

Title, Rituals, and Land Use: The Heritage of a Nigerian Society

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Abstract

Among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, land is regarded as the source of human sustenance and the eternal sacred pot from where all plants and humans draw their powers of fertility and reproduction. The Igbo venerate land as an earth goddess. As a predominantly agrarian society, they not only deify land by instituting shrines in its honor, they also take titles that regulate ownership and use of land. This study examines the interface between title-taking, African indigenous religious rituals, and land use practices among the Nsukka Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. In the study area, there is no taxonomical distinction between land and the earth goddess, and titles relating to land are laden with rituals whose meaning needs to be investigated. As a study in the axiology of the people, the study adopted participant observations and field investigations. It combines its findings with views in extant literature on Igbo worldview on land and land ownership and sifts the difference between the Nsukka Igbo and other Igbo people. The research is anchored on the theory of cultural peculiarity. This line of thought, it is hoped, would clarify some of the gray and contentious issues about rituals and inheritance in the study area. Such clarification would help reduce the tension between those who take such titles and those, for reasons of cultural barriers, do not have the right to do so.

Keywords

land, ownership, land use, rituals, worship, title, cultural, heritage, Nsukka, Igbo

Introduction

From the olden days to the present, human societies always endeavored to organize themselves in a number of ways and title-taking loomed large in African societies. Among the Igbo, title-taking is recorded to be of great antiquity. Olaudah Equiano (1967) observes that most of the judges and senators in Igboland were titled men who decided cases and punished offenders (see Paul Edwards). For long, title-taking has remained one of the intangible cultural heritages among the Igbo. *Intangible cultural heritage* is defined by Article 2 of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (CSICH) as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals identify as part of their cultural heritage. Intangible cultural heritage through transmission from generation to generation is recurrently recreated by communities and groups in reaction to their environment, their interface with nature, and their times past. It provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (Ahmad, 2006; Federico, 2011; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2003).

Among the Nsukka Igbo, one of the ways they use in recreating their heritage is through title-taking. McKereher and du Cros (2002) state that intangible heritage is traditional culture, folklore, or popular culture that is performed or practiced with close ties to “place” and with little complex technological accompaniment. They postulate that whereas tangible heritage assets represent the hard culture of a community, its places, and things, intangible heritage assets represent its soft culture, the people, their tradition, and what they know. However, Opata and Apeh (2016) are of the view that intangible cultural heritage refer to abstract legacies of past human actions that the humans of the culture area involved subsist with presently and are most likely to be handed down to their future generations as a mark of their distinctiveness, their fount of self-importance that is a window into their unspoken communal memory. Title and land use is an economic cum social issue. As Rustin (1970, cited in William & Larry, 1970) argues, the economy is the bone, and the social institutions are the flesh whereas the political

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institutions are the skin, which grows on that flesh and bone. Hence, all human freedoms are determined by economic structure of institutions.

Williams (1976) observes that an economy cannot be distanced from the social relations and political institutions and systems which constitute the relations through which humans in any given polity produce, distribute, and exchange the products of their labor. Given that an economy represents the matrix of interrelationships of the social, political, and economic organization of human life, a comprehensive survey of the role of land in such relationships among the Nsukka Igbo needs to be undertaken as titles and rituals associated with them (intangible heritage) empower people to make use of land (tangible heritage). Although Ottenberg (1961) observes sometimes in the past that any researcher on the Igbo must have to contend with the stark reality that very little was known about the distant past of the Igbo, probably for minimality of extant historical studies on Igbo cultural values at the time, it is pertinent to observe that there has been resurgence of interest of scholars and researchers in Igbo history and cultural studies in the recent times resulting in bountiful literature in Igbo studies. Nevertheless, Nsukka Igbo, the study area, which the colonial masters referred to as “the sick child of old Onitsha Province,” (Igba, 2014, p. 10) is yet to enjoy serious scholarly attention.

For a people who are mainly farmers, and who agriculture has been described as their “staff of life” (Uchedu, 1965, p. 30), land is very important. The Nsukka people, like most other Igbo groups, attach so much importance to land. This stems largely from the fact that land is an important factor in the construction of their social identity, the organization of religious life, and the production and reproduction of culture. The link across generations is ultimately defined by the complement of land resources which families, lineages, and communities share and control (African Union Commission [AUC], Economic Commission for Africa [ECA], & African Development Bank Consortium [AfDB] Consortium, 2010). What is more, evidence from the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO, 1948, cited in Kimble, 1960) has shown that in Africa, of which the Nsukka Igbo is part of, three people out of every four in tropical Africa are directly dependent on the land for a living.

Eneasoba’s (2012) study on land ownership among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, in which he made a case for women to be given opportunity to inherit land, postulates that throughout history, land has been recognized as a primary source of wealth, social status, and power. It is the most significant provider of employment opportunities in the rural areas and is becoming an increasingly scarce resource in urban areas due to population rise resulting from rural–urban drift. Most importantly, it is the basis for shelter, food, and economic activities. Citing (Umeh:1983 Eneasoba affirms that land is the social security of last resort for the Igbo. It is from the standpoint of land being a social security of last resort among the Igbo that titles connected to land, taken in

some selected communities in Nsukka, confer on their holders the license to own, farm, and have access to the use of communal lands on a lifetime lease basis (and the intricacies of such titles could be appreciated). Among the Nsukka Igbo, land has a spiritual essence. It is regarded as the abode of those departed ancestors who, more often than is realized, play an active and significant role in the daily life of their living progenies. Hence, it is very common to see them make allusions to violation of the law with the word *ikparụ ala* (desecration of the land). To guarantee conformity to norms and rules pertaining to land use and respect for it, as well as the ontological forces therein, the Nsukka Igbo have over the ages put several mechanisms in place which drive land use by individuals. This peculiarity in their culture has distinguished them from other Igbo groups. Among the means through which land could be used, title-taking remains very relevant. Such titles as *Aruma*, *Qzọ Ok’Obu* are the most prominent among a host of others. However, this study focuses more on *Qzọ Ok’Obu*.

