



# Igbo Enwegh Eze: From an antinomy to the Deutro Nomos – A critique of the second wave of Pseudo-Monarchism in the evolution of Igbo political systems

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## **Abstract**

Since the Igbo people of Southern Nigeria have experienced, and have indeed suffered, a profound crisis of identity, which has ultimately created gaps in group psychology and group coherence, and possibly reduced the capacity for group organization among the Igbo. Identity crisis can often manifest in a loss of will, in the radical constriction of social space, and in the loss of even the capacity to establish and consolidate values that often mark, differentiate, and preserve nations. Nothing signals, in my estimation at the very least, this crisis of identity more resolutely than the rise of the pseudo-monarchy in Igbo land. As an institution, the "Ezes" and the "Igwes" couched today as Igbo traditional rulers are creating a new order of reality. This paper traces the origin, manifestation and impact of this change on the Igbo.

**Keywords:** Igbo people, identity, Eze, Igwe, monarchy, politics

Since the end of the Nigerian civil war, the Igbo people of Southern Nigeria have experienced, and have indeed suffered, a profound crisis of identity, which has ultimately created gaps in group psychology and group coherence, and possibly reduced the capacity for group organization among the Igbo. This situation has, thus, in large part, affected not only the Igbo sense of themselves, but more crucially, the effective Igbo response to social action and initiative in the context of Nigeria. Identity crisis can often manifest in a loss of will, in the radical constriction of social space, and in the loss of even the capacity to establish and consolidate values that often mark, differentiate, and preserve nations. Nothing signals, in my estimation at the very least, this crisis of identity more resolutely than the rise of the pseudo-monarchy in Igbo land. As an institution, the "Ezes" and the "Igwes" couched today as Igbo traditional rulers are creating a new order of reality.

The rise of the pseudo-monarchy is disruptive. It goes to the very soul of the Igbo psyche and signals the depth of its cultural crisis. The rise of the institution of the monarchy aims to revise, and it will ultimately subvert the historical and spiritual foundations of Igbo life and political development. It is a heretic development, and this fact compels us to ask a number of questions about its development, its future, and its intentions. My task in this paper,

therefore, is not merely to disturb or disrupt the ideological foundations on which this heretical development has been conceptualized and institutionalized, but to consider three principal questions that implicate its radical development: one, what is the source of this antinomy? Because it is indeed antinomic. Two, what is the Igbo public response to it? Three, what are its long-term prospects in shaping Igbo political and even spiritual life?

The Igbo themselves from immemorial time always said, "*Igbo Enwegh Eze*." That is simply to say, "Igbo do not make kings," or "Igbo have no kings." They were emphatic and unambiguous about this fact of their common reality. The great Igbo novelist of the 20th century, Chinua Achebe, was quite literal in translating "*Ezebuio*" (a common name given by Igbo parents to a child) straight from its Igbo episteme to mean "the king is an enemy." That should well do. A king to the Igbo was anathema. That is the full import. This fact of Igbo life is why it is curious and challenging for us today who now hear many a revisionist scholar and cultural actor declare, "*Igbo nwere Eze*," which means "Igbo have kings." This revision is grounded on misconceptions. I draw this conclusion, not unconscious or unaware of Onwuejeogwu's (1979) assertion that the pronouncement, *Igbo Enwegh Eze* (a tonal variation of *Igbo Enweghi Eze*) "refers more to the prototype of political organization that existed in Igbo land thousands of years ago

than to what existed between the 9th century AD and the early 20th century" (117). It is curious to me, and significant as well, that Onwuejeogwu maps two period of the development or evolution of the monarchy, namely Igbo antiquity and Igbo modernity, and further claims:

Our study shows that the prototype (of essential Igbo political organization) has undergone changes and modifications. The "Igbo EnweghEze" saying is at present a cliché or slogan referring to the proto-Igbo political ideology characterised by egalitarian and republican features. The egalitarian and republican ideologies derived from the proto-Igbo continues to feature in all extant Igbo political systems studies (Onwuejeogwu, 1979, 117).

It is clear that what Onwuejeogwu attempts here is to apply a Parsonian model of social development in which the hierarchy of sophistication moves from the prototype of simple, egalitarian society, to more organized, more sophisticated, centralized monarchical states, and then on to industrial and

post-industrial society of modernity and postmodernity.

