**COLONIALISM AND THE RESILIENCE OF INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS IN AFRICA: FOCUS ON THE OZO INSTITUTION IN IGBOLAND, NIGERIA**

**Abstract**

Colonialism played a tremendous role in shaping the cultural landscape of many African communities. The Igbo people’s culture was not spared in the inferno. However, it would be wrong to assume that every aspect of the Igbo cultural element was fundamentally transformed by colonialism. One particular cultural element of the Igbo that remarkably resisted the colonial transformative influences was the Ozo title tradition. Drawing on ethnographic methodology and interviews with 100 Ozo title holders, community leaders, Igbo community members, and religious leaders across Igboland, the researchers argue that the Ozo title tradition in Igboland was only marginally transformed by colonialism. The findings are that although colonialism had a significant impact on many aspects of the Ozo traditional systems, the core values and principles of the Ozo institution remained largely untransformed by colonialism. This article offers a new perspective for analysing and understanding the interactions between colonial powers and the colonised communities beyond the traditional binary of domination and submission. It decolonises both knowledge and narratives of colonialism in international literatures as erasure and assimilator of indigenous cultures.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Indigenous Institution, Ozo, Igboland, Nigeria, Africa

**Introducing the Ozo Aristocratic Institution of the Igbo**

From the 1900, under British colonial subjugation and rule, the Igbo people’s cultural and traditional practices were forced by colonialism to reshape, and evolve within the new British perceived ‘civilized’ hybrid forms. The Ozo aristocratic institution of the Igbo seems to have been one of the very few Igbo cultural elements that remained marginally transformed by both British colonialism, Christianity and modernity pressures. The Ozo institution, although, manmade, depicts a recognized social rank of distinction, honour, and excellence in Igboland. The raison d’être for the founding of the Ozo institution in Igboland is for the encouragement of the people’s match to highest achievements. The Ozo title is, therefore, a prestigious and revered traditional title that is given to men who have achieved and displayed certain levels of success, influence, moral standing, honesty, integrity and generosity in the Igbo society. Although, the title is the preserve of the wealthy, it recognizes only wealth earned through honest hard work and probity of character. Therefore, an Igbo rich man whose sources of wealth are manifestly doubtful was not allowed to take the Ozo title.

The Ozo institution serves as an intangible embodiment of the traditions, values, and aspirations of the Igbo. The Ozo title is more or less a demonstration of the Igbo identity which is rooted in the principles of hard work, achievement, and communal harmony. If hard work informs the philosophy of life of a people as it does the Igbo, the Ozo title institution is a symbol of the identity of the Igbo. Indeed, the Igbo identity is exemplified in the Ozo institution and stands as a symbol of unified Igbo value system. Generally, the Igbo man is imbued with the spirit of aggressive achievement and the Ozo institution stands as an apex test of that spirit. The Ozo institution in Igboland encourages industry (Idigo, 1990:65). A poor man no matter how honest cannot go for the Ozo title because it is very expensive. Nevertheless, a rich son could sponsor a poor father to take the title and a rich father could sponsor a son who has prospects to be wealthy in process of time. One of the authors of this article is an Ozo titled man sponsored into the society by his father. This was after he had obtained his PhD in International Studies and also graduated as a Barrister at Law. The Ozo title is the highest traditional title an Igbo man aspires to earn in his life.

When one is initiated into the Ozo society, one automatically becomes a member of the traditional ruling group in his community. All initiates of the Ozo title are remarkably important personalities at all levels of the society. As Onwuejeogwu (1981:85)graphically noted, while the conferment of the Ozo title is ritually tied to the candidate’s ability to uphold and speak the truth, maintain equity and justice without fear or favour , the council of the Ozo society could strip one of one’s Ozo title if found wanting in any of these. This is because an Ozo titled man is expected to live above the common weaknesses of the ordinary person. Men who hold the Ozo title are seen as custodians of the Igbo traditional values and cultural practices. They stand as symbols and custodians of the Igbo identity.

Much of the work to understand the Ozo title system in the social sciences (Mbakogu, 2015; Eziyi, 2017; Ekweme, 2018; and Ude, 2020) discuss the social and cultural significance of the Ozo institution in Igboland. Their works focused on the Ozo institution’s role as a symbol of political power and societal status. The authors explored how the Ozo title system helps in the promotion and preservation of the Igbo identity. Mbakogu (2015) however went a step deeper in his work by exploring the ritualistic practices and symbolic meanings of the Ozo’s sacrificial items. He concluded that the Ozo institution is an intangible heritage that shapes the sense of uniqueness of the Igbo man in Nigeria. Egbunike (2016), Igwe (2017), Okoli (2018) and Nwachuwu (2020) explored the resilience of the Ozo title as an intangible heritage that plays vital role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Igbo communities. The authors examined the rights, duties and privileges of the Ozo title holder in Igboland.

