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Kingship Tussles in the Premillennial Era in Southeastern Nigeria: Implications on Regional Autonomous Communities between 2000 and 2017

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Abstract:

The study examined the rising trend of Kingship (Ezeship) tussles by the fragmentation of autonomous communities between 2000 and 2016 in Imo state. It argued that Ezeship explosion has impeded development in the autonomous communities. The study covered nine autonomous communities which cut across the three geographical zones of Orlu, Owerri and Okigwe. The Marxist political economy approach was applied in this study as a theoretical guide. The survey research method was adopted using interview techniques and copies of questionnaire and it was complimented with secondary data. Findings revealed that 'money-bag' politics play a key role in the divide for Ezeship stool and its attendant economic and political domination in the acquisition of autonomous communities. Also, the Ezeship tussle and proliferation of autonomous communities is sustained by sectional interests, such as, governments, town unions and other stakeholders in the community. The study recommends that communities should return to the customary mode of selection and appointment of the Eze and the premium placed on the use of money to buy the throne be de-emphasized. To check the abuse and neglect of tradition, communities must adhere to their customs and constitution in determining the right person tradition favours and who the community constitution upholds.

Keywords: Kingship/Ezeship, proliferation, fragmentation, autonomous community, traditional ruler, traditional institution.

1. Introduction

In every human society, there are unique systems of political, social and economic control. These systems are sometimes referred to as institutions and they are very useful in ordering effectively the collective goals and aspiration of the human society. Nwaubani (2012). Nwaubani opined that, these institutions, though many are unique in their compositions, and the most prominent among them is the 'Kingship' traditional institution, which is popularly referred to as the 'Ezeship' traditional institution in southeastern Nigeria. This kingship institution is the Zenith and the one that other sub-traditional institutions are subjected to, in carrying out their basic functions Anene (2014).

Therefore, the Ezeship institution is a model of Kingship institution in Imo state and the entire Southeast Nigeria and the title of Eze, is reserved for only government-recognized traditional rulers or kings. The meaning and authority attached to the stool is equivalent to, and comparable with the other traditional stools in Nigeria such as, the Oba in Yoruba land and Binin or Edo kingdom and the Emir of Hausa-Fulani (Onyema 2017).

Historically, before the inception of the colonial regime in Nigeria, communities in the Southeast, known as Igboland and other ethnic groups like the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, Igala, to mention but a few, had in place, an organized political, economic and social systems being administered through the Ezeship or Kingship traditional institutions. These traditional institutions were organized along with their local titles such as, Eze, Igwe or Obi in Igboland (southeast), Emir and Oba in Hausa-Fulani and Yorubaland, respectively.

Generally, the Ezeship (Kingship) traditional institution is widely acknowledged as an interesting but historically complex. This is largely because of the inherent variations in its nature, organizational structure and perceived relevance to modern democratic practices.

Anene (2014) observed that, these variations in the traditional system are usually inbuilt differing from place to place and depending on the peculiar historical evolution of the particular community in question.

Remarkably, the entire southeast geo-political zone in Nigeria, which includes Imo state, have through the years fashioned the Ezeship institution to suit their society and people. For this reason, the Ezeship institution in Imo state and Igboland (southeast) in general has not had a strong traditional background compared with what is obtained in the Yoruba land, Hausa/ Fulani Emirate and even the Benin traditional institutions. In those places, when an Emir or Oba sneezes the people would literally send shivers down one's spine. In the Hausa/Fulani area of the northern Nigeria in particular, the

word of an Emir is akin to law. This is quite different from what is obtained in the entire Igboland (southeast), due to the republican nature of the people. In any case, the Eze in Igboland is accorded some degree of respect as the Oba or Emir, notwithstanding, the republican nature of this ethnic group.

Furthermore, in the Northern and Western parts of Nigeria, the position of the Sultan, Emir, Oba, Baale, Etsu, Oni, Alafin etc., cannot and must not be ignored by any government in power in their respective states, and in the same vein, the position of *Eze*, *Obi* or *Igwe* must be respected by all state governments in the southeastern states of Nigeria. In other words, any government that ignores the traditional institution in Nigeria as a whole is bound to have problems. Nevertheless, *Ezeship* institution as earlier mentioned is not new in Imo state and the entire Southeast geopolitical zone in general. It is an age-long traditional institution which is so grey with antiquity and time has consecrated it into reverence. Earlier on, Anikpo (1991), as cited in Okodudu (2006) and Onyema (2017), had debunked the long-standing contention especially among foreign political anthropologists, who erroneously concluded that pre-colonial African societies, such as the Igbos were stateless and therefore has no *Eze* or king.

Notable scholars such as Ikenna Nzimiro, and Harneit-Sievers, had observed that, prior to the coming of the white man, a number of kingship institutions existed in Igboland, the southeast of Nigeria. Most of the institutions they contended, can be found in Nri dating back to 900 AD, Arochukwu- 1650 AD, Onitsha- 1750 AD, and Oguta- about 1800 AD, (Nzimiro, 1972, Harneit-Sievers, 2006). In his contribution, Animalu (2003) advanced this fact and pointed out the existence of some historical Igbo traditional rulers like the *Obi* Akazua of Onitsha (c.1873), who welcomed the first Christian missionaries sent by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) to Onitsha and Igboland and *Obi* Sam Okosi, the first Christian *Obi* of Onitsha (1901-1931), and the *Eze* Aro of Arochukwu kingdom, to mention but a few.

Onyema (2017), citing Harneit-Sievers (2006), noted that, some pre-colonial communities, especially those located around coastal communities and trading cities along the Niger, had a long-standing history indicating the existence of traditional rulers in the name of *Eze*, *Igwe*, or *Obi* as the case may be. Good examples of such communities as earlier mentioned are, Onitsha, Oguta, Arochukwu, Ossomari, Orlu, Owerri and the *holy city* of Nri, which had an elaborate chieftaincy institution in the pre-colonial era. This may be as a result of the influence of their neighbouring tribes like Benin, Igala, and Cross River peoples of Nigeria which played vital roles in the development and establishment of these ancient kingdoms.

These ancient kingdoms were ruled by traditional rulers such as the *Eze* Nri of Nri kingdom, the *Obi* of Onitsha in Onitsha, the *Igwe* of Orlu in Orlu, the *Eze Ozuruigbo* of Owerre Nchise in Owerri and, the popular *Eze* Aro in Arochukwu, just to mention but a few. Finally, Emezue (2009), in his contribution, cited Onitsha as one of the centralized kingdoms in pre-colonial Igboland, and maintained that, the traditional rulership office of the *Obi* of Onitsha equally carried with it some military command responsibilities. From these points of view, the notion of Igbo Village Republicanism which hinged on the principle of the popular aphorism that *Igbo-enwe-Eze*— “the Igbo have no king” is no longer an issue of debate. However, in Imo state and the entire southeast of Nigeria, the official recognition and political backing for *ezeship* or chieftaincy institution received a boost in the course of the 1976 local government reforms in Nigeria which created structures still existing today (Ogbuagu, 2009).

Ogbuagu further pointed out that, the Military governor of former Imo and Anambra states (now Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states) created by fiat, autonomous communities as constituencies for the would-be *Eze* and passed the 1978 Edict creating the *Eze* or Chieftaincy institution in each autonomous community. From this point of view, the *Eze* institution officially emerged, and with government recognition in Igboland or southeast, through the Military administration with the Chieftaincy Edict No.22 of 1978.

Furthermore, Article 3.1 of the Edict requires each autonomous community to select their own *Eze* and present to the Chief Executive of the state through the Chairman of the Local government, before the *Eze*s presented with the staff of office.

Later in 1981, the civilian government of Imo state under Chief Sam Mbakwe, passed the Traditional Rulers and Autonomous Communities Law of 1981 which transformed the title of chief into *Eze*, Uzoigwe (2009). This law, incidentally, is the latest on the subject, and supersedes all previous laws concerning *Ezeship* or traditional rulership in Imo state. According to Uzoigwe, the 1981 law was particularly important because it represented the wish of the people of Imo state. In addition, and by virtue of section 3(1) of the law, the title of ‘Chief’ as having the meaning of a traditional head in some autonomous communities were abolished and replaced with the title of *Eze*.

The fact is that, prior to 1981, some of the traditional rulers were called chiefs; some plain chiefs, some warrant chiefs and yet others were paramount chiefs, while few were titled *Eze* or *Igwe*. However, the change in the titles of all the traditional rulers in Imo state from chiefs to *Ezes* has been so enthusiastically embraced that one is likely to commit an unpardonable offence if today anybody addresses or refers to the traditional ruler of an autonomous community in Imo state as a chief. He must always be addressed as and called *Eze* of the autonomous community.

