Introduction to Ịzọn Language and Culture

Abstract

This paper aims to introduce Ịzọn to the world audience. We note the status of Ịzọn as a “main” language, the geographical location of the Ịzọn people in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, the occupations of the Ịzọn, the consonants, vowels, vowel harmony and nasalized vowels in Ịzọn. We observe that in Ịzọn a vowel becomes nasalized when it occurs in the environment of a nasal; that a high tone marked (´), and a low tone marked (´’) perform both lexical and grammatical functions in Ịzọn; that Ịzọn has S-O-V word order; that each word category is written separately; that the negative gha is marked on the verb; and that borrowed words, names of places and languages are nativised. We throw some light on the Ịzọn numerical system, namely: the traditional cardinal numbers such as ọyí (10), sí (20), ande/onde (400) and ande/ondemde/ondemonde (160,000); the modern standardized numbers such as 100 ọdọzọ, 1000 ogịzị, 1,000,000 ipámụ and 1,000,000,000,000 endêrì and the ordinal numbers, bułọ 1st and mamụ karamo 2nd. Next we look at the kinship, persons, religious, colour, body parts, cooking, occupational and other terminology in the lexicon of Ịzọn. Finally we observe some salient aspects of Ịzọn culture such as their dressing, religion, food, festivals, dances, traditions, and customs.

Keywords: Ịzọn, vowel harmony, nasalized vowels, tones, sí.

Introduction: The Ịzọn people and language

Nigeria has over 150 million people who speak 521 languages. In terms of number of speakers, the three “major” languages are Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. The six “main” languages are Ịzọn, Fulfulde, Tiv, Kanuri, Efik/Ibibio, and Edo. All others are termed “minor.” Ịzọn is a Niger-Congo language. Ịzọn refers both to the people and to the language. It is the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria, and has a population of
over three million people who speak 27 different dialects. The language is endangered by the attitude of its people who prefer to use English rather than Izon, for economic reasons.

The main occupations of the Izon are fishing, palm-wine tapping, gin-making, canoe-carving, net making, thatch making, basket weaving, harvesting palm fruits, farming and trading along the rivers, creeks and coastlines of the Niger Delta.

Izon means “truth” and connotes honesty, trustworthiness, intelligence, courage, and eloquence. The Izon people in Nigeria spread from Bayelsa and Rivers State in the East to Ondo state in the West, and from the coast of the Atlantic Ocean in the South to Elemebiri on the River Niger in the North (Donwa-Ifade 2005). Izon is therefore a cluster of dialects spread over a wide geo-political area known as the South-South Geo-Political Zone. Although mutual intelligibility decreases in some cases over wide geographic areas and across dialectal boundaries, the people are ethnically one.

Izon is currently spoken, used in broadcasting on radio and television, studied as a subject, and used as a medium of instruction in Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Rivers State in Nigeria. It is the main language of Yenagoa, Southern Ijaw, Kolokuma/Opokuma, Sagbama and Ekeremor Local Government Areas (LGA) of Bayelsa State; Burutu, Bomadi, Patani and Warri North LGAs of Delta State; the Ovia South West LGA of Edo State; the Ese-Odo LGA of Ondo state, and the riverine LGAs in Rivers State bordering Bayelsa State.

Apọị, Bassan, Biseni, Bumu, Egbema, Ekpetiama, Furuapgha, Gbarain, Ikibiri, Kolokuma, Ko, Kumbo, Ogboin, Okodia, Olodiama, Operemo, Oporoma, Oyiakiri, Seimbiri, Tarakiri and Tungbo dialects are spoken in Bayelsa State. Iduwini, Isaba, Kabu, Qbotebe, Ogbe-Ijoh, Ogulagh, Oporoz (Gbaranmatu), Mein and Tuomo are spoken in Delta State. Apọị and Arogbo are the only Izon dialects that are spoken in Ondo State, a majority Yoruba-speaking State.

For further introduction and discussion on Izon dialects, see also Prezi (2014b: 262–275), Agbegha (2009: 91–103) and Okaba (2008: 9–10).
1. The phonemes of Ịzọn

1.1. The consonants of Ịzọn

The following are the phonemic consonants of Ịzọn and examples of words which contain them, along with their glosses in English.

