

ORU EZI NA ULO PHENOMENON (DELIVERANCE MINISTRY) AMONG THE IGBO OF NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF THE CENTRAL SUBCULTURAL AREA OF IGBOLAND

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ABSTRACT

There is continuous belief in the need to exorcise evil spirits from the family in the Igboland. This has given birth to different forms of spiritual fathers who attempt to carry out this work of family cleansing which is general known as *Oru ezi na ulo*. The *Oru ezi na ulo* is done in different ways with different spiritual implements which necessitate examination of the practice. The present study therefore, examined *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon (Deliverance Ministry) Among The Igbo Of Nigeria: A Case Study Of The Central Subcultural Area Of Igboland. The aim of the study is to investigate the meaning – content of *Oru ezi na ulo* in Igbo land, examine the churches' teachings on *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon and its compatibility with Christian faith and practices, and identify the various spiritual leaders or groups that offer *Oru ezi na ulo* services in Igboland and their approaches to the practice. Both primary data such as interview and secondary data such as internet materials, journals, and textbooks were the sources of data. Descriptive research method was adopted for the study. The study was anchored on Émile Durkheim's Functionalist Theory because of its relatedness. Content analysis was used to analysis data collected. The findings of the study shows that *Oru ezi na ulopractice* highlights the dynamic nature of Igbo spirituality, where tradition and modernity are not seen as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary. The integration of Pentecostal elements into traditional Igbo religious practices demonstrates a pragmatic approach to spirituality, one that values efficacy and relevance over rigid adherence to orthodoxy. Based on the findings, the study recommended that it is important for religious leaders and practitioners from various traditions to engage in dialogues that respect and acknowledge the cultural and spiritual significance of the *Oru ezi na ulo*. Promoting mutual understanding and respect can help reduce potential conflicts and foster a more inclusive religious environment; Efforts should be made to document the oral histories and testimonies of individuals who have participated in or been affected by the *Oru ezi na ulo* practices. These narratives are invaluable for preserving the cultural heritage and providing firsthand accounts that enrich the understanding of the practice's significance and impact.

INTRODUCTION

Generally, in ordinary life, experience is a great motivator. The researcher is a priest working at Holy Spirit Parish Nnewichi Nnewi North Local Government Area, in the Catholic Diocese of Nnewi. The researcher has been a Parish Priest for six years now. He has experienced the activities of some parishioners who organize prayers in their families in the name of *Oru ezi na ulo*. Both pastors and priests were being invited to participate by the parishioners in their various homes.

Oru ezi na ulo, known as family deliverance, holds a significant place in the cultural and spiritual practices of Igbo people. *Oru ezi na ulo* refers to the process of freeing a family from spiritual or ancestral bondage, often believed to be the cause of various challenges and misfortunes experienced by the family. Example of this is the most recent one that happened at my church member's house, Mr Bathelomew Okoye, on the 22 of May, 2023, in which the family invited a Pastor from Imo state to pray and cast out demons that were believed to be the cause of the family's financial backwardness. The Pastor, in the course of his work, discovered that a man in the community who had land problem with the family is the cause of the problem. The Pastor requested for different items and money for use to send the family's problems back to their senders. In order to actualize, their aims, the family had to start looking for money everywhere which led to selling of lands and the proceeds used for the believed cleansing ritual.

As a result, some families seek the services of pastors and priests in the churches to help them overcome family spiritual challenges than native doctors. However, there have been reports of abuse, exploitation, and

extortion by some pastors who claim to be experts in *Oru ezi na ulo*. This has raised questions about the authenticity and effectiveness of *Oru ezi na ulo* in Igboland by these clergies and church ministers.

In recent years, there have been several high-profile cases of pastors in Igboland engaging in unethical practices in the name of *Oru ezi na ulo*. The one of 2nd June, 2023 is the most recent of this situation. A Pastor known as Pastor Osinachi Christopher from Isuochi Abia state, who has his Ministry at Makosa's compound, in Ifite Nnobi, Anambra state, was caught with a pot of charm he intended to bury at someone's compound which they will later bring out in the name of *Oru ezi na ulo*. Some have been accused of carrying out the practices of native doctors in the name of church, sexually exploiting women and young girls during deliverance sessions, while others have been accused of using fear and intimidation to extort money from vulnerable families. Example of this is the incident that took place on 24th November, 2019, in Nsukka Enugu state where one Pastor, Sunday Egbo, 26, a pastor and the founder of Christ Deliverance Ministry, Nsukka, Enugu State, was accused of raping an 18-year-old church member after church activities. Pastor Egbo met the young woman when he was invited for *Oru ezi na ulo* in her family, after which she was asked to come to the church for extension of the prayers and personal deliverance.

These trends have raised confusions on the true practices of *Oru ezi na ulo* and why people resolve to go for *Oru ezi na ulo* in many cases instead of going to hospitals in the situation of ill health, or checking their business decisions and choices in the cases of financial backwardness.

Caught in the intricate web of religion, tradition, economic hardship, and interpersonal conflicts, many families have faced different problems arising from *Oru ezi na ulo*. In most cases, the pastor or priest who are invited will be the reason for family disintegration, enmity between siblings, and other family problems. The pressure to conform to societal norms and the absence of open dialogue hindered them from seeking external support. This situation is very worrisome and the present study is geared towards investigating *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon and its attendant implications on the present Christian Dominated Igboland.

