



Gender autonomy in contemporary *Ezenwanyi* cult of Northern Igbo

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Abstract

The increasing spiritual consciousness in Igboland since the end of the civil war has created conditions for the emergence of several cult groups. One of such cults is the Ezenwanyi practice. It has in recent times gained more prominence. What started as a call to serve the spiritual needs of the people, has grown to include other interests. The cult's uniqueness, as the name literally implies (woman king), is that its membership is an exclusive reserve of women. This has raised a number of questions: Why this female chauvinism? Is it a counter to other male cults? Do the gods also recognise gender speciality in discharging certain spiritual functions? Is it possible in a supposedly patriarchal society such as the Igbo, to have a spiritual cult group that excludes the male folk? Is it part of female empowerment? Apparently, these questions have not been adequately addressed in the literature. Therefore, in this study, the authors explored the notion of gender autonomy in the Ezenwanyi cult in Enugu-Ezike, Obollo-Afor and Okpuje using a descriptive narrative technique. The findings reveal that (apart from claims of call to service, peer influence, economic interest and social relevance), cultural revival is evident in the growing interest in and proliferation of the Ezenwanyi cult practice.

Keywords: Gender, Autonomy, Ezenwanyi, Cult, Northern Igbo.

Introduction

Religion has continued to occupy an important place in Igbo society from generation to generation. It has been established that the Igbo people have a strong belief in the existence of a being greater and stronger than humans in every sphere of life (Iwuagwu, 1998). This being, which can be described as the Supreme Being is the creator and sustainer of what it created. Ugwu and Ugwueye(2004) affirm that among the Nsukka people where the study area belongs, God is known as *Ezechitoke* and is frequently used to describe the Supreme Being. The name. *Ezechitoke* indicates the ability of the Supreme Being to create which the people acknowledge by the name God is called. This makes Anyanwu(2004) contend that religion in Igbo land is subjectively the consciousness and the dependence of the people on transcendent being and their predisposition to worship him. There is no doubt that the worship of the Supreme Being among the Igbo agrees with the assertion of Mbiti (1969) that the strongest element in the African background, which wields much influence on the thinking and living of the people, is religion.

The world of the Africans is entangled in religion. The sky and all the heavenly bodies; the earth and all its dwellers, oceans and seas and all their inhabitants are given religious explanation in African perception. The cosmos is indeed a religious universe and Africans affirm belief in God and the worship

of him. The worship of God, therefore, is paramount in their religious belief and practices. This belief in the supreme being is acknowledged strongly in Enugu-Ezike, Obollo-Afor and Okpuje. Hence, there are different deities that people worship. These deities have priests known in Nsukka parlance as *Attama*. The *Attama* is a title that refers to the male priest of deities. But Obi-Ani et.al, (2018) stated that *Inyama* is used to refer to the female counterpart of *Attama*. The *Attama* or *Inyama* is seen as the mediator between the people and the unseen world. He is to get revelation from the supreme being in times of crisis for the people as individual members of the society or for the society at large. He is also to foresee an impending doom and find ways to avert such calamity to prevent its devastating effects and consequences on the people and society.

Furthermore, the explosive increase in spiritual consciousness in Igboland in recent times has resulted in proliferation of several cult groups and their cultural practices. Rather than the known *Inyama*, the *Ezenwanyi* cult has emerged and gained prominence in recent times in the study area. The uniqueness of the cult's name is what primarily aroused the researcher's interest as to whether or not the membership is exclusively reserved for women; especially in Igbo society which is largely believed to be patriarchal in nature. In view of the foregoing, the researchers are set to unravel

the secret behind the emergence of *Ezenwanyi*, the interest and prominence it generates in modern times in Igboland amidst the prevalence of Christianity and modernisation. Salient questions, therefore, are pertinent: Is *Ezenwanyi* gender bias in nature due to the name? And are there religious cults in Igbo society exclusive to females alone?

