`Tradition and Spirituality of the Ozidi Tale

By

Mark Warekoromor PhD
Department of Fine and Applied Arts
Faculty of Arts
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria.
mwarekoromor@gmail.com
+2347062628922

Abstract

Ozidi epic was told as a tale reflecting morality and history of the community but the story has its rituals and spirituality which made the tale meaningful and relevant to the *natives*. The Izon Ozidi tale of Orua, although made popular by J. P. Clark when he wrote the play Ozidi Saga and the Ozidi epic, the importance of its tradition and spirituality observed by the elders of Orua community that made tale incomplet was not emphasized. The spirituality involved in the process of telling the tale was not known to many scholars. The hidden secret that Ozidi, the hero represents egbesu the war god was only revealed to those who are true sons of Izon. Rituals concerning the Ozudu tales are still observed by the indigenes. Pere (Prime Minister) Zunguru B. Erewereyai of Orua, the custodian of Orua culture, claims he is now a born again Christian and is no longer interested in the spirituality of Ozidi tale. The myths of Ozidi tale were created from beliefs and encounters with nature. The traditional story teller of Orua Ambayai Dennis Zuomkemefa insisted the Ozidi tale rituals must be observed and libations be made before the Ozidi tale is told.

Keywords: Spirituality, Rituals, Storyteller, Rituals, Pere

Introduction

The Izon Ozidi-Egbesu spiritual tale of war is sometimes referred to as Ozidi epic, Ozudu tale or Azudu Saga of Orua in Tara-kiri southern Ijaw, Bayelsa state, Niger Delta, Nigeria. The natives of Orua where the tale started from call it "Ozudu duu" (Ozudu tale). The Ozidi tale was made popular by John Pepper Clark Bekederemo and it has become a proud property of the Izon culture. The Izon language does not have a word for "epic", rather, the Ozidi epic was an inspiring spiritual tale of the Izon god of war called Egbesu. The tale was told to emphasize the strength of Egbesu, the war deity, and its importance and relavance to the community. The Ozidi tale of warfare has a lot of spiritualty, coded massages and African traditional religious beliefs attached to the tale which were not made known to the academic audience. Today, there are different adultrated versions of the

Ozidi tale told in various clans (ebe) of Izon clan and with the introduction of pentecoastal churches that have no tolerance of Traditional African Religious concept of worship of God and have reduce the importance of the spiritual value of the Ozidi tale to just an entertainment epic and has reduced its original spiritual intent.

This researcher is a son of an Izon fisherman, who grew up in a normadic fishing camp comprising various Izon men that came from different clans (Ibe) of Izon, and with time they cultivated the culture of storytelling, masquerading, carving of masquerade head gear masks, canoes, paddles, fishing equipment and developed fishing techniques in adaption to the sea side environment of forcados River, Burutu. Understanding the Izon culture from the view of an Izon indigene from a society of various Izon sub group meetings in a normadic fishing camp who have developed a common Izon culture . Okpewho 1992, state thus: "A major advance in the study of African oral literature as literature came when native African scholars began to undertake research into the oral traditions of their own people" With traditional knowledge of Izon culture and hearing different traditional versions of Ozidi (Ozudu) tale, it is inspiring to place the cultural understanding of the narrative into a better reality of the spiritual importance of the Ozudu tale, hence the adventure in presenting the Izon Ozidi epic research in a spiritual perspective. There was the need for the researcher to visit Orua city where the Ozidi tale originated from to have a first hand information from the traditionally recognized Ozidi story teller of Orua Chief Ambayai Dennis Zuomkemefa. On my visit to Bulou Orua, the traditional ruler of Bulou Orua, Pere Zunguru B. Erewereyai, the Amanana-Owei of Bulou Orua, said he was not interested in discussing Ozidi tale because he claims to be a converted Christian, He decided to direct the researcher to the Ozidi tale orator and the Chief Preist of Egbesu, Chief Dennis Zuomkemefa Ambaye for information on the Ozudu tale.



Linear settlement of Orua community , Bayelsa State, Nigeria. 2015.
Source: Photograph by Mark Warekoromor, 2015



Close view of Linear settlement of Orua Community, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. 2015Source:Photograph by Warekoromor Mark, 2015.