In the context of everyday life, personal experience often serves as a strong motivator for research. The present researcher, a Catholic priest serving at Holy Spirit Parish in Nnewichi, Nnewi North Local Government Area under the Diocese of Nnewi, has spent the past six years ministering to parishioners and observing various religious practices. A particularly significant one among the Igbo people is *Oru ezi na ulo*, commonly referred to as family deliverance. This practice is often embraced by families who believe they are under spiritual or ancestral bondage, which they perceive as the root cause of their misfortunes, such as illness, financial hardship, or marital issues.

The phenomenon of *Oru ezi na ulo* typically involves the invitation of religious figures—either pastors or priests—into family homes to conduct prayers and spiritual cleansing. A recent example that underscores the influence of this practice occurred on May 22, 2023, in the home of Mr. Barthelomew Okoye, a parishioner. The family, believing their financial problems were spiritually rooted, invited a pastor from Imo State to perform

deliverance. During the session, the pastor identified a community member, with whom the family had a land dispute, as the source of their problems. He demanded various ritual items and a substantial sum of money to reverse the supposed spiritual attack. Consequently, the family sold property to fund the cleansing process, placing themselves under significant financial strain.

Oru ezi na ulo seems to be the only means some Igbo believe they can use to approach most of the problems they believe that are traceable to their family background. This is usually done by native doctors. However, in the present day Igboland, being dominated by Christians, churches prefer to carry out *Oru ezi na ulo* for any member family by themselves. To a great extent, many view *Oru ezi na ulo*, carried out by *dibias*, as a traditional practice that is incompatible with Christian beliefs. Some churches have taken a hardline stance against families following the traditional way of carrying out any form of spiritual activities instead of inviting a pastor to do the work (Ezenweke and Nwachukwu, 2017). This therefore, shows that some churches are validating the *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon, but it has to be carried out by their pastors or priests. This has continued to be a source of worry as one would try to understand if the sources of spiritual powers of these pastors are the same as the native doctors, given that in most cases, most of these pastors also request some of the items native doctors usually request before starting their *igba-afa* (divination). These items such as white cloths, salt, red oil, kerosene, fowl or goat, special oil, and others are usually associated with the works of a native doctor (Ekechi, 2020). But in the present day a pastor who is invited to do *Oru ezi na ulo* will request for some or all of these items, lending credence to the popular belief

that *Oru ezi na ulo* is now being carried out by the church clergies.

This trend of seeking spiritual solutions over medical or practical interventions is not isolated. Many families now prefer spiritual deliverance over consulting doctors or analyzing business missteps. While some clergy genuinely attempt to help, there has been a rising wave of unethical behavior associated with *Oru ezi na ulo*. Reports have surfaced of pastors exploiting vulnerable families through fear, manipulation, and financial extortion. Even more alarming are incidents involving the use of fetish objects, sexual exploitation, and outright deception under the guise of Christian deliverance.

For instance, on June 2, 2023, a pastor named Osinachi Christopher from Isuochi, Abia State—operating from Makosa's compound in IfiteNnobi, Anambra State—was allegedly caught attempting to bury a pot of charm in a family compound to later "discover" it as evidence of spiritual bondage. Another disturbing case involved Pastor Sunday Egbo, founder of Christ Deliverance Ministry in Nsukka, Enugu State. On November 24, 2019, he was accused of raping an 18-year-old woman he had met during an *Oru ezi na ulo* session. The victim was lured to his church for continued "deliverance," where the assault reportedly occurred.

These cases have cast serious doubt on the authenticity and ethical standing of many self-proclaimed deliverance ministers in Igboland. They have also brought to light the psychological and social consequences of *Oru ezi na ulo*, including family breakdown, interpersonal conflicts, and financial ruin. The pressure to uphold cultural norms and the absence of safe, open channels for discourse often prevent families from seeking

professional help or evaluating their challenges critically.

Caught at the intersection of religion, tradition, economic insecurity, and social expectations, many Igbo families continue to rely on *Oru ezi na ulo* as a means of addressing their challenges. Yet, the growing number of abuses associated with this practice calls for a thorough investigation. This study, therefore, aims to critically examine the *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon and its implications in contemporary, predominantly Christian Igbo society.

Statement of the Problem

The above background study warrants an investigation into *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon in Igbo society and the implications of this in the present Christian dominated Igboland.

What are the prevailing methods and practices of *Oru ezi na ulo* in Igboland, and how do they vary across different communities and religious affiliations?

Why do the people believe that any forms of challenges they face are traceable to their roots?

What are the Church's teachings on *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon and its compatibility with Christian faith and practices?

How do Christians in Igboland perceive *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon?

Which spiritual leaders or groups offer *Oru ezi na ulo* services in Igboland and their approaches to the practice?

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this research work is to investigate *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon and its attendant implications on the lives of the Igbo Christians of Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives of the study are:

To investigate the meaning – content of *Oru ezi na ulo* in Igbo land.

To examine the churches' teachings on *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon and its compatibility with Christian faith and practices.

To explore the perceptions and attitudes of Christians in Igboland towards *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon.

Research Methodology

The data will be gathered from primary and secondary sources. The primary data will be gathered from interviews, participant observations, and personal experiences. These will be supplemented with materials gathered from secondary sources which include library materials, biblical materials such as Bible dictionaries, bible commentaries, and extra-biblical materials like lexicons and various journals, books, related publications and internet materials. Qualitative descriptive analysis will be used to analyze the data generated in the course of this study. Qualitative descriptive analysis is an approach used in qualitative research to analyze and interpret data in a descriptive and systematic manner. It involves the detailed examination and interpretation of qualitative data to identify and describe patterns, themes, and meanings within the data set.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Deliverance

Deliverance is closely linked to the Christian understanding of salvation and is regarded as

a key aspect of the redemptive narrative. Within Christian theology, deliverance refers to liberation from sin and the forces of darkness, made possible through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Williams, 2016). This belief underscores the transformative power of faith and is encapsulated in the biblical passage: "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36, ESV). In church settings, deliverance is often practiced through prayers, rituals, and sometimes the laying on of hands by spiritual leaders. These practices are aimed at breaking spiritual strongholds and removing obstacles that hinder one's connection with God (Brown, 2020). Deliverance is not only about external release but also about internal restoration, allowing individuals to experience emotional healing and spiritual renewal (Kumar, 2017).