Subsequently, the 1981 law defined an *Eze* as ‘a traditional or other head of an autonomous community who has been identified, selected, appointed and installed by his people according to their own tradition and usages, and presented to government for recognition,’ (Laws of Imo state of Nigeria, 2003 and 2006, Onyema, (2017).

The same law of Imo state defined an Autonomous Community as ‘a group of people inhabiting an identifiable geographical area or areas, comprising one or more communities, bound by a tradition and recognized by a cultural way of life with a common historical heritage and approved as an autonomous community by government’.

1.1. Concept of the Eze (Traditional Ruler)

The *Ezeship* institution in Imo state and Igboland in general is the first among the traditional community power structures, that has come of age. In addition to the earlier definition, an *Eze* is 'a traditional head acting as the custodian of culture, custom and tradition and advising the community on them'. He is also the sovereign head in all traditional issues in his autonomous community.

1.2. Characteristics of the Eze

The *Eze* of an autonomous community must be citizen of that community. He is expected to be a man of wisdom, high integrity, patience, tolerance and understanding. Also, he is expected to defend both the legislative and judicial principles of their traditional government. As Ejitu (2015) puts it; an *Eze* (traditional ruler) should be person chosen, selected or elected by his people with exception of communities where the position is hereditary. He further maintained that traditional rulers were appointed essentially to secure confidence of their people in their relationship with the officials of the government and, of course with the outside world.

Other typical features of the *Eze* are as follows:

- The *Eze, Igwe or Obi*, are community based. This means that he must reside in the community of origin.
- No *Eze* in Imo state and Igboland (Southeast) in general, that has political, legislative and judicial authority extending beyond his autonomous community. The sovereign power of the *Eze* cannot be exercised in another autonomous community.
- All the *Ezes* are equal. There is no ground in custom, tradition or history that grade the *Eze* as first, second or third classes.
- The chairmen of council of the *Ndi Eze* (traditional rulers) in each of the 27 LGAs of Imo state and other states in the south east geopolitical zone, including the Chairman of southeastern states council of *Ndi- Eze* (traditional rulers) perform only political functions as stipulated in the bye laws guiding them.
- (iv) The *Eze* is also an impartial father of the community and as a traditional ruler, should stay out of party politics. This means that the *Eze* belongs to all the political parties in the community and act as father to all of them.

1.3. Functions of the Eze

The *Eze* of an autonomous community is recognized by every political community essentially as traditional head who presides over community affairs and constitute the principal rallying point for community actions. He is the person in position of leadership in his autonomous community and whose authority is derived and passed down from political, social and cultural heritage of his community to ensure a viable order. In a nutshell, the *Eze* is "a traditional head" and the custodian of culture, custom and tradition of the community (Onyema, 2017). However, the function of traditional rulers can be succinctly outlined in its political, judicial, socio-cultural and economic functions.

Politically, traditional rulers are the heads of government at the autonomous community level. The *Eze* is the chairman of *Eze-in-council* in their respective autonomous communities. The traditional rulers function as an interface between the people and the authorities of the state. Traditional Rulers are responsible for receiving important visitors to the community. The institution of the courtesy call to the Traditional Ruler, paid by visitors of all kind, including state governors, LGA chairmen government functionaries' and politicians, is especially noteworthy in this regard. A Traditional Ruler keeps regular contact to Local government council and even the State government, more especially, if he is a member of the State Council of Traditional Rulers. In summary therefore, they serve as transmission belt for government policies into the community sphere, receiving dignitaries and as well represent the community at ceremonies. These political roles cover the interests and aspirations of the community to the outside world and to the community itself.

On judicial functions, the *Ezes* (traditional rulers) perform judicial functions and uphold justice in their autonomous communities. They settle disputes and mediate in inter-village disagreement according to native law and custom. They act as patrons, mediators and arbitrators within the community. In fact, to an ordinary citizen of Imo state, the major functions of an *Eze* (Traditional Ruler) are, re-conciliation, mediation and adjudication. In conflicts situation involving more than a segment of the community, traditional Ruler being the impartial father of the community and in conjunction with their council should attempt to re-establish peace. As for the land and family matters, the traditional ruler handles them as part of their functions. Within the autonomous community, Traditional Rulers and their cabinets have become a major factor among a whole range of individuals and institutions involved in arbitration processes in their various communities. External arbitrators such as council of elders, *Nze na Ozo* title holders etc., are sometimes invited to solve specific conflicts, such as, land matters. Arbitration within the autonomous community is common and usually preferred to formal court proceedings because of the cost of law suits and perceived inconveniences of going to court. Usually, if any of the party does not accept the verdict and decides to take the case to a Customary Court, even to a Magistrate or High Court, the evidence given during the arbitration process before the *Eze* (traditional ruler) will be admissible and considered relevant at these higher judicial institutions.

Socio-culturally, the *Eze* acts as a bridge between the ideas of the old and the needs of the present. Since the late 1970s, the presence of Traditional Rulers in public life of autonomous communities in the entire southeast area has considerably expanded. They act as the symbol of culture and tradition, perform rites, preside over community festivals and other ceremonial functions, and at the same time, play the role of fathers to their autonomous communities. They are responsible for fighting social ills such as incest, bribery and corruption; they help the poor and destitute and work for the preservation of the *ezeship* institution. The first and foremost function of the *Eze* is as the embodiment of local custom.

Economically, the *Eze* (Traditional ruler) involves himself in developmental projects and in some cases, assisting local governments in the collection of taxes, rates and community levies.

They also motivate and organize their people to participate actively in the development plans at the village, and autonomous community levels. Their concrete roles within the communities they rule are imagined in many ways differing from one place to the other. In spite of their major role as embodiment of local custom and judicial, traditional rulers also play other vital roles in their various autonomous communities. Onyema (2017), summarized the functions of the *Eze* (traditional ruler) as follows:

- Maintenance of peace, goodwill, unity, and good governance in the autonomous community;
- Officiating at community-wide ceremonial and traditional functions;
- Initiating and/or supporting socio-economic development projects;
- Settlement of civil disputes; and
- Spearheading the preservation and refinement of the cultural traditions on which the autonomous community has reached a consensus or which it has implicitly accepted.
- In other words, the functions of the *Eze* would appear to be more than ceremonial but includes the above enumerated roles.

1.4. *Eze's cabinet or Eze-in Council*

In virtually all the communities of Southeastern Nigeria, the *Eze* has a council of chiefs (usually called the *Eze's cabinet* or *Eze-in Council*) around him. The council consists of village heads from the federating villages, chiefs who received their honorary titles from the Traditional Ruler, the traditional head of *Nze na Ozo* title holders, President General of the Town union, representatives of some cultural associations, and selected prominent citizens from the autonomous community. Normally, the council members are selected to represent the various constituent units of the Autonomous Community. However, the discretion of the traditional ruler himself to select his cabinet members may be rather limited because some people have their constitutional right to be in the cabinet. The council is presided over by the *Eze*, but in his absence, a senior chief who is often termed traditional prime minister presides over the council. In eventual death of *Eze* (traditional ruler), the Traditional Prime Minister will automatically assume the throne on acting capacity and as such be regarded as the traditional head of the community, until a successor is found. Therefore, the rulership of *ezeship* institution in its entirety, includes the *Eze* and the cabinet, which is usually called the *Eze-in-council*.

2. Statement of the Problem

Generally speaking, the Igbos of the southeast of Nigeria had a system of traditional rulership even before the introduction of indirect rule in the 20th century which described the premillennial era. The mechanisms and structures for making communal decisions and maintaining social control were customarily defined. The democratic principles used for the identification, selection, appointment and installation of the *Eze* are exercises embedded in the tradition and usages of their own people with customary ceremonies. The use of money to acquire the *ezeship* position or government imposition of the *Eze* is virtually nonexistent. According to Inyama (1993), the selection of individuals in the position of authority was based on kinship, gerontology, socio-economic status and some other prescribed means are determined by the communities. He maintained that, the Igbo customary law stipulates either hereditary, elective or the rotatory principles as the modes of selection and succession for the *ezeship* stool.

However, prior to 1999 in Imo state, the danger of *ezeship* tussle did not pose much threat as it is today.

The influence of such variables as the economic and political domination, flagrant neglect, abuse and violation of customs and tradition, bastardisation and corruption of the socio-cultural values and moral systems were effectively managed but remained minimal.

Regrettable, for the fact that the customary rules of social decorum in *ezeship* institution are abbreviated or wantonly ignored, the ensuing results are *ezeship* tussles, and other social vices.

