British people perceived to be influential, to be powerful, and to enjoy a high degree of acceptability among their people and (b) those of questionable character where it was not possible to get the corporation of the former.

Numerous reforms and edicts even in the postindependence and Nigeria Civil War era climaxed by the 1976 local government reforms followed the institutionalization of chieftaincy, which later metamorphosed into ezeship institution in Igbo land. Nevertheless, the imposition of chieftaincy in Igbo land,

including its terminological inappropriateness, reflects the distortion of a people's culture and traditions. According to Ogbalu (1975, p. 21), the White man brought the terminology *chief* into Igbo social life, as prior to colonial contact and the appointment of warrant chiefs, the word *chief* had no Igbo equivalent.

The term *king* means *eze* or, at times, erroneously referred to *chief*. When the Igbo say "*ndi* chief," meaning "the chief people," it reflects the foreignness of the terminology in the people's linguistic repertoire. Thus, to many Igbo studies scholars, the concept of chief is a British creation that does not have an Igbo equivalent. Despite the current popularity of the term *chief* in Igbo land, *eze* rather than *chief* has bearing in both the people's political philosophy and sociocultural usage. However, the appellation *chief* became a mark of social distinction for the new elites (new men) who emerged following the acquisition of western education and wealth, which capitalism has thrust up. The appellation functioned to give legitimacy to their newly acquired wealth, enhancing their social status in the process. Nevertheless, the institution of ezeship (offshoot of the warrant chief system) remains to be internalized by the Igbo people because of its lack of connectedness to the people's core traditions. It is worth noting that the post–civil war era and the incessant military interventions in the Nigerian political scene, with the subsequent need for the military administrators to reach the grass roots, just like the colonial administrators, compelled the military administration to reinvent the chieftaincy system in Igbo society, giving it much state recognition and support. This further gave impetus to the emergence of ezeship and its institutionalization in Igbo society, as it again provided the desired connectedness and viable agency, which the military administrators, like the colonial administrators, sought (Nwaubani, 1994, p. 362). In the then–Imo State, Nwaubani (1994), for instance, noted that Edict No. 22 of 1978 not only legalized this development but also thrust the chieftaincy to the fore again in Igbo states. The edict defined a chief as "a traditional head of an autonomous community identified and selected by his people according to their own traditions" (see Nwaubani, 1994, p. 364). In the course of history, however, *chief* was substituted by *eze*. Such chief or *eze* selected, following government prescription, was then given recognition by the government as a chief of a town or community. Of course, this new development generated much chieftaincy conflicts and fierce contestations for political leadership in communities in eastern Nigeria. Descendants of the warrant chiefs claimed right to the position of paramount rulership, and in some communities, they were rejected. In Nanka, a local community in Anambra State, for instance, this conflict lasted until 1999. In the book *Bumpy and Rugged Road to the Traditional Throne of Nanka*, Ezeugwa (2011) noted,

Under the British colonialism in the 19th century, the age-long political and traditional governance system of the Igbo people was altered significantly. *Eze*s or kings were introduced into most local communities by Fredrick Lugard as warrant chiefs. (p. iv)

However, the Igbo perception of a traditional leader is different from what obtains among the Hausa and Yoruba peoples of Nigeria, where the voice of the traditional ruler is held in high esteem, almost assuming the position of the voice of the gods in precolonial times. Little wonder that in Igbo land, they are often referred to as "leaders" rather than "rulers." Comparing traditional leadership in Igbo land with what obtains in Hausa land and Yoruba land, Oguejiofor (1996, p. 39) observes that traditional leaders in Igbo land lack godlike power and influence over their people. Thus, Chinua Achebe (1983) submits that "most of them [Igbo traditional leaders] are traders in their stalls by day and monarchs at night: City dwellers five days a week and traditional rulers on Saturdays and Sundays" (p. 48). The chieftaincy regalia of some of these rulers also reflect apparent lack of historical or ancestral reference, often imitating the regalia of kings and major personalities from other cultures even beyond the shores of Africa. Because culture is dynamic, paramount leadership has become part of the cultural terrain of Igbo land. Nevertheless, the traditional rulership in Igbo land has enjoyed the acceptance of its people, and a major feature of this political development is that traditional leaders represent the mouthpiece of the people in their relationship with other towns and the government. Internally, they help to coordinate the affairs of the community, working with the leadership of town unions in each town to bring different sociopolitical segments of the town together, thereby replacing the council of elders of the precolonial Igbo society. Nevertheless, the kingship system in most Igbo land today still remains a fledging system, lacking the traditional root that could have offered it much-needed underpinning and support in the people's psyche. As Ogbalu (1975) again noted,

