

***OZO* TITLE: THE IGBOMAN'S ARISTOCRATIC INSTITUTION**

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Introduction

Ozo institution is the greatest and largest pan-Igbo traditional titled group of men. It is the institution that distinguished dignitaries in order to create social stratification between members and less rich people. People like to be distinguished so one should not doubt that the institution started as a result of some people seeking some means of distinguishing themselves from the prolectorate. The institution grants its members some authority over non-initiates in society even at meetings, the *ozo* titled members hate being interrupted, more so by non-initiates. Because of the prestige people accord them, they feel so distinguished that they even dislike associating with non-initiates. They glorify their positions so much that many of them look down on people and so easily get irritated when they quarrel with non-initiates. They always feel that they deserve extreme respect.

Because to whom much is given, much is expected, the *ozo* titled men have some exemplary lives they should lead. They have some requirements for intending members in order to checkmate the entries of irresponsibly dishonest elements that would desecrate the institution. But with time, it is doubtful whether all the *ozo* titled men are honest enough to defend their red caps wherever they go. As proclaimed crusaders of moral principles, they are expected to say the truth always in order to shame the devil. It is the truth that would set the people free. In many cases, the oppressed people are suffering because nobody could say the truth, even the *ozo* titled men constituting the jury trying a case. Truth is trampled upon and the oppressed would go without obtaining justice. This is always the plight of widows that are victimized by their wicked brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law that forgot families left by their rich brothers. Such cheats do not consider the waning of their nephews and nieces in their bids to grab undue shares from the wealth left by their late brothers. The cases of the widows are just a few examples for so many people do not obtain justice in the Igbo traditional society, although the *ozo* titled men are parading all over the lengths and breaths of various communities. The situation is hopeless when the quarrel is between an *ozo* titled man and a non-initiate that is where his colleagues decide to look away from the truth.

The cost of taking the title is always high. Because of the need for distinction, the cost is made too high for intending members so that it would not be common. The cost becomes higher and higher as more people take the title, more so when one rich man or the other adds to the cost. No new title taker provides or pays less than his predecessor

But money may not be the problem of all the people who are yet to take titles. Some may not like the title due to their Christian beliefs. No matter how much it is claimed to be non-fetish, some Christian churches still reject it. Some people also might not have taken the title because they claim that apart from the show-off, a lot of the titled people they would emulate from are yet to show exemplary behaviours.

Whatever one invests in the title is not a loss. People gain a lot by sharing from the costs of taking the title as paid by those that subsequently take the title after they themselves. It is a way

of saving money. Okafor (1992:103) notices the issue of saving money by the title and states that “title-taking took the place of banks for” the people of Awka.

Definition of *Ọzọ* Title

Ekwealor (1998:56) is of the view that *ọzọ* title is the greatest male title in the Igboland of Nigeria. Although he did not state the characteristics in his definition to enable one differentiate this title from others, he is able to let one know the area of the people that take the title.

For Ilogu (1979:26) *ọzọ* is “a religious cum social association into which men are initiated sometimes with their wives at various stages with religious ceremonies. It is not a cult. It has no seasonal or annual religious celebration or a chief priest to supervise its shrine as there is none.

The *ọzọ* institution is the greatest and largest pan-Igbo organization which is meant for distinguishing people from the public with the provisions of enabling its members that are titled aristocrats dress in the paraphernalia of the red cap, bearing an eagle feather or feathers, anklets on two legs and holding an elephant tusk or an animal skin-hand fan.

Origin of *Ọzọ*

Whatever is in existence, except the Lord Almighty, has got its time of inception. The *ọzọ* titled institution started sometime in the past. Although those that started it had a long time ago died, there are traces to its origin. Ilogu (1979:25) accepts that it is difficult to research into the origin of the *ọzọ* titled institution. One thinks that his reason is because of the death of those that started or have witnessed its inception on the one hand and the lack of written records of the history. However, he speculated that it grew out of the need for priests who would preside over meetings of extended families and lineages, worship and supervise the people’s ancestral cult, and keep the custody of the family *ọfọ* stick, that is the symbol of justice and uprightness. Other reasons he thought gave rise to the formation of the institution are investing of economic resources into the title taking and gaining from new title takers in form of pensions and the religious need for God fearing men who would be related with the spirit of the land (*Ala*, the earth goddess) to ensure continuity of their families as well as their lineages.

