

**Reverse-Acculturation and Identity: An Overview of Recent Title-taking Trend among
Diaspora Onitsha Indigenes.**

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Abstract

Between November 2024 and early January 2025, over one hundred Onitsha indigenes, spanning various ages and genders, assumed traditional titles—Ozo for men and Odu for women. A significant proportion of these titleholders were members of the diaspora who, in a reversal of their acculturation process, sought to attain prestigious statuses that hold little practical value in their host societies. Similar patterns are observable across Western nations, where native Africans and other migrant communities organize sub-cultural groups, confer traditional titles, and perform rituals reminiscent of their countries of origin. While such Afro-centric cultural consciousness is commendable, the high frequency of title-taking risks trivializing historically revered institutions. This study investigates this emerging trend, exploring the motivations behind the increased engagement with native culture, including self-affirmation, belonging, social identification, and nostalgia for the homeland. Employing a **Cultural Identity Theory lens**, the research examines how diaspora indigenes construct and navigate their cultural identities to mitigate alienation induced by unfamiliar social and political structures. Methodologically, the study utilizes qualitative approaches, including interviews with community leaders and titled diaspora members, supplemented by literature and online sources to contextualize the findings within existing theories. The study concludes that, although identity is dynamic, heritage exerts a strong influence on individual self-conception. Furthermore, while personal ambition drives participation in these cultural practices, it should not undermine collective well-being.

Keywords: Acculturation, Reverse Acculturation, Retro-Acculturation, Identity, Cultural Identity.

Introduction

Globalization in recent decades has profoundly impacted non-Western cultures, facilitated by advances in technology, transportation, and communication. Cultural boundaries are increasingly blurred, giving rise to the notion of a “global village.” Historically, transnational migration and cultural exchanges predominantly flowed from dominant to minority cultures,

particularly following the end of colonial rule in African nations. Many native Africans migrated to Western countries for education and employment, undergoing a process of **acculturation** that often disrupted emotional, communicative, and cultural norms.

A notable trend is now emerging among diaspora communities, including Onitsha indigenes, as minority groups resist full assimilation into host cultures and instead revert to their cultures of origin. They form cultural associations, celebrate festivals, import artifacts, and confer traditional titles. Scholars such as Kim Younghee, Sung Yeon, and Carlos Garcia have described these dynamics as **Reverse Acculturation** or **Retro-Acculturation**. Between November 2024 and early January 2025, over one hundred Onitsha indigenes assumed Ozo and Odu titles, most of them diaspora members, signaling a return to indigenous prestige systems.

While this trend fosters community engagement and may offer personal and economic benefits, it has elicited mixed reactions. Some indigenes celebrate the festivities, while others view the widespread title-taking as diminishing historically exclusive and esteemed institutions, traditionally reserved for elders and the highly deserving. This development also underscores potential **identity concerns**, suggesting a subtle cultural revolt against alien host cultures.

This study investigates the increasing engagement of the Onitsha diaspora with indigenous titles and cultural practices in the US and Europe. It examines how these individuals navigate and construct their cultural identities, the social and political forces influencing their actions, and the broader implications for culture, identity, and globalization.

Reverse and retro-acculturation

Reverse Acculturation is a recent phenomenon which describes the change in direction of the acculturation process, back towards the culture of origin. In this process, individuals or groups from a dominant culture adopt values and practices from a minority and subordinate culture through exposure.

Kirsten Chan in the abstract of her dissertation, titled “Reverse acculturation: a Global Rebalancing Phenomenon” opines that this recent development is driven by globalisation, which has emphasized two forces in cross-cultural research – heterogenisation and homogenisation, which in themselves have increased power of diasporas and the emergence of a global consumer culture. Again, in the abstract of their paper, Younghee Kim and Sung-Yeon Park, reverse acculturation can be attributed to global exchange, advanced digital technology and multiculturalism. They cite the example of young Koreans who are fully acculturated members of the mainstream American Society but have learnt their heritage culture through international travels and advanced communication channels. They then introduce the heritage culture to their non-Korean spouses and family. Reverse acculturation can manifest in diverse ways, such as in food, drinks and cuisine,

adoption of language, music and the arts, cultural practices as well as values and worldview. Other examples of reverse acculturation can be found in instances of inter-ethnic title-taking and marriages which are becoming regular indicators of global cultural exchanges across peoples and continents.

