

“Reasons for the Expungement of the Ritual Dimension in Ozo Title Taking Focus on Onicha-Ugbo, Delta State, Nigeria.”

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons for the expungement of the ritual dimension in the initiation of Ozo title taking, focus on Onicha-Ugbo, Delta State, Nigeria. The research employed a mixed method research approach. The target group was made up of adult men from four different age brackets who are either Ozo titled men or non-initiated as well as Christian men. Out of the 10,000 targeted population of men, 200 respondents were selected for this research. The sample was selected, using simple random, purposive and snowball methods. The study also employed structured and unstructured questionnaires, individual interview guides and focus group discussion guides as data collection instruments. The results of the respondents revealed that traditional Ozo rituals reinforced hierarchical structures, communal cooperation, and spiritual legitimacy. By engaging in these practices, initiates demonstrate their readiness to uphold communal values, participate in governance, and embody moral and ethical standards. The public nature of these rituals also allowed the community to monitor and endorse the moral and social comportment of new titleholders, thereby maintaining social cohesion and cultural transmission across generations. But with the advent of missionary activities, modern civilisation, shift to urban cities, immigration and intermarriages in Onicha-Ugbo, significant shifts occurred in the practices surrounding Ozo title initiation. Certain indigenous rituals were deemed incompatible with Christian teachings and were gradually expunged or modified. This shift raised important questions about cultural preservation, the authenticity of initiation, and the broader social consequences of ritual expungement. To address this challenge, the researcher recommended some measures that if implemented, core rituals that conveyed ethical values, social accountability, and communal cohesion would be maintained, while elements less central to moral transmission could be adapted to contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Ozo title, Initiation, Rituals, Expungement, Reasons

INTRODUCTION

Initiation into Ozo institution is a social structure practised among Onicha-Ugbo people of Delta State, Nigeria. Ozo title taking was originally, a rite for adults and not for teenagers or children. Ideally, these should be men of integrity, capable of protecting their families, the community and property. They have the responsibility of promoting and preserving the traditions and customs of the community. Otuwurrune (1997) states that this was one of the ways of paying respect to elders, preserving the cultural values, maintaining law and order in the community and to worship the ancestors who are custodians of culture, traditions and customs. It was also meant to aid the smooth running of the community as the institution plays vital roles in safeguarding the people, property, the cultural heritage, ensuring harmony and peaceful existence. Accordingly, there were structures put in place to safeguard, defend and protect the community against attacks from enemies and to protect young women against forceful marriage. Rituals that accompany Ozo title taking among other rituals, were the necessary tools that ushered people into the very setting of the society. Their importance was core to Onicha-Ugbo tradition. Initiation into Ozo institution opened the door to individuals to belong and be accepted in the society. All these reinforce one's role in the community. This is majorly because initiation into Ozo institution was ritualized.

But today the ritual process has been expunged. The impact of Modern civilization and the missionary activities, have changed the psychic of people that no one is ready to go through the rigorous rituals of Ozo title taking any more. The title only exists without the corresponding ritual. People go about freely, wearing the 'red cap' as fashion without actually experiencing what it means to wear it. (*The 'Red cap' is one of the marks or symbols of*

an Ozo titled man. It exudes honour and respect to the one who wears it but he must also be a man of integrity). Today the 'red cap' has become common place because people can now buy Ozo title with money since it has been monetised. The social consequence of this practice is that some of these new generation social status holders flout community rules, compromise values and disrespect their elders without remorse and since there is no ritual, they do not feel bound by community ideals.

Objective of the study

The following objectives guided this study:

1. To examine the values embedded in the rituals of Ozo title taking?
2. To investigate the reasons for the expungement of the ritual dimension in Ozo title taking?
3. To explore possible interventions as way forward?