Figure 1. Chart showing the place of Western and Eastern Tarakiri, Ịzọn, Ịjọ and Ijoid, in a genetic tree of Niger–Congo. Adapted from: Jenewari (1980), Williamson (1989b), Lee & Williamson (1990) and Williamson & Blench (2000: 22).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>English gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. /p/ p</td>
<td>paa ‘appear; go out’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>paan ‘to denigrate by hooting at’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>piri ‘give’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>péré ‘rich/wealthy’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. /b/ b</td>
<td>bá ‘kill’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>béré ‘to complain’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>belé ‘pot’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. /t/ t</td>
<td>tìn ‘tree’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tubou ‘child’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tükpa ‘lamp’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. /d/ d</td>
<td>dada ‘father’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dawai ‘to dream’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dii ‘rope’</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dumoun ‘hair’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dumu ‘spear’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. /k/ k</td>
<td>ka ‘mature’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>koro ‘to fall; alight’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>kiri ‘ground’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>kâra ‘to carve’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>kírí ‘to chop finely’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>kárá ‘rafaia palm tree’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>konowe ‘leopard’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. /g/ g</td>
<td>ga ‘worship’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>goo ‘to read’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gidé ‘fish basket’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. /m/ m</td>
<td>mọ ‘and’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>moun ‘hunger’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maamu ‘two’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. /n/ n</td>
<td>nana ‘possess’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nini ‘nose’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>noun ‘needle’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. /ŋ/ ng</td>
<td>angi ‘egg’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>noun ‘needle’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. /f/ f</td>
<td>fa ‘lost’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>firi ‘work’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>farú ‘smell’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fanú ‘fence’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. /v/ v</td>
<td>vumuye ‘catapult’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vinmó ‘to quench’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>avíinviin ‘dragonfly’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. /s/ s</td>
<td>sara ‘funnel’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sango ‘demijohn (glass jar)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sibiri ‘alligator’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.2. Ịzọn vowels

1.2.1. Oral vowels

There are nine phonemic oral vowels in Ịzọn: /a, e, i, o, u, ẹ, i̠, ọ, ụ/. i.e. a, e, i, o, u, é, í, ó, ú. The first set of vowels: /a, e, i, o, u/ are wide vowels while the second set /ẹ, i̠, ọ, ụ/ are narrow vowels. There is vowel harmony of the eight non-open (non-low) vowels in Ịzọn so that only narrow or wide vowels normally occur together in a simple word. Wide vowels and narrow vowels do not co-occur in a simple word. However, the low (open) vowel /a/ is neutral to vowel harmony and co-occurs with either set.

Example English gloss

1. /a/ aba 'fish species' 131
    aka 'tooth, maize'
    ada 'paint'
    agurá 'star'
    aré 'name'
    akpa 'bag'

See also Prezi (2011a, 2011b, 2014a, 2014b: 262–275) and Agbegha et al. (2011: 6) for further discussion.
1.2.2. Nasalized vowels

There are nine phonemic nasalized vowels in Ịzọn, represented orthographically as: ä, ē, ē, ĩ, ĩ, ŏ, ŏ, ŭ, ŭ. In Ịzọn, when a vowel occurs in the environment of a nasal, the vowel becomes nasalized. When two vowels occur in a word before the final nasal, both vowels are affected by the nasalization. Usually, in the orthography, nasalised vowels are shown by writing the consonant “n” at the end of the syllable or at the end of the word as illustrated below.
### Introduction to Ìzòn Language and Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>English gloss</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>English gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. á</td>
<td>kan</td>
<td>‘tear’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saan</td>
<td>‘urinate’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>saa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fan</td>
<td>‘twist’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>fa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tan</td>
<td>‘gather, pack’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>ta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paan</td>
<td>‘to denigrate by hooting at’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>paa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. è</td>
<td>geen</td>
<td>‘brightly-light’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>egêni</td>
<td>‘visitor’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>pii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ě</td>
<td>see’n</td>
<td>‘shave’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. í</td>
<td>piin</td>
<td>‘crowded’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>siin</td>
<td>‘vomit’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>tij</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fiin</td>
<td>‘ringworm’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>tij</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ì</td>
<td>pin</td>
<td>‘tap (palm wine)’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fiin</td>
<td>‘ringworm’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>tij</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tijin</td>
<td>‘tree; wood’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>tij</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ò</td>
<td>goon</td>
<td>‘be extra bright, of light’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ondo</td>
<td>‘last long’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>odo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. ō</td>
<td>ton</td>
<td>‘measure’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koqon</td>
<td>‘take’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>koq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. ù</td>
<td>fôn</td>
<td>‘book’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tun</td>
<td>‘hat/cap’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>tu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. ū</td>
<td>sôn</td>
<td>‘stretch’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>füm</td>
<td>‘ashes’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>su</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kpuűn</td>
<td>‘to pull’</td>
<td>cf.</td>
<td>suu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See also Prezi (2011a, 2014a: 38, 2014b: 262–275) and Agbegha et al. (2011: 3–4) for further discussion on the topic.

