

**THE CHALLENGES OF OZO INSTITUTION AND ITS NAMES IN
CONTEMPORARY ABBA COMMUNITY, NJIKOKA L.G.A., ANAMBRA
STATE**

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Abstract

Ozo institution is a noble institution among the Igbo. It is the highest rank one can attain in one's life through personal or collective efforts. The aim of the study is to identify the problems confronting ozo and its names in Abba community. Ozo institution has been threatened by foreign influences. As a result, the customs and tradition of ozo society have changed to accommodate these foreign influences. These do not bear eloquent testimony to this great institution because many with questionable character have infiltrated the ozo society. The net result is the collapse of the norms undergirding the ozo title taking. This study made use of primary and secondary sources and adopted descriptive design approach. The study revealed that the lapses in ozo society came because of attitudinal change of the people toward ozo institution. The reason for this attitude was peoples' contact with the outside cultures. It was observed that many with questionable character have entered ozo society solely for showing off, class distinction, prestige and not necessarily for the preservation of this cultural heritage which is the highest traditional institution in Abba community and the entire Igbo land. The study therefore, recommends amongst other things that the entrance into ozo society should be made strict by the traditionalists whose institution is being desecrated. This will help ozo institution and its names to have enduring values.

Keywords: Ozo title, Names, Tradition, Challenges, Contemporary, Abba.

Introduction

The world has experienced changes including Abba community because of cultural conflicts and globalisation brought about by technological advancement. These unprecedented waves of change have affected so many cultural values in Africa. Abba town being part of Igbo land in Africa has

experienced these changes in many ways. Among these agents of change which truly threatened the existence of African Traditional Religion is Christianity. Christianity dealt serious blow to all institutions of Igbo traditional religion. Demonising entire Igbo culture is the worst Christianity has done. Ozo title which is one of the institutions in traditional religion is touched by these waves of change. Apart from Christianity, people have travelled to different parts of the world either for material or spiritual benefits and imbibed many ideologies which are at variance with existing customs and traditions of the community. To keep society going in the face of modernity, there are continuities and discontinuities in the way customs and traditions are practiced for mutual understanding and harmonious existence. Hence, the challenges ozo institution and its names are facing in contemporary Abba community.

Ozo institution traditionally, is an institution of nobility that accorded respect and honour on whoever attained the title in Abba community. Ozo title taking is a hallmark of achievement by the individuals who distinguished themselves through persistent hard work in their lives. The abundance of yam, wine, meat and other staple foods symbolizes prosperity and affluence in Igbo culture. It is a religious, socio-economic and political organization which is the highest rank in Abba community and Igbo land generally.

Taking of the ozo title in Abba is an elaborate ceremony. It is a rigorous ritual affairs/exercises and it involves so many things that has to do with so many ritualistic endeavours as observed by (Idigo 2001:101-110; Onwuejeogwu 1981:82-95). Ozo title taking is indeed an occasion to showcase rich cultural heritage of Igbo traditional religion. It is an occasion marked with extensive religious ceremonies in which the aspirants would undergo some ritual purifications/initiations that at the end would make them the voice of the gods, ancestors and the people. Also, Ilogu (1972), notes that it is a religious cum social association into which men are initiated (with their wives) in various stages with religious ceremonies.

Ozo title holders are at the helm of affairs in the council of elders called Ndi-chie (Idigo, 2001:118). Hence, they are referred to as the spiritualized fathers in Igbo cosmology. This means that the title holders are trusted to have assigned the task of being the custodian of customs and tradition. It implies that they will defend the customs and the traditions of the land. The initiates are seen as the symbol of justice, equity and moral uprightness. By initiation, one thus, becomes a member of Ndi-nze, one of the state councils, and he is regarded as a man of upright character and integrity (Onwuejeogwu, 1981:85 & Idigo, 2001). This is confirmed by (Nwahiri, 1984), when he posits that the Ozo title in pre-

colonial Igboland only went to men of unquestionable character, widely known for their high degree of morality, versed in the customs and traditions of the land, affluent and polygamous. (Uchendu, 1966). Opines that ozo title-taking was not only an expression of wealth but also a means of exercising the power it conferred.

(Agwu, 1987). Confirms that the ozo title-taking was the yardstick for measuring, wealth, influence and manhood. It symbolized all that was dignified and morally upright. It was the symbol of social justice, truth, hospitality and greatness. In fact, it personified all that the people believed in, in terms of religion, culture, tradition, politics and morality

The ozo initiate would always stand for what is right, just and truth no matter the circumstance. In other ways, the person is an embodiment of truth and fair play and must be an impartial judge in matters of jurisdiction. Across the length and breadth of Igbo land, ozo title is a major symbol of prominence (Attah :2016). This means that the ozo initiate is known not only within his environment but also beyond his immediate community.