To certain categories of Igbo cultural nationalist intellectuals, the evident absence of a highly centralized monarchical system in Igbo world, reflects a lack of sophistication in the development of the culture and a profound lack in its propelling consciousness. This is of course inaccurate and an unfortunate misapprehension of Igbo political and social development. But in the competing narratives that have characterized the contested space of the modern nation of Nigeria, this has created distinct unease – derived unaccountably from a fear of relative cultural underdevelopment or stultification. This fear of stultification has compelled this category of Igbo intellectuals to invent the Igbo monarchy. Onwuejeogwu offers us nine typologies of his evolution of Igbo political systems, from their segmentary stage, and concludes that,

The ideology "Igbo has no Kings" is based on the operation of segmentary lineage system only, for our typology shows that Igbo political system has evolved into complex types, but each still retains a strong element of the proto-type characterized by a segmentary lineage system which is called "Umunna". The democratic, egalitarian and republican ideology of the Igbo are enshrined in the

mechanism of a segmentary lineage system which limits the power of the monarch in centralized and middle range types where they exist in towns like Nri, Onitsha, Oguta, etc., and inhibits the development of monarchy in non-centralized type in places like Owerri, Ngwa, Ibusa, Illah. It is therefore, nonsensical for anyone to interpret the saying "Igbo enwe Eze" in its very simplistic form. Igbo political system is complex and dynamic and cannot be described by one sweeping ideological slogan misconstrued by westernized Igbo elite (Onwuejeogwu, 1979, 118).

I will return to Onwuejeogwu at some point in this paper, but let me emphasize here that the significant impact of his work, based on the theory of an Nri cultural hegemony propelled by a theocratic king – the Eze Nri – has provided the lightning rod for modern Igbo monarchists. The rise of the monarchical spirit and institutions in the Igbo world in recent years is one of the most significant cultural developments among a people whose very ancient culture publicly disavowed, and ritually disdained, monarchy, and resisted the idea of a single, ordained "son of God" whose line of descendants represents and embodies the will of the high God on earth – for that is indeed the meaning and symbolism of the monarch: the single agent of the divine embodied in a single person. Igbo cultural

psychology finds such absoluteness intolerable and absurd.

But who are these Igbo? This question itself has confused anthropologists and scholars of the Igbo world, including some Igbo themselves, who have advanced various hypotheses of origin, from the out of Egypt hypothesis, to the Jewish hypothesis, to the hypothesis of autochthony contained in that declaration of that old man of Nguru Mbaise, to Elizabeth Isichei in 1972: "We did not come from anywhere and anyone who tells you we came from anywhere is a liar. Write it down" (Isichei, 1976, 3). Basically, *Igbo wu Nfunala*. That is, Igbo are autochthons of the earth where they currently dwell, according to the old man. What is not in doubt is the antiquity of the Igbo. But of all the hypotheses, the most confounding and bewildering is the theory of Igbo-Jewish origin. This story of the "Igbo Jews" is too far-fetched and absurd, but it reflects another dimension of this identity crisis that, since the end of the Nigerian civil war, drives the Igbo to look for a consoling myth of origin. A new mythology has thus arisen, this time around the connection between Eri, the mythical culture patriarch of the Nri and Gad, the grandson of Abraham. Eri, the promoters of this fiction say, is a descendant from Gad, one of the descendants of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. In this myth, Eri, Gad's son, comes to settle in the present location by some movement through the Ezu and Omambala rivers. Eri then settles in a place

called Aguleri today, where these new mythmakers now say he even left a stone with the inscription, "Obu-Gad," written presumably in Aramaic. Until much recently, the myth around Eri was that he descended from the sky and, with the help of an Awka Blacksmith, cleared the swamps at Agukwu, where he settles with his company. I will return to this version of the myth, but let us first understand how the transformations of the story of Eri have transitioned from its original, to its new version which seeks to connect the Igbo with the Jews.

I have read some of the worst of these in the writings of a young scholar, Francis Madukasi, who recently claimed, with fatal impunity that,

it is pertinent to mention here that *Obu-Gad* shrine is strategically and naturally located in the village square of the Enugu-Aguleri where the mystery and the trinity trees that co-joined together with one visible root for about 5000 years ago and still stand up (sic) till date representing the affinal relation of three brothers (Eri, Arodi and Areli) that showed cased (sic) the headship of the Igbo cultural headship as it regards the custom and tradition of the Igbo people in diaspora. In fact, in Igbo cosmology, this notion of Trinity about cojoined trees is a true representation and an equivalent of

the Christians (sic) concept of the Trinity of God (God the father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit). It is believed to represents(sic) also the three major languages spoken in Nigeria (438).

