



Ozi Ikòrò

AFRICAN HISTORY · CULTURE · INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

CULTURAL HERITAGE

The Traditional Governance and Cultural Heritage of Ezionum in Ukwuani Society: *A Study of the Okpala System and Its Evolution*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

Ozikoro.com · Cultural Heritage · 5 min read

FEATURE
IMAGE

Chairman of Ukwuani local government and elders of Ezionum at the okpara uku place during nduku festival 2025

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

Ozi Ikòrò

THE TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF EZIONUM IN UKWUANI

The Traditional Governance and Cultural Heritage of Ezionum in Ukwuani Society: A Study of the Okpala System and Its Evolution

By Chukwunwike Ossai · Cultural Heritage · Ozikoro.com

Ezionum is one of the nine communities inside Ukwuani Local Government Area in Delta State, Nigeria. This place is special among the Ukwuani people who are a subgroup of the larger Igbo tribe and it has many histories and cultures that connects it to Niger Delta. Before Colonialism came to Nigeria, Ezionum had a strong cultural practice; they ruled themselves with the Okpala system, and the master in that system is the Okpala Uku. This article is going to tell us everything about Ezionum, its past, how they did things before, and what it means to the people of Ukwuani today.

Ezhionum is located inside Ukwuani LGA, which has nine clans, namely: Akoku, Amai, Ebedei, Eziokpor, Ezhionum, Obiaruku (its headquarters), Umuebu, Umukwata, and Umutu.

Ezhionum is traditionally made up of three (3) quarters, namely: Aweka, Ogbe-Nami and Ogbe-Ofu. The three quarters consist of twelve (12) families with five (5) in Aweka, three (3) in Ogbe-Nami, and four (4) in Ogbe-Ofu quarters. Historically, Ezionum came from the way the Igbo people sojourned from place to place in ancient times. They have deep connections with the Igbo ethnic group in terms of language and culture. Before the coming of the whites, Ezhionum had its way of running its affairs, with family ties and a strong tradition holding them together. The Okpala system is the main way they govern themselves.

Okpala System: This is how they ruled before colonization. Way back,



Ezhionum used the Okpala system to run things. This system means the oldest man, called Okpala, who controls everything. “Okpala” means “firstborn” or “elder” in the Ukwuani dialect, and in most Igbo dialects, maturity is wisdom and respect. This system is not just politics. It covers the family, tradition, and how they settle fights. They were like the president or king back then. The Okpala system was common in many Igbo areas before colonization. It was believed that people who are old are more sensible and blessed by God. In Ezionum, every family has its own Okpala, but the Okpala Uku is the master who watches over everyone.

The Work Of Okpala Uku. Okpala Uku was the highest man in Ezionum before the coming of the colonial masters. “Uku” means “big” or “great”, so it is just like the greatest elder. A king does not pass his crown to his son, but the oldest man from the oldest family takes the position. The Okpala Uku have many works which may include:

Settlement of Disputes: If people are fighting over a piece of land or a family issue, the Okpala Uku acts as a judge. Everyone respects his word because he is seen as a wise, neutral, and impartial man.

Rituals and God-Related Issues: He leads prayers and sacrifices to the ancestors and gods who control the river, bush, and farm. He speaks to the people’s spirit.

Preserves The History Okpala Uku is like a living book; it tells stories, proverbs, and traditions so that young ones can learn their origin. Even though Okpala Uku has a special power, he doesn’t work alone. He meets with other Okpalas from different families to discuss things before making the final decision. This makes the system fair, not a one-person rule.

In Ezionum, everyone is connected through family, age groups, and larger lineages. Every house has its own Okpala, who stands out for them in community meetings. All the Ndi Okpala are joined together, and the Okpala Uku leads them in the whole clan. This practice makes



them tight as a family.

Money-related issues back then were connected to farming, fishing, and trade. The good land in Niger Delta produces yam, cassava, and palm oil, while rivers produce fishes. They also sell things with those closer to them, especially through the river connected to River Niger. Okpala Uku and its indigenes share land, settle fights, and make sure everyone works together in a big farm or building. Trade brings clothes, tools, and salt to Ezionum, and Okpala Uku ensures that everything is fair and peaceful with the people they trade with.

Religious Practice In Old Ezionum Before the church originated, the people of Ezionum worshipped nature and their ancestors. They have a special bush and river where they pray to the gods for good farms, protection, and more children. Okpala Uku is the main person who leads the process. He kills goats or chickens to beg the gods and ancestors for blessings. This charm's power makes people respect Okpala Uku more because they believe he can communicate with the spirit that gives life. For example, during the start of a planting season, he performs a ceremony to ensure the yield of yams and cassava.

How Colonialization Changed Things When the British came into Nigeria around the late 1800s, everything got disorganized in Ezionum. They brought in "indirect rule" that gave them powers to warrant chiefs, young boys who were intelligent or loyal to the whites. This got the Okpala Uku and elders upset because they didn't get the respect that was supposed to be accorded to them. Colonial courts took over from the Okpala judgement, and churches brought God to fight the old charms. Even with all the problems, the Okpala System didn't die down. In Ezionum, the Okpala Uku still exists, even though it is just for the sake of tradition. They don't run the government again, but still have a say in community matters.

Ezionum Today: Old Ways Mixed With The New Ways Presently, Ezionum is still part of Ukwuani LGA. People still farm, trade, and teach in schools or government work. The Okpala System is not in



control as before, but the elderly and traditional leaders still get respect. The Okpala Uku or his kind still shows himself in festivals, marriages, and when people settle minor cases. Most Ukwuani people, including Ezionum, are putting effort into writing down their history so that the world knows how they existed before. This keeps the culture strong, even as mobile phones and city life have changed everything.

- Afigbo, A. E. (1981). *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*.
- Isichei, E. (1976). *A History of the Igbo People*.
- Uchendu, V. C. (1965). *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*.
- Nwauwa, A. O. (1995). *Imperialism, Academe, and Nationalism: Britain and University Education for Africans, 1860–1960*.
- Onwuejeogwu, M. A. (1981). *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom & Hegemony*.
- Opone, P. O. (2012). *The Ukwuani and Their Neighbours: Intergroup Relations in Precolonial Times*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chukwunwike Ossai

An enthusiast in tech with deep passion for studying and showcasing the vibrant cultural heritage of southern Nigeria . Combining my skill with my obsession towards African history and traditions to create contributions that impacts the digital space.



Ozi Ikòrò

History worth reading.

African history · culture · indigenous knowledge
