

**THE DILUTION OF TRADITIONAL KINGSHIP AUTHORITY AND THE
PROLIFERATION OF AUTONOMOUS COMMUNITIES IN IGBOLAND**

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Abstract:

The debasement of kingship and the proliferation of autonomous communities in Igbo land have become significant socio-political issues in contemporary Southeastern Nigeria. Traditionally, Igbo society operated a republican system with decentralized authority, where consensus-based decision-making was paramount. However, colonial and post-colonial state interventions introduced the institution of kingship, creating warrant chiefs and later autonomous community structures that redefined leadership. This shift has often led to contestations, rivalries, and the commercialization of traditional stools, thereby undermining their legitimacy and cultural significance. The proliferation of autonomous communities, sometimes driven by political influence and economic incentives, has fragmented previously cohesive communities, intensifying disputes over land, succession, and identity. This paper critically examines the socio-cultural, political, and economic implications of this phenomenon, arguing that it threatens Igbo unity, distorts indigenous governance, and fuels intra-communal conflict. The study concludes that restoring the sanctity of traditional institutions through transparent selection processes and community-driven reforms is crucial for strengthening social cohesion and preserving Igbo cultural heritage. Thus, the paper strives to fill lacuna in existing literature which are silent on the area of the present research interest, and aims, above other thing to supply necessary resource materials for scholarly activities and policy formulation. It however as part of its significance and result orientation, aspires to serve as a contribution to the world of scholarship, as it also uncovers, as part of its findings, that the proliferation of kingship institutions without regards to trado-cultural statuesque, negates the very essence of cultural ordering in Igbo land, and consequently, triggers myriads of socio-cultural and politico-economic upheavals into which Igbo land is currently, but helplessly enmeshed. To achieve the object of the present study, historical research methodology is adopted, while favouring thematic approach anchored on the employment of primary and secondary materials and the use of oral sources where necessary.

Key Words: Kingship, Acephalous, Autonomous Communities, Indirect Rule, Government Policies

Introduction:

Traditionally, Igbo society was acephalous (non-centralized), meaning that it did not have a centralized kingship system like the Hausa-Fulani emirate or Yoruba monarchical systems. Governance was largely republican, with authority shared among councils of elders, age-grades, title holders, and village assemblies (*Ndi Ichie*).¹ However, the colonial administration's introduction of the warrant Chief System disrupted this order, creating a centralized kingship structure where it never originally existed.² This shift laid the groundwork for the modern-day bastardization of kingship in Igbo-land. Today, kingship titles such as *Eze*, *Igwe*, and *Obi* are often commoditized with some communities selling or politicizing these titles. The institution, which should be a unifying and cultural symbol, has in many cases been reduced to a tool for personal enrichment, political influence, and social status.

It is worthy of note that some Igbo communities, such as Onitsha, Oguta, and Nri, already had monarchical systems before colonial contact, though their kingship was often religious and ritualistic rather than political in nature; though a borrowing from the Benin and Igala culture zones due to long period of contacts.³ The British colonial administration, however, formalized and spread the institution of kingship by creating the office of "Warrant Chiefs" to serve as intermediaries between the colonial government and local communities wherein there was no existent centralized potentate ready and willing to do the colonial bidden.⁴ This rather alien scenario marked an unfortunate, but pitiable significant transformation in Igbo political organization, introducing centralized authority in a society that was traditionally acephalous- non centralized political order.

Similarly, the proliferation of autonomous communities is another consequence of this phenomenon. Many villages and kindred now seek autonomy from their parent communities, often for political relevance, access to government recognition, and direct allocation of state resources. This has led to the fragmentation of Igbo society, weakening communal bonds, escalating land disputes, and fostering unhealthy rivalries.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the Segmentary Lineage and Acephalous Society Theory. This is aimed at using the classic anthropological ideas about segmentary lineage systems and acephalous societies to explain why many Igbo communities favored dispersed authority (age-grades, councils of elders, titled men) and resisted centralized kingship. This explains baseline political organization and the social mechanisms that constrained single-person rule.

The Segmentary Lineage Theory was developed by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, an anthropologist in the 1930s. The development of the theory came as a result of his experience in Nuer in Sudan. His theory stated that the society is organized around lineages (extended families linked by ancestry). And that these lineages are segmentary, meaning they are nested levels of kinship (e.g., household → lineage → clan → tribe). His theory also believes that authority and political organization come from kinship ties, not centralized rulers. The theory also posits that conflict and cooperation shift depending on the situation. For example: In small disputes, close kin unite against outsiders. Also, in larger conflicts, more distant kin come together against external enemies.