Over time, deliverance has evolved, particularly within contemporary church contexts. Today, there is an increasing incorporation of psychological principles and therapeutic methods alongside spiritual practices. Many churches now address mental and emotional struggles in tandem with spiritual warfare, embracing a more holistic approach to healing (Miller, 2019). Moreover, ongoing discussions within churches have centered on the emphasis placed on deliverance practices. Some congregations focus intensively on deliverance and spiritual warfare, while others integrate these with teaching, counseling, and discipleship to ensure spiritual and emotional growth (Jones, 2021). Additionally, some churches extend deliverance beyond the personal level to address social and systemic injustices, seeing their mission as including the transformation of society (Williams, 2019). This communal understanding of deliverance encompasses

efforts to confront poverty, oppression, and inequality.

Deliverance also raises theological questions regarding divine sovereignty and human responsibility. While some view deliverance as entirely dependent on God's intervention, others argue that believers must actively engage with God's grace to experience true liberation (Smith, 2021). In multicultural congregations, this practice must also be approached with cultural sensitivity. Churches increasingly recognize the importance of contextualizing deliverance to resonate with diverse cultural backgrounds and ensure inclusivity (Jones, 2020).

Concept of Ministry

Ministry, within the church, is a multifaceted concept that has developed over time to reflect changes in society and religious expression. One foundational perspective views ministry as a form of compassionate service and support to others. Smith (2015) describes ministry as a selfless effort to meet the needs of individuals and communities through care, guidance, and assistance. Conversely, Johnson (2017) defines ministry through a theological lens, as a divine vocation to spread religious teachings and promote spiritual growth among believers. In this view, ministers are charged with roles such as preaching, evangelism, and spiritual mentorship. A modern take on ministry is provided by Ekeh (2020), who introduces the idea of "relational ministry." This approach emphasizes building deep and empathetic relationships within the church and larger community. It focuses on authentic interpersonal connections and meaningful engagement. Similarly, James (2021) presents the concept of "ministry of self," which encourages clergy to prioritize their personal spiritual well-being. According to

this view, ministers must nurture their own growth and authenticity, as their inner state directly affects their effectiveness in serving others.

Further expanding the definition, Davis (2014) proposes the idea of "equipping ministry," which stresses empowering members of the church for active participation in spiritual and social endeavors. This inclusive model is grounded in the idea that all believers are capable of ministry. Stone (2018) extends the concept to include "contextual ministry," which advocates tailoring ministerial efforts to fit the specific cultural and social environments of a congregation. This approach recognizes that ministry should be relevant to local challenges and opportunities.

White (2022) adds the dimension of "prophetic ministry," where ministers serve as voices for justice and societal change. This model compels church leaders to speak against social injustices and call for systemic transformation. In pastoral care, Miller (2016) introduces "soul care ministry," which involves guiding individuals through emotional and spiritual difficulties by offering counseling, encouragement, and a safe space for healing. Thompson (2019), on the other hand, advocates for "creative ministry," urging clergy to innovate by using art, media, and unconventional strategies to communicate faith and engage communities dynamically.

Deliverance Ministry

Deliverance ministry, as a specialized branch within church operations, encompasses a broad array of meanings and functions. Sugirtharajah (2020) links it to liberation theology, which emphasizes freeing individuals and societies from political, economic, and social oppression. This

interpretation portrays deliverance ministry as an instrument for advocating justice and championing the rights of the marginalized, drawing inspiration from the biblical narrative of the Exodus. Another understanding of deliverance ministry centers on inner healing. Pagani (2018) describes it as a means of emotional liberation, addressing psychological trauma and deep-seated emotional wounds. Hecker (2019) supports this view by highlighting the integration of psychological tools with spiritual disciplines to foster emotional and spiritual wellness. This perspective considers the healing of the inner self as essential to overcoming spiritual bondage.

Ross (2014) presents deliverance ministry as a holistic practice that blends counseling, spiritual guidance, and pastoral care. It involves a process of self-awareness, healing, and empowerment, using tools such as prayer, meditation, and reflective dialogue to guide individuals toward freedom from emotional and spiritual constraints. Similarly, Pierce (2017) defines deliverance ministry as a supportive framework for individuals struggling with addiction and destructive habits. The ministry helps break these patterns through scriptural guidance and spiritual mentoring. Anderson and Warner (2014) depict deliverance ministry as rooted in the tradition of spiritual warfare. This involves confronting demonic influences through specific religious rituals and prayers aimed at spiritual liberation and mental restoration. Such practices affirm the belief in a supernatural dimension of human struggles, positioning deliverance ministry as a vital tool in the church's effort to combat unseen spiritual challenges.

Concept of *Oru ezi na ulo*

Oru ezi na ulo is a deeply symbolic and spiritually rich concept within Igbo cultural

and religious traditions. It denotes a ritualistic and communal practice aimed at liberating families from spiritual afflictions, generational curses, and other perceived negative influences that disrupt familial harmony and well-being. This cultural phenomenon underscores the Igbo worldview, where the family serves as the nucleus of societal existence, and the spiritual and material prosperity of the family unit is seen as essential to the broader community. Central to *Oru ezi na ulo* is the notion that ancestral spirits, when appeased or acknowledged, can restore balance, heal intergenerational traumas, and promote unity within the family (Ezeani, 2017). The practice merges spiritual intervention with cultural heritage, making it a vital means of cultural expression and identity preservation among the Igbo people.