Madukasi's assertion is a mish-mash of inventive myth and new-fangled evangelical Christian revisionism with its strange stranglehold on contemporary Igbo imagination. The ecology of this work leaves so much to be desired, but the worst of it is that it does not even pretend to be speculative; it makes very simplistic and highly irrational and unfounded conclusions about Eri, the Nri, and Igbo civilization. But the move is to concretize dynastic fiction with religious and historical fiction. First, the dates do not match between Jewish migratory history and the account of Eri's arrival to Agukwu. Secondly, the words now said to have been etched in stone on which the patriarch Eri is said to have memorialized his ancestor, Gad, ought to have been written in Hieroglyphics, rather than Aramaic, given the history of the development of that language. (See for instance, Bryne's (2006) study of Aramaic, "Middle Aramaic Scripts" in the Encyclopedia of Languages and Linguistics. Besides, given also the presumed place of Eri in the Igbo cultural universe, the Aramaic script should have found its way into the Igbo *Nsibidi*. But we have none of that. All we have is the invention of a Jewish ancestor, who became the father of the Igbo

and of Igbo culture. The driver of this new mythology is ironically fundamentalist Christianity, particularly the rise of an indigenous esoteric and hybrid sect, which seems very determined to one, establish the Igbo as "the lost tribe of Israel," and two, invent Eze Nri as an ordained King, who descended from the Jewish patriarch to found the Igbo. Thus, the ancestral shrine, "Obu Uga" has become "Obu Gad." It is like renaming "Ovu Umuhu," the ancestral shrine and clubhouse in my village in Mbaise into, "Ovu-Moses." It is a great, fantastic leap. But it signals for us how far inventors of Igbo dynasties are prepared to go in order to re-invent themselves and the Igbo story, on which they build their dynastic ambitions and fantasies.

But let us return to that question: who are the Igbo? What we know is that the Igbo currently inhabit Southern Nigeria. In fact, the politics of cartography in Nigeria currently have them confined in just five states. The Igbo however are great wanderers. Their migratory pattern across the surface and crannies of the modern nation of Nigeria testifies to both an adventurous spirit and an innate impulsion to explore and settle new spaces. Increasing evidence may however suggest that the Igbo may have originally settled and dispersed in far more than their current location, including very large portions of the central Savannah plains of modern Northern Nigeria. Only recently, for instance, the Ooni at Ife confirmed that the original

inhabitants of Ife (which these early settlers called "Igbo-Omoku,") were the Igbo, further complicating a long, controversial claim first made by the Yoruba historian, Ade Obayemi<sup>1</sup>. If the continent, Africa, is shaped like a hambone, or a great question mark at the centre of the world, Nigeria is shaped like a great Vagina, between the Sahara desert, which forms what might seem like a sealed portal, through the crags of Air, into the new world of the North, and at the lands lying at edge of the great sea – the Atlantic. The two great rivers, sweeping from two directions meet at Lokoja to create its clitoral valley. From the Benue valley an original population of the Igbo swept up and down the banks of the great rivers, settling in population clusters that make the Igbo the backbone of both precolonial and modern Nigeria. For thousands of years, the Igbo settled and created an indigenous civilization, possibly older than, and possibly nearly contemporaneous with, developments in Egypt and Nubia, but whose material evidence now lies scattered in fragments beneath the great sands of the dessert and

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<sup>1</sup> See also the OOni of Ife, Enitan Ogunwusi's comment at the visit of an Igbo delegation to Ife: "We still have House of Igbo right in this palace till date. We call it Ile Igbo up till now. Our ancestors are buried and transfigured there. That is where kolanut was first discovered and nurtured" in *Premium Times* (Online), April 22, 2019.