Retro-acculturation was first used to describe Latinos by Carlos Garcia in the early 1990s as “the phenomenon of people who were well on their way to assimilation, pausing along the path and making a conscious decision to go back and re-discover the culture of their parents and grandparents”. It is the conscious search for ethnic identity or roots especially by diasporas who may feel that they have lost their cultural identity. Hence, retro-acculturation can best apply to second and third generation Diasporas who never had the opportunity to experience their heritage culture. For such individuals, it is usually a process of assimilation/integration to incorporation and reinforcement of heritage culture. Cases of retro-acculturation abound among diaspora Nigerians. Many young Nigerians who were born in the West sometimes take an interest in their heritage culture, adopting practices totally incongruous with what they had learnt all their lives. Some of them return to Nigeria to take titles, take lessons in their heritage language and teach their children to speak the same in their bid to identify with their fatherland.

Culture, Identity, and Stuart Hall’s Cultural Identity Theory

The concept of identity can be understood through diverse prisms. While some view the concept as referring to the combination of an individual’s physical and behavioural traits that define him or her, others approach the term from the standpoint of their disciplinary biases. It can refer to the complex and multifaceted concept of who a person is, including the self-concept, personality, values and beliefs, as well as social status, roles and relationships in groups and family.

Towa, quoted in Olayiwola, contends that identity is essentially an effort at “reduction and differentiation. It also involves singularisation and individualism, by which a particular ethnic group is circumscribed through the identification of certain elements or factors that delineate them from others. These elements could include current family systems, beliefs, mentalities, morals, arts and linguistic situation” (Olayiwola, 2013). However, Olayiwola concludes that identity is synonymous to culture since, to him, culture is the singular element of differentiation among human societies. Identity cannot be divorced from culture since there is a symbiotic relationship between individuals and their culture – the individual exists within a cultural milieu while culture finds expression through the individual. Culture shapes the identity, while the identity influences culture. They continue to interact, influencing each other in complex ways. Adopted culture can change identity just as the individual has the ability to challenge and influence or change the same culture. This is why culture is, inexorably, an identifying factor of the individual.

The Cultural Identity Theory as propounded by scholars like Kim Younghee posits that an individual's sense of self is derived from formal and informal membership in groups that transmit and inculcate knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, traditions and ways of life (Kim, 2009). It deals with how people construct, negotiate and maintain their cultural group identities through communicative processes. Stuart Hall further propounds that identity is not a fixed or innate concept but actively constructed through interactions with people, culture, social experiences and representations. In other words, people form their identities from their interactions with the world around them and the more familiar these experiences are, the deeper the impact on the individual's identity. Hall expands that cultural identity is a complex and dynamic process shaped by historical, cultural, and power relations (Hall, 2018). Among some key aspects of his theory are such concepts as dynamism and fluidity, hybridity and creolisation, representation and power as factors that shape and reshape cultural identity.

As a theory, Hall's Cultural Identity theory explains the phenomenon of acculturation, reverse and retro acculturation. It gives an insight into an individual's ability to assimilate and adopt a Westernized identity yet quickly revert to the original cultural identity through association and communication. It also explains the process of retro-acculturation whereby second generation immigrants suddenly and successfully abandon dominant cultures for unknown native cultures, adopting totally different cultural identities. The fluidity and dynamism of communication, as well as hybridity of association can easily be identified as propellers of cultural change.

Significance of Ozo Title-Taking in Onitsha

Onitsha is a town in Anambra State of Nigeria and lies eastwards of the banks of the River Niger. There are several versions of the history of the people known as Onicha Ado N'Idu, however, all the versions rule out autochthony with each of them indicating prolonged movements from various origins to the same destination called Onicha-Mmili (Anionwu, 2019, p25).

The Onitsha political system is centralised with the Monarch or King at the head, though the monarchy is elective and not hereditary, open only to the clans that are descendants of Eze Chima, a former tributary to the Oba of Benin and father to several settlers/communities on both sides of the Niger River including Isele, Onicha-Ugbo, Onicha Olona, Ubulu towns, Onicha-Ukwu, Obamkpa, Ilah and Onicha Mmili (Henderson, 1978, p7). All these communities call themselves "Umu-Eze Chima" meaning children of King Chima.

