

***Otutunzu* Shrine: The Sacred Temple for Ritual Coronation of Igbo Monarchs and Hegemonic Endeavours in Traditional Religion**



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ABSTRACT: In every tradition, empire or kingdom there is a traditional mystical force that binds or welds every royal families together be it Europe, America, Asia and Africa. In Igbo tradition, coronation of kings is viewed as a kingly festival especially when it comes to coronations in Eri kingdom. In the coronation of any new king within the communities that make up Eri kingdom, especially Nri without “*Ududueze*” the covenant pot of clay, the coronation will not take place. The mystery behind this is still unknown. In Igbo tradition, this symbol of kingship act as a spiritual conduit that binds or compensates the communities that make up the Eri kingdom through the mediation for the loss of their contact with their ancestral home and with the built/support in religious rituals and cultural security of their extended brotherhood. As a point of emphasis, ‘*Otutunzu* shrine’ is a shrine strategically and naturally located at the confluence of *Omanbala* and *Ezu* rivers respectively and no citizen of Aguleri is allowed to fish in this particular location of the river because ‘they believed that the fish of the river were the children of the goddess of the river’. This paper explores the reasons and the mysteries why the indigenes are prohibited from fishing in this particular spot. This paper also focuses on how the ritual of coronation of Igbo monarchs are carried out especially the Nri coronation and why the renewal of covenant relationships between communities are done in this sacred space in order to reunite their intimate brotherhood and to show how the Aguleri community uses this temple to show her hegemony in Igbo land and consequently commemorates Eri as their great ancestor.

KEYWORDS: Ancestor, Brotherhood, Coronation, Deities, Kingship, *Otutunzu*, *Obu-Gad*, *Rituals*.

Something magical happens at such a sacred place that triggers an unconscious memory and to learn about the world of sacred place is to learn about ourselves... Sacred places and intersections are the locations where humans first erected temples, pyramids, shrines, churches and cities.

Olsen, B.

INTRODUCTION

Etymologically, the word *Otutunzu* is an Igbo coinage of two words meaning *Otu* and *Nzu* that is a place and *Nzu*. Interpretatively, it means a place of *Nzu*. In this sacred place, one is bound to see the native white chalk scattered all over. As a point of emphasis, ‘*Otutunzu* shrine’ is strategically and naturally located at the confluence of *Omanbala* and *Ezu* rivers respectively and no citizen of Aguleri is allowed to fish in this particular location of the river personally or by proxy because “they believed that the fish of the river were the children of the goddess of the river” (Ohadike, 2007:83). This is why Blier (1995b:75) affirms that the veneration of such creolized divinities constituted “transformative practices... which, when performed properly by humans, mobilized supernatural forces in order to affect human life”. According to an eye-witness account about how some dissidents and itinerants indigenes of the community went to fish in the confluence of the two rivers in those days. While they threw their fishing net inside the river, behold the said net was trapped inside the underneath the river. One of the fisher men decided to dive inside the river to know what was amiss but he was seen no more after hours of waiting by his colleague. So the colleague went to the village to inform the entire villagers about what happened. But after seven days, the missing fisherman appeared to narrate his ordeal and encounter with the spirits of the underworld and eventually he died. Sacrifices were performed in order to avert further consequences that may befall his immediate family or the entire community at large. According to Nzewi (2000:25) the temple of *Otutunzu* in which “it figures originated in Aguleri – a farming/fishing Igbo community on *Omambala* River basin of south-Eastern Nigeria”. Isichei (1980:2) argues that “it is possible to visit Aguleri, and go away seeing almost nothing of the town at all. Most of the houses are set back from the road, and cover a wide area, in the classic Igbo pattern. And one may know the town well

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and never guess its immense antiquity, for there is nothing visible to suggest it. Yet Aguleri, perhaps more than any other place, was the cradle of Igbo civilization. A long history, encapsulated in mythology, recalls a man called Eri, sent from God, who lived there". Strictly speaking, no one actually knows when Aguleri was incepted as a town but the truth of the matter is that the history of Aguleri may have dated back to the early part of civilization and modernity in Nigeria. Since there were no written records, the dates of events, origin and migration of Aguleri people depended heavily on time-honoured legends, oral tradition, recent archaeological discoveries and excavations (Omoregie, 1989). Aguleri is a community of "one people – one destiny" (Arkin, 1989: xi). The origin of Aguleri people would be linked to the migration of Igbo race to this present Nigeria as a nation. One school of thought traces the origin of the Igbo people to that of the Jews who were believed to have migrated from Egypt. The words Igbo, Ibo, Ebo, HEEBO are said to be a corruption of the name, Hebrew. As D. J Wiseman pointed out through the mouth of (Ikeanyibe, 1999:10) "the word Hebrew in Jewish language meant wanderer or a people with no secure place in society".