Ibo [*sic*] political organization is republican in every aspect of the word. Monarchy as a form of government was not acceptable to them for they loathe subjugation to a single individual however benevolent, powerful or wealthy. There has never been in myth, legend or in history anybody known as the king of Ibos, for the Ibos say Ibo *adighi echi eze* [*Igboechieze*]. In the same way no person was ever designated the king of a particular town. (p. 23)

Two issues can be deduced from Ogbalu's (1975) observation. First, the Igbo nation never had a king. This means that no one had ever been referred to at any point in the history of the Igbo as "the king of the Igbo people." Second, Ogbalu's statement could mean that there is no town that has a king in Igbo land. According to him, "no person was ever designated the king of a particular town" (Ogbalu, 1975, p. 23). This is contestable, as some towns, such as Asaba and Nri, have a kingship system that predated the colonial period.

In recent times, debates have reemerged around the statement "Igbo *adighi echi eze*," or put differently, "Igbo *enwe eze*," that is, "The Igbo have no king." For scholars such as the renowned Igbo culture historian Afigbo, such assertion lacks true representation of the political reality of the Igbo people even prior to Western incursion. In a response to Onwuejeogwu's (2001) reaction to Onwumechili's Ahiajioku Lecture in 2000, Afigbo in a pamphlet published in 2001 maintained that it is a fallacy to claim that the Igbo have no king. Although Onwumechili had earlier noted that "most" Igbo societies had no king, Afigbo was comfortable neither with the qualifier *most* nor with Onwuejeogwu's assertion that it was a misrepresentation of the Igbo historical reality to claim that the Igbo have no king. In Afigbo (2001), the scholar tried to differentiate those he believed to be kings in Igbo land from those rulers he believed are the products of colonial encounter. The latter category, to him, comprised those he still referred to as "warrant chiefs." These, to him, are those who have bought the support of their people and/or gained the support of the government that gave them the staff of authority, whereas genuine kings "by culture and usage" are those whose position "derive[s] from the blood line" (Afigbo, 2001, p. 18). This article is not, however, intended to engage in this debate. Nevertheless, the fact is that the hegemony that the British needed to execute the indirect rule system in Igbo land was nonexistent, and that necessitated the introduction of the warrant chief system. This category of ezeship has continued to exist in Igbo land. Its apparent lack of ancestral antecedent has remained the fundamental basis for the fledging nature of the ezeship system in the region. This lacuna, this article argues, contributed to the problems that the institutionalization of ezeship in urban Nigeria encountered and contributed again to its final dissolution. The next section of this article looks at the institutionalization of ezeship in non-Igbo states in Nigeria, a development that began immediately after the Nigerian Civil War.

Ezeship in Non-Igbo States in Nigeria

Migrants in urban society often discover that to survive, they need social and cultural capital to adjust to and cope with the challenges in the urban center.

The development of town unions and ethnic associations in urban Nigeria is an attempt to reduce the hardship that new migrants into the urban locality contend with in their bid to survive. Thus, the hometown associations (HTAs) provide a supportive environment for people, particularly in Nigerian society, where a dichotomy between indigenes and strangers exists, a differentiation that is again reinforced by the public administrators (Honey & Okafor, 1998, p. 5). Little wonder that the HTAs have been viewed as, in the words of Osaghae (1998, p. 111), "shadow states" where civil associations function in place of government when governmental institutions fail to produce what the people desire, particularly since the 1980s. Besides, the HTAs provide a platform for intimate personal relations, material reciprocity, and mutual aid networks and also created a platform for the migrants to enact shared values. Ethnic culture is translocalized and reenacted in a new environment where the migrants find themselves.