Beyond its cultural importance, *Oru ezi na ulo* also serves religious functions, reflecting the integration of indigenous spirituality with communal values. Many practitioners report profound spiritual rejuvenation and personal fulfillment through participation in *Oru ezi na ulo* rituals. These rituals often involve invoking the ancestors, seeking divine guidance, and requesting protection and blessings, particularly during periods of hardship or transition (Nwokorie, 2014). The connection to the spiritual realm fosters resilience and offers psychological solace to individuals and families navigating complex social realities. This spiritual engagement, for many, becomes a source of strength and moral grounding.

However, not all perspectives are unanimously supportive. Critics argue that *Oru ezi na ulo* lacks scientific backing and often relies on supernatural assumptions that are not empirically verifiable. Detractors suggest that the outcomes attributed to these

rituals may in fact be linked to psychological processes such as the placebo effect or naturally occurring changes in personal circumstances (Obasi, 2020). Furthermore, there are concerns about the ethical implications of certain ritual practices, particularly in settings where they may be manipulated or intensified by religious leaders for personal gain. In some instances, practices conducted in the name of *Oru ezi na ulo* may become exploitative, especially when vulnerable individuals are subjected to fear-inducing or physically harmful interventions (Okonkwo, 2019). Therefore, it is essential that religious leaders approach such practices with caution, ethical integrity, and a clear focus on the psychological and spiritual well-being of their congregants.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Functionalist Theory, originally articulated by Émile Durkheim, offers a useful lens through which to understand societal structures and their contributions to social cohesion and stability. Durkheim viewed society as an interconnected system composed of various institutions that work together to maintain order and functionality. Each component—such as family, religion, education, and governance—plays a distinct role in upholding the broader social structure. According to this theory, societal harmony is achieved when these parts operate in coordination to fulfill necessary functions. Religion, in particular, is seen as a pivotal institution that fosters unity, shared values, and moral order through collective rituals and beliefs.

Durkheim emphasized the social rather than metaphysical functions of religion. He posited that religious practices bring people together by reinforcing a shared sense of belonging and common identity. Through

rituals and symbolic actions, communities establish a collective consciousness that guides behavior and fosters social integration. This view shifts the focus of religion from spiritual dogma to its role in community building and social regulation. Moreover, changes in one part of the social system—such as shifts in economic or political life—often influence other parts, necessitating adaptive responses across the system.

Applying Functionalist Theory to the *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon provides valuable insights into its societal significance. Within the Igbo context, *Oru ezi na ulo* serves a stabilizing function by addressing familial disruptions attributed to spiritual causes. The ritual offers a structured response to personal and communal crises, thus preserving the integrity of the family unit and, by extension, the wider community. From Durkheim's perspective, this ritual exemplifies how traditional beliefs and practices reinforce collective norms, provide moral guidance, and offer emotional support during periods of uncertainty or stress. Furthermore, the communal nature of *Oru ezi na ulo* demonstrates the interdependence of various social actors, including family members, elders, and religious leaders. Their collaborative engagement in the ritual reflects the functional integration that Durkheim described as essential to social harmony. The ritual becomes not just a spiritual undertaking but a community event that strengthens social bonds and reaffirms collective identity. It provides a space where shared values and ancestral traditions are enacted, thereby sustaining cultural continuity and social stability.

Ultimately, Functionalist Theory frames *Oru ezi na ulo* as a crucial mechanism for managing social and spiritual challenges. It

emphasizes the ritual's role in reinforcing societal norms, promoting emotional well-being, and preserving communal cohesion. By addressing afflictions believed to originate from the spiritual realm, *Oru ezi na ulo* helps maintain the social equilibrium that Durkheim considered essential for the functioning of any society.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Tsekpoe (2019) investigates the growing prominence of prophetic and deliverance ministries in Africa and how they align with indigenous African spiritual frameworks. He argues that these ministries, by emphasizing supernatural causes of human suffering, resonate with the traditional African worldview that attributes misfortunes to spiritual forces. However, Tsekpoe also cautions that despite their cultural compatibility, such ministries can hinder deeper Christian discipleship and may perpetuate fear of witchcraft and malevolent spirits. He advocates for a pragmatic engagement between academic theology and grassroots religious practice to address these challenges.

In another study, Okoye (2017) explores the *Oru ezi na ulo* ritual as a traditional religious practice that promotes family welfare within the Igbo culture. Focusing on rituals surrounding pregnancy and childbirth, Okoye highlights how these practices aim to ensure spiritual protection and communal harmony. Through ethnographic research, the study reveals how *Oru ezi na ulo* maintains its relevance in contemporary society by adapting to changing social conditions. The study emphasizes that such traditional practices remain vital for emotional well-being, social support, and cultural continuity within Igbo families. However, it notes that the exact scope and role of *Oru ezi na ulo*

within broader religious practices remain unclear, indicating a gap that the present study seeks to fill.

IGBO SUB-CULTURAL ZONES

The Igbo ethnic group, indigenous to southeastern Nigeria, represents one of the largest and most culturally rich communities in West Africa. The Igbo homeland is traditionally divided into distinct sub-cultural zones, each characterized by unique dialects, customs, and historical experiences. These zones include the Central, Northern, Eastern, and Southern Igbo sub-cultural areas. Despite differences in expression, these zones are united by shared values, beliefs, and kinship systems that form the foundation of Igbo identity.