Nsukka: A Brief History

Nsukka is found in Enugu State of Southeastern Nigeria which was under the defunct Republic of Biafra. However, the term *Nsukka* had been used in different senses. Adiele Afigbo, a renowned professor of history and an authority in Nsukka history, asserts that Nsukka could be understood at three levels: the level of political geography, ethnoculture, and metaphysics. At the level of political geography, which is the focus of this study, it is an aggregation of village groups which—in the course of a series of reorganizations, unions, and amalgamation—was constituted in 1922 into a division by the British Administration of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. With slight adjustments between that date and 1952, the boundaries of this geopolitical entity have remained fairly stable, even though the name changed in the short-lived Republic of Biafra into Nsukka Province, and since then into Nsukka Zone. Although the earlier names—Nsukka Division and Nsukka Province—were indicative of greater internal integration as an administrative unit, Nsukka Zone suggests a loosening of an internal administrative bonds and cohesion.

Afigbo maintains that the idea of calling the entire area Nsukka could be explained by a certain idiosyncratic tradition in British colonial practice by which an administrative unit is known by the name of the town or village in which its headquarters situates (Opata, in Opata, Ozioko, & Eze, 1997). It was in keeping with this practice that most of what is today Nsukka zone was, between 1906 and 1908, part of the larger administrative area known as Awka subdistrict; between 1908 and 1919, part of another administrative area known as Okwoga Division; and then, between 1919 and 1922, known as Obollo Division. Thus, as a geopolitical expression, Nsukka division, province, or zone was a British creation. Presently, the zone is made up of six Local Governments Areas, namely, Igbo-Eze North, Igbo-Eze

South, Igbo-Etiti, Nsukka, Udenu, and Uzo Uwani. This geopolitical entity is bounded in the east by Abakiliki in present day Ebonyi state, in the south by Enugu, in the West by Onitsha, and in the North by Idah in Kogi state and Oturkpo in Benue state.

Located in the tropics and belonging to what most scholars classify as derived savannah belt, Nsukka is divided into six agricultural (economic) belts. These are the following: Igbo Ahaba (Ahaba is a plant—*Aciona bateri*) constituted by people from the Nsukka Plateau which stretches from south to north in the center of the area—Ukehe, Ibagwa-Aka, and Enugu Ezike areas. These are communities found in Igbo-Etiti, Nsukka, Igbo-Eze South, and Igbo-Eze North Local Governments. This area is the hub of high quality and quantity of oil palm wine production and consumption. The other belts are Uzo-Egu which is renowned for food and timber production, Igbo Oda (this economic belt is found in part of Uzo Uwani Local Government Area) which is another food producing area close to the Anambra River, the Igbo Ani (also found in part of Uzo Uwani Local Government Area) famed for food production, especially yam, Ekeke Ekere (found in parts of Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area) which depended on other areas for their food, and finally, Udunedem (presently in Udenu Local Government Area) who are, for the most part, traders (Opata, 1997).

In these areas, land is not seen only from the point of its economic importance but deified as the provider and life sustaining force. The difference between Nsukka and other Igbo communities of Nigeria in land ownership system is that they are the only Igbo group that has titles associated with its acquisition and ownership. The titles confer on the user the license to use communal land for farming activities after taking specific titles. These, however, confer right of ownership only to the holder of such titles but not to the family. This means that the right ceases when its holder dies.

Titles and Land Use Among the Nsukka Igbo

Titles and title-taking are integral components of the social life of the Igbo community. Human beings (and prominent deities—*alusi*), in consultation with appropriate oracles, can take up the title in a manner prescribed by the law of the land (Orji, 2011). Title-taking procedures are essentially similar among the Igbo, though with some slight variations in nomenclatures and etiquettes. It is a gateway to assuming vantage positions of social, religious, political, and administrative responsibilities at village and town levels. Nworah (2007) observes that in Igboland, titles could be either assumed without any ceremony or fuss, or taken through elaborate feasting and fulfillment of other conditions. Hence, Ndigbo would often derisively say that “there are titles and there are titles” whenever they wish to let an *Ofeke* (a man without “recognised” titles) know that although he had acquired a title, he does not have to brandish the paraphernalia of his title whenever and wherever revered men of title are present. The

average Igbo man is, by custom, expected to initiate into one or two recognized groups in his village or community to acquire a title. The rigorous ceremonies involved in the initiation and tortuous journey to acquiring the title could be performed by a father for a young son. If the father could not do that for him when he was young and he feels he has acquired sufficient wealth and moral will to go through the rigorous ordeals of the traditional rituals and practices, he performs the rituals and takes up a title for himself. A few of the titles that one can bear after such rigorous rituals include *Nze na Ozo*, *Ichie*, *Aruma*, *Qzo Ok'Obu*, *Omeregu*, as well as other Igbo traditional titles. Anyone who successfully goes through the stipulated processes and passes all the moral and endurance tests that go with them would be considered fully initiated, and his peers will no longer have any inhibition in giving him the traditional Igbo three—backhand- and palm hand shake—a handshake that is the prerogative of only the initiates. It is, however, pertinent to note that each society determines what works for them with regard to the process, rituals, and cost of acquiring such titles, which still further stresses the peculiarity of cultural practices.