Although the HTAs provided an umbrella for group unionism, in some urban centers, the HTAs lack the capacity to perform other functions and roles, such as provision of a megaplatform that can function as a unified voice for the disparate groups in their interaction with their host communities. This, according to Osaghae (1994), led to the evolution of an "ethnic empire" in northern Nigeria. In this region, for instance, mega ethnic associations for nonindigenes provided a platform for negotiations with the formal institutions of governance in the host community; with the Yoruba ethnic associations, they constitute what Osaghae (1994) calls "supra-HTAs" along the lines of traditional empires, complete with kings and chiefs. This development, according to him, is because in an urban center such as Kano, there are two categories of migrants: "the temporary migrant, who sojourn in the city for only a period of time, and the settler migrant who has more or less made the city a permanent abode" (Osaghae, 1998, p. 111). This distinction between settlers and temporary sojourners, he further argued, is significant in understanding the new development. The children born and raised in the city needed to be enculturated into the indigenous culture of their parents, which associational ethnicity has not adequately provided for. He then offered four basic reasons that migrant empire building appeared in Kano but had not appeared in such cities as Lagos, Ibadan, Abeokuta, Benin City, Port Harcourt, and Calabar, where there are even more Igbo migrants. These reasons, as Osaghae articulated, are as follows: closeness to the ethnic home area, which makes visits to these places possible; sense of being a temporary migrant, which is engendered by proximity to the home community; a dispersed settlement pattern in other cities other than the north, where communities such as Sabon Gari do not exist; and the large number of migrants, which made strong town unions possible (Osaghae, 1994, p. 58).

However, the first half of the 20th century witnessed the evolution of ethnic empires in cities like Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta, contradicting the earlier conclusion. Possibly, a different thesis is needed to explain this. This is not within the scope of the current article. However, for most of the informants consulted while gathering data for this study, personal aggrandizement and the need to legitimize one's wealth and social status can be said to be the reason. The position of *eze* has become agential for personal connection with the government of the day and therefore is the dominant reason for the institutionalization of ezeship in many non-Igbo states in western Nigeria. However, a child of bad omen in Ola Rotimi's (1971) text *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, this development did not last beyond a decade before the social formation was dissolved in non-Igbo states. This was in the year 2009. Although available literature has not offered an explanation for this, sociocultural complexities remain pivotal. The next section examines these sociocultural complexities.

Intersections of Space and Power in the Ezeship Phenomenon

The dialectical relationship in the terms *the power of space* and *space of power* reflects the nature of the relationship that exists between the traditional rulership in autonomous Igbo communities in Igbo land and the *eze*-Ndigbo in non-Igbo states. Urban dwellers, by their composition, are the economic lifeblood of their home communities. This role, besides constituting the more energetic and productive sector of the population, bestows on them the chance of playing a key role in the determination of the affairs of their hometown communities. The institutionalization of ezeship in the urban centers widens the scope and enlarges the currency and agency of these elites in urban centers, and hence the power base of some of them pitched them against their traditional leaders. By virtue of their social standing, and enhanced by wealth acquisition, Igbo urban "big men" are already placed in strategic position to contend and contest spaces in the hometown, at times to the disadvantage of those political gladiators or actors in the home community. Unlike the home-based traditional leadership, whose area of influence does not go beyond its autonomous community because of the nature of the Igbo indigenous political thought, for instance, the membership of diaspora *eze*'s "empire" is scattered to many Igbo towns, the hometowns of those urban dwellers who crowned him. This also implies that his popularity could spread farther and wider than that of his traditional ruler's. Invariably, the ezeship in non-Igbo states created an avenue for contestation of power, transgression of boundaries, and at times, open acrimony between these key actors. This,

more often than not, surfaces in Igbo social gatherings—such as during public celebrations like New Yam and *ofala* festivals, public launching, and fund-raising—which provide an arena for praise singing and public display of acceptance and acknowledgement. Such public occasions bring together indigenes in diaspora and people from different communities as either key actors, participants, or observers. A typical incident was recounted by an informant, Mazi Ikenna, as follows:

> In my hometown, Agujemba [not the real name], one of these *eze*s from the urban center came home claiming that he was a king of the Ndi-Igbo people in Nasarawa State. The public gathering was the burial ceremony of a chief, a member of the cabinet of the traditional ruler of our town. The *eze*-Ndigbo of Nasarawa state claimed he was an *eze* and wanted to dance into the arena with his entourage, a customary practice meant for our traditional ruler. As the drum for our king to enter was been beating the *eze*-Ndigbo of Nasarawa state entered with his entourage. Our king had already arrived with his entourage and ordered that he should be told to leave the arena, but the *eze*-Ndigbo from Nasarawa State refused and said, "*Obu M nwe ogbo*" [It is my turn to have the arena]. Our king refused to enter. When the Nasarawa state *eze* refused to leave the arena, our king ordered that he be carried out from the arena. This was done. (field work, 2011)