Study area

The research work was conducted in the Northern Igbo. Enugu-Ezike, Obollo-Afor and Okpuje belong to the Nsukka Northern Igboland sub-culture zone. Ogbu Kalu classified the Nsukka Northern Igboland sub-culture zone within the Northern Igbo Culture Area (Kalu, 2003). Enugu-Ezike is in Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area of Enugu State of Nigeria. It is found in the northern part of the state. Enugu-Ezike has common boundaries with Amalla and Obollo-Afor in Udenu Local Government Area in the East. In the North, it is bordered by Ette in Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area and Ofante of Kogi State. It also shares boundaries in the west with Alor-Agu of the Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area in Enugu State and Amaka Okpodu in the Igalamela-Odolu Local Government Area of Kogi State. On the south, Enugu-Ezike is bordered by Ihakpu-Awka and Iheaka in Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area of Enugu State. Omeke claims that global climatic changes have turned what used to be a high forest vegetation zone into a Guinea savanna

ecozone, with tropical dry land which supports the growth of palm trees (Omeke, 2010). Enugu-Ezike is known for palm trees.

Obollo-Afor is in Udenu Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. It is one of the communities in Obollo. Other communities are Obollo-Etiti, Obollo-Eke, Obollo-Orie, and Obollo-Nkwo. Obollo generally as asserted by Esogbue (2017) shares a common boundary on the Southeast and North Central geopolitical zones. Obollo-Afor is a commercial town that attracts commercial activities from far and near. Truck A3 road leading from Enugu to the northern part of Nigeria passed through Obollo-Afor. Though the location of the city has turned it into a commercial centre, agriculture remains their major source of economic earnings.

Furthermore, Okpuje is one of the towns in Nsukka Local Government Area in Enugu State of Nigeria. It is located at the North-West end of the Nsukka Local Government Area. The town is on a trunk "B" road from Nsukka to Idah in Kogi State. Okpuje has common boundaries with Nrobo and Abbi both in Uzo-Uwani Local Government Area in the South, In the East, Okpuje shares boundaries with Ibagwa-Ani and Akpa Edem and in the North with Okutu and Agu Ibagwa and in the west with Anuka.

Methodology

A qualitative approach using a descriptive narrative was employed in the study by the researchers. The researchers purposively

selected three communities in three local government areas in Enugu State. The selected communities are Enugu-Ezike in the Igbo-Eze North Local Government Area, Obollo-Afor in the Udeno Local Government Area and Okpuje in the Nsukka Local Government Area. Some practitioners of *Ezenwanyi* were purposely selected for the study; because they accepted to be interviewed and were also better placed to give useful information required for the research based on their office. The date and time for the study, as well as the aim of the study, were discussed at recruitment. The participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality and the privilege to withdraw from being part of the study any time they felt so.

Duality in Igbo worldview

Duality in Igbo philosophy finds expression in the maxim; *ihekuru, iheakwudebeya*, meaning (naturally, when one thing stands, its counterparts stand alongside it). The Igbo believe that by nature, nothing stands alone. There are two sides to every natural phenomenon in the Igbo worldview just like two sides of a coin. There are *ocha na oji* (white and black), *mma na njo* (good and bad), *ehihe na abali* (day and night), *nwoke na nwanyi* (male and female), *elu na ala* (up and down), *ibu na obere* (big and small), *ogologo na nkpuke* (long and short), *igwe na ala* (sky and ground), and so on. Since duality is found in the order of creation in Igbo society, it is reflected in their perception and

interpretation of reality. Two examples here will suffice. The kola nut which the Igbo cherish and celebrate has male and female lobes or cotyledons. This is how the Igbo distinguish between male and female cotyledons. According to Christopher Ugwu (personal communication; November 18, 2021), the one with a sharp ridge from the head to the tail is male. But the female cotyledon has a sharp ridge running halfway and flattens towards the tail. The second example involves the relationship between the earth and the sky. The sky (*igwe*) is male while its counterpart the earth (*ala*) is female. In this arrangement, *igwe* is the husband of *ala* and both engage in sexual intercourse during rainfall.

