

The Language Contents And Other Values Of Igbo Ozo Title-Names In Towns East Of The Niger: The Example Of Nkpor And Her Neighbours

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Abstract

Ozo is an old institution in many parts of Igboland. Ozo title-taking among others is also an achievement that deserves respect. Many scholars have studied intensively and extensively ozo as institution as well as the title-taking that goes with it. Very little attention has been given to study the names taken during this title-taking. This paper analyzed some of these names in their language contents, and some social and religious imports. It ends with the observation that there is proliferation of title-giving and -taking today, and suggests the role Government could play to preserve this institution in its past glory and significance.

Keywords: The language contents and other values of title names.

1. INTRODUCTION

In many parts of Igboland, ozo title is about the highest title of honour. Literature has also shown that ozo as an institution has attracted a lot of intensive and extensive studies over the years by scholars of different disciplines¹. Some religious, social, and political significance have been treated by scholars. In the early eighties, this writer went from matrimonial to birth hometown Nkpor in Idemili L.G.A. of Anambra State to collect information on traditional beliefs and culture of the town in order to record them for self and for posterity. She had as informants at that time, her late father Chief R.W. Okagbue, late uncle Chief Anamalu Okagbue, Chief Oraike Egwuatu and Chief Nwoye Otogbolu. All of them were ozo titled men. The documentation was done in 1981 in writing and different aspects of the documentation have been used for different purposes since then. To update the information collected over decades ago, we have added to the informants from outside the town Chief P.C. Nwachukwu of Umuoji and Chief Ezeogidi. Umuoji is in Idemili L.G.A. of Anambra State too and is a brother town to Nkpor. After the new information gathering, a step was taken to compare the information with the documentation by other scholars. A lot in Igbo culture and tradition would no longer be lost as feared by some people. Many scholars have done a lot to document different aspects of Igbo culture and, it is left for the contemporary society to face the task of adapting them to modern living and promoting them, in their entirety. This paper has identified abuses of traditional title taking in modern Igbo societies and offered suggestions for preservation and promotion of same.

On ozo institution, we found out many repetitions of information by different scholarly works. These repetitions are however relevant for the following manifestation: Ozo is a very important institution in most towns of Igboland. In the olden days, as well as today, to take the title is a mark of achievement. It shows that the person has got wealth which he is using to uplift himself and his family in social rank and status. The association of ozo titled men in Igboland is known as “Nze na ozo” and the titled men are called. “Ndi Nze na ozo”. The ozo title is a social rank of distinction².

To take the title traditionally requires a number of rigorous stages in every part of Igboland where it exists. Ozo title has been depicted as a symbol of justice and ozo titled men of older generations as custodians and regulators of the customs and laws of the land. This last characteristic has not been mentioned with respect to today’s titled men. It has also been shown that ozo institution met some conflicts with Christianity during the colonial and few years after, when the institution was purely pagan, involving pagan rituals and sacrifices. The resolution of the conflicts has been documented, and Christians have been shown to take the title without jeopardizing their Christian beliefs³.

The above are some of the similarities of ọzọ institution in different parts of Igboland. Minor differences were found in the preliminary stages gone through before taking the title in different towns. In some towns like Onitsha, and towns in Awka area, all in Anambra State, the traditional ways of title taking require preliminary titles that must precede the ọzọ title. In Nkpor and Umuoji, different stages are necessary but these stages are not titles. There are other titles in the two towns which are not necessarily tagged to ọzọ title taking. Another minor difference exists in the number of ọzọ titles existing in different places. One scholar identifies six types of ọzọ in former Njikoka L.G.A which includes the present Anaocha LGA and part of present Dunukofia L.G.A, all in Anambra state. In Nkpor there are five types of ọzọ title, and in Umuoji there are four types. We noted that there are three types that are common to the areas mentioned. These three types are called, Ọzọ Ezeani, Ọzọ Ezeisi, and Ọzọ Okpala. The fourth, fifth and sixth vary in places where more than three titles exist. The five titles in Nkpor are, Ezeani, Ezeisi, Okpala, Ikwelle and Ọzọ Idi. Idi is the highest ọzọ title in Nkpor because the title is owned by Dimideke the founder of the town who is now a deified human being. In Njikoka, the six titles are, Ezeani, Dim, Dunu, Ọkpala and Ume. In Umuoji, Ezeani, Ezeisi, Ọkpala and Ikwelle are identified. In these other places, Ọzọ Ezeani is the highest. Ezeani symbolizes one who is in the service of the land, the earth goddess. The bearer of the title in the real traditional sense is the priest of mother earth, the earth goddess.

Similarities and minor differences were also found in the different services rendered by different titled men. There are differences as well as some similarities in the contents of the “sacred box” and other belongings that all ọzọ men must have. The key contents like ọfọ (staff of office), oche ọzọ (ọzọ stool), eagle feathers and ọgu ọzọ (also staff of office) are usually present in all ọzọ institutions. The rituals involved in the burial of ọzọ men are also similar in many places.

