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**Revisiting Legal and Political Impositions in present day Nigeria:
A case study of Ezeship (traditional rulership) conflicts in
Ehime Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria.**

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Introduction

Imo State is one of the 36 states in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Imo State is made up essentially of people of Igbo ethnicity and has a population of about 2.5 million people based on the 1991 census.

Before the advent of colonization, Imo State like most other parts of the Igbo nation did not have kings as such¹, the Igbos being a vastly republican people. Nevertheless, they had village heads, battle heads etc. Colonization with its attendant slavery and focus on trade created a need for some sort of middlemen between the colonizing Europeans and the black populace, particularly the producers of palm oil, rubber and other commodities needed by the Europeans. Besides, these middlemen among other things, helped to collect taxes and facilitate the purchase and movement of slaves from the hinterland to the coasts. In time some of these middlemen came to hold positions of authority over their kinsmen and became known as “Warrant Chiefs,” with appropriate warrant from their colonial British authorities. These warrant chiefs were ranked in accordance to the population, the size of the community in which they held influence, the economic importance of their domain, seniority in ancestry and the effectiveness and ruthlessness with which they executed their mission. Based on the above criteria, the warrant chiefs were ranked as first, second or third class. Noteworthy of course is the fact that during the early days of colonization only three first class chiefs were to be honored with the appellation of “KING”. These were the “Obi of Onitsha”, the “Obi of Oguta” and “Eze Aro” of Arochukwu. It was not altogether difficult to fathom why these three chiefdoms were favored in the conversion to kingdoms. Onitsha and Oguta were the gateways to important seaways and therefore controlled much traffic and commerce. Arochukwu was famed with its ‘Long Juju’ and was accordingly the spiritual and oracular head of the entire Igboland. With the passage of time and concomitant development and civilization, however, more first class chiefdoms were created leading eventually to more devolution into “Ezedoms” or modern notion of KING(dom). As a matter of fact, scores of groups of people who were identified as having a specified geographical area living in tranquility, of common culture and actively engaged in known commercial activities for over four or five decades were constituted by the colonial powers as clans and the head of such clans were designated ‘Ezes’. Thus shortly after Nigeria gained political independence from the British in October, 1960 about thirty-six such Ezes emerged in the present Imo State.

As time wore on, new governments recognized new clans or carved out what was to be called new 'autonomous'² communities. Creation of such autonomous communities was often preceded by the establishment by government of a Panel or Commission to verify the claims of communities who apply for autonomous status. Most recently, the present Imo State Government constituted in 2003, one such panel headed by a Judge of the High Court, Justice Paul Onumajulu. This Panel conducted public hearings for communities that made representations for autonomy with a view to ascertaining which of them qualified for such status. At this time, there were already 80 such autonomous communities in Imo State. Over 250 communities applied for autonomous status of these, the Onumajulu Panel recommended 210³ for elevation to autonomous status.

So far, the government of Imo State in its several gazettes approved and established 120 new autonomous communities. As a result of different levels of conflict in the communities themselves some applications for autonomous status have not been approved. In many cases, the name of the autonomous community so created has been a source of disagreement and intense, sometimes violent disputes. In others still, although autonomous communities have been created, there exist disagreement over Ezeships of such communities. It is estimated that there are over 80 litigations in Imo state courts with respect to this current exercise of creation of autonomous communities and Ezedoms.

Focus of the Study

This study seeks to examine the extent to which legal and political influences have affected either the creation of new autonomous communities or the selection of new Ezes in Imo State, and any connections between that influence and the reported cases of conflicts associated with the new creation exercises. Ehime-Mbano Local Government Area, Imo State, is selected as the focus of the case study. Ehime-Mbano Local Government Area has a population of about 100,000 persons, based on the 1991 Nigerian Census.

Significance of the Study

By exposing the forces that contribute to the conflicts that have been associated with the creation of autonomous communities and the selection of their Ezes, we are in a good position to propose how these conflicts can best be resolved or prevented so as to avoid unnecessary wastage in human and material resources. In one community, it is reported that legal fees has amounted to nearly US\$10,000 or NI million Nairia, after a 6 month court litigation. In an already poor community with the extra burden community levy to pay for the litigation costs and Ezeship application and approval costs, such conflicts have far reaching, wider impact on the community.

Research Hypothesis

Legal and political impositions, with similar characteristics and features of the Warrant Chief system, have significantly accentuated the conflicts arising from recent creation of autonomous communities and Ezedoms in Ehime-Mbano Local Government Area of Imo State. In sum, it is arguable whether the modern Ezeship

appointment process in Nigeria is a valid reflection of the people’s will or choice. Further, the continuing legal and political impositions have undermined the effectiveness of the indigenous conflict management system in Imo state.

METHOD

The methodology include review of certain documents and interviews with the “Ezes” and/or their principal supporters and their adversaries in 9 autonomous or prospective autonomous communities in Ehime Mbanjo LGA; most of these communities have had or are experiencing deep conflicts over which there are still lingering controversies. The controversies at times were over substantive issues such as nomenclature or over who should be the Eze of such communities. Six communities with such conflicts out of a total of 18 newly autonomous communities were identified and all six were investigated. These communities are: Umueleke, Umunakanu Owerri, Umuezeala Ogwara, Ezeala Owerri/ Ezike, Umuoma Nzerem, and Umunumo. Three other autonomous communities in which there were relatively no conflict or controversy during their creations or in the process of selection of their Ezes were also investigated. The purpose for investigating these latter three autonomous communities (Umuezeala, Ibe Owerre Agbaja, Dioka Nzerem) along with the former six is to uncover whether or not there were any relevant distinguishing features between the groups that could on Mill’s⁴ dicta account for the Ezeship conflicts in the communities of study.

