

OZO Title and Indigenous Capital Formation in Igbo Society, Southeast, Nigeria, 1900 - 2015

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ABSTRACT: There has been a growing apprehension on how the ordinary man and woman in the rural communities of Africa can raise capital to start some micro-business and thus reduce poverty, and improve his or her standard of living. Successive governments, both colonial and post-colonial, have not address this concern successfully. Also, the early European writers and their supporters falsely presented pre-colonial Africans as people devoid of institutions for the promotion of growth and development. However, it has been established that **Ndi-Igbo** of southeast Nigeria developed institutions and mechanisms that encouraged both their socio-economic development and growth at the individual, group and community levels. **Ozo** title is one of the prestigious titles in **Igbo**land. It is predominantly a socio-political institution, whose roles cut across administrative, judicial, social and religious spheres. The social status of members of the society can be likened to that of aristocrats. However, specifically for capital formation among the people, the **Ozo** title is an indigenous non-agrarian institution for capital formation through which the members reap dividends of their investment, thus accessed resources to attend to their individual needs. Consequently, **Ozo** title becomes a dependable source of economic empowerment to members of the institution. The paper concludes that **Ozo** society is, even till today (2015), one of the viable socio-economic institutions for capital formation among **Ndi-Igbo** of the southeast, Nigeria, which has contributed immensely to the growth and development of its members. Primary and secondary sources of data were adopted in the analysis of this work. The period covered is 1900 – 2015.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Title taking in societies constituted major sources of capital formation among the Igbo, though on long-term basis. Before colonial rule, authority was vested in the hands of the societies' titled men or age grade associations, whose members were traditional elders. The notable title societies among the people were **Ozo** titleholders, **Eze-ji (Ezieji or Di ji)**, **Okonko** and others. These were elitist groups who performed religious, political, socio-cultural and economic roles for the people. Members were the custodians of the cultural heritage of the people. The cost of taking titles in our area of study was heavy, and it went with costly ceremonies. This paper, therefore, will examine the processes of initiating one into the **Ozo** society and how it becomes a veritable source of capital formation.

Ozo Title

The **Ozo** title was one of the oldest of all the titles among **Ndi-Igbo**. It was made up of a prestigious group of individual achievers who were respected and revered within and outside their communities. They were like the high priests in their various families. It was open to wealthy sons of the land (**Diala**), who are not of slave origin. There were two means of acquiring the **Ozo** title, namely, **IgwuOzo** (To dig the title) and **Isa Ozo** (To cleanse the title). The former was more costly, and was done by an entirely new entrant, while the later occurred when a member of the society died and the son (usually first son) inherited the title, after burying the father and has fulfilled all the required obligations and ceremonies. He would thereafter undergo similar processes as did his father, as well as spending resources as he did, but not as elaborate as that of a new entrant.¹

Research indicates that intending candidates were expected to possess some qualities that were investigated by other **Ozo** title-holders. The aspirant must be an indigene and first male child of his father. He must not be disfigured in any form; must be an upright man without any questionable character; must be married; always keep to his words; not a drunk; not a womanizer; and he must avoid other vices. Also, the aspirant must be wealthy enough to enable him carry out the costly ceremonies that went with taking the title. The cost was enormous and it involved money, quantities of yam and a number of livestock, not only as fees to the other and senior **Ozo** titleholders and the community, but also as expenses for numerous feasts and for an anticipated large number of participants.

Ahamefule enumerated the cost of taking **Ozo** title in **Anara** community of Imo state. The aspirant would first invite elders within his immediate kindred who were **Ozotitleholders**, to inform them of his intention. He must present to them 16 **Igbo** kola-nuts (cola aciminata), sixteen balls of **Odo** (a yellow substance), 16 alligator pepper, enough quantity of ground tobacco, 16 jars of good palm wine, 2 bottles of Aromatic Schnapps, plenty dishes of pounded yam with enough fish and goat meat, and cash which they shared among themselves according to seniority of initiation. After interrogating the aspirant, they ate and drank, then gave another date not less than three to 3-4 months to enable them ascertain the truth of the information given to them, and to make sure that the candidate was the right person for the position.