The major difference we found in ọzọ institutions of different places in Igboland is in the use of the word: Ndichie” or “Ichie”. Whereas many automatically regard every ọzọ man as “Ichie” and all ọzọ men as “Ndichie” the title is different in Nkpor and some neighbours. In Nkpor, an ọzọ man only stand the chance of being elected among the “Ndichie”. Ndichie is the ruling council of the town, the Igwe’s (chief of the town’s) cabinet. Nkpor has five villages in the following order of seniority: Umusiome, Isingwu, Ububa, Amafor and Mgbachu.

Each village has one Ichie in Igwe’s cabinet. In the same order of seniority these Ndichies to the five villages are called Onowu, Ogene, Owelle, Ozoma and Odu. To be elected as an Ichie takes a lot of material and other resources from the aspirant who makes the first move at the village level. In the olden days, the aspirant brought one big goat, sixteen big yams, one cock, twelve gallons of palm wine, one hot drink and sixteen kola nuts to the village ọzọ men who then make presentation to Igwe’s palace. The items were shared by Igwe and his cabinet. A new Ichie is elected on the death of any serving Ichie. Igwe does the red-capping of the Ichie. Wearing a red cap is also not automatic for ọzọ title in Nkpor. It has its own requirements in material and rituals. In the olden days, the final stage of the initiation into ọzọ used to be performed by Nze Nri. Nri is a town in Anambra state. Records also show that Eze Nri used to exercise power over not less than three quarters of the areas in Igboland. So many discoveries about Nri kingdom have shown that the saying “Igbo enwe Eze” (Igbo never have kings) is not true. Based on the above findings, we have decided for this paper, that long discussions on processes, types, requirements and refining of ọzọ institution to include Christians are no longer necessary. Not much was found on the significance of the different names taken on initiation into ọzọ. We have therefore chosen to do some discussion on a set of names that is common among ọzọ titled men in Nkpor and neighbouring towns. Some of the names are also taken for other titles apart from ọzọ

2. Igbo Ọzọ and other Title Names

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose/by any other word, would smell as sweet.”⁴ The above was the view of one British about names. In Igboland and many other parts of Nigeria, the answer will be different. The answer to the above question is not a simple one. There is so much in a name and many studies on Igbo names have shown that⁵. Some of the many descriptions of Igbo names say among other things, that they are not mere identification tags on the bearers, but that they are the language and the thought of the people. They are summaries of the personalities that bear them. They are also indications of present status and enunciated promise of future accomplishments. What then are in ọzọ and other Igbo title names? Do they have other characteristics that personal names do not have? We would attempt to answer the above questions through discussion of some sample names in the following paragraphs.

3. Sample of Ọzọ and other Title Names in Nkpor and her Neighbours: Their Language Contents and Thematic Values.

Taking a name is not a once- and- for – all affair in the life of a traditional Igbo⁶. This has meant that some individuals in Igboland have been addressed by up to three different names in their lifetime. Title taking, particularly ọzọ title taking has meant new names for the initiated, and oftentimes, it has also meant sending of old names, whether personal names, pet-names, “assumed” names or guy names to the “cooler.”

In Nkpor, as in many other towns, once a titled man, one gets addressed in public by a title name. The following names, which are not arranged in any particular order, are names commonly taken by people on initiation into ọzọ and other titles.

Many people answer Akunna. This name means father’s wealth. People who answer this name show that they earned the title through the wealth of their father. At times fathers also initiate their sons into ọzọ title and those sons take up the title when they become adults.

The name Nnabuenyi which literally means father is elephant glorifies the father of the bearer. Elephant is the biggest animal that we know and, to say that one’s father is an elephant shows high regard for one’s father who has been as big or great as to afford the great ọzọ title.

Many people also answer Akunne which means “mother’s wealth”. For these bearers, the wealth for the ọzọ title was made by their mother and thus the reverence to the mother by the name.

Others answer Akunwata which means child’s wealth. Nobody answer this name if any of the parents still lives, even if the person made the wealth by himself. Akunwata means therefore that the bearer made it on his own personal toils. Such a person can also answer Akunne or Akunna even if the parents are dead.

Some people answer Omeluora which means one who does charitable things for all. A name like this is often given to the bearer by the community. Oftentimes, such a person is a philanthropist and must have answered other names by himself. At times people take on the name on the satisfaction with their kindness to other people.

Some people answer Akukwesili which means that the bearer is worthy of his wealth, or that he merits his wealth. Another name is Ezeamanogaechi which means “king that people had long expected”. This means that the bearer has finally taken the title which many have long expected of him, but which, due to some reasons did not materialize as early as expected.