Orji (1991:46) authoritatively states that the institution started to exist as a result of the wealthy men’s search for their distinctions in society. The first person to initiate simply slaughtered a cow for his people, presented a seventy-gallon-volume container of palm wine, seven rolls of tobacco, kola nuts and alligator pepper, assorted kinds of food and some money they shared. His people drank all he presented and shared the money. They were very happy before he addressed them. Orji states that he addressed his people “*Ụmụ nna m bido tata were gaba, achọrọ m ka unu na-etu m ogbuefi*” which means “My kinsmen, from today on wards, I want you to address me as the slaughterer of the cow”.

Procedures of Taking the *Ọzọ* Title:

The taking of the *ọzọ* title has somewhat a long process. It is not completed in less than a year. But it generally depends on the cultural diversities of the Igbo people. Discussing the *ọzọ* title taking in Nri, Onwuejeogwu (1979:17-19) states that the process is so elaborate that it is divided into nine stages. The stages are:

- i. Stage One: Payment - In this, the intending *ozọ* title holder pays a little sum of money to the alliance group in his area. He notifies the *ozọ* men concerned through their leader. The sum was N40.00 or N60.00 by 1979. He will also present them with four gallons of palm wine. The members will drink the wine and share the money. This authorizes the intending member to share from the ceremony of the first stage from the following day if someone else is performing his first stage ceremony.
- ii. Second Stage: Installation - This time the *Isi Nze* (that is the head of *ozọ* titled men) will announce the four names the new title taker will be named. The *Isi Nze* will give him *akpa nnwefi* (the skin bag of an aborted cow) *akpukpọ ebule* (the skin of a ram) and *alọ okpulukpụ* (a short spear-like staff that is round on that occasion). He would feed them with sumptuous food and wine.
- iii. Third Stage: Admonition - After serving the group with food and drinks, the members would advise him on how he would conduct himself in the public. They will hand over some do's and don'ts by which *ozọ* titled men are known. He can now attend the meetings of young men with the traditional staff to show the new status he is preparing to change onto.
- iv. Fourth Stage: Taking the title per se - This is the taking of the *ozọ* title as all the occasions before this are preparatory. Talking the title costs very elaborately. The process is graduated as follows into steps

Step A: This is the ceremony called *ofọ ozọ*. The intending title taker asks the leader of the *ozọ* title to convene a meeting of the titled men within his domain. When they converge in the host's house, he will give them four gallons of palm wine and four gallons of raffia palm wine and N120.00 which they will share. He will partake whenever another person is celebrating the same step by taking his share of the food, drinks and the fee.

Step B: This ceremony is that of *Obu n'isii* - The celebrant pays eight gallons of palm wine and eight gallons of raffia palm wine to the *ozọ* men. He has to pay N200.00 to the *ogwe mmụọ* group.

On the next day, he will play host to the titled men. He will give them food, four gallons of palm wine and four gallons of raffia palm wine. On the third day, he will invite the titled men again to perform the ceremony of *nri afụ onụ* meaning the case of eating hot food without blowing air upon it to cool.

Step C: The host celebrates the feast of washing of the hand called *igba okpete*. The water of sugar cane is squeezed into a bowl and placed in the celebrant's temple. *ozọ* men have to dip their hands into the water after which the host will give them one and a half kobo each and the leader of the titled group is given two and a half kobo. Each of the wives of the titled men is given two and a half kobo. After the ceremony, the host becomes strong enough to eat anywhere without pollution.

Step D: The next ceremony is *Ula mmụọ* which means the vigil night of spirits. The *ozọ* aspirant has to feast all *ozọ* men, his age grade, all young boys (*okolobia*) and married daughters of his kindred (*umuokpụ*), the patrilineage of his mother and in-laws and friends. All the people that attended, have to exchange gifts as stipulated.

It is in this night that the *isi nze* (the leader of the *ozọ* men) hands over two items of paraphernalia: staff (*alọ-ozọ*) and a small elephant tusk known as *mkpalo*. His three names out of four would be given to him. He had already been given one. From now it would be offending to call him by the name his parents gave him.

Step E: The next ceremony is that of getting *ofọ* called *ikpata ofọ*. In the morning after the vigil night, the aspirant goes to the *isi nze* of his domain to collect the *ofọ* staff. He gets it at the cost of one hen, eight yams and twenty kobo. The *isi nze* has to sanctify the *ofọ* with the hen, a kola nut and palm wine before handing it to the aspirant as he prays thus “Our ancestors say go, be old, look after our people with justice and truth”. The aspirant does not reply. He collects the *ofọ* very quietly and does not talk to anybody until he returns to his house and keeps it on his altar.

