

Ozor Title Taking In Eastern Nigeria ‘A Marriage between Christian and Traditional Ethics?’ “*Piercing okpogho community*”

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Abstract: Ozor is a traditional title taken by qualified men in of South Eastern Nigeria. It is an honourable title given to men comparable to knighthood in Christendom. The Ozor 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 Ozor is expected at all times to stand on justice. These virtues are part of Christian ethics. Will Ozor tittletaking usher in a deeper marriage between Christianity and Igbo traditional ethos?

Key words: Ozor • Title • Tradition and Christian

INTRODUCTION

Ethics has been defined as the moral principles propelling the behavior of a person or group of persons. Every profession worth its name has its ethics. The Igbos of Eastern Nigeria received the gospel message of Christ amidst their traditional pattern of life. The point of contact between Christianity and the Traditional Religion of the Igbos cannot as expectedly be very smooth. Many traditional beliefs and activities were jettisoned and replaced with what many consider more sanitized form. Part of the basic tenets of Christianity is love, truthfulness, justice, uprightness etc. The African traditional religion is not totally devoid of these as misconceived by the early herald of the Christian message. Current researches show that certain Christian teachings, ethos and principles are found embedded in some practices in Igbo traditional life [1] said that Igbo morality is characterized by three features: prohibition, taboos and custom.

Prohibitions, according to Ilogu, include general prescriptions such as:

- Do not take the life of a member of the community.
- Do not steal
- Do not commit incest.
- Do not defraud strangers.
- Do not hide abominations that pervert the course of nature.

Ilogu noted that these prohibitions, though partially moral in content, are rooted in religious beliefs and observances connected with ‘ala’ the earth goddess. As earlier mentioned some of the above taboos synchronize with the Christian moral code. The ‘Ozor’ title is a symbol of goodness and love in Igbo traditional life.

The Ozor Institution: Ozor title is one of the most prestigious titles in Igboland. It is a title that seeks to build in the society, economic, ethical and moral values. According to Egudu [2] the quest for achievement is a basic impulse behind man’s ceaseless struggles in life. To be an ‘Ozor’ is the greatest achievements an average Igboman would seek to make. Ozor title confers on the holder, honor and responsibility. Egudu reports that the Ozor title marks a high social status which is consciously and assiduously struggled for in order to be attained. He pointed out that the Ozor title is neither politically effected nor craftily contrived, people have to work for it.

Generally, in Igboland, Ozor title is conferred to people who have good moral and ethical orientation. One has to be wealthy enough to meet up with the demands of the expensive ceremony [3] viewed Ozor as the highest achievement any free born male of a community would aspire to as a mark of social, economic and political distinction. According to him, preliminary titles such as Agwu, Ufiejioku, Amanwulu, Idochi, Nrinwammadu, Ekwu or Oba and in some areas Ichi (Tattoo) are performed before one takes the Ozor title.

Menakaya [4] sees an Ozor title as symbol of justice, a vindication of holiness, a trophy very much coveted by almost every male member of the Igbo society. For him, it is the last of a man's social achievement in most Igbo communities. It is the highest honor a man confers on himself. It is a cumulative effect of the cumulative effort of a man in his society. Ozor gives the title holder a position of authority, respect and honor in his village, community and beyond. Throughout Igboland an Ozor is respected. The Ozor title like all economic investments helps the title holder in his old age as he gets sizable shares of funds, food, wine etc. from the incomers or those on the journey of taking the Ozor title.

An Ozor title holder also reciprocates the honor given him by respecting himself. He does not tell lies or involve himself in immorality. He does not eat in public and carries himself with dignity. He speaks softly and does not howl at people. He settles minor disputes and sometimes serious ones. His word is sacrosanct as it is believed to be true. His attire is always there to remind him of what he is.

In his environment and community he adjudicates justice. He is trusted and he does everything possible to keep the people's confidence. Ozor and its virtues are so much prized in Igboland that Christianity embraces Ozor with some adaptations. According to Nze [5] Ozor title in Igboland can be performed by good Christians where and when adequate and sane adaptation has been done.

Most of what has been said about Ozor title taking in Igboland also applies to Okpogho, a "Historic mighty community" in Ezeagu L.G.A. of Enugu State, Nigeria. Okpogho is made up of five villages and has the distinctive feature of being the minting house of the pre-colonial Igbo nation and beyond. It may interest one to note that the concept of 'Okpogho' (Meaning money in Igboland) diffused from the name of the minting center and the hub of the economic revolution that changed the barter system of trading to the present day monetary system. An insight into Okpogho history will reveal that the community is unique in so many things and so many areas of cultural life.