Researches on themes, such as the Igbo traditional political systems and the likes are common, compared to the paucity of researches on the vexed issue of *ezeship* tussles and its negative impacts on the people of southeastern Nigeria, particularly, in Imo state. In other words, the study hypothesized that, it is the socio-economic and political influence in the choice of an *Eze* that creates conflict, *ezeship* tussle and orgy of destructions of lives and property in the autonomous communities. The study therefore examined the factors responsible for the recent *ezeship* tussles and its effects on the autonomous communities in Imo state.

3. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this work is to examine the factors responsible for the *ezeship* tussles in the premillennial era, and its effects on socio-political, cultural and economic development of the autonomous communities in Imo state (Southeast, Nigeria) between 2000 and 2016.

4. Theoretical Framework and Research Method

4.1. *Marxist Political Economy*

Marxist political economy in its holistic view and analysis of the society, emphasizes the inter connection of social relations, class conflict and organic relationship between the sub-

Structure/infrastructure (economy) and superstructure (polity). It is objective because it is based on observable and demonstrable phenomena and it establishes a logical method for explaining reality which is open, systematic and verifiable (Ekekwe, 1986; Onyema, 2018). The political economy approach postulates that economy determines other facets of social life. For Marx, a change in the substructure (economy or ownership of means of production) is expected to produce a corresponding change in the superstructure (polity), that is, ideas, structures, belief, value systems and other institutions. Marx adopted historical and dialectical materialism which states that the material conditions of existence and the inherent contradictions in phenomena are the basis upon which society moves or develops (Badey, 2005).

Ake (1981) opined that, economic need is the primary need, so economic activity is man's primary activity. The Marxian political economy therefore, emphasizes the primacy of material productions as the basis of human existence. For the Marxian's, man must eat to survive and therefore, man is compelled by the need to survive, to work and to be able to satisfy his food and other needs in life (Onyema, 2018).

Ezeship tussles being discussed in this work can be properly situated within the socio-economic and political development of Imo state. This is so because the *ezeship* issue sprouted from the ruins of the communal mode of production which characterized the emergence of private property. The emergence of private property led to the emergence of the state in the area represented by political power and authority that superintended over the nascent mode of production. This necessitated the need for property accumulation in whichever form including power and authority. In other words, powerful personalities in every era acquired more wealth and use it to acquire more titles for the benefit such an exercise was anticipated to bring. The *ezeship* tussles therefore, has something to do with materialistic tendency in man. In Imo state, for example, the acquisition of honour and prestige is important. Not only that, there is the land to share, there are equally titles such as *Nze-na Ozo*, *Ichie*, and other chieftaincy titles, which people aspire to hold. Moreover, the *ezeship* throne is there to be contested for. To aspire to such positions is not the problem, but the display of guile in the game is what brings about the squabbles. To adequately explain the *ezeship* issue, its socio-economic and political basis has to be unearthed. The theory looks at social problems like political manipulation and economic exclusion, injustice, exploitation, inequity etc., as sources of conflict (Onyema, 2017). As applied to the *ezeship* stool, Marxian political economy emphasizes the primacy of the economic base which underscores the economic gains attached to the exalted *ezeship* stools and the other chiefly positions. Economic authority is thus man's primary activity and his economic need is his primary need. This therefore explains the high premium attached to the economic and political factors in the on-going *ezeship* tussles in Imo state. Community members therefore, resort to struggling for *ezeship* position which would fetch them the money and power, and no longer see their bread elsewhere than in direct or indirect connection to the government house by any means whatsoever. In view of the foregoing, the guiding theoretical framework for this study is the Marxist Political Economy and it has provided. Therefore, Marxist political economy perspective provides a particular view of the phenomenon under study. Observation shows that *ezeship* tussle is a struggle to have access to state apparatus or resources, and one of the means of achieving this is by finding ways of eliminating certain group or opponents out of the contest or race, hence, tussling becomes one of the convenient tools for eliminating an opponent from the competition. Therefore, political and economic undertone are the central theme that dragged this research to the Marxian political economy approach as the theoretical stand point in explicating the rising trend of *eze* kingship tussles and the continued agitation for more of autonomous communities in Imo state between 2000 and 2016.

4.2. *Ezeship* (Kingship) Tussles in Imo State

Ezeship tussle is the fight over the *ezeship* stool by autonomous community members without due processes or regard to the customs and tradition of the people as enshrined in the autonomous community constitution. *Ezeship* tussles in autonomous communities has created problems leading to fighting and deepening tension and criminality such as; hostilities, disharmony, killings, damage of properties, kidnapping, consultation of oracles, court cases (litigations) and other vices that retards developments (Onyema, 2017).

Remarkably too, the struggle for *ezeship* throne has degenerated into the demand for more autonomous communities in the state, and has continued to increase even when many communities are destabilized and rendered ungovernable. These situations put the communities in a myriad of socio-economic problems in dire need. Therefore, many autonomous communities are in shamble and disunity due to the jostling for the noble stool. The situation has also turned some of the communities into an epitome of the "wretched on the earth" characterized by unprecedented rural poverty and socio-economic underdevelopment of the autonomous communities. Furthermore, social and economic development in dire need in many communities are being put in a jeopardy as the energy and resources that would otherwise have been channeled into development projects are wasted in conflict; a conflict that has actually sent the hand of the clock of development several decades back (Onyema, 2017). On the other hand, as a result of the supreme respect accorded to the traditional stool of *Eze*, tussling has become an instrument of determining who occupies the throne. This is against the custom or tradition as provided in the autonomous community constitution which clearly determines or interprets the right person the tradition favours and who the community constitution upholds. As a result of this sudden explosion of new autonomous communities, there is an emergence of pockets of kingdoms in every individual village setting, and now making mockery of a rather highly revered institution of *ezeship* (traditional rulership) in the state.

In some communities, wealthy and well-connected individuals with doubtful communal credentials have captured the position of the *Eze* (Traditional ruler), manipulating the community and/or government into recognizing them. The resultant effect is that the traditional stool in many communities has been hijacked and desecrated by such impostors, who lack integrity and have nothing to offer the people but only take advantage of the traditional stool to feather their own

nests. The tussles therefore, have brought about the bastardisation and corruption of the social-cultural values and moral systems of the entire Imo state.

Based on these negative developments, the stool now faces problem of selection and appointment of an *Eze* which eventually goes to wealthy individual who may not have qualified for the throne, but for the fact that he is capable of settling the bill. Therefore, *ezeship* tussles are on the increase in Imo state because a lot of people envision the position as a means of having access to the apparatus of the government.

4.3. Factors Responsible for Ezeship Tussle

The recent conflicts and tussles about *ezeship* rulership in Imo state can be attributed to ill-defined rules, especially of succession as well as from opaque histories and genealogies defining hierarchies of seniority among the villages that form the autonomous units.

Also, the lack of clear-cut criteria for becoming an *Eze* in most autonomous communities is now paving the way for all manner of people to aspire to become an *Eze* which often results to tussle. Worst too, in various communities where ascension to the throne is determined by family lineage, those who have money to throw about, often hijacked the throne and end up becoming *Eze* (traditional ruler). One of the contributing factors to the recent *ezeship* tussles is government insensitivity in yielding to the constant agitation for new autonomous community. The inception of the Nigeria's 4th republic in 1999 was greeted by the agitations for more autonomous communities. The agitation snowballed from one community to another and spread all over the state. This incessant rise for the agitation is because of the readiness of the state government and the Imo state House of Assembly who are legally assigned to approve new autonomous community and also issue the certificate of recognition to its *Eze*, to grant every request as long as it met all their demands including financial obligations.

However, this apparent government insensitivity to popular opinion in matters of who becomes *Eze* signals a desire of the executive to plant its own persons in the communities and at other strategic positions of authority. Also, these are aimed by the state at securing its political interests, using the community structure as a control and at the same time drawing battle line for the *ezeship* tussle. Beside government insensitivity is the economic and political domination militating the *ezeship* tussle in Imo state. Meanwhile, it is assumed that the acquisition of Autonomous community is meant for those who can afford the bill. Therefore, any person who can purchase the autonomous community with money stood the chance of being installed *Eze* even if he is not the choice of his community. No wonder, more recently, Wilyy Eya reporting for Prince News of October 17, 2010, has captioned a title; 'autonomous communities for sale in Imo state'? This is the root of the phenomenon being studied.