In the Ozo studies, lacuna exists as no in-depth study has been done to determine the extent this piece of the Igbo cultural element was transformed by colonialism. Our ethnographic evidence demonstrates that, although, the Ozo tradition was not static; it was not fundamentally transformed by the forces of colonialism which induced intensive socio-cultural changes in Igboland.

**An Overview of the Origin of the Tradition of Ozo Titles in Igboland**

The origin of the Ozo title tradition In Igboland is traceable to Eri, a prominent personality in Igbo history and mythology, and who is often regarded as the progenitor of the Igbo race. According to Madukasi (2018: 24), it was Eri, the progenitor of the Igbo that introduced the republican and aristocratic institution of the Ozo title known as Odoloma Eri. Idigo (2001: 110), in support of the above averment, added that the sacred institution of the Ozo title started since the time of “Eri—"Ube Eri."  As Idigo (2001: 112) continued, “Historically, it was at Aguleri Kingdom that the Odoloma Eri first metamorphosed into Ozo title society and its members acted as ambassadors to the Eri.” Eri is widely honoured not only as the progenitor of the Igbo but also as a cultural hero of the people who contributed a great deal to the shaping of the Igbo’s cultural identity. Eri is said to have established the Ozo institution as a means of promoting ethics, community welfare, good governance, social justice, and respect for traditions (Idigo, 2001:119).

Through the Ozo tradition, Eri laid down for the Igbo the framework for ethical leadership and good leadership values that emphasise merit and communal responsibility. In the spirit of the Ozo institution, leaders were not just to be affluent but must have a proven track record of service to their communities. In essence, the Ozo institution as founded was anchored on the traditional leadership and social stratification of the Igbo society. The fact that the origins of the Ozo institution is traced to Eri many centuries ago is a clear reflection of the establishment’s deep spiritual, political, social, and communal values. The institution is, therefore, highly linked to cultural heritage and identity, with the titleholders seen as intermediaries between the living and the ancestors

**Initiation into the Ozo Title Tradition**

All over Igboland, the initiation process into the Ozo title tradition is very elaborate. The rituals surrounding the initiation remain worthy of attention. The rituals are intended to school the Ozo candidate clearly on the duties and responsibilities of the Ozo title holder. The essence of this exercise is fundamental for an Ozo initiate: an automatic custodian of the Igbo customs and traditions. In Igboland, an Ozo title holder is also seen as an automatic upholder of the Ala (the Earth goddess), the philosophical foundation of the Igbo morality. Put succinctly, a novice in Igbo tradition cannot be an Ozo. In Igboland, aspirants to the Ozo title institution are initiated in their respective autonomous communities. An aspirant to the Ozo title begins by informing the head of the Ozo title institution in his clan or communities. It is the duty of the head Ozo in such a community to inform the Ozo sub-groups in the different villages or towns of the candidate’s intention.

Generally, the first person to take the Ozo title in any community of Igboland is the head of the Ozo in that community. The aspirant announces his intention by coming to the group with the necessary consultation charges. These charges range from tubers of yam to kegs of palm wine and kola nuts. The candidate, after presenting these consultation materials, would be told by the head of the Ozo sub-group the required items to be procured for his initiation, such as money, yams, bulls, cows, and so on. The initiation of the aspirant into the Ozo is followed by his coronation into the Ozo society. By the coronation ceremony, the aspirant is officially admitted into the Ozo group as an Ozo-titled man. The day of the coronation is always a colourful one, as the aspirant would be found dressed in his Ozo regalia for the first time. The dressing code includes a red cap strengthened at the base with a white leather ornament on which two eagle feathers are fastened, a fan made of animal skin, coral beads, a tusk, a horsetail (nza), anklets around his ankle, and so on.