the Savannah plains and the deep muds of the massive forest belt, a good part now lying beneath the floor of the great sea, the Atlantic, which surged inwards from the once great shining white plains which the Igbo called "Igwe Ocha." I contend that as archeologists do more systematic work in this vast theatre, it might be possible to recover the vast fragments, and create a more coherent picture of an organic and sustained cultural unity at the centre of which is a far more complex Igbo civilization and contact. After all, Thurstan Shaw who dug Igbo-Ukwu famously said that Igbo-Ukwu was just a tip of the iceberg to what lies beneath the Igbo soil. I believe that this culture area that I choose to call the "Atlantean matrix" holds the key to the disappeared civilization or culture which the ancient Egyptian priests described to Solon, the patriarch of Athens, nine thousand years after it is said to have destroyed itself. Catherine Acholonu<sup>2</sup> did magnificent, foundational work, with varying degrees of coherence of course, in trying to describe this disappeared civilization which also lingers like some ancient wraith in plain sight.

The point I would like to advance here is that Igbo culture – its restless, almost transgressive movements founded in its ancient code of the traveler – "Eje-Alo" – is

rooted in a repressed cultural memory of catastrophe and displacements marked by sequences of environmental collapse. Igbo republicanism and egalitarian culture is the product of a recoil from its own experience of tyranny in the past. To supplement this claim, I would rely on folklore, because oral narrative has a way of preserving truths using myths, aphorisms, proverbs, and even hyperbole, to heighten the effects of national memory where amnesia is likely to render it fraught. I will also have to later return to that recurrent question about Igbo identity – who the Igbo really are. The story the Igbo tell of themselves yields insight, even in the abstraction of folklore, to a value system, and a pattern of relationship with a complex world that has evolved from a theocracy, to an age of the monarchy, to the resistance against the first law of the monarchy that gave rise to Igbo egalitarian philosophy and republicanism. Azuonye (1987) amplifies the point I am attempting to make in asserting that in his reconstruction of the history of Igbo religious thought, "it is assumed that folktales, especially myths, are not only mirrors of reality but a dynamic instrument for social change. Thus ... we not only have a complex of motifs expressing and symbolizing certain deep-lying features of human and trans-human existence in Igbo cultural history but also a number of other components which seem to have been deliberately infused into traditional narrative patterns in the service of the religious and

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<sup>2</sup> See Catherine Acholonu's *They Lived Before Adam: Pre-Historic Origins of the Igbo*, CARC Publications, 2009

ideological positions of the dominant powers of various historical epochs" (44).

Thus, bearing in mind this *leitmotif* of the legitimacy of epochal transitions, Onwuejeogwu is right in asserting that the "evolutionary trend of Igbo political system, including the Ozo title system, is mirrored in Igbo patterns of population movement" (118). What I suggest here however is a pattern of political development different from Onwuejeogwu's description of an "Umunna" system as a mere prototype of early political development at the segmentary stage. It is a far more complex development. There are, it seems, five nations of the Igbo – with their various sub-nationalities – that make the confederacy called "Oha Ndi Igbo." The ancestors of the Igbo, and Afigbo (1981) did point this out, always told the story of an ancestral descent from the sky. About the Igbo, Afigbo notes, "[m]ost in fact claim that their ancestors either came out of the ground (*si n'ala pute*) or fell down from heaven" (7). In one version of this claim, this ancestral sky being known as Oha, descended from the sky at a place near the white plains of Igweocha, where he first met and fell in love with a woman, and they had five children – the children of Oha. They constitute the five Igbo nations: Agbaja, Isu, Oru, Idu and Nri. The foregoing suggests that Eri, the founding patriarch of the Nri, did not descend from Gad and, in spite of the contemporary claim, is not the founding patriarch of the entire Igbo. As I have noted

earlier, those who are making this contemporary claim are looking for a central dynastic narrative that mirrors some of the stories of Igbo neighbours. But the story of the Igbo is quite different. In fact, according to certain traditions of the lore in Awka, Eri is described as the last of the sons of Oha, and his movement with his lineage to the current location at Agukwu Nri was much later after the settlements of Owerre, Amaigbo, and the Ugwuele/Okigwe areas which constitute the heart of the Igbo, and the point of its various dispersals. Nri is a later settlement. The fact of Eri moving with his group from this first Igbo settlements, possibly from a location still called Nri-Ukwu in Uvuru Mbaise, by the banks of the Imo river, through the flood plains to the current location where the Ezu and the Omambala connects with the river network of the Igbo world seems more possible than the story of his sky descent, or travels through a river from Egypt or Syria or Yemen to the Anambra basin. There is suggestive evidence that Eri and his group fled their old location by Igweocha as a result of environmental catastrophe – the Atlantic floodings that resulted from Amadioha's experiments with "Ike" (fissile energy) and his costly war levies. Amadioha's wars disrupted the balance of the ancient world, and its ramifications continue to impact Igbo cultural psychology in significant ways to the present day.

