

Christianity and *Ọzọ* title-taking in Igboland: The Catholic Church response

Benjamin C. Nwokocha & Emmanuel C. Nnatuanya

Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

Abstract

Ọzọ society constitutes a well-structured and highly esteemed social stratum, which recognizes and places a member belonging to the group at a status much higher than the social level of his age or other mates in society. The Ọzọ ex-cathedra, are supreme in matters affecting the progress and well-being of all the communities in general. The findings of this study discovered that the Ọzọ title taking in the present times has been modified or Christened to exclude what was considered as fetish practices in order that Christians may participate in the exercise. Following this development, the study x-rays this modification and its relevance in promoting the Igbo traditional/Western religio-cultural assimilation. To achieve this task, the study adopted the primary and secondary sources of data collection with historical method of data analysis.

Keywords: Christianity, Catholic Church, and *ọzọ*, title-taking

Introduction

Ọzọ title-taking through varied stages and processes, elevates aspirants into the different classes of the *nze-na- ọzọ* society who, indeed, are bona fide members of the respective *ọzọ* titled groups. This organization is heterogeneous in character in the sense that members from the different classes of the *ọzọ* title systems are

accommodated therein to form a unified central body for the purposes of speaking with one voice in critical issues.

Titles and title-takings are integral components of the social life of the Igbo community. Both physical human beings (males) and prominent shrines (*alusi*) can take up the *ozọ* title in a manner prescribed by the law of the land also in consultations with appropriate oracles. Title-taking procedures are essentially similar among the Igbo but with some variations in nomenclatures and manners of approach.

Ozọ is an honourable title given to men comparable to knighthood in Christendom. The *Ozọ* titled man is expected to live above the common weaknesses of the ordinary person. As a result, he is highly admired and respected. One of his great hallmarks is truthfulness. The *Ozọ* is expected at all times to stand on justice. These virtues can as well be regarded as part of Christian ethics.

However, the *ozọ* title-taking in the present times has been christened and modified to exclude what may be regarded as fetish in order that Christians may participate in the exercises. Egudu, 2021 reporting the meeting held with the then Archbishop of Onitsha, Charles Heery about the mid 1950's, reported the Catholic Church's stance after modifying the institution by removing some restrictions, the Christians of Roman Catholic denomination were permitted to be initiated into the *ozọ* title society. It is in the light of this modification that this study x-rayed the Christian response vis-a-vis the Catholic church in regulating the *ozọ* institution in Igboland.

This signals the point of contact between Christianity and the Traditional Religion as expressed in the *Ozọ* Institution. *Ozọ* title is one of the most prestigious institutions the Igbo people cannot do away with. It is an institution that seeks to build the society's economic, ethical and moral values. The church in its attempt to

sanitize the institution, jettisoned what they considered as “idolatrous practices” in the institution to enable the Christians partake in the process. According to Egudu (2021), the quest for achievement is a part of the basic tenets of Christianity which is anchored in love and basic impulse behind man’s ceaseless struggles in life. It promotes truthfulness, justice, uprightness among others.

Therefore, it becomes necessary to ask if the Igbo culture did not have the flexibility to go through the huge cultural changes and influence and still retain some of its core features. In what way can Christianity, being a major religion in Nigeria be an asset in Igbo culture to resist Western negative influences? Can Christianity really enhance the Igbo culture and improve on their values?

In Igboland, *Ozọ* is the greatest achievement an average man can attain. *Ozọ* title confers on the recipient, honour and responsibility. Current researches show that *Ozo* title marks a high social status which consciously imparts in the society. The principles are found embedded in and assiduously struggled for in order to be attained. Generally, in Igboland, *Ozo* title is conferred to people who have good moral and ethical orientation. It is expensive such that it is mainly affordable to those who are wealthy enough to meet up with the demands of the title.

Igbo culture amidst Christianity and Westernization

The introduction of Christianity in Igboland brought about the exposure to new forms of life and changes to Igbo people’s world views. In spite of this development, there has been resilience of Igbo culture despite of western cultural influences. Apparently, it is also obvious that Christianity has been an asset in Igbo culture to resist western negative influences. It could also be said that with the huge influences from Western (Christian) cultures, the

Igbo identity is no more visible. Based on the findings, among the Igbo people of south-eastern Nigeria, Igbo culture remains the bedrock upon which interpersonal relationships are formed despite incursions of western ideologies. This paper observed that the Igbo people have shown resilience in their identity in a multicultural global world.

