



Implications of the expungement of the ritual dimension in Ozo title taking in Onicha-Ugbo, Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This article drew from functionalist theory, one of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology, which emerged in the early 20th century. Functionalism is primarily concerned with how social order is maintained and how societies remain stable over time. This study used a mixed method research approach of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The study aimed at establishing the implications of the expungement of the ritual dimension in Ozo title taking in Onicha-Ugbo, Delta State, Nigeria. The study targeted adult titled men, uninitiated and Christian men with a sample size of 200 respondents selected randomly. Structured and unstructured questionnaires, individual interview guides and focus group discussion guides were used as data collection instruments. The findings of the study revealed that the expungement of rituals in Ozo title initiation have disrupted the mechanisms of cohesion. The removal of rituals has weakened the symbolic and moral glue that once bound the community, leaving members vulnerable to value disorientation, commodification of titles, and weakened respect for institutions.

Keywords: Ozo title taking, ritual dimension, expungement, implications

Introduction

In the absence of ritual, the question is: Which alternative ways do individuals and groups utilize to fill the void left by the absence of rituals and which reactions does this absence provoke. Rituals are vital for establishing a rhythm, rendering stability, and fostering a sense of belonging and identity within a community Han (2020) ^[12]. The erosion of these practices, motivated by the relentless pace and individualistic nature of contemporary society in Onicha-Ugbo, has serious implications. Without these routine and ceremonial practices, the communal bonds and social structures that provided collective meaning and order gradually weaken. This collapse leaves individuals isolated and unanchored, drifting in the short-lived, momentary relationships that characterize much of modern existence.

Rites of passage can be seen as universal in human experience, in that all societies find ways to mark transition between one phase of life to another or social status to another. These require some kind of celebration or something to mark the change (Blumenkrantz and Goldstein, 2010) ^[6]. Rites of passage convey the effectiveness of ritual and its ability to nourish and fortify the lives of individuals and strengthens the psychological sense of community (Fujitani, 2023) ^[9]. They are well-defined as ceremonies, that tell milestone events in a person's life such as birth, maturity, reproduction and death and these are stages of physical, psychological and spiritual development that one must go through. All these are done in rituals because, in addition to strengthening social bonds, rituals also play a role in the process of transformation and transition in human life. Ritual traditions help individuals and groups to understand changes in life, give meaning, and reaffirm their identity (Fujitani 2023) ^[9]. The presence of rituals in these crucial moments shows how profound the role of rituals is in shaping and strengthening identity.

The Militaries for instance, engage in rituals and ceremonies

in order to be organically real to their members and to society, and also to engender commitment. In this case, rituals give occasion to a life or group event, they are signs that something matters to the group, and the individuals involved. When the militaries engage in rituals, it provokes admiration, respect and loyalty to members (Logan, and Kridel, (2019) ^[16]. Therefore, to ensure smooth transition from one stage to another, certain rituals, or symbols are required.

Epstein, (2018) ^[8] in illustrating the role of ritual among both Progressive and Orthodox Jews, explains that ritual is a way of reminding ourselves about what is important, about where we have come from, who we are connected to, and the responsibilities we have to the world around us. The "bar/bat mitzvah" ritual for instance, marks the formal acknowledgment by the community and by the initiates that they are now taking on these obligations and are full members of the Jewish community. These rituals, often performed in specific locations like the synagogue or the home, help individuals and communities acknowledge and celebrate these life cycle events. In it, they demonstrate their commitment to their faith and recognize that they are now responsible for following Jewish law. (Epstein, 2018) ^[8].

In exploring the historical background of indigenous communal structures in East Africa, scholarly literature heavily relies on early native accounts to contextualize traditional socialization pathways. Central to this discussion is Jomo Kenyatta's (1938) seminal ethnography, *Facing Mount Kenya*. It conceptualizes traditional rites of passage as the core educational and civic framework of the Gikuyu community. Kenyatta (1938) posits that a child's transition into adulthood is not an isolated event but a continuous, systemic integration process managed through domestic apprenticeships, oral traditions, and age-graded milestones. By structuring these rituals as a complete curriculum of citizenship, early historical documentation demonstrates that

Kenyan societies possessed functional, cultured pedagogical models long before the introduction of Western-style formalized schooling (Kenyatta, 1938).