Street view of Orua community, Photograph by Warekoromor Mark, 2015

He emphasis that he was a "born again Christian" because the spirituality involed in the Ozidi-egbesu tale and the fear of practice of witchcraft locally associated with the Izon-African traditional religion. The advent of Christianity in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria has changed the cosmology, concept and view of the Izon culture and the understanding of the Ozidi tale by some indegenes. Most Izon scholars neglected this spiritual aspect of the Ozidi tale on purpose. The spirituality aspect of the Ozidi tale could not be discussed or written about by scholars who were not interested inthe Izon traditional religion and its culture. It may become more difficult to accept the importance of the spirituality involed in the Ozidi tale when others who are not of Izon culture hear the Ozidi tale told by Izon scholars without the spirituality involved. The traditional story teller Dennis Zuomkemefa Ambaye said he believed that he was chosen by the goddess Egbesu and all efforts for him to refuse the request resulted to attack by the Egbesu. He also claim that his fore father, Atazi, was the first to receive revelation of the Egbesu tale. He requested that the researcher needed blessing from Egbesu to do a successful research on Ozidi / Egbesu tale in order to avoid attack from Egbesu



The Researcher and the Prime Minister of Orua Pere Zunguru B. Erewereyai



Warekoromor Mark, Consulting with the Ozudu Orator and Orua Community elders before the narrative.

An interview was conducted by the Orua community elders and the story teller of Orua to acertain the culture and the intensions of the author before the narration of the Ozidi by the traditional ozidi story teller of Orua. It is believed by the natives of Orua that the Egbesu deity only had recognition for the needs of a true Izon man. The interrogation was carried out because of the sacred nature of the Ozidi tale to the community and the detailed knowledge of the tale was for only the Izon man by birth. It was important for the griot and the elders to know the culture of the researcher and his ability to speak the Izon language. These were important factors to be considered by the elders before information about Egbesu was given out, were given out These could be due to the fact that most wars fought at the time of the tale were between neighbouring invading a cultures and colonialist.



Zuokemefa Dennis Ambayai Ozidi Orator in action. Bolou Orua town, 2015

The story teller was dressed in white, black and red, representing the three different ways to identify Egbesu.

After the interview, the expected approval signal was got from Egbesu for accepting my good intentions and mission to document the Ozudu tale. Special prayers and libations were made to the Egbesu and the ancestors for the protection and guidiance of the researcher. Confirmation and signal of acceptance of the prayer was received from Egbesu deity by the traditional storyteller before the cormencement of the Ozudu tale.



Joint Session of Community elders and Ozidi preast, His Assistance, and Community Elders Praying and Pouring of Libation to Egbesu and other gods for peace before the Ozidi Tale

Although prayers were directed to Egbesu to blesss the research to be successful without the attack of Egbesu prayers were directly channelled to Almighty God called Tamara (She that creates). The Izon believe in the existence of Tamara, ancestors and deities that act on his permission.

The Egbesu deity also inspired the traditional story teller of Orua to determine the duration of the tale per night for the seven nights the tale would last. The tale was expected to last for seven (7) days, seven being the traditional sacred number of completion in Izon mythology and spirituality.



Community elder pouring gin to mother earth in libation to Egbesu deity before the start of Ozidi tale
, Bolou Orua town, 2015.

During the cause of narrating the tale gesticulations and actions from the traditional story teller were believed to have been directed and motivated by the spirit of Egbesu deity and the griot could be inspired unconsciously in his actions hence the need for a spiritual guide

and assistance with a robe tied to the griot to enable distance control in case he becomes dangerous may need control from a distance.

Before the Ozidi tale began cleasing of the arena is done by sacrificing to the gods by the waterside by half naked virgins madians, it was a spiritual rite carried out to appeasse water spiritual beings for peace and blessing during the course of the tale in accordance with belief in an advance race of beings that live in the river. The story teller adorned a white garment and other egbesu deity colours Zuomkemefa (2015) (oral interview) further emphasised thus: "cleansing of the arena with seven virgin girls with seven saucers and with sweet items like cooked rice, biscuits and soft drinks on tray in procession to the waterside in honuor and sacrifices to the gods of the river (Bani-Ere). This is followed by special Ogele dance with a drag net and fish ritual".

