

## **IGBO TRADITIONAL PRACTICE OF “OZO” TITLE: ANY RELEVANCE TO NIGERIAN POLITICS?**

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### **Abstract**

Politics has always been considered a game of power, but true leadership is a test of character. In a society where politics is born out of self-interest and the hidden quest to embezzle public funds and grow one's pocket, the call for ethical leadership has become increasingly urgent. The *Ozo* title, deeply dedicated to ethical leadership values such as integrity, accountability, and communal service, becomes one of the best models for comparison with Nigerian political leaders. *Ozo* title system and the modern Nigerian politics that is embodied with nepotism, corruption, exclusivity, and poor governance are better juxtaposed for a standard meaningful solution for Nigerian political leaders. This study traces the historical origins of the *Ozo* institution, drawing attention to its role in pre-colonial leadership, the moral authority it held, and the initiation process that ensured only individuals of good character and dedication to communal service obtained the title. Without prejudice to its strength, the *Ozo* system faces challenges today, especially at the level of exclusivity created by financial barriers; its core leadership values, however, remain very relevant in advocating for political accountability and ethical governance. This research posits that Nigeria can develop a political culture dedicated to service rather than personal gain by incorporating *Ozo* leadership ethics into governance through leadership training, civic education, and merit-based appointments. By examining the wisdom of the *Ozo* institution and its leadership ethics, we can discover significant steps towards building a political system that prioritizes service over ambition, justice over favoritism, and common good over personal gain.

**Keywords:** *Ozo*, Colonialism, Nigerian politics, Igbo.

### **Introduction**

#### ***Definition of “Ozo” in Igbo society***

The concept of *Ozo* among the Igbos represents elite title and institution that symbolizes honour, leadership and moral authority.<sup>1</sup> It goes beyond the simple understanding of a rank; it is a sacred institution designated, as a reward, for individuals who have shown wisdom, integrity and commitment in carrying out duties tied to assigned positions in the communities.<sup>2</sup> Aside from spiritual and political responsibilities, taking the *Ozo* title indicates social prestige.<sup>3</sup> Those who attain this position become a mirror example of morality; they are expected to uphold justice, accountability and moral leadership.<sup>4</sup> In the Igbo culture, the word *Ozo* is attributed to a person who has passed through moral and ritual transformation. They are, therefore, believed to have been selected and purified.<sup>5</sup> The Igbos regard *Ozo* title holders as custodians of truth and fairness.<sup>6</sup> And because they are considered to be spiritual and its beliefs ancestral, the initiation into the title involves intricate rituals that includes purification ceremonies and oath-taking. This is meant to strengthen the sacred essence of the *Ozo* title.<sup>7</sup> Once the initiation is completed, candidates are, hence, considered as bridge between the Living and the Ancestors.<sup>8</sup> Outside of its spiritual significance, the *Ozo* title is also considered to retain social and political influence.<sup>9</sup> The voices of *Ozo* title holders are very much respected in topics of common interests and their very presence necessitates fairness in decision-making.<sup>10</sup> Not everyone is able to attain this position because of the nature of its rigorous process that also requires a sustainable level of financial stability. However, those who have the financial strength of attaining this status shoulders remarkable responsibilities of upholding justice, accountability and moral leadership.<sup>11</sup> Despite the historical significance of the *Ozo* Institution, its influence has been minimized by the structure of the modern governance.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the intricate essence of the *Ozo* institution remains untainted when it comes to its inherent virtue of justice, uprightness and fairness in matters of communal interests in Nigeria politics.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the *Ozo* institution still stands as a symbolic model of leadership based on merit and honour; it, therefore, remains a model for a just political system.<sup>14</sup>

