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By Idenze Ezeme

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The saying “Igbo enwe Eze,” meaning “The Igbo have no king,” is often misinterpreted. It is a statement that shows the way of governance in Igbo society without a central leader, not that there is no leadership or that rules are not in place. The Igbo people have had different kinds of leadership based on...



The Igwe, also known as the Obi of Onitsha and the Chiefs at the Ofala Festival, Anambra State, Nigeria. Photo: Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation



The saying “Igbo enwe Eze,” meaning “The Igbo have no king,” is often misinterpreted. It is a statement that shows the way of governance in Igbo society without a central leader, not that there is no leadership or that rules are not in place. The Igbo people have had different kinds of leadership based on their cultural traditions. These forms of leadership differ so much from kingship, as has been the case with most cultures, thus showcasing the special aspects of Igbo politics and social structure. Instead of having one leader, Igbo communities generally had councils of elders, respected individuals, and family heads in charge. This proves their high team spirit and sense of community in the way they lead their lives.

Decentralised but Organised Leadership

Igbo society has a long history and unique structure. This structure allows the sharing of power among different groups and people rather than being controlled by one person. However, this does not mean there is no leadership in Igbo communities. Rather, Igbo community leadership manifested in a few different but related forms:

Eze Nri: The Eze Nri is the central figure in Igbo culture—elevated as a king yet considered a sacred king. His influence was not limited to political boundaries because he was vested with spiritual functions and cultural significance. Eze Nri is believed to represent the spirit of his people. He would preside over important rituals, defend traditional customs, and be the arbiter in conflicts. Yet, he did not exercise power based on military strength; he derived it from his religious authority.

Western Igbo Monarchs: Long before colonial rule, different Western Igbo communities, including important towns like Onitsha, Asaba, and Aboh, had their kings. For example, the Obi of Onitsha became an important king whose leadership combined political power with cultural meaning, helping his community in government and tradition.

Similarly, in the Ika Igbo regions, influential leaders like the Obi of Agbor played important roles in the administration and organisation of their societies, often acting as custodians of local customs and



practices.

Aro Confederacy and Eze Aro: The Eze Aro of the Aro Confederacy was a strong leader whose power went beyond just governing. He led a strong network that affected trade, religion, and politics in Igboland and relationships with other places, showing the interconnected nature of leadership in this era.

Village Councils and Elders: In some Igbo communities, the system of government featured councils of elders known as Ndi Ichie. Family heads and representatives of various secret societies, such as the Ọzọ and Nze, generally constituted membership of such councils. This body was responsible for maintaining peace and conflict resolution through mutual agreement, thus underlining the crucial role of communal involvement in government.

These different leadership styles show that Igbo society didn't have just one governing method. Instead, they used various methods that fit the needs of each community, always focusing on the well-being of everyone.

Misinterpretation of “Igbo enwe Eze”

The statement “Igbo enwe Eze” reflects the Igbo people's preference for shared power and group decision-making. Unlike some cultures with centralised monarchies, the Igbo don't have one person in charge of everyone. Instead, they have a system where many people, like elders and leaders of different groups, share power. They make decisions together, listen to various opinions, and ensure choices represent what the whole community wants, not just one leader's wishes.

Historical Evidence of Igbo Kingship

Before the onset of colonialism, the social texture of Igbo societies was intricately interwoven with a hierarchy of recognised monarchs and rulers who yielded tremendous influence in the lives of their people. Notable among these leaders was the Eze Nri, a respected



leader who embodied spiritual authority across numerous Igbo communities. His influence extended into important areas such as religion, culture, and diplomacy, establishing him as a key figure in maintaining the integrity and traditions of the Igbo way of life.

Another important group was the Aro Confederacy, a vibrant alliance combining spiritual and political leadership. At the top of this confederacy, Eze Aro was respected as a ruler and spiritual leader who helped his followers with material and spiritual problems.

There were also important kings in the Western Igbo, such as the Obi of Onitsha and the Dein of Agbor. These were not mere figureheads; rather, they participated actively in the politics and culture of their respective communities, helping to make decisions and creating a sense of identity and pride among their people.

The British colonial system of Warrant Chiefs changed the traditional leadership structures. However, it is important to note that kingship in Igboland was not an innovation of the colonial enterprise; rather, it had very deep historical roots anterior to this external intrusion. All this attests to the strength and continuity of the local governance systems in Igbo society.

In Igbo's traditional belief, leadership is strongly associated with spirituality and a sense of servitude, contrary to ruling through force or conquest. Well-respected leaders such as the Eze Nri and Eze Aro did not derive their power from a strong army or by being dominant; rather, their power was rooted in strong religious and cultural respect. This unique structure fostered structured leadership that developed independently and did not require central political authority.

In this system, the Igbo did not have kings with absolute power or ruled through force. Instead, their community was led by leaders who were important in governance, management of religious practices, and improvement of the community's well-being. These leaders were keepers of tradition and caretakers of social welfare, ensuring the



people’s needs were met while respecting the values and customs that held the community together.

Most Igbo communities today are headed by traditional rulers known as Eze, Obi, or Igwe. These respected traditional rulers play an important role in keeping their people’s rich cultural heritage and old traditions alive. Their existence is clear testimony to the fact that Igbo customs are still alive, going against the adage that the Igbo do not have kings. They preserve the Igbo people’s values, beliefs, and identity through ceremonies, community gatherings, and cultural celebrations for generations.

