

The Socio-Religious Impacts of Agbalanze in Onitsha, South East Nigeria

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Abstract

Agbalanze cultural society of Onitsha is an association reserved for indigenous *Ozo* titled men. With its immemorial existence, men of Onitsha who love their tradition aspire for membership regardless of its cost implications. Primarily, men of Onitsha join this society to have a sense of belonging and benefit from gains accruing from being a member. Though a lot have been written about *Ozo* in Igbo land, not much has been written about *Agbalanze* Onitsha. The researchers therefore seek to unravel the social and religious impacts of *Agbalanze* in Onitsha. The research methodology employed in this paper is qualitative. The data was sourced through the primary and secondary sources. The researchers were able to establish that *Agbalanze* plays critical social and religious roles in Onitsha society.

Keywords: *Agbalanze*, Onitsha, Social-religious

Introduction

The ancient prestigious *Agbalanze* is reserved for only *Nze na ozo* titled men of Onitsha origin. For a person to enroll into this very social class, achievement of the prospective member should be evident. The individual must be seen to be of impeccable character in the society. He is expected to be a worthy family man with the potential to shield the family from external intimidation. Being a member of *Agbalanze* implies that the prospective member is either from a wealthy family or is wealthy. This society is fondly called the Pension Society of Onitsha men. This is due to enormous gain accruing from membership of the society. Everyone, benefits from this society especially during initiation of new members. The quantity of items and amount of money to be shared is determined by the number of initiates, the dues paid by the kindred group and the number of members in attendance. Beside history of other constituent groups in Onitsha such as *Nze Na Ozo* in Igbo land which we can find at our disposals, we cannot avoid discussing Onitsha customs and traditions without the mention of *Agbalanze* society and their outstanding impacts.

This work therefore seeks to uncover the socio-religious role(s) *Agbalanze* plays in Onitsha. However, according to Frank (personal communication November 10, 2023) indigenes and non-indigenes nurse the belief that *Agbalanze* is the gathering of fetish and cultic rich class of men who are selfish and care less about the progress of Onitsha. In view of this, people are discouraged from becoming members of *Agbalanze* especially Catholics that banned members of *Agbalanze* from taking part in the Eucharist celebration because they are accused of practicing idolatry (Sam; Personal Communication, November 10, 2023). This is because it is perceived that *Agbalanze* tradition is contrary to Christian belief(s) as contained in Exodus (20: 3-4) that urges Christians not to practice idolatry (Sam, Personal Communication, November 10, 2023).

Furthermore, it is on this premise that members of *Agbalanze* are at times isolated by their families and non-initiates at death; most importantly during their second burial rites where the first son and daughter are expected to carry out some fetish rites as alleged by the Christians. This misconception had been preached for decades, but with technology and globalization, lots of these alleged fetish practices have been observed or witnessed via live streams on social media, yet a lot of these facts have not been properly documented. This paper also seeks to unravel the socio-religious impacts of *Agbalanze* in Onitsha.

Research Methodology

This research is fieldwork based and therefore qualitative. Six persons; all males were interviewed and they represented our population for the study. While four were purposefully selected for the interview, *Agbalanze* restricted interview to only two of their members which were selected by them. Among the four that were purposefully selected are two Onitsha indigenes and two non-indigenes of Onitsha. Pseudonyms are used for the interviewees at our discretion. Secondary source of data came from textbooks and publication by the *Agbalanze* Onitsha. The data from primary and secondary sources were analysed descriptively in the work.

The People of Onitsha

The people of Onitsha also known as *umu Ezechi* mamigrated with their founding father *Ezechima* in the 16th century to a fertile and uninhibited land on the eastern bank of the River Niger. With the help of two noble men *Ogbodogo* and *Okonmany* he crossed the Niger with his children *Ukpali*, *Oreze*, *Chimevi*, *Dei*, *Ogwuezi* and *OligboDaike*. They found a new land and called it Ani-Ocha or Onyisili-ncha. *Onicha Onyisili-ncha*, *Ani-Ocha* or *Orisha* means despiser. Onitsha is known as Onisha Ado N'Idu. Ado is gotten from the Yoruba word *Udo* which means 'border', *N'Idu* from Igala which means 'Water'. To simply put, these three names tell that *Onicha* indigenes are made up majority of Edo and *Igala* with little of Igbo.