Emeasoba (2012) argues that in the southeastern states of Nigeria to which the Igbo belong, access to land is governed by both statutory and customary laws. Customary laws emerge from unwritten social rules derived from shared community values and traditions. In the traditional communities of Southeastern Nigeria, two customary land tenure systems operate—the matrilineal and the patrilineal systems. The matrilineal descent system is a kingship system in which inheritance is traced through mothers and their blood relatives as obtains among the Ohafia people (Orji, 2010) whereas in the patrilineal descent system, inheritance is traced through fathers and their blood relatives. The latter is what obtains among the Nsukka people. A characteristic feature of the patrilineal system is male dominance in land ownership and control. It is based on the principle that land is a priceless economic commodity and must be vested in men to ensure the welfare and continuity of the descent group. The patrilineal bequest arrangement generally sidelines women from land inheritance, especially in the case of exogamy. The men argue that it may possibly result in the transfer of land belonging to a dead family or lineage member to another lineage upon remarriage of the wife. Fathers under the Igbo traditional setting often do not will land to their daughters. As it concerns titles that confer on its holder's authority/right to make use of communal lands among Nsukka people, there are variations based on the value systems of individual groups. Among Nsukka people generally, there are three titles that confer right to use communal land on their holders. These are *Aruma*, *Qzo Ok'Obu*, and *Omeregu* titles. Although towns like Ovoko have the *Qzo Ok'Obu* title, there is *Aruma* in Nsukka town, and in Lejja, *Omeregu* confers the right to use of communal land. Whatever be the case, the title of *Onyishi* (the eldest man in a village or lineage) is one position which empowers its possessor the right of usage of

communal land in all the communities of the Nsukka Igbo. In Nsukka, all lands (personal and communal) belong to the *Onyishi*. He presides over any matter concerning land ownership and use in his domain. It is from the proceeds of the communal land under his care that he raises the money with which he performs an annual statutory feasting of his kinsmen—a sort of pay back and more significantly a sure way of keeping track of the history of the land under him as a public property.

A major prerequisite for one to be eligible to take titles that empower its holder to make use of communal lands is the ability to establish consanguineal bond to such land through paternal descent since through membership of this society, the ideational status of the members, the unifying ideology of the people, and their historical link with their ancestors are preserved. After fulfilling this condition, the second issue to be considered is the moral standards of the individual. If he is found to be among the group of professional litigants and meddlesome interlopers, or even of slave ancestry, the aspiration of the contender was ingeniously thwarted by the council of elders. This, they achieved by pretending not to be at peace with the eldest man of the group who owns the land to be used when such titles were consummated. Through such pretentious maneuvers, some of the elders would fail to honor any summon by the eldest man in respect to land issues that would pave way for such aspirant to take the title. By so doing, the intended initiate is denied the opportunity of having the approval of the owners of such land to take the title. This was said to be the case in Echara Nsukka which have left only Omah Nwaruma as the only person holding the Aruma title in the community (Ezema, 2013). However, if the candidate is such that his character and ancestry are not questionable, his track record in farming was always called up. If he is proved to be a distinguished farmer, he was usually given express approval to take the title as a way of putting value to the land as the land will be utilized for agricultural purposes only.

When the above conditions have been satisfied, the title seeker would be told the processes he must go through before he is given the full right to use communal land. Depending on the community or lineage, he has to undergo certain processes which come in stages and each successive stage brings the member closer to the gods of the land and the ancestors.

The first stage was for the aspirant to notify all adult males of his lineage (both the dead and living) who are the owners of the land he was aspiring to initiate into its cult. For this, he takes seven lumps of sizable kola nuts, a big gourd of fresh oil palm wine (*nkwu elu*), a cock that must have crowed and the comb not stained (*egbele nkwa ekwa ara ya nêti ka onwa*), and a hen that has weaned several chickens (*Okuko kparu umu amashi amashi*) to the house of the eldest man of their lineage. The aspirant is aspiring to initiate into an exclusively male cult, the *raison d'être* for the choice of the fowls: The cock represents male gender, and the hen the female gender. Cock is used to honor the deceased ancestors who

own the land, and the hen to honor the land; land is deified as the earth goddess. Hence, the hen is used to seek authorization from the earth goddess to endorse such exercise. The hen, as used in this context, is a symbol of fecundity used to solicit the help of the earth goddess to help the would-be titleholder by ensuring bumper harvest for his crops, a way of using spirituality to attain food security (Obayi, 2015) when the title-taking is finally consummated.

These items were used by the eldest man to announce the intention of the aspirant before their departed ancestors at the shrine of the lineage located inside the compound of the lineage meeting hall (*Obu Ama/Obu Ndiishi*) where certain mythological and allegorical images were housed. Examples of such images include *Ngweje* or *Nwakwa*, or *Akpa Mma* (carved images), *Osha* (earthen pot of various sizes), *Obonyi* and *Ekwe* (big and small wooden gongs), *Ivom* (metal gong), *Omangbe* (small axe), *Okwa oji* (wooden bowl for presentation and sharing of kola nuts), *Ofo* (staff of office that falls naturally from *Detarium Senegalese*), and a host of others. These images convey meanings and are very relevant in the cosmology of the people. The carved images, for instance, represent the departed male ancestors who led good life while alive and were given proper funeral rites, a prerequisite for their names to be called by the eldest man of their lineage when breaking kola nut or offering sacrifices to their ancestors. The items were used in worshipping the ancestors very late in the evening of *Orie* market day, a market day devoted to male spirits (Odume, 2014).

