

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.

The oozing of the title elicits the son's transformation from a mere kinsman to the custodian of the family's moral and ancestral estate (Ubah, 2024; Kurume, 2025).

The period 1957–1990 is an important unit of analysis for the historical analysis of this institution. From the 1957 evidence, Umunze's introduction of a centralized traditional ruler- Igwe Mathias Ugochukwu- appears to be a move away from the community's traditional system of the rotational sharing and consensual allocation of powers among its rulers to one of the kingship. That latter centuries also saw Nigeria gain independence; the Biafran civil war (1967–1970); military dictatorship; and, the growth of Christian missions and Western education in the rural Igbo areas, which must have presented tremendous pressure on the customary institutions in southeastern Nigeria (Ekechi, 1971, pp. 210–214; Isichei, 1976, pp. 161–178). In this article I want to consider how one minor lineage title survived these pressures and what its survival or adaptation might teach us about the durability of decentralized Igbo institutions more generally.

The historiography of Igbo traditional authority in recent years has been large but uneven. There have been thorough treatments of the warrant chief system imposed by the British colonial administration in southeastern Nigeria, the spiritual and metaphysical basis of Igbo title-taking (Nwala, 1980, pp. 84–96), and the general historical processes of Igbo social and religious change during the colonial and post-colonial period (Oriji, 1999, pp. 63–71).

Previous studies have neglected the minor, lineagespecific titles that existed between the household and the larger polity in communities such as Umunze, prior to and during the development of centralized kingship. This paper will explore this gap through a case study of the Ogbuehi institution. This research draws on oral histories from living titleholders, sons of deceased titleholders, and aged men with direct experience of the period studied, in combination with published literature regarding Igbo history, religion, and political culture.

The article is divided into six sections. It begins with a brief history of the origin of Umunze and its political system before 1957. It then considers the extraordinary configuration of the Umunze title system to locate the appropriate context for understanding the Ogbuehi. Next, the article reconstructs the ritual sequence of Igbo Ehi and examines its social meanings. Attention turns to the history of the institution during the period of centralized kingship with Igwe Mathias Ugochukwu and his heir, Igwe Dr. Nwafor Ugochukwu, during the civil war and military-rule decades. A discussion section then places the Umunze case in comparative Igbo scholarship on religious change, generational conflict, and the economics of local institutional routine. A brief conclusion clarifies the significance of the Umunze case for the historiography of Igbo traditional authority.

Umunze: Land, Origins, and the Pre-1957 Political Order

According to the oral tradition, the history of Umunze dates back to the great migration of a hunter and farmer called Nze Izo Ezema from the Ohafia-Arochukwu enclave in the fifteenth century, to the thickly vegetated fertile land that was then covered by swamp, and is now called Umunze (translated as the children of Nze). As genealogical tradition has it, Nze had seven sons by his first wife, out of his community, who later became the founding fathers of the seven wards or villages that make up Umunze, viz: Nsogwu, Ugwunano, Lomu, Ubaha, Ururo, Ozara, and Amuda. Subsequent migrations and refugees from neighboring communities (including the displaced of the Aro slave-trading wars), generally settled into Umunze and came to make it their home (Maduagwu, 2013, pp.

4–9). This historical account is particularly relevant for this paper as the entire title system of Umunze including the Ogbuehi institution, is based on this belief that every native of Umunze is by definition a named descendant of Nze, and therefore an automatic holder of a title, to be discussed further below.

Farming-based livelihood and community life on the lines of yam, cassava, and cocoyam cropped with the stony, semi-forested, two-season (rains and harmattan), tropical environment, the stream network (Okii, Iyi Akwu, Agho Mmiri), were intertwined factors in the organization of Umunze (Adolf Okoro, a member of the Ogbuehi group interviewed for this study, confirmed that you were "wealthy and a man if you could boast of plenty of large barns of yam") and the land's productivity, fertile, favourable terrain and weather, could provide the working man and woman in a typical family with surpluses that promoted early settlement, while title-taking ceremonies (Okoro, 2025), funerals, and festivals dates were likewise aligned to the helpings of the rain and leisure time for large ceremonies (Egboo, 2025).