Acephalous Society Theory: Etymologically, the word “Acephalous” was derived Greek

Meaning: *a-* (without) and *kephale* (head) → literally “without a head”. The core idea behind this theory is that in a society without a central authority or king, instead of a monarch, power is decentralized and distributed across kin groups, elders, age grades, or councils. The theory also posits that governance relies on consensus, negotiation, and collective decision-making.

Examples include: The Igbo of Nigeria as classic example—no kingship system traditionally, but governance through village assemblies, councils of elders, age grades, and title societies.

Other examples includes ; the Tallensi (Ghana), Tiv (Nigeria), Nuer (Sudan).

Link between both Theories: The Segmentary-lineage Theory explains how kinship structures create political order in stateless societies, while the Acephalous-society Theory describes the absence of centralized kingship, where such segmentary structures and councils maintain governance. In summary: Segmentary Lineage Theory supports politics based on kinship segments, shifting alliances, while the Acephalous Society Theory supports no central ruler; governance is collective and decentralized.

The Debasement of Kinship in Igbo Traditional Society: Kingship refers to the institution, system, or practice of traditional ruler-ship where authority is vested in a monarch such as a king, chief, or traditional ruler. In the African context, including Igbo land, kingship is more than political leadership; it embodies spiritual, cultural, and symbolic authority. A king (often called *Eze*, *Igwe*, or *Obi* in Igbo society) is traditionally regarded as the custodian of customs, traditions, and ancestral heritage. He serves as a mediator between the people and the spiritual world, while also ensuring peace, order, and justice within the community.

In modern Nigeria, kingship has been redefined through state recognition, where traditional rulers are given constitutional roles as custodians of culture but without direct political authority. This has, however, led to tensions, as the authentic traditional roles of kingship sometimes clash with political interference, commercialization, and internal rivalries. Kingship in Igbo-land has historically been a complex institution shaped by culture, tradition, and colonial interventions. The Igbo people, largely described as acephalous or egalitarian prior to colonialism, did not originally operate centralized monarchies in the same way as other Nigerian ethnic groups such as the Yoruba or Hausa-Fulani.⁵ Rather, leadership was shared among councils of elders, age grades, and titled men. However, with the advent of colonialism, the British introduced the *Warrant Chief* System, which imposed new forms of kingship that were alien to the egalitarian Igbo socio-political system.⁶

The imposition of the Warrant Chief System marked the beginning of what scholars describe as the bastardization of kingship in Igbo-land. By creating artificial rulers accountable to colonial authorities rather than their communities, the colonial state distorted indigenous governance and planted seeds of political fragmentation.⁷ These warrant chiefs, lacking legitimacy, often ruled with high-handedness and corruption, which fueled the Aba Women's Riot of 1929.⁸

In the post-colonial era, kingship in Igbo-land continued to undergo transformations. The proliferation of *Eze* titles and the recognition of multiple autonomous communities by state governments created further distortions.⁹ Uchendu argues that this phenomenon has diluted the authority of traditional rulers, as the once revered *Eze* institution became accessible to wealthy individuals who could "purchase" legitimacy rather than earn it through communal service or

lineage. The commercialization of titles, coupled with political interference, has led to what scholars describe as the bastardization of kingship.¹⁰

Further, the recognition of numerous autonomous communities has intensified intra-community conflicts, succession disputes, and a loss of cultural coherence.¹¹ State governments, for political expediency; often fragment large communities into smaller autonomous units, each with its own traditional ruler. This practice, according to Ikeanyibe,¹² not only weakens communal solidarity but also undermines the cultural integrity of kingship by making it a tool of political patronage.

The bastardization of kingship also has implications for Igbo identity. As Nwosu¹³ observes, kingship in its traditional sense was a unifying cultural institution, but its politicization has eroded its moral authority. Instead of embodying custodianship of culture and tradition, some contemporary traditional rulers act as political brokers, further alienating them from their communities.

Scholars emphasize that the political geography of Igbo-land has long been shaped by decentralized, village-based governance rather than large centralized kingdoms. Pre-colonial Igbo political organization consisted of autonomous villages and village groups governed through councils of elders, age grades, and other local institutions; this decentralization is often described as “acephalous” or “stateless.” Colonial rule, indirect administration, and later postcolonial state reforms reconfigured those local institutions by introducing formal recognition of chiefs and by giving legal status to territorial units called “autonomous communities.” Authors who trace this evolution argue that autonomous communities are rooted in pre-colonial patterns but have been transformed by modern legal and political processes.¹⁴

State laws in the Southeast (for example Imo State’s Traditional Rulers and Autonomous Communities Law No. 3 of 1999) set out procedures for recognizing autonomous communities and their traditional rulers (Eze/Igwe/Eze-ship). These laws typically require communities to document customary selection procedures, present a candidate to the local government, and secure state recognition. The legal framework therefore creates an institutional route to official “autonomy” and formal chieftaincy recognition — a route that did not exist (in the same formalized way) in pre-colonial times. While the laws aim to regularize recognition and protect

customary processes, implementation gaps and political interference have been widely documented, such as could be found in the Imo State Traditional Rulers and Autonomous Communities Law No. 3, 1999.¹⁵