#### ***Historical Origins and its Role in Traditional Leadership Structures***

In one of his writings, Idigo Fidelis highlighted that the origin of the Ozo institution is traceable back to Eri the progenitor of the Igbos. He introduced the republican and aristocratic institution of the Ozo title known as *Odoloma* Eri. This is a sacred system of government by the institution of the Ozo title-taking, which is said to have originated since the time of Eri ‘*Ube Eri*’.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, the *Odoloma* Eri evolved to become the Ozo title society, where its members would serve as advisers and ambassadors to Eri.<sup>16</sup> And that is why, according to Idigo, it is necessary that the officiating priest throughout the stages of the Ozo initiation rites would be an Nri priest. This tradition finds its root in the sacred role of *Menri* (Nri), whose official responsibility is to ensure that the prospective members of the *Odoloma* Eri meet certain criteria.<sup>17</sup> In the pre-colonial times, traditional governance was structured around moral authority/leadership and communal interest; that is where the Ozo institution finds its historical origin.<sup>18</sup> This system of government capitalized on integrity, accountability, and service to the community. The Ozo title was earned through personal merits of moral standards and wealth, unlike the hereditary structure of leadership.<sup>19</sup> Thus, one has to prove he deserves a seat among the Ozo institution by living right and also living for the community through financial communal services that would benefit the community. Title holders served as advisors, judges, and custodians of the Igbo customs; that is, they displayed significant roles in serving as moral leaders.<sup>20</sup> However, they did not stop in the political affairs; they went on to reinforce the sacred essence of the Igbo culture by participating in religious and cultural practices.<sup>21</sup> Research shows that the house of the Ozo title holder was like a sanctuary to the people; when a fugitive runs into such a house, he is spared the angry mob’s punishment until the Ozo calls for a gathering and justly handles the dispute in fairness.<sup>22</sup> This goes on to indicate the relevance of the Ozo institute in any community that yearns for moral leadership.

### ***Purpose and scope of the study***

This study aims to explore the historical importance of the Ozo institution and its role in traditional Igbo leadership. It attempts to analyze how the value of justice, fairness, and social responsibility, an embodiment of the Ozo institution, can proffer commendable options for contemporary governance, especially in Nigeria. Thus, through an examination of its ethical foundations, this study emphasizes the importance of indigenous leadership in tackling the modern political challenges.

The scope of this paper is to analyze the origins of the Ozo institution, its influence in traditional leadership, and the factors that contributed to its decline. It also examines whether its moral principles can continue to serve as a model for modern governance. Although the research focuses on the Igbo society, it draws holistic connections to the Nigerian leadership practices and emphasizes the need to focus on the value of the traditional system of leadership in shaping morally responsible governance.

### **Understanding the Ozo Institution**

#### ***The Meaning and Significance of “Ozo”***

Among the Igbos, the Ozo title was one of the oldest of all titles. The institution comprises individual achievers who were highly respected and revered within and outside their communities. Thus, they are like high priests in their respective families. The respected Ozo title was mostly available to the wealthy sons of the community (Diala – implying that they must not be of slave origin).<sup>23</sup> The Ozo institution is considered to be the highest and most important religious, spiritual, and social grouping in Southeast Nigeria, and so most people readily refer to its members as a sacred representation of the ancestors in human form.<sup>24</sup> In one of his interviews with Augustine Obi, Innocent Ogbonna records that the Ozo title is taken by individuals known as Nze, which literally means living spirit or an ancestor, and so when he takes the Ozo title, he automatically becomes “Onye Ozo,” literally meaning another person.<sup>25</sup>

In the Igbo society, the Ozo title is not merely a prestigious position but one of sacred responsibility. This position signifies a person’s commitment to justice, fairness, and the communal interest.<sup>26</sup> Because the title holders are seen as the bridge between the living and ancestors, the Ozo title holders are known to embody the necessary wisdom and moral authority required for moral leadership. The required process of entering the Ozo institution is streamlined down to two important factors, which include: material wealth and untainted reputation. This requirement ensures that not just anyone is eligible for the position.<sup>27</sup>