I have sketched, albeit very briefly, even narrowly, the story of Igbo origins, from the



arrival of Oha – the Igbo patriarch who often is described as a “sky being” in the myths – by Igweocha. The five children of Oha constitute the founding nations of the Igbo confederacy around which its concentric kinship system, the Umunna system, was created. They are children of the same father, and to this day, when they gather and invoke ancestral unity through the offering of libation, they respond with “Ise!” or “Ihia!” in acknowledgment of the confederacy of the five. Oha – their father – is said to have introduced the worship of the Sun god – Anyanwu – and of the divine feminine – Ala – as well as the study of Astronomy, to which all the first born sons, inducted into the Anyanwu cult, were instructed. As a result, these first born sons – the “Di Opara/Okpala/Okpara” became the priests of the land and the guardians of the mysteries of the Sun worship. This was the foundation of the first theocratic society established by the Igbo. The five lineages of the Igbo were also subjected to specializations which accorded with the idea of a guardianship of the earth. The Agbaja were builders and farmers. They made great earth works and cultivated and nurtured the land. The Isu were metallurgists and engineers. They knew the secrets of the forges, of metallurgy, and of fissile energy. They could create and control fire. The Oru were marine ecologists, and guardians of the waterways from the great rivers down to the great sea. The Idu were warriors and military defenders of the land. And the Nri were healers and diviners.

They were given the charge of cleansing the land of any evil. They may be regarded as the Levitical nation of the Igbo. Eze Nri was therefore a high priest of a theocratic order rather than a monarch or a priest-king. The rite he goes through are the rites of “ordination,” rather than of “coronation.” Onwuejeogwu (1979) has described the process of selecting and installing a new Eze Nri as a “coronation,” in line with his monarchist inclinations. These terminological impurities which have gone to describe the ritual of installing Eze Nri makes Onwuejeogwu wrong about the place of the Nri High priesthood and its status as a monarchy. I will return to this point in due course. But suffice it to say here that the Nri, with its High Priest, were always the guardians of Igbo sacred order and its divinatory systems, preserved in the “Afa.” Each of the five nations of the Igbo had its specialization.

The balance of the classical Igbo world persisted in spite of stresses until the rise sometime in that antiquity of a most charismatic and ambitious man, Kamalu Ozuzu. According to Igbo mythology, Kamalu was from the Isu clan of the Igbo and understood metallurgy. He was a brilliant scientist and a military tactician who experimented with nature in his ambitions to conquer the world and establish a powerful imperium. Kamalu had organized a powerful military force, assumed full sovereign powers over his world, and assumed the title “Amadi-

Oha" to signal his complete control of the public will, as the king of all that he surveyed. He established the first monarchical system among the Igbo, and ruled with iron fist under the first law of kings. *Amadi-Oha* as the first tyrant the Igbo knew smashed every opposition with brutality. There was material prosperity and innovation under him, but the people lived in fear. To this day, the descendants of Oha – the Igbo – still live in utter fear of this powerful giant of a man who became a god among men. He transformed himself into a "living god" and decreed that he be worshipped. The first thing he did on seizing the will of the people was to proscribe the fundamental basis of their religious life. Under Kamalu's religious reform, he established the doctrine that the Sun god was an ineffable god, *Chi-Ukwu*, and therefore was uncontainable. Such a divinity required neither image nor shrine, because he was embodied in all nature and was thus unrepresentable. He decreed that no shrine or image should thenceforth be made and dedicated to the Sun god, but ordered that he, Kamalu, be worshipped and venerated in the temples or shrines already established to the Sun god, as a living, and visible embodiment of the gods. The great temples or shrines dedicated to the Sun god (*Anyanwu*) at Ozuzu by the great white plains where Oha, Kamalu's ancestor, was said to have first alighted from the skies, and the temple of the "Mother of the gods" – *Nneoha* – at Umunneoha was retrofitted to serve

thenceforth as the site for the worship of Amadioha. That was how the Shrine of Amadioha at Ozuzu and the Igwe-ka-Ala at Umunneoha came to be. Amadioha created a new military and priestly class, the "*Umuamadi*," and invested them with enormous powers of sanction and the authority to cleanse the land of any evil. This was especially an attack on the Igbo Levitical group, the *Umu Nri*, who were part of the growing network of opposition to Amadioha's overreach and greed for power. Under this condition of threat, probably, Eri was compelled to flee into exile with his party, traveling by water until he arrived at the swampy but virgin forest, now called Agukwu.

