TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS AS AGENTS OF COMMUNITY INTEGRATION FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION: A STUDY OF OZUITEM, ABIA STATE. 1999-2015

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Abstract

The data that is now available indicates that pre-colonial Ozuitem civilization had a systematic and structured system of government. The primary cause of the decades-long social disputes that have their roots in socio-economic and political system is the non-participatory functions of traditional institutions in modern Ozuitem as opposed to their roles in managing both people and resources in pre-colonial times. Traditional institutions are no longer relevant as a result of this transformation, which also poses risks to the community's peace, security, and stability. This essay seeks to analyze aspects of traditional institutions and community integration in Ozuitem. The Paper used both secondary data and primary sources as part of its research. The document makes several proposals, some of which include giving those institutions a constitutional function and encouraging friendly connections between the government and those institutions to lessen local strife. The government's recognition of traditional institutions at all levels will improve their performance, particularly when it comes to handling issues relating to Community integration and transformation in Ozuitem. Traditional institutions in Ozuitem should be granted constitutional roles so they could have a say in the management of their respective locales, not just as advisors, but also as developers to the Community.

Key words: Traditional, Institution, Community, Integration, Sustainable Transformation.

Introduction

Traditional institutions are defined as long-standing social laws, customs, or public events; a set pattern of group behaviors that are widely acknowledged as core components of culture, passed down from generation to generation, and were used by the populace during the pre-colonial era. This might be considered the Ozuitem people's life ritual, which includes all they do for one another from birth to death. Mathew in his book, *The History and Culture of the Igbo People*, [1] talked about them as it relates to the Igbo in general. Leo Nnoli also discussed some of them as it relates Umuchu people in particular in his book, *The Culture-History of Umuchu*.[2] At each stage of life, different ceremonies should be done for or by them as part of these traditional institutions, which are made up of various institutions into which they should be initiated. In every organized community in Igbo, socio-cultural norms and values that are ingrained in traditional institutions still play a significant role. The established cultural norms and values serve as a powerful weapon for human survival, though they are also the cornerstones of any civilized society since they bring order and prevent any condition of lawlessness. Olusola noted that, in pre-colonial Nigeria, traditional institutions had norms and values that served as the foundation for how they governed, exerted power over, and influenced their constituents[3]. In Igboland, prior to the British administration, traditional institutions and their rulers were linked with governance in several parts of modern-day Ozuitem for centuries. Additionally, these institutions of traditional rulers in Ozuitem were essentially the only forms of government that served important functions like serving as stewards of communal assets like land and resources and custodians of Okika-Izu system which is an administrative assembly in Ozuitem, as well as guardians and symbols of cultural values and religious practices. They also provided justice, enforced contracts, and handled disputes.

Following the colonization of Nigeria, the British government used the indirect rule system tomore conveniently. Indirect rule, as opined by Garba*et al*., is a style of colonial administration that relies on local chiefs or other authorized mediators, as well as traditional laws and practices, with British officials serving only as administrative overseers.[4]In Ozuitem, Chief Alfred Uche was the Chief appointed by the colonial masters to supervise the administrative activities through the maintenance of law and order in the community. In this regard, Ozuitem's efforts at achieving Community integration relatively fell short. The integration crisis that Ozuitem is currently experiencing is primarily due to issues with property disputes, micro-local politics, individual ego, ancestor seniority, youth restlessness, and other related issues that trace back to then. Together, these have led to the community's physical and social infrastructure deteriorating, its sense of unity eroding, and its residents feeling unsafe.

Prior to 1999, Nigeria's political landscape was dominated by military rule, which stifled popular ideas and gave no room for political inclusion. To this extent, therefore, traditional institutions could hardly collaborate and interface with the state for societal growth. With the reintroduction of democratic rule in 1999, however, traditional institutions were expected to play more crucial roles in societal transformation, as the new form of government would promote political inclusivity. How much of this has been achieved sixteen years after democratic rule (1999-2015) constitutes one of the objectives of this paper.