### 1.3. Tone in Ìzòn

Tone, according to Williamson (1989a: 253–278), is the pitch of the voice that makes a difference in the meaning of the words which have the same segmental phonemes. Egberipou and Williamson (1994) also give further insights into the tone patterns in Ìzòn.

There are two basic tones in Ìzòn, high and low. These two tones perform both lexical and grammatical functions in Ìzòn. High tone is marked (´) as in bárá ‘hand.’ The low tone (‘) is usually left unmarked for the sake of convenience as in eni ‘my.’

When a long series of high tones occur in a word, we usually mark the first high tone (´) to show continuing high. Thus, amànànàówéi could be simply marked amànanaowei.

Tone in Ìzòn performs both lexical and grammatical functions.

#### 1.3.1. Lexical tone

The pitch of the voice can make a difference to the meaning of words whose segmental composition is the same. The following minimal pairs contrast:
1. Low tone:

Ado  ‘Edo, Bini’
Abo  ‘a kind of bag woven from raffia or leaves of screwpim’
Áma  ‘you’ (used in addressing a woman whose name is not known)
Àri/emene  ‘I’ (Pron.)
Agbada  ‘bridge, raised platform or one of the ribs’

2. High tone:

Adó  ‘basket’
Abó  ‘canal’
Amá  ‘right side’
Àri/éméné  ‘you’ (Pron.)
Abá  ‘a species of fresh water fish’

1.3.2. Grammatical tone

Tone plays a significant grammatical role in the grammar of Ịzọn. In addition to distinguishing the meaning of lexical items, as in the examples above, tone also distinguishes the meanings of sentences, such as statements and questions (cf. 1 and 2) below:

1. ेmìnjì ेfèmìnjì  ‘I am eating’
   1sgS sg. PRES.PROG.-eat
2. ेmìnjì ेfèmìnjì  ‘you (sg) are eating’
   2sgS sg. PRES.PROG.-eat

For further discussion on tone in Ịzọn see also Prezi (2014b: 270–271) and Agbegha et al. (2011: 10).

2. The word order of Ịzọn

Ịzọn is an SOV language, e.g.  Kịmịnjì  obori bami
Man-the goat killed
   ‘The man killed the goat’

2.1. Morphology

Each word category is written separately. The negative gha is marked on the verb. Borrowed words, names of places and languages are nativised. For further discussion on the morphology of Ịzọn see Prezi (2011b) and Agbegha et al. (2011: 7–12).

3. The numeral system of Ịzọn

The Ịzọn use both the traditional and modern counting systems. As Evilewuru (2008: 52–56) observes, two important terms,  fènjì which means ‘remainder’ or ‘extra’ and  mı which is the conjunction ‘and’ dominate the counting system. Most numbers Ịzọn are made up of two parts: first, the counting bundle (called  kịnj pou); second, an extra or remaining part which is not up to another complete bundle, to which the term  fènjì is applied. The traditional major counting bundles (pou) in Ịzọn are  oyi ‘ten’ (10),  sı ‘twenty’ (20),  ande ‘four hundred’ (400) and  ande njìmande‘which is one hundred and sixty thousand (160,000).
3.1. The cardinal numbers

The cardinal numbers in Ịzọn are:

- 1 kẹnị́
- 2 maamụ́
- 3 táárú
- 4 nén
- 5 söọnrọ̀n
- 6 söndié
- 7 söńọ́ma
- 8 nińa
- 9 isé
- 10 öyí
- 11 öyí / ö́i kẹnị́ fẹ́nị́ (ten and one)
- 12 öyí maamụ́ fẹ́nị́ (ten and two)
- 13 öyí táárú fẹ́nị́
- 14 öyí nẹ́n fẹ́nị́
- 15 öyí söọnrọ̀n fẹ́nị́ (also, die)
- 16 öyí söndié fẹ́nị́
- 17 öyí söńọ́ma fẹ́nị́
- 18 öyí nińa fẹ́nị́
- 19 öyí isé
- 20 sí
- 30 sí öyí fẹ́nị́
- 40 ma sí / maa sí (two twenties)
- 50 ma sí mọ öyí mọ
- 60 táá sí
- 70 táá sí mọ öyí mọ
- 80 nińa sí
- 90 nińa sí mọ öyí mọ
- 100 söọnrọ̀n sí
- 110 söọnrọ̀n sí mọ öyí mọ
- 120 söndié sí
- 130 söndié sí mọ öyí mọ
- 140 söńọ́ma sí
- 160 nińa sí
- 180 iséńa sí
- 190 iséńa sí mọ öyí mọ
- 200 öyí sí
- 220 öyí kẹnị́ sí fẹ́nị́
- 250 öyí ma sí fẹ́nị́ mọ öyí mọ
- 300 öyí söọnrọ̀n sí fẹ́nị́ (dia sí)
- 399 öyí iséńa sí fẹ́nị́ mọ öyí isé fẹ́nị́ mọ (i.e. 380 and 19 = 399)
3.2. The standardized counting system