This religious aspect of ozo institution is what stands the ozo title holders out in public in the olden days through the impeccable life they lived both in their immediate community and beyond. This last characteristic has not been seen with respect to today's ozo titled men. The once revered institution has been corrupted by the events of modernity. This article is to address the present predicament of ozo institution in Abba community which if allowed continuing will not bear eloquent testimony to this great institution and its names in Abba community and beyond in future. Many with questionable character have infiltrated into the society because of moral laxity on the part of the traditionalists who saw nothing wrong with it in Abba community. Many factors such as globalization, technological advancement and western cultures are the causes. There is need to inject into ozo society new ideas that will sustain it against these effects of modernity. This will go a long way of preserving ozo title taking which is Igbo cultural heritage generally.

The Influence of Modernity on Ozo Title and its Names in Abba Town

Since the advent of Western civilization and Christianity, African continent which Abba community is a part has experienced tremendous changes that have affected it both positively and negatively. In all spheres of life of Africans, the changes are felt both spiritual and physical. There was a total overhauling of the peoples' world view in the religious, socio-economic and political aspects. It was a kind of revolution which people were unaware of and never

prepared for its coming. It came and swept off the feet of everyone on its way. As observed by all and sundry, the revolution is a mixture of western culture and all therein. The victory theory of Christianity rests on these. The outcome was confusion in the minds and practical lives of African Christians. Reflecting on the impact of Christianity with its foreign culture on African traditional religious culture, Mbiti (1969) affirms that without warning and without physical or psychological preparation, Africa has been invaded by a world revolution..., but Christianity in its modern return to Africa is the main carrier of this world revolution.

In fact, the forces of social change have destabilized traditional beliefs and practices. The former religious outlook which gives cohesion and meaning to Abba community existence is no longer there. Based on this, Achebe (1958) succinctly sums it up that the white man is very clever... He has put a knife on the things that hold us together and we have fallen apart.⁶⁷ Indeed, things have fallen apart in many ways and the situation is not redeemable if care is not taken because of the present generation who put all their hope on everything foreign as the only way of life. Commenting on the above assertion, Nwadinigwe (2000), affirms that due to the pollution of the Igbo religion, most of our men and youths see no reason to respect the dignity of human-hood and the glory upon which the Igbos are bestowed. The result is all kinds of social ills most especially as it concerns some of our fathers who have nothing to teach the incoming generation.

It is observed that most of the problems witnessing in the society today are partly from the elders who have compromised their integrity because of monetary gain. This attitude of the elders has contributed to the present predicament of ozo title taking in Abba community and entire Igbo land.

Influencing factors

Ozo title taking and its names are part of Igbo culture and this explains their survival to the present day. Many customs have been or are being vastly swept away by contact with western civilization. But ozo title taking and its names are persistent. The present tendency is for the ozo title taking and its names to be completely shorn of rituals, and religious ceremonies in order to attract and also suit the taste of the Christian young men who constitute the bulk of wealthy citizens of the present day Abba community. The non- Christians who are the main holders are fully aware that without these names, ozo title taking which costs them fortunes would become extinct and useless in the course of time. It is in light of these introductory remarks that we will reflect briefly on some of

the influencing factors to this ancient institution of the Igbo. These factors include: Christianity, Western education, urbanization and materialism.

Christianity

The influence of Christianity has caused certain customs and beliefs to be discarded or modified, at the same time that it has caused others to be retained by one level of society while on another level new alternatives are being accepted. Through school, Christianity succeeded in turning the heart of people away from their cultural root. Another traditional institution that underwent pressures from Christianity is the *ozo* title-taking. This ethically and socially elevated traditional title was condemned as pagan, and true Christians are not allowed to take the title in spite of the enormous social control principles associated with this institution. The most disturbing aspect of the whole matter was the total rejection without prior consideration of the meaning or sense of these traditional institutions. This is the case of *ozo* title taking which was disdained at the initial stage and labelled as pagan ceremony by the early Christian converts in Abba community. They repudiated traditional beliefs and practices believing that Christianity would offer them much needed hope in life. Ekwueme (1974:13) laments that "early missionaries tagged all indigenous forms of arts as the work of the devil, especially as almost invariably those associated with some religious or quasi-religious ceremonies." This attitude is attributed to how the missionaries introduced Christianity to the people. The missionary journey as Ekwunife (2016) observes was 'operation sweep' aimed at injecting the poison of hatred in the minds of their various converts all in the name of Christ. The missionaries made the converts to understand that Christianity is more superior to traditional religion. Therefore, they would have nothing to do with anything tradition including *ozo* institution.