When he comes back with the eldest man of his lineage after offering sacrifices to the ancestors, a date is then fixed for him to make his intentions known to the living members of his lineage, which in some communities must be on *Nkwo* market day (Ezema, 2013). On the appointed date, he presents to his guests two big gourds (*Obele Agbada Mmanya ebo*) of oil palm wine tapped from a life-standing oil palm tree (*nkwu elu*), and four lumps of kola nuts—all of which must have a minimum of four lobes. It was on this day that the person who would act as an intermediary between the title seeker and the members of the society from other lineages in the community was chosen. However, as a rule, the intermediary must be a member of the group but, where no member of the intending member's lineage belongs to the association of the titled men, an alternative was sought from another lineage that has blood relationship with that of the aspirant.

After the intermediary had been chosen and the members sumptuously feasted, the intermediary so chosen automatically becomes the liaison between the members of the group and the intending entrant. Before the end of the feasting, the intending initiate confer with some elders in company of the liaison to come up with a date he would conclude the title at the community-level which must not be less than a full year. The date so chosen was communicated to the overall messenger (*Oga Ok,Obu*) of the organization through the liaison for consideration and approval. It is customary for all adult

males in the lineage of the aspirant to reciprocate their kinsman's entertainment on the day he is to consummate the title at the village or town level. In some cases, the kinsmen are grouped into two: those who would take care of providing food and those who provide palm wine. When the date draws closer, a delegation would be sent to the aspirant to brief him on the level of contributions he should expect from his kinsmen in executing the event. As a way of showing solidarity, their assistance starts with the clearing of the venue of the event and providing shades by the younger male children of their lineage who are not yet of age of making financial contributions.

Traditionally, the approval of the society usually does not come before one year. This is because the members do wide consultations with both the living and other ontological forces through the spokesperson of some oracles and diviners. This one-year period could be likened to a period of probation which, among the people, is termed *inoniba*. During the probation period, both the intending member and those who are members sought the services of diviners. This is because the citizens are convinced that diviners foretell the future and by so doing, help man to avert misfortunes by spelling out through unseen but intuitively recognized forces what was to be done to forestall danger. While the members did theirs collectively as a way of ensuring that none of them gave false information about the intending member, the person seeking to become a member would do his in the full view of elders of his lineage as a way of preventing him from concealing any information that might not be in his favor (Ezema, 2013).

As a way of ensuring that the diviner does not compromise and give unbiased interpretations of the views of the gods to favor or disfavor the society or the intending member, he is subjected to an oath of neutrality which could come in several ways. In some cases, the elders made a circular ring on the floor of the lineage house or any chosen venue with the aid of a very sharp knife. Ash was sprinkled on the mark, and in an earthen clay plate (*okere/akere*) inside the ring so formed, they had a bowl of water. When this is done, the eldest among them brought a lump of kola nut of three lobes (*oji okike*) and said prayers in which he solicited the intercession of the ancestors, the earth deity, and other elemental beings. He prayed for their support and assistance throughout the divination period. After his supplications, he made sure that the kola nut used in the prayer was broken into pieces to ensure that all present had a share. As each of them picked his share of the broken kola nut, he dipped it inside the water in the circular ring of ash and chewed it.

Rationalizing this action, Ugwoke (2014) avers that it (the ring made with a very sharp knife on the floor of the venue) symbolized many things. First, it reminds both the diviner and those who seek his service that all of them are subject to the power of the earth goddess who owns the land they live, and as well control the affairs of men. The sharp knife used in drawing the circular ring represents the speed with which

the earth deity (*Ani* or *Ala*) acts when offended—a subtle way of warning all to be sincere in their dealings. The ash (*ntu*) used to cover the mark made with the knife represents death and decay—irrevocability. This idea was copied from experience of using firewood as fuel and the resultant ash that emanates after the wood has been burnt. Most importantly, the use of ash was a way to accommodate female ontological forces as an instrument from their primary constituency—the kitchen—was used, whereas every person partaking in the kola nut ritual means that all of them have agreed to honor whatever might be the outcome of the divination; a sort of consensus arrived at through participation in a ritual and a sign that all of them save the diviner have equal stake to the land been sought after through this process.

Still on ensuring that no one influences the verdict of the gods through the diviner or any other form of manipulation, another mechanism used is that the eldest among those gathered for the divination in the lineage house who must be the lineage head brought the staff of office which is a symbol of common ancestry and ordered every person in the lineage present to lay his or her hands on it. As their hands were on the staff of office, he placed his own above every other hand to signify seniority and made prayers in which he invoked the spirit of their ancestors and beckoned on them to curse any person, with any sinister motive, intent on manipulating the result of their divination. It is imperative to point out that the diviner was not allowed to place his hand on the staff of office for the reason that he is not of the lineage—an *aide-mémoire* that he is of a different parentage. However, in this scenario, the diviner was made to place his divination objects on the altar of the sun god (*Onu Enyanwu*) and vow that he would only say what he was told by the gods. These stages are called *Ikpa agbaa Ok'obu* and *Ogbugba eha Ok'obu*, respectively.