The Central sub-cultural zone comprises towns such as Ihiala, Awka, and Onitsha. This region is particularly noted for its religious and cultural dynamism, making it a focal point for traditional rituals like *Oru ezi na ulo*. Other zones include the Eastern zone (Owerri, Orlu, Okigwe), the Southeastern zone (Aba, Umuahia, Ohafia/Arochukwu), and the Northern zone (Nsukka, Enugu, Abakaliki/Afikpo). Each of these regions exhibits distinctive social structures and ritual practices that reflect localized histories and environmental influences.

This study focuses on the Central sub-cultural zone due to its unique interplay of tradition, modernization, and religious diversity. The region serves as a valuable case study for examining how rituals such as *Oru ezi na ulo* are interpreted, practiced, and adapted in contemporary Igbo society. By concentrating on this zone, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the ritual's cultural functions and its implications for family and community well-being.

Central Sub-Cultural Zone of Igboland

The central sub-cultural zone of Igboland stands out for its historical depth, vibrant socio-cultural traditions, and economic dynamism. This region, which includes communities such as Awka, Onitsha, and Ihiala, is recognized for its pivotal role in commerce, traditional values, education, and spiritual life. Positioned at a geographically strategic point, it fosters interconnection among various Igbo subgroups, creating a confluence where heritage and contemporary influences meet. The central zone exemplifies the entrepreneurial ethos of the Igbo people, as seen in the prominence of commercial centers such as the Onitsha Main Market. Uzochukwu (2020) highlights that the fusion of economic activities and cultural traditions in this region has significantly contributed to defining the broader Igbo identity.

What makes this zone especially remarkable is its capacity to merge longstanding traditions with the demands of a modernizing society. Festivals, indigenous governance systems, and religious observances continue to flourish, even as the communities embrace education, urban growth, and innovation.

Awka: Cultural Capital of the Central Zone

Awka, situated in Nigeria's southeastern corridor, is a central sub-cultural hub within Igboland, celebrated for its deep cultural roots and historical contributions. Known traditionally for its blacksmithing skills, Awka gained regional prestige for its metal craftsmanship, which had wide-reaching impact throughout pre-colonial West Africa. This metallurgical expertise enabled Awka to supply agricultural and defensive tools to

surrounding areas, thus enhancing its socio-economic standing. Uzochukwu (2018) asserts that the blacksmiths of Awka played a foundational role in sustaining Igbo communities by supporting farming and security needs.

Spiritually and culturally, Awka remains an epicenter of Igbo traditional life. It continues to practice ancestral veneration and observe age-old religious rites that are interwoven with Igbo cosmological beliefs. Its local governance, grounded in egalitarian ideals, relies on the involvement of age-grade systems and councils of elders. As Okoye (2020) notes, these indigenous governance frameworks serve as vehicles for participatory decision-making and social harmony. Awka's ability to preserve its traditions while progressing in areas such as education and civic development underscores its unique position as a center of both heritage and innovation in Igboland.

Onitsha: The Commercial Heartbeat of Igboland

Onitsha, one of southeastern Nigeria's most prominent cities, holds a critical place within the central sub-cultural zone due to its historical, economic, and cultural importance. The city's location on the banks of the River Niger made it a strategic center for regional and international trade, linking Igboland with other West African communities. According to Okonkwo (2018), Onitsha's function as a major trading post elevated its stature and enabled it to become a confluence of cultures and ideas.

Today, Onitsha continues to thrive economically with its iconic Onitsha Main Market, one of the largest in West Africa. This market supports commercial activity on local, national, and international scales. Ikenna (2022) emphasizes that the market's

vibrancy reflects the Igbo people's reputation for business acumen, with Onitsha nurturing generations of successful entrepreneurs. Culturally, Onitsha also hosts numerous festivals and supports the arts, education, and religious life, all of which contribute to its rich identity. Its dual role as a cultural anchor and economic engine demonstrates the multifaceted significance of Onitsha within Igboland.

Ihiala: Cultural Heritage and Agricultural Strength

Located in southeastern Nigeria, Ihiala is another key community in the central sub-cultural zone of Igboland, renowned for its strong cultural traditions, spiritual diversity, and agricultural expertise. Historically, Ihiala has maintained communal cohesion through its traditional governance mechanisms, which include councils of elders and age-grade organizations. These institutions help in maintaining order and upholding cultural values. Obiefuna (2018) points out that such traditional structures have been critical in sustaining the social fabric of the community.

Ihiala's spiritual life illustrates a blend of traditional Igbo religion and Christianity. The people continue to honor ancestral spirits and sacred spaces while also embracing Christian practices introduced during colonial times. Okafor (2020) observes that this duality creates a rich spiritual environment where both traditional and modern religious beliefs coexist. The community's economic strength, largely derived from agriculture and small-scale industries, and its intellectual contributions further cement its role as an important part of the Igbo cultural landscape.

The Role of Ancestral Roots in Igbo Culture

Ancestral heritage holds a foundational place in Igbo cultural life, shaping their worldview

and community practices. The Igbo people trace their origins to revered ancestors, whose legacies are preserved through oral history, rituals, and community structures. Nwoko (2014) asserts that this deep connection to ancestry forms the bedrock of Igbo communal identity.

One major aspect of ancestral veneration in Igboland is the regular offering of sacrifices, food, and symbolic items to deceased ancestors. These rituals reaffirm the presence and influence of the ancestors in the lives of the living (Echeruo, 1998). Communities are often organized around extended family systems, known as *umunna* or *umuada*, which maintain social cohesion and enable conflict resolution and collective decision-making. Nwosu (2019) explains that these kinship systems reflect the communal nature of Igbo society, where ancestry forms a unifying thread.