The researchers in addition examined documents presented to them by those interviewed as well as documents emanating from Ehime Mbanjo Local Government Offices, Imo State Government Gazettes and copies of Court judgments.

Findings

In this section, the researchers present a summary of their interviews with respect to the nine autonomous communities investigated and documents examined.

A. Table 1: Autonomous Communities where Ezes have received staff of Office from Imo State Government

Autonomous Communities in Ehime Mbanjo LGA		
S/No.	Name of Autonomous Communities	Name of Eze
1.	Umueze I @	C. I. Okeke
2.	Umueze Ama @	T. I. Ozoemena
3.	Umueze II @	A. Emeferonu
4.	Umuduru Egwelle @	D. Emereonyekwe
5.	Umueleke @	S. I. Urechukwu
6.	Umualumaku/Umuihim @	C. N. Nduka
7.	Umualumaku/Umueze @	C. U. Okoro
8.	Umuezeala Ama @	A. O. Igwe
9.	Umuezeala @	Tob. C. Iwuagwu
10.	Ezeala Owerri/Ezike @	J. U. Okeagu
11.	Umunakanu @	I. E. Onyeji
12.	Umunakanu Owerri @	B. Onuoha
13.	Agbaje	T. A. Ogoke

14.	Nneano Agbaja	B. Nwachukwu
15.	Ibe Owerre Agbaja	C. K. Dike
16.	Umukabia	L. Anyogu
17.	Amaimo Umukabia	V. A. Onuoha
18.	Ikpem	E. Onwumere
19.	Dioka Nzerem	J. O. Mgbeahuru
20.	Umunumo Ibeafor	P. O. Alozie
21.	Umunumo	Justice C. B. C. Ubah (Rtd)
22.	Umuchoke Umunumo	S. C. Okeke
23.	Umuezeala Nsu	E. E. Iwuji
24.	Nsu	E. C. Iwunze
25.	Umuakagu Nsu	E. N. Ibechi
26.	Ihitte Nsu	H. Anyanwu
27.	Ibeama Ukwu Ama @	E. J. Njoku

Table 1.2: Autonomous Communities with only Eze-Elects

S/No.	Name of Autonomous Communities	Contesting Eze-Elects
1.	Umuezeala Ogwara @	P. I. Ubah, Louis Nwagu
2.	Nzerem	Emmanuel Nduka, Harrison Ogoke

Key: + *New Autonomous Communities*

* *Conflict Autonomous Communities*

@ *Ehime West (the rest belong to Ehime East)*

B. Six Conflict Cases

(a) Umunumo Autonomous Community

The central problem here was two-fold namely: (a) Was C.B.C Ubah (former Chief Judge of Imo State) who hails from Umuanuno Village the right person to be Eze? (b) Should this autonomous community keep the title “Umunumo” when there already existed an “Ibeafor-Umunumo autonomous community?” and an “Umuchoke Umenumo Autonomous Community” was being proposed. The core of the matter is as follows: In 1978, Umunumo Autonomous Community was approved and created by the state government with Eze Echeruo as its first Eze. This autonomous community comprised ten villages namely: Umuofeke, Umunagbala, Umuwosha, Umuogwara, Umuchima, Duru na Okiri, Umuanunu, Eze na Obom, Umuaro, Ofe Owerri na Ofe Ama.

In 1996 the first five villages were carved out as “Ibeafor autonomous community” with the residue retaining the former name. Of these latter five villages, Duru na Okiri is regarded as the first (or most senior) and had provided the first Eze (Echeruo) for the whole Umunumo and it had been agreed in the Town’s Constitution in 1978 that Ezeship would rotate among the component villages. Now that a new Eze had to be provided for the residue “Umunumo A. C⁵.”, the Town Union requested the second senior village of Umuananu to nominate an Eze. This resulted in the nomination and ultimate approval, recognition and crowning of the incumbent Eze. This did not go

down well with most members of Duru na Okiri (1st and most senior) and Ofe Owerri na Ofe Ama (5th and most junior) villages. They sought redress in the law courts. Their central argument was that since Ibeafor-Umunumo had been carved out from the old Umunumo, the first Ezeship rotatory system had collapsed and in the new (residue) Umunumo, the rotatory system of selecting an Eze should commence afresh. In their view, the first and most senior village which is Duru na Okiri (which had already produced Eze Echeruo) should provide the first Eze in the new dispensation. In the litigation that ensued, Umuanunu which is the second village won and so her nominee duly became the incumbent Eze⁶. Their own argument was that once the rotatory system of choosing an Eze in the old Umunumo Autonomous Community had started, it could not be stopped or reversed even in the face of splitting the Autonomous Community. In their view, no member of a family is entitled by traditional value and sharing system to take a second share when other members of the family had not taken their own first share.

