

THE IMPACT OF TITLE-TAKING IN ONITSHA ON ANAMBRA STATE: A CASE OF THE OTU-ODU AND AGBALANZE SOCIETIES: 1950-1959

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Abstract

The study appraises the impression which Otu-Odu and Agbalanze societies as a title-taking institution in Onitsha has had on Anambra State, covering the period between 1950 and 1959. 1950 is a takeoff year for the study because it marked the initial recognition and calls for reformation of Ozo by the Christian segment in the area while 1959 was the year, the Otu-Odu society became inaugurated as an official institution, and hence the choice of a terminal date. Mainly, the work makes use of primary sources of data which include oral interviews and other materials to explore the major role, as well as socio-economic cum political impact of the societies on Anambra community. The paper argues that aside from being a vital tool for unification and peaceful co-existence among the people, the institution has been proven to serve both economic and political emancipation for the entire Igbo nation. The study submits that there is a need for the removal of all the practices inherent in the title-taking institution which some Christian denominations consider diabolic, so as to effect the reforms capable of eliciting holistic accommodation and eventual recognition of the entire Christendom.

Keywords: Title-Taking, Onitsha, Anambra State, Oto-Odu, Agbalanze

Introduction

In Onitsha tradition and custom, there are four cardinal institutions; The Obi, Ndichie, Agbalanze and Otu-Odu. These four institutions work in their individual capacity to ensure progress, peace and development of the Onitsha people with relevant supports from other subordinate groups. The Obi is the ruler of Onitsha. The word Obi means soul, family household or head of family household; He is the highest authority in the political structure of the

Onitsha society. The Ndichie, otherwise known as Red Cap Chiefs, are the Obi's councilors. They are divided into three grades, viz: Ndichie ume, Ndichie Okwa and Ndichie Okwarraeze. Ndichie Ume are war chiefs and members of the cabinet. The Ndichie Okwa are second grade chiefs. They are primarily assigned the duties of assisting the Ndichie Ume in executing administrative functions. The Ndichie Okwarraeze is categorized as third grade. As the name implies, titles of this grade may be conferred on public-spirited citizens who may not be Ozo men by the Obi. Otu-Odu however is an exclusive prestigious institution for Onitsha women while the Agbalanze is one of the highest ranking societies of men in Onitsha.

Institutions are established with enduring patterns of social relationships made up of social groups. Just as institutions consist of social groups, social groups consist of statuses, that is, the position that a person occupies within a social group which by and large, defines one's social identity. As one of the prestigious social societies in Onitsha, the Otu Odu (Ivory) and Agbalanze (custodian) societies exemplifies this position.

Conceptual Clarification

Otu-Odu: Odu literally means elephant tusk. Otu-Odu is the initiation ceremony carried out for candidates. The Odu title is the highest title any Onitsha woman aspires to acquire. History traces its origin to 'a more private and individual affair of famous Onitsha women of character and affluence. Following its recognition in 1959, this simple association changed to a prestigious society, became modernized and its functions were amended¹

The roots of Otu-Odu society can be traced to the spirit of communalism which, in itself, encouraged women's participation in economic activities. The social structures such as the extended family system coupled with the preference for endogamy ensure that the social order of the society is based on communalism. This permeates all aspects of social relations. Onitsha women, for example, have always been involved in a village, community and inter-community activities.

While the Onitsha culture promotes the spirit of communalism, it also encourages industry/hard work and individual excellence in all spheres of life. It is no surprise that one of the aims and objectives of the Otu-Odu society is 'The preservation of the ancient and age-long tradition of according a befitting prestigious status to deserving women.' Other objectives include 'The creation of a forum for the interaction of such women of distinction with the view to fostering unity, peace and the promotion of progress and development of the society; the establishment of enterprises and projects that

will improve the well-being of its members and the entire community; and the provision of financial support for charitable/humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross, Motherless Babies Homes, Homes for Destitute, etc.²