Step F: This step is installation. It has some processes. They are as follows:

- a. *Ida Mmuọ* – This is the making of an altar. It is done on the *Eke* Day. The aspirant prepares an object place at the gate under which all persons entering the compound must go under. This shields persons from dangerous attacks from enemies. In the afternoon, the guests would be seated while the aspirant is seated on the ceremonial wooden stool, *oche mmuọ*. The *isi nze* will then plant four *ogilisi* trees to represent the four market days of *Eke*, *Orie*, *Afọ* and *Nkwọ*. The aspirant is now a potential ancestor of the land.
- b. *Installation Proper: The aspirant decorates his body with nzu (kaoliọn, that is a piece of white chalk). He would sit in front of his temple. The isi nze ties the ankles of the aspirant with cords (eriri ukwu), gives him the symbol of truth and uprightness (ofọ) and a staff (ngwuogiriga) he would then place a red cap on the head of the aspirant. The Isi nze will then announce his four names.*
- c. Sanctifying the Tongue: This ceremony is called *isa ire*. The *isi nze* does this by dipping *ukpa* leaves in raffia palm wine and rubbing them on the aspirant’s tongue for four times after which he would do the same with the leaves of kola nut. The *isi nze* will then rub him the beak of a hen. The *isi nze* will warn the new *ozọ* man on how to talk thus “You are now *nze*. Beware of evil and dirty deeds. Beware of lies. Never tell lies, beware of injustice. Never be unjust. Bring peace and prosperity to your people” The beak of the hen is torn apart and the blood is dropped on the tongue of the new *ozọ* man before spilling it on to the ground. The hen is later cooked and eaten by the *ozọ* men.

Step G: This is the outing ceremony known as *izu ahia*. It is done on the *Eke* Day. He goes out with a band that stays and plays as he dances. It is during the outing ceremony that he goes to the *Eze Nri* (the traditional ruler of the town) and pays tribute.

Step H: This process is Seclusion. The new titled man stays in his house for twenty-one days.

Step I: This is the final process. It is the ceremony of the last ritual. It is done in the seventh month of *Nri* traditional calendar. The new titled man makes an *ebo* which is his altar which shows that his compound is that of an *ozọ* titled man. He will then go to the *ebo* of his domain where he would confess his past misdeeds, in fact evils. After this he would go to *ajaana* shrine where he would be cleansed.

Lastly, he will pay N4.20 to the whole of *Nri*. This is for recognizing his four title names. He will then pay N21.000 to the *Nri* Progressive Union for his registration as *ozọ* titled man. He will be issued with a certificate that would be signed by the President and the Secretary of the union

and the *Eze Nri*. The titled men recognize Nri people and Nri Progressive Union so that the people and the union would accord them their due respect and call them by their title names

One of the aspects of the aristocracy of the titled men is the paraphernalia. The *ozọ* titled men is easily noticed in the public. He puts on his red cap with one feather or two. One feather is for the personal membership of the titled man, whereas each of the rest represents one of his sons that he had sponsored on *ozọ* title taking. He normally puts on the Igbo traditional flowing dress, gown or *jompa*. He also has anklets on his legs and holds an animal-skin hand fan or a staff. Onwuejeogwu (1979:11) has already taken note of the dress code of the *ozọ* titled men: "Though variations have occurred, the basic is the paraphernalia of red cap, *ugo* feather ... ankle cord....". They do not play with their paraphernalia. In Abatete of Anambra State of Nigeria, any member that comes in the midst of *ozọ* titled men without putting on the red cap is fined.

Another prestigious culture of the *ozọ* titled men is their greeting. One man greets the other by mentioning the title name and the other would also reciprocate by mentioning the name of the person that greeted him. They shake hands by striking the back of their right palms together before holding their palms, face to face, tight and asking each other about the conditions of the health of the members of their household respectively.

The *ozọ* titled man talks with authority whether in private like in ordinary conversations or in public as are the cases at meetings. He feels his ideas must be adopted. When a non-titled man says something reasonable at meetings, a titled man who has no good idea might say that he has something else to say, only to end up rattling round the idea of the non-titled man. In various African traditional settings, the idea that some titled people do not regard non-titled persons is general. The difference between the titled man and the non-titled man is observed in the order of speaking. The titled man feels too highly offended if he is interrupted by the non-titled man. This is better showcased by Achebe (1956:24) between Okonkwo and Osugo. Okonkwo challenged Osugo for contradicting him. Okonkwo described him as a woman.