The second litigation to which the incumbent Eze was subjected was that of nomenclature – since “Ibeafor-Umunumo A. C.” had been carved out from the old “Umunumo A. C.”, was the residue right to continue with the name “Umunumo A. C.”? Most members of “Ibeafor-Umunumo A. C.” and members of Duru na Okiri, Ofo Owerri na Ofo Ama were of the view that it was presumptuous for the residue to continue with the name “Umunumo” after the split since, after all, both those at Ibeafor and in the residue were all Umunumo citizens. In the litigation that ensued, again the incumbent Eze won. In the view of the Judge: (a) having been carved out into their own autonomous community, the people of Ibeafor had no business dictating what name a different autonomous community should answer in the absence of a well documented and articulated agreement at the time of the split that the old name should not be retained by any of the parties; (b) as for the co-plaintiffs from Duru na Okiri and Ofe Owerri na Ofe Ama, their right and interest to raise this issue of nomenclature had been whittled down by the fact that they were at the same time agitating for a separate autonomous community (which was ultimately to be created as Umuchoke-Umunumo A. C.). Eze C. B. U. Uba had indeed been installed in 2001, that is, before the Onumajulu Panel.

(b) *Umueleke Autonomous Community*

Umueleke is made up of five villages with the following order of seniority:

- Umuishi na Duruofa
- Umueleke Ama
- Umuduruoma
- Ezike na Okorocho
- Umueleke Owerri

Incidentally, Eze S. I. Urechukwu (aka Saclux) whom the Imo State government had recognized and given the staff of office hails from Umueleke Owerri (the most junior of the villages). Why was this allowed to happen when it is common tradition in Igboland that whenever things are shared in the

family, the last child is always the last to take a portion? Our finding revealed that before 1999 when this present civilian dispensation came on board, the people of Umueleke sought to have their own autonomous community. To this end, then Mr. Urechukwu provided between ₦350,000 and ₦500,000⁷ (\$3000-\$4000) to be used to facilitate the financial expenses attendant on the search for an autonomous community. This search at the end of the day did not bear fruit and the people of Umueleke were either unable or unwilling to return Mr. Urechukwu's money. With the advent of civil rule, Umueleke people renewed their quest for an autonomous community. Once again, it was impossible to raise the kind of money needed for this exercise either from community purse or from any other individual other than Mr. Urechukwu. Because of the need and urgency surrounding this pursuit for autonomy (it had been claimed that Umueleke people had been subjected to a number of humiliating circumstances by the Eze of Umueze II autonomous community to which they had hitherto belonged) representatives of the five Umueleke villages (including one of our informants) went to Mr. Urechukwu at Umuahia in Abia State where his Saclux Paint business is located. According to one of our interviewees, Mr. Urechukwu who incidentally was also the President-General of the Town Union was asked to spearhead and finance the search for Umueleke autonomous community. In response, he reminded the delegates that the community had failed to repay the money they borrowed from him the last time she went on a search for the autonomous status. His position this time around, was that he could only invest his money and his resources if the community was willing to concede to him the pride of place of being their first Eze⁸. There and then at Umuahia, an agreement was devised in writing wherein he was conceded the position of "leader"⁹ of the autonomous community should he succeed in ushering in the much valued autonomy single handedly. We were informed that this written accord was later read out publicly at the various village meeting grounds without any opposition from citizens¹⁰. But by the time the Onumajulu panel sat in 2003, opposition to Mr. Urechukwu had visibly emerged and widened. This opposition was spearheaded by Umuishi na Duruofa which is the first ranking village. The representative of this village who had hitherto been the unofficial ruler of the Town (but who was the first signatory to the Umuahia accord) claimed that their mission to Umuahia was merely to negotiate for a loan to enable the Town pursue its quest for autonomy. We were also informed that at a certain stage certain citizens raised money so as to return to Mr. Urechukwu whatever he might have spent to secure Umueleke Autonomous Community. Mr. Urechukwu rejected this attempt to return his money and after a very short time government approved his Ezeship and gave him a staff of office. We were informed that as soon as Mr. Urechukwu got the written accord, he swung into action and got the full backing and support of the member representing Ehime-Mbano in the Imo State House of Assembly. This member of the House of Assembly hails from the neighboring town of Umueze II. We were told that this Ezeship conflict has on several occasions led to near-violent communal clashes. It has also impeded

many development efforts and there is presently no viable Town Union in Umueleke. The legal battle continues.

(c) *Umuezeala Ogwara Autonomous Community*

Here, the autonomous community has been created but there are two principal claimants to the Ezeship stool along with one secondary claimant. As a matter of fact, the secondary claimant (Mr. B. Nwachukwu) referred to above had been acting as the leader of the community (after the death of his own father who had been serving as the chief of the town) for about 19 years before the Onumajulu panel. And as matter of fact also, all earlier applications for autonomy including that initially presented to Onumajulu panel bore his name as Eze-elect. Suddenly, at the Onumajulu panel, one of the signatures to his own earlier nomination turned around to nominate someone else (Mr. P. I. Ubah) as Eze-elect. His argument was as follows: Mr. Ubah hails from the eldest branch of the Duruoha ruling house and deserves more support than his earlier nominee even although the latter's father had "ruled" the community for scores of years before his death and in spite of the added fact that this signatory had indeed for several years worked as 'Palace' Prime Minister under Mr. Nwachukwu. The rest of the Duruoha ruling house had objected to Mr. Ubah's nomination on a number of grounds viz.:

- (i) That his grand father's (Epeagba) lineage did not constitute the most senior in the Duruoha ruling house;
- (ii) Even if the Epeagba lineage was the most senior, history holds that Ubah's grandfather exchanged the staff of authority (Ofo) of the Duruoha family for sexual favors from a woman from an adjacent kindred and it took battles, loss of lives from the other parts of the Duruoha family to redeem this staff of authority. As a result, this Ofo authority had come down to Mr. Nwachukwu through his own father. So, having trivialized and lost family Ofo through an act of unparalleled indiscretion and profligate, it would be nothing short of stupidity to elevate the descendant of such a naïve ancestor to the status of Eze. Besides, how would the loss of lives and properties that accompanied the redemption of the Ofo be redeemed? While these arguments were raging, the various village heads were swaying from one side to the other until at the end of the day with the support of the then Town Union Executive they anchored their support for Mr. Ubah and went ahead to bind themselves with an oath (which involved the scarifying of a fowl) in support of Ubah. This was followed by a division in Mr. Nwachukwu's faction of Umuduruoha. The argument was peddled that due to some unpopular judgments he had pronounced in the past, Mr. Nwachukwu was not likely to be acceptable to the entire Umuezeala Ogwara community. Besides, the point was raised that the first son of his grandfather Duruoha was not his own father, but Nwagu, and so Mr. Louis Nwagu was chosen in an election conducted by the Duruoha family as their principal nominee for the stool of Umuezeala Ogwara Ezeship. It needs to be added at this point that while the Nwachukwu-Nwagu arm of the Duruoha family stood firmly on a 'hereditary'

principle of Ezeship, however imagined, the Ubah arm of the same Duruoha family canvassed the rotatory principle. No wonder then a significant percentage of Umuezeala Ogwara people support Mr. Ubah. As a matter of fact, sometime before the government approved Umuezeala Ogwara Autonomous Community and shortly after the Nwachukwu-Nwagu arm of Umuduruoha commenced litigation in the courts, Umuezeala Ogwara Community under the direction of the Town Union Executive organized a coronation ceremony for Mr. Ubah. The position now however is that the Umuezeala Ogwara Ezeship tussle is before the law courts. The Nwachukwu-Nwagu branches of the Duruoha family, present Mr. Louis Nwagu (and not Mr. Ubah) as the nominee of the ruling house for the Ezeship stool.

(d) *Ezeala Owerre/Ezike Autonomous Community*

The central issue to the crisis here is nomenclature – what name should the autonomous community bear? This autonomous community comprises of the following seven villages, namely: Umuezike, Umuagha, Umualuwoke, Nneato, Umueze Owerre, Umueze Ama, Umuebo.

Our investigation showed that it was common knowledge that Umuezike village is the most senior of all. The rest of the details are as follows: the entire town met and agreed to demand a new autonomous community to be known as Ezeala Owerri autonomous community. After the usual screening process, Mr. Onyebuchi Ndubueze from Umuezike was selected as the Eze-elect under a rotatory Ezeship system. On the basis of this, an application was duly made to government for an autonomous community. Surprisingly, several months after this application was made a splinter group comprising the majority of people from Umuezike village sent in another application for an autonomous community to be known as Ezeala Owerri/Ezike autonomous community. This group nominated Mr. Okeagu (again, of Umuezike) as her Eze-elect. As a follow up, this same group filed an action in the court seeking a declaration that Mr. Okeagu was the rightful person to present an Eze. An attempt to achieve an out-of-court settlement was moderated at Owerri by the member representing Ehime-Mbano in the State House of Assembly. The moderator was able to convince Mr. Okeagu and his party to withdraw the court case. In return he convinced the other group to allow Mr. Okeagu to be presented to the Ehime Local Government Chairman as a second Eze-elect. The assurance was given that this second presentation would in no way undermine the chances of Mr. Ndubueze becoming the Eze since his case was already well known in all government quarters. The agreement between the parties was put in writing and shortly after the court case was withdrawn and Mr. Okeagu was presented to the Local Government Chairman as a second Eze-elect. Thereafter, events moved at a very fast speed and within a few months Mr. Okeagu was approved and recognized as Eze by the government to the total consternation of the opposing party. Eze Okeagu has since received the staff of office but a section of his own village and the other villages have refused to recognize him. Indeed, these other villages have since filed a court action in which the member representing Ehime-Mbano at the House of Assembly was joined. In the meantime, the party opposed to Eze Okeagu continues to blame her misfortune on the member of

House of Assembly whom he claims extorted heavy sums of money from him. As a result of this conflict, the signboard bearing Eze Okeagu's name has been pulled down numerous times. Besides, Eze Okeagu's efforts to prevent the other party from observing his own traditional ceremonies (like Iwa akwa-the traditional wearing cloth ceremony) at will have always resulted in near-violence and police hired from the State capital, Owerri, have stood on the side of this other party while Eze Okeagu engaged the police from Ehime Mbano headquarters.