The Agbalanze Society

Agbalanze custodian of Nzena Ozo institution given to high ranking titled men only and there is only one Agbalanze in each village or town. The Ozo title association often referred to as the Agbalanze society is, a socio-political and religious all-male group that is also highly revered in Onitsha traditional society. Unlike the Otu Odu, the Agbalanze prides itself on voluntary but selective association based on ancestry and enormous wealth. It is so prestigious that no matter how wealthy or educated an Onitsha man may be, he cannot acquire the status that goes with the title. Chike Akosa (1999: xvi) notes, that "Ozo-titled men are considered as 'Patricians' - in this sense, elites. Hence, Onitsha indigenes look up to Ozo title as, a summumbonum (Latin for the highest or the singular and most ultimate) of human achievement."³ Along this line of thought, Richard Henderson (1972) states that "Besides its material benefit, the people of Onitsha conceive Ozo title-taking as a pathway to divinity and in that sense, more than an analogical metaphor of kinship." Akosa (1999: xvi) further notes that "every Onitsha man could through the Ozo title look beyond to the possibility that he might ultimately become a chief or king."⁴ Fees are fixed to ensure that members remain equivalent in prestige.

Across the length and breadth of Igbo land, Ozo title ship is a major symbol of prominence. The title- taking event is typically organized with an abundance of yam, meat, wine, and other staple foods - all of which symbolize prosperity in Igbo culture. Normally, only the male genders that are free born of the villages, are allowed to take the title, therefore, in other words, Ozo title taking is limited to the male of descent origin. An "Osu" or "Ohu" can in no means take an Ozo title in Onitsha and in Igbo land in general. In the pre-colonial Igbo society, religion and title taking were interwoven, most of the legal sanctions rose supreme from the gods that were at most of the times, the intermediaries. Any man who eventually takes high title was seemed to be highly discipline and consequently severed recognition from the gods and the Almighty God.

The Role of the Ozo Man in the Society

There are various roles in which the Ozo title holders play in the society. It can be said emphatically that the Ozo title is the highest cultural ambition of the

average Onitsha man, because it confers on the recipient the traditional order of priesthood and the highest degree of social standing in the community.

According to Lucy Nnaemeka, one role the Ozo men play in the society is officiating in the family shrine.⁵ Nobody can officiate on the family shrine, except an Ozo titled man. Even the Diokpala (head of the house) of a family cannot officiate on the family shrine unless he has taken the Ozo title or lesser part of it known as ikpa Muo , otherwise he has to appoint any Ozo man in his family to officiate on his behalf at his pleasure.⁶ When an Ozo man presides at the family shrine as an agent of a non-titled Okpala, he does so with great caution for he should not by stretch of imagination treat his principal as subordinate. He is therefore accountable to him for all his services.

Another role of the Ozo man in the Onitsha society according to Olisa Okolo is his unique representation in the society. In any social gathering, an Ozo man, no matter his age, becomes the presiding personality. Kola nuts or drinks are first offered to non-titled men, whose status in life may even be one of affluence or high social degree.⁷

Furthermore, Chukwudi Asiegbu states that in his exclusive right as a spiritual head, the Ozo man invokes God's blessings and breaks kola nuts or pours libation on the ground to appease the ancestors. ⁸

As a mark of respect for old age, he may surrender his right to the oldest non-titled man in the gathering to perform the required ceremony.

Another role in which the Ozo man plays in the society is upholding religious, social and cultural values in the society. They make sure they obey the rules of the society so as to set good example for members of the society.⁹

Agbu Winifred states that, it is the role of the Ozo man to maintain order and stability in society, especially in social gathering. Their role is very important in the Onitsha society.¹⁰

It is this position of the Ozo man that, no doubt won for him a religious and social pre-eminence that makes Onitsha members of the Christian religion to aspire to the title. In this respect these Christians are asking for special dispensation to take the title without running the gamut of its rituals. ¹¹

The Role of the Otu Odu Woman in the Society

The Odu women play a very significant role in the Igbo society particularly in the Onitsha society. The roles of the Odu women in the society could be political or social. Lucy Nnaemeka said that in Onitsha, there are certain roles one needs to play as a member of the society. However, the role of an Otu Odu woman is far different from the roles an ordinary woman plays in the society.¹²