Historical accounts of Onitsha showed that *Ezechima* unfortunately only sighted the promised land just like the biblical Moses across River Niger, as he joined his ancestors in Obior. Onitsha as a kingdom runs a monarchical system of government of which presently has its twenty first monarch in the last six centuries since she migrated and settled across the Niger (Anionwu; 2019).

Onitsha is a land with rich cultural heritage and ancient histories that make her indigenes outstanding in their various phases of live and disciplines. Regardless of this, Onitsha people are born educationists who produced the first of most profession in South Eastern Nigerian after they embraced civilization and Christianity which was brought to them the early missionaries whom they accepted in 1885. Such persons are the Owelle of Onitsha Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, Prof. Chike Obi, etc. Onitsha has grown from being a city or town to the hub of trade and commerce in South Eastern. The Onitsha people are referred to as *Ndi Onicha* and they speak Igbo language; though they have their own Igbo dialect.

Sequel to their monarchical system of government headed by the *Obi* (traditional ruler), each of the monarchs that ascends the throne (*ukpo*), seeks the wise counsel of wise men called *ndi ichie* (red cap chiefs). The *ndi ichie* are of three categories; *Ndi ichie ume*, also known as the first-class chiefs, *ndi ichie okwa* and *ndi ichie okwareze*. The *ndi ichie ume* are classified into six, namely: *Onowulyasele* (Traditional prime minister), *AjieUkadiugwu* (*idejiogugu*), *OduOsodi* (*Nkataukwu*), *OnyaOzoma* (*Asakalapkaobi*), *OgeneOnira* (*Ukpaka*) and *OwelleOsowa* (*Anyu*).

These men are the military commanders of the king; the war lords or lieutenants of Onitsha. They head the six administrative quarters or wards or clans of *Onitsha Ebolten'ani*. According to Mikia (Personal Communication 18 January, 2022), the first-class chiefs are called *Ndi ichie ofo* (staff chiefs), while the second and third classes are called *Ndi ichie osissi*. It is very important to note that when one becomes a member of the king's wise counsel, his social life and public appearances change totally; including dressing. Other constituent groups in Onitsha like the *Agbalanze* prestigious cultural society of Onitsha, Prestigious *OtuOdu* society of Onitsha (Ivory group for women), *Ogbo So Achi Ani* (the ruling age grade), *Ikporo Onitsha* (Association of married women), the youth council etc, help the monarch in the smooth running of the kingdom. Annually Onitsha celebrates festivals such as; *Ofala* (annual outing of the king), *Iwaji* (New yam festival), *Ajachi* (sacrifice to the gods), *Umatu* (feast of new corn), *olili akasi* (celebration of Cocoyam), *Ikelebeji* (the kings new yam festival), *Iru Ani* (to venerate the land), *Osisi-Ite* (an end to farming season), *Ogbalido* (victory celebration after war done before *ofala*), *Osekwulo* (to cast away evil from the town).

These events prior to civilization, commerce and other natural gifts in Onitsha attract visitors from far and wide to Onitsha both daily and annually. Onitsha (*Ebolten'ani*) comprises of nine major clans that make up the twenty villages: *Umuezechima* (*Isiokwe*, *Ogboli-Olosi*), *Umuezeroli* (*umuaroli*, *Ogbeozala* and *ogbendida*), *Okebun'abo* (*Ogbeabo*, *ogbembubor*, *umudei* and *ogbeodogwu*), *Awada-* *Ogbeozoma*, *Ugwu-na-* *Obamkpa* (which comprises of *Umuase*, *Iyiawu*, and *umu Odimegwugbuagu* of *Odoje*), *Ubulu-na-Ikem* (*umuikem*), *Ogbeolu* (*obikporo*, *mgbelekeke* and *ogbeotu*), *Eke n'ubene* (*ogboli eke* and *umuonogbo*) and *Obior*.