There was no one ruler in Umunze before 1957, government was in the hands of umunna, that is, patrilineage; which was headed by the oldest or leading members who was not a ruler but a custodian or guardian of the family land, shrines and traditions. He presiding over the umunna meetings, arbitrated in minor cases and performed sacrifices on behalf of the lineages. As Sunday Oranusi has put it, the head of a lineage had no personal power but rather 'seniority, wisdom and respect rather than force'. This reads as an expression of the 'segmentary' nature of igbo political order which Adiele Afigbo highlighted and characterized, in his famous discourse on the igbo political system as formal or conventional, segmentary and decentralized system in which political power was intentionally dispersed among several cooperating or complementary but independent organizations. Above this was the village assembly with its elders, representatives of age-grade, elder statesmen or titled men including Ogbuehi title holders, who discussed community issues and with religious leaders who advice based on their knowledge and worship of the shrines (Afigbo, 1981, pp. 22–29; Okoro, 2025; Oranusi, 2025).

Title without Purchase: The Umunze System and the Ogbuehi Institution

The Umunze title system differs from that more common elsewhere in Igboland where or Nze titles are primarily earned or purchased after the candidate has fulfilled certain moral, ritual and financial obligations (Ebele, 2003, pp. 41–47). In Umunze however, each and every son and daughter of Umunze would have Nze or ozo title by virtue of group descent from Nze, the founder of the town. Traditionally, therefore, there was no practice of crowning or bestowing chieftaincy title on individuals, as every other title is automatically possessed by all, with the exception of very few hereditary titles such as Aka Ji Oho, Ojimgba (linked to the head of Ugwunano) village, which cannot be purchased or sought after (Igwe, 2025).

In this context then, the Ogbuehi title, the only one that can be truly bought by an individual person in Umunze, can be said to be the only one that is genuinely open to individual achievement. It is not bought nor even elected by the community of Umunze but is bestowed on the individual person for the accomplishment of a particular filial obligation, that is, killing of an ehi (native cow) during his father's funeral (Kurume, 2025). Although technically, it is only men who are eligible for the title, first son is particularly singled out; and while other sons can be informally designated Ogbuehi, only first

son can be a member of the Ogbuehi titleholders' society and in case of death, the title will revert to the other designated son (eldest or next eligible) with the society's approval. The hybrid nature of this competition whereby it is based on ascribed status (birth) and state of born into (ascribed) coupled with performed obligations (the funeral sacrifice) is clearly reflected in the hybrid feature that is introduced by this title.

Challenges facing title-taking in the twentieth century

By the second half of the 20th century, migration to towns and abroad for education and employment posed another challenge to the practice of title-taking in Umunze; it became increasingly difficult to trace kinship lines or ascertain who was entitled to a hereditary chieftaincy honour. Indeed, as Umunze men became more familiar with other titles in Nigeria, where wealth, for example, could buy a chieftaincy of honour, this knowledge began to cause confusion as to how Umunze titles worked in a way that was based on ancestors. Similarly, as Peter Mbaeje noted, where ancestors' obligations were neglected or compromised by Christian influence, "the moral power of the title is diminished", which gave rise to what is discussed below as a perpetual tension between religious and cultural obligations in deciding who qualified to take a title (Mbaeje, 2025). The cost of the title-taking ceremonies themselves - livestock, food and drinks for the entire community - came to price some would-be title-holders out of the running, meanwhile, adding an economic criterion to a process that was in essence son-of-ancestor and not son-of-money (Ahuwe, 2025).

Igbu Ehi: Ritual Process and Social Meaning

The Igbu Ehi ritual, which confers the Ogbuehi title upon the recipient, takes place in phases that are distinct from one another. First, family elders have a duty to satisfy themselves that the aspirant, usually the first son of the deceased, is of the moral standing the title calls for, a locally bred cow is shown to the representatives of already titled Ogbuehi members for them to ensure it fits the prescribed customary requirements before the act of killing could proceed, according to Felix Uba, the killing of the cow is an act of 'spirit and community' done in the presence of elderly family and titled men to affirm the title conferment in view of family's family, and by witness account the transition occurs of who was once an ordinary son becomes a bearer of the honor of the family (Okoli, 2025; Uba, 2025).