Ogbobe-Mcbenedict (2005:61) is also aware of his respect for the non-titled man. It is often inferred in land that no matter one's attainment in life, if he fails to cap it with an "*ozọ* title, he is not truly a man in the right sense".

The leadership of the community takes cognizance of the *ozọ* title. They are also selected for political positions. There are some issues that the community might be handling and the people might suggest that all *ozọ* titled men should join the executive members to take care of the issues. That is why Ogbalu (1981:100) and Ofoeogbu (1982:219) state that the *ozọ* titled men constitute one of the main political structures of Igbo man's traditional administration.

Ogbobe-Mcbenedict (2005:62) notes the leadership roles of the titled men: "Most often than not, it is these exalted class of people that usually act as chair persons during meetings and greetings".

Ozọ titled men are honoured because they are aristocrats. Everybody in the community respects them very well. The people are convinced that they deserve honour. Ogbobe-Mcbenedict (2005:61) notices that they are honourable:

“*ozọ*” title holders are prestigious lots in Igbo land. No doubt, every “*ozọ* titled man commands great deal of respect among his folks and community members”

The title is all about wealth. The cost of taking the title is always exorbitant. It is made so high in certain places that it is not taken by poor people. The members of the society glorify wealth, even if not all of them are rich. Some poor men take titles when their relatives sponsor them. However, all *ozọ* titled men are adjudged rich even if they do not eat three square meals a day. Ogbobe Mcbenedict (2005:61) states that “the title seems to be entirely for the bourgeois due to the huge financial involvement”. Ekwealor (1998:58) marvels at the cost of taking the *ozọ* title in Ugwuoba, Oji River Local Government Area, Enugu State, because the preliminary ceremony of Ajaaja engulfs a lot of money.

Titled men are solemnized. They are anointed men of God who are called upon to bless kola nuts on occasions irrespective of the age of the people present. They originally have their tongue sanctified, for which everybody trusts them because they cannot tell lies else they will die. This is why people see them as great men. Orji (1999:46-7) is aware of this attainment and states:

As time went on, some elements of questionable character started to join the society. Their ‘yes’ could not be ‘yes’ and their ‘no’ could not be ‘no’ as before. At this stage, the ‘*ozọ*-ship’ was about to lose its respect and dignity. It was then that the question of taking the initiate to juju shrines was introduced. This was to make the intending title-holder, or the would-be-*ozọ* titled man, make solemn declarations before the juju-gods to be of good character and be bound to uphold the ethics and the tradition of the *ozọ*-ship.

The aristocratic nature of the society grants its members special titles which distinguish them from the common man. In some Local Government Areas like Awka; Idemili especially Abatete; Onitsha; Ogbaru etc. the title is Ogbuefi. The titled men use it in place of Mr. in Enugu, Udi and Ezeagu Local Government Areas of Enugu State, the title is *ozọ*. But in some areas of Imo and Abia States, the *ozọ* titled men adopt the title of *Nze*.

The aristocracy of *ozọ* title is very much clearly coded in the titled names of the members. The titled names are codifications of policies, historical, political, economic, religious and social issues connected with the lives of those that take them. The *ozọ* titled names are Akukalia meaning that wealth is surplus; Akunne meaning mother’s wealth which suggests that it is the mother of the so named one that financed the title or that she made him what he is; Ezeude which means that the so named one is a king that his name reverberates; Nnanyelugo is for he that whose father sponsored his title or that his father made him great enough to earn the money of financing his title; and Akunwata is for the people that achieved greatness, that is the person struggled to earn the money for taking the title. Other names include Chinyelugo for the person saying that it is God that made him a title holder.

In the events of sharing the booty, the *ozọ* titled men take lion shares. When a he-goat is used in bringing back the corpse of the late daughter that married out of the kindred, it is the titled men that slaughter it. If no titled man is around, the goat is kept waiting for one of them. When the skin is burnt and the goat is washed, it is only an *ozọ* man that will dissect it. There are specific parts of the goat that they will take depending on their kind of titles and positions in the institution. One particular titled man has the right of taking the lower parts of both the forelegs

and the hing legs. Another has the right of taking the neck. At the end, little or nothing is left for the common man.

The *ozọ* titled men see themselves as exceptional people to others. Other people in their eyes are too ordinary to occupy the same seats with them. They feel that God added something else to their nature. They are special about themselves. Orji (1999:46) acknowledges the same aspect of aristocracy when he stated that the first *ozọ* titled man felt different over his people: “He was then able to assert a measure of superiority over other members of his community”.