Research questions

The study posed the following questions:

1. What are the values embedded in the rituals of Ozo title taking?
2. What are the reasons for the expungement of the ritual dimension in Ozo title taking?
3. What are possible interventions as way forward?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ritual Theory

Ritual Theory, developed from the works of scholars like Victor Turner and Catherine Bell, focuses on the role of rituals in shaping meaning, identity, and social relations. Rituals are understood as performances that **symbolize transitions, reinforce communal bonds, and negotiate power dynamics**. They are powerful tools of identity formation and cultural reproduction (Bell, 2017).

Modernization Theory

Modernization Theory explains social change in terms of society's transition from traditional to modern structures, influenced by urbanization, education, industrialization, and globalization (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). It suggests that traditional practices often decline as modern values and institutions emerge. In Onicha-Ugbo, modernization has introduced new forms of **education, religion, media, and economic practices** that challenge the relevance of Ozo rituals. The Church, for instance, has reinterpreted or replaced certain ritual symbols, while urban migration has reduced the younger generation's participation in traditional rites. From this perspective, the disappearance of rituals reflects broader modernization processes. However, the theory also raises critical concerns: can modernization fully replace the social functions of traditional practices, or does it leave behind gaps in social cohesion and cultural identity?

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

The following paragraphs examine the values embedded in the rituals of Ozo title taking in Onicha-Ugbo.

Values Embedded in the Rituals of Ozo Title Taking in Onicha-Ugbo

Rituals are universal practices of human culture and so are everyday practice in human life. Ritual cuts across disciplines: anthropology, psychology, sociology and religious studies. For instance, when one is faced by the problem of transition, risk and uncertainty in the human lifespan during Ozo title initiation process, ritual provides the psychological and cultural solutions to it (Lagare and Nielsen, 2020). In politics, ritual effect is realized in ensuring social cohesion and has integrative function (Bellah, 2003). For example, some rituals involve the representation or glorification of 'heroes' like during incorporation stage in the rites of passage. Hence, rituals do not simply serve a social, bonding function, but also have an 'ethical' function through which the preferred norms and values of the group are preserved and reasserted (Post et al, 2003). Furthermore, Baele and Balzacq (2021) demonstrate that ritual activities occur every day in both domestic and international politics,

citing EU summits of heads of States, UN General Assemblies, and conferences, Nobel Peace Prize ceremonies, and other similar interactions as examples of events that contain a ritualistic character in them.

In the African context, rituals connect us to our ancestors and therefore give meaning to our existence. Ritual is “a means to negotiate a responsible relationship in the human community, with the ancestors, spirits, divinities, and cosmos” (Grillo, 2012). Mbiti (1991) shows that Africans celebrate life and therefore they also celebrate their religion in that, they dance it, they sing it and they act it. A lot of the concrete demonstration of African Religion happens in rituals and festivals. This demonstrates what people believe, what they value and what they wish to apply in daily life. Among the Ashantis of Ghana, West Africa, is the “Accession Ritual”. The king is appointed by the Queen Mother in consultation with the traditional high court officials. In the appointment of a king the use of a ‘golden stool ritual’ which has great bearing on the soul of the nation is employed. The golden stool represents symbolically the collective soul of the Ashanti nation. In the rite of installation, the Chief is taken to the Stool Room where he is placed on the stool of his ancestor for a minute and lifted up thrice. This ritual means that the king rules by virtue of his relationship with his ancestors. This accords him with a special sacredness and will henceforth be surrounded by a number of taboos (Kayode, 1984).

Among the Mende’s and the Kono’s of Sierra Leone, ritual ceremony in initiation is very paramount. They continue to practice Female Genital Circumcision (FGC) despite the World Health Organisation condemnation of it. The women themselves criticized the tendencies of Western observers who view FGC as a reflection of women’s oppression by patriarchal societies. On the contrary, the women see the FGC as a way to preserve female sources of power and authority as well as promote characteristics such as strength, tenacity, endurance and fearlessness in young women (Hipple, 2024). The initiates go through the ritual process with pride and commitment.