Politically, according to Chinyere Obi, a woman who bears the Odu title plays the role of a political head in most female gathering within a family and in any other female social gathering. The decisions taken by an Otu Odu woman is highly revered in any gathering. Therefore one of the roles in which an Otu Odu Woman plays is decision making and implementation.¹³

According to Agbu Winifred, one prominent role in which women with the Otu Odu title play concerning the political aspect is that they help in making policies. They also help the town in taking decisions aside from formulating policies. She further states that the Otu Odu title confers a position of authority where an Odu woman makes decisions that are in consonance with those of the king.¹⁴

Socially, the role of any Odu woman is to promote and establish peace and unity among women in the Onitsha society. This is intended to foster a peaceful co-existence among the women in the area. Also, the role of an Odu woman is to promote development in the society. Another social role of an Odu woman is to embark on establishing enterprises and projects that will improve the well being of the members of the entire community.¹⁵

In essence the role of an Otu Odu woman socially is to bring the Onitsha women together in peace and unity which further leads to the positive growth and development of the Onitsha society.

Economically, Agbu Winifred states that, the Odu titled woman helps in offering financial assistance to women and children in the society, thereby leading to the growth of the society. Furthermore, the Odu society plays a role of offering financial support to humanitarian organizations such as the Red - Cross, motherless babies home, Homes for destitute.¹⁶

These roles they play socially, politically, and economically have helped in the Onitsha society to grow rapidly, and they are roles expected to be played by any woman who holds the Odu title. These roles are very essential in the development of the Onitsha community and also in the Otu Odu society.

The Social-Cultural Impact on the Community

In the Onitsha society, the Impact of Ozo institution is obviously felt in its Christian religion and the partisan politics. A complete Ozo man in Onitsha is seen as a father and Ozo institution is seen as a highest social paradigm on which people aspire¹³. An Ozo man is usually regarded as one who has worked hard throughout his life before he acquired the position. The Igbo, according to Basden, "demonstrates a kind of superiority complex especially when they have achieved their title rank."¹⁷

Any holder of Ozo title is insured against insults and indignities from anybody. In Onitsha, Ozo man, as one of his social significance is always given kola nuts first in any gathering, where there is no other Ozo titled man, he alone also takes the money presented "to make the kola nuts ripe".¹⁸

As Igbo, the rite of native kola nuts is well known in the society. Therefore, as it is commonly said that he who brings kola nut, brings life, it is believed among the people of Onitsha that the life of the titled men is more precious than those of the non-titled ones. Hence, the kola nut is given to him first. Kola nut is also used in sacred and sacrificial rituals and so as a sacred and holy man by virtue of sharing, and being initiated into the Ozo title institution, has the right of taking the kola nuts before any other person.¹⁹

An Ozo man as part of their social significance receives important dignitaries into the town. It is their duty to receive and entertain visitors. When an important visitor is to visit town, Ozo titled members meet and deliberate on the proper way to receive him, they will also be there physically to welcome the visitor. An Ozo titled visited man is one who has made it in the society.²⁰ As such, they are not looked upon, just as leaders rather they are regarded with respect and admiration. To some people, they represent their ideal personality and people they emulate. They are honored and recognized in any gathering. In short, he has a high social standing among his people.

According to Olisa Okolo, an Ozo man is regarded as a holy man and in order to maintain that regard, he stays clear from certain things like adultery, telling lies, cheating and so on. In the traditional sense, an Ozo man should play the role of a father. He is expected to be loyal in any place and also in dealing with his fellow human beings.²¹

Far and wide, even in the contemporary times, an Ozo man commands a high degree of prestige and intrinsic respect. He has a high social status; as a result, he avoids all things that will contaminate his character and personality in the society.

The Impact of the Odu society socially cannot be left out; this female society has made a great impact in Onitsha. In the researcher's findings, the author has come to understand that one of the impact of the Odu society can be seen in the unification and peaceful co-existence of women in Onitsha; though naturally, conflicts are inevitable, Onitsha women have tried with the help of the Odu society to live as one, organizing themselves into social groups, coming together to discuss issues affecting the community and bringing out possible solutions.²² More so, the Otu Odu (just like the Ozo institution) woman has a high degree of prestige and intrinsic respect. She has a high social status, as a result, she avoids all things that will tarnish her character and personality in the society, with this, she is able to make positive impact in the society, thereby setting good examples for women to adhere to in order to make Onitsha a town embedded in a high moral standing.