The rite's underlying logic rests on a cosmology, well attested across Igbo and wider African traditional religious thought, in which death is understood not as annihilation but as a passage requiring proper ritual assistance if the deceased is to join the ancestors in harmony (Mbiti, 1969, pp. 32–41). Failure to complete Igbu Ehi was believed to leave the father's spirit unsettled, with consequences for the family's wellbeing; the ritual therefore performed a protective as well as a status-conferring function (Okoro, 2025). Socially, the rite marked the first son's assumption of authority to speak and act on behalf of his lineage; as Samuel Kurume put it, "through Igbu Ehi, the first son speaks and acts with the authority of his lineage," a claim to representative legitimacy visible also in Umunze's distinctive greeting conventions, in which only men who had performed Igbu Ehi were entitled to the triple-tap greeting, *ina ito*, reserved for recognized Ogbuehi (Kurume, 2025; Ubah, 2025).

The concomitant requirements of spiritual obligation, material expansion and social recognition are not confined to Umunze. 'Ritual sacrifice' mediating interactions between the living,

the dead and wider society can be found throughout the practice of Igbo traditional religion, where the performance of sacrifice or *ichu aja* is the central idiom in ensuring the individual's relationship with spiritual and ancestral power is functioning optimally. Viewed within this wider perspective, Igbo Ehi is unlikely to be seen as an anomaly particular to Umunze, but rather as a local expression of a larger Igbo 'pattern' where sacrifice functions simultaneously in religious, political and economic roles to legitimize rulership through its costly participation with the ancestors rather than by its verbal declaration (Onwuejeogwu, 1981, pp. 58–66).

The Ogbuehi Titleholders under Centralized Kingship, 1957–1990

The introduction of Igwe Mathias Ugochukwu in 1957 placed a hierarchy of power in what had been a horizontal distribution of power between lineages, age grades and titled men. On balance, evidence would indicate that the kingship served more as a new establishment rather than a replacement for the former structure, leading to a dualism of power. The Igwe would have become the formal, administrative and ceremonial head of the traditional political system in dealings with the government, with lineage heads, elders and titled men, including the Ogbuehi, still enjoying considerable power in traditional affairs (Uba, 2025). In practice, however, the sustained cooperation of these institutions seemed to give legal authority to the Igwe. Donatus Ubah pointed out that the palace often turned to these organizations for advice in the resolution of family disputes, land allocation, organization of festivals, and development projects. This change from representing the family to become a councillor of an emergent political order in this expansion of the Ogbuehi (Ubah, 2025).

An attempt to formalize this accommodation was made also at the reign of Igwe Dr. Nwafor Ugochukwu. The taking of titles was now officially regulated as thresholds for morality, ritual and financial obligations were well defined to obviate some of the usual conflicts over the choice of titles and their precedence in the community. The public celebration of the whole rite was also upgraded. Evidence supplied by Adolf Okoro indicates that even the title owners who did not comport themselves well were either severely criticized or by some means ostracized when it came to community decision-making processes, thus the institution probably maintained genuine internal discipline rather than became merely a sinecure (Okoro, 2025).

The civil war and military-rule decades

The perceived importance of the Ogbuehi titleholders seems to have been highlighted by the period of upheaval led by the Nigeria-Biafra civil war in 1967-1970 and the following decades of military intervention in Nigeria. The power and influence of formal structures of the State as well as of the centralization of traditional authority were significantly weakened, leading to a situation where institutions more grounded in the local situation shouldered unprecedented responsibility for peace maintenance. Innocent Okoro, for instance, reports that he was "called upon on several occasions to settle disputes, not only within my own nuclear family but the entire village", that was charitably sustained by the "Perception that Ogbuehi decisions [are] based on ancestral wisdom and what is best in moral terms and not based on anything on individual whims" (Okoro, 2025). Sunday Oranusi, too, recalls being approached by the Igwe himself over land issues and inheritance matters for which the voice of the Ogbuehi was all the more needed as "he carries weight because he is guided by the past".

This implies the transfer of ritual authority into politics under times of institutional stress (Oranusi, 2025).

The economic implications of this influence are worth noting. To preserve the position of Ogbuehi required the expenditure of resources in sustenance of these ceremonial responsibilities over the lifetime of the person. The title became therefore linked to the power to mobilize resources of kin and community for public purposes including festivals, public works and public assistance. This probably increased the prestige of title holders as persons whose showings had both functional and symbolic value in public debate (Okoli, 2025).