For the Maasai of East Africa, circumcision represents the beginning of adulthood for both boys and girls. Boys must endure the operation without flinching or crying out, while girls are allowed to show pain but cannot marry or bear legitimate children within Maasai society if they refuse to undergo the procedure. In their book *African Ceremonies*, Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher (2002), note that the Maasai “believe that the male or female youngster who undergoes the agony of such an ordeal with courage will be able to endure the challenges of life and uphold the proud reputation of the Maasai people” (Hipple, 2024).

In South Eastern Nigeria, Iwa Akwa initiation ceremony is a ceremony into adulthood which takes three years to prepare. The initiates are guided through the customs, and are supervised from the beginning of their initiation through the main market-square display (Okeke, 2022). In Iwa Akwa, the participant’s mother must have been married properly to the community and be admitted by women of the community, and the father must have properly passed through the initiation stage in his days. Rituals that mark changes from passive to active membership in the community with the accompanying privileges and obligations are performed.

Initiation into Ozo Title in Onicha-Ugbo Before the Late 1980’s

In Onicha-Ugbo, a man became a real man only after initiation into Ozo title taking in ritual process. It involved series of sacrifices and purifications carried out intermittently from the stage of seclusion, through liminality, to the final threshold. Initiation into Ozo society was core to Onicha-Ugbo tradition. Ozo title taking is an initiation into the nobility of the town and it attracts numerous social, economic and political privileges to its holders as well as responsibilities. At the social level, the Ozo title enhances the social recognition accorded to the holder in the society. Economically, Ozo title holder gains a lot from sharing of monetary and other material proceeds from traditional ceremonies like burial ceremonies. He is usually given prime position over other social groups (Okwechime, 2012).

Politically, he is entitled to sit amongst other Ozo titleholders, according to his ranking, during village or town’s policy or decision-making conventions. If God blesses him with long life, he could become the custodian of the Nze of the idumu, (spiritual head of the quarter) or at the village level (ogbe) and may be counted among the top twelve who sit in the Obi’s Council (king’s council) (the highest decision-making body in the town) (Okwechime, 2012). In fact, Akabike and Anizoba (2021) attest that Ozo titled men are referred to as the spiritual fathers in Igbo (Onicha-Ugbo) cosmology. They are trusted as the custodians of customs and tradition. They also have the responsibility to defend the customs and the traditions of the land because they are seen as

the symbol of justice, equity and moral uprightness. Ozo titleholders are men of high degree of morality, proficient in the customs and traditions of the land. An Ozo titleholder himself stands for social justice, truth, hospitality and greatness (Akabike and Anizoba, 2021).

In the past, the initiate made public pronouncements to abide by the norms, the ethos and ideals of the community during the rigorous public initiation ceremonies. These rituals bound him to the community as Stephenson (2015, Some', 1998), said that, to contemplate about ritual, is also a way to reflect on human nature, sociality, and culture. These days, things have changed. Unfortunately, some elders have compromised the whole process of initiation. Ozo title taking has become monetised. The candidate only needs to deposit the stipulated amount of money and he becomes an Ozo titled man. The public ceremonies involved in the initiation are no longer there and the community sense of the ceremony has been removed. The initiation itself has become a private affair and the people forget that a community cannot exist without ritual (Some', 1998). But when the ritual initiation was practiced, the following were the values.

Integration with the Community

Religious ritual reestablishes a unified social order, primarily by reaffirming the sentiments on which this social order is based. Turner, (1995) opines that rituals, have the power to integrate and reconstruct a national community around extraordinary events. Rituals, he posits, are essentially important in times of crisis or shock, because they hold the potential to reinstate a possibly fragmented society. This integrative function is mainly achieved through the embeddedness of symbolic elements into the consistent ritual process expressed (Baelel and Balzacq, 2021). A man becomes a full Ozo titled man after performing the necessary rituals and at the end of the seclusion stage he comes out a new person and the older members welcome and jubilate with him.