The public space by its very nature is open and accessible to all people. Thus, public acknowledgement enacted in the public space signifies collective acceptance. The public space also has the capacity to generate tension between and among power brokers in the community and in fact does, as the above example indicated. Space, particularly, social space, can also be symbolically conceptualized as one's area of influence. For the traditional ruler of an autonomous Igbo community, the hometown unequivocally is his space of power, quite unlike the "king" in the diaspora, whose area of influence or "kingdom" is in the state where he was crowned. This does not in any way suggest that the king in diaspora enjoyed total acceptance of his "subjects," for even amongst these urban dweller, political skirmishes were common occurrence, while some viewed the whole scenario with a sense of apathy. In Ibadan, southwest Nigeria, the political tussle is still in court even though the practice has been dissolved.

Anyway, when the cultural practice was in vogue, some urban dwellers accepted them, and they commanded their patronage. Back in the home community, through the process of diffusion, this influence may and in fact at

times does spread to the hometown community, including neighboring communities, depending on his capacity in terms of the extent to which the urban *eze* can use his "financial muscles" to generate significance. This further makes the space and power of the urban *eze* fluid and at times not readily determinable. In any case, the interaction and connections between places or spaces and actors continued to thrust up discordant voices. The implication is that it reinforces the apparent rivalries that have always existed between the traditional rulership in the hometown and the town union leadership in the urban centers in many autonomous communities in Igbo land. Although the town union and the traditional rulership seem to work together for the progress of the local community, more often than not, they are two strange bedfellows. Depending on the attitude and disposition of the one who occupies the "throne" in the home community, or the power brokers in the city, the city dwellers who control the wealth and who are needed to develop the home community may and in fact often view the traditional rulership as lacking in modern skills and strategies and therefore out of touch with modernity and new realities. In this way, the diaspora seems to undermine and at times intrude, maybe unintentionally, the power base of the kingpins in the rural community, violating the "rights" and privileges of those who control the affairs of the community in the hometown. The emergence of diaspora eze-ship tended to worsen this scenario.

Transgression of boundaries is not always in the hometown. This can also conversely take place in the urban centers. With regard to ezeship, the reality is that there was an unanswered question of how to determine hierarchy of authority when the *eze* from the hometown was invited to a public function in the urban center, where the diaspora *eze* was also in attendance. This, as simple as it seems, had generated conflicts in certain situations, such as in Abeokuta, at a point. An informant narrated the scenario thus:

> Some *eze*s were invited to Abeokuta from *ala* Igbo (Igbo land) for a social activity organized by three local government areas from one of the states in the southeast. Several *eze*s from Igbo land were invited. And one of the traditional rulers invited was a very prominent person. The then *eze* Ndigbo of Abeokuta was also invited to the occasion. At a point the then *eze* Ndi-Igbo of Ogun State got offended and became *very* angry that he was not given due recognition and decided to walk out of the occasion. It took the intervention of one of the *eze*s (the most prominent) that came from the east to bring him back to the social activity. He placated him but also pointed out to him that while they (traditional rulers from the east) are sitting on traditional stools, he (*eze* in non-Igbo states)

should remember that his own is a political *eze*. They were sitting on the stools which were inherited. (fieldwork, September 2010)

This scenario reflects the obvious power contest and tensions that are unresolved in the institutionalization of ezeship in non-Igbo states. This tension is generated and exacerbated by the nature of the indigenous Igbo sociopolitical philosophy, structure, or institution, which is informed by the fact that the Igbo people never evolved a large political empire like their Yoruba and Hausa counterparts. Hence, there is an evident lack of foundational basis on which to engraft the emerging social structure in non-Igbo states. This is very much unlike the Hausa, for instance, whereby the Saarki of the Hausa in any part of the country cannot contest space with the emir of his hometown when in northern Nigeria. For the Igbo people, there is no hierarchy of authority under which the ezeship institution in non-Igbo states could be grafted upon. According to Ichie Ezeaka, an informant and a man about 67 years old who resides in Ibadan, fundamental to the failure of ezeship in non-Igbo states is its lack of cultural roots. According to him,