The rise of new elites is another contributive factor responsible for the *ezeship* tussles in Imo state. Onyema (2017) pointed out that *ezeship* tussles are now the available instrument in the hands of the educated and traditional elites, community leaders, local champions, unemployed youths, religious fanatics and social groups to check the abuse of traditional values of *Eze*'s stool. Some elites and wealthy individuals in the state have come to regard the throne of *ezeship* as a serious communal issue, disregarding the important implications of tussles on the socio-cultural and political development. Another major factor identified as contributing to the *Eze* crisis in Imo state is the bastardization and corruption of Igbo social-cultural values and moral systems. Uwalaka (2003), lamented that the recent reversal of the great cultural values and traditional ethical norms is posing serious threat to the *ezeship* institution and as a result, the hallowed traditional stool have been corrupted. The fallout of the above factor therefore, is disrespect to traditions, cultural mores and community constitution. Furthermore, the relationship between the *Eze* and his community's town/improvement union has been another source of problem. Who holds political power in the community? The *Eze* or the people via town union? Customarily, town unions hold political authority while the *Eze* holds traditional authority. The involvement of the *Eze* in politics has led the traditional rulers trying to hijack both political and traditional authorities. This has led many communities now bemoaning the burden of traditional rulership. As far back as 1993, Inyama lamented that the 'most of the problems rocking the autonomous communities are the question of whether the *Eze* is both traditional and political head'. Some *Ezes* see their installation as the dawn of an era of unlimited powers which has led to squabbles and litigations in most autonomous communities. Some of these *Ezes* have gone as far as amending the community constitution to add more powers to their stool. This has also received resistance from the town improvement unions. It is worthy of note that the town improvement unions, constitute the economic power center, and the principal financiers of these unions are considered the most influential groups in almost all the communities.

On the same note, the formation of parallel town union executives which controls their own loyalists also affects the smooth running of community government and hampers development since none of the group is ready to provide any developmental project that will benefit the generality of the community members. In spite of the tussles generated, many people still have high regard for the *Eze* stool as a result of the supreme respect attached to the throne, and still want it retained for the generations to come.

4.4. Effects of Ezeship Tussles in Imo State

For decades now, autonomous communities in Imo state have been victims of consequential *ezeship* tussles. The tussle has been a bane to the vast number of autonomous communities in Imo state, and has remained unresolved by both the present and past governments.

This situation puts the communities in a myriad of socio-economic problems in dire need, and so many autonomous communities are in shamble and disunity due to the jostling for the noble stool. In addition, the situation has

also turned some of the communities into an epitome of the “wretched on the earth” characterized by unprecedented rural poverty and socio-economic underdevelopment of autonomous communities.

On the other hand, Youth development programmes have greatly suffered a remarkable set back. This is seen in their inability to organize eventful programmes such as football competition, holidays’ extra-moral classes for secondary students by undergraduates in tertiary institutions of learning. Also affected by this ugly trend are the cultural exhibitions of the people such as masquerades, traditional dances. Furthermore, other communal activities such as road maintenance, market clearing, and removal of felled trees or cutting down of dangerous trees on the road side. All these are as a result of the dichotomy created by *ezeship* tussles in the various autonomous communities.

Observation shows that, in Imo state and other parts of south-eastern Nigeria, the government in power are much involved in the affairs of traditional government more than in other states in Nigeria. This is because the procedures involved in order to obtain official recognition for a Traditional Ruler requires him to prove popular support from the community and the state government as well. This is frequently done by a formal presentation of the *Eze* by the community during a public meeting with the government. However, details of this procedure are laid down in the state by-law and they are defined at the autonomous community level by their constitution which vary in practice.

Obviously, this allows for some degree of government manipulation, on the issues of candidacy on creation of a new Autonomous Community and even succession when the throne is vacated. There are usually frequent and intense lobbying from sectional interests such as the town union, community elites, even the youths to some extent, and government officials as well. *ezeship* tussle in most of the autonomous communities has succeeded in creating problems leading to fighting and deepening tension and criminality such as; hostilities, disharmony, killings, damage of properties, kidnapping, consultation of oracles, court cases (litigations) and other vices that retards developments.

However, there are incidences of loss of lives and property through fratricidal and wars of attrition in the feuding communities. Nwabueze (1985) captured this at its puppet stage, when he averred that “community members in different camps were at each other’s throats, with frequent clashes between rival groups, which leading to considerable casualties in human lives and property”.

Furthermore, many families, communities and institutions are now burning in *ezeship* tussles fratricide and conflagration. These communities have become theatres of undeclared wars and many people have died under mysterious circumstances.

In some communities, there is evidence that, many people now live in fear as they do not know what will happen next.

Supporting the above comment, Kanayo Ume reporting for the Guardian News publication in 2013 laments that, “all over Imo state, many communities are embroiled in turmoil because some vested interests seeking power saw the granting of autonomous community as a gold mine and resulting to tussles for the *ezeship* stool”. In the same vein, many people have fled from their communities and now wear toga of ‘refugee’ in their own country because of uncertainty occasioned by the *ezeship* tussles.

Also, town unions are not spared as a result of the formation of parallel town union executives which control their own loyalists. In some communities such as Awo-Mbieri autonomous community in Mbaitoli LGA for example, there is the dissolution of popularly and properly constituted town union executives. For this particular reason, the Awo-Mbieri Progressive union -APU), suffered such fate because of *ezeship* tussles and this led to the institution of a legal suit by the union. In furtherance, this resulted to the dethronement of their monarch by the appeal court judgment of 8th July, 2008, in Port Harcourt as reported in Nigeria News point of 14th-16th July, 2008. This hampers development since none of the group is ready to provide any developmental project that will benefit the generality of the community members.

In some communities, more than one person is parading themselves as *Eze* or *Eze*-elect with parallel town unions, including women and youth leaderships in the same autonomous community. Thus, there is general enmity in the communities as members in one group see their counterpart in another group as an opposition and in some cases, they use nick-names such as *black leg* to the disloyal group and *white leg* to the loyal members, Onyema (2017).

Another serious effect of *ezeship* tussles is high level of insecurity. Nebo (2010) once lamented on the security situation in the entire southeast. According to him, ‘in southeast of Nigeria, many wealthy personalities have moved their aged parents to Lagos and Abuja to keep them away from kidnappers. Even the integrity of our Igbo culture has been impugned by the hosting of *Igba nkwu* (traditional marriages) in Lagos, Abuja and other cities because of personal safety challenges, Nebo concluded.

Daily Sun newspapers of (2012), also reported that, the *Eze*-elect of Awo-Mbieri autonomous community was kidnapped on Sunday, 6th May, 2012 (at about 12.15hrs), in the premises of St Peter’s Catholic Church Awo Mbieri.

Most communities have become thoroughly dichotomized into two antagonistic groups, to the extent that even after the conflict or tussle have been resolved and one faction recognized by the government, the losing faction have remained unreconciled and the tussles remain almost unabated, Onyema (2017).

For these reasons, many communities are under Police siege because of the *ezeship* problem in order to maintain peace. However, the Police may have been able to restore order but not peace in the community.

5. Research Method

This study adopted the descriptive survey method of data collection. Primary data was gathered using the questionnaire, oral interview technique, informal discussions, focus group discussion (fgd), expert opinion, and town hall meetings to correlate the data, while newspaper cuttings, and publications to compliment the primary data. The

questionnaire was carefully designed because it is a sort of self – administered interview and requires no interviewer or proctor to interpret it to the respondents.

The questionnaire was considered suitable because it is often used in empirical social research in Sociology. On the whole, a total of one thousand, three hundred and twenty-five (1325) copies of questionnaire were proportionally distributed to the nine autonomous communities which formed the research locations. Out of this number, one thousand, two hundred and seventy (1270) were retrieved and analyzed, using simple percentages and the Z-test.

5.1. Population for the Study

The target population of this study included households' heads, traditional rulers, chiefs and town union Executive members cut across the 27 Local Government Areas of Imo state.

5.2. Sample size

Sample size was determined using the total number of households in each autonomous community and taking 10% of the total number of households. The total number of sample size produced from the nine autonomous communities is 1270. The study allotted number of sample respondents to each autonomous community in proportion to their population.

5.3. Sampling Techniques/ Procedures

The Multi-stage technique that makes use of different sampling techniques such as probability and non-probability methods was used for the study. As Ifeancha, (2010) puts it; 'Multi-stage implies selecting a sample from a sample'. Ab initio, Imo state with twenty-seven (27) Local government areas were grouped into three Clusters using the three Senatorial districts in the state. Imo West Senatorial district (Orlu) forms cluster one (1) with 12 Local government areas; Imo East Senatorial district (Owerri) also forms cluster two (2) with 9 Local government areas; and Imo South Senatorial district (Okigwe) formed cluster three (3) with 6 Local government areas. Within each sampled Local Government Area, one autonomous community was randomly selected using the table of random numbers. In all, nine (9) autonomous communities are covered by the survey. Proportionally, four (4) Autonomous communities emerged from cluster one, three (3) from cluster two and two (2) from cluster three.