Introduced by Williamson *et al.* (1990), the standardized counting system makes use of the terms for the cardinal numbers written against them.

$$
\begin{array}{c}
100 & ọdọzo' \\
1000 & ọgịzi' \\
1,000,000 & ịpámụ \\
1,000,000,000,000 & endeřị \\
\end{array}
$$

3.3. The ordinal numbers

The ordinal numbers, excluding the one denoting 'first,' are formed by combining the cardinal numerals with *karamo* 'taking' or 'coming' to form phrases. In these phrases, the cardinal number comes first, and it is followed by *karamo*. For example, *mamụ karamo* means 'taking or coming number two.'

1st  *bulọ*
2nd  *mamụ karamo*
3rd  *taáry karamo*
4th  *nein karamo*
5th  *soọnron karamo*

4. The lexicon of Ịzon

Without being exhaustive and going into detailed discussion, the following are the equivalent words found in the lexicon of Ịzon.

4.1. Kinship terminology

Parents, elders
father  
grandfather  
mother  
grandmother  

Siblings, spouses, extended family relations
husband  
wife  
co-wife  
child  
foster child  
son  
daughter  
grandchild  
uncle (mother’s brother)  

By marriage
father-in-law (one’s husband’s father)  
mother-in-law (one’s wife’s mother)  
brother-in-law  
sister-in-law  
wife of one’s brother, or a brother or sister of one’s husband  

Relation  
brother  
older brother  
younger brother  
sister  
older sister  
younger sister  

4.2. Persons

human being  
man  
woman  

*ambiguous

kịmị  
oweikịmị  
eyọrọkịmị; eyoro-ere

*ambiguous

yei  
ta  
yanfaran  
tubou  
sibe tubou  
yai  
embaụ  
tau-tubou  
yabị  
yei-dau  
uyafo  
uye-yin  
age-owei  
age-araụ  
yado  
biña bo  
biña owei  
okosu owei  
tu owei  
biña araụ  
okosu araụ  
tu araụ  

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God's power Tamaraukuro Prezi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Igbo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>owei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td>eyọrọ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child / offspring</td>
<td>tubọụ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>male child / boy</td>
<td>owei tụbọụ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female child / girl</td>
<td>eyọrọtụbọụ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new-born baby</td>
<td>ayapị / ayatụbọụ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>infant / very young child</td>
<td>kalatụbọụ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>old man / elderly man</td>
<td>okosukimi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>old woman / elderly woman</td>
<td>okosuere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slave-wife</td>
<td>ẹjọ-ere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>regularly married wife</td>
<td>ekiye-ere</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3. Religious terminology

christian                      | tamaraụ karị kimi |
christianity                   | tamaraụ karị buọ |
pagan                         | oru karị kimi     |
paganism / idolatory           | oru karị buọ      |
priest                        | karị owei / ekian sin owei |

4.4. Colour terminology

red                           | kuekue; wowo; yereyere (conspicuously red) |
orange                        | iselebeni       |
green                         | ago; vili       |
yellow                        | balabala; odoón; ope |
blue                          | nọ; bulọ (bula) |
black                         | dirimọ; kpịlịkpịlị (very black) |
white                         | ọnọ; alọ (white cloth) |
brown                         | kele kele; daki |
pink                          | kimi ebimọ erein |
grey                          | fọunbirobeni    |
purple                        | agun-agún      |