We can just mention a few of those things that make Okpogho an outstanding community in Igboland. First, they claim descent from the East where their father came out with yam and an iron rod in his hand. Like the Yoruba Oduduwa legend, their descent is not from any known community. They claim first in metal technology, in yam production, in medicine and in many other traditional practices. One of such practices they claim they originated in Igboland is the Ozor title taking. According

to Nkemegbune Chukwuma, 65yrs old Okpogho man resident in Okpogho, the wealth that accrued to them in the ancient Igbo society based on their minting and metal technology made them think out a prestigious title that will be honourable and attainable by the wealthy and great achievers. When they finally established it with its elaborate ceremonies, they handed it over to the "Nshi" in "Nri clan" to now continue to confer the title to other Igbos too. This is the Ozor. The choice of "Nshi", according to Chukwuma, is because they too were wealthy too as a result of their commercial activities and they were interested in the title. This accounts for why the Nshis' go throughout Igboland to confer the Ozor title but only Okpogho confers the title on its own kith and kins without the assistance of the Nshis. Ozor title taking in Okpogho is very elaborate and may span for years depending on the wealth of the person taking the title. A very wealthy person may take a shorter time to take the title.

Like many other places in Igboland, a person must have a good character before being considered for the title. If he considers himself fit and ready to take the title, he approaches the Umunna and informs them presenting wine and cola. After interrogating him, the Umunna will declare to give him their fullness of support. After this, the "Title taker" goes to ndihu (The spirit of the dead ancestors) offers wine to them and tells them his intention. He will then call the Ozor title holders, give them wine and cola and declares his intention to them. He will also give each of them money called (Onunohu ndi ozo)- a kind of sitting allowance. Each of them must receive the money they agreed will be given them.

The next step is to kill a goat called "Eghu Ogbugbuchi". In the past one has to get the ichi marks during the ceremony. But these days, only the goats are killed with the ceremonies. The next ceremony that follows is the killing of ("Eghu Alio"). Alio, is a kind of spear that will be hoisted in a chosen place in the man's compound and the blood of the goat is poured on the ground where Alio is hoisted.

Eghu "Obubuanii" (Digging ground ceremony) comes next. This requires the killing of a goat too. The 'Ozors' will pick some mud, pound it and place it beside the alio or the mkpo where the Ozor will be eating eventually. The following ceremony is that of "Placing the Ihejioku"-ido Ihejioku. It also requires the killing of goat for feasting and wine. This is mostly done after the new yam festival. There is also a goat killed referred to as eghu "Obi aka n'iyi". After this ceremony, the 'Title-taker' can no longer go back. He must finish the Ozor ceremony.

The next ceremony is the killing of a cow referred to as “Efi ozor (Ozor’s cow). At this, the initiation now has the Ishi Ngwu (The diggers head) which marks a major accomplishment in the ceremonies.

The last goat to be slaughtered to complete the ceremony is eghu onu ndida na onu agbushi – this time fowls are included in the ceremony. It shows that this person has done all that is required for the ceremony and is now a full-fledged Ozor.

The Ozor in Okpogho like in other parts of Igboland is a very revered institution. When the Ozor is eating, the ekwe will be played for him in his mkpo. He will attain higher grades when he initiates or performs the Ozor ceremony for his child or his children.

Higher Grades of Ozor: In Okpogho Community, an Ozor can acquire higher status if he performs Ozor ceremony for his child or children and initiates him into the Ozor title holders. His new status will be dependent on the number of children he initiated into the Ozor title holders.

An Ozor title holder ties a stringed white wool round his two ankles. Anyone that sees him anywhere recognizes him as an Ozor title holder apart from his other regalia. When he initiates one of his children into the Ozor, he acquires a new status that will be effected in his attire. He now wears one leg akpukpo ebule (The skin of a ram). This will be tied around one of the legs between the ankle and the knee. If he performs the Ozor ceremony for a second child, he wears the akpukpo ebule on the two legs. If he does same on the third child, he puts on idogo (A kind of big beads or olumolu) on one leg. He puts another one if he initiates a fourth child. This time when he is eating in his mkpo (A secluded eating place), instead of the ekwe (Wooden gong), the oyo (A kind of rattles) will now be used in making music for him because of this new status. This is the highest grade of Ozor in Okpogho. This new grade demands greater responsibility and attracts even more respect. The Ozor walks gracefully in his new status with peculiar sounds emanating from the Idogo tied on his legs.

Etiquette of Ozor Title Holders: As mentioned earlier, the Ozor is a class institution. The great reverence of the Ozor comes from his uprightness of character. By virtue of his status in the society, the Ozor is bound to be truthful. He is expected to administer justice without fear or favour. To maintain his dignity, he does not eat in public. He cannot be seeing fighting or quarrelling. He must always show good examples for others to emulate. After eating, he should reserves some food for those that serve at his table. The Ozor cannot see a dead body unless he rubs the ‘nzu’ on his eyes. This also implies that he can never indulge in anything capable of causing someone’s death.

CONCLUSION

Ozor is one great traditional institution that portrays the ideals of the Christian teachings. This may be why the Ozor survived the erosion of the Christian tide in Igboland in general and in Okpogho in particular. In many communities, Christians are allowed to embrace the Ozor title as they remove anything connected with idolatry in the ceremony. However, in spite of the goodwill of the society enjoyed by the Ozor title holders, some people are still skeptical about the morality of the modern Ozor title holders while acknowledging the moral rectitude of the Ozors of the past generations.

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