SETTLEMENT

Eri, the founder of Igbo race was among the migrants and he was believed to have moved and settled temporarily with his followers, in an area near the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers (Ikeanyibe, 1999:11 & Idigo, 2001:72). From there Eri moved to the Anambra valley and quickly settled near the bank of the River *Omanbala* [corruptly called Anambra by the Europeans] at a place known as *Eri-Aka* near *Odanduli* stream, which is presently today located between Ivite and Igboezunu Aguleri respectively. Over time, Eri went out on war raids and captured many men and women and his settlement began to grow exceedingly (Idigo, 1990:3). Eyisi (2010:4) asserts that "by the 1280 B. C they had fully established the first Igbo settlement in Aguleri with distinct culture, religion, tradition and language". Idigo (1990:3-4) argues that "after the death of Eri, his off springs grew in number. To avoid over-crowding and to prevent a situation where all of them could fall prey in an attack which was then the order of the day, the son's dispersed to different places of abode today. The children of Agulu, the first son, remained in their grandfather's [Eri] abode, and together with Adamgbo's children, evolved the town, Aguleri. To Agulu's name was appended to his father's name Eri, making Agulu-Eri. It is pertinent to mention here that some scholars like Afigbo (1983:8) in his article claims that "this special creation of Eri was said to have taken place in the area where Aguleri is now situated. This site should have been inherited by Nri, the first son of Eri but, for no reason mentioned in the legend, Nri moved out of the ancestral home that should be his right, and settled in an open plain named Agukwu".

Reviewing this assertion, I must say that this paragraph is highly mitigated; filled with fabricated liars, misinterpretations; misrepresentations and distortion of time honoured historical facts because in Igbo culture and tradition it is a known fact the Aguleri is the first son of Ancestor Eri. It is also a known fact that under inheritance traditional laws and customs of the Igbo's that the first son must take over his father's house after the death of his father. Nonetheless, for Afigbo to claim that Nri is the first born of Eri is fallacious, which constituted an academic fraud and it is totally unacceptable and I advice that he should carry out his research properly.

No wonder Williams (1988:79) warns that this kind of formulation about inheritance is "misguided and wrong, but that such crookedness must finally be rejected out of hand". However, through the institutions and mediation of royal ordination and ceremonial rituals and spirit manifestation, Aguleri reasserted and repositioned in this way to her authority over other Igbo's in diaspora to "represent the headship of Igbo race" (Nnamah, 2002:9). Nnamah (2002:9) again asserts that "it is also very vital to mention here that Aguleri is strategically located at the point of origin of Igbo land from where Igbo land spread further into the hinterland".

As a point of emphasis, Aguleri has as an ancient cultural community has been commemorating this festival in honour of Eri but only recently that the *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo*, a pan Igbo group has officially instituted this ritual festival in the Igbo lunar and ritual calendar of the Igbo custom and tradition in order to honour Eri as the progenitor of the Igbo race. In reaffirming this position, Paul Nnamah, (2002:9) argues that the significance is that Aguleri as a town represent the boundary of Igbo land from where Igbo land stretched eastwards to the rest of its heartland. Arguably, this hegemonic and cultural expression is only typical of the cradle and for a boundary community it makes a stronger claim to originality (Nnamah, 2002:9). More so, till date, for the fact that Aguleri has retained the original Igbo form of writing that is compared with the Egyptian hieroglyphics is another good point to claim the originality for boundary community and all these marks Aguleri identity (Nnamah, 2002:9) which McAdams (1988:18) refers to as a well "structured self-image". It is on this position that Neuman (1980:12) argues that ancient towns like Aguleri is "the birth place, ancestral home, and a historical centre of culture. Other areas, important as some have now become, are nevertheless derivative from tradition". Insofar as some of the areas deriving their art music from the great tradition of Aguleri became, themselves, "great centre's for the dissemination of musical culture, though geographically distant from its original place and surrounded by different local traditions, other areas remained little centre's of the great tradition" (Capwell, 1993:96).

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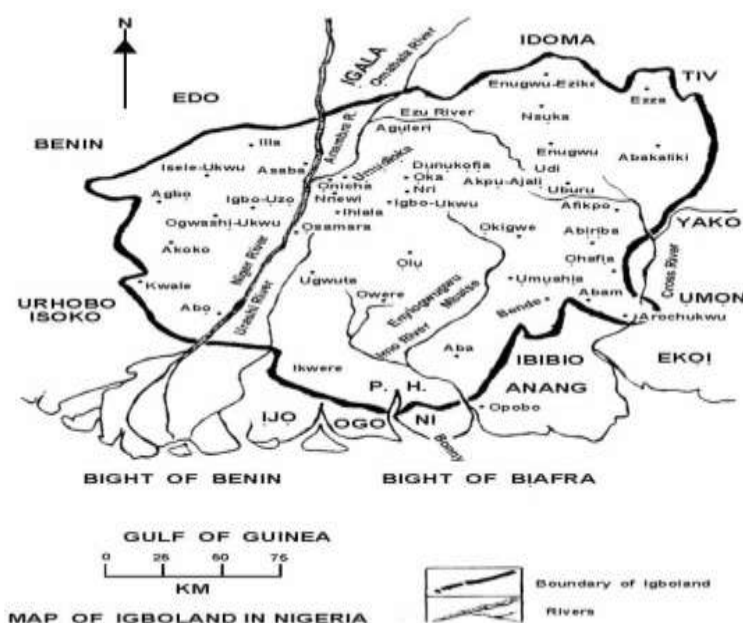
ANCESTRAL WORSHIP

According to Idigo (1990:60) “Aguleri people have strong belief in the existence of one God, the creator of all things whom they call Chi-Ukwu, the Supreme Being, under whose control is the spirits both good and bad. Ancestor worship is also practiced and the people offer sacrifices to their dead fathers, where the King is believed to serve as an earthly representative between God and people, and this demonstrated convincingly that the concept of God was indigenous to the Igbo religious traditions (Metuh, 1981:7), which promises concrete blessings and protection (Isichei, 1980:4). Uchendu (1965:101) affirms that “the number of Igbo deities, spirits, and oracles is enormous and their anthropomorphous character is well recognized. He argues that “Igbo attitude towards the gods is not of fear but of friendship, a friendship that lasts as long as the reciprocal obligations are kept” (Uchendu, 1965:101). Besides, these deities owned in common there are individual deities whom each person keeps and worships through the carved wooden images or idols”. (Idigo, 1990: 60).