The philosophy of duality is made manifest in the Igbo perception and understanding of the ordered nature. Aspects of nature are in pairs, and this is where the concept of duality comes into play. This has found its way into the Igbo thought, belief and cultural practices. This also plays out in their religious thought and practices; hence *Ezenwanyi* cult in the Igbo society. Apart from the interpretation of duality in natural order already given, instances of duality in religio-cultural practices abound in the study area. We give some instances: first, there are elements of gender bias in the celebration of some festivals. A good example is the *Egba Chukwu* (festival in honour of the creator) which men and women celebrate at different periods of the year; men observe their own at

the time of plenty (harvest) while women celebrate theirs at the time of scarcity (planting season). Secondly, masquerade practices are entirely a male affair excluding the females. However, while some masquerades have the men behind the mask, they reflect the female outlook in their appearances, costumes, and style of talking and walking. Third, though deities are conceived as male and female entities, in a shrine of a male or female deity, the effigy of the male is represented. In other words, a female deity has a male effigy and vice versa. Thus, dualities in Igbo understanding and interpretation of reality which translate into their religious beliefs and cultural practices may have necessitated the emergence of the *Ezenwanyi* cult.

Origin and nature of the *Ezenwanyi* cult

The origin of *Ezenwanyi* in the study area cannot be traced without the mention of the *Inyama* cult. It has always been a herculean task to date the origin of cults in African society. Obi-Ani et. al. (2018) opined that the origin of *Inyama* dates back to ancient times. An *Inyama* is linked to a deity that chose a woman and possessed her. One does not become *Inyama* by choice or lineage. The deity has the prerogative to choose any person of her choice to be the *Inyama*. However, *Ezenwanyi* is a prototype of *Inyama*. Some who could not be possessed to be *Inyama* took to *Ezenwanyi* probably to fulfil their life ambition. This proliferation of the *Inyama* cult in the name *Ezenwanyi* cult

is a modern trend. Theresa Ugwuanyi (personal communication November 30, 2021) revealed that the origin of *Ezenwanyi* dates back to early 2000. She argued that it was in the early 2000s that the cult and the name '*Ezenwanyi*' were noticed in the study area. Another informant, Ngozi Ugwu (personal communication November 30, 2021) corroborated the assertion when she insisted that the cult of *Ezeanwanyi* became known between 2000 and 2005. She was not explicit with the year because she was not certain of the year of either its emergence or when the activities of the cult became noticeable in that society, although there were no particular cultural activities that could be linked to the origin of *Ezenwanyi*. It is pertinent to note that the cult of *Ezenwanyi* is a modern invention of the twenty-first century in the Northern Igbo. Its origin, however, may be linked to the campaign for cultural revival. Many Africans who are still tied to their background seek solutions to their challenges, especially the problems alleged to be spiritual through traditional means. This is where the activities of spiritual personalities such as *Ezenwanyi* become necessary and are consulted.

Noteworthy is also the fact that an *Ezenwanyi* is said to be possessed by spirits. According to Apollonia Onah (personal communication January 15, 2022), *Ezenwanyi* is linked to the marine world. She revealed that when someone desires to be *Ezenwanyi*, she seeks power in the marine

world which possesses such an individual to function as *Ezenwanyi* in society. The name *Ezenwanyi* according to Nnenna lyida (personal communication November 30, 2021) was invented by the spirit which possessed them. She averred that the spirit which possessed her instructed her to bear the name *Ezenwanyi*.

Again, by virtue of their status and responsibility, there are rules guiding their operations. These rules and regulations are implemented as instructed by the spirit (Nnenna lyida: personal communication; November 30, 2021). There are, therefore, no general specified guiding principles for the *Ezenwanyi* cult. It is expected that as directed by the gods, the guiding principles or taboos should be obeyed by the concerned *Ezenwanyi*. The rules include meditation on a certain day in the native week, avoidance of extramarital affairs, abstaining from certain native food until the time for ritual cleansing of the food is due and, not having intimate relationships during her monthly circle. An *ezenwanyi* is not expected to eat in public during events and ceremonies and also not to mingle with ordinary people. They are to stay away from their duty during their monthly circle for those of them who have not reached menopause to avoid desecrating the altar and their objects of operation.

Ezenwanyi may wear specially designed attire or ordinary clothes depending on individual leading or directive by the spiritual world.