In the scroll of Igbo history, the Ozo institution has remained the symbol of moral traditional leadership, rooted in integrity and accountability. While modern influences have reduced its authority, the Ozo

institutional foundational values remain the source of inspiration in debates on moral leadership and communal harmony in the present-day society.<sup>28</sup> In the Igbo society, the Ozo institution cannot be removed from the cultural and spiritual practice of the Igbo community, which they represent. Thus, they go beyond the mere title of prestige.<sup>29</sup> In its cultural dimension, the Ozo title serves as a symbol of honour, leadership, and discipline that strengthens communal principles and guarantees that those who attain it become embodiments of the high standard of virtue.<sup>30</sup> The process of this initiation is a cultural practice that involves elaborate rituals, social validation, and a feast that represents an individual's transition into a renowned status within the society.<sup>31</sup> The cultural dimension of the Ozo institution is more often than not intertwined with its spiritual dimension. This is so because the Ozo title has been considered to be a gate to the community of the ancestors, who are the spiritual guides of the Igbo community.<sup>32</sup> Hence, the cultural activities of the Ozo institution cannot be removed from its spiritual implication.

Robert Nicholas (1994: 54), cited by Madukasi Francis (2018), argues that Initiates of the Ozo title are said to inherit a melo-rhythmic tradition of talking instruments that is generally not accessible to the ordinary members of the community. This instrument, which he referred to as 'the idiophonous slit-drum', is best known as a 'traditional transmitting instrument of telegraphy'.<sup>33</sup> Since this spiritual encounter through the use of the instrument is only accessible to the initiates, the common way to infect the entire community with this spiritual encounter is through the creation of what Fitzgerald et al (1995:57), cited by Madukasi, call the "breeze of blessing". This is born out of ritual dance done by actual initiates of the Ozo title.<sup>34</sup>

### ***The Process of Attaining "Ozo" Title***

The Ozo title is reserved only for individuals who meet the required criteria and eligibility. Thus, attaining the Ozo title is not a privilege, but a merit based on wealth, character, and achievement, which are the key factors in evaluating eligibility.<sup>35</sup> The candidates for the initiation must be individuals of unquestionable character, known for their uprightness, fairness in judgment, and resilient spirit in upholding communal interest.<sup>36</sup> They are also meant to be of original blood from the sons of the soil, otherwise known as *Diala*. In the same line, they are most times expected to come from families with a history of nobility; this is to reinforce the expectation that Ozo title holders are meant to serve as role models in their personal and communal affairs.<sup>37</sup>

In the process of selection, there are necessary consultations to be sure the person meets the criteria for eligibility. This consultation is carried out among elders, existing Ozo title holders, and community leaders for the achievement of a credible result.<sup>38</sup> The next step involves the rigorous initiation process that includes elaborate initiation ceremonies filled with meaningful rites that signify their entry into a new chapter of life.<sup>39</sup> During these rituals, the candidates are presented with symbolic items that Jean During (1993:561) in Madukasi's work identifies as "the image of both the heavens and the assembled circle of mystics".<sup>40</sup> This initiation symbolizes rebirth, transforming the candidate into a new person. While the initiation is elaborate, the responsibilities of the Ozo title holders are demanding. They serve as custodians of the tradition, mediators between the living and the ancestors, and moral authorities in the communities. Thus, they become role models for morality among the Igbo society.<sup>41</sup> They are expected to show wisdom in their actions and judgments. They are also an essential part of the religious rites, closing the gap between the living and the ancestors. That is such a great honour, accompanied by greater responsibilities.<sup>42</sup>

### ***The Core Values of the "Ozo" Title***

In Igbo society, the Ozo title transcends its symbolic status; it is also an embodiment of a deep commitment to integrity, accountability, and service. The Ozo initiates are expected to uphold an unwavering moral excellence, acting as pillars of truth and fairness in society.<sup>43</sup> Because title holders must live as examples, the Ozo institution embodies integrity, upholding transparency in their actions and ensuring justice prevails. Their misconduct can become ugly scandals and lead to a loss of respect and influence if it persists. Sometimes it could result in the unmaking of an Ozo initiate.<sup>44</sup> Another core value

of the Ozo institution is accountability. Initiates become responsible for communal interest, granting advice on matters concerning leadership, resolving disputes, and upholding ancestral culture.<sup>45</sup> Their actions must be in the best interest of the community, ensuring that their decisions promote peace and harmony. They are not in a position to enrich themselves or act solely for their own benefit.<sup>46</sup>