Significance of the Sacred Temple of Otutunzu Shrine in Connection for the Coronation of Igbo Monarchs

Coming to ritual importance of the sacred temple of *Otutunzu* which is the ritual centre for coronation of the Igbo monarchs and commemoration of ancestor worship in Aguleri, Igbo religion, it is very significant to reiterate here that the sacred temple has common synergy to the existence of the confluence of the two rivers (*Ezu na Omambala*) situated at Aguleri. It is on this note that De Heusch (1994:233) affirms that “there is no doubt that the river marks the border between two cosmic realms”, where lays the “spiritual power or powers” (Nabofa, 1994:15). Parrinder (1969:58) describes “such sacred place as the home of powerful spirits, whom their leader often represented as a great king who lives in an underwater palace with mermaids and mermen as his attendants. From time to time he tries to flood the earth, and in some stories there may be links with Asian tales of a primitive deluge”. As a point of emphasis, it is in this sacred shrine known as [*Agbata Ezu na Omanbala*], the confluence of *Ezu* and *Omanbala* rivers that Eri prepared and buried the covenant pot of clay called “*Ududu Eze*” which he handed over to Aguleri as the first son for the identification and coronation of kings among the Igbo speaking tribes in Nigeria (Eyisi, 2010:10).

Here, it is believed, Eri landed with his entourage first before moving to settle in *Obu-Gad*, Aguleri. The *Obu-Gad* [that is Gad’s memorial palace] is apparently visible and this remains a tourism site in Aguleri town of Anambra state till date (Eyisi, 2010:3). Igwah et al (2014:1) echoes that this place is very symbolic because it is believed that “it was at this point that Eri had a divine revelation that they had reached their ordained place of settlement”. Isichei (1976:4); Onwuejeogwu (1981:22) & Xrydz-Eyutchae (1986:11) significantly points it out that it is “from this point each settlement pursued its own separate existence and development, owing allegiance to Aguleri, where the collective ancestral temple of Eri still stands to this day”. Buttressing this significance of this place for its Kingship and ritual authority, Onwuejeogwu (1981:168) further explains that “the Nri Kingship has a deep and long connection with Aguleri”. This is because native shrine of Eri stands as a thing of pride both for the town and for the deity...thus a visible reminder of the covenant between the villagers and their god (Ray, 2000:31).



Source; Ebiem, (2013)

Figure 1: The indication on the top is where Aguleri as a town is situated in the Nigeria-Igbo Map. It is here –[the confluence of Omambala and Ezu river] that captures and houses the celebrated sacred temple of Otutunzu where Eri the Father of Igbo race first settled and erected his temple.

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It is pertinent to mention here that *Obu-Gad* shrine is strategically and naturally located at the village square of the Enugu-Aguleri where the mystery and the trinity trees that co-joined together with one visible root for about 5000 years ago and still stand up till date representing the affinal relation of three brothers (Eri, Arodi and Areli) that showed cased the headship of the Igbo cultural heritage as it regards the custom and tradition of the Igbo people in diaspora. In fact, in Igbo cosmology, this notion of Trinity about the co-joined trees is a true representation and an equivalent of the Christians concept of the Trinity of God (God the father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit). It is believed to represents also the three major languages spoken in Nigeria.

Onwuejeogwu states that (1981:114 & 87) “in the first level only the temple of *Uga* was formed. It was the temple of Eri, in Aguleri. All successors to the throne of *Eze Nri* must visit the temple of *Uga* during the coronation to perform the rituals of presentation, re-enactment and integration”, and this is done “in order to receive blessings from Eri and to collect a lump of clay brought from the bottom of the Anambra river which would be used for making the shrine of Nri, Menri”. He argues that “the political significance of the temple is generally uppermost in the minds of the Nri traditional elite, the *ozo* titled men” and it is during this period the *Ikolo* – “*Ufie* sacred music sound/played day and night for one year in the Kings palace” (Onwuejeogwu, 1981:114 & 87-88). Insofar as the scepter of authority given to Aguleri by his father Eri – the father of Igbo race is a representation of the divine which has its ritualistic functionalities embedded in it, this marks Aguleri as “the repository and custodian of genuine tradition” (Hobsbawm, 1983:8). It is very paramount to mention here that there are ritual synergy between *Otutunzu* shrine, *Agbata-Ezu na Omambala* and the temple of *Obu-Gad* erroneously called ‘*Uga*’ by some scholars because these places in Aguleri cosmology serves as a ritual hob and destination for the coronation of traditional monarchs in Igbo land.