According to Chiwendu Nkoli, the Odu society as earlier stated has contributed immensely in setting good examples and living a good life. Odu chieftaincy is more of a social institution; their activities include social gatherings, events that bring women of all statuses in Onitsha together which in return gives women in Onitsha a sense of belonging. It is important to note that the Odu society supports women and their rights in Onitsha; they also support each other in different areas such as marriage of their children, burials, birthdays and many other events.²³

The Economic Impact

It is important to know that for one to be an Ozo titled man, certain factors like birth right and wealth, especially the latter, plays great part. This is because titles are not free gift of nature that is bestowed on individuals. They are paid for and this singular factor makes title taking, an exclusive thing because, not every man can embark upon such an expensive venture.

Ozo institution as investments, developed ventures which contribute a lot in the development projects in the society. For instance, they could utilize their collective resources towards the accomplishment of certain projects like community school; postal agencies, health care centres and village halls.²⁴ Olisa Okolo said that Ozo institution is an investment venture, the title acts as insurance to the members in their old age, therefore improving the standard of living of Ozo men in Onitsha. This is because they are assured of regular revenue from new members who join the Ozo title.²⁵ The dividends from the entrance fee of these new members help to sustain the old members. The material rewards accruing to an Ozo man are attached to their functions as

dispensers of justice; they are rewarded with material things, either in kind or in cash.

Moreover, in the olden days, booties accruing from wars or from any other avenues are shared disproportionately among the citizens. The Ozo titled men and the richest were given large part of these booties.

Furthermore, Olisa Okolo states that the Ozo title institution contributes immensely to the economic growth of the society. The contributions of members who are of high status and wealthy men are shared among themselves in this respect, an Ozo man after taking this status regains his wealth, spent in attaining such status through contributions. More so, these money gotten from these contributions are extended to the Onitsha community, as indicated above such contributions are used to construct buildings, build schools, repair bad roads etc.²⁶

Agbu Winifred said that in the case of the Otu Odu society, the economic impact is similar to that of the Ozo society, they contribute in making the Onitsha society developed. In the area of standard of living, an Odu Woman's standard of living is of a high ranking, before attaining the title, the aspirant is said to be a woman who is wealthy, and after gaining the title, she does not lose this wealth but rather she attains more wealth which she is expected to use to develop the community. In some cases you find an Odu woman sponsoring a child's education, building schools, funding charity organizations, helping the less privileged. These acts alone have contributed in the economic development of Onitsha .²⁷

Political Impact on the Community

The Ozo institution is an embodiment of political activities in Igbo land. They are the community leaders or the rulers of their communities. It is from among them that the king is often chosen and the kings select his cabinet members from among them. They are the politicians of any Community hence, the popular saying that "ala adighi mma bu uru ndi nze" (that is, the title holders benefit the land when there is crisis in the land). They constitute the members of Onitsha town council. In fact, it is the basic qualification based on which town council members of many communities in Igbo land are selected.²⁸

They settle disputes especially marriage disputes and land disputes as the leaders of the community. Because they are regarded as trustworthy individuals, their decisions are taken. They form the main decision making body in the society, major issues are deliberated upon and solutions are

proffered. They lead the people in times of war and natural disasters. In contemporary times, because of the emergence of modern state machineries, most of those powers have been curbed.²⁹

Before this time, Ozo title holders in their work as “Ndi Oji ani” helped very well in the maintenance of order and rule of law in the society thus, helping towards peaceful co-existence of members of society.

The Odu women also have political impact in the society. According to S.I Bosah, The King is without a queen mother, otherwise known as “OMU”. However, the queen according to Onitsha tradition is not necessarily the king’s wife. She is selected and installed by the Obi from among the entire women population of the town. The candidate for such an exalted office must be a woman recognized for her high social standing in the community which could be an Odu title holder.³⁰

Members of the Otu Odu society are pre-eminent in women’s society generally and more often than not, it is from among their rank that female chiefs are appointed to the Omu’s cabinet. In this cabinet, they are given political powers and have the right to make decisions concerning women in the society.