Historically, rites of passage in the Kenyan context served as the primary mechanism for social stratification, political organization, and legal accountability. Kenyatta (1938) in his analysis of traditional institutions, the completion of initiation rites—most notably *irua* (circumcision)—instantly elevated an individual's legal status from a dependent youth to a participating citizen. This transition established the *rika* (age-group) system, which is a lifelong group model that cut across individual kinship lines to forge broader communal cohesion and military defense units. Within this background, rites of passage must be understood not merely as religious or physical modifications, but as vital constitutional pillars that sustained judicial governance, land rights, and elderly councils (*kiama*) in pre-colonial Kenya (Kenyatta, 1938).

In Africa, and among the Hamar tribe of southwestern region of Ethiopia, becoming a man involves “Bull Jumping” (Nuñez, and Pfeffer, (2016) ^[20]. It lasts for three days and these are very important days in the life of the initiate because if he fails, that brings shame to the family but if he succeeds, he is set to marry a girl of his family's choice and also qualifies to own cattle. The bull-jumping is the last part of the event (*ukuli*) and usually happens around October/November, at the end of harvest. According to traditions, the eldest child of the family must go through the bull jumping ceremony rite of passage before his younger ones can follow, and it is the father who decides when his eldest son is ready (Nuñez, and Pfeffer, (2016) ^[20].

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In West Africa and particularly in Sierra Leone, initiation into the *Poro* (for young men) and *Bundu* (for young

women) society is done in elaborate ritual ceremonies. Nothing is skipped or the initiation will be rendered invalid. In these initiations the process spans a long period and at the end, the initiates come out ready to enter into the world of adults and become men and women respectively. Additionally, in many communities in Nigeria before now, community values were transmitted through the process of socialization in ritual. Indeed, value is built into the system of members of the society for the good of the society through the various forms of passage rites. This is because culture and value are interrelated and values build human society with common conscience (Adibe, 2009) ^[21].

Among the Onicha-Ugbo people of Delta State, Nigeria, initiation into *Ozo* institution is a social structure that is practiced. Obviously, one cannot say for sure when this practice started. But people grew up and found it done. *Ozo* title taking was originally, a rite for adults and not for teenagers, adolescence or even 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) ^[22] stated 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. The initiation ceremony spanned a long period, done in four stages with series of purifications and sacrifices.

Statement of the Problem

The *Ozo* title is a prestigious institution in Onicha-Ugbo, central to administration, justice, social cohesion, and religious practices. Traditionally, the ritual initiation safeguarded its integrity by transmitting values of discipline, honor, and communal responsibility. It also functioned as an economic and socio-political institution, providing support and leadership within the community.

However, the removal of ritual ceremonies has undermined these values and created new social challenges. Membership is now often secured through wealth or proxy rather than ritual discipline, leading to the commodification of the institution. Some affluent families even admit underage sons, fostering elitism and discrimination against non-members. Without the binding force of rituals, *Ozo* members lack the unifying values once central to their identity, while Christian adaptations have proven less effective in enforcing accountability. This shift has contributed to value disorientation, weakened respect for elders, erosion of cultural identity, and breakdown of social order. Examining the specific implications of expunging rituals in Onicha-Ugbo, makes this study necessary for understanding its cultural and social consequences.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the implications of the expungement of ritual ceremonies in *Ozo* title taking in Onicha-Ugbo. By doing so, the study aimed to enlighten

the community on the dangers of losing its cultural roots and values.

Objective of the Study

The objectives of the study were as follow:

1. To investigate the implications caused by the removal of rituals in Ozo title taking in Onicha-Ugbo.

Research Question

The study asked the following question:

What are the implications of the expungement of ritual in Ozo title taking in Onicha-Ugbo?