Under Amadioha's iron rule, there was prosperity and a great sense of public order. Amadioha initiated and codified the first set of the Igbo law systems: the "*Iwu-Ala*," "*Iwu-Oha*," "*Iwu-Amadi*," "*Iwu-Nze*," "*Iwu-Anyanwu*," "*Iwu-Chukwu*," "*Iwu-Dibia*," etc. Although these would be modified in the post-Amadioha era, they formed the foundations of Igbo cultural laws. Amadioha's theory of justice was merciless. He pronounced and asserted instant and willful justice. The old forms of collective, deliberate judicature as determined by the gods gave way under his rule. He established his court and his shrine in Ihi-okpu Ozuzu, thus appropriating what was once a public square. He imposed heavy taxes and ordered the seizure of the property of those who

would not pay up these high taxes or war levies. He ordered that those he judged guilty of crimes against the state be killed and left unburied as a testament both to his iron will, and as a lesson to those who might want to defy him or the state he embodied. Amadioha forbade sloth and laziness amongst the young – particularly young men who were regularly forcibly conscripted into his military force. In the march and training of these forcibly conscripted youth, those who showed fear or lack of vigour were taken behind and executed, their bodies left for the animals and to the elements. Amadioha's method and forms of regular conscription of young men to build his very massive army caused fear and anxieties for parents of young children who dreaded the approach of Amadioha's agents, who had the power to kidnap or execute anybody they wanted. To this day, Igbo still say, "Amadioha were kwa gi!" (May Amadioha take you!) It became a potent curse because those conscripted into Amadioha's service never returned to the land. They became "*Umumadi*" – literally, "Amadioha's children." Although they came under, and enjoyed the special protection of imperial law, they were distributed to Amadioha's many war camps in the known world, and they fought to the death. They often never returned to their parents, or their lands.

Amadioha is always described in the Igbo stories as a "red skinned man," and is patron divinity, and protector of Albinos. Amadioha

is said to have experimented with biological systems. According to the myths, Amadioha may have experimented with what we can deduce today with our contemporary knowledge of science as artificial human reproduction. In one such story, he sends a bolt of lightning which splits a silk tree to reveal a new man and woman. And it was said he arrived always with "a swarm of bees." Could this be an indication of an awareness of nanotechnology even in that period of human history? Could those "swarm of bees" be highly developed miniature drones? I speculate of course. But Amadioha's most tragic experiment was his attempts to control high energy – which the Igbo call "Ike" – and to perfect rocketry as a delivery system. This was part of his desire to create something of a silver-bullet for war. For though he faced opposition from the "Oha" confederacy, his mind was set to conquering the then known world. As part of his program he embarked on mining what was then a secret substance called "Orishakalam" – the ore of the gods – likely the Uranium deposits in the Ugwuele/Edda escarpments. In the process of manipulating fissile energy, Amadioha and his scientists lost control, and were blown upwards into invisible and ungatherable pieces. Such a fiery and dramatic end of a powerful and charismatic man created and sustained the myth of Amadioha in the Igbo cultural consciousness. He was instantly transformed into a tutelary god of war and of iron. He became immortal because it is still said in the Igbo world that

during a great and fiery thunderstorm, Amadioha who continues to roam angry and impatient in the eternal circuit, appears. Because he is unburied, he is trapped in the stratosphere between the heavens and the earth. He assumes the place of the cautionary and exemplar god, who embodies consequence and retribution. If anyone violates the sacred and holy sanctities of the earth goddess, Ala, or Nne Oha, they suffer the fate of Amadioha who continues to exert fiery justice. To this day, he is said to appear, accompanied by "Evuleocha Amadioha" – Amadioha's large white ram. This image of the white ram might just be a mythologizing of the massive white cloud, like the mushroom cloud of Hiroshima, which followed the fiery explosion, and the eerie darkness that covered the earth, and the thunderstorm that accompanied it, as observed by contemporary witnesses, but transformed by myth. Amadioha Ozuzu – also called Kamalu, or Kamanu, or as they know him in Ohafia, Kalu Akanu (Kalu, meaning someone who hears but refuses to heed/listen) was possibly the first and only king of the Igbo. The tragic and cautionary king satirically reproduced in the Igbo folktale as "*Eze Onyeagwanam*" which is told to every Igbo child is Amadioha, the tyrant king. He was a warrior-king, and he was also a brutal tyrant, who however brought far-reaching innovations in Igbo material and spiritual life.