Multiple empirical studies such as government gazettes document a sharp rise in the number of autonomous communities across parts of Igbo-land, especially in Imo State and neighbouring states, from the 1980s onward and accelerated in the 2000s–2010s. Researchers identify several interacting drivers: (a) political incentives and patronage — politicians and state assemblies have power to create/approve communities and may do so for patronage or pecuniary gain; (b) competition for symbolic authority and resources — owning an Eze stool confers social status and access to local rents; (c) local aspirations for development and representation — groups sometimes pursue autonomy to bring government attention (schools, roads, projects) closer to them; and (d) demographic/land pressures and internal factionalism that encourage splits along kindred or village lines. Quantitative counts in some states show hundreds of new autonomous communities created within short time spans, producing a dense patchwork of newly recognized traditional stools.

In summary, the bastardization of kingship in Igbo-land can be traced to colonial distortions through the warrant chief system, perpetuated by post-colonial political manipulations, commercialization of titles, infiltration of money bags, hijacking of power by political jackals, and the proliferation of autonomous communities. This transformation has weakened the cultural integrity of the institution and created governance challenges within Igbo society, it has also led to the rapid proliferation of autonomous communities without territorial expansion in Igbo land.

Proliferation of Autonomous Communities in Igbo Land: An autonomous community is a self-governing socio-political unit within a larger ethnic or state system that has been granted formal recognition by the government. In Igbo land, the term “autonomous community” became prominent during the late 20th Century, especially with policies that allowed villages, clans, or groups within larger towns to seek official autonomy from their parent communities.

Specifically, an autonomous community is characterized by:

- A recognized traditional ruler (often given a certificate of recognition by the state).

- Its own community institutions, including town unions and councils of elders.
- Defined territorial boundaries and identity, distinct from other communities.

The proliferation of autonomous communities in Igbo land has been both empowering and controversial. While it allows smaller groups to preserve their identity and have direct access to government resources, it has also led to fragmentation, rivalries, and the weakening of traditional unity.

Socio-Political Forces behind the Establishment of Autonomous Communities in Igbo Land; Colonial Legacy of Indirect Rule: The British colonial policy disrupted traditional Igbo governance, which was largely republican and consensus-based. By imposing warrant chiefs and later centralizing authority in recognized leaders, the foundation for modern “autonomous communities” which was completely alien to the Igbo political structure was laid. The quest to assert control over Igbo people by the British led to the creation of autonomous communities and the subsequent balkanizations that we are witnessing today. In most parts, the would be warrant chief appointees were social deviants, criminals, but bold and daring individuals who were socially, culturally and traditionally unwanted elements who were ready to do the bidden of the Colonialists as a vantage position to revenge years of socio-cultural rejection. This, to a large extent, accounted for the dubious mannerism and high handedness with which some of the warrant chiefs discharged their duties within their geopolitical sphere of influence.

Quest for Political Recognition and Power: Individuals or groups often push for the creation of new autonomous communities to secure traditional ruler-ship titles (Eze/Igwe) and gain political influence within local government structures. Majority of those who push for this were hitherto bandits and fraudsters who today feel that the only means they can get recognition from the society is by becoming *Ezes* in their various communities. It is important to note that some prominent Igbo individuals who amassed wealth through fraudulent activities—commonly referred to as *Obtaining by Tricks* (419)—sought legitimacy and social recognition by returning to their communities to assume the title of **Eze** (traditional ruler). In order to facilitate this ambition, several established towns were fragmented into smaller autonomous communities, thereby creating additional traditional stools to accommodate these aspirants.

Another contributing factor has been the tendency of politicians—some of whom were previously associated with fraudulent activities—to use the creation of autonomous communities and traditional ruler-ship positions as a means of rewarding allies, friends, and former associates.

Access to Resources and Government Benefits: Communities seek autonomy to attract direct government attention, developmental projects, and recognition in state allocations. Smaller units believe autonomy will give them a stronger voice in lobbying for roads, schools, or health facilities. These claims have turned out to be false. State governments in Igbo land prefer using political wards in the distribution of social amenities whenever they decide to do so. Communities endowed with natural resources such as oil and gas often pursue autonomy from their parent towns in order to gain direct access to, and greater control over, these resources. This strategy, unlike non-oil producing communities has worked effectively as could be noted in areas like Ohaji, Egbema, Owaza in Abia where youths and leaders of communities wage wars of resource allocation against oil companies,

Social and Cultural Identity: Many clans, villages, or kindreds often seek to assert their unique identity, cultural heritage, and historical significance, particularly when they feel overshadowed or marginalized within larger parent communities. This desire for self-determination is frequently driven by a combination of social, economic, and political motivations. Smaller units may perceive that their voices, traditions, and contributions are underrepresented or undervalued in the decision-making processes of the broader community, leading to a sense of exclusion.

