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The History and Significance of the Igbo Red Cap (Okpu Mme / Okpu Ododo)

By Idenze Ezeme

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The red cap, called Okpu Mme or Okpu Ododo, is essential in Igbo culture, especially in communities that follow the Nze na Ozo title system. The cap has strong cultural and spiritual meaning, and its use is connected to traditions in certain Igbo areas, especially those influenced by the Umunri people in the north-central part of Igbo land. This article looks at the history, meaning, and changing role of the red cap in Igbo culture.

The origin of the Igbo red cap is a subject of debate. Some researchers believe it was inspired by the European fez cap that came with the colonial period. In contrast, some think it came through the Sahel region during the Sahara Desert trade routes. Nevertheless, there is proof that the red cap existed before the colonial period and is very different from the Moroccan red cap, inspired by the Ottoman era red caps and has been a symbol of spirituality and status in Igbo culture.

· Pre-Colonial Roots:

The red cap has always been linked to the Nze na Ozo title system, an important part of Igbo culture. It's thought that the red cap, which represents this system, was first made from local materials before the European fez material was used. Just like how gin replaced palm wine in some ceremonies, the European fez caps may have replaced an older version of the red cap, keeping the same meaning but using different materials.

A 1906 description of an "Igwe" participating in Asaba with the same



cap on indicates that it is of African, not European, origin, revealing its rich history and cultural significance.

Fez caps were worn by colonial African soldiers, which may have helped popularise the red cap style. The Igbo red cap, however, has deep spiritual and cultural significance that makes it highly different from these widespread colonial ones.

Symbolism and Significance of the Red Cap

· Spiritual and Cultural Identity

The red cap does not exist simply for looks. It is a symbol of status, spirituality, and power in Igbo societies. It is particularly symbolic in societies aligned with the Nze na Ozo society.

· Ties to the Nze na Ozo Society:

Members of Nze na Ozo society are typically dressed in a red cap. This represents their religious orientation and leadership. They are referred to as Agbala Nze, which means prosperity and in conformity with the divine (Ukpuru, 2019).

· Symbolism of the Color Red:

The name Okpu Mme translates to “blood-red cap.” The red color represents fire, which is the symbol of Agbala, a powerful god. Fire represents power, energy, and spiritual power.

· Not Just for Leaders:

The red cap doesn’t always represent political leadership. Instead, it shows a person’s membership in special cultural or religious groups, focusing more on tradition and spiritual roles than political power.

· Geographic Origin and Spread

The red cap is present in the areas under the control of the Umunri regime, where the Nze na Ozo community is present. Only title-holders wear the cap in such communities. In southern Igbo



societies, however, where the Nze na Ozo community is less dominant, leaders and older men may not wear red caps.

- Western Igbo Differences

Among the Igbo communities west of the Niger River, the red cap is often referred to as Okpu Ododo. This term is also used in some eastern Igbo areas, reflecting regional linguistic and cultural variations.

- A Pan-Igbo Symbol

In recent times, the red cap has become a symbol for all Igbo people, signifying unity and pride in Igbo culture. Its extended use has, however, sparked controversy over what is authentic, especially in areas where it was not originally worn.

Challenges in Authenticity and Cultural Identity

The evolution of the red cap as a cultural symbol raises important questions about authenticity and cultural identity:

- Cultural Borrowing vs. Indigenous Origins:

Was the red cap introduced through colonisation or long-standing trade networks, and how does this influence its authenticity as a symbol of Igbo heritage?

- Modern Pan-Igbo Identity:

While the red cap is now widely recognised as an Igbo cultural symbol, its origins and traditional restrictions on use highlight the complexities of adopting a single cultural marker across diverse Igbo subgroups.

The red cap, also known as Okpu Mme or Okpu Ododo, represents the depth and tradition of Igbo culture. It is connected to the Nze na Ozo society and holds spiritual meaning, making it an important part of Igbo culture. As it becomes a symbol for all Igbo people, it's important to remember its history, regional differences, and spiritual value. By



understanding its past, the Igbo people can keep celebrating the red cap as a sign of identity and tradition, while also celebrating the variety within their culture.

- Ndi Igbo Worldwide. (n.d.). Significance of the feather on a red cap in Igbo cultural society.
- Ukpuru. (2018, February 8). Red caps in Igbo society
- Ukpuru. (2019, January 8). Symbolism of Agbala Nze in Igbo spirituality.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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