Christianity and Ozo title Recognition

Onitsha Agbalanze society is an association that teams with intellectual giants in its membership. Giants that are learned in many subjects including the Holy Writ.³¹ However, the Ozo title recognition with Christianity will be discussed thoroughly because the Ozo title is seen as a religious and political title while the Odu title is a social title.

Olisa Okolo said that the Ozo title has been criticized by Christians who allege that it is a diabolic and fetish title which should not be taken by a Christian. On the contrary, he upheld that the Ozo title is not diabolic as criticized by Christians. Invariably, it is a traditional means of worshiping God.³²

The Ozo title became accepted into Christianity in 1950, Ozo institution gained recognition with the Catholic Church and thereby became recognized as a religious institution where Christians could gain membership. However, before its recognition, the institution has claimed that the Onitsha traditional religion is as innocuous as the Jewish religion and that nothing in Ozo title taking ceremonies is diabolical. One of them by name Chukwudi Asiegbu quoted the holy writ (Deuteronomy cap. 32) to show that traditional religion

is of God's own making. The verse runs thus "God assigned to each nation a god but Jacob descendants, he chose for himself".³³

In co-relating the place of Ozo title in African traditional context with certain titles held in Christendom, it is believed that Ozo title as a concept has gradually found its way into Christianity. In Africa, Ozo title is just a process of stratification of human society, where one should be conferred with certain titles of honour in appreciation to his exemplary virtuous life, but in Christianity, certain attempts have been made to Christianize Ozoship in such a way that most peculiar rites that give one the right of confirmation as an Ozo-title holder, which have been so regarded as idolatry, are conspicuously abandoned in order not to contradict Christian beliefs and practices.³⁴

Chukwudi Asiegbu said that darkness and light don't go together, and there is nothing like an honorary Ozo chieftaincy title. When you are made a chief, usually you are expected to undergo certain initiations. He further states that in most cases Ozo men are called upon to perform certain traditional rites on behalf of the community which a devoted Christian should not be seen performing except, he/she is on a mission to convert the members into Christianity.³⁵

More so, before Ozo title gained its recognition in the church, Ozo men were not allowed membership into the church, they were regarded as unholy and fetish. The Ozo men were restricted from participating in anything that involved Christianity. According to Joseph Uzoma, after the recognition of Ozo title in the church, Ozo title holders were allowed to resume church membership and all its privileges and practices after initiation.³⁶

Other Christian denominations are yet to recognize the Ozo institution as a holy institution, they strongly hold onto the verse of the bible that states "be not unequally yoked with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath light with darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14)". This belief has made the Ozo title non-recognized in some other Christian denominations hence reference to many other bible verses is made to justify the scenario.

In essence, the Catholic Church have embraced and recognized the relationship between Ozo title and Christianity as compatible; just the same way traditional chiefs in the area are recognized. Conversely, most Pentecostal churches, Anglican and orthodox churches have refused to accept Ozo title-taking as a holy title free from diabolic acts. Invariably, Ozo title has not been

fully recognized in the Christendom as some churches have refused to recognize and accept it.

Conclusion

Title-taking in Onitsha among the Otu-Odu and Agbalanze societies have long played an effective role in the entire Anambra community. The fact that this institution has not been properly documented presents a glaring lacuna which this work seeks to bridge. The Otu-Odu and Agbalanze societies should not be allowed to die off like some of other igbo traditional religious practices. They are very important cultural practices of the igbos and therefore should be upheld. The recognition of the Ozo institution within the Catholic Church in 1950 paved way for devoted Catholics to gain membership into the institution. Also, in 1959, the Otu-Odu society was inaugurated and officially became an institution.

Consequently, the need to preserve this institution is very germane for the exposure of the Igbo culture and tradition, not just in Nigeria but the rest of the world. Therefore, Otu-Odu and Agbalanze societies need to be improved upon and recognized as the custodian of morality in Igbo land rather than being overshadowed by modernity and Civilization. A significant improvement is critical, such that certain practices that are perceived diabolic and fetish in the institution will be expunged. This will certainly go a long way in widening the horizon and by extension, strengthening the institutional capacity for Anambra state to consolidate on the gains of this highly revered rich cultural heritage.