By pursuing independence, these sub-groups aim to preserve and promote their distinct customs, rituals, and leadership structures, ensuring that their heritage is recognized and respected. They may also seek control over local resources, land, and development initiatives, believing that autonomy will allow them to better manage and benefit from these assets. Additionally, the pursuit of independence can be fueled by competition for prestige and social recognition, as communities often equate political or traditional autonomy with status, influence, and legitimacy.

However, while this drive for self-assertion reflects a legitimate desire to protect cultural identity, it can also lead to fragmentation and rivalry. The creation of autonomous units within a previously unified community often results in disputes over boundaries, resource allocation, and

recognition of traditional authority. Such divisions can challenge communal solidarity and sometimes generate conflicts that undermine collective development efforts. Nevertheless, the underlying impulse remains rooted in the aspiration of smaller communities to claim their place, preserve their cultural distinctiveness, and ensure that their heritage is not subsumed or forgotten within the larger social landscape.

Conflict and Rivalry within Larger Communities: Disputes over leadership, land ownership, or the allocation of resources are among the most significant factors that drive sections of communities to seek autonomy. When certain groups within a larger community feel marginalized, underrepresented, or unfairly treated, they may perceive that their interests, traditions, and economic opportunities are being dominated or suppressed by rival factions. Leadership disputes—whether over the legitimacy of traditional rulers or the distribution of political power—often create a sense of exclusion for those who feel their voices are not heard or respected within the decision-making processes of the larger community.

Similarly, conflicts over land ownership or the use of communal resources, such as farmland, forests, or mineral deposits, can heighten tensions and fuel grievances. Sections of a community may feel that they are being denied equitable access to valuable resources or that rival groups are appropriating land and benefits that rightfully belong to them. These frustrations often accumulate over time, fostering resentment and a desire to establish independent structures where decision-making and control over resources are localized and more directly aligned with the interests of the aggrieved group.

Resource distribution conflicts also play a crucial role. In many cases, government or traditional allocations—such as development projects, public infrastructure, or financial grants—may be perceived as favoring one faction over another. This perception of inequality further incentivizes groups to seek autonomy as a means of ensuring fair treatment, self-determination, and protection from perceived exploitation or domination.

Ultimately, the agitation for autonomy under such circumstances is often framed as a struggle for justice, recognition, and empowerment. Communities pursuing independence hope that by creating separate administrative or cultural units, they can safeguard their identity, assert control

over leadership and resources, and reduce dependence on larger groups that they view as oppressive or unresponsive to their needs. However, while autonomy may address some grievances, it can also generate new tensions and competition, especially where boundaries, legitimacy, and resource entitlements remain contested.

State Government Policies: Successive state administrations, particularly in the South-east, have frequently encouraged or readily accepted petitions for the creation of new autonomous communities. While such recognition is often presented as a means of promoting grassroots governance and local development, it has, in practice, become a tool for political maneuvering. Governments have used the establishment of autonomous communities as a way to reward political loyalty, granting official recognition to groups or individuals who have demonstrated support for ruling parties or influential politicians. By legitimizing these new communities and their leadership structures, administrations are able to strengthen their political foothold, secure votes, and consolidate influence in areas that might otherwise be politically unpredictable.

Additionally, the creation of autonomous communities has been employed as a strategy for pacifying aggrieved or marginalized groups. Sections of towns or villages that feel neglected, underrepresented, or unfairly treated by the parent community often petition for autonomy as a means of gaining recognition, control over resources, and a stronger voice in governance. State authorities, by acceding to these petitions, can defuse tensions, prevent potential unrest, and project themselves as responsive to local grievances.

However, this approach carries significant consequences. While politically expedient, it often undermines traditional norms of communal cohesion, disrupts established leadership hierarchies, and encourages further fragmentation. Communities may become embroiled in disputes over boundaries, leadership legitimacy, and resource entitlements, as rival groups seek similar recognition. Over time, the repeated use of autonomous community creation as a political instrument can weaken cultural institutions, dilute the authority of traditional rulers, and shift the focus of governance from collective development to political patronage and factionalism. This pattern has contributed to a cycle in which the proliferation of autonomous communities becomes both a reward for loyalty and a source of long-term social and administrative challenges.