To ascertain the authenticity and significance of these sites to the tradition, culture and hegemony of the Igbo people, Jeffreys, (1935:347); Idigo, (2001:42) & Onwuejeogwu, (1981:87) echoes that “this is why before any Nri traditional ruler is installed, the king is led to Aguleri where he performs sacrifices to the sacred temple of *Obuga* before being given the scepter of authority or *Ududu Eze* by the Igwe of Aguleri” through the assistance of the traditional prime minister who performs the rituals meticulously as decreed by the God(s) and ancestors so that it can retain its original ritual connotations in order to avoid sacrilege. It is very significant to note that during this ritual festival according to Nzewi (1979:170) that “the incumbent principal religious officiant and his assistants set about procuring objects for the sacred rituals or ceremonies of the festival.

It may be necessary to repair, renovate or rebuild the shrine house or temple or to prepare the shrine or temple grounds”. This is because during this kind of ritual coronation ceremony the new Igwe elect of the Nri people would pay homage to some deities/shrines like *Okpanime*, *Oye*, *Otutunzu* where two rivers meet (*Agbanabo*) all in Aguleri through the mediation of the ritual spiritualists. Nabofa (1994:37) affirms that through the mediation and assistance of the traditional prime minister of the Aguleri who sits on what may be the oldest ancestral throne in Igbo land, “these kinds of rituals are rigidly and meticulously followed so that they can retain their ancient, ritualistic and spiritual values as revealed and decreed by the divine in order to avoid sacrilege”. This is why Michael Zogry (2011:20) reaffirms that this kind of ancient ritual is “a ceremonial landscape imbued with sacred significance”. No wonder Igwah et al (2014) echoes that through the mediation of the spiritual energy that exudes from the sacred temple of *Otutunzu*, it therefore becomes “a place for spiritual re-dedication and the evocation of the proud ancestry of Eri descendants and *Ndi-Igbo* in general. It is a sacred place for royal empowerment and self purification”. No wonder Fitzgerald et al (1995:57) describes this kind of ritual enhancement as “breeze of blessings” projecting that sign of mortality and brotherhood which has been meticulously managed and maintained by the spiritual bureaucrats who represents the indigenes.

In Traditional Igbo belief system, it is believed that rituals are performed by traditional elders in such ancient community like the Aguleri because they are regarded as the custodians of tradition, custom and hegemony and according to Waterman (1955:49) such “only old men in the community knew the entire ceremonial...repertory”. For this reason, some Igbo ethnographers of the South-Eastern region of Nigeria concludes that Aguleri as an ancient kingdom for “so long is respected for clinging to the ways of their ancestors” irrespective of the fact that they embraced Christianity which encompasses civilization and modernization (Paredes, 1995:355). The sacred temple of *Otutunzu* which is located in Aguleri through special sacred ordination as a sacred place and a generic ritual home of the Igbo nation is there for identity construction that cements brotherhood and unity among the Igbo people. In this sense, Aguleri prides herself as the cradle of Igbo race projecting herself also as the ancestral home of the Igbo nation in diaspora.

In fact, the coronation ritual ceremony of an Nri king would not be complete if ‘*Ududu Eze*’ that is got in this particular place is not handed over to the acclaimed king to be by the traditional ruler of Aguleri (Idigo, 2001:42). No wonder, Nabofa (1994:55) describes such sacred or mythical pot as “the power house of power in the home or community”. This sacred or mythical pot called *Ududu Eze* would be idiomatically compared to a griot which is described as a musical accompaniment/object without which, no celebration or ritual would be complete (Babey, 1976:24). As a point of emphasis, it is significant to mention here that the claim of Aguleri as the cradle of Igbo civilization (Isichei, 1980:2), and the head of the Igbo people is by virtue of being the first born of Eri, the father of the Igbos who at the death of his father, was given the scepter of authority to rule Eri settlement. Therefore, a centralized authority like Nri had no authority over settlements towns established by his offspring (Idigo, 2001:82).

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This sacred object which stands for authority, justice and leadership among the Igbo people serves as a binding force among the communities that constitutes Eri kingdom to their common ancestor (Idigo, 2001:42). These types of shrine serve also among the power points of expressing the believer's sense of the sacred and the orderness of the divine realities (Nabofa, 1994:45). Idowu (1969:128-130) describes such shrine as "primarily the face of the divinity. There the divinity is represented by the emblems which are regarded as sufficient reminders of his attributes". Mary (2002:121) pragmatically and symbolically, describes such sacred shrine as the "place where the heaven comes down to earth". Nabofa (1988:78) posits that such places are as "they are, as they were spots where the spiritual come down to the earthly and the earthly is elevated to the spiritual". Mbiti (1975:144) argues that such places are not for common or careless use, because they are considered to be sacred or holy. Chidester (1992:10) explains that such sacred place is inhabited by the dead, a domestic space in which the ancestors resides or visits. He argues that in ancestral ritual, death is not a barrier between the living and the living dead who continued to interact and communicate with the descendants (Chidester, 1992:11). Olsen (2004:13) observes that something magical happens at such a sacred place that triggers an unconscious memory and to learn about the world of sacred place is to learn about ourselves. He affirms that such sacred places and intersections are the locations where humans first erected temples, pyramids, shrines, churches and cities (Olsen, 2004:13).