During the coronation, food and drinks were served to all attendees. The heads of all the slaughtered goats, bulls, cows, rams, and so on were collected for the head of the Ozo in the community. In the process of the coronation, the initiate will be asked to tell the Ozo group his Ozo name. As the initiate pronounces it, the prefix would be immediately added to his name. The coronation ceremony of an Ozo begins with the shooting of twenty-one (21) earth guns (nkpo n'ala); it also ends at midnight with the shooting of the same twenty-one earth guns. Igbo aspirants to the Ozo title who are in the Diaspora return home to their respective autonomous communities to take the title. In the words of Achunike (1995:103),

The Igbo in the Diaspora come home from time to time to take the title, for it not only confers honour and prestige; it gives them recognition (and some empowerment to participate in decision-making) at home and aboard. If the title is taken abroad, it empowers the holder neither in the Diaspora nor at home. If, however, it is taken at home, it gives ever empowerment both at home and abroad.

**Theoretical Framework: Cultural Resistance Theory**

Stuart Hall (1981) in his Cultural Resistance Theory entitled, “Notes on Decolonizing the Popular,” explores the concept of popular culture as a site of struggle and resistance against dominant cultural norms. Cultural resistance theory is, therefore, concerned with how cultures of communities or groups resisted homogenization or assimilation by popular or more advanced cultures. The theory carefully explores why and how certain aspects of a people’s culture managed to withstand the pressures of colonialism by continuing to hold a place of high esteem in the society.

Cultural resistance theory is highly relevant in studying the Ozo institution in Igboland because through the interrogative lens of the theory, one gains a deeper insight into why and how the Ozo tradition in Igboland was able to demonstrate resilience against colonial cultural homogenization and assimilation. The theory is also relevant for through its lens one also gains knowledge of the Ozo title’s significance in the life of the Igbo and the institution’s role as the preserver of the Igbo distinct identity. By the theory, one understands that the Igbo’s continued celebration of their Ozo tradition is a display of cultural resistance against external forces that tend to destroy, dominate or assimilate indigenous cultures.

**Methods**

The study seeks to explore the extent the Ozo tradition in Igboland was reshaped and or transformed by colonialism. It employed interview-based survey, case study and ethnographic research methodologies. The survey and case study yielded information through interviews on the people’s opinions, feelings and beliefs on the subject matter under investigation. The views of 100 Ozo society members, community leaders, community members, and religious leaders across Igboland were sought. They were interviewed from January 4, 2023 to March 6, 2024 from both rural and urban communities in Igboland.

The interviews were formal. From the case study, 5 Igbo communities were selected by the authors for deeper understanding of the dynamics of the Ozo institution in Igboland. The communities selected were Ovoko, Nnewi, Olu, Afikpo and Isi-Alangwa. These five communities were selected for in-depth study because literature on the Ozo institution in Igboland has failed to cover them adequately. They were, therefore, chosen as less studied communities of Igboland with a view to exploring them to fill existing knowledge gaps on the Ozo title tradition in the region. This offered the researchers more qualitative insights into why the Ozo institution was able to resist appreciably the transformative pressures of colonialism. This methodology aligns with Agbegbedia's (2013) perspective that a survey is a tool for gauging an individual's knowledge, facts, thoughts, and feelings. In line with the above view, Ilogu (1985) asserts, “The most basic tenet of survey research is this: if you want to know what people think, then, ask them.”

By ethnographic method, the primary researcher’s membership of the Ozo title institution in his community of Ovoko, Enugu State with over 15 years of post-initiation or coronation experience in the Ozo society enabled him to gain very deep insights into the Ozo society’s social, cultural, religious and political landscapes. His direct observations and participations in his community’s Ozo activities were rich source materials that the work benefitted from. The data collected were analyzed using content and descriptive techniques. The conclusion of this research was, therefore, derived from the qualitative synthesis and interpretations of both the primary and secondary data. Two techniques namely phenomenological and discussion approaches were instrumental in analyzing and arriving at the result of this study.

**Table 1: Consultative Interview Schedule.**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **CONSULTATIVE INTERVIEWS** | **CODE** | **DATE** | **GENDER** | **LOCATION** |
| Ozo Society Respondent | OS1 | 7 August, 2023 | M | Nsukka |
| Ozo Society Respondent | OS2 | 23 July, 2023 | M | Awka |
| Ozo Society Respondent | OS3 | 10 February, 2024 | M | Enugu |
| Ozo Society Respondent | OS4 | 3rd January 2023 | M | Ovoko |
| Community Leader Respondent | CL1 | 8 June, 2023 | M | Owerri |
| Community Leader Respondent | CL2 | 10 Sept., 2023 | M | New |
| Community Leader Respondent | CL3 | 12 Nov., 2023 | M | Umuahia |
| Religious Leader Respondent | RL1 | 6 Sept., 2023 | M | Abakiliki |
| Religious Leader Respondent | RL2 | 4 Dec., 2023 | M | Afikpo |
| Religious Leader Respondent | RL3 | 9th August 2023 | M | Isi-Alangwa |
| Community Member Respondent | CM1 | 25January,2024 | M | Nkanu |
| Community Member Respondent | CM2 | 12 Nov., 2023 | F | Nsukka |
| Community Member Respondent | CM3 | 14 Sept., 2023 | F | Aba |
| Community Member Respondent | CM4 | 6 March., 2024 | M | Ohafia |