Demographic Growth and Settlement Expansion: Population growth and the physical expansion of villages often create significant pressures for self-governance, prompting sub-groups within these communities to seek recognition as independent autonomous entities. As the population of a town or village increases, the existing administrative and traditional structures can become overstretched, making it difficult to manage resources, resolve disputes, and coordinate development effectively. Larger populations may lead to the emergence of new neighborhoods, quarters, or kindreds that develop their own distinct social, economic, and cultural identities over time.

These sub-groups may feel that their needs, interests, and contributions are underrepresented or overlooked within the broader parent community. The physical expansion of settlements—through the establishment of new hamlets or outlying areas—can exacerbate this sense of marginalization, as distance from the central authority limits participation in decision-making, access to communal resources, and inclusion in leadership structures. In response, these sub-groups often petition for formal recognition as autonomous communities, seeking control over local governance, resource management, and developmental planning.

The push for self-rule is also driven by the desire to preserve and promote cultural identity, leadership traditions, and heritage that may be distinct from the dominant groups within the parent community. By gaining autonomy, these sub-groups hope to secure greater political representation, manage resources more efficiently, and assert their identity without interference from rival factions. While such recognition can foster localized governance and development, it can also lead to disputes over territorial boundaries, leadership legitimacy, and resource allocation, sometimes intensifying competition and undermining broader communal cohesion. Ultimately, population increase and spatial expansion not only create practical pressures for decentralized governance but also reshape social dynamics, triggering a complex interplay between autonomy, identity, and community solidarity.

Erosion of Traditional Igbo Consensus System: The introduction of kingship, or **Ezeship**, into a society that was traditionally acephalous—meaning it functioned without centralized leadership—has transformed the social and political landscape, making leadership positions highly coveted and a source of personal prestige. In the past, authority within such societies were

distributed among councils of elders, age grades, titleholders, and community assemblies, ensuring that decision-making was collective and leadership was based on merit, wisdom, and communal consensus. However, the advent of Ezeship has introduced a concentrated form of power, where an individual occupying the throne wields significant influence over cultural, social, and sometimes economic affairs within the community.

This concentration of authority has created strong incentives for individuals to aspire to kingship, as it is now associated not only with prestige and respect but also with control over resources, access to governmental recognition, and the ability to shape communal policies and development initiatives. Consequently, the allure of the throne has fueled agitations for the creation of new autonomous communities. Sections of a community that previously had little chance of producing a king within the parent town now petition for independence, hoping to establish their own traditional authority structures.

The drive for these new communities is often motivated by ambition, as well as by social and political calculations. By creating additional autonomous units, more opportunities for kingship positions arise, allowing ambitious individuals to ascend the throne without contesting established leadership hierarchies in the larger community. Over time, this trend has led to a proliferation of autonomous communities, as aspirants, political actors, and even external authorities collaborate to restructure traditional governance to accommodate multiple claimants. While this expansion may bring localized governance and recognition, it also undermines the unity of the original community, increases competition for resources, and introduces new dynamics of rivalry and factionalism within the broader cultural and social landscape.

Socio-Political Effects of the Transformation of Kingship and the Proliferation of Autonomous Communities in Igbo Land:

Erosion of Traditional Authority: The dilution of kingship authority significantly weakens the traditional role of the **Eze** as a central symbol of unity, cultural continuity, and moral authority within the community. Traditionally, the Eze was regarded as a custodian of customs, a mediator in disputes, and a rallying point for communal solidarity. The institution carried immense respect because it represented not merely political leadership but also spiritual and cultural stewardship.

However, the proliferation of autonomous communities and the multiplication of traditional stools within the same cultural or geographical space have gradually undermined this revered status.

When several individuals lay claim to the same throne or when multiple kings emerge within what was once a single traditional polity, the authority of the institution becomes fragmented. Rival claimants often mobilize supporters, create parallel structures of authority, and challenge one another's legitimacy in courts, government offices, and within the community itself. This situation generates confusion among community members about who the legitimate traditional ruler truly is.

As these conflicts persist, the Eze's ability to function as a unifying figure becomes severely compromised. Instead of serving as a neutral arbiter and a respected symbol of communal harmony, the throne may become entangled in factional politics and personal rivalries. Consequently, the legitimacy of traditional rulers may be questioned, and the respect that once surrounded the institution begins to erode. In the long run, this fragmentation weakens the capacity of traditional leadership to maintain social cohesion, uphold customary laws, and effectively represent the interests of the community.

Increased Communal Conflicts: Rival claims to kingship frequently generate deep-seated disputes within communities, as different individuals or factions assert their entitlement to the same traditional stool. These conflicts often arise from disagreements over lineage, customary succession rules, or the legitimacy of the processes through which a candidate emerges as a traditional ruler. As each claimant seeks recognition from government authorities and support from community members, the disputes commonly escalate into prolonged litigations in courts of law. Such legal battles can persist for years, draining financial resources and intensifying divisions among families, villages, and interest groups within the community.