As Lovell (2002:23) has pointed out, "such territory or space is characterized both as a metaphysical domain, and as a terrestrial entity. Deities are believed to dwell in another plane, but also need to have their presence manifested and anchored on earth in order for humans to propitiate them properly". Such sacred space to use Reg Saner's phrase is "capturing" (1987:723). Weightman (1996:59) argues that "as sacred places are created, an inner light outweighs outer darkness and a spiritual journey commences". Falola & Essien (2007:xiii) argues that divine powers that radiates and exudes from this kind of sacred place "creates a broad-based spiritual cesspool that provides other forms of spiritual protection".

Peters (2002:23) asserts that such sacred centers are believed to be where "many deities were understood to meet a variety of human needs and when some needs are met, the status quo is maintained; when other needs are met, there is transformation of individuals and societies to new states of being". Brown (2004:164) posits that such places are where traditional religious ties tend to compensate the communities like those ones that make up the Eri kingdom "through the mediation for the loss of their contact with their ancestral home and with the built/support in religious rituals and cultural security of their extended brotherhood". This means that there is synergy between the seen and unseen worlds making Aguleri to be the cosmic epicenter of spiritual and cultural home of the Igbo people through the sacred ordination of Eri the progenitor of the Igbo's in diaspora. It is on this position that Macdonald (2004:317) argues that 90 per cent of the indigenes like that of Aguleri "identify themselves as Christians, but at the same time they continue to assert the tradition and hegemony of their ancestors". In this position, Kaplan (2000:122) observes that such rituals are still observed and maintained today by the traditionalists in the community and "even among most members who have converted to dominations of Christianity". Such occasion "serve as a catalyst in cementing people's solidarity" (Dube, 1996:110), and in order wards the community "are dancing on the shoulders of their ancestors" (Glocke & Jackson, 2011:6), through the mediation of "ordered hierarchy from deity to man" (Rowe, 2008:32). Ilesanmi (1996:2) argues that it cannot be denied that the entire community, including the 82% who are said to be Catholics, under the symbolic shadow of ancestorship hold great ancestor like Eri in high esteem probably not as a deity, but purely as an ancestor of the community, a great grandfather of high dignity whose influence is still currently felt in the town politically, socially and religiously. Most importantly is the fact that the cosmogonic myth about Eri and the commemoration of his coming "provided an ideological inclusive arena for communal ritual, blending and uniting the various communities at a crucial juncture" (Levine, 1997:196).

Buttressing this point, Ejizu (2002:126) comments that "the annual liturgical calendar continues to be strictly lived out from cycle to cycle, with a good number that had joined Christianity participating in certain instances". From this assertion, one can say tersely that Aguleri as an uncontaminated indigenous community in Igbo land that has embraced Christianity centuries ago has never alienated herself from traditional religion. In that wise, through the mediating rituals that are involved in the commemoration of the coming of Eri among the Igbo communities through the sacred ordination of Aguleri as the ancestral head of the Igbo's, it is evident to validate romantically the return of the god(s) through the ritual festival of *Olili-Obibia* Eri connecting to the rituals in the sacred temple of *Otutunzu* in Igbo land. This is why Ejizu (2002:116 & 126) affirms that in Igbo land, special religious activities, like the festival of *Olili-Obibia* Eri — Commemoration of the coming of Eri which takes place at *Otutunzu* temple is "accorded the more renowned deities in various areas" while "regular sacrifices and festivals continue to be offered and held in honour of these deities, besides other private acts of worship".

The Ritual Festival of *Olili-Obibia* Eri in Connection to *Otutunzu* Shrine in Aguleri Cosmology

The ritual festival called *Olili-Obibia* Eri was designed as a unifying force for the Igbo's both at home and elsewhere. It features religious ceremonies, agricultural trade fairs, dancing and musical entertainments. All these served to strengthen and demonstrate the bond of union that kept both Aguleri and his dispersed brothers together. Thus Eri festival was initiated by Eri himself in a

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form of a miniature, yearly ritual celebration to remember his arrival at *Agbanabo Ezu-na-Omambala* rivers) where the sacred of temple *Otutunzu* is situated and to thank the gods for his successful arrival and somewhat agricultural activities. It is a three day ritual activity that is held every 10th – 12th November. It is very significant to note that when people travel to their places of origin for the festivals, especially the traditional ones, some of them return to their places of work with some sacred materials obtained from the priest's in-charge of the community shrine.

The water and *nzu* from the *Agbanabo Ezu-na-Omambala* Rivers where the *Otutunzu* temple is housed celestially blessed are two ritual paraphernalia given to the devotees to carry to their places of sojourn. It has been observed that such sacred water and the *nzu* serves as a “psychological devices for communicating and personalizing religious ideas” (Nabofa, 1994:46) and the idea is that the carrier of such water and *nzu* believed that “he has been insulated against all possible unwholesome external influences” (Nabofa, 1994:51). On this ritual celebration, of *Olili-Obibia Eri* Margaret Mead (1972:231) comments that it is on this month of November that “every theatrical performance which is also an offering to the gods that those who wish to make a thanks offering...sheer heaven for the anthropologist”.

In fact, the scenario of this event is better experienced than to be explained. It is on this position that Ilesanmi (1996:9) affirms that “it is a symbolic approach which ecumenism has not succeeded in achieving”, and “they cannot be refuted by anything that has come down to us, in lyric, liturgy, or mode of worship from these primordial forces that the concerted might of Islam and Christianity have failed to crush” (Soyinka, 1999:x). Salamone & Mbabu (1994:211) argues that it is through this method that “the African traditionalist is committed morally, physically, and spiritually to native rituals and ceremonies that never entirely die no matter which foreign missionary religion is adapted, Christianity or Islam”. This invariably becomes a significant success in the maze of cultural ecology in Igbo Traditional where Christendom possesses a great treat for its survival.