That Amadioha is viewed even to date as a culture hero – as in fact one of the great divinities in the Igbo pantheon and spiritual system – reflects the complexity and reach of his impact in Igbo mythology. In parts of Igbo land, he is revered as the god of justice, of metallurgy and of war. Simon Ottenberg tracks him among the Edda who venerate him as a vegetation god, and the patron god of agriculture and prosperity. There are shrines to Amadioha, all over Igbo land, and adherents to his liturgy. There are certainly exceptions. For instance, among the Agbaja, in the Nsukka areas of Northern Igbo land, who retained the shrine, and worship of the Sun god, Anyanwu, there is no tradition of the veneration of Kamalu or Amadioha Ozuzu. This might suggest the historical importance of this part of the Igbo world in the ancient resistance to Amadioha's overreach and claim to both divinity and royalty. Yet the effect of Amadioha's "tragic dare," his attempt to master and deploy fissile energy and the catastrophic accident created Igbo paranoia against power and devolved Igbo philosophy into a centrist liberalism that disavowed absolutes. First, the tragic accident led to an environmental collapse of a scale that remains the touchstone of Igbo attitudes to the natural world. There is a constant in the Igbo folklore of the hundred year famine as a result of environmental cataclysm. The inability to produce food and survive drove Igbo dispersal. The Igbo survivors of this accident also recoiled from war and violence, and

established, as a central covenant with Chukwu, the practice of "Udo" – peace as the central principle in Igbo spiritual practice. This recoil from war also drove them into the great equatorial forests in search of a natural refuge, an enclosure, and protection from the external world of empire builders and the pursuit of great imperial dreams. This situation of isolation inside the great forest enclosures was an example of group expiation – a submission to a pietist relationship with the natural world. The Igbo rebuilt a civilization under the woods. They dismantled Amadioha's imperial dreams, sealed dangerous innovations, and further experiments with energy. To this day, we still hear the Igbo say, "*Anyi maara dowe ike.*" which means, "We know the secrets of energy, but we deliberately sealed it." Sometimes, one hears the caution: "*Onye emena ihe ike,*" which simply means, "Let no one trifle with energy." Sometimes its associative meaning is a caution against indifferent destruction of life. But the most important fallout, and one relevant to this discussion, according to the Igbo stories, is that the Igbo banished or abrogated the monarchy, by basically freeing it from exclusion. Every man has the right to take any title they desired. The Igbo however established a set of principles which made it literally impossible for any Igbo to attain the ritual status of King.

The foregoing retrieves from the depth of Igbo folkloric tradition the philosophical and

cautionary basis of the idea of "Igbo Enwegh Eze." The Igbo have no kings because the one single example of a universal monarchy among the Igbo in antiquity was tragic. That example, even if it is the one we know only in myth, provides a sense of the unease which the true Igbo feels about submitting himself/herself to the governing will of another. The idea of an individual imposing his will and assuming the collective sovereignty of the whole is anathema to the Igbo long used to his own freedom. Out of an abundance of caution, the Igbo conceived ideas fundamental to the preservation of individual freedom and sovereignty.

"*Onweghi onye wu Chi lbe ya*"... This radical proposition, which the Igbo hold to be very self-evident – the idea that there is no one who is master of the other – rests on that complex relationship between the individual and their "Chi." To the Igbo, to submit one's "Chi" to another is a kind of mastery that should never be tolerated or even contemplated. It is a form of erasure. The concept of the "Chi" is so central to the life force of Onye Igbo, so much so that to say, "*Chi wam,*" –assume my "*chi*" and govern me – is considered by the ancient Igbo as an act against the divine self. It is to kill and sacrifice the unique in-dwelling god that accompanies one at birth to life. It is to willingly submit to slavery and subjection.