Additionally, Baelel and Balzacq, (2021) maintain that rituals enhance the 'reintegration of the group whose morality is shaken and sees to the re-establishment of morale'. Ritual action has the power to keep Ozo titled man integrated into the institution especially after he defaults. Gelfand et al., (2020) also posit that one of the well-studied social regulatory functions of rituals lies in their ability to generate the experience of the fusion of the individual with group identity. This sense of fusion with the group can be created through two mechanisms. The first is the perception of behavioural development, which triggers feelings of similarity, trust and self-other overlap behavioural progress, as a cross-culturally universal element of collective rituals. This happens in the form of prescribed movements, gestures, singing, chanting, dancing during initiation ceremony, and has been found to have profound effects on later social interactions (Gelfand et al., 2020). The second mechanism is the experience of emotional synchrony. This is the collective experience of intense emotions, which generates a self that is merged with the group and is capable of motivating pro-group behaviours, including self-sacrifice (Whitehouse, 2018).

Consequently, ritual sacrificial process like those of Ozo title ceremonies, functions to reestablish social equilibrium after it has been upset (Bell, 2009). Ozo titled men are the visible embodiment of the community force for implementing its social order. Their authority affects the community as a whole. In the same vein, their supportive presence in community is very valuable. But it is only through a valid initiation process incorporated with ritual, that this can be achieved.

Through the Ozo title rituals the man comes to full realization of his purpose and the responsibility he owes to the building of his community (Okwechime, 2012). Just as he is the responsibility of his village, to help him become a man, so the good and the progress of the community are his secondary duty after his own family. In it he says "yes" to the common good of the community. This is because the initiation is not only an outward social symbolization of the movement from one stage of social to the next but also a mystical transformation intended to remold the moral, mental and spiritual orientation of the initiate towards his world and his role in it (Imasogie, 1982).

Reasons for the Expungement of Rituals in Ozo Title Taking in Onicha-Ugbo

Impact of Christianity

Missionary activities affected the entire social fabric of life in Onicha-Ugbo. Okwechime, (2012), Akabike and Anizoba, (2021) and Madukasi, (2018) surmise that the nobility was traumatized and its sacred traditions

degraded. Okwechime (2012) remarks that, because initiation rites into Ozo title were associated with traditional religious practices, any Ozo, on conversion, was made to renounce the title and burn his osisi (*insignia of his Ozo title: a wooden carved stick*). Why would people abandon their tradition and religion just to accommodate another, he wondered? Aniago (2015) decries the fact that many traditional beliefs and activities were jettisoned and replaced with what many considered “*more sanitised form*”. The expungement of the ritual dimension in Ozo title taking in Onicha-Ugbo represents a complex interaction of religious influence, cultural negotiation, and social adaptation. While these adaptations facilitated Christian participation, the community largely maintained that full legitimacy and cultural continuity depended on engagement with traditional rites.

Missionary activities, especially the concession that allowed Christians to take Ozo title, without the significant rituals associated with it, significantly disrupted traditional practices, but symbolic substitutes such as bringing the insignia to the Church for blessings, allowed for partial preservation of the functions of ritual (Gbuji, 1984). However, the perception that Church-only initiation was insufficient indicates that the social and spiritual functions of ritual remained highly valued. The Church blessing was meant to be an adaptation since it could suffice for a public ritual and commitment. But there is always tension between the adherents of Traditional Religion and Christians because Ozo title without ritual initiation is regarded as incomplete initiation. Some Christians on the other hand, maintained that these “religious ceremonies are not essential to the title-taking” (Madukasi, 2018). They have equally abandoned the practice of bringing the insignia to the Church for blessing, resulting in a more complex situation of ritual expungement.

Naturally, people look up to Christians as models and custodians of moral, justice, love, peace and honour just as an Ozo title holder is a custodian of justice, moral, faithfulness and peace as they apply with traditional religion. The moral codes of conduct, were anchored on religious observance as institutionalized rituals which guided interpersonal relationships, and aided the maintenance of order and control in the social life of the people (Okwechime, 2012). Regrettably, these have been diluted by the traditionalist in a bid to accommodate Christians. For their sake Ozo title taking was modified and was integrated into the blessing of the insignia in the Church but they too have failed to adhere to the conditions laid down for them. This has seriously not only contributed to weakening the social structure, but has threatened the preservation of the cultural heritage and values of Onicha-Ugbo people.