Endnotes

¹Interview: Lucy Nnaemeka, Aged 45, Onitsha-umuase village, 11th November 2016.

²Interview: Lucy Nnaemeka, Aged 45, Onitsha-umuase village, 11th November 2016.

³Interview: Okolo, Olisa, Aged 60, Onitsha-umuase village, 24th June 2017.

⁴Interview: Chukwudi Asiegbu , Aged 50, Onitsha- Umuase village, 11th November 2016.

⁵Interview: by Okolo, Olisa, Aged 60, Onitsha -umuase village, on the 24th June 2017.

⁶Interview: Agbu Winifred, Aged 54, Onitsha-umuase village, on the 22nd June, 2017.

⁷ S.I. Bosah. *Groundwork of the history and culture, of Onitsha*, by fourth dimension publishers, 1982, p 154.

⁸ Interview: Lucy Nnaemeka, Aged 45, Onitsha-umuase village, 11th November 2016.

⁹ Interview: Lucy Nnaemeka, Aged 45, Onitsha-umuase village, 11th November, 2016.

¹⁰Interview: Chinyere Obi, Aged 32, Onitsha-umuase village, 11th November, 2016.

¹¹Interview: Agbu Winifred, Aged 54, Onitsha-umuase village, on the 22nd June, 2017.

¹²Interview: Chinyere Obi, Aged 32, Onitsha-umuase village, 11th November, 2016.

¹³Interview: Agbu Winifred, Aged 54, Onitsha-umuase village, on the 22nd June, 2017.

¹⁴ Chudi oji chukwuka. *The effects on the growth of Onitsha community* (A case study of Onitsha in Anambra state). LNC Okeke publishers, 2015.

¹⁵ Basden G.T. Among the Ibos of Nigeria, published by Frankcass and Co Ltd, 1966.

¹⁶ Chudi oji chukwuka. *The effects on the growth of Onitsha community* (A case study of Onitsha in Anambra state) by LNC Okeke publishers, 2015.

¹⁷Chudi oji chukwuka. *The effects on the growth of Onitsha community* (A case study of Onitsha in Anambra state), by LNC Okeke publishers, 2015.

¹⁸Ogbalu F.C.The igbo institution and customs, Onitsha. by University publishers Co, 1964.

¹⁹Interview: Okolo, Olisa, Aged 60, Onitsha -umuase village, on the 24th June 2017.

²⁰Interview: Okolo, Olisa, Aged 60, Onitsha-umuase village, on the 25th June 2017.

²¹ Interview: Chiwendu Nkoli, Aged 40, Onitsha-umuase village, on the 25th June 2017.

²² Chudi oji chukwuka. *The effects on the growth of Onitsha community* (A case study of Onitsha in Anambra state), by LNC Okeke publishers, 2015.

²³ Interview: Okolo, Olisa, Aged 60, Onitsha-umuase village, on the 25th June 2017.

²⁴ Interview: Okolo, Olisa, Aged 60, Onitsha-umuase village, on the 25th June 2017.

²⁵ Interview: Agbu Winifred, Aged 54, Onitsha-umuase village, on the 22nd June, 2017.

²⁶ Chudi oji chukwuka. *The effects on the growth of Onitsha community* (A case study of Onitsha in Anambra state), by LNC Okeke publishers, 2015.

²⁷ Ogbalu F.C. Igbo institution and customs, Onitsha, by University publishers Co.

²⁸ S. I. Bosah. *Groundwork of the history and culture, of Onitsha*, by fourth dimension publishers, 1982, p 171.

²⁹ Eke-prince Ekwerekwu. *Know your Onitsha families*, N court road Onitsha, published by Michy age publication, lagos, 1986.

³⁰ Interview: Okolo, Olisa, Aged 60, Onitsha-umuase village, on the 25th June 2017.

³¹ Interview: Chukwudi Asiegbu, Aged 54, Onitsha-umuase, on the 25th June 2017.

³² Interview: Chukwudi Asiegbu, Aged 54, Onitsha-umuase, on the 25th June 2017.