Ilogu (1979:26) very much agrees that the *ozọ* titled man is an aristocrat. He sums up the status the titled man enjoys thus:

The privileges which the *ozọ* titled man enjoys are many but the principal ones relate to political and social status. In most Ibo areas only the *ozọ*, men hold political offices and represent their families and lineages in the village group council or presided over settlement of cases, making of covenants and the establishment of new cults. Socially they belong to the noblemen’s rank – a social status marked out by the honour accorded to those holding that position. They also take precedence in all public entertainment and feasts irrespective of their age. For instance at Ontisha the *ozọ* man, however young is to be served first at public meetings, he alone carry and blow the elephant tusk, put eagle feathers on his cap, sit on a goat’s skin on dias, pour libations of wine to the spirits of dead ancestors be the Okpala or head of his extended family or lineage. It will be an insult for anyone to address him in public other than in his title name. Only *ozọ* titled men could greet one another with the double hand shake. The *ozọ* titled man used to be the banker for his community, because he was so trusted that people kept their precious properties with him. He is exempted from menial labour.

The *ozọ* man is a man of God. He keeps himself away from sins because *Ala* (the mother deity) would deal with him severely if he goes contrary to the dictates of the deity. He makes sure his actions would be acceptable to the gods of the land as well as the Most High God. This is why Ilogu (1979:26) states that the *ozọ* titled man must “lead” a holy life, uphold publicly and privately, morality of the land and observe all the taboos, religious ceremonies and rituals of the gods and goddesses of his community.

This traditional institution is worthy of emulation. That is why students of Igbo extraction in various tertiary institutions in Nigeria are practising the culture. In some educational institutions of high learning, each hostel has a traditional ruler, *Igwe*. He has the members of his cabinet. In some educational institutions, the cultural institution operates at the holistic level, that is the school has one traditional ruler and the members of his cabinet. That of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria is known as *Otu Nze na Ozọ*. The first *Igwe* was Obinna Ezenwaka that was coronated in August, 1992 (Emejulu, 2002:55).

Eligibility:

The *ozọ* traditional institution is a revered one because it is sacred. This is why the *ozọ* titled men are careful in admitting members. They have various qualities they consider in determining the eligibility of an aspirant to the institution. This is to make sure that the dignity of the institution is not defiled. The aspirant must satisfy the following conditions:

- i. He must be a free born. He must not be an outcaste
- ii. He must be an original native of the land and not a sojourner
- iii. The aspirant to the title must not be of a questionable character. He should be a person of clean image, that is he must be trustworthy.

Rules and Regulations:

To maintain the dignity of the society, the members have some rules and regulations that are helping to check their behaviours. This is because associating the institution with criminal acts will bring it to disrepute. The rules and regulations include the following:

- i. They should not steal
- ii. They should not pound food
- iii. They should not eat the meat of poorly rated animals like dogs, pigs, tortoises etc. This is why the Igbo people say “A na-egbu mbe debe ọla ọ bu ndị nze ga-abo” “Why do we keep the meat of tortoise over night when we are not waiting for the *ozọ* titled people to dissect it”. (This means that those that slaughter tortoise should not wait for the authorization of *ozọ* titled men for they have nothing to do with it)
- iv. They do not eat unclean food. This means the food prepared by a woman that needs to undergo some cleansing process. They do not eat food sold at the market place.
- v. In some places they do not carry corpses
- vi. They do not tell lies because their tongues are sanctified
- vii. Before someone takes the title, his father or elder brother must first take the title. If he is the first to take the title in his family, he will make a ceremony amounting to that. That is the foundation on which he would stand to begin his title ceremonies.
- viii. They are exempted from manual labour (Ilogu, 1979:26).

Conclusion

The *ozọ* title institution was started by wealthy men to distinguish themselves from the common people of their communities. The institution originated in Igbo land. It does not exist outside Igbo land to enable one think it has external influence. It is from that place that other communities must have learnt of it and organized their own.

The aristocracy of the society is not in doubt. The members of the society occupy influential positions in their communities. They officiate at political, religious and social functions of their people. Non-titled members of the community have to look forward to the *ozọ* men for the direction of the affairs of life. They are waited for if they are absent. For example groups of people going to conduct marriage ceremonies must have at least one *ozọ* member to lead. It is he who would discuss with his colleague from the group of their in-laws otherwise the people would be said not to have very important personalities. If the negotiation is to continue another day, they would be told to come in the company of an *ozọ* man. The same is the case when a community is sending people on delegation, at least one *ozọ* man must be in the team to lead as the spokesman.

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