Growing dreadlocks with local beads

(*ashakpa*) fixed on the dreadlocks is a common feature of *Ezenwanyi*. This, however, is grown by such individuals as directed by the spirit. But in some cases, people grow dreadlocks for society to regard them as powerful, not because of any directive from the gods (N. Ugwu, personal communication, November 30, 2021).

Generally, among the Igbo, marriage is valued and cherished. Any person ripe for marriage is expected to marry or be married. The cult of *Ezenwanyi* therefore, does not abhor marriage. Among the cult, some became *Ezenwanyi* after being married while some got married as *Ezenwanyi* (A. Onah, personal communication, January 15, 2022). Theresa Ugwuanyi (personal communication, November 30, 2021) argued that some left their husbands and children after becoming *Ezenwanyi*. She further intoned that the cult does not forbid marriage. It depends on the individual's conviction. She likened the marriage status of *Ezenwanyi* to what obtains in Christianity where some of their religious leaders do not marry while some do marry. She averred that such is obtainable among the *Ezenwanyi* practitioners.

Generally, every interested adult female is initiated into the cult. It is revealed that both the educated and non-educated females are initiated into the *Ezenwanyi* cult. However, most of the cult members are found to have a poor educational background. There is no identifiable reason why more of the females with a poor educational background are

Ezenwanyi. Nevertheless, those that the researchers communicated with are culturally rooted in their native homelands. They claim to have arisen from among their people. None of them was a foreigner or a visitor. They live among their people and claim to have clients from far and near (including people of different status).

Igbo religion/spirituality in the creation of the *Ezenwanyi* cult in modern Igbo society

Igbo Traditional Religion for centuries has been an integral expression of the people's cultural reality. It is the mirror through which the people perceive the cosmos; thus, their worldview is seen as religious. Found in this religion, is a strong belief in the supreme being, a genderless spirit who is perceived to be the creator of the universe (Achebe, 2003). However, gender is expressed in the created order. This gender expression in the creation is seen in the two great spheres: *Eluigwe* (the sky) and *Elu-uwa* (the world), which are male and female respectively. All the sky gods, *Anyanwu* (sun), *Amuma-Egbe-Elu-Igwe* or *Kamalu* or *Amadioha* (thunder) are all male gods. Again, the earth goddess (*Ala* or *Ani*), is a female deity. According to Ugwu and Ugwuweye (2004), "the earth goddess is arch-divinity in Igboland. As the great mother goddess, she is the spirit of fecundity. 'Ala' is mentioned second to the Supreme Being before other gods follow" (p.40). After the earth goddess follows the goddess of the river. These are spirits which dwell in the mysterious depths of the water. The above

points to a general show that as there are male deities so are also female deities which men and women are called to serve.

While there are undisputable pieces of evidence of the phenomenon of duality in nature, it seems it is more evident in femininity as there are many goddesses. However, both genders are called into the service of gods and goddesses as priests and priestesses. This is in line with the assertion of Parrinder (1962) that women may be priestesses and frequently, they are as prominent as men in the conduct of religious affairs.

Ezenwanyi is seen as an unrestricted offshoot of *Inyama*. The creation of this religious cult is a modern trend as initially was not part of the culture of the northern Igboland. *Inyama* is chosen through divine orchestration. Unlike the *Inyama* who must be called by a deity for assignment, one becomes *Ezenwanyi* out of volition. The person is then initiated into the cult by other members of the cult. There is no particular requirement or mode for initiation. The requirements are determined by the gods who prescribe the requirements for each individual who is a candidate for initiation. The requirements for initiation include kola nut, palm wine, *kaikai* (local gin), *nzu* (local white chalk), local fowl (in some cases rooster), and other materials as demanded by the gods. The *Ezenwanyi* according to an informant, Nnenna Iyida (personal communication, November 30, 2021), is possessed by *mamiwota* (marine spirit). Being

possessed by a marine spirit qualifies one to be regarded as *Ezenwanyinwa miri* (marine daughter). It is the marine spirit that empowers the candidates after their initiation to work, giving them insight and guidance into the spiritual realm. This makes them see beyond the ordinary and comprehend what other mortal beings cannot.