The contemporary society of Onitsha is no longer the Onitsha of ancient times. There is a great change due to their contact with western world. Just as expressed by Ottenberg (1959: 130) thus: "the Ibo are probably most receptive to cultural change and willing to accept western ways, of any large group in Nigeria" which Smock & Smock (1969) corroborate in their words; "characterization of the Ibo usually emphasize their exceptionally positive orientation towards development and modernization", happened to Onitsha traditional

society. Presently, Onitsha is made up of two local government areas; Onitsha South and Onitsha North. The 2006 population census puts the population at 512939. According to Igbokwe, Ezeomodo & Ejikeme (2013) Onitsha is predominantly a commercial city; being one of the largest markets in Africa and also one of the fastest growing commercial cities in Nigeria. Onitsha has foremost educational institution such as Dennis Memorial School, Onitsha (DMGS) in Igboland. Important people of diverse disciplines are the products of these educational institutions.

Despite the inroad civilization has made into the Onitsha traditional society, Onitsha has continued to preserve its culture. *Agbalanze* society is one of such cultures that people of Onitsha, especially the custodians of culture, have sustained. However, this does not mean the absence of influence of civilization on the original practice of *Agbalanze*. But the influence does not affect the core essence of the *Agbalanze* society.

History of Agbalanze Onitsha

The origin of *ozo* title in Onitsha is not traceable. The only available record can be traced back to the 18th century during the reign of *Obi Chimedie*; the 9th monarch of Onitsha who handed over his *ozo* title to his grandson Orezeobi. Orezeobi became the first *Ozonwa* (*ozo* whose father is alive and also *ozo*) (Nzekwu 2002). According to Anionwu (2019), other scanty information regarding the history of *Agbalanze* can also be traced to *omekome* age grade of Onitsha (1876-1878) using now the oral and genealogy to situate the beginning of *ozo* title which is the precursor of the ancient *Agbalanze* in Onitsha.

Furthermore, Akumama (Personal Communication, September 24, 2023), stated that this society which is a socio-political, religious and all-male society is highly revered in Onitsha traditional society. This group is also known as the *Ozo* title association. The *Agbalanze* prides itself on voluntary but selective association based on ancestry and success. It is so prestigious that no matter how wealthy or educated an Onitsha man may be, he cannot acquire the status that goes with the title except joining the association. The *Agbalanze* is known for the plumes (eagle feathers) adorning their hand-woven caps. The dream of an average Onitsha man is to be a member as it means achieving a great feat.

Furthermore, Akumama (Personal Communication, September 24, 2023) holds that *Agbalanze* is *ozo* titled man that has gone to *Nze* (conclave). *Ozo* title taking is done when one performs the *Ibu ego ozo* rite and becomes after then *Eze Ozo* which makes him become a priest that is sacred and has the final decision with an impeccable judgment. He becomes a mediator between the living and the dead. *Ibu ego* makes a man *Ozo* member but becoming *Nze* makes *Ozo* man an *Agbalanze*. There is the object of covenant called in today's Onitsha society *Okwa chi*. The *Okwachi* is given to the priest at the *nze* before the *Ima nzu* which serves as the purification. On the night for the atonement of the sins of the initiate, a black goat is slaughtered to cleanse him.

The *Ozo* titled *Agbalanze* is ancient and constitutes a very important part in the administration of the community because of the high religious position they occupy in ministering to the spiritual needs of the people. Matters affecting traditional religion are handled by them. In consultation with the *Obi* and *Ndi ichie*, they decide measures to be meted on any person who contravenes any religious rites. They ensure that title-taking is not abused but kept attractive and dignified in order to maintain high social status in the community. They play roles in the justice of peace in their localities and their decisions are always held in high esteem. The association grew and enacted changes and reforms that helped to sustain it from generation to generation. Presently, *Agbalanze* is one of the constituent groups in Onitsha that helps not only in perpetuation of Onitsha customs, but has lots of roles in the political and religious affairs in Onitsha.

Simply put, a member of *Agbalanze* becomes an officiator of religious functions in Onitsha, though he can be limited to performing certain functions if he is not the *diokpa* (spiritual head) but can act as an auxiliary. The sacredness of *Agbalanze* Onitsha has made the society not only a gathering of wealthy men or class, but also a gathering of religious and political men. From them the governing councils like the council of Chiefs (*Ndi ichie*); the political heads of clans are chosen by the monarch to help advise him in his administration; *Diokpa* (spiritual head) and the Obi of Onitsha (traditional ruler). Once a member of this group, one becomes a priest, a chief and a patriarch who people consult when important societal issues or advice is needed. Being a member of this very association connotes that the initiate and his entire family are from the wealthy class more so that his immediate household is in peace.