According to Ilogu (1974), Western names such as Joseph, Mark, Henry, were given to people through baptism to transform them from “heathen” to “Christians”. In marriage, monogamy was introduced in place of the predominant polygamy. Knighthood was introduced to replace *Ozọ* institution. Ekechi (1997) states that “with the introduction of modern Western cultural modes of dressing, traditional decorations, drawings and paintings as well as women beautifications with camwood (*uri*), and red dyes (*uhie*), were considered unfit for Christians”. This exposure to new forms of life and the possibilities it offered brought drastic changes to people’s world views.

The advent of Christianity in Igboland meant the introduction of a Christian world view. The religious beliefs, practices, and the provision of social services of this immigrant religion have impact on the religious and cultural life of the traditional communities. Christianity at times has undermined some of the traditional religious and cultural values which have fostered peaceful co-existence over the years. The Igbo have embraced Christianity and western culture which have displaced the traditional religion in its organized form yet the traditional religious beliefs and practices still rule the minds of many Igbo Christians. One of such beliefs and practices that have survived the onslaught of the forces of change in Igboland is the belief in deities.

Mbiti (1969) states that “deities though in retreat are very much alive. The average Igbo Christian would not normally

participate in the public worship of deities but would resort to deities for help when difficult life situations such as illness, misfortunes, deaths, barrenness, present themselves for solutions. “In this situation, culture clash is inevitable as the dominant culture strives to “over throw the recessive culture” (p.8). As conflict emerges, new modes of behaviour and lifestyle emerge which result in new identity. One of the major effects of this in this recent time is the resilience of Igbo culture. Alongside Christianity is the Igbo traditional religion (ITR) with a belief system that governs ethics and morality among much of the population. Christianity was inherited as a form of achievement that abolished “twin killing and human sacrifices.

According to Onwu (2005), “Christianity introduced education, built hospitals and charity homes. Christianity decreased superstition, increased and re-shaped the Igbo world view” (p.51). Ekpunobi and Ezeaku (2011) notated that: Some aspects of the traditional values and morality have been influenced by the processes of modernity that are passing through the African societies. Some values and morality are wearing new frames in order to grapple with the increasing socio-religious problems of the contemporary society. Christianity, with its message of hope and humanitarian concern attracted many Igbo people. The social security and human development that emerged at the time through education were all well attractive. The new possibilities ushered in by Christianity made people to embrace the missionaries without thinking of the implication it might have on them. The extent to which such western ideologies and their inherent traits of superiority have spawn conflicts with the outcome including destabilization of the economic, political and religious lives of the people.

The paper will show how Christianity could be an asset in Igbo culture to improve their social institutions one of which being *Ozo* institution. It is the intent of this paper to demonstrate how the church vis-a-vis Roman Catholic church have impacted on Igbo culture positively. Though the Igbo traditional religion was passed on to succeeding generations, but the advent of Christianity in Igboland had some influence on the traditional beliefs (Talbot, 1969).

Moreover, before the advent of Christianity, Africans were noted for their deep knowledge of God. Mbiti (1969) writes that “Africans are notoriously religious”. This could be seen from the fact that they believe in the existence of the supreme God – “*Chukwu* or *Chineke*” (Great God) and other minor gods whom they take to be the messengers of the supreme God, or who acts as intermediaries between man and the supreme God. They held “*Chukwu*” so high and cannot approach him directly and as such go through the deities. Deities are regarded as God’s representatives on earth. Some of these deities according to Otteberg (1958) are regarded “as the personification of phenomena such as rivers, hills, lightening and farms”. Different names are given by the people of Igboland for the deities in the pantheon. Ilogu (1974) recognizes four major deities in the pantheon of Igbo god. They are; “*Anyanwu*” (the sun god), “*Igwe*” (the sky god), “*Amadioha*” (god of thunder and lightning), and “*Ala* or *Ani*” (the earth goddess). Individuals worship the Supreme Being through their small deities and ancestors. Thus, the existence of many local deities in Igbo religion does not define their religion as polytheism. These deities have shrines, priests, and religious festivals as part of their worship. Igbo traditional religion involves several sacrifices, rituals, and initiations such as initiation into the masquerade court, the *Ozo* institution, *Nze* title, *Ichie/oha*/elders

council. (Tolbot 1967, Isichie, 2004). There are relationships between the gods, oracles, and divination (Ogbaa, 1992, Iroegbu, 2009), such as *Amadioha* (god of thunder), *Ogwugwu*, *Ahiajoku/Ifejioku* (yam goddess), *Chiokike* (god the creator).