Despite modern influences, ancestral practices remain vibrant. Cultural festivals such as the Ofala Festival are opportunities for reflection on ancestral ties and the transmission of traditional values to younger generations (Njoku, 2018). These ancestral values continue to serve as moral guides, emphasizing traits like respect, honesty, and communal responsibility (Mbachu, 2013). Igbo traditional art—including masks, sculptures, and textiles—often incorporate ancestral symbolism, acting as visual records of the people's historical and spiritual journey (Onwuejeogwu, 2015).

Cosmological Foundations of *Oru ezi na ulo*

In Igbo belief systems, *Oru ezi na ulo* (spiritual intervention or deliverance within the family) is deeply rooted in cosmological thought. This worldview includes a hierarchy of deities, ancestral spirits, and a supreme

being, Chukwu. Okonkwo (2014) explains that ancestors are seen as intermediaries between the living and the divine, often petitioned for protection and guidance. Rituals and sacrifices aimed at appeasing them form an integral part of *Oru ezi na ulo* practices (Smith, 2015). Also central to Igbo cosmology is chi, a personal guiding spirit that shapes one's destiny.

Nwadike (2018) emphasizes the enduring importance of collective responsibility in spiritual matters. Even as urbanization introduces more individualistic lifestyles, the communal nature of Igbo society persists. Families continue to rely on extended networks for support during spiritual challenges. Additionally, Ezeokeke (2019) notes that digital technology and social media have helped in preserving and spreading awareness of traditional practices like *Oru ezi na ulo*, linking diaspora and local communities in the process.

Nonetheless, these traditional practices face threats from globalization and the appeal of modern lifestyles. Younger generations often disengage from ancestral rituals, weakening cultural continuity (Onwuka, 2021). In response, scholars, cultural institutions, and government bodies are working to preserve Igbo cosmological knowledge. Okafor (2022) asserts that intergenerational

transmission—led by community elders—remains critical to safeguarding these traditions.

ORU EZI NA ULO IN PRAXES

In Igbo spirituality, priests and traditional spiritual practitioners act as vital links between the earthly world and the spiritual realm. They play a crucial role in interpreting signs, omens, and symbolic dreams, helping families understand the spiritual implications of their experiences. Through their guidance, families are able to align their choices with divine direction, thereby maintaining spiritual balance and harmony in their lives (Onwuejeogwu, 2017).

During periods of distress or uncertainty, these spiritual figures serve as a source of strength and comfort. They offer rituals, prayers, and spiritual interventions aimed at healing emotional pain and restoring communal well-being. Their tireless dedication to the spiritual welfare of the people strengthens the cultural fabric of Igbo society by promoting faith, unity, and resilience. Through their sacred duties, these practitioners preserve the core values and rituals of *Oru ezi na ulo*, ensuring that Igbo spiritual heritage continues to thrive across generations (Onuoha, 2023).

Case Study I: Pastor Christopher Mbadiugha a Promoter of *Oru ezi na ulo*



An interview with Pastor Christopher Mbadiugha, who just carried out Oru ezi na ulo at his church member's house

In an interview with Pastor Christopher Mbadiugha (personal communication, 15th of April, 2024), a native of Owerri North Local Government Area in Imo State, conducted on April 15, 2024, he highlighted the deep cultural and spiritual relevance of *Oru ezi na ulo* in Igbo society. Pastor Mbadiugha emphasized that the practice is not merely a traditional ritual but a profound expression of the Igbo people's belief in ancestral influence on the lives of their descendants. He explained that *Oru ezi na ulo* is widely viewed as a necessary spiritual intervention aimed at breaking generational curses and overcoming spiritual limitations that may obstruct the progress and well-being of individuals within a family. He noted that in traditional Igbo cosmology, an individual's welfare is intricately linked to the spiritual health of their family lineage.

Pastor Mbadiugha also pointed out the importance of understanding the cultural and spiritual framework from which *Oru ezi na*

ulo emerges. He noted that the Igbo people have long believed that the misdeeds or unresolved issues of ancestors can cast a shadow over the present generation. This understanding necessitates occasional spiritual rituals to cleanse the lineage and reestablish harmony. According to him, while *Oru ezi na ulo* has its roots in indigenous practices, many aspects have now been integrated into modern Christian spirituality in the region. Deliverance sessions led by pastors and church leaders are now common, blending traditional beliefs with Christian doctrine to address deep-rooted spiritual concerns.

The continued relevance and acceptance of *Oru ezi na ulo* in Igboland are further reinforced by the authority of cultural and traditional institutions. Pastor Mbadiugha acknowledged that traditional priests, diviners, and spiritual elders play a pivotal role as stewards of sacred knowledge. Their approval and leadership in *Oru ezi na ulo*

ceremonies confer legitimacy on the process, strengthening the faith of community members in these rituals. Their status as respected figures enhances the perceived credibility of the practices and helps to maintain the cultural transmission of these rites across generations.

In addition, the practice of *Oru ezi na ulo* continues to gain acceptance because of its perceived capacity to address life's uncertainties. Pastor Mbadiugha explained that the Igbo, like other communities, face numerous challenges including illness, misfortune, and interpersonal tensions. Through spiritual rituals, families seek not only solutions but also reassurance and protection. These rituals become a means through which individuals confront their fears and find hope. He also noted that the communal aspect of *Oru ezi na ulo* contributes significantly to its social acceptance. The ceremonies usually involve not only immediate family members but also

neighbors and community elders. This collective participation fosters a shared sense of identity and responsibility, reinforcing bonds of kinship and social cohesion.