Impact of Modern Civilisation

Modernity, Ritzer (2000) asserts, is a double-edge sword, providing positive and negative development and both the agents of modernity and recipients of modernity, “are caught in maelstrom of hazards”. With the incursion of modern civilization, Onicha-Ugbo society was exposed to critical modes of thought. With this, the modern class of Onicha-Ugbo people became rather alienated from what tradition is and gradually abandoned their age long desired and cherished customs. This group of people tend to see initiation rituals as too stressful, primitive, and anti-social.

Akabike and Anizoba (2021) put it neatly that the forces of social change have destabilized traditional beliefs and practices. The traditional religious outlook which gives solidity and meaning to Onicha-Ugbo community existence is now threatened. Removing the ritual dimension and ceremonies in Ozo initiation rites have contributed to the disregard of the fundamental aspect of Onicha-Ugbo tradition. Christopher Okigbo, a Negritude poet laments that indeed, a break with traditions is one of the fundamental constants of the Modernist stance where people believed the previous generations’ way of doing things was to say the least, “a cultural dead end”. The world events were escalation into unknown territory. He went further to state that Modernist era reflected the uprooted experience of life in which tradition, community, collective identity and faith were eroding (Oden, 2019). Hence Achebe (1995, p. 161) aptly sums it up that “the white man is very clever... He has put a knife on the things that hold us together and we have fallen apart”.

Royce (2015) explains that as the pre-modern era gives way to the modern era, the moral rules governing people’s conduct undergo a corresponding change. Onicha-Ugbo is gradually experiencing a corresponding change in the moral rules governing its people’s conduct. Although Durkheim (1995) reasons that the state of crisis is not due to any intrinsic characteristics of modernity, nor is it an inevitable outgrowth of the system of private ownership. It is, instead, he maintains, an unusual product of a tumultuous passage from the pre-modern period to the modern period. Equally, Onicha-Ugbo community is progressing and transiting from a traditional

community to a modern one and this comes with such challenges. It is at once profound, rapid, uneven, incomplete, and contradictory (Durkheim, 1992).

Durkheim (1995) highlighted the resulting state of upheaval as constituting a crisis of integration and solidarity which he describes as a moral crisis. Here, Okigbo interjects that passage rites (Ozo title initiation) is like a labyrinth and this means the road to reaching the spirit world which he called the ‘heavensgate’. He assured that though the Modernist era has altered the ways of the past, the gods could still receive one back to its fold as long as one performed the cleansing rites (Oden, 2019).

The problem facing the modern Onicha-Ugbo people suggests a combination of weakened moral, social and cultural structures that resulted from the abandonment of their root and imbibed something that is borrowed (Okwechime, 2012). This is a concern because some elders in Onicha-Ugbo are in support of ceremonies of Ozo title taking without ritual and this has implication for the future generation. They are deluded about the lures of modern era and social life and this may not be helpful because what is borrowed does not sustain.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area

The study was carried out in Onicha-Ugbo, a town in Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. The traditional ruler is His Royal Majesty (HRM), Agbogidi Victor Chukwumali-eze 1, the Obi of Onicha-Ugbo. Its rulership is directly from Ezechime. Onicha-Ugbo is among the nine towns that make up the ancient Ezechima clan in Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta State. “All the clans have integrated with the town, resulting in a very large town as we have it today” (Okwechime, 2012). However, though the nine towns are from the same clan, (Anioma), they have very distinct ways of conferring Ozo title (Uba and Ani, 2018). Onicha-Ugbo is a conglomeration of people who migrated from different origins. Each village is a compact settlement divided into wards or quarter (Idumu) and each quarter consists of non-nuclear extended families (ebo) made up of smaller nuclear extended families (umunna), all living in close proximity and recognizing the authority of the oldest man and or the most senior Ozo title holder who is a custodian of Nze (spiritual leader) of the quarter Okwechime, 2012).