The advent of Christianity has brought most of these gods and their worship to an end (Ilogu, 1996). The *dibia* (diviners) play important roles in Igbo religion and spirituality. Orji (2007) “explores the *Dibia* in historical contexts as priests, healers and diviners. They together with the chief priest (*onye isi ala/ Eze mmuo*) are intermediaries between the gods (spirits) and the people (humans)”(p.41). A distinct feature of the Igbo civilization is the absence of any formal, centralized political authority. According to Ilogu (1974), “they have egalitarian and republican structure with sub-groups and recognize the council of elders as the highest decision-making body who are the custodians of *Ofo* (symbol of authority)”(p.6). Land is the source of economic existence of the Igbo and is shared among patrilineal lines. There are communal and individual ownership of land. Igbo people also engage in commerce, craftsmanship and trade. The social life of the Igbo people is built on core values and ethics such as taboos, sacrileges, equality, and honesty. Certain rituals are performed in course of reconciliation, where if the offence is outrageous, the defaulter is utterly banished such as killing of human beings. They place high premium on male children as custodians of culture and inhabitants of the “*obi*” (homestead). Igbo culture venerates nature which is believed to be inter-connected with “*Chiokike*” (god the creator).

As Katherine (2001) notes, “there is a strong Igbo belief that the spirits of one’s ancestors keep a constant watch over them, the living show appreciation for the dead and run to them for future wellbeing” (p.4). The Igbo people worship “*Chukwu*” and

deserves to have their religious life correctly identified and labelled on their own cultural terms and relatives. It is therefore imperative to reflect on how Christianity helped Igbo religious ideologies to embrace change and continuity in their social and religious institutions.

The *ozọ* traditional institution in Igboland

The *Ozọ* institution in Igboland is one of the most enduring traditional institutions of Igbo society. The Igbo were organized in a non-centralized system whereby the traditional rulers of the different clans formed the highest political authorities in Igbo villages. (Afigbo, 1980). These were seen as the symbols of the people's past, custodians of their history and upholders and preservers of their culture and customs, epitome of cultural norms and values of the society such as truth, discipline, courage and responsibility and so on. (Emordi and Osiki 2008). It has frequently been falsely said that traditional institutions (*Ozọ* and traditional rulers are fetish cultural practices, or are undergoing struggles for relevance and survival in contemporary Igbo politics. The position here is that traditional *Ozọ* institution is never fetish in nature. It has always been relevant and has survived a lot of organized efforts to scrap it completely. Traditional institutions are very relevant in Igbo society but what it is clamouring for is constitutional role and recognition.

Despite this, traditional *Ozọ* institution has continued to exercise considerable influence and play active role in the political administration at all levels of Igbo world. For instance, in settling disputes among individuals in a community, such differences are mostly settled by the *Ozọ* title holders. The study argues that the continued relevance of the *Ozọ* title holders are very significant because their authority and legitimacy are derived from the

people's traditions and customs (Ashiru,2010). *Ozọ* occupied important positions among the peoples of Igbo land. Their positions were sanctioned by the traditions, history and culture of their respective communities who held them in high esteem and reverence (Amusa, 2010).

There is no gainsaying that one important feature of culture is that it is dynamic. Culture and traditions change as the socio-economic and other needs of a society change. A tradition suited for that society would need to be evolved. No culture is a finished product. It therefore follows that both the Igbo culture and Western culture must learn from each other. Ekechi, (1997) observed that some Christians were backsliding to idol worship as the social status they expected to gain from the new religion became unachievable. Some recreated new shrines and objects of worship as they had thrown away the ones they had before baptism. Some who dismissed their wives recalled them and also renewed the *Ozọ* title that they renounced. Not only that they returned to traditional religion, but also they remained there as “baptized pagans” answering Christian names”. Instead of denigrating the traditional culture, it would have helped the traditional systems to throw away the bath water while retaining the baby.

The response of the church as regards to *Ozọ* institution, however, is that of reform in repositioning the concept of change and diversity as a means by which the Igbo peoples embraced the expansion and change that resulted in cultural clash as the dominant culture strives to dislodge the recessive culture. Instead of condemning the practices without due regard to the values intrinsic in them, the church vis-a-vis the Catholic denomination have strived to establish commissions and centers for cultural studies in which relevant experts participate. In this way the core traditional values including the *Ozọ* title institution would be

preserved and enhanced. Although it seems that westernization and Christianity have “overthrown” all traditional Igbo cultures, evidence indicate that some core features of these cultures like *Ozọ* system have remained very significant.