Geographical Location and Physical Features of Ozuitem

Ozuitem, which the majority of people spell as "Ozuzu Ike Item," is a town in Bende local government area of Abia State. The town has common boundaries with the majority of the other towns in the area because of its advantageous location in the LGA's geographic center. As a result, she gained the desirable title of

former Elu-Elu County Council headquarters. The Alayi and Igbere encircle Ozuitem on its northern border. Umuhu Ezechi, Amaeke Abam, and Bende are to the north-east, east, and south-east, respectively. Umuahia Ibeku can be found on the south. The Akoli-Imenyi and Uzuakoil, respectively, encircle Ozuitem's northwest and southwest edges. The name Ozuitem was given by the person who built the town, like many other Igbo towns and settlements. Significantly, the people's primary line of work is farming.

Understanding Traditional Institutions in Ozuitem's Transformation

Overtime, traditional institutions' function in Ozuitem evolved. The Ozuitem Society before colonization was one cohesive unit, being a kingdom that represented distinctive cultural units, including a long-established system of government. However, the inhabitants of pre-colonial Ozuitem did not develop a large-scale kingdom. The village, which was made up of lineage groups, was the primary political unit. The shared conviction that all of these lineage groups sprung from the same ancestor united these groups. The village groups seem to have a common structural ancestor. Each village group had its own independent government and managed its own affairs without intervention from any outside power. Each *Ama* (the compound groups that made up the numerous settlements) in Ozuitem was governed separately from the others. Prior to 1999, Ozuitem had an Eze known as *Obu Ozu* of Omaka. He had a chiefs' council. However, at the moment, each of the village's sub-groups has its own chief, including *Amaeke Isiegbu, Obuofia Isiegbu, Ebem, Umuolazi-Okube, Ndiagho, Isi-ali, Mbalaka*, and *Umuobasiukwu*. The partition of Ozuitem into eight villages was brought on by the desire for autonomy among nearby settlements. More importantly, this arrangement has promoted stability and growth in Ozuitem.

In inter-village matters, Amagbo in Isi-ali served as the administrative center. With their council of elders, the *Obu-ozu* from the various sub-sections or clans traveled to Amagbo. Isi-ali was an amazing name that had deep significance. This indicates that at Isi-ali in Ozuitem, the head and center of Ozuitem, as well as a gathering place and the *Obu-Ozu* of many villages, were chosen. The Eze and his council of elders at Isi-aliOzuitem were chosen from the *Nkuma-Esato*, with assistance from the *Okika-Izu*. Except for the need that the *Obu-ozu* belong to the *Nkuma-Esato* group of patrilineal, Umunna lineages, the office of the Eze was not hereditary. The Ukenche was a further branch of administration in Ozuitem that was important to the Traditional institution to promote communal integration.[5]It is claimed that the insecurity that prevailed in this region is what gave rise to this arm. *Obu Ozu*, the Paramount Traditional ruler, ordered that different age grades hold their meetings, or nche, on a daily rotating basis. In order to watch over the village while the others were at their farms, they did this. They were meant to mount guard for the protection of the Traditional ruler, and the community against bandits, slave hunters, and potential fires.

Secret societies were crucial to the upkeep of law and order in Ozuitem. The secret organizations known as the Okonko-ekpe have a significant impact on the process of choosing the traditional monarchs, and in pre-colonial Ozuitem, the *Okonko* institution served as a link for social integration. Informants claimed that the main purpose of Okonko-Ekpe's nighttime sessions was to keep the curious eyes of the outsiders at bay[6]. Like the ukenche did during the day, they once more acted as a deterrent against potential nighttime invasions by robbers and slave hunters. Only sessions with other chiefs were presided over by the Eze. Except for the Okika-Izu, he did not actively participate in the administration of his community's affairs and did not attend village meetings. He was always the courageous emissary, leading delegations on behalf of his particular village or the Ozuitem as a whole for the sole purpose of community

integration and development strategy. This was his most beneficial function to his people. There were no ritual obligations associated with the *Obu-ozu* position which is the seat of power managing all Affairs of Ozuitem traditional institutions, and the Nkuma-esato, however, the families that made the kings, had the power to remove him if they felt it was necessary.