However, with passage of time, the same people that were brainwashed came to realise that some of these traditional beliefs and practices are not as bad as the missionaries painted them to be. Idigos (1990:66), observes that it was not easy for these Christians to forgo the time-honoured custom of title-taking which is regarded as being very advantageous in raising one's social status encouraging industry and serving as pension to the aged. Hence, Christians quest for *ozo* title but on different dimension which has stripped *ozo* institution its most important aspect which is the rituals or religious ceremonies. Disrobing of *ozo* title-taking of religious ceremonies/rituals which are its fundamental aspects has contributed to the attitude of modern man towards *ozo* institution. Before, an *Ozo* titled man made a covenant with his ancestors through religious ceremonious/rituals during initiation and the awareness of the unfailling

sanction from the divinities and ancestors was responsible for the prevalence of law and order in the traditional society. Confirming the importance of *ozo* to traditionalists, Ekwunife (2007) posits that *ozo* represents a means of salvation. Through it the holder escapes the condition of powerlessness, and receives power from the gods, the kind of power he demonstrates with the number of chalk lines he draws on the sacred ground. Since it involved a lot of ritual ceremonies which the aspirants must observe, It was *ipso facto* assumed that henceforth, the holder would not indulge in shady behaviour such as lies, adultery, stealing and so on which would tarnish his image Akabike (2019). He would live a life of holiness, truth and justice before the public otherwise he would be stripped of the title. This assertion is corroborated by Owuejeogwu (1981:85), when he posits that the *ozo* title holder continues to enjoy his position while alive but if at any point in time he is found wanting of these, his council with the consent of Eze could strip him of *ozo* title.

The conferment of *ozo* title which used to be the highest traditional title with its prestige in Abba community was totally and truly torched by the acidic nature of Christianity because of inordinate ambition of present generation, Akabike (2019). The consequence is that *ozo* institution is seen today as a socio-economic and political institution which offers one opportunity to belong to elite club of the town. The *ozo* title names that come with the title are today a mere label as the initiates are not living up to aspirations of the people and the names they bear.

Nowadays, this noble institution is no longer what it used to be because many with questionable character are conferred the title. The essential spiritual and moral aspects of this noble institution are constantly undermined and are no longer upheld by the title holders. The consequence is the death of that time-honored institution that has been an embodiment of such cherished and positive ethical and social values as holiness, truth, solidarity and justice. The destruction of this healthy means of social control has brought about untold evil practices such as bribery and corruption, embezzlement of public funds, injustice, sexual immorality, cases of murder, and all kinds of indiscipline among the *ozo* title holders in the society.

The acceptance of Christians into *ozo* title taking fold is one of the contributing factors of influence of modern life on *ozo* title taking and its names. In Abba town, acceptance of Christians taking *ozo* title features prominently among Roman Catholics. The Anglicans and Pentecostals are rather adamant about it. They do not allow their members to take *ozo* title in spite of all modern changes affecting Abba town. *Ozo* title taking, they said is a pagan ceremony, and their

members partaking in ozo title means they are no longer Christians. Moreover, they are adulterating their doctrine, hence, prohibition of the members from taking the ozo title or if taken, lead to excommunication. Buttressing this further, Idigo (1990:66) writes that the Christians of various dominations were prohibited by their churches from taking titles because the ceremonies in course of taking the titles are mingled with the pagan rites. He further notes that in order to avoid participating directly or indirectly in the pagan worship connected with title taking and yet reap the benefits of taking titles, the Christians and the pagans came to agreement approved by the church hierarchy that the procedure of taking title should be the payment of money which substitutes the yams, the cooking of food and sacrificial ceremonies according to pagan rites. The Roman Catholic position is rather pragmatic and tends towards a compromise. The official position is that a Roman Catholic member who feels he must become an ozo title holder might be allowed to do so. The permission must come from the Bishop of the diocese if he is satisfied that the title as performed is not contrary to Christian teaching, practice, attitude and values.

However, Christians' quest for ozo title is to satisfy the people's present yearning for privileges, titles, class distinction and pompous display of wealth incidental to material age. Thus such names as Okaa obuluzo, Ochili ozua, Omenka, Onye nwe aku to mention but a few are conferred on Christian holders. The reason for ozo title taking among the Christians is the Igbo man's knowledge of the British system of knighthood and lordship and his contact with the Yorubas who excel every other people on the west coast in their flair for chieftaincies and titles.

Thus, Christianity has affected ozo title taking adversely because the Christians themselves are not into keeping the norms and taboos of ozo title ship. What they are after is the social status and perhaps the economic gain accruing from the ozo institution.