He continued, the second time involved a larger gathering of kindreds of titleholders. At this stage, he presented the required material items including entertainment. This happened for a record period of fifteen times and at the sixteenth time, the aspirant was initiated. It is worthy to note that at each time, the number of participants increased and the aspirant also increased the material items needed, as well as the entertainment and ceremonies involved.² Northrup has tried to quantify the cost of taking titles thus:

In 1850s, title-holders in Onitsha numbered about 200 in the junior grade, who had paid fees of 100,000 cowries... and a large number of animals and yams, and about six senior title-holders, who had paid 'enormous sum'.³

The initiated **Ozo**, as noted earlier, must be a man of integrity, always on the path of truth and justice, a peacemaker, good leader, avoids taboos of the land, a defender of the community and the poor. He was handed a staff of authority and a symbol of truth called **Ofo**, whose efficacy need not delay us here.

Politically, they were the kingmakers and governed the land with the **Eze**(King). In Anara, before one became the **Eze** of the community, he first became a member of the prestigious **Ozo** title-holders, and after his coronation, he was called '**OnyeisiNdi-Nze**' (The head of all **Nze**). The **Eze** could not rule the people effectively without the help of **Ozo** titled men. They were wealthy men who used their resources to help in the development of their communities. They offered sacrifices on behalf of members of the family, and therefore, acted as high priests. Besides, they performed the role of judges among the people. They settled all forms of disputes within and outside their communities. Iheanacho stated that **Ozo** titleholders were instrumental to peaceful settlement of dispute among members of the community. Before their court, everybody was equal, irrespective of position or status in the society. Judgment was just, cheap and swift, unlike the conventional courts where justice could be costly, delayed, or even denied.⁴

Members of the community benefited immensely from them, especially the less privileged. They were the protectors of the community and defenders of the defenseless. Their words were like bonds and were honoured. '**Inye** or **IziMkpara**' (Showing of staff), by **Ozotitleholders**, sufficed to explain how their words were honoured by the people. In times of need or difficulty, the poor could run to an **Ozo** title-holder because he had the capacity of salvaging the situation. An example was marriage. The titled man could take a poor member of his family or community to the family he wants to marry from. By symbolically giving or showing his staff or other insignia, the proposed family accepted the young man as their son-in-law, and the process of marriage could commence. This was done in conviction that the title men kept their words, and therefore, he would definitely come to pay the dowry and other marriage rites in due time. Also, indebted men of the community benefitted from this practice. Through showing his staff or insignia, the **Ozo** title-holder could act as a guarantor of a debtor to a creditor.⁵

The house of an **Ozotitleholder** was like a sanctuary to the people. If a fugitive ran to him, such a person was protected from immediate harm. He later produced the person at gatherings, like family, lineage or village assembly, where disputes were justly handled and resolved.⁶ Furthermore, it was used to ascertain the family backgrounds of members. Any family that had an **Ozo** titleholder guaranteed that members of the family were marriageable and that members of the family could take responsible positions in the community. The presence of the **Nze** showed that the family was no stranger or outcast. Therefore people associated with them freely.

On personal ground, the titleholder acquired some privileges and advantages over ordinary members of the community. He represented the extended family or the lineage as a member of the elders of the village council. He presided and proffers solutions to conflicts or disputes between members of the community. He was the religious leader of his people. He belonged to the social class of 'nobles' and enjoyed all the privileges that came with it. For example, he was first served in the gathering assembly of the community irrespective of his age⁷. Other privileges were exemption from communal and manual labour, he took the lead in social functions, and would break the kola-nut before it was shared to the people⁸. These among other privileges accrued to an initiated **Ozo**. Nevertheless, the **Ozo** titled-man could lose all these privileges and entitlements if he was ever convicted of a grievous crime like theft⁹. The next focus of this paper is on the economic gains acquired by the titleholders.