Table 1 contains information on the interviews and the codes that were used in the discussion below. In order to secure research participants and deal with ethnical concerns, personally identifiable data was anonymised to maintain confidentiality and privacy.

**The Ozo Title Tradition and Colonialism**

Colonialism, undoubtedly, had colossal impact on many aspects of the culture of the African societies (Molokwu, et al, 2023). In Igboland, colonialism pruned, refined and transformed the Igbo cultural elements, their practices and identities causing them to assume perhaps new, ‘civilized’ hybrid forms (Eze, 2023). In Igboland, the people’s belief systems, religious practices, local governance, leadership patterns, and judicial system were all brought under the transforming and pruning influences of the British colonialism. The Ozo institution was, however, not spared in the inferno. Colonialism affected the Ozo tradition’s scope, traditional roles and practices. However opinions are divided as to the extent this piece of the Igbo cultural element was transformed by colonialism.

In narrating the impact of colonialism on this element of Igbo culture, it was noted first that before colonialism, most Igbo communities relied on the Ozo society or the Ozo titled men for settlement of disputes. Of course, before the imposition of colonial rule on Igboland, the Ozo society members acted as both political leaders and judges. They judged both criminal and civil matters. They have in-depth knowledge and understanding of the local customs, traditions and norms of the land and this helped them in the administration of justice (OS4, CL3, CM1). But with colonialism, their scope of justice administration was pruned. Of course, colonialism introduced the British legal frameworks which redefined the legal roles of the Ozo institution limiting their powers in the administration of justice to only civil matters (OS3, RL1, RL3).

Historically, under the 1901 Native Courts Proclamation which came into force in January 10, 1902, many customary practices of the people were to be invalidated, pruned, reconstructed, transformed or modified (Elias, 1975). The said Proclamation empowered local colonial authorities to invalidate or modify customary practices of the people that were repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience. by declaration or resolution (Balonwu, 1975).Under this 1901 Native Proclamation, many traditions, customs and customary rules of the Igbo people which the Ozo titled men were coroneted to preserve and enforce were invalidated as they were declared repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience, and many contrary to public policy and morality.

For example, colonialism invalidated the sociological father customary practice of the Igbo people of Nigeria which the Ozo society was supposed to enforced in the region (Ogbu, 2002). According to this custom, if a man paid dowry on a woman and the woman left the man and entered into a union with another man, the children produced by the latter union or the marriage belong to the first husband if the dowry is not returned. In other words, until his dowry is repaid, all the children of the latter union belonged to the first husband. Under the Colonial Proclamation of 1901, this piece of custom was declared repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience for to allow such a custom would be depriving a biological father ownership of his children and handing them over to a sociological father..

More so, colonialism also found objectionable and invalidated the Igbo customary practice of Nrachi which the Ozo upheld and enforced in the Igboland (OS1 CM3). By this custom, a father plants his unmarried daughter in his house for purposes of raising children for him.To the colonial authorities, the custom is perfidious, and the petrifying odour smells to high heavens. The custom is against the dictates of equity, repugnant and contrary to natural justice, equity and good conscience (Ogbu, 2002). In the view of the colonialists, Nrachi offends public policy as it encourages promiscuity and gives license to immorality. In the same manner, colonialism’s repugnancy test knocked off the women to women marriage customary practice among the Igbo which the Ozo society was supporting and enforcing among the people.

In the same vein, colonialism also struck down the ‘Oli Ekpe’ customary practice of the Igbo people of Nigeria which the Ozo society upheld and enforced all over Igboland (OS3, RL1). By this custom, the surviving brother of a deceased inherits the property of his late brother because the surviving wife has no male child. To the colonial authorities, Oli Ekpe’ custom of Igbo is repugnant to natural justice equity and good conscience and should not be enforced by the Ozo in Igboland.