An important fallout of the end of Amadioha's heresy was the dismantling of an imperial system. The Igbo recoiled from

imperial conquest, and organized, and evolved a most complex republican system based on small, containable *polis*. A federation of small town governments, none big enough to conquer the rest, and none so small as to be too vulnerable to the other. This system of small but dynamic federating units is far more complex than is immediately obvious: it is based on a fractal principle. Igbo society is ultimately a widening, concentric network of spirals, of interconnected towns linked by maternal or paternal affiliations, under the Umunna and Umunne system.

Out of these networks of towns was also the creation of a land tenure system that de-commodified land. Basically, the Igbo established a very sophisticated land trust system, in which land belonged to family holdings through the clan, and no one was so poor that they cannot have land. As a result of this land tenure system, the Igbo did not evolve a feudal caste of land owners, and there was no history of peasantry in Igbo culture, since all men born to the land were lords of the land – the *Ama Ala*. It is this land tenure system that deconstructs any notion about the monarchy among the Igbo. For who is the king, but he or she on whom all land is endowed. And it is this ownership of land by the monarch, whether it is the constitutional or the absolute variety, that differentiates a subject and a citizen. The clear historical fact is that no Igbo, not even

one under indenture, the "*Ohu*," is subject to any king.

Admittedly, the foregoing does beg the question, given the changes that have occurred in the political and cultural systems of the Igbo who now host over two thousand monarchs – the *Igwes* and *Ezes* who are now called the "Traditional Rulers" of the Igbo people. This phenomenon of the 20th century has roots in the Warrant Chiefs system. This system has been examined so thoroughly by Afigbo (1972), Ekechi (1989), Oriji (2007), and so many early Igbo historians that it will be unproductive to re-examine it here. It is enough just simply to say it was the failed British colonial attempt to create proconsuls. The statutory function of the colonial Warrant Chief was to be tax collector and to enforce English colonial laws and its new system of justice. The Warrant chief was an exact replica of the tyrant king Amadioha's agents, who went about collecting taxes, conscripting free labour, and imposing an external will on the "freedom-loving" Igbo. It was the same condition from which the Igbo recoiled in antiquity. That was why that system collapsed and was unsuccessful among the Igbo, who did not feel themselves subject to any external power and defied it. Eze Nri Obalike, for instance, aware that his sacred, priestly duties had no monarchical function, rejected his appointment by the British as a Warrant Chief. Obalike became the model on which the novelist Chinua Achebe crafted the character, Ezeulu, in his

*Arrow of God*, who rejects the monarchy in defence of his duties as High priest of Umuaro. Perhaps that was why resistance to colonial rule was fiercest among the Igbo.

By the end of the civil war in Nigeria, however, the problem of the governance and control of a modern multi-ethnic nation under military rule became imperative. It was even more urgent to contain the Igbo and establish some level of authority over Igbo society which had just emerged from rebellion against the Nigerian state. One critical way the Federal Military Government in Nigeria thought to do this was through a unified local reform. The Dasuki Panel Reports on the unification of the local government system in 1976 basically imposed the Northern Emirate Council model and the Native Authority system of the West, with its roots in colonial administration, on the East.

Official recognition of and political backing for chieftaincy institutions returned in the course of the Nigeria-wide local government reform of 1976 that created structures [that] still existing today. This reform wanted to 'bring government closer to the people', and to strengthen the role of the local level as a third tier of

government, besides the Federal and state levels. 'Traditional rulers' as the Udoji Public Service Review Commission had put it in 1974, were believed to be important, even 'in the context of a development-oriented society', to act as 'the impartial fathers of their communities and embodiments of local custom'" (Harneit-Siever 1998, 63).

It is, to put it simply, the return of the Warrant Chiefs system which had created pseudo-monarchies in the Igbo world, from 1891 to its rejection in 1929/30.

The 1976 local government reforms were the basis for the creation of the current "Autonomous Communities" system, each now bearing the appellation, "Ancient Kingdom," and many of these without any sense of irony. It is almost too comical to be real. It is also almost a perverse inversion of the trajectory of human social development since the Enlightenment. Everywhere else, in societies where monarchical systems have held sway, people have risen to dismantle it, and create more democratic spaces for public governance. In the case of the Igbo, in that perverse sense, it is like working back the hand of the clock. Therein lie both the irony and the contradiction.

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