Iyase is a name which means that the bearer is now qualified for shares in the ọzọ institution. This name was actually borrowed from Igbo brothers west of the Niger.

Omeokachie is a name which shows that the bearer has not only taken one title but that from time to time he gets another for one of his sons. He does it again and again.

Okaibeya is a name which literally means that the bearer is greater than his mates (age-mates or set). Such a bearer sees himself as having built a house, married and taken the ọzọ title before his mates.

Onwanetilorá is a name which means the moon that shines for all. It shows that the bearer does things with his wealth to benefit everybody. Such a name and title is often given to somebody by the community as appreciation for his service to all. Such a person is often chosen as one of the representatives of his towns in, and outside the locality. He is one of the decision makers.

Akajiugo means hand that holds the eagle. Eagle is the king of birds and to answer the hand that holds the eagle shows that the person is great among the people as a result of his wealth.

Omeakaokwulu is a name, which means, he that does as he says. He had fulfilled his promises for his people. Oftentimes, this name is also given to the bearer by the community. It has been given to politicians for bringing facilities of “national cake quality” to the community.

Ochilozua is a name, which means somebody who looks after everybody. The bearer believes that he helps everybody in need and that he does not discriminate. He does not like to see people suffering.

Ugodinobi means there is eagle in the “Obi” (obi is a man’s or family house). This name shows that the ọzọ title is not lacking in the family of the bearer. Almost every male in this family has ọzọ title.

Okaaomee is similar in meaning to Omeakaokwulu. It means that the bearer plans and executes. He does not fail to carry out his plan or his promise. He does not “eat his words”.

Umunnanwezueaku is both a wish and an affirmation. It means (let) every member of the clan (have) has wealth.

Nzedinachi means that to become “nze” lies with one’s “chi” (personal god). The bearer of this name believes that his personal god is instrumental to his success as ọzọ man.

The name Jibue means yam elevated the bearer. It shows that the bearer is a big yam farmer and that he made his wealth and took the title through success as yam farmer.

Ugonabo means two eagles. It means that the bearer has taken a second title. Most of the time, the name is given to the bearer by others.

Ezeoba means king of the barn. Like Jibue, it means that the bearer got the wealth with which he took the ọzọ title through his occupation as a big yam farmer.

Okwuotoekeneze means he who greets the Igwe (chief of the town) standing. This bearer does not need to remove his hat when greeting the Igwe. Every village in Nkpor has one Okwuotoekeneze and those are the ndichies discussed in the earlier paragraph.

4. The Social and Religious Imports of The Title Names

The title names listed in this paper carry the full imports of ọzọ title. In them are embedded the social, political, and religious characteristics of ọzọ title. Only in a society where individualism does not thrive does one see the significance in names like Akunna, Akunne, Nnabuenyi and a host of others. These names do not only show reverence to father, mother or other individuals, but they also show humility on the part of the bearer, much more so if the parents are dead.

A name like Nzebunachi carries a religious import of belief in a supreme being, for the bearer attributes success to the will of personal chi (god).

A number of names show awareness of the bearers to the fact that man is a social being and should behave as such. Thus names like Onwanetilora, Ochilozua, Omeluora show that the bearers have a sense of duty to help the less privileged of his society.

Other title names show the consciousness among the Igbo to always use every system of names as a way of recording their family history. Thus people answer names like Ezeoba and Jibue to record the occupation that helped them to rise in social status. People answer Ugodinobi, Ugonabo, and Omeokachie to show the continuous progress in their family.

Some names show the political awareness and stand of the bearers and those that confer the titles on them as is shown in the names like Omekaokwulu, Onwanetilora and Okaaomee which are either taken by, or given to the bearers for their roles in the community, especially for their contributions for the good of all.

There are names which we regard as a show of pride in the bearers. Names like Okai beya and Akukwesili do not appear to show humility on the part of the bearers. We do not consider it nice or wise for anyone to claim worthiness of the status earned, or to broadcast that he achieved success faster or earlier than his mates, for, as Nzebunachi rightly implies, “Nze” or any success of man lies with the personal “chi” or a supreme power.

We would now conclude the discussions with some comparisons of today’s hankering after traditional titles and honours with the state of affairs in the olden days, and from there make concluding remarks and suggestions.

5. Proliferation of Titled Men and Deviations from Traditional Values of Titles of Honour

Traditionally in the olden days, titled men including Ọzọ titled men were deemed “holy” and were expected to live a life that showed that they were of high moral standard, observing all the taboos in the land and all the traditional religious ceremonies and rituals of the gods and goddesses of the community. This was why they were involved in every cleansing ritual. They were not expected to tell lies and they should settle disputes and not take sides. Real traditional titled men were known not to eat anyhow outside their Obi. Before they ate outside, they were usually granted food (ina ndi nze nni). This was done by presenting them with tubers of yam and fowls. This also involved some rituals. If by mistake the Ọzọ man ate outside without “ina nni”, he must invite a “dibia” (medicine man) to cleanse him of abomination by performing some rituals with fowls, money, and other requirements.