### **Traditional Igbo Governance and the Role of Ozo Title Holders** ***Pre-colonial Political System***

The pre-colonial Igbo society lacked a centralized government, unlike other kingdoms and empires. Hence the popular saying: "*Igbo enweghi eze*". The Igbo people lived in self-governing, autonomous communities, with elders making decisions for communal interests after collective deliberation, based on the traditions of individual autonomous communities.<sup>47</sup> Each village managed its own political affairs independently, led by a council of wise and respected elders, lineage heads, and titled men, including Ozo title holders, who were instrumental in ensuring that law and order were maintained.<sup>48</sup> It was the duty of the Ozo institution and other title holders to uphold a leadership system built on integrity, fairness, wisdom, and service rather than lineage. Thus, leadership was earned and not inherited; this ensured that the leadership system remained adaptable and meritocratic.<sup>49</sup> There was also the age-grade system that was vital in uniting the youths with the common interest of keeping the community safe through security checks; they were also helpful in organizing communal labor, while the elders provided guidance and settled disputes.<sup>50</sup>

It was difficult to separate religious and spiritual beliefs from governance; leaders relied on the counsel of deities and ancestral spirits for important decisions. The *Ofo* staff, representing divine authority, played a crucial role in settling disputes and ensuring justice aligned with ancestral customs. Thus, the major ritual symbolic object used for justice in Igbo society is the *Ofo* staff.<sup>51</sup> This pre-colonial political system ensured accountability and collective involvement, preventing the centralization of power in the hands of one leader.<sup>52</sup> Although the heritage of virtue in leadership was disrupted by colonial rule, some of the defining values of Igbo governance, such as democracy, fairness, and collective leadership, have continued to have a lasting impact on leadership practices today.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Impact of Colonialism on "Ozo" Institution***

The colonial rule ate deep into the morals of the Ozo institution and other leadership institutions among the Igbo society; it reduced its influence and reshaped its traditional role in Igbo society.<sup>54</sup> The Ozo title holders, before the colonial rule, were respected leaders and were instrumental in leadership, settling disputes, and maintaining cultural traditions. Their power was derived from collective recognition and sacred endorsement, upholding justice and ethical leadership in governance.<sup>55</sup> With the establishment of British colonial administration came the breakdown of the Igbo's traditional political framework. The colonial government imposed indirect rule, favoring warrant chiefs who lacked the respect for the moral and cultural standing of Ozo title holders.<sup>56</sup> This change affected the authority of the Ozo institution, because authority was now given to individuals selected by the British colonials rather than those chosen by the Igbo community based on merit and integrity.<sup>57</sup>

Additionally, colonialism brought Western governance and legal structures, overshadowing and weakening indigenous institutions. The moral authority and the governing power of the Ozo institution were weakened; their impact on communal decisions gradually faded alongside their political authority.<sup>58</sup> Again, Christianity and Western education also played a role in this decline, when some converts started perceiving traditional titles as inconsistent with their newfound religious beliefs. Consequently, the Ozo institutional growth was heavily threatened, and many stopped taking the title because they found it incompatible with Christianity.<sup>59</sup>

Colonialism also created a rift among the Igbo society when it shifted wealth and prestigious status away from the Ozo institution to the colonial administrators, colonial traders, and Western-educated elites. A new economic class was created that was independent of the validation from the Ozo institute. Wealth and prestige became tied to Western education and employment in the colonial system.<sup>60</sup> Despite facing

challenges, the *Ozọ* institution continues to exist, though in an altered form. Although its political power has weakened, it remains a symbol of respect, cultural preservation, and moral leadership in Igbo society.<sup>61</sup> The contemporary initiative to safeguard and reshape the institution reflects a deepened understanding of the historical value of the *Ozọ* institution and its contribution to current leadership structures.<sup>62</sup> Thus, highlighting the perseverance of Igbo cultural heritage and its resilience in the face of foreign disruption.