Many of the disputes and cases adjudicated upon by the Ozo society on these elements of the Igbo custom tagged repugnant to natural justice that were appealed against by the affected people were soon upturned. This greatly reduced their influence on the people of the region and left them marginalized. The colonial authorities argued that most of the traditional systems which the Ozo were coroneted to preserve were arbitrary, lacking in consistency; and therefore, incompatible with Western notions of justice. In sum, colonialism greatly suppressed, the powers and authority of the Ozo all over Igboland, and sought to establish colonial administration as the sole source of power and justice in the land

Christianity introduced by colonialism also has had outstanding impact on the Ozo institution in Igboland. The Igbo people are deeply religious and are known for their strong Christian heritage.The Christians of Igbo extraction are often torn between two heritages, the traditional heritage of the people and the alien heritage of Christianity. Today, this crisis of heritage becomes apparently conflictual when an Igbo knighted Christian is interested in receiving the Ozo traditional title. The conflicts it has engendered are both psychological and anthropological. Conflict here is an experience of disagreements and opposition in individuals, between individuals, and between groups of people in the Igbo society. The consequences of such conflicts are often grievous and touch the Ozo institution deeply and almost every strata of the Igbo society because of the personalities involved.

The Christian knighthood title like the Ozo title is a mark of personal achievement. Knighthood, whether of St. John, St. Sylvester, St. Christopher, or St. Lumumba, among others, is the highest of the church titles. Shiweobi likens knighthood to a reward system but not exactly the same, he notes:

Originally, knighthood was an honour conferred on kings to noblemen who distinguished themselves in service as champions at war. But later on, the church adopted it to compensate or encourage personalities who spend their time and money for the upkeep of the church (1992:15).

The controlling factor for knighthood is an assessed integrity of life of the candidate in Christ manifested in one’s (the rich’s) generous mind to spend what one has for God in defence of the Christian faith. The initiation of one into the knighthood institution empowers the initiate to be a partaker in decision making in church affairs both within and beyond. Unfortunately, some decisions of the church which the knights are empowered to take may be diametrically opposed to the view of the traditional society which the Ozo represent and vice versa.

In Igboland, vital and fundamental discussions that touch the lives of the people and the Igbo as a community are the preserve of the Ozo title holders. The Igbo Christian knights who are not Ozo title holders are, therefore, excluded from participating in such sensitive decision making processes in their communities. Many of the Igbo Christian knights, wanting to be part of the decision making body in their communities chose to combine their knighthood titles with the Ozo traditional title. Unfortunately, the two titles have different cosmological backdrops because of the traditional rites of initiation and role demands that contrast with their Christian faith. The demands on the Ozo to defend the traditional values of the fatherland often conflict with the demands on the knight to defend the principles and doctrines of the Christian faith.

In essence, most often the two institutions make incompatible demands on their clients, the Igbo Ozo-knight or the Ozo-knighted Igbo. An Ozo, for instance, is expected to reverence the deities of the local Igboland, and the Christian God. Also, an Ozo is expected to give more cultic attention to traditional deities that are believed to be more readily at hand, responding quickly to unwholesome behaviours and situations than the not so near Christian God who is slow in anger and rich in mercy.

However, the impact of Christianity on the Ozo institution became apparent as some Church denominations in Igboland tried to work out ways by which aspiring Christians could take up both the traditional Ozo and Christian knighthood titles without soiling their Christian testimony. According to the declaration of the Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha, in the process of the Ozo title taken by Catholic faithful, “No native sacrifice of any kind will be offered by their members on the occasion of the taking of the Ozo title” (Achunike, 1995: 102).  It was their resolve that in place of the native sacrifices, a Holy Mass would be offered for Roman Catholic Christians taking the Ozo title. This decision and declaration of the church introduced unquantifiable conflicts into the Ozo traditional system in Igboland. In many Igbo communities, it sparked off the issue of “valid” (genuine) and “invalid” (fake) Ozo title holding nomenclatures (Achunike, 1995: 102). This is because the native sacrifices which are offered in the process of the Ozo title taking are for the ratification of the title by the gods and ancestors of the land. Therefore, in the belief of the Igbo traditionalist Ozo, any Ozo title not so ratified by gods and ancestors through sacrifices is invalid.

Also in their opinion, the occasional trips to the shrines to perfect the Ozo title cannot be symbolically performed in the church environment and building. To present when the Ozo’s principally traditional rituals of initiation will be eliminated so as to freely accommodate aspiring Igbo Christians remains a big question. Conversely, when the Christian Churches in Igboland will in the spirit of enculturation accept to purify the elements of the Ozo initiation process rather than fighting for their elimination remains another big question. But then, the total elimination of the Igbo traditional demands of Ozo institution is a dream possibly never to come true. Traditions die hard. Highest traditions like the Ozo institution die hardest: result of primordial traditions.