Initiation into Agbalanze

The journey into the membership of *Agbalanze* society of Onitsha is not an easy task. For this reason, the prospective initiate has to prepare himself primarily financially in other not to be caught up with unforeseen expenditure and levies. According to Mikia (Personal Communication, January 18, 2022), the present-day initiates who desire to take this title should at least have a minimum of fifteen million naira (₦15,000,000.00) and maximum of twenty million naira (₦20,000,000.00) per candidate. However, Akumama (Personal Communication, September 24, 2023) holds that no specific amount is enough for this title as the choice, taste or class of the initiate is a factor to consider when preparations are being made.

However, since *Agbalanze* initiation is a journey to traditional priesthood, the intending initiate is also expected to prepare oneself spiritually by purifying himself inwardly before the Obi sanctifies him on the night of his initiation through the rite of *imanzu* (purification rite). Initiation into *Agbalanze* Onitsha is a spiritual journey that takes a number of days. This process cannot be perfected without *Muo* (spirit) of one's family and paraphernalia of other related kindred group that he shares the same ancestry with. Each stage of this process contains spiritual anointing which is perfected by the kinsmen. At the end of each process, an initiate is enthroned into a stole until he reaches the climax of his initiation that makes him a fully-fledged member of the group.

The initiation rites begin with screening by a panel for the intending members prior to the commencement of the traditional rites. At the commencement of the traditional rites, the initiate whether his father is dead or alive, meets *diokpa* to perform the *ichichi aka n'ani* (a pre-information of the intention to be initiated into *Agbalanze* to the spiritual head of his family or clan), then he whose father has joined his ancestors will now perform the *ikpokor mmuo* rite or *inyedo muo*. This involves bringing the spirit of the ancestors to allow his father and father's father who were titled and are dead to partake in the annual share in his son's title taking. In the case of he whose father is alive, he is to take the title with the *muo* of his own father, but initiated as *ozonwa*. This stage is known as *Eze mmuo* for the initiate. The second step is *igbaokonti*. It is prior information to your kinsmen to inform them about your mission; he begins meeting his relations. This begins with *nkatausokwu* (inner chamber meeting), and finally *nkataumunna*. After the *igbaokonti* follows the *Igo Mmuo*. Here, the family members take the initiate to his maternal home and his father's maternal kindred for prayers and blessing on their child who is about to embark on a journey. This is followed by *Igomuonwunye*, *Ada* and *Okpala*. This has to do with the presentation of kola, hot drink and palm wine by the wife, son and daughter of the initiate.

When these are done, *Ibu ego ozo* (title fee) which is done according to the tariff of the village or kindred group is performed. At this stage,

the rest of *Agbalanze* Onitsha members assemble to take part in getting the dividends their intending member has brought which is in line with the tariff of the group. Rites such as *asigbako mmanya* and *isi mmanya* are performed and at the end of the *ibu ego*, the initiate is made to seat on the parchment and when he is lifted up, he is called *Eze ozo (ima Eze goduozo)*. The initiate marches out with a goat parchment and in white regalia jubilating in thanksgiving for completing this stage. At this stage, prospective initiate is not entitled to any privilege conferred on *Ozo* title member even if he stops at this stage. According to Akumama (Personal Communication, September 24, 2023) holds that *ibu ego* initiate whose father is still alive won't be allowed to seat on the parchment to avert causing the death of his father. The parchment an initiate is supposed to seat on is that which he used in performing *Ikpoko mmuo nnia*". After the *ibu ego*, the initiate cannot be called an *Agbalanze* until he completes his initiation cycle.

More so, since *Agbalanze* initiation is a journey into priesthood, in the evening before *ina obibi* (initiation night), he performs *ikpo nze iru* (a prior invitation of the Obi for purification). Then the intending initiate is also expected to prepare oneself spiritually by purifying oneself inwardly before the Monarch sanctifies him on the night of his initiation through the rite of *Ima nzu*. This very night is called *ina obibior ula ozo*. It begins officially by 9pm with prayers; breaking of kola nut and libations poured. Thereafter is followed by the *ije na nze* (a closed-door meeting with the monarch). It is within the *nze* and in the presence of the monarch that the code of conduct (*iwu nze*) guiding the *ozo* is made known to the initiate.