Christianity, Modernization, and the Erosion of Ritual Authority

The accommodation of the Ogbuehi institution with centralized kingship also came alongside a slow but decisive negotiation with Christianity and Western education. The church maintained that the ancestors' rites of Igbo Ehi must have been contrary to Christian belief, and individuals or families reacted by performing the rite in secret or adapting it in a manner that sought to reconcile customary and religious demands. Ubah attributes to some families the effort to mediate ancestral rites and the church, which included performing the ritual in secret or altering it to conform with Christian values (Ubah, 2025). Rather, such gradual concession, rather than outright denial is what makes compatible with Afigbo's commentary about Igbo social-religious institutions that were characterized with response to the Christianising influence as 'over time and 'as a whole was not lost in any of the major categories of Igbo life, it slowly was maintained by simply altering the outward aspect of ritual practice (Afigbo, 1992, pp. 301–309).

Western education seems to have had a similar but different effect. Educated titleholders possessed new skills in negotiation, record-keeping, and dealing with government officials, which would have helped to give the Ogbuehi a distinct edge in acting as an intermediary with modern bureaucratic processes. Education may also have contributed to generational change: younger, more educated titleholders were less preoccupied with ritual purity, but more focused on leadership and social mobility. Samuel Kurume argued that "the younger generation sometimes sees the title more as a ceremonial badge than a moral and spiritual obligation," indicating that cultural shift not demise (Kurume, 2025).

The removal of young men through migration increased these stresses. The departure of the young men to study or work elsewhere in Nigeria and even outside the country has the effect of eroding the transmission of these cultural features across generations. The decreased number of young men is believed to have affected the timely performance of ritual acts and exposure to the well-being of the group as observed by Ephraim Okoli (Okoli, 2025). Yet by 1990 the institution had neither collapsed nor been rendered purely ceremonial. Its moral authority in dispute resolution and family representation persisted, now framed within an accommodation between ancestral obligation and Christian conscience that mirrored comparable adjustments made by lineage-based institutions across Igboland during the same decades.

Discussion: Small Institutions and the Comparative History of Igbo Traditional Authority

The consequences of the evidence from Umunze for three issues of substantive concern to historiography of Igbo traditional authority are as follows: The first issue of substance concerns the relationship between the recently centralized chieftaincy and the previously existing decentralized

institution in the twentieth-century Igbo town. Prior to Ogbuehi, most of the literature on the subject had been limited to the colonial warrant chieftaincy and its friction with the segmentary Igbo political culture. Ogbuehi's case is revealing in that even in the post-colonial era the indigenous centralization of authority in the form of the installation of an Igwe was not expected to displace the segmentary pattern. Instead, the indigenous centralization was likely to operate alongside the segmentary pattern through a process of negotiated duality in Umuze from 1957 to 1990. The evidence lends credence to Afigbo's observation that the pluralistic nature of Igbo political culture was probably tolerant of and contributed to the convergence of the two institutions (Afigbo, 1981, pp. 112–119).

There is a second debate that relates to religious transformation and the survival of institutions. Elsewhere in Anambra State, some communities have apparently disappeared from traditional institutions under the influence of evangelical Christianity, an evolution that has been shown to be even more disruptive than the accommodation regime in Umuze. For example, the spread of the Born-Again Believers Association at Adazi-Nnukwu was shown to have been associated with the systematic socio-religious protest and disengagement from age-grade societies, masquerades, and title-taking, all staples of customary social organization.

The process produced a more complete generation- and denomination-based dichotomy of ritual discontinuity than the more nuanced form of renegotiation represented by Umuze. When viewed in this perspective, the interaction of Christianity with the traditional titles system in Igboland appears not to have been uniformly progressive: it depended to a large extent on whether Christians in a given community believed that ancestral duties belonged to individual, private consciences as in Umuze, or to groups that needed reform through organizational effort, as in Adazi-Nnukwu.

This inconsistency is a facet of the wider phenomenon of religious-based tension in Igbo and Nigerian society. Studies of faith-based violence in Nigeria suggest that the coexistence of Christian, Islamic and traditional assertions of moral authority has the potential to, in less stable environments, intensify from theological dispute into outright violence with both security and social outcomes (Mgbemena et al., 2022, pp. 58–61). The history of Umuze on this score – that Christianity and its claims on believers' lives met ancestral obligation more often in private revision of Igbo Ehi than in the rejection or deadly dispute of it – point towards a case of the possible range of outcomes when Christianity enters space shared with indigenous religious practices in Nigeria. That more volatile range of outcomes has historically received far more academic and policy attention than the quieter, but commonplace, sort.