However, that many Igbo Christians are totally opposed to the views of the Igbo traditionalist Ozo is evidenced in their open, spirited condemnation of the Ozo institution. To a lot of Igbo Christians, a Christian holder of the Ozo title must denounce the title before he could be regarded as a good Christian. Today, legions of Igbo Christians see an Igbo knighted Ozo as eating from the altars of mammon and God at the same time.

But to many respondents, the Ozo institution in Igboland was not transformed by colonialism. They point to the fact that the core values and principles of the tradition remained intact during and after colonialism. For instance in the days of colonialism and after up to present, an Ozo initiate was and has remained an automatic custodian of the Igbo customs and traditions. He is an upholder of the Ala, the Earth goddess, the philosophical foundation of Igbo morality (OS4, RL1). Therefore, a novice in Igbo tradition to date cannot be an Ozo.

CM3 upholding the above view that the Ozo title institution was only minimally transformed by colonialism because its core values have remained intact point to the continued sacredness of the institution. To CM3, colonial and post-colonial Igbo people of Nigeria saw and have continued to see the Ozo institution as highly sacred, godly, holy and most divine. To the Igbo, an Ozo-titled man is a living spirit and an ancestor. The sacredness of the institution even starts from its choice of membership. In Igboland, membership into the Ozo title must be approved by both the general members of the Ozo society in the community of the applicant and the community’s deities (OS3, CM1, CL3). As such, the Igbo believe that Ozo members are divinely appointed and selected.

Idigo (2001:101-102) commented on the sacredness of the tradition via its sacrificial ceremonies thus: “The Ozo title taking in Igboland is full of elaborate sacrificial ceremonies and rigorous ritual affairs/exercise that involve so many things that have to do with so many ritualistic endeavours.” Put succinctly, the process of obtaining and becoming a member of the Ozo title society involves undergoing a series of rituals that are deeply rooted in Igbo culture and tradition. It is the belief of the Igbo people that by participating in these symbolisms and rituals, individuals seeking the Ozo title membership connect with their cultural heritage. From it, they also learn about the indigenous beliefs of the people and, as such, would be able to embrace their traditional commitment as Ozo for upholding the Igbo customs and traditions. In essence, the ritualistic endeavours are meant to school them well in the Igbo cultural practices and traditions that they are initiated to protect as Ozo (RL2, OS3).

One of the primary authors of this work, being an Ozo title holder, adds:

The numerous native sacrifices of cows and goats that are performed during the Ozo title taking are for the ancestors’ and deities’ ratification of the title. Ozo title in Igboland is not so ratified and is invalid. At times, it may demand visiting the shrine of a given deity of the community to perfect the title of an initiate with specific sacrificial items. Therefore, all Ozo reverence the deities of their local Igboland. The Ozo knighted Igbo Christians have strong attachments to Igbo traditional deities and participate in visiting shrines as the need arises. The above situation, which I have observed as an insider (member of the Ozo Society) for over 15 years, was what Obiefuna (1995) lamented in his work entitled, “Idolatry in a Century Old Faith.

 The continued sacredness of the Ozo title tradition is also witnessed during the initiation ceremony. During the initiation, the initiate comes out with his bare body covered with white chalk (signifying purity). The initiate yields his tongue for incision. The tongue is incised at seven places. A black paste is often very quickly applied to the wound for immediate healing. The seven incisions are made to drum home to the initiate the seven abominable acts an Ozo title holder should avoid (OS2, CL1, RL2). The abominable acts are telling of lies, stealing, sleeping with another man’s wife, and plotting of disunity in the community. The other acts are eating food prepared by unclean women (women in their menstrual periods), eating of unclean animals like rats, and removal of boundary landmarks (OS2, OS4, CL2). The initiation ceremony opens with the shooting of 21 earth guns (nkpo-na-ala) and closes with the same number of earth gun shots at midnight. The shooting of 21 earth guns (nkpo-na-ala) in the middle of the night is believed to connect the title holder with ancestral spirits and deities of the land for blessings, protection, and guidance (OS4, CM2, RL3).