The last stage of the divination rites varies from community to community. In Ovoko, where the institution of *Ozo Ok'obu* is still very much in vogue, it involves three high-ranking elders of the group (*Ozo Ok'obu*) and the aspirant. This is usually performed under high level of secrecy in the sacred grove of members called *ala onu onueha Ok'obu*. During the performance, the contender was made to wear a free-flowing red garment signifying danger and death whereas the three elders wore black, which, in Ovoko cosmology, is a color associated with mother earth, thus suggesting love and care. On the contrary, the diviner wore a white gown made milky by age and dirt. This symbolized antiquity, purity, divinity, and holiness. The gruesome environment of the sacred grove and the stillness of the night—all contribute to instill fear in the novitiate.

The performance culminates in the party of five that went to the grove eating up all materials used for the sacrifice save a big pig slaughtered and the blood used to seal the sacrifice by sprinkling the blood on the images on the altar of the shrine in the grove. The items which they must consume include eight lumps of kola nut; four tubers of roasted yam

which must not be any of the following species of yam, *Abala* (water yam—*Dioscorea alata*), *Okuu* (yellow yam—*Dioscorea cayensis*), *Una* (three leaf or Trifoliate yam), *Edu* (aerial yam—*Dioscorea Bulbifera*), but *eshi ji* (*Dioscorea rotundata*); and four roasted rats. Even as the choice of yam is limited to white yam, the people made distinction between them, and such distinction influences the decision of the aspirant based on his financial capability. The preferred types are the ones called *Agbura* (known to mature very early after planting and has a very nice flavor when cooked) and *Nwopoko* (noted for being very easy to pound, good flavor and high yield). The other two categories not quite honored are *Adaka* (very hard to chew and does not have any appetizing flavor) and *Obja oturugo* (known for late maturity and difficulty in pounding).

As for the rats, choice was limited to two species—*Iko* (wild terrestrial vole) and *Oke ulo* (black domestic rat). Rationalizing the choice of these species of rat, Oshanya (2015) enthuses that the black domestic rat was made a choice in the ritual to remind the initiate that the relation between him and the land he is about to acquire through such title was like that between the house owner and the rat; the rat only uses the place as a habitat and cannot lay any claim of full ownership of the house and could be chased away any time the house owner deems fit. In like manner, the terrestrial voles that create pathways in the bush are aware that such paths are temporary as they have to change place yearly after every bush burning—a reminder that tenureship and right to use the land is not eternal.

Most importantly, Oshanya avers that of all vertebrates, rats are the most common in the study area with the shortest life span—a pointer that right to use such land is not perpetual. Another reason for using these species of rats is embedded in a local wise saying among the people (Ogbu, 2015). The saying has it that the domestic rat said that he is aware that he is a stranger that found a hideout inside the roof of a thatched house to enable it to have access to edible items in the house. This points to dependency—a reminder that the aspirant must bear in mind that the land sought was not his. As for the vole, there is a proverb which says that only he who saw the night thinks of having a son—a metaphor for mating between couples with a view to having children. This, in relation to the rituals of this title-taking, means that it is only he who invests that expects a return. These labyrinthine and formal courses of action pave way for the next stage of the initiation process known as *ikpo echi Ok'obu*.

At the *ikpo echi Ok'obu* stage, it is expected that the aspirant would prove his financial readiness and preparedness to take the title. An interesting feature of this aspect of the ritual of title-taking is that it is one of the stages that could be used in dating the age of this very institution. The use of the term *echi* in respect of money used reminds one that the institution predates the use of modern currency, before contact with Europe and subsequent colonization. Prior to this day, the *Oga Ok'obu* was mandated to send messages to members of

the association informing them of the decision of the gods on the candidature of the aspirant based on the outcome of the series of divinations. On an agreed date, all the members converged at either the aspirant's ancestral lineage hall (*Obu ama*) or the compound of his lineage or clan head to receive the applicant and make merry. As they gathered, the intending member would present a medium-sized basket containing 20 to 50 big balls of pounded yam, a big pot of soup, seven lumps of kola nut (*oji ok'obu*), eight manilas (*echi esato*), and a sizable snuff box that would go round all the members present. If the candidate does not have a big sized snuff box, he was made to present the members with three snuff boxes contained in a type of container locally called *Okwut, ekw' Oku* (the modern day equivalent of this container is the small-sized bottle of mentholated spirit). He also makes a second presentation of four lumps of kola nut (*oji ihuma*) and four manilas (*echi ihuma*). All presentations as a matter of policy must be done through the intermediary. The latter items were used in initiating the new member into the inner secrecy of the masquerade that is attached to the institution.

The next stage in the initiation process was held at night which must be on *Orie* market day. This is called *enyas mma* (the night of the spirits). This was held in the compound of the intending member. On this day, the aspirant presented the members of the society with one big pot of palm wine that has no sign of adulteration with water (*ekwukwu nkwu elu atughi munyi*). The members confirmed that water was not added to the wine by pouring some in a locally designed not calabash cup. They looked into the cup to see whether they would see a reflection of their faces. If seen, it would be assumed the wine was adulterated but, if not, it was certified fit for drinking by the group (Oshanya, 2015). This practice is in line with the observations of Opata and Apeh (2008), who scripted that as a way of ensuring that palm wine sold in the open market were of good quality and not adulterated with water,

if a customer accuses a tapper or seller of adding water to his wine to increase quantity, the leaders will proceed to ascertain the veracity of the accusation. They would pour the contested wine inside a cup and look inside it. If their faces appear on the surface of the drink as if in a mirror, that confirms adulteration, but if not, then the wine is adjudged undiluted. (pp. 185-202)