Fasting and prayer vigils are essential parts of *Oru ezi na ulo* ceremonies, reflecting a strong commitment to spiritual renewal. Families often gather for extended periods of worship, led by religious or spiritual leaders, to intercede for divine intervention in the face of familial difficulties. These communal gatherings build a support system, strengthening both faith and unity. In addition, Pastor Mbadiugha observed that symbolic acts such as breaking chains or tearing garments are sometimes included to signify liberation from spiritual constraints and a fresh beginning for the family. Onyishi and Uchendu (2018) affirm that such symbolic gestures amplify the meaning of the deliverance process and reinforce the family's intention to embrace transformation and renewal

.CASE STUDY II: A Meeting with A Traditionalist who Specialised in *Oru ezi na ulo*



A Discussion with Ikechukwu Nnamani A Traditionalist

During a personal conversation with Ikechukwu Nnamani (personal communication, May 17, 2024), a traditionalist from Nkanu East in Enugu State who was actively engaged in conducting *Oru ezi na ulo* for a family in AmaNkanu, he emphasized the inherently communal character of this spiritual practice. He noted that *Oru ezi na ulo* is not an individualistic event but one that draws participation from extended family and community members alike. This collective involvement stems from the Igbo worldview, which perceives the misfortune of one person as a potential threat to the collective well-being of the entire community. Rituals such as communal prayers, dances, and spiritual cleansing are carried out to restore balance and unity, thereby strengthening community ties and enhancing mutual cooperation (Nwoye, 2011).

Nnamani further explained that *Oru ezi na ulo* has evolved to accommodate contemporary religious expressions, particularly through the integration of Christian beliefs. As Christianity gained ground in Igboland, elements such as Christian prayers, hymns, and biblical references began to merge with traditional rituals. This cultural fusion reflects the fluidity of Igbo spiritual practices and their ability to adapt to changing religious landscapes (Uchendu, 2010). Moreover, these practices now respond to modern-day challenges such as economic instability, health issues, and family strife, offering spiritual remedies that aim to restore hope, peace, and prosperity in uncertain times (Okwe, 2023).

The long-term purpose of *Oru ezi na ulo* goes beyond immediate spiritual healing. These rituals are also intended to cleanse the

bloodline of spiritual afflictions believed to be inherited from previous generations. As Ilogu (2019) explains, through specific ceremonial acts, families seek to liberate their descendants from generational curses and ensure lasting spiritual and material progress. This underscores the proactive nature of Igbo spirituality, which encourages preventative spiritual action for the benefit of future generations. Beyond their spiritual objectives, these rituals serve educational purposes as well. Young members of the community are exposed to cultural teachings and moral values as they observe or participate in these deliverance practices. They learn the significance of the rituals, the spiritual figures involved, and the moral lessons embedded within the practice, thereby ensuring cultural continuity and identity preservation (Okafor, 2016).

The digital age has also left its mark on *Oru ezi na ulo* practices. Through the use of social media and digital platforms, Igbo people within Nigeria and in the diaspora are now able to access and even participate in aspects of these rituals remotely. Online teachings, livestreamed deliverance sessions, and digital testimonies allow for broader participation and engagement with these cultural traditions, demonstrating the technological adaptability of Igbo spirituality (Ugorji, 2020). Additionally, the evolving role of women in the spiritual sphere has brought new dimensions to *Oru ezi na ulo*. Traditionally male-dominated roles are now being shared with women, who serve as spiritual leaders and intercessors. This shift not only increases inclusivity but also enriches the delivery and interpretation of spiritual experiences from diverse perspectives (Nzegwu, 2016).

Socio-Cultural Implications of *Oru ezi na ulo* in Igboland

The socio-cultural significance of *Oru ezi na ulo* in Igboland is profound, influencing both individual lives and community dynamics. At its core, *Oru ezi na ulo* represents a family-oriented ritual aimed at spiritual cleansing and restoration, often undertaken to liberate families from ancestral curses or spiritual afflictions. These ceremonies are typically conducted by spiritual leaders or traditional healers and are marked by symbolic and communal performances aimed at restoring harmony within family units. One major cultural impact of *Oru ezi na ulo* is its role in promoting communal solidarity. Families undergoing these rituals often receive support from neighbors and extended family, enhancing social cohesion and fostering a deeper sense of shared responsibility within the community.

Furthermore, *Oru ezi na ulo* plays a pivotal role in preserving cultural identity among the Igbo. These rituals are deeply embedded in indigenous beliefs and customs, functioning as both spiritual and educational platforms. The recitation of ancestral chants and the performance of symbolic acts during these ceremonies serve as living expressions of Igbo heritage. Younger generations acquire essential knowledge about their ancestry and spiritual obligations through participation in these ceremonies, ensuring the continuation of cultural values (Okafor, 2016).

On an individual level, the psychosocial benefits of participating in *Oru ezi na ulo* are noteworthy. Individuals undergoing the rituals often report a sense of relief, clarity, and renewed strength. By addressing underlying spiritual concerns, these practices offer a framework through which participants

gain emotional healing and psychological resilience. Such outcomes can positively affect personal well-being, family relationships, and broader social engagement (Ibeneme, 2023).

Reasons for the Practice and Belief in *Oru ezi na ulo*

Oru ezi na ulo addresses both spiritual and material concerns within Igbo families. A key objective is to reconcile the present generation with ancestral spirits and to correct the spiritual consequences of unresolved past transgressions. It is believed that ancestral disturbances can manifest as curses or misfortunes in descendants. Therefore, rituals are carried out to cleanse the lineage and restore spiritual balance (Ezeanya-Makun, 2019). Additionally, illness in Igbo thought is frequently attributed to spiritual causes. *Oru ezi na ulo*, in this context, functions as a form of spiritual therapy aimed at exorcising harmful spirits believed to be the cause of such ailments (Nwachukwu, 2015).