Capital Formation

Ozo institution, as one of the sources of capital formation among the people, the economic benefits enjoyed by titleholders cannot be overstressed. It lasts all through the lifetime of the holder and could be inherited. As earlier observed, the cost of taking title in **Igboland** was heavy, to the extent that the initiated **Ozo** spent almost all he had accumulated prior to taking the title.¹⁰ This was done to enable the holder form capital via aspirants to the title society. He was qualified to partake in the sharing of entrance fees paid by a new candidate and the sumptuous ceremonies that went with it. In this way, the cost of taking the title was not a waste, but rather an investment for future benefits. Due to the privileges that accrued to title-holders in the traditional system, many strove to secure it in the pre-colonial era, thereby making the institution a very viable one. The membership of the **Ozo** society, constituted a source of capital formation, through the funds raised from the aspirants. The heavy and costly payments made by candidates, in cash and otherwise, were the sources through which members reap the dividends of their investments. Authors such as Green asserts that; "It was in the nature of an investment on which a share of the fees of every new member is a dividend".¹¹ Nwabughuogu termed it "...a source of insurance in old age",¹² while Aligwekwe has observed that "In this way, the **Ozo** was a sort of 'bank' or an 'insurance' scheme in which people lodged their wealth for interest and for protection against old age".¹³

As indicated earlier, it is pertinent to state here that these economic needs motivated members of these title societies more than other benefits. Most of them were interested in investing their wealth for future dividends. To maximize the gains that accrued to them via titled societies, some devised means of initiating their children in areas where this was accommodated. Afigbo noted this thus:

Such initiation of little boys into these privileged and restricted organizations was largely a matter of financial investment, as it entitled a man who had so initiated his sons to take many shares when the entrance fees of new members were being shared.¹⁴

II. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the **Ozo** title as a veritable source of indigenous institution for capital formation among the Igbo of southeast Nigeria. The qualities of individual members of this prestigious institution were highlighted. Also, the different means of attaining the, and the processes of initiation into **Ozo** title were discussed. Besides, the roles, rights and privileges pertaining to, and the sanctions meted out to, initiated **Ozo** titleholders were considered. Specifically, **Ozo** title institution as a viable source of forming capital for members was treated. The position of this paper is that **Ozo** title institution is still one of the existing non-agrarian institutions for capital formation in traditional societies, even in modern times (2015), among the **Igbo**.

ENDNOTES

- [1]. Interview with Nze D.A. Ahamefule, 76 years, UmunekeAnara, Imo State, Retired Civil Servant, 06/03/2013.
- [2]. Interview with Nze D.A. Ahamefule, 76 years, UmunekeAnara, Imo State, Retired Civil Servant, 06/03/2013.
- [3]. David Northrup, Trade Without Rulers, (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 111.
- [4]. Interview with Nze Chris Iheanacho, 62 years, UmuduruheAnara, Imo State, Businessman, 12/10/2013.
- [5]. Interview with Ichie Silas Chukwuonye, 78 years, UmunekeAnara, Imo State, Farmer, 06/10/2013.
- [6]. ChiekaIfemesia, Traditional Humane Living Among the Igbo. An Historical Perspective, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd, 1979), p. 89.
- [7]. P.E. Aligwekwe, The Continuity of Traditional Values in the African Society the Igbo of Nigeria, (Owerri: Totan Publishers Limited, 1991), pp. 124-125.
- [8]. ChiekaIfemesia, Traditional Humane Living, p.89
- [9]. A.I. Nwabughuogu, The Dynamics of Change in Eastern Nigeria, 1980-1960: Indigenous Factor in Colonial Development, (Owerri: Esther Thompson Publishing Company, 1993), p.32.
- [10]. Thompson Publishing Company, 1993), p.32.
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- [12]. M.M. Green, Igbo Village Affairs, (Britain: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd, 1964) p. 48.
- [13]. A.I. Nwabughuogu, The Dynamics of Change in Eastern Nigeria, p.32
- [14]. P.E. Aligwekwe, The Continuity of Traditional Values, p. 120.
- [15]. A.E. Afigbo, Ropes of Sand. Studies In Igbo History And Culture, (Ibadan: University Press Limited, 1981), p. 148.

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