Other items presented by the aspirant included two gallons of special palm wine which the members drank while still standing at the entrance of the aspirant's compound. This is called *mmanya ogbo uzo*. Also, to be presented to members on this day are 28 lumps of sizable kola nuts and three different containers of very big snuff box. However, the 28 lumps of kola nut were used at different times for different purposes. First, the members were presented with four lumps on arrival. This is called *Oji etukwu* (literally translated to mean kola nuts used to receive the members to his house, a

sign that they were highly welcome) or *oji okuodo* (kola nut used to say welcome). As the candidate for the title presents them with wine and other edibles, he gives them another eight lumps of kola nut, which is called *oji ok'obu* (meant for the taking of title and belonged to all members). Out of this, the head of the lineage of the candidate who, by tradition, is to do the presentation on behalf of the aspirant, takes one as *eka oji* (his statutory share as one who owns the land and being the person who presented the kola nut to the group). This leaves the members with seven lumps which they all shared.

It is important, however, to note that the clan or lineage head whose duty is to present the kola nuts to the group always sent a representative because by convention, he is not supposed to be absent from his residence at night as it was believed that that was the period he communes with the ancestors. In some cases, the very old ones among them sanction people who come into their rooms unannounced. As a norm, people ought to announce their presence as soon as they stepped into the premises of the eldest man. Impromptu visits disrupt their interactions with the departed ancestors (Okpe, 2014).

On the day of *enyas mma*, the members are expected to sing around the community with the aspirant. This exercise is called *ayaheme* or *oheala* or *okwegara okóbu*. During this exercise, the members move from one household to the other in the village of the candidate; they are presented with eight lumps of kola nuts. The kola nuts are used in the following order: One is given to the lead singer as a compensation for straining his voice (*oji nsacha olu egara* which literally translates to clearing the throat of minstrelsy); another one goes to the candidate's intermediary, the only person who is not a member but accompanying them in the arduous exercise. The kola nuts are called *oji ochurua enyas*. When the joyful train gets to the residence of the lineage head, two of the remaining six kola nuts were given to him. He chooses one randomly and broke it in the presence of the assembly and throws them up. The lobes of the kola nuts so thrown up would naturally disobey the law of gravity and fall to the ground. If all the lobes face downward, it portends danger and the partying group disbands, but if the reverse is the case, it signifies good omen and the revelry continues amid pomp and pageantry. This reaffirms the application of symbolic logic through using kola nut as an instrument of divination. The members share the remaining four among themselves.

On this same day, the intending member presents the group with big balls of pounded yam and a big pot of soup that is prepared by special cooks. The soup is made with okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*), preferably dry okra (*Ukpọ Okwuru*), the kernel of wild mangoes (*Irvingia Gabonensis* and *Irvingia Wombolu*). The soup was made to be very thick for it to be able to survive the test to be conducted on it by members of the group upon presentation to them. The assessment of the thickness of the soup is tested by placing a very big ball of pounded yam on it. If the ball sank, the soup was adjudged to be of low quality, but if the soup is able to carry

the weight of the ball of the pounded yam, it will be assumed to be of standard quality. In the event of the soup failing the test, the aspirant would be taken to task and the members threaten to leave his house in anger. The negative result of the test and the fact that the already prepared items in one's house are not consumed by the people for whom they were prepared for brings an indelible shame to the entire family or lineage members. As a result, to assuage the anger of the members, it elicits much pleading from the aspirant and his relations, and to douse the tension, the members would grudgingly settle to eat the food. The show of unwillingness in consuming the food is referred to as *udele igwe evuru nri* (the vultures have carried the food—implying that the members are like vultures that are always innocent and cannot be faulted in their action because the candidate is aware of the rules, a remark showing that they were obeying the laws of their land) or *eshi azoyama nri* (literally meaning that the pig has used its snout to scatter the food—a remark showing the rage of the members).

After grudgingly consuming the food, the members fined the aspirant. The fine was not stipulated but based on the spot evaluation of the intensity of malfunction on the part of the candidate. This may appear punitive but any action interpreted out of context, based on a people's norms and worldview, is bound to be subjective. In this case, it is apposite to state that the action of using the best soup on this day was because the people are of the opinion that all the items used in the cooking are products of *ala* (land) and *ala* (the earth goddess) needs to be given the best of its bounty to ensure steady flow of such resources. The failure of the candidate to meet the required standard was frowned at as it was equally interpreted to mean disregard for the spiritual custodian of the chief resource, prompting him to take the title and, by extension, a sign that he may not add value to the land (by not being agriculturally productive) after taking the title.