In this wise, it is very clear here to say that *Olili-Obibia Eri* as an indigenous ritual festival that is breaking boundaries of Christendom where it is believed that the gospel has achieved an amazing success in Igbo land while, the walls of pagandom is claimed to have collapsed Jericho-wise. Nonetheless, Ali Mazrui regrettably laments that:

No African country has officially allocated a national holiday in honor of the gods of indigenous religions. All African countries, on the other hand, have a national holiday that either favors Christian festivals [especially Christmas], Muslim festivals [such as Idd el Fitr], or both categories of imported festivals. The Semiotic religions [Christianity and Islam] are nationally honored in much of Africa; the indigenous religions are at best ethnic rather than national occasions (1991:69-70).

No wonder Frazar (1922:131a) affirms that from “certain festivals of the ancients, we may be able to detect the equivalents of our May Day, Whitsuntide, and Midsummer celebrations, with this difference, that in those days the ceremonies had not yet dwindled into mere shows and pageants, but were still religious or magical rites, in which the actors consciously supported the high parts of gods and goddesses”. This kind of negative attitude towards Africans and their culture from public space/existence throughout Africa, with the recent singular exception of The Republic of Benin, speaks volumes about identity construction and reconstruction in Africa (Chicago Tribune, 1996:8). Mutua (1999:171) argues that the status of indigenous religions within African states cannot be understood without resort to the nature of the colonial state. Ayisi (1972:70) affirms that ethnic festival like the *Obibia Eri* festival “besides being a national festival, it is also a calendrical festival because it occurs annually like the Christmas season”.

Adelowo (1990:166) in his article “*Rituals, Symbolism and Symbols in Yoruba Religious Thought*” argues that the main difference between worship on the sacred day and worship during the annual festival is that, there are more pronounced and elaborate programmes connected with annual celebrations. Buttressing this point further, Adelowo again affirms that:

This is usually an occasion for jocundity and thanksgiving; people appear in their best and give of their best. The offerings are mostly thank-offerings, and the meals constitute an opportunity of communion between the divinity and his ‘children’ on the one hand, and then among the ‘children themselves on the other’. It is a period for special renewal of covenant relationships. On such occasion, the head of the community, the priest-king, the *Pontifex Maximus*, is usually involved. It is he who is ultimately responsible for all that happens during the festivals. He also has a special ritual, which, personally or by proxy, he must perform during each festival (1990:166).

It is very significant to say here that the kind of food eaten and offered in this type of festival by the members of Aguleri community during the yearly thanksgiving celebration for commemoration of ancestor Eri is basically pounded yam this is because traditionally, cultivation of yam is associated with Anambra – Aguleri people (Onwuejeogwu, 1981:22 & Isichei, 1983:24). Aguleri as a community is classified as a “yam zone” (Coursey & Coursey, 1971:447) and in Igbo land as a whole, it is believed that yam is the king of all the food crops (Achebe, 1958:26-32). This is why Basden (1966:389-390) describes it as “Igbo staff of life”.

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However, Falola (2003:147) posits that through this kind of commemoration of ancestor like Eri “the ruling dynasties in the various states forged relationships with one another by promoting brotherhood relations and the cordial relations among them were sometimes explained in affinal relationships”. This is to counter the claims that “the gospel in Igbo land achieved an amazing success where the walls of pagandom collapse Jericho-wise” (Ayandele, 1973:126). Also, in order to counter the belief that the retreat of the African gods is rather obvious do to the waves of nationalist resurgence at various points in time that made them to accept the verdict, arguably through the ritual ceremony of the *Olili-Obibia* Eri -- commemoration of Eri in Aguleri, it has been observed that this ritual somehow and “romantically sought to re-plant the gods back firmly in African’s firmament” (Ogbu, 2002:1). Although, Idigo (2001:177) regrettably comments that in those days, other Igbo communities come to Aguleri to offer sacrifices in the sacred temples to request for one favor or the other and that helped to maintain the link with their root but since their massive conversion into Christianity, these activities became extinct, only Nri keeps to this norm. Idigo (2001:179) further argues that “the Eri and Aguleri connection is avoided in order to give them the opportunity of projecting Nri as the head of the Igbos. But the truth is that Eri is the founder of Igbo race”.

Notwithstanding all these controversies and to put the record straight, Aguleri through the sacred ordination still becomes the ancestral home of the Igbo race (Boston, 1960:55). It is in this sense that one can say tersely that there is a ritual synergy between the sacred temple of *Obu-Gad* and ancestor commemoration of the coming of Eri (*Olili-Obibia* Eri) which serves as a binding bond between all the Igbo people in diaspora as a sacred space for brotherhood and mortality. In so far as there is a ritual synergy between *Obu-Gad* and Eri, therefore it stand to say that *Obu-Gad* would be described as the sacred temple of the spirits of the royal ancestors situated in the homestead of Aguleri. It is imperative also to note here that such temple is an embodiment of ritual communication where symbolic ritual festival that surrounds the coming of Eri has been neglected for some time now by the Igbo’s which suppose to be a source of inspiration and knowledge where people can receive myriads of blessings from their great ancestor. Arguably, (Nabofa, 1994:12) regrets that such shrines of African traditional religion are replete with artistic symbols but it is a pity that most of these are being neglected, pilfered out and smuggled into Europe and America. Writing in the context of *Mbari* house a replica *Obu-Gad* and the ritual relation with the *Olili-Obibia* Eri, the observation of Chinua Achebe in this respect may be worthy of note:

The purposeful neglect of the painstakingly and devoutly accomplished *Mbari* house with all the art objects in them as soon as the primary mandate of their creation has been served, provides a significant insight into the Igbo aesthetic value as process rather than product. Process is motion while product is rest. When the product is preserved or venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised. Therefore the Igbo choose to eliminate the product and retain the process so that every occasion and every generation will receive its own impulse and experience of creation. Interestingly this aesthetic disposition receives powerful endorsement from the tropical climate which provides an abundance of materials for making art, such as wood, as well as formidable agencies of dissolution, such as humidity and the termite. Visitors to Igbo land are shocked to see that artifacts are rarely accorded any particular value on the basis of age alone (1984:ix).

Buttressing this kind of non-challant attitude towards such significant and symbolic relic [*Mbari* cult], Geoffery Parrinder attests to the observation and affirms that:

The panorama of life is well illustrated in the *Mbari* ‘decorated’, houses which Igbo people of Nigeria have traditionally erected at special times. These were temporary temples, built at the specific command of a god, but never repaired after construction and soon falling into disrepair. The central figure of such temples is *Ala*, the great Mother Goddess, the spirit of fertility, and guardian of the dead which as they are buried in the earth are said to be in her pocket. Some of the statues of *Ala* with a child in her arms have been compared to Italian Madonnas or the Egyptian Isis with her son Horus (1987:128).

The picture of total negligence and complete ruin Achebe and Parrinder are painting here calls for urgent reorganization, rejuvenating and revitalization of all the sacred shrines in Igbo land in particular and to guard them for cultural integration and transmission of indigenous knowledge for posterity irrespective of modern civilization because such “exotic objects have been given value as art and culture” (Clifford, 1988:12). On this, Idigo (2001:180) warns “let me remind the Igbo nation that like the Christian religion, the Igbo traditional religion believes that life is a continuum. Our dead ancestors are not dead and gone. Their souls are living. Our pioneer fore- fathers are still living. We must overcome our shortcomings in order to attract their blessings. If we do not, the likelihood is that we shall continue to be haunted and disunited”. Affirming this assertion, Hakan Rydving (2004:101) exhorted the Igbo nation by advising them “to stand firm in their beliefs and not desert the customs of their ancestors”. Buttressing this further, Idigo (2001:178-179) argues that “the neglect of the historical knowledge is to a nation what the loss of memory is to human beings. The Igbos should therefore be prodded to take a renewed interest in their history in order to understand why they are in this current state”. This is because according to Achebe (1958:143) “our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes”. On a general note, in

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traditional religion of the Igbo people festivals like the *Olili-Obibia* Eri and sacred temple of *Obu-Gad* are invaluable resources encoded with learned pattern of behaviour, ideas, and beliefs shared among a people and socially transmitted from one generation to another (Sofola, 1973:ix).

However, Peters (2002:25) argues that “many traditional sacred centers are the centers for particular peoples in their particular geographical and historical circumstances...a sacred center today has to be the center of the entire expanding universe as well as the center of our own lives. That is a big stretch for some traditional ideas”. Kaplan (2000:122) asserts that “such shrines are maintained today even in also “similar ancestral alters are still maintained in the palace (Blackmun, 1997:150). Nabofa (1994:45) argues that such “shrines in traditional Africa are connected with the homesteads. These are places where family religious activities are carried out. It is in such places that the traditional beliefs and culture are first transmitted to the notice of the young ones in the family”. Rowlands (1985:208) affirms that “the medicines used at the shrines are produced in the palace (sic); thus in original ritual boundaries which...served to coordinate rites of pollution removal at the palace for the chiefdom as a whole”. According to Mary (2002:111) “this means giving territorial expression to the battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and as it were establishing Heaven on Earth”. She argues that as it is in traditional religion like the whole Igbo religion, the efficacy of prayers requires the mediation “this means giving territorial expression to the battle between the forces of good and the forces and the annexation of a sacred space or shrine (Mary, 2002:111), which Akintola (1992:38) describes as the “shrine of mortality”.

Akintola (1992:38) again argues that in the esoteric sense, it is simply the depository containing all the basic cult objects of religious veneration; and it is, in fact, the place where worship is offered, and devotions paid to the Deity, the Supreme Being of Creation. Continuing with the argument, (Akintola, 1992:40) again stresses that “the shrine of mortality accordingly, in this process of spiritualization, that is, of moving man away from his sensuous nature into his bliss and eternity of spirit, is fitted into place as a continual reminder to the initiate that the spiritual nature he desires to acquire or rouse in himself, can be roused fully and effectively only after the philosophical death of his sensuous or carnal personality”.