Onicha-Ugbo was chosen as the study area because Onicha-Ugbo is the head of the Ezechime clan. Whatever happens in Onicha-Ugbo influences what happens in other communities and whatever cultural or traditional problems or challenges that affect Onicha-Ugbo can spill over to other communities. Therefore, addressing the issues around ritual ceremony in Ozo title taking in Onicha-Ugbo, provides a gateway to handling similar issues in other communities. They share a common local institution, be it Ikpa-alo or Ichiozo, these are different names of the same social institution of Ozo title taking.

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed research design of survey quantitative and phenomenological qualitative methods. Mixed methods approach unite the results of quantitative and qualitative patterns and helps to expand the scope of the study (Mvumbi and Ngumbi, 2015). The use of quantitative research was to facilitate data collection and analysis of numerical data so as to describe and clarify, the value of rituals and the reasons for their removal. In employing quantitative research method, the study wanted to know the value of ritual ceremonies in Ozo title taking and the reasons for its removal in Ozo initiation ceremony. Qualitative research approach was also used because it explored the experience and perception of participants regarding the phenomenon. It allows an in-depth investigation of a social or human phenomenon in non-numeric terms (Kimalu and Mrimba, 2015). Here the researcher tried to ascertain how people generally explain what is going on in Onicha-Ugbo social structure, how it affected the value system and communal living and how the issues can be addressed.

Table 1: Target Population Table

Categories	Population
Christians: Ozo title holders, with and without ritual and non-initiates	1,500
Home based young adults with Ozo title of 20-40 years	2,250
Urban dwellers: young adults & elders of 30-70 years with Ozo title	2,200

Home based adults without Ozo title who are between 45 - 65 years	1,550
Home based elders with Ozo title of 75-90 years	2,500
Total Population	10,000

Sampling and Data Analysis Procedure

The total sample for the study was 200 respondents. Yamane's (1967) formula was used to calculate a sample size which represented the total target population of 10,000. A 50 per cent confidence level and $p = .05$ was assumed for this equation. Therefore, to calculate sample size (Yamane, 1967) (where 'n' is the sample size, 'N' is the population size, and 'e' is the level of precision). A calculation of sample size in this survey from the formula, gave a total of 200 sample size for this study: The target population divided by fifty percent confidence level. The formula for determining the size is thus:

$$n = N / 1 + N(e)^2$$

n = is the required sample size from the population under study

Where N = is the whole population that is under study

e = is the sampling error or level of precision

Therefore, $n = 10,000 / 1 + N(e)^2$

$$n = 10,000 / 1 + 10,000 (0.05)^2$$

$$n = 10,000 / 50.0025$$

$$n = 200$$

The researcher used Walpole (1982) formula for proportions in order to ensure equal distribution of respondents.

$$n_i = (N_i / N) n$$

n_i = Quota size required

Where: N_i = Number of respondents in each stratum

N = Total study population

n = Total sample size that will be used

With the above formula, the researcher was able to derive the sample for each category in this way: $n_i = (200 \div 10,000) \times 1,500 = 30$

$$n_i = (200 \div 10,000) \times 2,250 = 45$$

$$n_i = (200 \div 10,000) \times 2,200 = 44$$

$$n_i = (200 \div 10,000) \times 1,550 = 31$$

$$n_i = (200 \div 10,000) \times 2,500 = 50$$

Table 2: Sample and Sampling Matrix

Participant categories	Target Population	Sample size	Sampling Method
Christians: with and without Ozo title ritualised	1,500	30	Simple Random sampling
Home based young adults of 20-40 years with Title	2,250	45	Simple Random sampling
Urban dwellers: young adults & elders: of 30-70 years with Ozo title	2,200	44	Simple Random Sampling
Home based adults of 45- 65 years without title	1,550	31	Purposive sampling

Home based elders of 75-90 years with title	2,500	50	Purposive and Snowball Samplings
Total Population	10,000	200	