The next ritual is called *okpukpa ala okóbu* (clearing the ground for the main event in the course of consummating the title). This comes in three phases. In the first phase, the clan head, his first wife (*Obunọkọ*), and an assistant were invited by the candidate to his house at noon. On arrival, they would be presented with four lumps of kola nut; each of which represents an Igbo market day (*Eke, Orié, Ahọ, and Nkwo*), a very old native hen and a gourd of fresh palm wine which must be drunk using the lineage's ritualized horn of a buffalo (*mpu atu*) as a cup. The clan head in the company of others, including the aspirant, went straight to the shrine of the earth goddess of the entire lineage. On getting to the shrine, he sat down and used one of the kola nuts to pray, after which he broke the kola nuts into lobes. Holding the lobes in both palms which were made to be open and the inner parts of the kola nut facing downward—pointing to the ground—he sought the permission of the ancestors and beckoned to them to grant the aspirant success in his ambition as he had been cleared by the gods in the process of divination. After his prayer, he placed one of the lobes of the kola nut whose

radicle was not detached at the altar of the goddess and then slaughtered the hen, making sure the blood spread on the lobe of kola nut he placed on the altar and other effigies therein. Those lobes in which their radicles were detached were shared by those present, whereas the detached parts were thrown on the altar as a sign of communion between them and the goddess. Pouring of libation using the horn of buffalo followed. However, it is during this exercise that the rationale for the number of persons in this stage became obvious. The eldest man represents the ancestors whose land was the bride of the aspirant whereas his first wife represents mother earth in human form; the assistant was the person who breaks the kola nut for the eldest man and also pours the palm wine into the horn and shared the remainder. The very old hen used for sacrifice to the earth goddess at this stage of the title-taking is said to represent the antiquity of the land sought by the candidate (Ezema, 2013).

The second phase takes place in the evening and involves the clan head, his first wife, his assistant, and the most senior male in each of the smaller lineages that constitute the clan. It is this party that eats the fowl sacrificed at noon amid sumptuous entertainment by the aspirant. Rationalizing why members of the smaller lineages that is like an expanded executive council were involved at this stage, Okpe (2014) avers that it is this ritual that marks the final bond of approval by the members of the lineage, their dead ancestors, and the earth goddess—the custodian of land. Corroborating Okpe's view, Oshanya (2015) uses a proverb to strengthen the argument thus, if one person kills a billy goat belonging to the public, the critics among them would contend that the billy goat was pregnant (*Onye na boma mpi Oha owa eha ime*). This implies that at each stage, the collective agreement and consensus of all the land owners were needed.

Another stage of the rituals of taking this title is called *eshushue mma* (noon of the spirits) and was held on *Aho* market day. At very early hours of the day, young members of the organization accompany masquerades as they move from household to household in the community of the aspirant collecting gift items as a sign of their solidarity with the candidate. However, any family or household that rebuffed the roving group was adjudged to be opposed to the candidate's ambition. In such situations, the masquerade uttered some words in very coerce voices to mock such families or household. After the house to house visit, the group in company of the masquerades assembled in the house of the aspirant where they would be presented with a hen, two lumps of kola nut, two gourds of palm wine, and two tubers of yam. It is important to observe that items used at this stage are two in addition to the hen. The number two is significant in Igbo life; it represents the Igbo concept of duality, of things being in twos: good and bad, male and female, living and the dead. The masquerades, called incarnate beings, represented the ancestors. With the items presented to them, they retired to the house of the custodian of the masks. Later at noon, at the sounding of a metal gong or blaring of the *ariwa* (the horn of

a giraffe) by *Oga ok'obu*, all members of the organization assembled at the house of the aspirant and sat in a secluded area provided for them as nonmembers were not allowed to behold them in session. Their entertainment is heavy but a significant aspect is that as they ate with the intending member, they entered into a sort of covenant with him by pledging not to moot or execute evil against each other.

The next stage in the initiation process is called *ogō arua enyas* or *uchichi ndiishi* (night of propitiating the ancestors and lineage deities). This was held at night in the ancestral building of the progenitor of the lineage of the aspirant. At sundown on this day, the senior elders of the organization, the aspirant, the lineage head of the aspirant, and the chief priest of the earth goddess assembled at the venue. On getting to the venue, they would be presented with a medium-sized basket full of sliced boiled yam, a big pot of soup prepared with the seed of *akpaka* (*Pentaclethre macropylla*), a hen and two big gourds of palm wine. The lineage head offered sacrifices on behalf of the aspirant wherein he implored the ancestors to guide and protect all that would attend the final ceremony.

According to our informants (Ezema, Okpe, and Obayi), the choice of the venue of this event and the timing are of great importance. The venue is the home of the progenitor of the aspirant's lineage where his grave and all the effigies of the ancestors and their deities as well as the shrine of the earth goddess of the lineage are located. The presence of the priest of the earth goddess is very important as he sat by the shrine of the earth goddess during the whole exercise even though he is not the officiating priest in the ceremony. This ceremony is usually rounded off by the intending member of the group announcing the date he is to perform the concluding rites of the title-taking.

On the appointed date, all members of the group as well as friends and well-wishers would assemble in the compound of the candidate's ancestral hall at noon. The members of the association are to be presented with two big gourds of palm wine which they drank before they formally sat down. Also, to be presented to them are big baskets of pounded yam, two big pots of soup, 14 lumps of kola nut, and a very large snuff box, one huge locally bred and healthy live pig, and seven live rats. Seven of the kola nuts presented are to be kept aside for initiating the aspirant into the masquerade institution in a ritual called *Ihuma*. They ate, drummed, sang, and danced at intervals. This afternoon session is usually climaxed with the tying of white thread to the ankle of the candidate and decorating him with beads around his neck.