To OS2 and CM3, the continued non-imitation of women into the Ozo institution, both in the colonial and today’s post-colonial Igbo society, is clear evidence that the Ozo, as a piece of Igbo cultural tradition, was untransformed by colonialism. As they adumbrated since Eri, the progenitor of the Igbo, introduced the aristocratic and republican institution of the Ozo title, women are not admitted into the Ozo society, no matter how well educated, rich, influential, or successful. This prohibition of women's membership is a further pointer to the inviolably sacrosanct nature of the Ozo institution in Igboland and the resilience of the tradition in the face of past and present campaigns for gender equality (OS2, CM3).

Multitudes of writers have speculated on why women were and still not admitted to the Ozo society in Igboland. To Matroy (1993:61), women were not admitted into the Ozo society because they cannot be trusted with secret information. Women can divulge secret information that is capable of betraying a community. Elizabeth Isiche (1983:289) approached the reason for the non-initiation of women from the point of view of patriarchy and women's subordination by men. In her words, “The Ozo title agrees with and upholds the Igbo cosmology where men were perpetual performers of an act and women were perpetual spectators. To Mohmood (2005), women were not permitted to join the Ozo society because women’s menstrual blood was a threat to the spiritual potency of the Ozo institution. In Igbo cosmology, a woman's menstrual blood is thought to have the ability to contaminate. A woman in her menstrual period cannot come near the Ozo initiation arena; talk more of her becoming an initiate.

One of the writers of this article, being an Ozo, provides an insider’s reason for the women’s prohibition. In his words,

Women were barred from being initiated into the Ozo title society because the Ozo initiates were automatic earthly representatives of the gods of the land and ancestors as well as automatic custodians and defenders of the Igbo customs and traditions. However, in the process of the initiation, we were warned not to have anything to do with any woman during her menstrual period, including our wives. During our initiation, the entire initiates recounted it as the 5th of the abominable acts an Ozo title holder should avoid. We yielded our tongues for incision, promising to observe that as one of the injunctions all the days of our lives. In the circle of the Ozo, we do not hold women’s menstrual blood issue as the major factor for their non-inclusion in the Ozo society.

To many respondents, the royalty of the Ozo attire and the continued dignity and royalty the attire confers on the Ozo title holders across generations is also a pointer that the Ozo tradition emerged almost unhampered by transformative pressures of colonialism. As Idigo (1990:64) pointed out, an Ozo-titled man in Igboland is known for his Isi-Agu attire, a red cap on which is fastened one or two eagle feathers, an ornamented fan of animal skin, a horse tail with a leather work handle, anklets around his ankle, beads, and an Offor (tusk). An aspirant into the Ozo society must procure all these items before his initiation or coronation. These items forming the costume of the Ozo initiates are symbols of nobility or royalty, honour, hegemony, aristocracy, and kingship in Igbo cosmology. The import and power of the above dressing code may have forced Idigo to aver thus:

The Ozo-titled men form a society of high rank, having a special uniform of dress or cloth, arm and/or leg rings, iron staff, hat, and ivory trumpet; no commoner could mimic this style with impunity (1990:65).

According to Basah (1973:36), referenced in Hahn-Waanders (1990:88), Obi Okosi instituted the red cap worn by Ozo-titled men in 1901 as a means of differentiating native court members from Ozo title holders and from common citizens during the colonial era. The aforementioned red cap, known as Okpu ododo in Igbo, was first worn in 1901 as a component of the Ozo-titled men's costume. It has not only endured but is now the most recognisable representation of the Igbo political elite's identity as a royal family or their ties to the aristocracy (Perani & Wolff, 1999: 125). To Kaplan (2004:190), the Isi-Agu attire worn by the Ozo-titled men has remained in vogue across generations because it is symbolic with meanings. According to him, “The attire is a statement of occasion, intent, mood, and power that evokes memory (Kaplan, 2004:190). Hall (1928: 136) had earlier intoned that the Isi-Agu regalia of the Ozo title holders in Igboland is worn correctly as a robe of honour. When you see them, you know that they are of the royal family.

It is also believed that the Ozo institution emerged from colonialism almost untransformed and mostly unassimilated because the developmental roles of the institution have remained the same since introduced by Eri, the progenitor of the Igbo. From the birth of the institution, to present the Ozo titleholders in Igboland, form development associations in their respective communities. The Ozo titleholders associations all over Igboland are platforms for socio-economic, educational, and cultural development of the Igbo communities and towns. The associations are known for developing their respective communities through donations, scholarships, financial support, and embarking on communal projects. Therefore, for centuries the institution has fostered cooperation, unity, solidarity, and oneness in Igboland. In effect, it was impossible for colonialism to surmount that fundamental piece of the people’s cultural tradition.