Theoretical Framework

Functionalist Theory

Functionalist theory is a macro-level theory that examines broader social structures rather than individual interactions. Functionalist theories explain social events, practices, and institutions by showing how they contribute to social cohesion, order, and continuity (Hassa, 2019; Wahab *et al.*, 2023) ^[14, 27]. From this perspective, institutions such as family, religion, economy, and education, all function to maintain social stability. Rituals, according to Durkheim, are powerful unifying practices that create social solidarity: the shared bonds that hold communities together (Nickerson, 2023; Ranjan, 2019) ^[19, 23]. In the case of Onicha-Ugbo, the expungement of rituals in Ozo title initiation have disrupted these mechanisms of cohesion. The removal of rituals has weakened the symbolic and moral glue that once bound the community, leaving members vulnerable to value disorientation, commodification of titles, and weakened respect for institutions (Wahab *et al.*, 2023) ^[27]. Functionalism also stresses the importance of social consensus, a shared agreement on values and norms (Ulfath, 2020) ^[26]. Abrupt changes, such as the elimination of ritual from Ozo initiation, threaten this consensus and destabilize social order. Ulfath (2020) ^[26] notes that while change is inevitable, it should be gradual to preserve stability. The sudden disappearance of rituals of Ozo title taking in Onicha-Ugbo thus risked weakening institutions and disrupting collective identity.

Emperical Review

Implications of the Expungement of the Ritual Dimension in Ozo Title Taking

Which alternative ways do individuals and groups utilize to fill the void left by the absence of rituals and which reactions does this absence provoke? This question was prompted during the cancelled ritual ceremony of Territorial Belonging Practices of Inclusion and Coexistence in Geneva, Turin, and Zurich March, 2020 due to the Covid-19 Epidemics. The cancellation was welcome with sadness, melancholy, nostalgia for the traditional festival, and sense of loss. The reason for this feeling found expression in the words of Gamba and Cattacin (2021) ^[10] that cities are “inclusion Machines.”

Cattacin, Gamba and Alzola (2023 ^[7]) lament that the cancellation drastically reduced the number of participants and raised discontent among the citizens who felt deeply deprived of a collective celebration. “Every revolution demands its price”, they emphasized. This is because in the place of the traditional ritual festival, improvised and made-shift practices (digital) were put in place but unfortunately, these did not produce a symbolic emotional intensity. The

improvised alternatives did not have a fundamental role and the basic needs of social interaction, emotional support, and sense of continuity that ritual provides. They stressed that there is need to keep rituals alive through a collective narrative or alternative forms as the way to fill a void.

Han (2020) ^[12] regrets that the disappearance of symbols points towards the increasing atomization of society and at the same time, society is becoming increasingly egotistic. The egotistic process of internalization develops a dislike to form. Rituals, he says, evade selfish interiority. Unfortunately, symbolic perception is gradually being replaced by a *serial perception* that is incapable of producing the experience of duration. Serial perception, he continues, and the constant registering of the new, like the modern and information technology, does not linger. Instead of participation in rituals that help quell anxiety, remotivate purpose, forge a collective identity and a sense of belonging, many individuals (in Onicha-Ugbo, have lost connections with ceremony. In like manner, replacing ritual ceremony of Ozo title with money or by proxy, may not bring about closure and the people know this: that Ozo title devoid of ritual is incomplete. Arnett (2004) ^[4], therefore holds that ritual is a necessary tool for closure, for integrating force in a community and for the stability of the group. Absence of it could bring about the following implications.

Weakened Social Structure

Ideally, Ozo title is limited to freedom by birthright, financial strength and a reserved for adult men who were qualified. It also showed the candidate’s ability to “make” money and would be commended for his astuteness (Basden, 1969) ^[5]. Just as a Christian proselyte is catechized in the “Way” so that he/she can qualify to be admitted to sacraments, so also the intending Ozo candidate must be a man of good character, morally sound, a man of integrity and a responsible man. This is because rituals bring forth a community in which resonances occur, one that is capable of accord, of a common rhythm. Rituals produce sociocultural axes of resonance along which may be experienced three different kinds of resonant relationship: *vertical* (e.g. to the gods, the cosmos, time, or eternity), *horizontal* (within one’s social community), and *diagonal* (with respect to *things*) (Hartmu, 2019) ^[18].

Consequently, today, in Onicha-Ugbo, many adult men do not relate the order of things in the community because the values have been compromised; confirming that one cannot give what one does not have. As a result, anomaly is no longer corrected like before. In the past, differentiated ritual practice itself was one of the defining markers of group membership and its associated identity. This helps individuals to know who they are or, in reference to group terms, who speaks through them (Kemper & Goffman 2011) ^[11]. Awkwardly, Onicha-Ugbo social system has been compromised. As custodians of the people’s traditions, Ikediugwu (2015) ^[15] submits that Ozo title holder ordinarily, should cherish and observe all the cultural norms of his people because they are seen as models of the traditional society.