At nightfall on the same day, a group of four men in company of the candidate, the *Egbeocheala/Onyenweala* masquerade (masquerade of the earth goddess) move in train to a sacred grove in a solemn procession. During the procession, the candidate held seven live rats and a small pot which contains some herbal concoctions to be used in the ritual. As the procession goes on, nonmembers and even members who are not part of the ritual were informed of the procession by the

shrill cry of the masquerade. On hearing the high-pitched cry of the masquerade, everyone gave way and scurry into hiding until the procession passed. To ensure that no one comes in contact with them during the procession, they sang a warning song that informs that such solemn procession is on and all should stay clear. The song goes thus:

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Ma O! Ma O! Ma O! | Spirit Oh! Spirit Oh! Spirit Oh! |
| Ọ nọ n'uzọ gba O! | Whoever is on the way should clear |
| Ogbodu gba O! | Noninitiates give way Oh! |
| Onyeke gba O! | Men give way Oh! |
| Onyenye gba O! | Women give way Oh! |
| Ụmuntị gba O! | Children give way Oh! |
| Onye anọchile Ụzọ O! | Let no one stay on the way Oh! |
| Onye chi nti Ọhụ n'enyà | He who doubts will see the consequences |
| Ma ne madu anaghi azọ ụzọ | Humans and spirits do not contest road use |
| Gba o! Gba O! | Stay clear, Stay clear Oh! |
| Ọ nọ n'uzọ gba O! | Whoever is on the way should give away Oh! |

On hearing this song, all passersby rush into hiding because anyone who came in contact with them would be heavily fined or would suffer from one form of mysterious ailment or the other because that is tantamount to *inyo ma* (prying into the secrets of the masquerade institution).

When they got to the scared grove, the aspirant would be made to lie down on the ground facing the altar of the earth goddess while the chief priest of the earth goddess sat behind the effigies on the altar facing the aspirant. As the chief priest said the prayers and made all the necessary sacrifices and incantations, the masquerade stood behind the aspirant uttering some words in very low tone and sometimes in affirmation of the prayers of the chief priest. When the prayers and sacrifices were over, the candidate stood up to face the masquerade. The chief priest now educated him in the inviolable secrets of the association and the masquerade institution after which he took an oath of secrecy, never to reveal such secrets to women and nonmembers of the group. On completion of the tutorial, the rats would be killed, roasted, and eaten by those present and the heads buried in a particular spot in the grove. This marked the end of the entire process of the title-taking as the burying of the heads of the rats which were severed from their bodies symbolized that the actions taken were irrevocable; those rats cannot resurrect anymore, a sign that no one can challenge the authority of the titleholder to use the land.

Having undergone all these processes successfully, the initiate becomes a full member of the *Ozọ ok'obu*. On a date approved by the lineage head, the new member of the society would be taken round all the lineage farm lands that had been fallow over the years and shown the boundaries of each. He would be made to know the history of each plot of land

mapped out for the society's use and the laws guiding their use. History of each plot of land which always hinged on issues like being used as collateral year back without redemption by the original owner, compensation for a favor done to their ancestor, or a reward to their ancestor for a heroic deed, those who had farmed on the land before the neophyte, and the limit of his claim of ownership which expires with his death, and so on.

However, the combined forces of Christianity and modernity are challenging this age-old established institution. For the Christians, they argue that any Christian, irrespective of his religious persuasion, who carries "*ofo na ogu*" has accepted all the deities co-opted into them such as *Agwu*, *Amadioha*, *Ala*, *Agbara mmiri*, *ofo* deity, and so on, through commissioning of "*ofo na ogu*" (Nwaorgu, 2001, p. 216). Through such lame explanations, some Christians in Nsukka have rejected all titles connected to land use because, to them, land is nothing other than a deity. Also, they cite the book of Deuteronomy which says,

When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you.

Ironically, such Christians would be the first to lay claims to ownership of land through their ancestry—a sign that there is a need for reeducation. Modernity on its part through urbanization has limited the availability of communal land. In the wake of the introduction of modern systems of government, the right of ownership of great portions of communal lands has been ceded to the government through enactment of Land Use Acts, and some communal lands now belong to Christian groups. People in government can now acquire land without going through the rigors of initiating into any traditional institutions. Consequently, people are no longer keen in investing in the institution as the rewards are now limited due to paucity of land. Resort to oil economy has also dealt a devastating blow on farming as a source of income. Thus, spending a fortune to take such titles is no longer considered a wise investment.

Conclusion

Among all cultures, there exist minute and sometimes major differences in their laws and customs. The Igbo of Nigeria is no exception as seen in right to land use. This difference is made supported by an Igbo aphorism that *nku di n'mba, néy-elu mba nri*, which literarily is translated as any substance considered as fuel for cooking by any given society serves

their purpose. In line with this aphorism, the people of Nsukka being predominantly agrarian devised a means of not only giving value to land but also through such means reducing the tension of contest for land use and ownership. Incidentally, the processes involved in having access to farm land entail a lot of rituals that their rationales are anchored on consensus, respect for the earth goddess, departed ancestors, and other ontological forces within such polity. However, acquiring a land for temporary use through title-taking is an intangible heritage peculiar to the Nsukka Igbo.

This heritage is currently challenged to go extinct by forces of modernity, especially Christianity. The major challenge Christians have in taking this title is based on faith. It is therefore pertinent to recall what Angelus Silesius (as cited in Castle, 1998, p. 220) says:

No ray of light can shine,
If severed from its source;
Without my inner light
I lose my course.

This presupposes that one must always be mindful of his heritage and identity. W. B. Yeats (as cited in Castle, 1998) enthuses that the light of lights looks always on the motive, not the deed, the shadow of shadows on the deed alone. From Yeats, we are cautioned to mind the essence, rationale, and logic of an action, and not the unnecessary eccentricities of faith.

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