## **The Contemporary Nigerian Political Landscape**

### ***Key Challenges in Nigerian Politics***

Among the challenges facing Nigerian politics are corruption and a lack of accountability, which impact governance, economic development, and public trust.<sup>63</sup> This corruption can be observed in various forms, including the misappropriation of public funds, bribery and vote-buying, abandoned projects, selective justice, police bribery, human rights abuses for financial gain, and fuel subsidy fraud. Others include budget padding, nepotism and favoritism, money laundering, and corruption in education and healthcare, among others.<sup>64</sup> Many politicians and government officials prioritize self-enrichment and personal achievements, often neglecting the interests of the broader community.<sup>65</sup>

The lack of accountability has become a significant factor that has fostered corruption in post-colonial Nigerian politics. The absence of strong enforcement of anti-corruption laws, a lack of vigilance in political observance of judicial processes, and bribery have enabled many defaulters to evade punishment due to the offences they have committed or abetted.<sup>66</sup> Sometimes, corruption cases are exposed, but prosecutions are often delayed or compromised; this has sponsored continuous dishonesty in the political system of government.<sup>67</sup> The people have lost trust in the government because of the deficiency in accountability.<sup>68</sup>

Another major challenge is the weak institutional structures in the country. There is a strong lack of independence, and institutional bodies are not able to function on their own. Government institutions like the judiciary, law enforcement, and anti-corruption agencies face challenges such as inefficiency, political manipulation, and insufficient funding.<sup>69</sup> This lack of independence prevents them from performing their duties effectively, thereby allowing corruption and misconduct to flourish.<sup>70</sup>

The electoral system is also compromised by institutional weakness, resulting in practices such as vote manipulation, lack of transparency, and weak enforcement of electoral laws. The persistence of these problems disrupts fair elections and reduces public confidence in the electoral system.<sup>71</sup> In the same vein, weak legislative oversight crumbles accountability and allows the executive to wield unchecked power, contributing to ineffective policy enforcement.<sup>72</sup> The absence of stable institutions results in inadequate implementation of policies and reforms, leading to short-term success.<sup>73</sup> Although steps have been taken to improve governance structures, legislative reforms, and encourage active public participation, these efforts aim to develop strong institutions that preserve democratic values, uphold the rule of law, and promote transparency.<sup>74</sup>

There are also the ethnic and political divisions that stand as one of the challenges in Nigerian politics. In a country with over 250 ethnic groups, political allegiance is now influenced by regional ties and ethnic identities rather than by policy or individual competence.<sup>75</sup> It would be easy to deduce that this deep-rooted division fostered favoritism, marginalization, competition for power, etc. Thus, creating rifts that undermine the unity of the country.<sup>76</sup> Rather than promoting inclusive governance, political parties often capitalize on ethnic sentiments to garner political support, thereby further exacerbating divisions. Consequently, elections were usually determined by religious and ethnic divisions, with leaders focusing more on regional interests than on the country's overall development.<sup>77</sup> This creates a continuous cycle of suspicion, with specific groups feeling left out of the decision-making; this fuels political instability and calls for inclusive representation.<sup>78</sup>

There must be a deliberate effort to promote national integration in order to address these divisions. Considerations should be made for equal distribution of resources and promotion of leadership based on merit rather than ethnicity.<sup>79</sup> Although Nigeria has made an attempt to foster unity through policies such as the Federal Character Principle, the creation of States, and the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), sustained political reforms and civic education in schools are necessary to form an inclusive democracy.<sup>80</sup>

### ***Comparison between "Ozo" Leadership Ethics and Nigerian Political Practices***

In the Igbo cultural setting, the Ozo title represents a leadership system that is based on ethical values, which include merit, integrity, and communal interest. These were necessary values for eligible candidates for the Ozo initiation. Thus, it was necessary to have these qualities and also wisdom, fairness, and selfless leadership to gain the respect and validation of the community members and the elders as well.<sup>81</sup> This system of leadership eligibility promotes a meritocracy, where leadership is based on one's character and contributions to the successful achievement of communal interests, as well as serving the people rather than focusing on personal self-interest.<sup>82</sup> Rather than upholding these values, the Nigerian political system is largely driven by nepotism, favoritism, and corruption as opposed to meritocracy. Political leadership selections are frequently influenced by personal and ethnic connections instead of prioritizing capability and ethical standing or even character.<sup>83</sup> Many politicians do not pay attention to public interests, but they focus on enriching themselves, disrupting good governance, and marginalizing the citizens. The electoral process that is meant to reflect the will of the people is rather compromised by the buying of votes, manipulation, and rigging; this has been known to disrupt good governance.<sup>84</sup>