The rituals of *mkpu-ozọ*

The rituals of *Nkpu-Ozọ* is the hall mark of *Ozọ*-taking in Igboland. The rituals are considered fetish by the church because of the sacrifices involved. In most Igbo communities, such rituals are usually carried out at about 3:30 am in the *Oye* morning. The key people involved in the ritual exercise include the head of the *Ozọ*-title, the aspirant, the *Okwa-nzu* boy or girl and *Umu-okpu*, depending on the community involved. The rituals are carried out in the shrine by the head of the *Ozọ* title in a given community. (Nwokoye ,2022). In Adazi-Nnukwu of Aniocha Local Government of Anambra State, the head of *Ozo* on getting to the shrine, takes his position by standing erect close enough to the *mkpu-Ozọ* (a staff of authority representing the *ozọ* institution), the aspirant is also made to stand beside the *mkpu-Ozọ* and in front of him the *Okwa-nzu* carrier is made to take a position near enough to the *mkpu-ozọ* while the *Umu-Okpu* (daughters of the land) wait at a distance of about thirty metres from the *Mkpu-ozọ*. While the head of the *ozọ* society holds his conventional *ofo* in readiness for the formal initiation rites, asks the titled man in potency, his title name. The *ozọ* designate would then state his name like *Ozọ Obunyelugo*, the head then strikes his *ofo* on the candidate’s forehead once; and moves two steps backwards and strikes his *ofo* on the ground saying, *Ozọ Obunyelugo, Iga-ezeka ya nka* (you will live long enough to enjoy the fruits of the title).

After the formal initiation, the head collects the fresh *ofo* from the new *ozọ* man, traditionally prays and consecrates it, and then

returns same to the new titled man as his own *ofò*. (Nwokedi, 2023). How tender or hard the head hits the forehead of an *ozo* man-in making with the *ofò* depends on their personal relationship. If the relationship is cordial, it will be a mild hit, but if otherwise, the wound he (the aspirant) sustains from the action may last for days. The head picks the *okwa-nzu* and gives to the new titled man; a cannon fire marking the end of the initiation ceremony. The end is followed with dancing to the *ufie* tune (traditional gong and drums) accompanied with extravagant entertainments. However, these rituals may not be considered fetish in its entirety but what the church disapproves is such ceremony being anchored in a shrine instead of a public square where everybody irrespective of individuals faith inclinations would easily partake in.

***Ozo* title taking as prescribed by the Catholic Church**

The *Ozo* title-taking in the present times has been modified or christened to exclude what the church considered as “fetish practices” which involves the rituals of *Mkpu-Ozo* in order that Christians may partake in the exercises. After removing the restrictions, Christian members of Igbo society were permitted by the church to be initiated into the *Ozo* title society. Being that the church would not accept any practice that promotes idol worship, the *Ozo* title-taking has to be modified for the interest of the Christians.

For the Christians, the basic requirement in *Ozo* title taking now in most Igbo communities is that aspirants would pay a lump sum of money (*iwa-ozo*) and then prepare sumptuous meals together. More than enough drinks would be provided for the *ozo* titled dignitaries as well as other people. At the end of the varied entertainments involving meals, drinks, traditional music, and other ceremonies, the aspirant then becomes a full-fledged member

of the *Ọzọ* society. The initiation is not as rigorous or involving as it used to be in the pre-colonial days since practices that are incompatible with the tenets of the Christian beliefs and practices have been removed to avoid running into conflicts with the church.

Conclusion

For purposes of modifying and consolidating the Igbo social and cultural institutions, the Catholic church in Igboland have taken a bold step in christening the *Ọzọ* institution to enable the Christian aspirants to partake in the exercise. The Catholic bishops Conference in mutual understanding with the Igbo stake holders; seeing about the well-being of the Igbo people, either revoked or amended certain ritual practices that are repugnant to the Christian faith. In the past, the exercise was usually presided over by the traditional chief priest but today has given room for Church leaders to partake in the ceremony. This is a welcome development and a part of social reformation of Igbo traditional culture and practice.

References

- Abalajiobi, D.T. (2010). Women participation and political process in Nigeria. Problems and Perspective. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*. 4(2), 75-83.
- Adesoji, A.O. (2010). *Traditional Ruler ship and Modern Governance in 20th century*. In Babawale, T.A. Alao and Adesoji (eds), *the Chieftaincy Institution in Nigeria*. Concept Publishers for Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization Lagos: Nigeria.