So many other obligations are also proofs that ọzọ titled men were regarded as special class of people and were expected to show their special nature in everything they did, in the manner of exemplary life among their people⁷.

During the second Republic in Nigeria, many politicians were honoured in different places in Igboland with as many titles as the campaign promises they made to different communities. Then and still today, people were and are honoured in the communities for looting the public treasuries in the name of “share from national cake” which people long for, get and declare wealth. Even those who got wealth in questionable way like “drug pushers” were and are honoured with traditional titles as soon as they were, or are ready to present millions of naira for requirements of the title desired, as well as fill the pockets of community decision makers with naira.

People who should be leaders of thought have sold their consciences in our contemporary society and they no longer ask questions, nor make comments when they should. We would not fail to mention the admission of people who made their wealth through armed robbery into the ọzọ title institution. Many title holders also made their wealth on contracts that were never executed, or were executed with inferior materials to what was paid for. There are today many title holders of ill-gotten wealth. We are not saying that every title holder made it on ill-gotten wealth but we are calling for caution in the frequency of these titles and honours. We are calling for reviews of the conditions for granting these titles and honours.

In his thesis, Okoye James mentioned that during oral interviews which he conducted for his research, it was discovered that the pagan or traditional ọzọ men tried to avoid all taboos associated with ọzọ title because they felt that if they do not keep them, they might offend the gods and the ancestors under whom they vowed to keep them. On the other hand, other believers who took the title by payment of money only observed some of the taboos originally attached to the title, not because they jeopardize their faith, but because they do not see the need to keep them⁸.

Some Igbo home video films support the above comments on the reckless way and manner that traditional titles and honours are being conferred on people of questionable character. Many of these Igbo films do not fail to include conferment of one title of honour or the other as a mockery of our corrupt institution. On the issue of taboos, we do not need to search long to find tilted men of our time breaking the taboo of uncontrolled eating in the public. There are other abuses of the traditional values of the titles and the names that go with them. We would stop and offer some suggestions and remedies.

6. Concluding Remarks and Suggestions

There is urgent need for the purgation of title-taking and giving in our contemporary society. Now that titles like ọzọ and its preliminaries have been refined to allow other adherents other than traditional religion adherents, there is need to have the body in local government which is in charge of chieftaincy and such matters re-examine the criteria for conferment of such titles in every Local Government area. We call for the prohibition of conferment of any form of title by all communities on politicians on the basis of electioneering campaign. That every town should have electricity and pipe borne water in the twenty-first century Nigeria should not depend on the “benevolence” of any politician who is bribed with one chieftaincy title or other. No one provides the amenities out of his own pockets. Titles like Okaomee, Omeluora, and Onwanetilora have been conferred on leaders who ended up not doing what they promised to do for the conferring community, nor ever shined as moon for all as the name Onwanetilora says.

Every community should start implementing to the letter all the sanctions required for taboos in the title institutions. The sanctions should also be looked into by the section of the Local Government in charge of chieftaincy and other such matters. This is to ensure that different religious believers who aspire to title taking are covered by appropriate sanctions. The choice of a title name should be done prior to initiation so as to subject the aspirant through a period of examination to ensure that the name chosen befits the character that bears it. The name should also reflect the inherent values of the ọzọ institution. Ọzọ and other titles in Igboland have been extensively studied, documented and shown to have good values worthy of preservation and promotion as aspects of culture. We have tried to show that the title-giving and -taking have been recently abused, because no time is taken to ask questions on the character of the aspirants to the title before conferring the title. As a religious institution with high moral values ascribed to it, membership to ọzọ title should be made highly meritorious. It is not enough to confer a title of honour on somebody simply because the person can buy it with money. There is need to exercise some control in the conferment of these titles so as to restore the dignity in the title as that of people who live exemplary life worthy of emulation. If we are able to purge ọzọ and other institutions of the ills mentioned above, they would be restored to what they were in the time of our forefathers, both in the significance of the title names and other values.

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Notes

1. Cf. bibliographical information at the end of the paper.
2. Monsignor M. Maduka. "Defense of Ozo title" *Nigerian Mirror*, 8th July, 1975, p.3
3. Egbo, E. O. "Conflicts between Traditional Religion and Christianity in Igboland South Eastern Nigeria", *West African Religion*, Nsukka, 1971, No. 10. Cf. also James U. Okoye, "The Religious Rites in Ozo Title-Taking," B.A. Thesis, University of Nigeria, Nsukka 1978.
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7. James Okoye, *ibid*
8. *Ibid*.

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