Ozidi tale spirituality was emphasized with inspiring and compeling songs. The ogele dance with special dance steps were carried out early in the morning with a drag net to appease the invisible gods from the river (Egbesu and Beni-ere) who may be in attendance. According to the Izon oral tradition, this may be due to the sacred words and invocations used in the cause of the tale. These are some of the sacret knowledge kept under the custody of the elders and the griot. Most characters in the Ozidi tale reflect the myth and cultural belief of the Izon supernatural world. Charecters like *Aziza, Ogueren* and *Agbogidi* in the Ozidi tale reflect the daily interrection nature and attempt to understand God (Tamara) better. The Ozidi tale reflects the strength an average Izon man could possess in time of warfare and it also reflect the ability of the Izon man to achieve victory in wars with the help of Egbesu deity.

The only way the traditional story teller of Orua could reflect the immortality of the Egbesu deity in Ozudu was the reincarnation of soul personality of Ozidi in the tale. The traditional Ozidi story teller of Orua in the course of the tale never diferentiated between Ozidi the son and Ozidi the father in reflecting the immortality of the soul.

The Izon culture acknowledges the belief in the reincarnation of the soul personality. That was the reason Ozidi the son was renamed after his father as "Ozidi", The story teller referred to Ozidi the son always in the tale as "Ozidi" in continuation of the name of his father to the mixed of audience children woman and elders. The immortality that could be reflected in the tale was to have Ozidi personality inherited the kama of his father and will want to revenge himself in the young Ozidi, his son, but there was a gradual revelation of his frailty and uncertainties .The Ozidi tale, though spiritual and of traditional rituals, contains historical references of Izon ancestral home like Benin or Edo, pronounced as

Ado and Bini due to the predominant use of the Izon language as a source of communication by the natives and such places, names and events like "Aziza", "duama bou (forest of the dead) and Bini bou (Benin the historic root of some Izon sub groups) were not pronounced correctly. The Ozidi tale reflects the heroic character of Ozidi as an Izon warrior who have the personality of the Izon god of war. Schueb (2005) states thus:

> ...oral societies have these separate categories: history, the imaginative tale, heroic poetry, myth, and epic. Epic, therefore, is not simply history. History exists as a separate genre. The essential characteristic of epic is not that it is history but that it combines history and tale, fact and fancy, and worlds of reality and fantasy. The epic becomes the grand summation of the culture because it takes major turning points in history (always with towering historical or non-historical figures who symbolized these turning points)……
>
> *ttp://kids.*britannica*.com/blackhistory/article2*

Although the Ozudu tale was told to a combined audience of the society, the spiritual relevance was always under check by the elders to avoid diviation from original intention of the tale. The reincarnation of Ozidi the father to become Ozidi the son was a way of teaching immortality of the soul personality of man.

Oral tradition gives the indegenes of Orua the descrption of Ozidi without him being human in the society but representing the war god, Egbesu. Warekoromor (2015) was able to create a studio painting depicting the symbols used and the ancient look of Ozidi the war lord of Ozidi tale, in painting.

In the days of inter-tribal and community wars, red cloth of Egbesu deity were worn around the waist and head by Izon warriors. Warekoromor, 2015, first recreated the Izon Ozidi hero in painting as described by the traditional Ozidi story teller of Orua. The researcher made a painting and depicked the average Izon warrior of about 200 years ago wearing Egbesu props .

Warekoromor (2021) quoting Marilyn 1992, further states thus, " The artist within (the God in man) has made the universal connection to the spiritual, which becomes part of the fabric of the painting." Tones, value and texture of colours were used by the artist to create the mood and spirituality he felt about Ozidi in this painting. Dark colours of different values were used to represent the mysterious forces empowering the warrior, Ozidi. Okpewho states that for the art, this will mean that, though he accepts and respects

a methaphysical order, the artist reduces the abstrations to reality. The artist is a realist because he operates on two levels of realism.



Mark Warekoromor, *Ozidi* , Mixed Media, (Palm frond, Sea Cowries. Textile Materials. and Oil on Canvas,25 x 40 cm, 2015. Photograph by Mark Warekoromor

Studies of Different Concepts of *Egbesu* Pot

The artist made different creative sketches of traditional Izon clay pot that were used at the time Izidi tale was first told to Orua community audience. The artist was also informed by the traditional story teller of Orua town, Ambayai and the elders (personal communication, 2015) that the presence of the Egbesu spirit could be contained in a clay pot in any chosen Izon community. Clay pots are produced locally by women who collect fresh clay soil from the riverside. The fresh clay soil are rolled into clay balls and allowed to dry. The clay soil were later soaked for some time to allow the sand in it to settle down. The throw wheel is not used by the traditional Izon artist. Firing of the pot is done by burning it on firewood. The aesthetic, solidness and durable of the pots were mentained but the production is mainly for use. The shape and size of the clay pot is determined by the traditional artist.