4.5. Body parts terminology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Igbo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>body</td>
<td>angọ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hair</td>
<td>tịbị dumoun (head); eteme (body)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>head</td>
<td>tịbị</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>face</td>
<td>andị</td>
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<tr>
<td>eye</td>
<td>torụ</td>
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<tr>
<td>ear</td>
<td>beri</td>
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<tr>
<td>nose</td>
<td>nini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mouth</td>
<td>bịbị</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lip</td>
<td>bịbị-apiran (also bịbị-odu)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tooth / teeth</td>
<td>aka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tongue</td>
<td>mọlọ; mọlọ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neck</td>
<td>kọn; kọn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction to Ịzọn Language and Culture

shoulder  apele
chest     agbobu; akpu
arm       bira; birabiri
hand      bira; bira-bulou
finger    bira-imgbisa; bira-esangbala
leg       buo
knee      emgbiele
foot      buo-kubu; buwo-abo
toe       buo-emgbisa

4.6. Bodily fluids, wastes

blood     asijin
urine     saan dinayai

4.7. Cooking terminology

cook      tuo
boil      tajọ
fry       gbana
slice     kere; ke
chop      pele
pound     temi; titi
peel      kara
butcher   baa
grind     san

4.8. Utensils

pot       bẹlẹ
knife     adejịn
spoon     kayẹrẹ; engasị
fork      fooku
plate     kpamanku; panụ

4.9. Names of some animals

crocodile egere
dog        obiri
elephant   opuobori
fish        endi
lamb        anana
lion        adaka
pig         oporopo
shark       afurumo
snake       seiyẹ; kiriwei
tiger       kụnụwei / konọwei
4.10. Vehicles and accessories

bicycle = azigere
canoe = aru
bus; car; train = ogboyọaru / ogboaru
aeroplane = efin bekaru / efin-aru

4.11. Parts of a house

doors = ogige
bedroom = okpo
sitting-room (parlour) = warjiki

4.12. Clothing / clothes and ornaments

bag = akpa
brassiere = endouserimọeye(-mọeye)
cap / hat = tun
cloth or wrapper = bidẹ
eye-glasses = tọru-tuaye
gold = golu
head-tie = losi
pant = kolukapa
shirt = aru
shoe = aghụka
shorts = afu
silver = siliva
trousers = saka

4.13. Cardinal points (directions)

North = kọnoaku
South = amabịra akụ or amaku
East = ọmụaku (du) or ọtuụaku
West = tamụ akụ or tamụ

4.14. Diseases / illnesses

cough = alọu
cold = odidi
catarrh = niniyai

4.15. Occupations / professions

fishing = endi baa
farming = kiri gboro
palm-wine tapping = koro piịn
teaching = tolumo
carving = eyi kara
blacksmith = asima-owe
Introduction to Ịzọn Language and Culture

The information given on the lexicon of Ṭọn in section 4 is extracted from an unpublished work by the present author.

5. Salient aspects of Ịzọn culture

According to Bouchard (1998: 19–39), the three fundamental features of the ethnic identity are race, language, and religion. The Ṭọn language serves as an identity to the Ṭọn people. It is among the first things a child learns in Ṭọnland. The Ṭọn culture is transmitted to the child through a gradual socialization process. Thus, the Ṭọn child acquires or learns various useful skills such as building of mud/thatch houses, story-telling (at moonlight), and any other art or cultural activities from their parents, guardians and elders in society. See also Prezi (2014b: 265).

The natural identity of the Ṭọn is in their language and dressing. Ịzọn people dress decently. Traditionally, the Ṭọn man normally wears a long-sleeve shirt on his body, wears an expensive cap called Atakala or a bowler hat on his head, ties a big George wrapper of six yards called ighuru (egburu) bide on his waist, wears shoes on his feet, and carries a good walking-stick (called akọlọ) in his hand as his dressing. Sometimes the men wear “up and down” ashoke, with a costly cap or hat and beautiful beads known as ebọlọ. The Ṭọn woman, on the other hand, normally ties two well-designed Hollandaise wrappers on her waist, the outer one is tied shorter (i.e. tied up to the knees – middle of the leg), the inner one is tied longer than the other (i.e. tied downward to the ankles), and she wears shoes. She wears a blouse on top of the wrappers, and wears beautiful beads or necklaces on the neck, and earrings on the ears. She plaits her hair and wears a head-gear (called head-tie or scarf) to cover her head. Traditionally, Ṭọn ladies were expected to dress decently. There is a kind of dressing expected of a father, mother, young girl, young boy and elderly man or woman in different situations, e.g. when going for a burial ceremony, marriage ceremony, and so on.

The traditional Ṭọn man is expected to stand for the truth at all times, and talk with confidence and dignity. He loves peace and lives a peaceful life. He loves festivals such as fishing festival, masquerade festival, dance festival, etc.