The ethical principles of Ozo leadership stand in stark contrast to contemporary Nigerian politics, revealing a disconnection between historical values and present-day governance. Opposed to the moral responsibility embodiment of the Ozo system, Nigerian politics has continued to struggle with ethical challenges that impede national growth.<sup>85</sup> There is a need to go back to the drawing board and re-examine the core values of the Ozo system of leadership and integrate them into the Nigerian political system, which appears to lack the necessary values for good governance.<sup>86</sup>

The Igbo leadership is traditionally built on the principle of communal service, in which leaders are expected to uphold justice, fairness and the common good of society. In this context, leadership is not an opportunity to enrich one's pocket, but an opportunity to serve better than the previous leader who is believed to have set a good example by his moral standards as a leader.<sup>87</sup> The Ozo initiates become members through proven integrity, wisdom, and public service, making sure that leadership remains a position of honour and responsibility and not a position for acquiring power and amassing wealth for personal benefits. Continuous emphasis on meritocracy is to ensure that leadership is essentially for those who will serve the community by promoting communal interests.<sup>88</sup>

Unlike the Ozo system, leadership in modern Nigerian politics is often dominated by self-serving leadership rather than communal welfare. Nepotism and favoritism frequently influence political appointments, prioritizing personal or ethnic ties over qualified candidates for leadership.<sup>89</sup> Many political leaders prioritize their own interests over the communal interest, diverting resources meant for the people towards private enrichment. The absence of conscious accountability of the leading office makes it difficult for the people to trust the government or their promised agendas.<sup>90</sup> The sharp contrast between these systems of governance calls to mind the need to return to ethical leadership that places emphasis on the common good and fairness over personal ambition. The Ozo system promotes a model of leadership that, when followed, provides an opportunity for the people to enjoy a leader with prioritized dedication to the pursuit of the common good.<sup>91</sup>

### **The Contemporary Nigerian Political Landscape**

#### ***Enhancing Political Leadership and Governance***

Good governance is built upon the strong pillars of integrity and moral authority, which provide a foundation for accountability, trust, and effective leadership. A society thrives when its leaders are driven by integrity and a commitment to the common interest over personal interest.<sup>92</sup> The absence of integrity in

leadership creates a system damaged by corruption, nepotism, and incompetence, thereby weakening public trust in institutions and dividing leaders from citizens. When a government prioritizes self-interest over accountability, reinstating integrity and fairness becomes a challenge.<sup>93</sup> The Ozo initiates are considered to be models for the highest moral standards, upholding justice, fairness, and communal interests. The process of initiation ensures that only men of good moral standing and character are eligible to join the institution.<sup>94</sup> The Ozo title holder is a moral compass and not just a leader; he is bound by oaths to defend the truth and maintain accountability of the office he has received.<sup>95</sup> It is these values that foster trust within the community, because people rely on their leaders to act with fairness and wisdom in decision-making.<sup>96</sup>

When these principles are applied to the modern Nigerian political leadership, they could bridge the gap between leadership and public trust. Leaders who show evidence of integrity and moral authority naturally command respect and actually earn the love and trust of the people.<sup>97</sup> When leaders, following the accountability mechanism of the Ozo system, are held accountable for their actions, it could help to change the moral view of the Nigerian political leaders. They would learn to govern with the sole aim of meeting the demand for communal interests.<sup>98</sup> This would help to grow a country where leaders can become more transparent, accountable, and beneficial to all.