(e) *Umunakanu Owerre Autonomous Community*

As created by government, this autonomous community comprises the following components

Amazi
Umugolo
Umuerim Ama
Ofookwe
Okpaziza

It has Boniface Onuoha as Eze. Those opposed to the above arrangement presented the following argument: For a long time in their history there had not been an organized Administrative Unit formally known as Umunakanu Owerri Town Union. That is to say, the component units of the new autonomous community had never operated together as an administrative unit or as a community. What had always been in existence since 1993 is Ezeadike Town Union. Ezeadike is comprised of ten villages namely: Umudiopara, Umuokoro, Umudire, Umuezealihu, Umudimire, Umualun, Umuerim, Umuduru ebo, Umuadawa and Umuduruofoaro.

These ten villages can be conveniently classified into Ofookwe (6 villages) and Okpaziza (4 villages). The people of Ezeadike had all along applied for their own autonomous community with Mr. Ephraim Onuoha (from same family as Boniface Onuoha) as their Eze-elect. At no time did they participate in meetings of the newly founded Umunakanu Owerri Town Union. As a matter of fact, the other communities surrounding Ezeadike joined not only to demand the Umunakanu Owerri Autonomous Community (to which they Ofookwe and Okpajiji against the will of citizens of these units), they in addition filed a court action against Ezeadike's demand for autonomy. The most surprising turn of events was that while the issue of nomenclature and Ezeship was still in court, government approved and recognized Boniface Onuoha as the Eze (in 2004). More surprisingly, the very Umunakanu Owerri Autonomous Community of which Boniface Onuoha Eze was gazetted by the same government in April, 2005.

As things stand, the crises between the two communities continue to rage and the people of Ezeadike blame their woes on the support given to the other party by the member representing Ehime Mbano in the State House of Assembly.

(f) *Nzerem Autonomous Community*

This autonomous community was created with Emmanuel Nduka as Eze-Elect. Incidentally, Mr. Emmanuel Nduka's late father was the last Eze of the undivided Nzerem. Though the late Eze hailed from the head village in Nzerem, his own

particular family was not the one that ranked first traditionally. And as a matter of fact, the Late Eze Nduka became Eze simply because he had been nominated and supported by the first ranking family whose responsibility and right it was to provide an Eze. Now, after his demise and after the carving out of Dioka-Nzerem from the former bigger Nzerem Autonomous Community, this same first ranking family has nominated and supported Emmanuel Nduka as the Eze.

However, members of the second ranking family raised the objection that if the first ranking family could not get a befitting candidate from within, the second ranking family should be allowed to provide a candidate before moving to the third ranking family from which the Ndukas hail. Accordingly, the second ranking family nominated Mr. Harrison Ogoke as her own Eze-elect and then went to court to challenge the nomination of Mr. Nduka.

In the course of our interviews, we were told that a majority of members of the other six villages comprising the autonomous community are in support of Mr. Emmanuel Nduka. The new Nzerem autonomous community is made of the following villages: Umuegealu, Umuduruokoro, Umuoha, Umuguma, Nnoche, Umualawo, Umuosu. Ezeship in this community is rotatory.

C. Three Non-Conflict Cases

(a) *Umuezeala Autonomous Community*

Eze Tobias Iwuagwu of this community is the first son of an earlier warrant chief – Chief James Iwuagwu. Nevertheless, he is not from the first ranking family of the leading village. The Eze selection process took this form: The community set up a panel comprising the present Eze, leading sons (in some cases University Graduates) from families ranking higher than that of the Eze and some other persons. In the process of the meetings of this committee, the other leading sons from the higher ranking families voluntarily showed disinterest in the Ezeship and conceded it to Tobias Iwuagwu.

(b) *Owerre Agbaja Autonomous Community*

During one interview with Eze C. K. Dike of this community along with his father and his other Nzes (titled men in Eze cabinet), the Eze made it clear that there was no opposition whatsoever to his ascent to the stool of Eze. His family is the highest ranking family and he was her nominee.

(c) *Dioka – Nzerem Autonomous Community*

During our interview, Eze John Mgbahuru asserted that his nomination was unanimously adopted by all members of his community. His family is the highest ranking in his community.

Table 2: Overview of number of old and new autonomous communities in Ehime-Mbano

Name of autonomous communities before Onumajulu	Number of Autonomous Communities Created after	Total Number of Autonomous Communities
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	Panel	Onumajulu Panel	
Number	11	18	29
%	37.93	62.07	100

Table 3: Conflict and Non-Conflict cases in the New A. C's

	New A. C's without Significant Conflicts	New A. C.'s with Significant Conflicts	Total
Number	12	6	18
%	66.66	33.33	100

Table 4: Political Influence and Conflict Cases

	Conflicts in which member of House of Assembly was cited	Conflicts in which member of House of Assembly was not cited	Total
Number	4	2	6
%	66.66	33.33	100

Table 5: Nomenclature and Conflict Cases

	Conflicts Involving Nomenclature	Conflicts Not Involving Nomenclature	Total
Number	3	3	6
%	50%	50%	100

Discussion

From the above data a number of issues emerge and we shall take them one by one.