However, having been initiated into the cult of *Ezenwanyi*, she needs to get connected continually to the source of power. In view of this, there are materials to work with so as to consult and commune with the spirits whenever their assistance is required. These instruments of operation are *ofò* (stick of justice), *akparata* (object for divination), *ashakpa* (object for divination), *ogbodoaga* (object for divination) and other materials as may be required by the spirits for individuals for definite purposes. Thus, *Ezenwanyi* becomes an intermediary between the people and the spiritual world. She acts as a mediator between the people and the spiritual world in proffering solutions to humanity. Adult females of any age can be initiated into the cult. One is only expected to fulfil the requirements for becoming an *Ezenwanyi* and a member of the cult.

The interest and the popularity of *Ezenwanyi* in modern times are not unconnected to the vicissitudes that contemporary society is subjected to. Society is faced with many problems challenging human existence and survival. It is therefore the responsibility of

the *Ezenwanyi* to seek solutions in every ramification to the myriads of misfortunes of people when consulted. In African society, human problems including ill health have spiritual causes. This is because; according to Kalu(1974) African worldview is majorly religious. Africa is very religious in that virtually everything in Africa is given spiritual interpretation. Mortal beings can only have insight into the spiritual realm when in spiritual disposition. The *Ezenwanyi* is in the position to proffer solutions to the problems of the people since she has a relationship with the spiritual world. She is seen to possess the power and wisdom to approach the spiritual world, to consult with them (spiritual spirits or forces) to find out the cause of any problem and give proper answers and solutions to the problems. Certain attacks and misfortunes that come as a result of malevolent powers such as witchcraft and ill-will through charms are believed to be handled effectively by the *Ezenwanyi* due to her connection with the spiritual world. She is seen to know not only the psychological problem of people but also their spiritual problems. In this case, Nnanna lyida(personal communication, November 30, 2021) contended that *Ezenwanyi* handles the case of *Ogbanje* (born to die). *Ogbanje* are children who are born to die in their childhood and continue to return to be born again by the same parents. Both genders can be possessed of the spirit of *Ogbanje* which the *Ezenwanyi* claims to have the solution to.

Contrary to this premise, the cult of *Ezenwanyi* has proliferated in modern times in the study area to offer solutions to diverse challenges of life which people are passing through including modern problems. Nnenna lyida (personal communication, November 30, 2021) claimed that people seek help for promotion in different areas of life and protection from accidents as well. The cult of *Ezenwanyi* enhances the status of its members. Apollonian Onah (personal communication, January 15, 2022) and Nnenna lyida (personal communication, November 30, 2021) in separate interviews contended that their vocation has enhanced their social status. They revealed that they are given special recognition at events. However, according to them, some people also denigrate and discriminate against them because they are associated with the traditions of our forebears.

Again, the researchers discovered that *Ezenwanyi* practice is a means of economic empowerment to the people. Most of the practitioners have amassed wealth from the practice and this is evident in the kind of houses they built. Nnenna lyida (personal communication, November 30, 2021) confirmed that, even though her mission is to aid people in their problems, she has become wealthier. This is because those who consult them, according to Umeka Odo (personal communication, December 12, 2021), pay certain charges and/or bring items which include fowls and yams as demanded by the

gods. Apollonian Onah (personal communication, January 15, 2022) averred that the financial charges and items help them to take care of their needs and to live a comfortable life.

The Igbo people are attached to their culture. Ugwu (2014) describes Igbo attachment to their culture as being inseparable. Uwaegbute(2021) opined that the inseparability of the Igbo from their culture is the reason why Christian youths participate in masquerades. To the Igbo people, what alien religions and modernisation offer do not satisfy their yearnings and aspirations. In view of this, Apollonia Onah (personal communication, January 15, 2022) solidifies this claim in the submission that the culture of the modern Igbo society is being revived to satisfy the present reality in the society. The cult of *Ezenwanyi*, therefore is part of the cultural revival movement in Igbo society.