### ***Potential for Institutional Reform***

Nigeria's potential for institutional reform lies in incorporating traditional ethical leadership values, such as those of the Ozo system, into the Nigerian governance structure.<sup>99</sup> In Igbo society, the Ozo title serves as a model of leadership founded on merit-based principles, accountability, and dedication towards serving the community; and these are principles common to effective governance.<sup>100</sup> As opposed to the modern political system, which is very much characterized by nepotism and personal gain, the Ozo institution upholds a system where leadership is only attainable based on one's show of integrity, wisdom, and dedication to serving the community.<sup>101</sup> By institutionalizing the selection of leaders based on merit and upholding strict public administration standards, corruption and poor governance performance could be tackled.<sup>102</sup>

A fundamental component of institutional reform is reshaping leadership at the grassroots level. Local governance functions as the foundation for national politics; however, national politics continues to fail because it is based on nepotism and the absence of transparency.<sup>103</sup> With its strong moral principles and dedication to communal interests, the Ozo system presents a valuable model for strengthening leadership at the level of local governance.<sup>104</sup> At the grassroots level, political reorientation could be encouraged by incorporating ethical education into the political education and encouraging communal participation that fosters common interests. This will encourage effective accountability and ensure that the leaders are regarded with respect and love.<sup>105</sup>

By integrating the ethical values of the Ozo institution, Nigeria's institutional reforms can create a governance model that blends cultural heritage with practical governance efficiency. The infusion of these principles into contemporary governance can restore faith in governance, reinforce democratic responsibility, and create a more balanced and political order.<sup>106</sup> To advance this reform, scholars must investigate the potential of traditional leadership structures to complement recent democratic institutions, identifying areas where they can reinforce accountability and public trust.<sup>107</sup>

### ***Challenges and Limitations***

Despite its moral and ethical strength, the Ozo institution may struggle to adapt to modern political governance due to its dedication to equal representation and participatory leadership. Although there remains a major concern about the tendency of the Ozo tradition to focus on elitism and exclusivity, creating barriers for inclusive leadership and democratic representation.<sup>108</sup> The Ozo title was historically reserved for wealthy or influential families, given the high financial costs and adherence to strict traditional rites associated with the Ozo title-taking. With eligibility strongly associated with financial

stability, the Ozo title initiation meant that only a privileged few could participate. Thus, it creates a disconnection between rulers and the general public by seemingly prioritizing the interests of the privileged over communal interests.<sup>109</sup> For a modern political system that aspires to inclusivity and democratic participation, there is a need to adopt those Ozo system values that would remove financial and social barriers that prevent people from democratic participation.<sup>110</sup>

The direct adoption of the Ozo system values could face strong challenges, considering Nigeria’s multicultural and religious diversity, and the fear of the possibility of achieving this without risking exclusion or bias towards a specific ethnic group. Because the Ozo system is of Igbo origin, it becomes difficult to be adopted by different leadership and religious structures since the ethnic groups have diverse religions and leadership systems, although similar in some ways, yet different from that of the Igbo Ozo system.<sup>111</sup> In a society of diverse religions and ethnic groups, governance must embrace inclusivity, accommodate and harmonize perspectives from different ethnic and religious groups in order to foster national unity. Some religious groups may find the Ozo title incompatible with their religious beliefs, complicating efforts to incorporate its values into governance.<sup>112</sup> Therefore, a successful integration of Ozo principles into governance can be achieved when it is modified to ensure inclusivity across ethnic groups and diverse religions, while sticking to its emphasis on fairness, justice, communal interest, and moral leadership.

### **Conclusion**

The Ozo institution is committed to leadership embodied with transparency, accountability, and service to the community; these are required leadership qualities that build an inclusive leadership, making it highly relevant for the Nigerian political system that is anchored on nepotism and self-interest. As opposed to this, the Ozo system encourages a communal interest-oriented leadership, chaired by fairness, justice, and inclusivity in decision-making. Its commitment to ethical leadership serves as a model for addressing corruption, lack of public trust in leadership and exclusivity.

By incorporating Ozo principles into the Nigerian politics, Nigeria can build a political system where candidates for leadership are examined based on integrity, competence, transparency and dedication to common interests. Promoting a merit-based leadership, accountability of office and inclusive participation can help unite the distinct traditional leadership ethics and the modern Nigerian political system, thereby, creating a just and reliable governance in Nigeria.

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