In some instances, these rivalries go beyond legal and administrative contestations and erupt into violent confrontations between supporters of competing claimants. Youth groups and community factions may mobilize in defense of their preferred candidate, leading to clashes that can result in injuries, loss of lives, and destruction of property. These conflicts not only disrupt peace and

social harmony but also undermine the authority and dignity traditionally associated with the kingship institution.

Similarly, the proliferation of autonomous communities has contributed to the emergence of boundary disputes and struggles over identity. As new communities seek formal recognition and territorial autonomy, disagreements often arise regarding the demarcation of land boundaries, ownership of communal resources, and historical claims to particular territories. Neighboring communities may contest these claims, arguing that such areas historically belonged to them or were shared spaces within the larger parent community.

These disputes frequently lead to tensions between neighboring groups, as questions of identity, heritage, and territorial rights become intertwined with political and economic interests. Over time, such conflicts can deepen mistrust among communities that once coexisted peacefully, thereby weakening the broader cultural and social bonds that previously held them together.

Politicization of Traditional Institutions: Kingship in many communities has increasingly become politicized, as government involvement in the recognition and validation of traditional rulers often prioritizes political loyalty and influence over cultural legitimacy and customary norms. Historically, the selection of an Eze or other traditional ruler was guided by lineage, community consensus, and established customary practices, ensuring that only individuals with recognized moral authority, leadership qualities, and a deep understanding of local traditions assumed these positions. However, modern political dynamics have frequently overridden these cultural criteria, with governments and political actors using the recognition of kingship as a means to reward allies, consolidate support, or assert influence over local communities.

This politicization has created opportunities for politicians to exploit the system. One common strategy has been the balkanization of existing towns and villages into numerous autonomous communities, each eligible to have its own recognized traditional ruler. By supporting the creation of these new communities and the elevation of friendly candidates to kingship, politicians can extend patronage networks, reward loyalists, and cultivate local political bases. In

many cases, these newly created communities exist less as functional administrative or cultural units and more as mechanisms for distributing favors and consolidating influence.

The consequences of this trend are profound. Kingship loses much of its traditional moral and cultural authority, as the title is increasingly associated with political expediency rather than communal service or ancestral legitimacy. Communities may become fragmented, as rival claimants backed by different political factions compete for recognition, creating tensions and disputes that undermine social cohesion. Moreover, the focus on political patronage diverts attention from genuine development needs, as resources intended for community growth may be allocated based on allegiance rather than equitable or strategic planning. Over time, this politicized approach erodes the integrity of traditional institutions, diminishes public respect for cultural leadership, and weakens the capacity of kingship to serve as a unifying and stabilizing force within society.

Cultural Fragmentation: The Igbo traditional system has historically thrived on principles of communal unity, collective decision-making, and shared responsibility. Decisions affecting the community were typically made through deliberations involving elders, titleholders, age grades, and other recognized stakeholders, ensuring that the interests of all members were considered and that social cohesion was maintained. The Eze or traditional ruler served as a unifying figure, guiding consensus-building processes and fostering harmony within the community. This system emphasized collaboration, mutual respect, and the prioritization of communal welfare over individual ambition, allowing the society to function cohesively despite internal differences.

However, achieving such cohesion has become increasingly difficult in recent times, primarily due to the fragmentation of towns and villages into multiple autonomous communities. While the creation of new communities may have been intended to promote localized governance and address developmental aspirations, it has inadvertently weakened the traditional structures that once ensured unity. Multiple autonomous communities within what was historically a single town or clan often operate with competing leaderships, divergent priorities, and overlapping claims to land, resources, and recognition.

This proliferation of autonomous units has led to disputes over kingship, boundaries, and access to communal resources, eroding the sense of shared identity and mutual obligation that once characterized Igbo society. The fragmentation undermines peaceful co-existence, as rival factions frequently contest authority, engage in litigation, or resort to communal clashes to assert dominance. Cultural disunity emerges as the younger generation witnesses these divisions, perceiving traditional institutions as compromised or irrelevant. Over time, the erosion of collective decision-making and communal solidarity threatens not only social harmony but also the preservation of cultural norms, shared heritage, and the moral authority of traditional leadership within Igbo society.

Loss of Cultural Heritage: When kingship becomes commoditized—that is, when traditional leadership positions are treated as items to be bought, sold, or politically manipulated—the reverence and respect historically accorded to sacred traditions, rituals, and cultural taboos begin to erode. In a system where the throne is no longer earned through adherence to ancestral norms, lineage, and communal consensus, the moral and spiritual authority of the king is significantly weakened. The Eze, once seen as the custodian of customs and protector of societal values, risks being reduced to a figurehead whose position is maintained through wealth, political patronage, or personal ambition rather than genuine legitimacy.