In Igbo land, we grew up to hear that the Igbo do not have king. It is of recent that all these things started happening; that is when we started hearing it. *Eze* Igbo in Ibadan; *eze* Igbo in Abeokuta, *Mba*! [No!] Can there be two kings in a community? *Igbo anaghi enwe eze. Igbo jegodu ennwe eze o bughi na mba* [Igbo do not have a king. Even if the Igbo want to have a king, not in a strange land]. (fieldwork, September 2010)

For another informant in Abeokuta, Mazi Igboanugo, said,

The issue of *eze* in the first place is not cultural; it is not traditional. If it has been traditional, people would have understood their appropriate place. For instance, the Hausa people have their Saarki and I don't think any of the Hausa or Saarkis from the north will come and they will be having conflict because that thing has always been there and people live with it. For the Igbo there are no guiding traditional principles. (fieldwork, September 2010)

Besides the sociocultural quagmire, the institution of ezeship in non-Igbo states lacked a sustainable system of succession and also failed to meet the Igbo cultural prerequisite before becoming an *eze*. In most communities in Igbo land, to be an *eze*, one must belong to the line of ezeship or fundamentally

be an *ozo* titled man, which implies that he must be grounded in the customs and the traditions of his people and that the character and integrity of such an individual must have long been scrutinized and found blameless and thus found worthy to be conferred with the *ozo* title. As such, the titled man is the custodian of the customs and traditions of the people and ready to protect the group's interest. Besides, an informant noted that "the *eze ndigbo* in non-Igbo states also violates another principle which is the fact that a son cannot become an *eze* when the father is still alive, *I ghotara* [you understand]?" (fieldwork, 2010). These preconditions were jettisoned in these states, and this further created space for people with questionable character to use their wealth to navigate their ways to the position of *eze*. Speaking on the dissolution of ezeship in non-Igbo societies, another informant, Mazi Uzoamaka, who resides in Abeokuta, noted,

> Some *eze*s from *ala* Igbo (Igbo land) felt that it was not proper for people to be having the title *eze* Ndi-Igbo because at times when they come home there is a kind of conflict. Somebody comes to town and says he wants to see the *eze*, it may be the *eze* he knows where he is living and people may know the traditional ruler, I mean the *eze* of that locality, that autonomous community. . . . In that situation there is some kind of conflict. (fieldwork, September 2010)

The dissolution of the ezeship in urban Nigeria was, therefore, necessitated by the irreconcilable discordant tones that the social formation was generating. Spaces of power and hierarchy of authority were undefined. Hence, intrusions and transgression of spaces of power was a common occurrence. Such transgression of boundaries is inevitable among a people whose ancestral antecedents lack such kingship institutions. Inevitably, the intersections of and connections between places, actors, and power brokers cannot but generate the conflicts of interest that emerged. The needed distinction and separation between these spaces were not spelled out, either because of lack of adequate time for the cultural practice to evolve and mature or because of the actors' embedded interests, which did not make way for change. All these led to the eventual collapse of the ezeship system in non-Igbo states.

The Implications of the Dissolution of Ezeship in Non-Igbo States

The concept of group mind as espoused by Anyim Osigwe can best be used to explain the reason for the dissolution of ezeship in non-Igbo states in Nigeria. According to Anyiam-Osigwe, the *group mind* refers to

an expansive resource, a well-spring of ideas and thought processes that is created when people of a particular group or society intermingle their ideas, questions, perspectives, aspirations, knowledge and experiences in relation to specific goals or issues.

As the sum total of everyone's positions and concerns, the Group Mind is a synthesis in which the defining elements of the fundamental interest of the respective participants are preserved in the resultant Commonweal whose legitimacy and mutuality are subscribed to by all. (Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe Foundation, 2003, p. 13)

In this regard, the decision to dissolve the ezeship in non-Igbo states reflects an attempt by the Council of Igbo Traditional Rulers to protect the Igbo collective interest and identity. It is of truth that the ezeship in non-Igbo states is a social formation that, rather than promoting the Igbo collective interest, in western Nigeria, for instance, was characterized by egocentrism and political conflict and bickering, which was anathema not only to the identity of the Igbo people in these places but also to the sociocultural development of the Igbo people. The group mind principle, therefore, demands that if the ezeship cannot promote the group interest, the "fundamental interest of the respective participants," as Anyiam-Osigwe puts it, it has failed to serve its fundamental purpose. Little wonder that Anyiam-Osigwe reminds us that

minds that are focused together upon a common theme create a mutual force, which is not merely addictive, but vastly more powerful than that of any individual or group of individuals. (Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe Foundation, 2003, p. 8)