Many respondents gave their opinion as to why the Ozo title institution’s core values survived the colonial transformative pressures. According to OS1, CM2, RL2, Idigo, 1990:67, the Ozo institution as an Igbo piece of cultural element was almost wholly untransformed by colonialism because the institution is synonymous with the Igbo identity. By Igbo identity, one is referring to who the Igbo are in essence. Igbo identity here refers to the “wholeness” of the Igbo, the Igbo quality as a human species. To Mead (1971:3), “The basic connotation of identity when applied to a person or group is that of sameness or oneness that persists in time.” As Aligwekwe (1991:1) added, “Identity is perdured sameness by which a person or a people are marked out as different from others and does not alter with time or situation.” Looking at the term identity, Odoemene (1993:3) went etymological. According to him, “Identity is derived from the Latin word idem, which means ‘same”, or ‘identities.”. When the word is literally translated, it means “sameness,” with the connotation that its essence or substance (individuals or groups) remain identical and identifiable no matter where found.” Okadigbo (1976:4-6) added a voice to the Igbo identity, noting that the Igbo have eight characteristics for the identification of their “Igbonity,” that which makes them ndi Igbo (Igbo people). Although Okadigbo enunciated eight principles of Igbonity, Oguejiofor (1996) seems to have captured the description of the Igbo identity best. Following a thorough analysis of various writers' perspectives on Igbo personalities and cultural characteristics, Oguejiofor identified ten distinguishable characteristics that constitute the Igbo identity. The ten attributes are aggressiveness, ultra-democracy, clannishness, hard work, communal consciousness, egalitarian individualism, drive for achievement, hard work, and lack of kings (1996:4–29).

 The prestigious Ozo tradition in Igboland is the Igbo identity of hard work and achievement. If hard work informs the philosophy of life of the Igbo, the Ozo tradition is the identity of the Igbo as a people (Oguejiofor, 1996:32). The Igbo man is imbued with the spirit of aggressive hard work and achievement, and the Ozo institution in Igboland is an apex test of that achievement and hard work (Madukasi, 2008: 42). The Ozo title was invented by Eri, the progenitor of the Igbo, to encourage achievements through hard work. In Igboland, the Ozo title’s raison d’être is to encourage good aspiration for keeping the Igbo society on the path to hard work and the highest honest achievements. An Ozo-titled man stands as a symbol and custodian of Igbo identity (CL3 RL3). Although, the Ozo title taking is the preserve of the Igbo wealthy men, those whose sources of wealth are manifestly doubtful were and are not allowed to take the Ozo title. Indeed, the Igbo identity as exemplified in the Ozo institution is a symbol of a unified Igbo value system and sharing unto inner solidarity.

In the words of CM3, “The Ozo institution in Igboland can never be altered because it is like the blood and oxygen in the life of the Igbo man generally.” As CM1 added,

The Ozo title tradition emerged almost unhampered by colonial influences because it can never be receptive to imported ideas. In Ozo, we find the original Igbo spirit of honest achievement. Ozo, as the spirit of the Igbo, is in the blood and so cannot be changed by pressures from both internal and external.”

**Conclusion**

Colonialism played a tremendous role in shaping the cultural landscape of the Igbo people of south-eastern Nigeria. However, some cultural elements of the Igbo resisted colonial transformative influences, the Ozo tradition is one of them. The Ozo tradition could be referred to today as “untransformed” by colonialism merely because the core values and principles of the tradition seem to have survived transformative pressures of colonialism. Colonialism had an impact on that piece of Igbo tradition, mainly in the areas of its operational scope and degree of influence on the people. Christianity, for its part, was not able to purify by way of enculturation the elements of the Ozo traditional rituals, beliefs, and native sacrifices. The resilience of the Ozo as a cultural element of the Igbo lies in the fact that the institution is rooted in the Igbo identity.

The Ozo tradition demonstrates the Igbo spirit of hard work, competitiveness, achievement, integrity, excellence, generosity, and community harmony. The Ozo institution serves as a tangible and intangible embodiment of the Igbo traditional value systems and aspirations. The Ozo institution is a symbol of honour, leadership, tradition, and cultural identity. The institution is a preserver of the rich cultural heritage of the people and plays a vital role in the maintenance of the social fabric, unity, and progress of the Igbo nation. Therefore, as the tradition runs in the blood of the Igbo, it was difficult for the more popular colonial culture to submerge, assimilate, or homogenise it.

**Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest**  
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship and or publication of this article.

**Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals**  
This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent**  
Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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