Protection against spiritual attacks is another reason families undertake *Oru ezi na ulo*. Igbo communities recognize the threat of malevolent forces and see these rituals as preventive measures to ward off such attacks and secure divine protection for the family (Otego, 2016). Economic prosperity is also a strong motivator. Many turn to *Oru ezi na ulo* to remove spiritual obstacles believed to hinder success in business and personal endeavors, thereby securing financial growth for both present and future generations (Echeruo, 2018).

Beyond individual families, *Oru ezi na ulo* rituals enhance broader communal unity. Through shared participation in spiritual

practices, community members reinforce their collective identity and shared spiritual goals. These rituals thus serve as instruments of both spiritual renewal and cultural continuity (Uloneme, 2010). Ultimately, *Oru ezi na ulo* reflects a comprehensive approach

to life's challenges, integrating cultural heritage, spiritual security, and social cohesion into a unified practice that continues to thrive in contemporary Igbo society.

SUMMARY

The *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon represents a distinctive religious and cultural tradition among the Igbo people, particularly within the Central Subcultural Area of Igboland in Nigeria. This spiritual practice involves specific rituals, prayers, and deliverance ceremonies aimed at liberating individuals from spiritual afflictions, curses, and perceived malevolent influences. Rooted in traditional Igbo cosmology, *Oru ezi na ulo* has evolved through time, now manifesting in forms that reflect a fusion of indigenous beliefs and the doctrines of Pentecostal Christianity. This evolution illustrates the adaptability of Igbo spirituality, shaped by historical religious practices and influenced significantly by the growing prominence of Pentecostal movements in southeastern Nigeria.

Traditionally, the Igbo people have engaged in various forms of spiritual rites aimed at healing, protection, and communal well-being. With the advent and spread of Pentecostalism, particularly its emphasis on spiritual warfare, deliverance, and miracles, the *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon has been redefined to incorporate elements of both belief systems. The Deliverance Ministry, as observed in this region, symbolizes a convergence of ancestral spirituality with modern Christian theology, giving rise to a unique spiritual practice that resonates deeply with the socio-religious identity of the people (Kalu, 2018). This blend has created a

religious space where traditional and contemporary spiritual systems not only coexist but often reinforce each other.

The widespread acceptance and growth of the Deliverance Ministry within the Central Subcultural Area can be attributed to its responsiveness to the changing spiritual, psychological, and socio-economic needs of the people. By integrating aspects of traditional Igbo religion with Christian deliverance ideologies, it addresses issues such as spiritual oppression, family curses, and misfortunes—challenges that are deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of the community (Okeke, 2019). This synthesis provides both spiritual solutions and emotional comfort, positioning the *Oru ezi na ulo* as a significant force in the contemporary religious life of the Igbo.

Moreover, the appeal of the *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon lies in its capacity to reflect and respond to the lived realities of the people. In periods marked by economic instability, unemployment, or social upheaval, the assurance of divine intervention offered by these rituals becomes a source of hope and psychological resilience. It represents a spiritual coping mechanism that helps individuals confront uncertainty while maintaining a strong connection to their cultural roots (Ezeaku, 2020). Through these practices, believers find not only deliverance but also a reaffirmation of their identity and community values.

The spiritual dynamics surrounding *Oru ezi na ulo* also strengthen communal bonds and reinforce traditional norms and values. These ceremonies often involve family members and community participation, thereby serving as both a religious and cultural event. The participatory nature of the ritual fosters unity, shared beliefs, and a collective sense of purpose, which are essential in maintaining the social fabric of the Igbo society (Nwachukwu, 2021). Thus, beyond personal spiritual liberation, *Oru ezi na ulo* facilitates communal healing and continuity of cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The *Oru ezi na ulo* phenomenon encapsulates the fluid and dynamic interaction between indigenous spirituality and contemporary Christian beliefs in Igboland. It highlights the resilience of Igbo religious traditions, demonstrating their capacity to adapt and remain relevant in modern times. Through its synthesis of Pentecostal doctrines and traditional practices, the Deliverance Ministry continues to address both personal and collective challenges, offering spiritual liberation, psychological reassurance, and cultural reinforcement. The enduring relevance of *Oru ezi na ulo* showcases the pragmatism embedded in Igbo spirituality—one that evolves while preserving its core values.

The study of this phenomenon sheds light on broader patterns of religious hybridization in

Africa, revealing the complex strategies employed by communities to sustain spiritual well-being in the face of change. It also highlights the importance of appreciating such integrative religious expressions in understanding the spiritual life of African societies. In a world where identity and faith continue to intersect with modern pressures, the *Oru ezi na ulo* remains a testament to the transformative potential of culturally grounded spiritual practices.

Recommendations

To advance knowledge on the *Oru ezi na ulo* practice, it is essential to encourage further interdisciplinary academic research. Future studies should involve anthropological, sociological, and theological inquiries that explore its historical origins, current manifestations, and its social and psychological implications. Such research would enhance understanding of how indigenous and foreign religious systems merge to form new modes of spiritual expression.

Furthermore, promoting interfaith dialogue is crucial. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations should engage in constructive conversations that recognize and respect the cultural and religious value of *Oru ezi na ulo*. Such dialogue can help bridge gaps in understanding, reduce religious tensions, and foster an inclusive environment where different spiritual traditions coexist peacefully.

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