These communities are large and populous with the result that it was not easy to go around all the households. Doing so would consume more money, energy and time than necessary. In order to give the entire population a fair chance of being represented in the sample, the systematic sample technique was employed to select our respondents. This is a probability sampling method which according to Ukwuije (1994) would approximate random sampling if the population frame list is arranged in an unbiased fashion. This ensured that heads of households, traditional rulers, chiefs, *Nze na ozo* title holders, the elites which include prominent politicians, leaders of town unions, the community government council (CGC), women and youths' associations from the nine autonomous communities was adequately represented in the sample. These constituted our population.

Also, houses in the rural areas of Imo state are randomly scattered. Therefore, respondents are selected from households along the major roads or route ways in the community. This is in harmony with the work of Onyenechere (2004), cited in Onyema, (2017), on 'Spatial Analysis of Rural Women and Informal Economic Activities in the Development process of Rural Areas', in Imo State. Systematic sampling technique is used to select the household for the survey.

To choose sample units, we developed a list of households, and an interval number was randomly chosen. This means that in every interval of ten in the list, one sample (respondent) was systematically selected and this continued until the sample area was covered. Where the head of the household is a woman, the next house is chosen and thereafter the sampling interval of every tenth house is adjustably maintained.

6. Methods of Data Collection/ Instrumentation

The questionnaire method, interview technique, observational methods comprising both participant and non-participant methods, panel analysis and telephone surveys.

In conducting this research, primary and secondary data collection formed the main sources of data.

6.1. Sources of Data Collection

6.1.1. Primary Data

The main source of data consists of information from sample survey with 1270 respondents to a questionnaire of 46 variables designed to elicit information on the proliferation of autonomous community. Oral interviews are used to extract relevant information from government circles and from town union officials in order to abstract independent information on the proliferation of autonomous communities in Imo state. Also, field work participant observation and key informant interviews was technically applied.

Our questionnaire is divided into three sections. Section A seeks information on the socio – economic characteristics of the respondent. Section B contains open ended questions where the respondents give a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Section C, on the other hand, involves the use of Likert Scales, where our respondent is required to score his feelings using the scale of (a) Strongly Agree (S.A), (b) Agree (A), (c) Disagree (D), (d) and Strongly Disagree (S.D). Likert

scales are used to obtain responses to the questions and also determine the degree of agreement and disagreement on the issues raised.

The questionnaire was administered to the nine autonomous communities in the research areas, namely; Mgbidi, Ubah (Umuaka), Umuokanne, Umuokwara-Akokwa, Awo-Mbieri, Ihiagwa, Okwunakuwa-Uvuru, Eziamaka-Okwe, and Osuwere autonomous communities. On the whole, a total of one thousand, three hundred and twentyfive (1325) copies of questionnaire were distributed in proportion to the population of each research area. Out of this number, one thousand, two hundred and seventy (1270) were retrieved and analyzed. The study substantially made use of oral interview to extract relevant information from knowledgeable adults in the study areas. The respondents here were; Traditional rulers *Ezes*, Chiefs, Chief priests, eldest *Nze-na-Ozo* title holders, key informants, and leaders of town unions, women and youth's associations from the nine autonomous communities studied.

6.1.2. Secondary Sources

Secondary sources of data included statistical records from the Ministry of Chieftaincy and Community Development Owerri, Imo State House of Assembly, and Ministry of planning and Economic development, Owerri. The study also generated data from the review of existing literature, government official gazettes, journals, internet facilities, magazines and newspaper publications, unpublished works and library books.

7. Results and Findings

7.1. Presentation of Data

Appropriate analysis accounts for adequate presentation and examination of facts collected from the field. We shall begin our analysis with some preliminary data of our respondents.

Age	No of Respondents	Percentage
18-24	278	21.89%
25-34	175	13.78%
35-44	491	38.66%
45 and above	326	25.67%
Total	1270	100%

Table 1: Showing the Age Distribution of Respondents

Source: Field work, 2016

Proper care was taken to ensure that certain category of people, especially the *under 18 yrs.* were not included in the sample. This was to enable us benefit from the experiences and analytical rigors of developed minds. The table above shows that 21.89% were 18 -24 years of age, 13.78% were 25 – 34 years of age bracket, 38.66% fell on 35 – 44 age brackets, while 25.67% were of 45 years and above.

Sex	No of Respondents	Percentage
Male	948	74.65%
Female	322	25.35%
Total	1270	100%

Table 2: Showing the Sex Distribution of Respondents

Source: Field work, 2016

In the data analysis, there is evidence of more male in the sample than the female folks. The reason was that most women are shy and preferred such political matters to be handled by their husbands. The above shows that 74.65% were males while 25.35% were of the female folks.

Marital Status	No of Respondents	Percentage
Single	413	32.52%
Married	779	61.34%
Widow (er)	78	6.14%
Total	1270	100%

Table 3: Showing the Marital Distribution of Respondents

Source: Field work, 2016

The table above shows that 32.52% were single, 61.34% were married and 6.14% were window. This indicates that a good number of our respondents are youths.

Qualification	No of Respondents	Percentage
Below FSLC	78	6.14%
FSLC	382	30.08%
WASC/SSCE/GCE/NECO	437	34.41%
NCE/Diploma	169	13.31%
HND/BA/B.Ed./B.Sc.	164	12.91%
MA/M. Ed. /M. SC. /Ph.D.	45	3.54%
Total	1270	100%

Table 4: Showing the Educational Qualification of Respondents

Source: Field work, 2016

The above table shows the educational attainment of our respondents. We made sure that those who actually filled in our questionnaire had some level of education. There were some educated people who were not actually certificated in our sample. This included people who read from *standard one* to *standard five* in those days but did not obtain the *standard six* certificates.

Occupation	No of Respondents	Percentage
Applicant	14	1.10%
Student	106	8.35%
Businessman	429	33.77%
Farmer	342	26.93%
Civil Servant	163	12.84%
Retired civil servant	216	17.01%
Total	1270	100%

Table 5: Showing the Occupational Distribution of Respondents

Source: Field Work, 2016

The table above also indicates the occupational distribution of our respondents. Having presented the personal data of our respondents, we have to move forward to analyzing our guiding statements based on what transpired in the field.

7.2. Data Analysis

7.2.1. Hypotheses Testing

The research tested three hypotheses.

7.2.1.1. Hypothesis 1

(H₁) Competition for Economic power and political domination tend to generate ezeship tussle and disintegration of autonomous community.

H₀: There is no significant relationship between economic power and political domination ezeship tussle.

This is our central hypothesis which sees both economic and political factors as the principal etiology of the ezeship tussles and splitting of autonomous communities in Imo state. The study also considered related variables to the factor such as;

- People tussle for Ezeship position because of the economic and political gains.
- People use the ezeship tussles to carve spheres of influence for themselves.
- The quest and thirst for title by the individual is responsible for ezeship tussles in your
- Competition for Eze throne may bring about ezeship tussles in your community.
- Ezeship tussles in Imo state are politically motivated,
- It is the quest for a group of people to retain traditional political power that is the source of the tussles in your community.

Item Description	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	Total Responses
Item 1	571	488	156	55	1270
Item 2	311	708	172	79	1270
Item 3	683	414	166	7	1270
Item 4	355	623	219	73	1270
Item 5	337	807	84	42	1270
Item 34	288	540	363	79	1270
Frequency	2545	3580	1160	335	7620
Σ Ranks x Frequency	10180	10740	2320	335	23575

Table 6: Responses to Competition for Economic domination and Political power and Ezeship tussle

$$Z_t = \frac{\Sigma \text{rank} \times \text{frequency}}{\text{Total responses}}$$

Total responses

23575

$$= \frac{10180}{7620} = 3.09 \text{ Approx. } 3$$

7620

Decision- Accept the hypothesis if the computed value is greater than the critical value. Otherwise reject it. Based on the above, we reject the null hypothesis which states that

There is no significant relationship between economic power and political domination ezeship tussle. This shows economic domination and political power are the major factors responsible for ezeship tussle in Imo state. This finding is in agreement with the observation made by Leader Newspaper publication of (December, 2012), that, 'a lot of people envision Eze position as an avenue to amass wealth while others clamour for it just for the sole purpose of personal aggrandizement and material gains'. Furthermore, one year later in (2012), the same Newspaper lamented that, the traditional stool in many communities has been hijacked and desecrated by mediocre elements who lacks integrity and have nothing to offer the people, but they only take advantage of the stool to feather their nests by boasting their economic and political domination'.

There are several resources to be shared among the people in the community, and people are usually interested in the harvest of economic and political spoils. There are also things to compete for in the communities leading to the alignment and realignment of forces. Even having access to the state apparatus or at least the corridor of power of every government serves the interest of certain people to tussle for ezeship position.