- a. ***Political Influence/Imposition:*** From our findings, political influence was **brought** to bear in four out of the six **cases** of conflict. On closer study we note further that these influences impacted on all incidents of conflicts in autonomous communities situated in Ehime West, the question we attempt first of all to answer is: why did the same political influence not impact on conflict areas in Ehime East? Firstly, we note that the House of Assembly representative in question hails from Ehime West and therefore has more links, friends, in-laws and associates there. In order words sociological factors (social and geographical proximity) are likely to have had a part to play. Besides, it is generally held that while citizens of Ehime East comprise people of two contrasting levels of civilization which are somewhat poles apart (the Nsu-Umunumo axis comprising fairly well educated people many of whom are highly placed in government while the Agbaje-Nzerem-Umukabia-Ikpem axis

composed largely of traditionally oriented people who are sticklers over traditional ways of doing things), the citizens of Ehime West fall in somewhere in between these two ends of the spectrum. As a result, Ehime West indigenes are more likely to be vulnerable to political intrusions from outside along with the concomitant giving and receiving of gratification that go with such interferences. This means that worldview and level of development (education, employment) had a role to play. Next, we note that although nothing in our research gave any clear indication that the type of political intrusion into community affairs witnessed was institutionalized, there is need to examine the entrenched political interests along partisan lines. As a matter of fact, in the particular case of Umuezeala Ogwara, two factions of the same ruling political party were in contention, though with varying intra-party factions. The President-General of the Town Union belonged to one faction (Abuja faction) while some other members of the community who belonged to the Imo State faction of the same party threatened at one point that autonomous status would not be granted to the community until the President-General abdicated. In the same Umuezeala Ogwara, it became clear that once the Owerri faction of the political party supported one Eze-Elect, the Abuja-faction shifted its support to the other. Thus the ding-dong affair associated with the Ezeship tussle at Umuezeala Ogwara. Now, this means that the sort of political interference that was manifest was strictly one devised by individual politicians. And this leads to a next question. Why would the individuals get so enmeshed with such interference? Two answers can be conjectured. Firstly, graft. It is a widely held view in Ehime-Mbano that when the member of House of Assembly in question was majority leader and led a House Committee around the state on the creation of autonomous communities, much exchange of money took place. Besides since it is widely believed that this same representative unofficially extorts a substantial amount of money (millions of naira) from Ehime-Mbano Local Government coffers every month ostensibly for proposing and backing the Local Government Chairman. Secondly, personal political ambitions must have played an important role. In the last one year or so, the Assemblyman in Question has flooded most places in Imo State (including Ehime-Mbano L.G.A) with posters which depict his intention to contest the post of Governor in 2007. In fact, this Governorship ambition is clearly at the heart of the political influence in Umuezeala Ogwara Ezeship tussle. The President-General of that Community, who has already been alluded to, is fiercely in support of an Abuja-based Senator for the 2007 Imo State Governorship election, while his adversaries support the Assemblyman we have so far been talking about.

- b. ***Legal Imposition:*** Our study did not reveal any legal imposition in the strict sense of manipulation of the legal process to achieve clandestine wishes of the execution. Generally, most people have not responded negatively to the judgments of the courts per se. The big snag, however, has always been that the speed at which the judiciary machinery moves is extremely slow. For instance, in a recent case, an Eze was installed in March 2006 after a nine-year long legal tussle. That the judiciary has operated on a reasonably respectable platform is

borne out by the case of nomenclature arising over the Umunumo Autonomous Community. In our view, the ruling that a body carved out of an existing cannot turn round thereafter to dictate what name the entity of which she was formerly a member should answer seems sound, particularly when we recall that each of these communities is “autonomous”. Indeed, perhaps as a result of this ruling, we now have Agbaja Autonomous Community retaining her name even as Owerre-Agbaja and Nneano-Agbaja were carved out of it; Nsu Autonomous Community retains her name even as a number of autonomous communities are carved out of her; Umukabia Autonomous Community retains her name even as Amaimo Umukabia is carved out of her. So, as a matter of fact, this study revealed that political forces that relished influencing the process of creating autonomous communities or of appointing Ezes, often avoided the legal process. But then, while legal imposition in this strict adjudicatory sense has not been revealed by this study, there is another sense in which political influence (like the one revealed in this study) invariably led to legitimization or legalizing of Ezes or autonomous communities which do not meet the overall or general approval of members of the communities in question (for example, the case of Umunakanu Owerri here people were forced into an autonomous community without their consent). What the legal process reifies political establishment vs. community choice is a matter of further inquiry. At this time, there is a sense of court *inertia* in Ezeship conflicts; many of the cases languish in the court endlessly.

- c. ***Nomenclature and World View:*** Our study revealed a general proclivity by some villages to want (at times with impunity and disregard of other people) the names of the villages to appear in the nomenclature of the autonomous community. It is difficult to understand why such villages feel that their own village is divinely qualified more than others (simply because that they are the first village) to have their name appended to the general name of the autonomous communities. We saw this at Ezeala Owerre/Ezike, Umunakanu Owerre vs Ezeadike. It is true that all Igbos are committed to the adage Ahamefula (*my name should not be lost*), but there is no corresponding adage which demands that other people’s names should be lost. In fact, Igbos have the saying: *Egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebele, nku kwa ya* meaning “a common bird should perch, Eagle should perch, the one that says the other should not perch should have his/her wings incapacitated.” This study revealed that the issue of nomenclature merely served as a divisive factor to enable some people garner support for the autonomous community and Eze of their choice. It is not likely that they expect their peculiar worldview to be satiated at the expense of others.
- d. ***Perceptions of Ezeship:*** This study revealed that people harbored a number of contrasting and confusing perceptions about the Ezeship institution. We shall discuss four of such perceptions.
- i. ***Ezeship, the notion that the most senior person in the most senior family is the most qualified for Ezeship and the principle of rotation:***