J.A.G. Mc Call gave acount on the legendary history of the Clan and the ancient indigenous traditional institutions; The four primary divisions of the Clan, *Agbua, Mba, Isiegbu, and Ofiavu*, were said to be Ozu's four sons. Although the seniority of these was contested, taking into account regional prejudice, cross-examination, and general agreement, the above order was determined to be the correct one. These four divisions were further separated into what is known as "Onumara" or "kindreds". Although these are villages in terms of location. Again divided into "Ezi" or compounds, these kindreds are then further divided into "Ulo" or homes (or families).[7] Lineages were used in Ozuitem to conceptualize relationships between groups. The role that the lineages played in the sociopolitical framework of Ozuitem was similar to that of the age classes, village councils, secret societies, and other organisations. In other words, Ozuitem is made up of four components unit, these major units are for Socio-political, cultural and economic representation and interest of Ozuitem. Furthermore, these various units were divided along eight sub-groups of villages which represented the eight families of Ozuitem. These subgroups lived in various regions and descended patrilineally from Omaka, who continues to preside over all traditional institutions in Ozuitem and promotes community cohesion and integration for sustainable development.

Conceptual Clarifications

Traditional Institution

Due to the complexity of the political and administrative elements of traditional systems in various Igbo regions, it is challenging to offer a generally accepted description of a traditional institution or authority in Ozuitem. Traditional institutions are a body of an ethnic group or clan that holds the highest primary Executive authority in an indigenous polity or that has been appointed to the position in accordance with the customs and tradition of the area in question by instrument or order of the state government, and whose title is recognized as a Traditional institutions title by the state government.[8] Despite this difficulties, a traditional institution is the indigenous polity that existed before to the arrival of the colonizers.[9] Egwurube further posited that, Traditional institutions can be characterized as a collection of people or groups of people who, through morality, hold communal political leadership positions and who, with the support of the community, are given the power and legitimacy to orderly direct the affairs of particular ethno-cultural or linguistic groups. According to the Dasuki Committee report, traditional institutions are groups of people who have been nominated to a position because of their ancestry and in conformity with local norms and tradition.[10] Therefore, it is clear that traditional institutions are those native political structures whereby leaders with a track record of success are chosen and put in place in accordance with the rules of their local laws and customs. Due to the high moral standards associated with choosing the Eze OMAKA, also known as *Obu Ozu*, traditional leaders or heads in Ozuitem are still chosen with care.

Integration

Simply put, integration involves blending in and becoming a part of a group or society, frequently making adjustments to fit in with its lifestyle, practices, and traditions. The term integration, in Onwuka's opinion, implies a process of structural links between

two or more components of a system or system.[11]Ibaba further emphasized that integration as functionalism in human society as a social system composed of sub units or interdependent elements can be used to determine its essence. These units are dependent on one another and are related to one another functionally.[12] These units work together and depend on one another in different ways. This implies that every occurrence present in the society serves a purpose for its continued existence as a whole. It also implies that social institutions, such as the family, religion, polity, economy, and education, which are considered to be subunits of society, are interconnected and integral to the survival and sustainability of society. The main definition of integration at the community level is political integration, which is the result of a process where political players / traditional institutions from various microcommunities or groupings in Ozuitem embrace communal identity. Furthermore, the understanding of a shared identity among a group of people residing in a certain society is referred to as community integration. It indicates that even if one come from various castes, religions, and families, it's understandable that all are one. Building a vibrant and wealthy community requires a lot of integration of this sort. In general, community integration can be understood as a process meant to eliminate the microcommunity and replace it with a feeling of brotherhood. This is accomplished by tearing down social barriers, getting rid of primate dominance, strengthening communal bonds, and creating a feeling of shared identity. Individuals are the basic building blocks of integration, and community members are integrated because they have a shared identity. Thus, community integration applies to two or more communities rather than just one.