The King or Obi of Onitsha is assisted in his administrative duties by the Chiefs (ndi-ichie) who are categorised into "ndi ichie-ume" (first class chiefs, who are six in number); the "ndi-ichie okwa" (second class chiefs); and the "ndi-chie okwa-areze" (the third class chiefs). These chiefs are selected by the Obi from the villages and clans that make up the community (Arah, 2010 p37).

At the village level, the chiefs are assisted by the “Ozo-titled” men who are also spiritual leaders of their families and clans. At the family level, however, the “okpala” or “diokpa” is the administrative and spiritual head, though where he is not a titled man, he must abdicate spiritual leadership to any of the titled men in the family. This was why, in the past, the “diokpa” or “ikpala isi” had to be an ozo priest to “put him in a comfortable position to render full service to the community ie, oblation in all spiritual ceremonies...” (Amuta, 2024, p154). Hence, the religious significance of an Ozo title holder is of utmost importance in the community. The Ozo title elevates its holders to a higher religious, social and political order with certain rights and privileges and is also the first step to attaining a place in the ruling hierarchy of the kingdom.

The Process of Ozo Title-Taking in Onitsha

The rites of passage for an Agbalanze or Ozo-titled man begins with “Inyedo Muo” which serves as a sort of notification to the ancestors and a plea for their blessings (Bosah, 1981, p155). It also serves to bring back the “spirit” of the initiate’s dead father (where the latter is late) into the house to receive his annual share of sacrifice from the hands of his son (Anionwu, 2019, p53).

Next is “Igba okonti” where he consults with his relatives. Then, there is “Igo Muo” for prayers from his mothers and father’s maternal kindred. “Ibu Ego” involves cash exchange as against food crops and cowries of past days; then there is “Igbako Mmanyanya” and “Isi Mmanyanya” before “Ina Obibi” the initiation ceremony which lasts a whole night till morning, when the big ceremony “Mmacha N’ozo” comes up.

This “Mmacha” is the climax of the whole ceremony and is attended by a large crowd consisting of the Agbalanze, friends and family. The new member, in immaculate white, eagle feathers on his headgear, dances into the arena followed by a virgin “okwachi” bearer. The dancing, amidst other “nze na ozo” (Agbalanze) climaxes when the initiate embraces his first son and daughter, and lastly his wife. The final rites takes place on the following, day when the initiate and his immediate relatives assemble before the kindred “Ani” shrine for the “Ugwo Ozo” and “Afia Ozo” respectively.

Reverse and retro acculturation among Onitsha Diaspora Ozo-Title-Holders

The year, 2024, witnessed a record high in the number of initiates into the Agbalanze Society of Onitsha. In the last quarter of the year alone, out of eighty-six (86) new entrants into the prestigious society, forty-four (44) reside in America and Europe. Furthermore, many of the remaining 42 initiates were sponsored into the fold by these diasporas because by Onitsha law, a man cannot take the title when his father or elder brother is an “iregwu” or non-initiate. One can only do so when the elder abstains and gives his permission for the younger to go ahead. The object of this study remains the interrogation of the purpose for which these Diasporas will go to great lengths for a native African title after having undergone the often difficult process of acculturation into their host and dominant societies. Perhaps,

there exists a need to establish, through the process of singularisation and differentiation, an identity that is wholly and uniquely African, for personal fulfillment and more.

In separate interviews with new initiates, older members of the Agbalanze society and non-initiates, many reasons were adduced for this recent trend.

Interviewee 1 is a resident of the United Kingdom who took the Ozo-title in August 2024. According to him, he took this step purely for social reasons - to acquire and belong to a social circle which would meet his social needs upon his return to Nigeria because he plans to come back to his native land in the near future. He insists that he has always seen himself as an Onitsha man and loves the culture and traditions of his homeland to which he shall return.

Interviewee 2 is a third class chief, who took the title of “Ike Akatamkpoani” and is, as well, the Palace Secretary in the Traditional Ruling Council. He believes the trend is a “normal” and welcome development, as according to him, it is the ambition of every Onitsha man to take the Ozo-title. He argues that the Diasporas in question are Onitsha men and will always identify with their heritage, hence, it has nothing to do with the depreciation of the Naira against the dollar.

Interviewee 3 is an Ozo-titled man who believes that internal/family rivalry and squabbles have led many into the society, so their lineage shall not be subjugated to others in the clan. He, however, believes that the fall of the naira has certainly facilitated many title-taking ventures including the “ozo” and “odu” titles in Onitsha.