Spiritual sanctity is attached to the clay pot when Egbesu spirit has been invoked into the pot and fresh palm frond were attached to the pot.



Mark Warekoromor , *Pen and Ink Drawing of Egbesu Pot 1*, 12cm x 18cm, 2018

Photograph by Warekoromor Mar



Mark: Warekoromor,, *Pen and Ink Drawing of Egbesu Pot 2*, 12cm x 18cm, 2018

Photograph by Warekoromor Mark



Mark Warekoromor , *Pen and Ink Drawing of Egbesu Pot 3*, 12cm x 18cm, 2018

Photograph by Warekoromor Mark

The Modern Izon Ozidi Warriors

Egbesu deity, as a war god, was acepted by the Izon of Orua community as the Ozidi tale becaurse a standard of bravery, morality and history of that clan. The Egbusu deity was adopted by other Izon clans (ebe) as god of war. Other Izon communities now have their Egbesu deity named after them. The Egbesu deity as personalized by the Ozidi tale of war is now as a stardard for most Izon communities.

The spirituality and efficiency of egbesu deity as the god of war as represeted by Ozudu as an hero in the Ozidi tale of Orua was embibed by other Izon communities in the protection of the Izon indegenes and has resulted in the adoption of the Egbesu deity by other Izon clans (ebe) . The Egbesu spirit could be tamed in the use of traditional Egbesu colours, earthen pot (Ogun) or a shrine.

The discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta at Oloibiri resulted in rivary among the culture of the region and the perceived oppression of other cultures outside the Niger Deita using the Nigerian government mechinaries to deprive the Izon indigenes of the Niger Delta their God given wealth, resources and their right in the Human Rights Watch, Nigeria: Crackdown in the Niger Delta, of May 1999, declared thus:

> The Niger Delta has for some years been the site of major confrontations between the people who live there and the Nigerian government's security forces, resulting in extrajudicial executions, arbitrary detentions, and draconian restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly.

The aggression on the right of the Izon people was committed in responce to agitation for damage on the environment and unemployment of its indigenes. The federal Government of Nigeria using the resources earned from the Niger Delta region to develop other parts of the country while the Niger Delta area was neglected. The Nigerian soldiers were deployed to the Niger Delta areas of Bayelsa and Delta States, becaurse While there are security concerns of kidnappings of oil workers and inter-community conflict between neighbouring cultures especially in Delta State of the Niger Delta. The Egbesu deity of Orua which was personified by Ozidi the hero in the Ozudu tale became was a source inspiration to the present day Izon youths of the Niger Delta in the struggle for control of oil wealth in the region. The colours and symbols of the deity are used as identity of the struggle. The ancient used of spear and machetes by the Izon heros was modernised with the use of sub-marine guns and explosives for modern warfare in the Niger Delta for the struggle for control of oil revenue with Nigerian Federal Government. The Izon youths

fighting for better control of Niger Delta resources called "Niger Delta Vengance" who now dress in red, black and white Egbesus, colour had the inspiration of the Ozidi tale and the spirit of Egbesu deity.



Niger Delta, Izon Militants with Egbesu Coloured Banners. Sometimes referred to as "Ozidi Warriors"S *Vanguardngr.com*

The Kaiama Declaration was issued on the 11th of December 1998 by the Izon Youth Congress (IYC) to aticulate the needs the Izon culture in the crude oil rich Niger Delta of Nigerian. (Punch News paper)

Conclusion

There was a connection between the story teller and the audience during the course of the story.

The success of a performance is the degree at which the traditional audience agrees with the story of griot. The spiritual influence of the god *Egbesu* on the story teller may lead to new revelation on the *Ozidi* epic which was not known before and may be welcomed by the community elders. Most times these new revelations come during the time the story teller is in a state of trance and that is why an assistance is needed by the story teller during performances

During the couase of the story telling spiritual informations are passed the the story teller who is surpose to be in trance by the ancestors, Egbesu deity of war and other gods of the community The success of the seven nights performance depend on the degree at which the traditional audience agrees with the story of griot. The natives at *Orua* believe that the goddess *Egbesu* chooses story tellers for this major porpose., This is sometimes done through divination or consultation with the gods.