After the *ima nzu* (purification) the initiate takes a title name which he will be address with. This journey is revered as sacred because from that very night till death, the candidate is expected to abide by the code of being truthful and transparent, after he has sworn with the ark of covenant; his (*okwachi*). With procession lead by the spiritual head around 11pm, accompanied with a drum and a pre pubertal *okwachi* carrying girl, the initiate and his *Ozo* kindred group with their staff of office (*osissi*) that compliments the drum sound, match to meet the rest of *Agbalanze* members. But first to the direction of where the president and his executives are seated. This is called *egwu awalu ozo*. As they approach the general *Agbalanze* Onitsha to announce a new member who his title name comes first before his other names, they circle dance the arena thrice before the other members of the group who have long been expecting them pick their staff to join the dance. The *diokpa* then exits the arena back to the *iba* to await the return of his kindred group. The sound of this very drum announces joy and hope just like the Vatican smoke during the election of the Pope at the conclave. Other rites for *ina obibi* includes; *egwu ogbo mkpoko* (dance of equality), *egwu ili afa* (title taking song for wife and children).

The following day(s), the initiate undergoes the following rites of passages; *mmacha na ozo* (victory dance), *igba ugwo ozo*, *ikpo ifejioku iru* and *ije afia ozo*. Every rite under gone by the initiate inaugurates him into a new stage or level until the last rites of initiation has been concluded. The initiate must be time conscious and present the best of the items that are required of him to avoid being penalized. After *igba ugwo ozo* follows the *ikwo aka ozo* (wash away poverty perpetually), the initiate is now fully entitled to attend functions of *Agbalanze*. *Ikpoko ifejioku iru* is performed by only he whose father has joined his ancestors and has completed all the rites required for the first and second burial. Then the initiate becomes not only one of the members of the wealthy class in Onitsha but also a fully-fledged traditional priest and a Chief who is duty-bound to intercede or supplicate before God the needs of his people.

Again, an aspirant who is absent can be represented in proxy by a member of the *Ozo* kindred group or an *Ozo* title holder of his choice. Anionwu (2019) opines that whether the aspirant acquires the title directly or by proxy, he is entitled to emoluments accruing to members after the initiation. Proxies may represent *Ozo* initiates if at the time their initiation, consideration is made on the following circumstances; if the initiate is an infant, unavoidably absent from home and invalidated because of old age or a disabling illness. If after *Ibu Ego* or the prospective initiate dies, it is deemed necessary and mandatory to complete the ceremonies. In this case, a proxy will take the *osissi* in what is usually described as *ichi osissi* and bring the process to a logical conclusion.

Paraphernalia

Paraphernalia according to Hornby (2015:1117) is “a large number of objects or personal possessions, especially equipment that you need for a particular activity”. Paraphernalia of the *Agbalanze* therefore are the materials, instruments and apparels required of the prospective member to have and present for the initiation which the initiate continues to use as a member of *Agbalanze* society. This means that the *Agbalanze* member as an *ozo* priest is entitled to have vessels or equipment during and after his initiation.

These sacred vessels, what they stand for and how they are used are discussed thus:

Osissi (Star-apple shaped sticks or staves) -This represents the staff of office like a bishop's crosier. The staves are two in number: the superior one which is bound with an iron ring is deposited in the family's shrine after the demise of the *ozo* for his commemoration. According to Akumama (Personal Communication 24th September, 2023) “this is also the soul of an *Agbalanze* priest”. *Osisi afulu* (the inferior one), is broken in two at the man's internment and placed on his grave to symbolize the severance of all ties with his conferrers. Until the inferior stave is broken, the deceased *Ozo* man continues to share in the *Ozo* title fees in his village.