7.2.1.2. Hypothesis 2

(H₂) Agitation for autonomous community is influenced by ezeship tussles.

H₀: There is no significant relationship between ezeship tussles and agitation for more autonomous communities.

To test this hypothesis, a portion of our questionnaire was devoted to the struggle for Ezeship stool.

7 It is the struggle for Ezeship stool that give rise to disintegration of Autonomous communities in your area.

Item Description	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	Total Responses
Item 7	672	444	130	24	1270
Frequency	672	444	130	24	1270
Σ Ranks x Frequency	2688	1332	260	24	4304

Table 7: Responses to the Agitation for Autonomous Community Is Influenced central hypothesis by Ezeship Tussles

$$Z_t = \frac{\Sigma \text{rank} \times \text{frequency}}{\text{Total responses}}$$

Total responses

4304

$$= \frac{2688}{1270} = 3.39 \text{ Approx. } 3$$

1270

Decision- Accept the hypothesis if the computed value is greater than the critical value. Otherwise reject it. Based on the above outcome of our analysis, we are compelled to uphold the hypothesis that, agitation for autonomous community is influenced by ezeship tussles. In other words, we reject the null hypothesis which states that, there is no significant relationship between ezeship tussles and agitation for more autonomous communities.

This finding conforms to the Guardian Newspaper report of (2013: 67). It lamented that, "all over Imo state, many communities are embroiled in turmoil because some vested interests seeking power saw the granting of autonomous community as a gold mine".

This is true because, a lot of people envision the ezeship position as a means of having access to the apparatus of the state.

7.2.1.3. Hypothesis 3

(H₃) Sectional interests in the selection and appointment of the *Eze* (Traditional ruler) tend to generate ezeship tussles and disintegration of Autonomous Communities.

H₀: There is no significant relationship between sectional interest in the selection and appointment of the *Eze*, ezeship tussles and agitation for autonomous communities.

We looked at related factors that energize and sustains the ezeship tussle and increased in the demand for more autonomous communities as shown in our questionnaire. These are:

- If the government follows the customs of the people in the appointment of the *Eze*, conflicts and tussles may reduce.
- If government adheres to the laid down legislation on the creation of new Autonomous community, Ezeship tussles may reduce in Imo state.
- Ezeship tussles are on the increase because community leaders failed in their responsibilities to the people.
- Ezeship tussles in your community persisted because stakeholders took sides.
- Ezeship tussles persisted in your community because youths took sides.
- Town unions and other power centers contribute to the ezeship tussles in their various communities.

Item Description	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	Total Responses
Item 13	777	380	71	42	1270
Item 14	674	422	84	90	1270
Item 20	448	669	92	61	1270
Item 21	379	723	74	94	1270
Item 22	406	460	198	206	1270
Item 25	468	679	41	82	1270
Item 32	1014	207	17	32	1270
Frequency	4166	3540	577	607	8890
∑Ranks x Frequency	16664	10620	1154	607	29003

Table 8: Responses to Sectional Interests in the Selection and Appointment of the *Eze* (Traditional Ruler) and Ezeship Tussle

$$Z_t = \frac{\sum \text{rank} \times \text{frequency}}{\text{Total responses}} = \frac{29045}{8890} = 3.27 \text{ Approx. } 3$$

Decision- Accept the hypothesis if the computed value is greater than the critical value. Otherwise rejectit. Based on the above, we reject the null hypothesis which states that

There is no significant relationship between sectional interest in the selection and appointment of the *Eze* and ezeship tussles leading to agitation for autonomous community. This shows that sectional interests such as the influence of the government in power, town unions - who are the economic indicators in their various communities, and other stakeholders are the major factors responsible for ezeship tussle and agitation for autonomous communities. This finding is in agreement with Herniet Sievers (2006), who opined that, 'ezeship tussles are now the available instrument in the hands of the educated and traditional elites, community leaders, local champions, unemployed youths, religious fanatics and social groups to check the abuse of traditional values of ezeship stool and the fragmentation of Autonomous communities in the state'. Also, Uwalaka (2003:91-106) attributed the socio-political failure as being responsible for the bastardization and corruption of the cultural values and moral system. According to him, reversal in recent times, of the great cultural values and traditional ethical norms did not spare the hallowed *ezeship* stools.

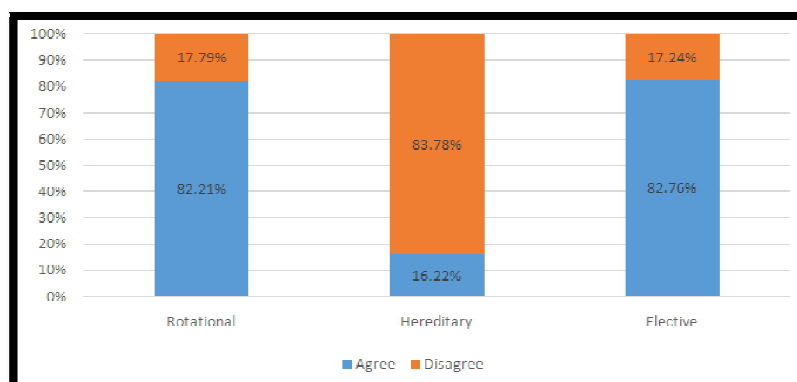


Figure 1: Assessment of the Accepted Mode of Selection/Appointment of the *Eze* in the Various Communities

In three different samples made to ascertain the generally accepted mode of selection and appointment of the Eze, an overwhelming majority of one thousand, and forty-four people representing 82.21%, accepted the rotation of the throne, two hundred and twenty-six people representing 17.79% are in support of non-rotatory of the throne. On the hereditary mode of selection and appointment of the Eze, one thousand and sixty-four people representing 83.78% rejected the keeping of the Eze throne on one particular family or place, while two hundred and six people said yes and agreed on the hereditary.

On the elective mode, almost all the people in the communities toed the same line of action as in the rotatory mode by voting for elective mode as alternative to rotational. The result of is that, one thousand and fifty-one people representing 82.76% supported the elective mode, while two hundred and nineteen representing 17.24% voted against elective mode. This may be an indication of the people's awareness of the principle of democracy.

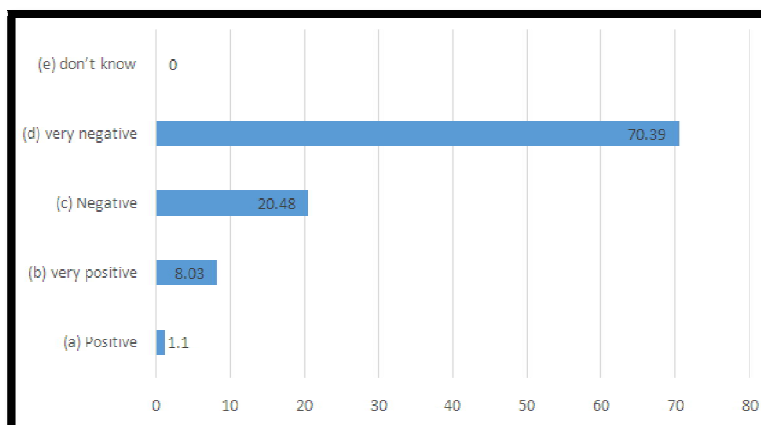


Figure 2: Assessment of Government Peace Committees Performance in the Ezeship Tussles

In the field, fourteen people representing 1.10% and another one hundred and two representing 8.03% responded positively and very positively respectively, while two hundred and sixty and another eight hundred and ninety-four equally showed negative view of the matter. This indicates a total rejection by the members of the various communities visited with regard the government Peace Committees initiated in the communities to settle the ezeship tussles.

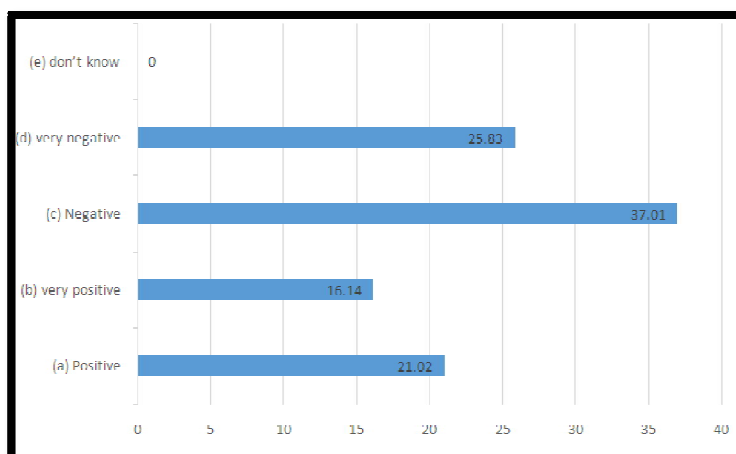


Figure 3: Assessment of Community Peace Committees Performance in the Ezeship Tussles

Also, in the field, two hundred and sixty-seven people representing 21.02% and another two hundred five representing 16.14% responded positively and very positively respectively, while four hundred and seventy and another three hundred and twenty-eight equally showed negative view of the matter. This means that majority of the members of the various communities visited rejected almost all the Peace Committees set up by the communities.