The world view behind this sort of thinking which is commonly prevalent is based on the way things are shared in families in Igbo society – the eldest child takes first, followed by the next eldest and in that order until we get to the youngest. This principle on its own seems to be in accord with succession principles and other lands which have Kings¹¹. What injects some level of complexity into the system is the principle of rotation. This means that with the passage of time, every family in the community produces an Eze. The implication here is that in Ehime-Mbano, there are no royal classes and no commoners-everyone could be King someday. Certainly this very arrangement amplifies the age-long notion that ‘Igbo Enweghi Eze’ (Igbos have no King) since Kingship in the most conventional sense involves divine right¹² and therefore some sense of heredity and permanence. A situation where anyone could be King is egalitarian and seeks to democratize the Ezeship Institution. Of course, it also has a way of promoting order and harmony in the society. But one thing is clear, it has departed from the orthodox and conventional notion of Kingship, particularly when rotation is not among some determinate number of ruling houses.

- ii. ***Ezeship as a property:*** In Umuoma-Nzerem, the burning issue was whether or not the most senior family whose responsibility and right to provide an Eze has authority to take recourse in that right as a means to nominate anyone else from another family in her own stead. To put it in another way, is the Ezeship a property which the person whose turn it is to be Eze can transfer to someone else? The verdict in the Umuoma-Nzerem case will throw light on whether this posture is in line with traditional practice and natural justice. Our concern in this paper is merely to identify the fact that such a perception of the Ezeship exists.
- iii. ***Different applications of the principle of rotation:*** This study revealed two different modes of application of the principle of rotation. In the case of Umunumo Autonomous Community, the people of the second village (Umunumo) argued that once the wheel of rotation had been set in motion, it cannot be reversed or stopped even if the original entity becomes eventually dismembered. The court of law upheld this position, this making it possible for C. B. C. Ubah to become Eze. However, in the break away entity of Umuchoke-Umunumo Autonomous Community, the Eze hailed from Duru na Okiri Village which had already produced Eze Echeruo in the old dispensation of undivided Umunumo. This is to say, in Umuchoke A. C., the principle of rotation was started afresh. If the C. B. C. Ubah principle had been applied, the Eze for Umuchoke would have hailed from the second constituent village of that autonomous community. Our study revealed that the C. B. C. Ubah principle was also rejected in the choice of Eze in Umuezeala Autonomous Community, Umuoma-Nezrem and in most others. We shall not attempt to explore why these two different applications of the

rotational principle of Ezeship have been allowed to thrive side by side. What is important at this stage is that we have discovered such contrasting applications of the same principle.

- iv. ***Transition from warrant chief to Eze:*** We discovered a lot of ambivalence in respect of this transition. Family members of the warrant Chiefs perceived Ezeship as a continuity of the rulership of their ancestor who was a warrant Chief. As such they argued that Ezeship was to them a hereditary right. However, a majority of ordinary persons interviewed held the view that the warrant Chiefs were not Ezes. These group of people canvassed the view that Ezeship was a totally different and new phenomenon. As such it should be rotatory and in line with traditional family principle for sharing things. Our investigation revealed that half of Unuduruoha family of Umuezeala Ogwara held the view that the transition from warrant chief to Eze was the proper position to take. In Umuezeala autonomous community, this view was not canvassed by the descendants of Chief James Iwuagwu (a warrant Chief) but the leading members of the more senior families and who would be the ones to contest against Mr. Toby Iwuagwu, seemed to have a tacit belief that the transition from warrant chief to Eze was one such way of avoiding Ezeship conflict. Hence they cheerfully conceded the Ezeship to Mr. Toby Iwuagwu.
- e. ***Ezeship tussles, traditional conflict-resolution strategies and democratization.*** Our point of interest here is to uncover the impact of traditional conflict resolution strategies on Ezeship tussles in Ehime Mbano. Traditional conflict-resolution strategies in Ehime-Mbano include: Ohaneze (the entire community); Umunna (a particular lineage); Ama-ala¹³ (highest group of Elders) Ndi Isi Ala (Village heads); Umuada (daughters married to other lands); Umu Ebiri (Age grades); Idu Ishi (oath taking); Iku Ofo (invoking the powers of the community staff of authority, *itu uge mmai* (throwing down the dreg of palm wine and thereby invoking the ancestors or pouring of libation). Although the main focus of this study was not to determine the extent to which these strategies have been engaged (and with what degree of success) in the Ezeship tussles examined, several of those interviewed cited the use of various combinations of these strategies. In the case of Umuezeala Ogwara, for instance, we were told that after adopting Mr. Ubah as Eze-elect, *ndi isi ala* (the heads of the component villages) sealed their decision by oath taking, pouring of libation, sacrificing a fowl and spilling the blood. As for the engagement of the Ohaneze, we discovered that this strategy had been universally employed. The question then is – why have these indigenous strategies failed to contain the cases that had to spill over to the courts of law? The answer appears to lie in the uncertainty and slowness attached to the possibility of sanctions arising from disobeying the consensus outcome of the application of such methods. Indeed, one of those interviewed in Umuezeala Ogwara lamented the slowness of the gods to act. A similar response came from an interviewee in Umueleke.