Ezeship in non-Igbo states was, therefore, antithetical to the Igbo common interest. However, as Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe Foundation again observed, the group mind "is guided by the vision and interest of the group" (p. 8). For this purpose, he further noted,

Contributing to the group mind engenders feelings of trust, confidence, empowerment, inclusion and love for the group, and creates a context that is conducive for the expression of innovative ideas. (Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe Foundation, 2003, p. 14)

But it is also important to note here that what is contributed to the commonweal, in this case, the "innovative ideas," must be that which fosters and

enhances the well-being of the group, or what will lead to Dipo Irele's (2010) conception of "genuine development." According to Irele,

> Genuine development has to be rooted in the cultural values of society. Any development that is detached from the culture of the people concerned would be meaningless. (Irele, 2010, p. 99)

Maybe a little exposition on the term *culture* will be relevant here. According to the British anthropologist Edward Burnnet Tylor (1958), culture is

> that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as member of society. (p. 1)

From this definition, it is obvious that Tylor perceives culture to be observable behavior, that is, what people do based on shared meanings because they are members of a particular society. For Haviland (1993), however, culture is not observable behavior but rather the values and beliefs that people use to interpret experience and generate behavior and that are reflected in their behavior (Haviland, 1993, p. 30). In this later interpretation, one sees culture as a guiding principle of action and of behavior. Whichever case one accepts, the basic issue here is that people share understanding of how to conduct their lives, and this becomes a mark of distinction for them. Behavior of an individual or a group of individuals who constitute the collective must of necessity be expected not to be drastically in opposition to what is acceptable to the group. It is in the light of this that the ezeship phenomenon in non-Igbo states, as I stated earlier, is antithetical to Igbo collective interest and cultural development. Indeed, every endogenous system has its norms, values, and precepts around which cultural practice revolves. These are part of what gives such cultural practice its legitimacy. Devoid of this primary ingredient, any attempt to recreate locale through translocalization has only a matter of time to collapse.

One of the fundamental bases for the initial institutionalization of the *eze* ndi-Igbo was the need to develop a more supposedly relevant political organ to coordinate the disparate Igbo groups in northern Nigeria, a form of "mega association" for the Igbo in the region. The reinvention and creation of locals function also to satisfy the nostalgic appetite for the hometown institutions. Although the Igbo Council of Traditional Rulers in eastern Nigeria has dissolved the ezeship system in non-Igbo states, there is the question of how to continue to coordinate the disparate Igbo ethnic associations in these states

and to raise a common voice for all the Igbo groups in their relationship with the political authority in their host community.

Findings from this study indicate the need for an alternative platform different from the ezeship system as a political strategy for the Igbo in these states. Informants are of the opinion that the dissolution of the ezeship system in non-Igbo states bears no negative consequences on the coordination of Igbo people in these cities. They are of the view that rather than being functional, the system was a source of discontent among the people, as desperate powermongers sought to entrench and impose themselves on the people contrary to Igbo cultural practice. The fact that ezeship has cultural undertones complicated the situation. Interestingly, in Abeokuta, prior to the initial institutionalization of ezeship, *Nzuko Ndi*-Igbo [assembly of the Igbo people] was already in existence, and the Igbo in Ogun State were able to coordinate themselves and achieved much as a group. For instance, an informant, Mazi Nwoka, an indigene of Imo State who resides in Abeokuta, Ogun State, noted that through *Nzuko Ndi*-Igbo, the group was able to negotiate with the government, which led to the acquisition of land for an Igbo secretariat in the state. According to him,

> if we strictly stick to the Igbo culture . . . the concept of *Nzuko Ndigbo* is more traditional than the chieftain system. It was the romance with warrant chief and the desire for "house of chiefs" that led to the creation of chieftaincy in Igbo land in the first place. It is not part of our culture. I have never been in support of ezeship because it is against the Igbo culture. I don't think they have any useful function. "The president of *Nzuko Ndi*-Igbo" is the leader. There is no cabinet but executives who direct the affairs of the group for 2 years. (fieldwork, September 2010)

Other informants advocated the return to the Igbo Union of the preindependence era, with branches all over the country. For Mazi Ogonigbo, an informant who resides in Ibadan,

> before the civil war in Kano, they have the leader of the Igbos. They have all Igbo Union and I must tell you they will come together under the umbrella of Igbo Union. Then, they will elect among them either the chairman or the president of the Igbo community. It is guided by their constitution. It is guided by what is prevalent in that area, which does not interfere with the cultural custodians. It is about the welfare of the people in diaspora.