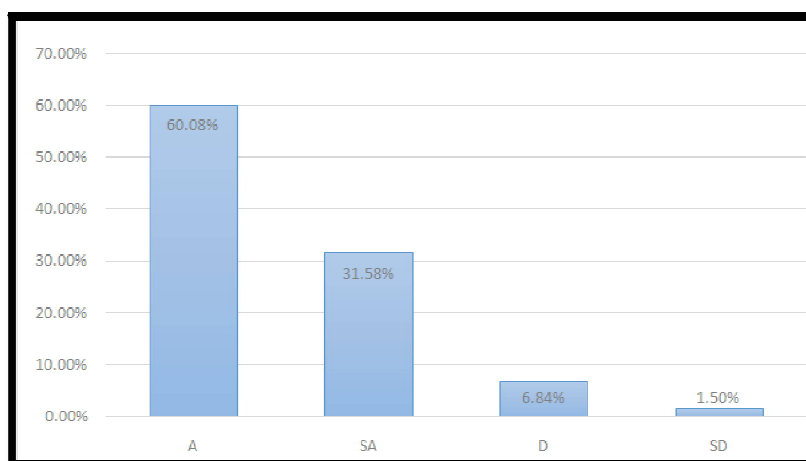


Figure 4: Assessment of Abuse of the Customary Rules of Selection and Appointment of Eze

From the above data, 763 respondents representing 60.08% of our population agreed with additional 401 respondents representing 31.58% strongly agreeing that, the Abuse of the customary rules of selection and appointment the Eze is a serious factor militating ezeship tussles and constant demand for new autonomous communities in Imo state. Similar question posed during an oral interview also overwhelm in confirmation. They contended that those who benefit will oppose any move to harmonize customs and tradition to this regard.

To keep the struggle intact, they always hammer on the historical dimension of the struggle which, to the layman and the uninitiated, appears to be the philosophical and ideological bases of their action. This gives them support without recourse to their hidden agenda. An insignificant number of 87 (6.84%) and 19 (1.50%) disagree and strongly disagreed on this assertion

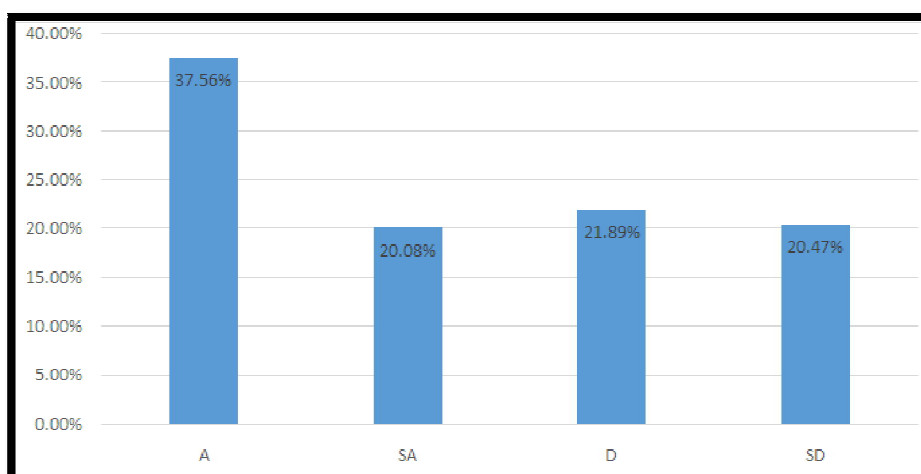


Figure 5: Assessment of the Elites as a Factor Responsible for Ezeship Tussles

From the above, the rise of new elites includes the educated, political and economic elites indicating a positively contributing factor to ezeship tussles in Imo state. From the data above, 477 and 255 respondents representing 37.56% and 20.08% agreed and strongly agreed that the rise of new elites is a factor responsible for ezeship tussle in Imo state, while 278 and 260 respondents representing 21.89% and 20.47%, disagree and disagreed respectively. The close margin witness in this table showed that elite factor is not as serious to make impact on the issue of ezeship tussle. Stakeholders and town union leaders interviewed was of the opinion that elites existed decades ago with little or no experience of ezeship tussle as seen recently.

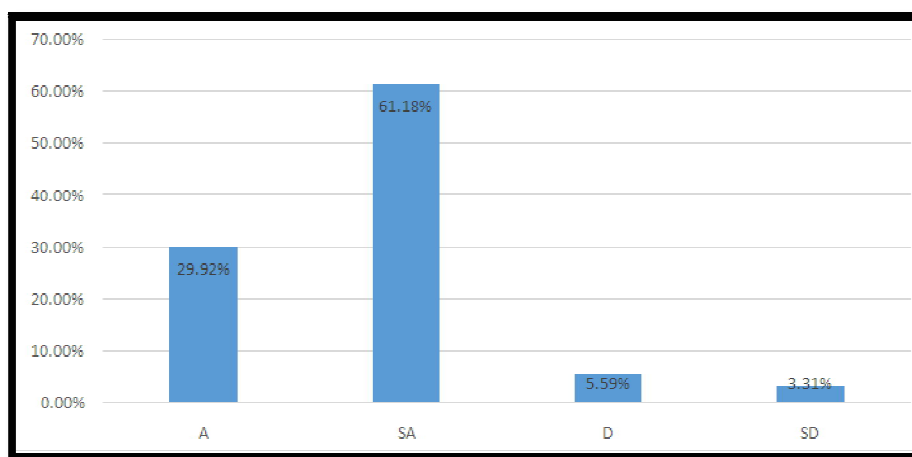


Figure 6: Assessment of the Level of Corruption in Selection and Appointment of the Eze

From the above, corruption has been declared as a terminal disease affecting the ezeship stool in Imo state. A whopping figure of 380 representing 29.92% and 777 representing 61.18% agreed and strongly agreed that corruption is a major factor breeding ezeship tussle in Imo state. Few respondents 71 (5.59%) and 42 (3.31%) disagreed and disagreed that corruption is not a problematic to ezeship tussle in Imo state.

It was gathered in an interview that the abuse of the community constitution by both the community and government and attempts to reject the popular rotational and elective mode and adoption of hereditary mode in the selection and appointment of the Eze. In the same interview session, our respondents indicated the government for the demand that the name of the Eze-elect be first submitted to the government through the state House of Assembly. Most of these respondents pointed accusing fingers at corruption in the struggle for power in whatever form as the worst culprit in the current ezeship tussle engulfing many communities in Imo state. It was also gathered that, at the death of community's Eze, it is difficult for the community to come into accord with the rotation or elective principles in the selection of the Eze in the Autonomous communities.

8. Discussions of Findings

In Imo state, the creation of autonomous communities has continued to be a controversial exercise by both the present and past governments. The reason to this development is that, the communities yearning for autonomies and members of the Imo State House of Assembly who have been appropriated with the power to create and approve an autonomous community, see it as a goldmine. To these parties, in other words, creation of autonomous community is a perfect conduit to make money that cannot be questioned or audited. Recently, even the Deaf and Blind can feel the dexterity exhibited by the state House of Assembly in creating autonomous communities while a great number of pressing issues are not attained to by this law-making arm of government.

No wonder, the Prince publication (2010), raised an alarm with a caption 'Autonomous Community for Sale in Imo state'. From the findings, many autonomous communities have for years back been locked up in a grim battle as who becomes the traditional ruler - the Eze. Among the major factors responsible for the ezeship tussles as revealed by the research work is the abuse of the tradition, customs of the people, and these norms remain the uppermost. Also, corruption on the side of the government in the selection and appointment of the Eze, accounts for a greater share of the blames. This is followed by the rise of educated, political and economic elites in that order that contributes to the recent tussling for the ezeship throne in Imo state.

From another interview conducted, it was revealed that, after the death of an 'Eze' (Traditional Ruler), attempts were usually made to re-negotiate the constitutional order of rotation, and at times, there are emergence of claims of hereditary principle for a successor, which results to squabbles. In reality, such rules of succession have often become a source of long-standing tussles and conflicts within the communities in Imo state till today. Where conflict arose however, the government legislation set rotation among component units along the line of seniority as the standard principle of selection in all autonomous communities where other laid-down procedures failed or did not exist (Supplement to Imo State of Nigeria Gazette 19, 6, of 21 May 1981, Part C, Chieftaincy and Autonomous Communities Law, 1981).