This decline in the sanctity of kingship has profound social and cultural consequences. Communities may begin to disregard age-old taboos, ethical injunctions, and customary practices, seeing them as irrelevant or unenforced under rulers who themselves lack authentic authority. Rituals that once carried deep symbolic meaning may be performed perfunctorily, or their significance may be entirely diminished, eroding the spiritual cohesion of the society.

Moreover, the commodification of kingship can create an environment in which immoral or harmful practices proliferate. Without a respected traditional authority to enforce norms, mediate conflicts, and uphold justice, unethical behaviors such as corruption, exploitation, and social injustice may escalate unchecked. Traditional ceremonies—whether rites of passage, festivals, or communal adjudications—lose their authenticity when presided over by rulers whose claims to the throne are contested or perceived as illegitimate. The community may no longer experience

these ceremonies as genuine expressions of cultural identity and spiritual continuity, but rather as hollow performances that fail to inspire respect or obedience. Over time, the erosion of cultural authority and sacred traditions can lead to a broader moral decline within the community. As the link between leadership, tradition, and ethical conduct weakens, social order and cultural continuity are jeopardized, leaving communities more vulnerable to internal divisions, exploitation, and the erosion of their collective identity.

Economic Implications: The proliferation of autonomous communities often creates an increased demand for government recognition, administrative institutions, and access to development projects. Each newly recognized community typically seeks its own set of administrative structures, including community leadership bodies, traditional councils, and local development committees. In addition, these communities often expect separate government attention in the form of infrastructure projects, social amenities, and representation in political and administrative processes. While such recognition may be intended to promote grassroots participation and local development, the multiplication of communities can also lead to duplication of administrative structures and unnecessary competition for limited public resources.

As a result, government agencies may be compelled to allocate resources to multiple smaller units within the same geographical area, even when such units previously functioned effectively under a single administrative framework. This situation can lead to inefficiencies, fragmentation of development planning, and the wastage of scarce financial and administrative resources. Instead of coordinating development efforts on a broader and more strategic scale, resources may become scattered across several competing communities, often resulting in poorly executed or incomplete projects.

Furthermore, the conflicts arising from the creation and recognition of autonomous communities frequently disrupt local economic activities and communal development initiatives. Disputes over leadership, territorial boundaries, and access to government benefits can cause divisions that hinder cooperation among community members. Markets, agricultural activities, and other forms of local enterprise may suffer when communities become polarized by rivalries and prolonged disagreements. Similarly, communal projects such as road construction, school development, and community health initiatives may stall due to mistrust and lack of coordination among competing

factions. In the long run, these unwarranted conflicts not only undermine social harmony but also slow down economic progress and sustainable community development.

Generational Distrust: The youth, witnessing corruption, intense rivalry, and persistent contestations surrounding traditional leadership, may gradually lose confidence in the credibility and moral authority of cultural institutions. When traditional titles and leadership positions appear to be influenced by wealth, political patronage, or personal ambition rather than by established customs and communal consensus, young people may begin to question the relevance and integrity of these institutions. Over time, such perceptions can weaken their sense of attachment to indigenous systems of governance and cultural values.

This situation often fosters a sense of alienation from ancestral heritage, as the younger generation may come to view traditional authority as compromised or disconnected from the original ideals of communal service and moral leadership. Consequently, many youths may increasingly gravitate toward Western models of governance and modern political structures, which they perceive as more transparent, structured, or merit-based. The gradual erosion of trust in traditional institutions therefore poses a significant challenge to the continuity of cultural identity, communal cohesion, and the preservation of indigenous governance systems.

Docket Congestion: The frequent disputes surrounding the recognition of autonomous communities and the legitimacy of kingship titles often lead to prolonged litigation in the courts. Rival claimants and factions within the same community frequently challenge government recognition, traditional authority, or the processes through which such titles are conferred. As these disagreements intensify, they not only consume considerable time and resources in legal battles but also deepen divisions among community members. In several instances, the conflicts have escalated beyond the courtroom, resulting in violent confrontations and communal clashes. Such disputes have, at times, degenerated into full-scale communal wars, causing loss of lives, destruction of property, and long-term instability within affected communities.

Diminished or Total Lack of Respect for the Institution: When a town or clan begins to produce numerous kings within the same geographical or cultural space, the prestige and

sacredness traditionally attached to the institution of kingship gradually become diluted. In many African societies, the kingship institution was historically regarded as a highly revered and exclusive position, reserved for individuals who embodied wisdom, integrity, and deep commitment to the welfare of the community. However, when the proliferation of autonomous communities leads to the emergence of multiple kings within what was once a single traditional unit, the uniqueness and dignity of the title can be undermined.