Interviewee 4 is the current Secretary of the Agbalanze Onitsha. He believes many are coming to realize that the group is more of a social group, against the many misconceptions which people had held. Beyond this, many Onitsha indigenes are coming to realize that taking the title does not impede their Christian and other pursuits.

Interviewee 5 an Ozo-titled man is the president of the Igbo peoples’ association of Oslo in Norway, Europe, who has sojourned over 40 (forty years) abroad. He insists that as an Onitsha indigene, this is his identity and he will remain so no matter how long he resides in the West. His father was a titled man so it is natural for him to follow suit. He does not miss his cultural heritage as they practice it in Norway whenever they gather. He imported the “Ijele” Masquerade into Oslo and they invite Norwegians to witness African cultural performances each year. However, unlike diasporas in the USA, there are no competitions and no pressure to take the titles. He affirmed that among the Onitsha residents in the USA, non-initiates, regardless of age, are made to feel inferior to the title-holders, hence the rush to belong to the “upper class”.

Interviewee 6, however, described the recent spate of title-taking in the society as an unhealthy development which has mostly been spurred by unnecessary competition and rivalry among some Onitsha immigrants in the USA. He regretted that the trend was affecting the younger generation of the community and exacerbating an already existing dangerous tendency to make wealth at

any cost. He, however, believes there would be a downturn in number if the Nigerian currency appreciates significantly against its Western counterparts.

Conclusion

The revelation that some Onitsha indigenes in diaspora return to take the Ozo title for unhealthy reasons such as competition or the need to belong to the “high and superior” class, casts a negative light on the institution’s values and ethos, especially as it is a misrepresentation of the Onitsha Ozo cultural system. Reports of younger titled indigenes holding elders, who are non-initiates, in derision have been a source of worry to many indigenes as such behavior belies the respect usually accorded to elders. This concerned group believes that even though the Ozo title is known to elevate the individual in status, an elder should always be accorded his place of authority in a gathering as the Onitsha custom demands.

Other areas of concern arise from this title-taking trend, such as the bastardisation of the standards and traditions of the people. Every community has its set qualifications for attaining certain status in the society and all over Igbo land, especially, these titles are meant to be given in recognition of such qualifications, as a mark of honour bestowed by the community and not merely for anyone who can afford it. Moreover, an “agbalanze” or “Ozo Onitsha” is a priest with responsibility to his family and clan. One wonders how children who are also given these titles alongside their fathers fit into this priestly order.

The sixth interviewee’s response underscores Hall’s belief that representation and power play an important role in shaping cultural identities. The desire to remain relevant and belong to the controlling group is a strong motivation, but in this case, is also a source of rancour and concern which calls for proper regulation and supervision from the community leaders, especially the Obi-in-council. Moreover, an Ozo title is taken at a very exorbitant price, which also explains why only a few could afford to take it in the past. Only ndigenes of unquestionable character and integrity, whose source of wealth was known, were accorded this honour. Such considerations should be sustained for the preservation of the moral fabric of the society and its traditions.

Whatever the motives and aspirations of these title-taking Diasporas may be, a connecting link runs through them all – the power of self-perception and the need to belong and possess a cultural identity. Acculturation as a process has social, psychological and cultural dimensions with changes that are borne of the need to balance two cultures while adapting to the prevailing ways of the dominant society. However, the imposition of a dominant culture on a weaker one may lead to loss of cultural heritage and feelings of alienation from both the original and new culture. This explains the urge among many diasporas, whether African, Asian or Hispanic to re-enforce their heritage for socio-cultural identity and wholeness of the self. As Olayiwola (2013) argues,

“cultural identity is, therefore, used to designate those recurrent features that consummate a people’s mode of existence and when eroded ultimately annihilate such people from the global cultural landscape” (p324).

The economic advantage afforded to the Onitsha Diasporas by the fall of the Naira accorded them the opportunity to advance their social ambition and identify with their roots. Nevertheless, even the “usurper” called globalisation is assuming different dimensions through reverse and retro-acculturation as there is a gradual melding of cultural practices and values owing to the interaction of diverse cultural identities. After all, this insidious but obvious assertion of minority cultures, as represented by the Diaspora indigenes of Onitsha, does not occur in isolation but is also leaving the global space with significant colouration.

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