Although, his study focused more on the discrimination, none admittance of all classes of people and lack of gender balance in Ozo institution. Ikediugwu criticises the deviation from justice and from sound moral standards that have become the new values as well as the “bastardaization” of Ozo institution, exhibited by the custodians of truth and

tradition. He suggests that when men who are custodians of tradition compromise values, tell lies and politick in matters of culture and tradition, then they have defiled their “*washed tongues*” (Ikediugwu, 2015) ^[15]. Against this backdrop, many *Ozo* title holders in Onicha-Ugbo today are unsure about their identity because they have watered down the social structure. Ideally, ritual is supposed to demarcate the boundaries of the different grades so that the ritual practice is a form of both responsibility and accountability to themselves, their families and the entire community. But since this has been removed, the social structure is weakened.

At the forefront of this decline is the rise of individualism, which prioritizes personal autonomy, self-expression, and individual achievement over communal values and shared experiences. In a society increasingly focused on the individual, collective rituals, which require participation and a sense of belonging, often lose their significance and appeal (Han, 2020) ^[12]. Again, the original norm was that *Ozo* membership was not to be approved by ‘anyhow’, ‘anybody’ without the approval of the deities, ancestors, the king, the members of existing *Ndi-chie* (elders) as this would constitute a violation of Onicha-Ugbo cosmology. This also sees the men in such position as privileged since it is believed that they are divinely selected and appointed (Madukasi, 2018) ^[17]. But the social structure is compromised now and this procedure is being violated, thus, bringing about serious effect on society ideals. Furthermore, due to individual self-interests, *Ozo* title is now: being conferred on children who could neither express themselves nor defend their families or community; it is even conferred on candidates by proxy who do not have idea of what the title is all about; it can be bought by anyone. But as Basden (1969) ^[5] remarks: “The sale of honours degrades them to a monetary level and ends by producing an indifferent attitude towards them and their holders” (p. 133). Also, Han (2020) ^[12] decries that the erosion of rituals has both economic and political effects. Chinua Achebe in his popular novel: *Things Fall Apart* describes what happened in Umuofia and (what is happening in Onicha-Ugbo presently) as: “*Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*” (Achebe, 1995) ^[1]. Although one may disagree with the long protocol of ritual process of *Ozo* title taking: waiting until one becomes an adult before taking the title, one may lose leadership position because members advance in rank by lowest. This could be the reason underage males are admitted into *Ozo* title so that they can advance in rank because death does not announce when it will come. But then, the expungement or absence of the corresponding ritual in the rites of *Ozo* title taking also questions the validity of the title (Akabike and Anizoba, 2021) ^[3]. This is because as it is said that: “Before you talk to rats, you must come to their level” (*Onicha-Ugbo Proverb*). Ritual process qualifies one to be a full member of an *Ozo* institution. But without the ritual process the wrong men can be initiated while it debar some of the best men because of the difficulty in raising the fees.

Before the expungement of ritual, every stage in the initiation signified some values. As such, ‘his attire: the *‘red cap’*, ‘*elephant tusk*’ and ‘*white woven cloth*’ reminded him always of who he was and the rigorous initiation process he underwent (Okoronkwo, 2014) ^[21]. But in the absence of the ritual, *Ozo* titled man is like a man without portfolio.

Han (2020) ^[12] upholds that rituals historically provided a framework within which individuals could operate, offering moments of reflection, connection, and pause. But in the absence of these structures, meaningful activities will experience existential anxiety. Furthermore, the collapsing of rituals has profound social implications because rituals traditionally, served as the glue that held communities together, fostering solidarity and a sense of shared identity. But as these rituals fade, so does the social cohesion they engendered. The weakening of communal bonds can lead to increased alienation, where individuals feel more disconnected from one another and from society as a whole (Han, 2020) ^[12].

Akabike and Anizoba (2021) ^[3] regret that this sellout has made men with questionable character to penetrate into the *Ozo* society due to the moral laxity on the part of some elders and traditionalists who watered down the values. They posit that most of the challenges experienced in communities today with regards to *Ozo* title taking are partly from the elders who have compromised their integrity because of monetary gain. This attitude of the elders, they claim, has contributed to the present predicament of *ozo* title institution. Some of them they say, have become so corrupt and gullible and can easily be bought over by people of double character who were wrongly admitted into *Ozo* society because they bypassed the ritual ceremony.