Transformation

'Transformation' has evolved into a politically alluring term in Nigeria for a variety of reasons. This situation exemplifies what philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Wittgenstein

have called the perilous and even tyrannical aspect of language: metaphors, the 'tools' of language, become stale gatekeepers to the world of created meanings while also trapping their users in dogmatic and biased interpretations. Thus, conceptual clarity is necessary, as is fighting the need to "misrepresent to ourselves the way in which we really use words."[13] It is important to bear in mind that although we talk about change when we talk about transformation, we actually don't talk about any kind of change in an effort to free the term's meaningful usage from its shackles. Humanity has long been fascinated by the phenomenon of change, whether it occurs in the political or cultural spheres. For example, the ancient Greeks struggled with this issue. In the midst of a constantly shifting political and cultural context, their philosophers sought to find something constant. This endeavor was a reflection of humankind's reluctance to accept change as a fact of life and its need for consistency, certainty, and stability. In fact, at one point in Ozuitem history, stability and the ideal of certainty were seen to be the same thing. Contrarily, change was perceived as being detrimental. The ancient Greeks left behind the idea that "principles" are eternal and the focus on them in Western thought.

Heraclitus rose to prominence among the ancient Greek philosophers due to his philosophy of change, acceptance of change as a reality of life, and positive assessment of this occurrence. The same was done by several Roman intellectuals. For instance, Marcus Aurelius counseled his followers to adopt the mindset that "nature" likes nothing more than to modify current forms. Renowned philosophers like Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche also reflected on the concept of "change" in their works.[14] These and other observations led to the realization that the concept of "transformation" had many different dimensions. It can relate to a wide range of prototypes, from subtle adjustments to complete overhauls. Transformation occurs on a variety of levels in our surroundings, despite being a part of daily existence. In the human and cultural realm, which includes the

worlds of politics, economics, social interaction, organizations, institutions, and built structures, the term "transformation" often serves as an umbrella term for two quite different processes that are brought on by human interventions. The characteristics of the strategic interventions, as well as the interventions' goals and results, vary between them.

Challenges
Traditional institutions in Ozuitem, like in many other parts of Igboland, play a crucial role in the governance, culture, and social fabric of the community. However, they also face several challenges that impact their effectiveness and relevance in modern society.

The respect that used to surround traditional institutions and rulers is dwindling, which is one of the problems that traditional institutions in Ozuitem are experiencing. Political Interference; traditional institutions in Ozuitem face challenges from political interference, local politicians attempt to co-opt or manipulate traditional rulers for their political gain, which compromise the integrity and independence of the institutions, they currently perform errands for politicians, and they are always available to attend events, whether they are important or not. Traditional Rulers, who by custom and tradition are not supposed to be visible everywhere, now parade themselves at government offices in search of various favors.

In Ozuitem, persons in charge of traditional institutions now take center stage at political rallies and run for office in an effort to curry favor with the ruling elite. Failure to follow orders and support the politicians frequently results in dethronement and other forms of punishment that have an impact on the community's physical development. Other difficulties include the absence of constitutionally mandated duties, terrible work environment, a lack of official recognition, lack of government incentives, high public expectations, and so forth.

Decline in Respect for Traditional rulers in Ozuitem: In the past, custodians of traditional institutions held significant authority and were highly respected in the community. However, with the growth of modern governance systems and legal structures, the power and influence of traditional rulers/leaders have diminished. As a result, their decisions and pronouncements may not carry as much weight as they did before.

Socio-economic Pressures; Ozuitem, like many rural areas, faces socio-economic challenges, including poverty, unemployment, and lack of basic amenities. Traditional institutions may struggle to address these issues effectively, as they often lack the resources and capacity to tackle complex socio-economic problems that could engender development. Additionally, the Ozuitem Community is continuing to fragment as independent communities are being created, which is undermining the community's tendency toward cohesive unity and integration. These autonomous creations still do not serve their intended aim of promoting rapid grassroots development.