As the number of kings increase, the symbolic authority associated with the throne may begin to diminish in the eyes of both community members and outsiders. The title may no longer command the same level of respect and reverence that it once did, particularly if the processes through which these kings emerge are perceived to be influenced by wealth, political patronage, or personal ambition. In such circumstances, kingship may gradually lose its moral and cultural weight and instead be viewed as something that can be acquired through financial influence or political connections.

Consequently, rather than being regarded as a sacred cultural institution that upholds tradition and communal unity, the kingship title may become the subject of ridicule or skepticism. People may begin to mock the institution, describing it as a purchased honour or a political reward rather than a legitimate symbol of traditional authority. This perception not only erodes the dignity of the throne but also weakens the cultural institutions that historically played a vital role in maintaining social order, communal identity, and respect for tradition.

Impediment to Development: Rival kings and competing autonomous communities often struggle for legitimacy and official recognition, a situation that can significantly complicate efforts to achieve unity within a town or clan. When multiple traditional rulers claim authority over closely related communities, disagreements frequently arise regarding jurisdiction, precedence, and entitlement to governmental recognition and benefits. These rivalries may manifest in persistent disputes, petitions to government authorities, and legal battles, all of which consume time and resources that could otherwise be directed toward community development. Such divisions make it difficult for stakeholders to reach consensus on important developmental initiatives. Projects such as the construction of roads, schools, healthcare facilities, and other

social infrastructure often require cooperation among community leaders, youth groups, and development associations. However, when rival kings and factions within the community pursue competing interests or seek to outdo one another for political or economic advantage, collective decision-making becomes increasingly difficult.

As a result, rather than mobilizing resources and efforts toward shared progress, communities may remain trapped in cycles of rivalry and mistrust. Developmental projects may be delayed, abandoned, or poorly coordinated, while external investors or government agencies may hesitate to engage with communities perceived as divided. In the long run, the lack of unity and cooperation fosters stagnation, preventing communities from harnessing their collective potential for sustainable growth and social advancement.

In summary, the debasement of kingship and unchecked creation of autonomous communities has led to cultural erosion, political manipulation, social conflicts, and weakened communal unity in Igbo land.

Conclusion and Suggestion:

Policy and Legal Reforms: Review of Government Recognition Process: The state governments should re-evaluate how autonomous community status and traditional rulership certificates are granted. Recognition should be based on cultural legitimacy and historical continuity, not political patronage. Also, standardization of Selection Procedures, and clear laws should be established to guide the selection, installation, and recognition of traditional rulers to prevent arbitrary creation of kingships.

Enhancement of Cultural Reforms: Reaffirmation of Customary Norms: Communities should return to indigenous methods of selecting leaders through elders, kingmakers, and family lineages, rather than purely political appointments. Town Unions and cultural groups like *Ohaneze Ndigbo* should mediate disputes and ensure that kingship practices reflect Igbo values and traditions.

Conflict Resolution Mechanisms: Communities should constitute Dialogue Platforms where community reconciliation forums where disputes over kingship and autonomy can be settled through dialogue, mediation, and arbitration rather than litigation or violence. Also, Dispute

traditional councils and state ministries of chieftaincy affairs should encourage ADR rather than excessive court cases that deepen divisions.

Public Enlightenment: Citizens should be sensitized on the dangers of kingship bastardization and unchecked creation of autonomous communities, highlighting its impact on unity, development, and cultural heritage. Promotion of research, teaching, and documentation of pre-colonial Igbo political organization to guide modern adaptations should be encouraged.

Socio-Political Reorientation: Traditional rulership should be insulated from partisan politics to preserve its sanctity. Politicians should stop using kingship as a reward system. More so, instead of splintering into smaller autonomous communities, emphasis should be placed on cooperation and regional unity for development projects.

Progressive Leadership: Traditional rulers should be encouraged to focus on community development, conflict resolution, and cultural preservation rather than power struggles. State chieftaincy councils should periodically evaluate the performance and conduct of traditional rulers.

In summary: The bastardization of kingship and proliferation of autonomous communities in Igbo land can be reduced through legal reforms, cultural revival, depoliticization of kingship, conflict resolution, and education. By restoring the dignity of kingship and discouraging unnecessary fragmentation, the Igbo nation can safeguard its cultural identity while promoting unity and sustainable development.

Endnotes:

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3. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (London: Macmillan, 1976), **27–31**.
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8. Adiele E. Afigbo, *Source already cited*, **154–158**.
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10. Victor C. Uchendu, *Source already cited*, **102–106**.
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14. Axel Harneit-Sievers, *Constructions of Belonging: Igbo Communities and the Nigerian State in the Twentieth Century* (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), **169–176**.
15. Imo State Government, *Traditional Rulers and Autonomous Communities Law No. 3* (Owerri: Government Printer, 1999), **secs. 4–9**.