Before now, the idea of witnessing ritual performance in person during initiation provided one with a story to tell and retell, hence augmenting one’s status in one’s crowd and in wider circles. It ignited in others, the desire to do likewise. Unfortunately, this desire has been stifled in men since they can easily become titled men by proxy with money. The importance of witness is now frequently undervalued, but it is highlighted when the witness is gone or the opportunity for witness is unavailable (Nelson-Becker & Sangster, 2019) ^[18]. A witness validates. Equally, being a witness to self and others is a sacred task fulfilling. One can be a witness to one’s own experience, a witness to the experience of others, be aware of the witness of others to one’s experience, and provide witness to an event. Again, ritualizing it, helps the witnesses to appreciate the level of meaning. “To think about witness is to think about others”. It means that someone is a watchful observer or providing validation, attesting to the reality or experience (Nelson-Becker & Sangster, 2019) ^[18]: 162/3).

However, a primary witness is the self says Schneider (2012). “We are the most important and only full witness of our own lives” (p. 361). In the case of *Ozo* title taking, this is very important as it helps people identify who has undergone the ritual process because they witnessed to the ceremony. The above authors illustrated the many roles and importance of ritual including the need to make people appreciate the importance of ritual in integrating, validating witness and mediating tradition.

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed method research approach of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The study involved adult titled men, uninitiated and Christian men with a sample size of 200 respondents selected randomly. Structured and unstructured questionnaires, individual interview guides and focus group discussion guides were used as data collection instruments. There were also secondary sources from academic journals, literature

reviews from related publication on the implications or disappearance of ritual in *Ozo* title initiation. Due to the mixed method approach of this study, data analysis was done both by using quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data was collected through questionnaires and was analysed quantitatively using SPSS version 26. The data obtained from the interviews and focus group discussion guides, was analysed qualitatively and thematically in accord with the research questions of the study. The responses from respondents were recorded, interpreted and presented precisely according to the study data.

Findings of the Study

The findings of the study revealed that historically, the *Ozo* title was conferred through a rigorous and carefully regulated set of rituals that reaffirmed both the social hierarchy and the moral obligations of the initiate. These rituals were foundational to the legitimacy of the institution, ensuring that only those of proven character, moral integrity, and commitment to community welfare could attain it. Recent qualitative and quantitative data indicated a notable shift in the practice of *Ozo* title taking, particularly in urban centers and among younger generations. The ritual dimension, once essential to the conferment of the title, has been increasingly reduced or completely removed. It was revealed that many urban dwellers sought the prestige and recognition associated with the *Ozo* title without participating in the ritual ceremonial obligations. Accordingly, “the public ceremony and commitment of being an *Ozo* has been destroyed because of the expungement of the important aspect of it. These days any man can wear the ‘*red cap*’ (one of the symbols of *Ozo* titled man) meant for only *Ozo* titled men and walk about freely. As a result, it is now difficult to know who an *Ozo* truly is.

Conclusion

The Study suggested that cultural documentation is a critical strategy for mitigating the loss of ritual knowledge. The importance of committing traditions to writing and ensuring that children are exposed to cultural practices is important. Those who manage to know the culture and tradition should commit it to writing so that people can read about it and practice it so others can know about it. Parents should take their children home from time to time. Teach them their culture and they will internalize it.” By institutionalizing knowledge through documentation, oral history, and experiential learning, communities can preserve cultural memory even when ritual enactments are limited. This approach aligns with contemporary research on cultural preservation, which highlights the necessity of combining formal and informal mechanisms to ensure sustainability of traditional practices. Written records and experiential exposure serve as tangible pathways for young people to internalize cultural values and understand their significance, bridging gaps created by ritual reduction.

Recommendations for further research

While this study highlighted the generation of emotional energy and communal solidarity, future studies could quantify these effects and examine their relationship to cultural pride, resilience, and identity formation.

Engage in comparative studies: Engage in comparative studies across other communities and indigenous institutions in Nigeria to gain insights into the best practices for cultural adaptation and preservation. Such research could identify strategies that balance modernization, religious influence, and urban pressures while maintaining the moral, symbolic, and social significance of traditional rites.

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