The Law further stated that where seniority cannot be determined, then the most populous unit takes the precedence and the rest rank according to population (Igbozurike 1993). The Imo State Gazettes repeatedly include lists of Ezes (traditional rulers) recognized for some Autonomous Communities where the rotation system is to apply, with further details about the order of succession among the federating villages.

In some cases, too, the twin problems of the mode of succession and hierarchical order usually threaten the relationship between the Town Union and the Eze Institution. The Eze and his supporters naturally argued for heredity as the mode of succession in contrast to the views held by the Town Union and a generality of the people who opted for elective principles through democratic election.

Some Ezes claimed ascendancy over the Town Union as manifested in efforts to decree the dissolution of the Union as seen in the case of Awo-Mbieri autonomous community, where the then Eze dissolved the popularly and properly

constituted town union's executives of the Awo-Mbieri Progressive union (APU). The Union, on its part, flexed its muscle in the removal of the Eze through the town union constitution by instituting legal actions in the law court. Such fate suffered by the union because of ezeship tussles, also snowballed into the dethronement of the monarch by the appeal court judgments of 8th July, 2008, in Port Harcourt as reported in News point publication of July, 2008.

The outcome of responses also revealed that many panels of enquiry or peace committee has been constituted to look into the problem of ezeship tussles in the state.

A good example of this, is the 'Judicial commission of enquiry into Autonomous communities in Imo state' set up by Governor Rochas Okorochoa in 2013, as reported by Leader Newspaper publications of August 11, 2013. The terms of reference as contained in the report are as follows: (i) to ascertain whether all the Autonomous communities in the state where Ab initio qualified to be given autonomous status in accordance with the law that was in force when each community was created; (ii) identify Autonomous communities that were not qualified in accordance with the law at the time they were created and to be accorded autonomous status; (iii) identify all traditional rules.

Since the results of the various peace committees are not helpful, the autonomous communities have continued to be reduced to battle grounds by powerful individuals who desired the *ezeship* stools by fair or foul means. The result of the unhealthy situation, is that the peace, unity and development of the affected autonomous communities are swept off the ground by cross-litigation, fictionalization and mud-slinging by the parties to the disputes.

The implication of this sorry situation is that village heads, kingmakers and other traditional authorities have either lost a sense of direction or compromised themselves for pecuniary gains. This feeling is based on the fact that the process of selecting an *Eze* is duly provided in the constitution of every community, hence, the issue of who should be a traditional ruler need not to be a problem in any community if the village heads and kingmakers are men of honour and integrity who can always say, defend and insist on the truth.

It is therefore, an obvious fact that most of the *ezeship* tussles in most communities arise due to the flagrant abuse, violation or neglect of the tradition and constitution of the autonomous communities. Instead of concluding who the tradition of the community favours and the agitation which the constitution of the community upholds, some communities go contrary to it and thereby creating conflicts.

From another oral interview conducted, the creation of autonomous communities is a welcomed development by community members. What becomes questionable, however, is the demand that the name of an eze-elect be submitted before the approval of the autonomous community.

Some mischievous cliques in those communities where there are conflicts, cashed in on this requirement to smuggle in any name of their choice without holding plebiscites and later foisted such persons on the community with the connivance of some government officials and without consideration of the popularity of the persons. What looks more like a tidier situation is that the autonomous community would first be created and approved. Then, the members of the community would choose the eze in accordance with the constitution of the land and under the supervision of the ministry.

As earlier mention, it is thrilling to observe the dexterity exhibited by the House in creating autonomous communities more than in anything else, especially when a great number of more pressing issues have remained unresolved by the House.

This apparent government insensitivity to popular opinion in matters of who becomes eze stems from a desire of the executive to plant its own man in the communities and at other strategic positions of authority in order to secure its political interests, using the structure it can control. Knowing this, the self-styled power brokers choose their eze and run to the government house to profess their unalloyed loyalty to the government in power. In many cases, the government falls prey and the tussle are created. Imo state, termed the 'Heart Land of Nigerian Nation' cannot be considered peaceful and stable when many of her autonomous communities are engulfed in varying degrees of *ezeship* disputes.

They felt that they needed separate development, because the outcome of the eze-ship struggle had proved that they were marginalized and had destroyed communal unity. Therefore, educated and wealthy individuals have contributed a lot to the ezeship tussles fueling the fragmentation of communities in Imo state. What people or communities are yearning for today is the system of rotational and elective mode for the appointment of the Eze. The era of hereditary mode using red cap and other regalia as symbol of traditional leadership is gradually fading away and giving rise to intellectual and enlightened leadership in the autonomous communities in Imo state. Therefore, all former reverence attached to Ezeship stool are gradually giving way to a new elite system. We can safely conclude that the rise of new elites is responsible for the ezeship tussles and proliferation of autonomous communities in Imo state.

9. Summary of Findings

- Economic and political domination played a major role in the acquisition of Autonomous community as any person who can purchase the autonomous community
- with money stood the chance of being installed Eze.
- Sectional interest such as government, town union and other stakeholder in the community influenced the rate of emergence of autonomous communities.
- Finally, the study is of the view that, the establishment of peace committee by communities and panel of enquiry or legislation by the state, could not work, not because of its imperfections, but partly because the operators of the system are hardly committed and adhering to the custom and constitution for the selection and appointment of the Eze

10. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate and explain the etiology of the recent explosion of *ezeship* tussles in autonomous communities in Imo state between 2000 and 2016.

The research was carried out in nine autonomous communities from nine LGAs, randomly chosen, and covering the three Senatorial areas in Imo state.

To aspire for *ezeship* position is not a problem, but the display of guile by aspirants is what brings about the squabbles. *Ezeship* tussle coupled with the fragmentation of Autonomous Communities in recent time, pre-occupy much communal political initiatives and consume considerable amounts of political energy and financial investment as witnessed today.

In addition, the ensuing interference by successive governments and other sectional interests emerge as a very strong factor contributing to the increasing cases of *ezeship* tussle and proliferation of autonomous communities in Imo state. This is in the form of undue abuse, violation or neglect of customs, tradition and constitution of the autonomous communities by the government of Imo state and other power structures which triggers *ezeship* tussles in the state.

In view of the foregoing, the study is of the view that the establishment of peace committee by communities and panel of enquiry or legislation by the state, could not work, not because of its imperfections, but partly because the operators of the system are hardly committed and adhering to the custom and constitution for the selection and appointment of the *Eze*.

Therefore, in order to ensure peace, rule of law and natural justice in today's conflict-ridden autonomous communities in Imo state, there is an urgent need to preserve all the important values of the traditional institutions.

11. Recommendations

The study recommends that, all levels of government should take adequate steps in resolving outstanding *ezeship* tussles in the autonomous communities. This study strongly urges the Imo state government to see recognition of traditional rulers as a declaratory rather than a constitutive right or power of the government to avoid royal rumblings in the state. Also, the *ezeship* institution should be modified so as to remove the oppressive and autocratic powers presently enjoyed by the traditional rulers. Payment of stipend to traditional rulers should be abolished to reduce government control of traditional rulers. The study also recommends that traditional powers are to be shared so that the *Eze*-in-council, community leaders, chiefs and other titled citizens are involved in a harmonious leadership of the various communities.

To reduce the incidences of *ezeship* tussles and conflict, government should only recognize an *Eze* where a community is capable of producing one in line with the custom and tradition of the community concerned. The study therefore recommends that, *ezeship* institution should be depoliticized so that we can take the people's culture back to its pristine roots.

Rather than giving the state the power to recognize and dethrone an *Eze*, the study is of the view that the state council of *NdiEze* (council of traditional rulers), be giving the power of recognition and dethronement of the *Eze*. This will allow for thorough and inward investigations on why the *Eze* be removed taking into consideration the customary and constitutional set up of the communities concerned. Furthermore, Kingship traditional institution (*Eze, Igwe, Oba or Emir*) should be integrated into the nation's constitution and be accountable to the federal government, especially in the prospects of maintaining peace and peaceful coexistence among the rural communities.

More so, to reposition traditional rulership in Imo state for more relevance, the problem of rulership or tussling, and the random fragmentation of Autonomous Communities must be checked.

Such issues as the accepted mode of selection to know who merits the throne, the right person tradition favours and who the community constitution upholds are to be properly situated.

The study advice that government should review and revive the modality of selecting and appointing the *Eze* in line with the customs of the people and should stop recycling the same old known and unworkable ideas.

If the above recommendations are adhered to by all the parties concerned, stability may likely return in most of the autonomous communities.

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