The traditional Ṭọn man values women, marries many wives, and consequently has many children who assist him in the business of distilling gin. Although polygamous, he tries to love his wives equally as much as possible. He pays the dowry (bride-price) on each of his wives. He does an introduction on which occasion he pays the love fee, and later does a traditional marriage for each wife. Increasingly nowadays, however, the youth do church wedding and many additionally register their marriages in court.

The Ṭọn man eats ample food. He settles near rivers and engages in fishing. Owing to the hard works the Ṭọn people engage themselves in, they usually eat foods that contain carbohydrates and other energy-giving foods. The favourite foods of the Ṭọn are palm fruit (banga) soup, oil soup, pepper soup and plantain. He usually eats in a group with his sons, especially the grown ones. He loves to have a lot of pepper in his food. That is why he loves pepper soup so much. Before and after meals, they wash their hands according to age-seniority. Drinks, meals, fish and meat are always shared according to seniority.

Ṭọn men eat alligator pepper and kola nuts when they take their favourite hot alcoholic drinks such as native gin, Schnapps, Bertola, etc. They also drink a lot of the palm wine which they tap.

In ancient times, the Ṭọn worshipped idols, gods and deities (oru) such as Benikuru – the chief deity (Amananaorii), Obudou – the producer of fog for protection, Inozu and Anumu – the gods of
wealth, Osun – the god of thunder, amadasu, Mamiwata – the god of the waters, Opugbula, Onanaowie, Gbanagha, alụta bubu, odele, and egbesu the god of war. They also used to make masquerades such as awọziowu “giver of children”, Burutu-ogbo and ọkẹ́lu ẹ̀kẹ̀. Nowadays majority of the Ìzòn are Christians and no longer participate in the worship of idols.

The Ìzòn people have chiefs of families, compounds or quarters (egede) called Alaowei, and they have kings (Pẹ́rẹ́) who preside over clans made up of several towns and villages.

The favourite pastimes of the Ìzòn are story-telling in moonlit nights and wrestling after processions to both ends of the community, especially during the dry season.

The best known Ìzòn musicians are late King Robert Ebizimor, Chief I. K. Belemu, Barrister S. Smooth and Bestman Doupere. The Ìzòn culture and people have different types of dances such as Ungu seri, in which they use water pots and other materials to produce music for the dancers. The Ìzòn culture also has Owigiri as one of the major cultural dances.

When an Ìzòn man sees his fellow Ìzòn man, they greet each other. The younger person shows a sign of respect to the elder person by kneeling down or by genuflecting. The younger person (whether male or female) greets the senior and announces ukoidẹ meaning ‘I am on my knees’; ‘I kneel’; genuflection – sign of respect to the elder person. The elder person then says seri or seri tiẹ meaning ‘rise or get up’.

The ethical practices and other useful traditional skills and knowledge are deliberately transmitted to younger generations through myths, proverbs, pithy-sayings and ceremonies.

Some forbidden things in Ìzòn tradition are as follows:

1. An Ìzòn man does not have sexual relations with a woman who is under her menstruation. The Ìzòn claim it weakens a man’s spirit, but this may also be due to unhealthiness of a menstrual flow.
2. An Ìzòn man does not pass under women’s clothes when they are spread to dry. The Ìzòn claim it weakens the man’s spirit.
3. An Ìzòn man is not expected to see the placenta and afterbirth when a woman delivers a child. This is a superstitious belief.
4. Ìzòn persons do not use the left hand to take, give or pass on something. The Ìzòn feel it is disrespectful.
5. An Ìzòn man does not have sexual relations with a woman during the period of war. The Ìzòn claim it weakens the man’s spirit, and could result in the untimely death of the man if he goes as a soldier to the war front.
6. An Ìzòn man does not use a bathing bucket or basin to fetch drinking water or store food items. This may be due to traditional wisdom concerning the unhealthiness of using such bath items because germs and bacteria could be contained therein.
7. When a war-boat or war-canoe sets out from its community for its destination, it is not expected to berth at any other community. The Ìzòn claim it dampens the morale of the soldiers. Additionally, the men could be dissuaded from proceeding to the battlefront.

See also Evilewuru (2008), Okaba (2008) and Prezi (2014b) for further discussions on Ìzòn culture.
References


Prezi, God’spower T. (2011b) “Strategies for Marking Negation in Ìзон.” Being a Ph.D. seminar paper presented to the Graduate Board of Studies, Department of Linguistics, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.