Both probability and non-probability sampling methods were used by the researcher in this study to select a sample of respondents. Individual interviews, focus group discussions, and structured and unstructured questionnaires were the main instruments for data collection employed in this study. Due to the mixed-method approach chosen by the study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for data analysis. Qualitative data was collected through open-ended questionnaires, interview guides, and focus group discussions. These were thematically analyzed. Close-ended questionnaires were used to gather quantitative data. The analysis of the data was done with SPSS version 26. Quantitative analysis of the questionnaire data was conducted following the study's research questions. The results were coded, interpreted, and presented. Similarly, the data was summarized descriptively, including the means, percentages, and frequencies. Graphs and tables were then utilized to illustrate the data.

Research Findings

This report lists Ozo's ritual values (social, political, economic, moral, identity). The Ozo title in Onicha-Ugbo, Delta State, Nigeria, has historically been a prestigious mark of social status, spiritual commitment, and moral responsibility within the community. Traditionally, initiation into the Ozo institution was a rigorous ritual process that incorporated symbolic rites, spiritual observances, and communal recognition. These rituals served not only as a means of validating the title but also as instruments for maintaining social cohesion, moral order, and cultural continuity.

However, with the advent of Christianity (mission teachings, Church policies, conversion patterns), in Onicha-Ugbo, the ritual dimension of Ozo title taking underwent significant expungement. This was largely due to the clash between indigenous spiritual traditions and the Christian worldview, which often discouraged or condemned certain indigenous practices as pagan. Consequently, concessions were made, allowing Christians to take the Ozo title without undergoing the full traditional ritual. Instead, they could present their insignia to the Church for public blessing and commitment. This shift raised questions regarding the authenticity of initiation, the preservation of cultural values, and the broader social implications of ritual expungement.

From the survey, 70% of respondents affirmed that missionary activities significantly affected the social fabric of Onicha-Ugbo, leading to the degradation of sacred traditions. This indicates that the advent of Christian influence altered the traditional systems of cultural transmission. A minority (16.7%) of respondent felt that missionary activities did not have such a significant impact, possibly reflecting respondents who had minimal engagement with Church teachings or who maintained strong allegiance to traditional beliefs. About 13.3% of respondents expressed uncertainty, reflecting generational or experiential differences in exposure to traditional versus Church-influenced practices.

Table 1: *Respondents' Perception of the Impact of Missionary Activities on Ozo Title-Taking*

Response	Frequency (%)	Interpretation
Yes	70.0%	The majority of respondents affirmed that missionary activities significantly affected the social fabric of Onicha-Ugbo, contributing to the degradation of sacred traditions. Christianity altered traditional systems of cultural transmission by discouraging practices such as Ozo rituals, which historically reinforced social norms, communal cooperation, and moral conduct. This finding supports scholarly observations, including those of Oket P'Bitek, that colonial and missionary interventions disrupted indigenous institutions and reshaped social hierarchies and cultural practices.
No	16.7%	A minority of respondents believed that missionary activities did not significantly affect the social fabric of Onicha-Ugbo. This view may reflect individuals with limited exposure to Church teachings or those who maintained a strong commitment to traditional beliefs and practices.

Response	Frequency (%)	Interpretation
Undecided/ Not Sure	13.3%	Some respondents were uncertain about the impact of missionary activities. This uncertainty may reflect generational or experiential differences in exposure to traditional cultural practices and Christian influences.
Total	100%	The responses indicate that most respondents perceived missionary activities as having a significant influence on the erosion of traditional institutions and cultural practices in Onicha-Ugbo.

This implies that: “The Ozo title-taking in the present times has been modified or Christened to exclude what was considered as fetish practices in order that Christians may participate in the exercise,” (Nwokocha & Nnatuanya, 2024).