A third area of dispute surrounds the economics of customary ritual, with the case of Ogbuehi offering an apt reference point. The costs of taking a title in Umuze are so high that they effectively exclude men from the institution of title-taking, even when they are good candidates. This phenomenon mirrors findings by one of us (Adedeji) on the pricing of customary bride-price in Mbano, Imo State, where rising bride-wealth prices are affecting courtship, marriage, and even the standing of entire communities among potential affines (Nwokedi et al., 2025, pp. 81–96). In both cases, a traditional institution originally oriented to moral and ancestral duties, assumed a more important role as a chief financier over the course of the twentieth century. This was unequal, by financial class. Both studies suggest that we should be paying more attention to this economic aspect

than it generally receives in the biblical scholarship which focuses almost exclusively on its ritual and theological aspects.

Furthermore, the documented passing down of customary duties by Umuze's elders to the younger generation in the later part of this study's period foreshadows a pattern that recent scholarship on contemporary Igbo youth in the twenty-first century argues has taken more troubling form. Whereas the Ogbuehi elders consulted in this study represented the younger generations as careering away from moral and ritual duties, later research on Anambra state has pointed to a related, and even more extreme, truncation of control exercised by family and community elders over Muslim and Christian youth in the urban cities of Igboland. Cybercrime and, in the case of the Awka metropolis, cult violence, have thus-conceivably-been driven by the loosening of moral authority once exercised through lineage, title, and other systems of intergenerational transmission (Nwokedi & Felix-Joe, 2025; Nwokedi et al., 2025). The Umuze case and the subsequent literature – when viewed in conjunction – suggest that the undermining of institutions, such as the Ogbuehi title, over the twentieth century was not entirely a sign of bad culture. Rather, it was one chapter in an overarching history whose social effects are evident in the current moral and security problems faced by Igbo communities.

The findings of this research on the institution of Ogbuehi in Umuze have huge significance for the understanding of the survival of decentralised African political institutions if challenged by external factors (Molokwu et al, 2023). Traditional ideas of traditional authority are undermined as the ways in which lineage-based offices effectively negotiated centralized kingship, colonialism and modernization are made evident. Moreover, the findings have overlaps with the general trends of social organisation, which include the varying gender and patriarchal arrangements of the Igbo communities (Okezie 2026, Okezie 2027, Okezie 2026). Moral authority has been maintained through historical institutional adaptations, however, the defection of intergenerational transmission of moral authority over time can be compared with contemporary security and socio-economic issues such as domestic instability and public violence as experienced by the world (Okezie, 2022; Ezeogidi et al., 2020). Grassroots sociopolitical institutions are still dynamic and act as important buffers when institutions are stressed.

Conclusion

Between 1957 and 1990, the holders of the Ogbuehi title for Umuze occupied a place in Igbo traditional rulership historiography that has mostly been ignored, owing to the focus on kingship and warrant chieftaincy. In the context of a lineage institution and deriving its ritual form from the obligation of ancestors, its broader legitimacy was one that kingship as centralization could accept but was unlikely to replicate. The installation of two kings in the succession of holders of the Ogbuehi title (both of whom fell within the second generation of titlebearers) before the 1967 civil war, following the taint of one of them with military authority in 1966, shows that rather than collapsing completely or exhibiting stickiness it managed to adapt its ritual form while presumably maintaining its family representation, justice, and legitimating functions.

This historical study bears two wider implications. First, the historical endurance of the fragmented Igbo political culture of the turbulent middle decades of the twentieth century probably depended on more than the continued resilience of major chieftaincy structures, although it certainly required that they survive; it seems more likely to have depended on a thick layered substratum of

more fragile, smaller, mostly titled structures involving localised lineages, whose history has never been systematically mapped. Second, comparisons with other studies of religious change, traditional economic performance, and generational transition in other parts of Igbo society suggest that local responses to those forces were quite variable, from Umunze's modest ritual accommodation, through more systematic institutional retreat elsewhere, and that these differences and long-term social consequences still deserve further comparative investigation. A documentary history of this substratum, village by village, title by title, would be an important contribution to the history of Igbo social change.

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