Okwachi (Ark of covenant)-*Okwachi* according to Orakwue (1953) is similar to the Christian guardian Angel. Anionwu (2019:69) posits that *Okwachi* “which resembles a sedan chair with two handles on both ends is beautifully crafted”. It has a significant position on the ancestral altar of an *Agbalanze* at every sacrifice he makes. The horror overhanging on this item will suffer immediate dissipation when it is understood that the *Okwachi* contains nothing but five wooden pieces of *egbo* (*egbo* is part of *okwachi* which is ark of covenant) tied together and representing the soul of *Ozo*. It is called *nkpuluchi* and always kept white by being smeared with the native chalk to show that the soul of *Ozo* must always be in a state of purity. It (*okwachi*) is sternly and completely kept away from blood during the life time of the *Ozo* titled individual.

The *Ozo* at the night of his initiation confronts the *Nze* (symbol of purity, truth and justice) and vows to uphold the cardinal virtues in his life. It is only at his second burial that the *nkpuluchi* is smeared with blood and buried with the (catafalque) *igbudu* (lamentation of second burial coffin of catafalque). To emphasize the degree of the purity the *Ozo* must endeavour to attain, it is an undefiled young girl that carries the item during the initiation ceremonies. The smearing with blood and the burial of the *nkpuluchi* meant that the soul has returned to the Maker.

Okpulukpu (Sacred treasure wooden box) - This is used by the *Ozo* titled man for storing sundries like kola nuts, native chalk, eagle feather and sometimes cash as no one is expected to touch it. This is strictly out of bound from every other person except on the permission by the owner.

Okposi- Six *egbo* sticks tied together. Four out of the five represent the unknown or unidentified ancestors and the fifth *nkpuluchi* is tied with the *ogbo nu uke* interpreted as predestination. The Onitsha traditional religion consists mainly in communion with the spirit of ancestors to whom aspirations are made as intermediaries and to whom offerings of aliments and libation are occasionally made.

Ikenga - It represents the spirit of fortune of the *Ozo* titled man. It is a wooden sculpture. The *ikenga* is believed to be no longer potent after the burial of an *Agbalanze*. For the reason of completeness, at initiation or after the initiation, initiate obtain either of *azuzu* (*akupe*) or *okike* (elephant tusk). *Azuzu* (leather fan) which he uses for fanning to cool off the body during meeting, can also be an improvise plate for breaking and sharing of kola nuts. An eagle adorning cap and *okike* (elephant tusk) denote fusion of wealth, strength and purity. Whenever any of these items is lost, damaged or burnt by fire, it is expected that a new one be provided as replacement.

Social and Religious Impacts of Agbalanze in Onitsha

The essence of formation of groups is not only majorly for what her members stand to benefit, but also for the positive impacts they are to bring to the society. In the case of *Agbalanze*, we are going to carefully bring out their social impacts in Onitsha and finally discuss their religious roles.

Social Impacts of Agbalanze in Onitsha

Ozo title taking is an honour bestowed on an individual who has been found worthy to be thanked for what he has done. In Onitsha, this is beyond what is stated above. Most people are initiated into this group for their family not only to have a say in the society but also to have a representative when important issues are discussed. After the initiation of an *ozo* in Onitsha, there is a noticeable change in the social life and association of the initiated. From this point he is now found in the midst of class of men from different phases with the purpose of actualizing common interest. The equality of men in this society is made possible during their night of initiation when they perform the dance rite of *ogbo mkpoko* (coalition of age mates).

By this they work as a team for the reason of achieving a targeted objective. This brings about the saying, *Agbalanze ada aka ibie* (there is equality among *Agbalanze*). Members of *Agbalanze* are known to be of high repute and discipline in Onitsha. This very code guides them before and after their initiation until they join their ancestors. In other words, they are role models to good behaviour and are never found misbehaving during gathering or they are penalised for defaulting without bias or favouritism.

Presently, a lot of individuals in Onitsha who happen to be friends with members of this association have learnt how to comport themselves especially in public functions so as to avoid bringing shame to their friends (Frank, Personal Communication, November 10, 2023). For the singular fact or reason that one is a member of this society, he is accorded respect in public function and treated as a special guest regardless of his age or personality. This is because he is seen as a father and priest. He is presented with a kola as a mark of respect. In most cases, the kola nut is accompanied with hot drinks and other souvenirs. Every member of the *Agbalanze* society due to his class has a guarantee against public embarrassment. They are also advised to desist from attending occasions that bring insult; for him whose people look up to should not be an object of ridicule (*onye ana ekili ekili ada ekpo ntu*).