When asked whether taking the insignia to Church without traditional Ozo initiation constituted valid initiation, 75% responded “No”, indicating that the community largely viewed traditional rites as essential for full recognition within the Ozo institution. Only 20% considered the Church alternative valid, suggesting that while some accepted symbolic substitutes, the majority still recognized the intrinsic value of ritualized induction. Five percent (5%) were uncertain. The reasons provided emphasized that traditional rituals impart moral discipline, communal responsibility, and spiritual legitimacy that a Church blessing alone could not confer.

Table 2: Respondents' Views on the Validity of Taking the Ozo Insignia to Church Without Traditional Ozo Initiation

Response	Frequency (%)	Interpretation
No	75%	Majority believed that taking the insignia to Church without undergoing traditional Ozo initiation does not constitute valid initiation.
Yes	20%	A minority accepted the Church alternative as a valid symbolic substitute for traditional initiation.
Not Sure	5%	A small proportion of respondents were uncertain about the validity of the Church alternative.
Total	100%	

The findings demonstrate that expungement of the ritual dimension in Ozo title taking was driven primarily by the interaction between Church activities and the Christianization of indigenous practices on one hand. Missionary presence provided both ideological and institutional authority that challenged ritualistic aspects deemed incompatible with Christian doctrines. In response, concessions were made to allow for Ozo title taking without traditional rituals, but with optional Church blessings to maintain symbolic continuity.

Modern civilisation equally challenged the traditional celebration of Ozo rituals and has weakened traditional authority structures. Social cohesion was similarly impacted by the expungement of rituals. Ritualized practices had historically facilitated shared experiences, fostered emotional bonding, and reinforced mutual accountability among members of the community. These interactions generated a sense of collective identity and solidarity, ensuring the resilience of social networks and the smooth functioning of communal governance. With diminished ritual engagement, therefore, these mechanisms of social integration were weakened. According to Muthiga (1962):

Our customs are dug up.
And put aside like the grass
On which the dancer trod.
And foreign crops implanted;
And we pass by, eyes on the ground.
Submitting to the foreign as ours.

A respondents indicated, the reduction in communal emotional energy risked fragmenting social bonds and diminishing the capacity of the community to respond collectively to challenges or conflicts. Chleo, (2024. P. 145) puts it that “as globalization accelerates and technological advancements reshape daily life, traditional rituals (especially), of Ozo title taking, faces significant challenges”. Finally, the report proposes culturally sensitive interventions – from educational programs and dialogue to heritage policy – detailing stakeholders, steps, risks, and success metrics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study demonstrated that modernization, and religious influence, particularly Christianity, had replaced traditional practices. Ceremonial obligations were often bypassed in favor of symbolic recognition or financial transactions. To address this challenge, it was recommended that the Ozo institution adopt a selective retention approach. Core rituals that conveyed ethical values, social accountability, and communal cohesion should be maintained, while elements less central to moral transmission could be adapted to contemporary contexts. Furthermore, collaboration between traditional leaders and local churches should be encouraged to harmonize cultural and religious practices. This could involve structured ceremonies where Christian blessings complemented, rather than replaced, essential ritual acts. Such integration would preserve the ethical, symbolic, and communal aspects of the Ozo title while respecting contemporary religious beliefs.

CONCLUSION

This article aimed at discussing the reasons for the expungement of the ritual dimension in initiation ceremony of Ozo title taking in Onicha-Ugbo, Delta State, Nigeria. The author looked at it from the perspective of the background, the importance of ritual, change, and the future. Initiation into Ozo title taking without the corresponding rituals does not allow for continuity of the people’s age long tradition because values are inculcated to the generations to come through the social institutions and the people’s social structure. Ritual, like value provides for all encompassing humanization. In the absence of which members of Onicha-Ugbo community will be incapable of functioning in civilized society.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Encourage more written and documentary projects: Sponsor people who are culturally minded to take up writing and documenting important aspects of the people’s culture and tradition

A Call for Cultural Promotion: Organise a celebration to showcase the culture and the traditions, and create social groups that will promote the culture.

Symposium: Organize a symposium to enlighten the people on their culture; to know what is idolatry and what is not and on the importance of ritual ceremony in Ozo title initiation.

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