The statement “Igbo enwe Eze,” meaning “The Igbo have no king,” is not meant to be understood literally. Instead, it represents the rich tradition of decentralised and participatory governance that characterises Igbo society. Throughout history, leadership in Igboland has manifested in diverse forms, including figures such as the Eze Nri, a revered spiritual and political leader, and the Obi of Onitsha, who holds significant cultural authority. Additionally, local governance is reinforced by the wisdom of village elders and the collective decisions made by community councils. These systems are uniquely Igbo. They emphasise the sharing of authority, participation of the community, and the involvement of all in decision-making. This is a far cry from the unitary monarchs of other cultures.

Below are the detailed descriptions of important precolonial Igbo monarchs and their significant roles in their communities: 1.

The Eze Nri was a holy king. He was believed to be a political leader and a spiritual guide in the area.

Importance: The institution of the kingship of Nri dates back to the 10th century and was instrumental in bringing together different areas of Igboland through religion, culture, and trade. The legacy of Eze Nri is still a key part of what it means to be Igbo.



Eze Nri Tabansi Udene Nrijofo II. reigned from 1938 to 1979

Role: The Obi of Onitsha was a political and cultural leader believed to have descended from Edo.

Significance: This king was instrumental in uniting the Onitsha community. The Obi settled most disputes and spoke on behalf of the people in external affairs, serving as a vital link between the community and others.

Role: As ruler of the important Western Igbo kingdom of Aboh in the Niger Delta, Obi Ossai presided over a key territory.

Importance: The Aboh monarchy was instrumental in controlling major trade routes on the Niger River. This profoundly affected Igbo society and the people around them, increasing trade and cultural exchange.

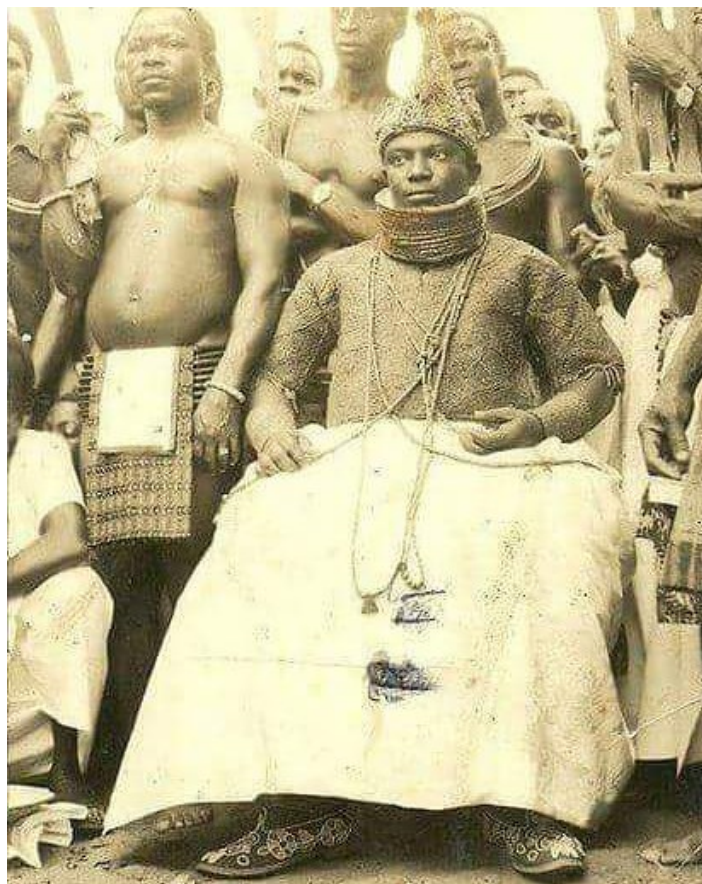


The Obi of Aboh Kingdom, Obi, Dr Greg Oputa 111. Photo: The Pointer

4. *Obi/Dein of Agbor (Ika Igbo)*

Role: This king ruled the Agbor kingdom, a fusion of Igbo and Edo cultures.

Importance: The Agbor monarchy maintained peace in the region and was involved in trade and cultural interactions with neighbouring communities.



Obi Obika Gbenoba, Obi of Agbor who was Obi from 1935 till 1967. Photo: Solomon Omojie

Position: Eze Aro was the head of the Aro Confederacy, a powerful body that greatly influenced trade and religious practices within the region.

Significance: Eze Aro’s authority stretched far beyond Arochukwu, undergirded by the high repute of the Ibini Ukpabi Oracle, the spiritual and judicial centre for the people, in whose influence both trade and religion were felt throughout Igboland.



Hrh Eberechukwu Oji (Eze Aro IX). Aronewsonline

- Igwe of Nnewi: Esteemed as a central figure in Nnewi, the Igwe is respected for his cultural leadership and commitment to preserving local traditions.



Igwe Kenneth Onyeneke Orizu III, Obi of Otolo in Nnewi North, Anambra State. Photo: Dr.fwilson

- Asagba of Asaba: This monarch provided crucial governance and cultural leadership in Asaba, ensuring the community's social cohesion and engagement with broader regional dynamics.



Chigbogu Azinge, Asagba of Asab. AsabaTV

These monarchs had a common goal: leading their communities through cultural leadership, governance, and economic influence that has guided the history of the Igbo people into the present.

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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