Another informant, Mazi Anasiegbu, puts it this way: "*Ihe gba nbo ime bu, iha pu* anything *bu eze asi eze asighi. Ka ana akpo ya 'onye ndu ndigbo.' O kwa ighotara*?" meaning "What is important to be done is to stop the issue of 'king this and king that,' let it be known as 'the leader of the Igbo people.' Do you understand?" The changing perspectives are reflections of complex and dynamic thrust-ups that accompanied the disappointment many Igbo indigenes feel for the social formation and for the inability of the Igbo urban political gladiators to recognize, in the words of one of the informants, that "ezeship is beyond wearing kingly attire." It is based on custom shrouded in mysteries and ancestral rituals and beliefs that have respect for a particular geographical space.

Conclusion

This article has sought to examine the complex social and cultural issues in the institutionalization of ezeship in non-Igbo states in Nigeria, which led to the collapse of the social formation. I have argued that although the sociocultural dynamics are externally imposed, the sociocultural complexities are internally generated. The imposition of the warrant chief system in Igbo land, despite the initial resistance by the Igbo people, and its final institutionalization through the chiefship system represent the power struggle between the Igbo people and the colonial powers and the former's resistance to external imposition of the warrant chief, a battle that failed because of the superior military might of the British. However, because culture is dynamic, the ezeship in Igbo land has today become, in the words of Nwaubani (1994), "a guest on the centre stage."

However, in the case of the ezeship in non-Igbo states in Nigeria, there is a perspective that reflects, in the words of the chief priest of Nanka, the Igbo adage that states, "*Alunsi solu oha bia n' eso oha ana*," meaning "The deity that is brought into a town by members of a community vacates the town at the insistence of the community." The *eze Ndi*-Igbo in non-Igbo states in Nigeria was initiated and institutionalized by the Igbo people in those states, and it was the Igbo people who rejected the sociocultural structure when the people realized that rather than engendering social harmony and positive group image, it was actually creating social dysfunctioning.

From my discussion in this article, it is evident that the institutionalization of ezeship in non-Igbo states represents an epoch in the history of the sociocultural development of the Igbo, a period marked by an attempt to evolve a social formation that unfortunately failed. Part of the reasons for this failure can be attributed to the following: (a) The social formation lacked the

institutional framework that is required to offer it legitimacy. For instance, neither the *nze* nor the *ozo* titles and their processes of conferment, which are prerequisites for ezeship installation, were observed in these cities. Yet the recipients attempted to parade themselves as kings in their hometown. (b) Some of the contenders for the position of *eze* in non-Igbo states lacked enviable pedigree and, therefore, lacked moral authority to parade themselves as Igbo leaders in the urban centers. (c) The absence of a well-thought-through mode of succession compounded the already existing problems. Finally, (d) a lack of knowledge of and respect for boundaries on the part of the "city-crowned kings" led to incessant conflicts at the public arena as a result of transgressions of boundaries of the traditional rulership in the hometown. This generated disgust for the social formation from Igbo land. In the face of all these odds, the thesis of cultural nostalgia, and a strong voice for the diverse Igbo groups in non-Igbo states, the institutionalization of ezeship in non-Igbo states could not survive.

The suggestion for a return to the preindependence Igbo Union, therefore, seems to hold much water. Not only will this give voice to the Igbo people in the different places they may find themselves, but it also promises much relevance in the emerging political scenario in the Nigerian nation-state. Not only do the Igbo as a people lack a sociopolitical umbrella, a pan-Igbo ethnic group under which they can articulate the Igbo interest in the Nigerian political space, but there is, indeed, a yearning gap that needs to be filled. A return to the Igbo Union can provide an alternative and a complementary umbrella to *Ohanaeze Ndigbo* (an Igbo Socio-cultural organization) with the objective of harmonizing Igbo interests in Nigeria as a political enclave.

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Bio

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