

ANCESTRAL LEGITIMACY AND TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY: THE OGBUEHI TITLEHOLDERS IN THE SOCIO-POLITICAL HISTORY OF UMUNZE, NIGERIA, 1957–1990

Chinonso Christian Kurume

Department of History and International Studies, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University,
Igbariam Campus, Anambra State, Nigeria

Esther Chiamaka Okezie

Department of History and International Studies, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University,
Igbariam Campus, Anambra State, Nigeria
Email: ec.okezie@coou.edu.ng

Cynado C.N.O Ezeogidi

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus, Anambra State, Nigeria

Abstract

This article considers the emergence of the Ogbuehi title institution in Umunze, a town in Nigeria's Orumba South Local Government Area, between 1957 and 1990, the first decade of Umunze's centralized traditional rulership and a period of critical decades of upheaval in Igbo history. Using oral interviews with surviving Ogbuehi titleholders and their heirs together with the historiographical and ethnographic literature, I argue that the Ogbuehi institution, unlike the more widely studied Igwe chieftaincy, a relatively larger and more powerful kingly office, which dominated historical scholarship on Igbo traditional politics, was an effective and resilient form of lineage representation, moral judgment, and ancestral legitimation within the clamp of a new centralized kingship which was introduced in 1957. Furthermore, I try to contextualize Umunze within a wider pattern of Mmanwu ritual title offices in other Igbo communities where the forces of Christian evangelization, Western education, the Nigeria-Biafra war, military rule, and out-migration seemingly incubated the survival of ritual title offices that were insignificant in size but strong in term of historical resilience. Umunze's example may challenge the historiography of Igbo traditional leadership, which has predominantly focused on kingship and warrant-chief based studies, by suggesting that decentralized Igbo political culture drew substantial strength from lineage offices whose histories remain inadequately researched.

Keywords: Ogbuehi; Igbo title systems; Umunze; traditional authority; Igwe institution; Anambra State; Igbo religion and history.

Introduction

Umunze, the administrative headquarters of Orumba South Local government Area of Anambra State, is one of the Igbo societies that do not have kings as the major political institution in pre-colonial period, but where political authority was shared among heads of lineages, age grades, specialists in rituals and titled men. The polycentric governance system, where it is dispersed into many institutions instead of being concentrated in one, has been generally regarded as the defining political culture of the Igbo (Afigbo, 1972, pp. 15–18). Out of all the traditional offices in Umunze, the Ogbuehi title may be said to hold a unique position. The Ogbuehi title is awarded to the first son after the death of his father and the slaughtering of a native cow called Igbo Ehi during the funeral rites.