- Afigbo, A.E (1980). *Igboland before 1800*. In Ikime, O. (ed), *Grandwork of Nigerian history*. Heinemann Educational Publishers, Ibadan, pp.73- 88.
- Agbo, (C.O (2011). *Culture, Craft, Globalization*. In Oloidi, F.J. (ed).Nigerian Peoples, Cultures and Development. Enugu: Ebenezer Productions Nigeria, Ltd.
- Ali, A. (2006). *Growth and Development in Africa: Perspective in Gender Equity. Education and Development*, 9(1) 18-24.
- Amadi, L. E. (2014). Corruption and Development Administration in Africa: Institutional Approach. *Afr/J.Political Sci.Int.Relations*. 8(6), 163-174.
- Amusa, W. (2010). *The Story of Nigerians*. Untouchables. BBC News. retrieved 27th July, 2015.
- Anih, S. (1992). *Religious Ecumenism and Education for Tolerance*. Institute of Ecumenical Education, Thinkers Corner, Enugu, Nigeria. P. 31.
- Anyanwu, K. C. (1981). *African Philosophy*. C.BN. Rome. P.63.
- Ashiru, D. (2010). *Chieftaincy Institution and Grassroots Development in Nigeria*. In Babawale, T. A. Alao and Adesoji, A. (eds.), *The chieftaincy institution in Nigeria*. Concept Publishers for Centre for Lack and African Arts and Civilization, Lagos, pp; 115-140.

- Asinugo, E. (2014). *The church and the fight against Osu Caste system in Eastern Nigeria* Accessed 27/11/2016. International Journal of Theology and Reformed Tradition Vol.8 2016 Page 152.
- Berger, P. (1974). Some second thoughts on Substantive Versus Functional Definitions of Religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. (3), No. 2, pp. 125-133.
- Boffetti, J. (2004). *How Richard Rorty found Religion*. First Things, Issue Archive, May.
- Eboh, B. O. (1973). *The Concept of the Human Soul in Igbo Traditional Philosophy*. P.33.
- Egbu, D. E. (2021). *Education and Socialization*. Owerri; Springfield Publisher Ltd.
- Ekechi, N. G (1997). Culture Issues Woman's Human Rights: Among the Igbos of Southern Nigeria; An Approach of their Implications to Women Development. *International Journal of Forum for African Women Educationalist in Nigeria Vol No.3* p.214.
- Ekpunobi, G.C. and Ezeaku, B.S. (2011). *Art in the Renaissance*. 1st October.
- Emordi, C. and Osidi G.E, (2008) *The Africa Model and the Dialogue between North and South*. Fourth Dimension Publishing Company, Nigeria. P.149.

- Ilogu, F. K. (1974). *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland*. Cirencester, United Kingdom. P.138.
- Ekezie, J. O. (1966). *Spiritual Renaissance in Nigeria*. Nsukka: P. 42.
- Ilogu, F. K. (1996). *Moral Values as the Pivot for Sustainable Development in Nigeria*. Enugu: Nigerian Peoples Culture and Development.
- Iroegbu, , J. H. (2009). *Sociology*. Chicago: University Press.
- Isichie, I. (2004). Gender disparity and parental influence on secondary school achievement in Nasarawa State, Nigeria. *Journal of Research in National Development*. 8(2) 1-6.
- Katherine, A. (2001). *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our lives*. London: Profile.
<http://www.first.things.com/article/2008/09/how-richard-nortyfoundreligion-45>. [https:// www.very well.com/what-is-resilience-2395059](https://www.verywell.com/what-is-resilience-2395059).
- Mbiti, R. M. (1969). *Folk medicine*. Accessed 28th Nov. 2016.
- Nwokedi, B. U. (2023). *Appeasing the gods: The outrageous cultural practices in Igbo society*. Awka: SCOA.
- Nwokoye, N. K. (2022). *Christianity and African culture*. Enugu: Snap.
- Ogbaa, C. (1992). *Traditional Humane Living Among the Igbos*. Enugu, Fourth Dimension.

- Orji, C.K. (2007). *Cultural Resources in Nigeria; Rethinking Definition, Management and Value..* Journal of Liberal Studies. Nsukka; University of Nigeria Press.
- Onwu, E (2005). *Ofo:A Religious Symbol of Igbo.* Lagos: Nigeria Magazineno. P.82.
- Otterberg, E. C. (1958). *Christianity and Igbo Culture.* London; Nok Publishers.
- Talbot, P. E (1969). *Metaphysics: The Kpim of Philosophy.* Owerri, Nigeria: International Universities Press Ltd.
- Tolbot P. (1967). *Kpim of Personality: Treatise on the Human Person.* London: Macmillan.

Benjamin C. Nwokocha & Emmanuel C. Nnatuanya are lecturers in the Department of Religion and Human Relations, Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.