Gender autonomy in the institution/cult in Igbo

There have been controversies and misconceptions on the social and religious relationship between the male and female genders in Igbo society. The question is, are there cults that are exclusively for males or females in the study area? The name '*Ezenwanyi*' seems to depict its exclusivity to females. The word *Ezenwanyi* is of two Igbo words: *eze* (king) and *nwanyi* (female or woman). It can be interpreted literarily to mean 'woman king'. Due to the patriarchal nature of Igbo society, it may be erroneous

for anyone to conclude that there are cults that are wholly for both genders.

Ezenwanyi, according to Nnenna Iyida (personal communication, November 30, 2021), is a name which was given to them by the marine spirit. She revealed that the name does not make their cult exclusively a female affair. She further averred that their male counterparts are designated *Ogbuebule* (killer of ram). Although she claimed that their male counterparts operate majorly as *dibia* (herbalists), little or no difference exists between them as they have the same source of power and meet together to discuss matters concerning them. Furthermore, Apollonia Onah (personal communication, January 15, 2022) pointed out that no cult can be reserved for any gender. She revealed that though she is a woman, she could participate in masquerade activities which is popularly believed to be exclusively a male affair. She intoned that her status has made her equal to men. She could invite masquerade to her compound on certain occasions and dine with them. But for a woman to attain the status, such a woman must have reached menopause and also be able to keep secrets. Hence, by virtue of her attainments, she also considered herself equal to a man.

Though the *Ezenwanyi* has a male counterpart, it functions as an entity. For instance, research revealed that *Ezenwanyi* practitioners are consulted in their private shrines by people who are facing various

degrees of life challenges. These challenges of life range from ill health; including insanity and epilepsy, and attacks perceived to be spiritual in nature, such as witchcraft and poisoning. Umeka Odo (personal communication, December 12, 2021) and Nnenna Iyida (personal communication, November 30, 2021) revealed that as an *Ezenwanyi* she consults the gods through divination and other rituals without reference to their male counterparts. Findings show that *Ezenwanyi* receives revelation directly from the gods for their clients. However, caution is applied when a male adult is involved in a ritual process that may involve bathing the entire body. In this situation, the *Ezenwanyi* initiates the ritual bathing process and leaves it for a male counterpart who completes the ritual in the absence of the *Ezenwanyi* by which time the client has become naked. This exceptional case is where the male counterpart, *Ogbuebule*, interferes with the activities of *Ezenwanyi*.

Although there are the male and female members distinguished by the different names with which they are addressed, *Ogbuebule* and *Ezenwanyi*, findings show that the difference in names is a matter of identity difference as there seems to be a balance of duties within the cult group which tends not to suggest discrimination between sexes as is obtainable in the nature of some cults in Igbo society (Apollonia Onah; personal communication, January 15, 2022). Therefore, gender autonomy exists in the

Ezenwanyi, cult in a dynamic way which shows a complementarity between the female and male sexes in Igbo society. Both the *Ezenwanyi* and *Ogbuebule* enjoy the same status as devotees of the deity having equal rights to operate personal shrines, possessing the power and instruments of divination, unlimited access to knowledge of herbs, roots and other medicinal properties used in curing ailments and the authority to exorcise spirits and deal with witchcraft. There is no limit to the exercise of her powers beyond which the male counterpart takes over. The exceptional case already mentioned above is a matter of respect and not a rule.

Conclusion

Ezenwanyi cult is an offshoot of *Inyama*. The rise of the cult of *Ezenwanyi* in modern Igbo society is as a result of the myriads and diverse challenges of life. It is possible also that the quest for cultural identification and

cultural revival has helped in making the *Ezenwanyi* cult flourish. The cult's relevance in society is acknowledged by those who patronise it. The *Ezenwanyi* claims to serve as a link between society and the divinity. Its practitioners are believed to transverse beyond the physical realm to receive answers for solutions to the problems people have.

While the *Ezenwanyi* cult seems to be exclusively for women in Igboland, the researchers discovered that the duality of nature also plays out in this case as men in Igboland also have many such reserved cults. The name *Ezenwanyi* appears to have shown chauvinistic inclination, but the research reveals otherwise. The study also finds that the cult has not only helped people (regardless of gender or inclination) who patronise it but has also helped the members of the cult as it has bettered their economic, political, and social welfare.

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