In a sleak summation, it is essential to recognize that the challenges faced by traditional institutions may vary from one community to another, and some institutions might find ways to adapt and overcome these challenges, while preserving their cultural heritage and significance. Moreover, the situation in Ozuitem community may have changed since the innovation of colonial rule which tend to upturned the ancestral cultural heritage through the modern form of governance and adminstrations.

Conclusion

Traditional institutions play a pivotal role in Ozuitem, fostering community integration and facilitating sustainable development. These age-old structures, deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of the community, serve as the bedrock for social cohesion, cooperation, and collective decision-making. By promoting

inclusivity and preserving ancestral customs, these institutions strengthen the bond among residents, fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. Furthermore, the mechanisms for imposing community government, which were well-organized in the pre-colonial and even post-colonial Ozuitem to manage affairs, administer justice, and ease social tension, have been completely eliminated. Downplaying traditional institutions' contributions to society's governance will result in anarchy because they are the institutions that are most closely connected to the people and the keepers of their cultural heritage. Election-related conflict, the Ezeship of Omaka and Headship of Seniority and Government Interference, and especially the continuance of massive inter-communal and civil disputes experienced in Ozuitem are all examples of this.

The traditional institutions in Ozuitem could serve as sources of community integration and sustainable development by imbuing in the people, a sense of cohesion and oneness, acting as advisory bodies and constantly interfacing with the federal, state, and local governments, encouraging the indigenous people to participate in all facets of development, managing local land resources, and most importantly, serving as information hubs. Moreover, traditional institutions in Ozuitem act as custodians of indigenous knowledge and sustainable practices, ensuring the preservation of natural resources and ecological balance. They instill a sense of environmental stewardship, encouraging responsible resource management and eco-friendly initiatives. Through their adaptive nature, these institutions have embraced modern challenges, forging partnerships with government agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations to drive sustainable development initiatives. Their involvement in education, healthcare, and economic activities empower the community and aid in improving the overall quality of life of the people.

In essence, the synergy between traditional institutions, community integration, and sustainable growth in Ozuitem exemplifies a harmonious blend of heritage and progress. It serves as an inspiring model for other communities seeking to preserve their cultural roots, while striving for a prosperous and environmentally conscious future.

Recommendations

Cognisance of the many challenges bedevilling Ozuitem's transformational growth and integration, this study posits the following recommendations:

Government recognition of traditional institutions at all levels in Ozuitem will improve the performance of the institutions, particularly in handling challenges relating to Community integration and Ozuitem development.

Traditional institutions in Ozuitem need to be granted enabling laws and legislative roles so they can participate in the development of the community as well as the management of their diverse locations, not just as advisors.

In Ozuitem, better connections between the government and traditional institutions will essentially lessen the frequency of local disputes over topics like farm land, culture, religion, and other things.

Traditional institutions themselves must accept their roles in society and set an example for others to follow at the community level and not to be stamp ready to be used by the politicians in government.

Sustainable growth and transformation Initiatives: Traditional institutions can promote sustainable growth and transformational practices to safeguard the environment and the community's well-being. Encouraging eco-friendly initiatives,

conservation projects, and responsible resource management can have long-term benefits.

Strengthen Community Engagement: Traditional institutions should actively engage with the local community to understand their needs, concerns, and aspirations. This can be achieved through town hall meetings, focus groups, and other forms of interactive communication. Understanding the community's perspectives is essential to ensure that the traditional institutions' actions align with the interests of the people they serve.

Preserve Cultural Heritage: Ozuitem's traditional institutions should focus on preserving and promoting their cultural heritage. This includes safeguarding traditional practices, languages, art, and customs. Initiatives such as cultural festivals, storytelling sessions, and historical documentation can contribute to maintaining a sense of identity and pride within the community.

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