The Ozidi epic is an oral tradition that is tied to the ancient life style of survival in a form of tale and a myth that gives the story cultural rite, which makes the tale historical, cultural, moral and spiritual. The Egbesu deity of war when invoked the Egbesu priest still appears physically in different forms.

Oral interview

	Name	**Positioned Held in the Community or Profession**	**Age**	**Personal/Public Interview**	**Place**	**Date**
1	Zuomkemefa D.Ambayai	Recognized story teller of Orua.	64	Public	Orua	Sept. 2015
2	M. Debole	chief, king-maker of Ogbolubiri kingdom	65	Personal	Eghodor	Jan. 2014
3	J. Layefa	Elder of Aphonor quarters	81	Personal	Kiagbodo town	Dec 2014
4	S. Izakpa	Elder of Kiagbodo town Igbile – biri	78	Personal	Kiagbodo town	Dec 2014
5	E. Zunguru (Pere)	The amanana wei of Orua (The king of Orua)	75	Personal	Pere's Palace, Orua town	Sept. 2014

References

Alagoa,E.J.(2002).*Izon***:***HistoryPespective,*Retrievedfromhtt//www.waado.org/nigerDelta/ethnichistories/ijaw/izon-alagoa.html

Alagoa, E.J. (2005). Oral tradition along the Ijo of the Niger Delta,*Journal Of African History3*, 4-20

Alagoa, E.j.,Tamuno T. N. and Clark J.P. (2009) *The Izon of The Niger Delta*, Onyoma Research Publications, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Campbell, J. (1919). *The hero with a thousand face*. Princeton **:** Princeton University Press.

Clark, J. P. (1966).*Ozidi* .London : Oxford University Press.

Clark, J. P. (1977).*The Ozidi, saga of the Ezon (Ijo) in the Delta of the Niger.* Ibadan**:** University Press.

Clark, J. P. (2006).*The Ozidi saga.* Ibadan **:** University Press

Cultural Legend of the Ijaw People-(2010) Retrieved from, .http//ijaw-legend html google search.

Damian, C. (2017).*Symbol and aesthetics: on the six principles of painting.*Retrieved from http://www.symbol-and-aesthetics.org/the-six-principles-of-painting.htm

Egonwa, O.D. (2007*). Writing about art and making art in Nigeria,* (Many Legs How Much Movement ?, 4thInaugural Lecture). Delta State University, Abraka. 19th September

Egonwa, O.D. (2011). (*Ph.D studio art lecture*,) Delta State University, Abraka.

Epic of Sundiata Paintings(2017). Retrieved from. wwwbadassofttheweek. com.

Finnegan, R. (1992*).Oral tradition and the verbal arts*.London/New York: Routledge.

Harold, S. (2015).*African literature: The oral tradition and the written word,* .Retrieved from, https//www.britannica.com/art/africa-literature/oral-tradition-and-the-written-word.

Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria: Crackdown In The Niger Delta*, 1 May 1999, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a7f74.html [accessed 20 January 2023

Okpewho I. (1992). *African oral tradition.* Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis.

Okpewho I.. (2014). *Blood on the Tide:The Ozidi Saga and The Narrative.* Boydell & Brewers,1-33, *narratology*,Retrieved from, *https*//wwwjstor.org/stable/107722/j.chsv.8ch.

Okpewho I. (2017). *Myth in Africa*. Retrieved from google books https//books. Com. Ng.//book.

Mbiti, J. (1969). *Africa religion and philosophy*. Portsmouth, N, M, **:** Heinnemann.

Nketia, J.H.K. (2012). Safeguarding Traditional Culture and Folklore in Africa.Accra. university of Ghana

Ray, B. C. (1976) *African religion, symbol, ritual and community,* Englewood cliffs, N. Y. Prentice Hall.

Mitchel Paintings of Establishing Mood and Spirituality (2017). Retrieved from, https / mountainscholar www. Google.com.

Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria: Crackdown In The Niger Delta*, 1 May 1999, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a7f74.html [accessed 20 January 2023]

h*ttp://kids.*britannica*.com/blackhistory/article280666*

.

.