Western Education

This is another contributing factor affecting ozo institution and its names. There are two modes of ozo title taking in Abba town nowadays namely- the Christian mode and the original cultural mode. Though relative and peculiar to each Igbo community, it retains the true sense and customs of ozo title. Ozo title in modern mode translates all the rituals and religious ceremonies into money. This has been the possibility of the title to lose its values in the hands of the non-Christian holders. Apparently, it is devoid of the sanctity and the feeling which the customary ozo as an institution possesses and diffuses among its members.

The absence of the fear of the earth deities in the modern system of ozo title taking saps it of the moral sanctions and sanctity associated with the traditional ozo title. The revived Ozo title as a result of western civilization is not ozo title geared to relationship but bears the mark of conspicuous consumption and split of political personality. Formerly, ozo title is known for the justice and holiness which demand its members to live a holy life worthy of emulation. But today, you find ozo title holders living a profane life, lying, embezzling public funds, and the worst of all, committing adultery. What its members are interested in is their share and not necessarily the source of the money even though thieves are barred from title taking in the olden days and it is a sacrilege for stolen goods or money to be offered. Hence, the modification of the ozo title taking and its names deprives these of their real meaning.

Urbanization

Besides the direct agency actions of the Western education and Christianity discussed above, the existing level of social change already present in the Igbo society had its own eroding effects on the ozo institution and its names.

The modern revival of urbanization started with the advent of colonial powers. People easily flock to the newly created and fast growing townships in search of either job whether in manufacturing industries in trading, service functions or places for business. The city is not on community based on kinship or tribal relationship, but merely an aggregation of individuals (Mbiti 1969). The influx from the rural villages to the townships promotes the process of urbanization, as the population of the townships continue to grow. Migrants with different rural backgrounds find themselves together in the townships. Differentiation in lifestyle increased greatly.

The accepted effect of this heterogeneity of the urban population is the slackening of the controlling effect of the different villages' rural traditions, while the modern systems of social control take over. With the absence of community sentiments in the townships, the basis of the sacred power of the ozo institution and its names is effectively lost. Ozo institution and its names are devoid of the traditional awe and respect which are exerted in the olden days. Ozo and its names as a traditional institution are killed by city life. They become simply a form of dramatic play which anybody irrespective of personality or class can take, without pre-condition of initiation; nor any fear of earth deities, hence, those numerous ozo names without their real meanings. Examples are Ogbu neche ndo- fig tree that gives shade, Onwa na etili ora-Moon that shines for the masses, and so on.

Materialism

Materialism is the belief that only material things exist. In other words, it is the tendency to value material things (wealth, bodily comforts and so on) too much and spiritual, artistic and intellectual things are minimized. The reason for the modernization of ozo title names is materialism, under which we have social aspects of it. Socially, because of the modern trends, people answer any name they like regardless of the religious and the real meaning. They want to be noticed among others and to show that they have money. This account for why there are numerous names without religious implications. Examples are Ochiliora- Public leader, Ozulu umu ogbenye- Feeder of the poor, Akukalia-Surplus wealth, Ome ka nti nu- One whose achievement deserves publicity, Nwa ka ibe ya- A son whose is greater than others, Opulu ozo- He who has enough for ozo title and so on. These over pomposity by this group of people made them to take ozo title before their elder brothers or while their fathers are life. In the olden days, before a man could take ozo title, he would make sure that his elder brother has taken the title or he would initiate his elder brother. And moreover, their father would not be a life. However, one attraction of the ozo title is that it confers on the holders pompous title or praise names- Aha otutu and a feeling of dignity as an important and influential member of the society. But today, the reverse is the case. People do not maintain good names rather they use it as a fancy.

To sum it up, modern trends have dealt a serious blow on ozo institution and its names in our society.

The Future of Ozo Title- Taking and its Names

The future is uncertain because of people's yearning for privileges, title, class distinction and pompous display of wealth- incidental to material age. The uncertainty of future should be checked by the ozo title holders especially the non-Christians by taking into consideration some aspects of ozo title norms, taboos, and customs. By this, it is meant they should try to see and feel the values of ozo title more than the values of money being realized from the new entrants. The non-Christians or the traditionalists should try to set examples for the Christians by keeping the rules and regulations of the ozo title taking. This will help to uphold the benefit and real meaning of the ozo title and its names. This is because what affects ozo title has automatically affected its names as well. They should inculcate in the minds of Christian young men the reason for the ozo title and its names. This is because if this excessive wealth is not curbed in them, in the near future they may inject new idea which may not augur well with ozo institution and its names. And once this is done, ozo title taking and

its names will completely lose their religious, social, economic and political values or importance.

However, the modern people should see privileges as responsibility and also what makes a personality and not vice versa. They should see ozo title as the culture of the town and not exactly the means of exhibiting wealth.

In summary, the modern people of Abba must as a matter of necessity reflect their ethos, continue the best there is in ozo title taking and its names in order to save ozo institution from Christianisation in the near future.

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