In the case of Ezeadike, the Eze-elect and the elders threatened that they would invoke the power of their Ofo if the conflict continued to linger on. To a large extent then, the potency and efficacy of the traditional conflict strategies over such immensely important issues as the Ezeship tussle lie on the intensity and swiftness with which sanctions are meted to offenders. A vivid example which has continued not only to perch on the memory of but influenced all those involved in chieftaincy tussles in Ehime-Mbano and its environs was what has been regarded as a festival of deaths in old Umunumo Autonomous Community between 1996 to 1998 wherein the Eze who was selected in total disregard of the head family died only for his wife to die shortly after; the President-General of the Town Union who facilitated the choice of the Eze died and his wife followed suit shortly; the man who was co-contestant to the Ezeship, and who hailed from the head village but not the head family, also died. As a result of these deaths, the Ezeship was immediately handed over to the nominee of the head family of the head village even though he has little education, is hard of hearing and of modest lifestyle. Who says then that traditional strategies cannot produce satisfactory solutions to traditional problems including the Ezeship tussle? Everyone interviewed had wished that the gods woke up from their slumber.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Our investigation revealed that the demand for autonomous communities is largely a spontaneous quest of indigenes of the communities concerned. These communities with common ancestry, history, culture and values, among other things, desire to be independent of their immediate neighbors; desire to highlight and perpetuate their common name, to promote development and government presence to the grassroots of their villages.

It was discovered, however, that somewhere on the line divisive forces creep in through individual or village/group interests and ambitions. These divisive forces create loopholes or bridge heads for external political interests who attempt to hijack the processes of creating autonomous communities or electing Ezes in their own interests. In the cases investigated, these interferences were largely individual political interests and they resulted in the legitimatization of autonomous communities and appointment of Ezes without the overall consensus of all concerned. Accordingly, one major research hypothesis that legal and political impositions have significantly accentuated conflicts arising from recent creation of autonomous communities and Ezedom in Ehime-Mbano LGA is to be accepted.

This investigation also brought to the fore certain perceptions which the people had about Ezeship. Some conceived of the Ezeship as something that should rotate from one component village to the other in order of seniority. In their view, Ezeship was like any other thing being shared in a family and had to go round. Besides, they held that their communities never had Ezes in the past. A few others, particularly those who hailed from the families of the former warrant Chiefs, saw a continuity from the warrant chieftaincy to Ezeship. As such, Ezeship should be hereditary. We discovered that traditional conflict resolution strategies which could be effective in most areas of private traditional life did not prove particularly effective in Ezeship tussles unless such strategies were accompanied by swift and severe sanctions from the gods.

This research has focused solely on Ehime-Mbano Local Government Area and the findings there from may not be adequate for us to generalize with respect to the entire Imo State. It is therefore recommended that this study be replicated in at least three other local government areas, taking one from each of the three other Senatorial Zones of Imo State.

Moreover, it is recommended that the Council of Ndi Ezes in Imo State could be encouraged to constitute Ezeship Arbitration Commission to look into Ezeship disputes when all internal traditional conflict-solving machinery have been exhausted and before recourse is sort in the courts of law. An additional recommendation is that an in depth study could be undertaken of the machinery of indigenous/traditional conflict-resolving techniques with a view to enhancing their capacity to cater adequately for Ezeship disputes. In order words, how effective have the Ezes been in performing their primary customary role of conflict resolution?

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Umunumo, Owerri – Agbaja, Dioka – Nzerem, Umueaeala, Umunaknau. We also thank the numerous other persons whom we interviewed.

References

1. **G. T. Basden, “Notes in the Igbo Country”. The Geographical Journal, Vol. 39. Jan – June 1972. See also Uwazie in *Modes of Indigenous disputing in Nigeria*, 34 Journal of Legal Pluralism, 1994.**
2. “Autonomous” status implies that the community is culturally cohesive and common ancestry. On issues of native law and custom they constitute an entity independent of others around them.
3. Imo State Government White paper on Onumajulu Panel, 2004.
4. John S. Mill’s Method of Agreement states as follows: If two or more instances of the phenomenon under investigation here only one circumstance in common, the circumstance in which alone all the instances agree, is the cause of the given phenomenon.
5. A. C. means “Autonomous Community”
6. Some have argued that as a former Chief Judge of Imo State, C. B. C. Ubah brought his influence to bear on the judges who handled this case. Eze Ubah flatly denied this claim during our interview with him.
7. We interviewed two people with respect to this claim. The interviewee who appeared to be in support of Eze Urechukwu claimed the amount in question to be ₦500,000. The interviewee from the protesting villages claimed the amount in question was ₦350,000.
8. It has been claimed that about a decade or so earlier, one citizen of Umueleke, Ugo Blessed, proposed to pursue and achieve single handedly the autonomous status for the community. Mr. Urechukwu opposed this of some publicity asserting that one man ought be allowed to fetch autonomy of Eze for the community.
9. Those opposed to Eze Urechukwu held the view that the word “leader” did not mean ‘Eze’.
10. This claim was contested by those opposed to the Eze.
11. Succession rights usually progress in order of Seniority (e.g. Succession rights in the British Throne).
12. Recall the principle of Divine Right of Kings.
13. P. A. Tallbat and H. Mulhall, “The Physical Anthropology of Southern Nigeria” (London, 1936).