Any person no matter the gender found guilty of assaulting an *agbalanze* is severely penalized by the clan. Sequel to this, being a constituent group in Onitsha, members of *Agbalanze* are not left out during special functions in Onitsha; especially during *ofala* or reception of dignitaries who came to pay homage to the monarch for

various intentions. Their white dresses and other expensive wears they put on accompanied with their specially designed Hats with eagle feather on it and on their hands a parchment hand-fans, educate people on the essence of looking good when they attend functions. Because they are a social group, non-members are not permitted to be in their midst. In view of this, people are pleased to undergo the process of being members to enjoy the benefits that come with it.

Religious Impacts of Agbalanze in Onitsha

The religious place of *Agbalanze* in Onitsha cannot be over emphasised. At initiation, the initiate becomes a traditional priest in Onitsha and he is obliged to perform some traditional rites either by proxy or physical presence. During the initiation, the *ozo* is entitled to have the following vessels according to Akumama (personal communication; 24th September, 2023) to help him discharge his duty: *osisi, okwachi, ikenga, okpulupu and okposi*. These vessels are called the spirits and are needed by the *ozo* priest to officiate only on the grounds that his father is dead and has performed every rite for his first and second burial and also performed the *ikpo ifejioku* rites. These vessels are kept in the *iba* where it is preserved. They are called the spirits (*idimmuo*). An initiation rite into *Agbalanze* itself has religious implications which fortify the initiate.

Furthermore, after the initiation rites of an *Agbalanze*, he becomes a mediator, officiator, oracle and an intercessor between *Chukwu* (God) and the people especially when he becomes the *diokpa* (spiritual head) not really by age but by the virtue of representation of an ancestor who lived a good life and never died before his father or elder brother(s) and must be traditionally buried. In a circumstance where *diokpa* is not an *Agbalanze*, an *ozo* auxiliary from his kinsmen will be required to assist him until he takes his own title and ascends the ancestral stool (*ukpo*). The *diokpa* in Onitsha is same as a chief priest in the general Igbo world view. Some of the rites they are obligatory to perform includes; *inyedo mmuo* (appeasing the spirit), *inu mmanya* (wine carrying), *ini ozu* (burial), *ini igbudu, ichi ozo* (title taking) etc. In his absence, he can be represented by any other person who is an initiate from the same clan or family who has performed his *Ikpofejiokuiru* rite that makes him a fully-fledged priest. During these religious rites mentioned excluding *inu mmanya, ini ozu, inu igbudu*, other rites come with a killing of a she-goat before the spirits and the blood from the animals serves as polish in preservation of the sacred vessels; except *Okwachi*.

More so, in the general Igbo world view the chief priest is an embodiment of purity and chastity (Anyanwu: 2004). This is not farfetched from *diokpa* in Onitsha who is expected to be pure both in heart and in body with his immaculate white dress outfit from head to toe. They are expected before every religious function in Onitsha to go through the process of examination of conscience before appearing before the spirits. When found pure they proceed to function, but if found guilty or unclean, must be sanctified or he commissions another *Agbalanze* who is a fully-fledged priest to carry out the function but is expected to remain in his home until the following day. Finally, the seat of *diokpa* is not contestable in Onitsha rather it is hereditary. Death awaits anyone who contests or fights for the seat. There other severe punishments that await such person for desecrating the stool. It is obligatory for the heirs who seats on the stool to be transparent and chaste to avoid punishment and must always stand by the truth regardless of the implications.

Conclusion

Every association is expected to be of immense benefit to their society. *Agbalanze* society has enormous functions in Onitsha society. The prestige in *Agbalanze* society has made most Onitsha men to desire for membership irrespective of the cost implication.

This has created advocacy for many families in Onitsha today and made them fit into the society. For every time one takes this title, lots of entitlements are gained by the family, friends and Onitsha. It should be admitted that since they are the melting point of so many cultural and tradition rites in Onitsha, it is of high importance that people who have the wish and the money to join should be encouraged to do so, so as to help in the growth of Onitsha kingdom. The *Ozo* title (*Agbalanze*) is ancient and constitutes a very important part in the customs and traditions of Onitsha.

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