Ray (1993:268) asserts that prayers, offerings, and sacrifices therefore require the construction of sacred space, where the forces of the invisible ‘other’ world can be brought into this world and effectively controlled. Wosien (1992:23) affirms that such “sacred structure space facilitates orientation, provides the framework for worship, and transforms chaos into cosmos, thus making human life possible”. Nabofa (1994:45) argues that “such sacred places of worship provide geographical points of reference to religious beliefs and practices. They indicate the physical points of contact between the beings in the supra-sensible realm and those in the physical plane. Most of the shrines and sacred places in Africa are etiological. They teach theological, historical and moral lesson. In most cases, the myth, legends and stories that are told around them have little or no historical foundations. Nevertheless, they are valuable resources for transmitting and concretizing religious concepts and lessons, in both time and space”.

Insofar as this invisible energy web also correlates with known areas of anomalies in gravity and space-time, it has been postulated that different dimensions exist simultaneously and that an electromagnetic web of energy interlocks all things on this planet (Olsen, 2004:13). Jett (1995:41) affirms that “because of this power, which is dangerous or beneficent according to those property of one’s approach, non initiates avoid sacred places, while those with the proper ritual knowledge—especially medicine men—may make pilgrimages to pray, to renew their ritual equipment and the efficacy of their prayers, to obtain medicinal plants, and to collect sanctified soil and water”. However, these festivals overlap irrespective of their nature, every festival is preceded by ritualistic ceremonies and some festivals that are seemingly social have ritual underpinnings/sections in them and similarly, ritual festivals that are seemingly solemn and serious have social dimension too (Nti, 1990:3). But unlike the other traditional drums in Aguleri which are strictly used for rituals and other festivals, the *Uvie* sacred drum ensemble is either for “social and religious occasions” (Adegbite, 1988:17).

These are the types of symbols that is believed to be imbued with natural powers and they carry a potent aura of sacredness and religiosity in the minds of the people that recognise them to be the embodiment and epitomy of their spiritual guardians simply because of the mythological and ritualistic embellishment that have surrounded them from time immemorial (Ejizu, 1986:2). Nabofa (1994:11) argues that “artificial symbols are created by an individual or a group to represent notions of their own. Such symbols usually relate to their own particular experiences and may mean nothing to any other group of persons”. Ejizu (1986:34) affirms that “a typical example of this is *Ofo*, which is a ritual object of Igbo consciousness and ritual life, and in Igbo tradition and customs; an *Ofo* bearer is believed to be the earthly representation of the ancestors of a particular community”. According to Onunwa (1990:53) *Ofo* is a sacred stick of office and authority held by kings, chiefs or family heads. Iheanacho (2005:111) opines that “*Ofo* is a ritual instrument which symbolizes lineage headship and sacred authority”. Broadly speaking, for one to carry such a sacred object in the confines of the traditional Igbo culture and tradition it clearly shows leadership and spiritual support of the gods and the ancestors. No wonder Ekeke (2012:9) comments that “*Ofo* depicts that one has the support of the ancestors and deities of the land as he sits on the throne as the king, head or family representative. It shows that the person in question is not a usurper but is the actual person according to lineage/tradition qualified to carry the mantle of leadership or sit on the throne or occupy that position”. Idigo, succinctly opines that:

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Owing to the itinerant nature of his priestly duties Nri was given powers to hand *Ofo* to community leaders in different Igbo settlements as he travelled far and wide in the course of his duties as the priest and traditional doctor of Igbo people. This is why before any Nri traditional ruler is installed, the king is led to Aguleri where he performs sacrifices to the sacred temple of *Obuga* before being given the scepter of Authority or *Odudu Eze* by the *Igwe* of Aguleri (2001:42).

The coronation Mystical Journey of the Nri King

Onwuejeogwu (1981:87) asserts that it is during this ritual coronation journey that the acclaimed Nri King would “stay four days at Aguleri in *Obuga* to receive the blessing of Eri and to collect a lump of clay brought from the bottom of the Anambra Rivers by divers”. Igwah et al (2014:1) argues that this particular place is very symbolic because it is believed that “it was at this point that Eri had a divine revelation that they had reached their ordained place of settlement”. Also, it is through this mystical journey during the coronation of an Nri King by the Aguelri that (Jeffreys, 1935:347 & Onwejeogwu, 1981:87) affirms that there is a divine injunction that the candidate is ordered to “go to Aguleri, obtain your *Odudu* and may you return safely to rule your people”. Jeffreys again asserts that during such coronation rituals:

A spirit-seeker is consulted for the most propitious days to raise the *Odudu*. A sacrifice is made on the river-bank, the future divine King points his *Ofo* over the water and prays that all dangers be removed. Where upon a man plunges in and brings up the *Odudu*. Feasting and rejoicing now follows. The candidate has proved his godhead (1935:348).

Isichei (1976:4); Onwuejeogwu (1981:22) & Xrydz-Eyutchaë (1986:11) recapitulate that it is “from this point each settlement pursued its own separate existence and development, owing allegiance to Aguleri, where the collective ancestral temple of Eri still stands to this day”. To ascertain the authenticity and significance of this site to the tradition, culture and hegemony of the Igbo people, Jeffreys, (1935:347); Idigo, (2001:42) & Onwuejeogwu, (1981:87) asserts that “this is why before any Nri traditional ruler is installed, the king is led to Aguleri where he performs sacrifices to the sacred temple of *Obuga* before being given the scepter of authority or *Ududu Eze* by the *Igwe* of Aguleri”.

It is on this position that Onwuejeogwu (1981:168) affirms that “the Nri Kingship has a deep and long connection with Aguleri”. Idigo (2001:179) laments “that the Eri and Aguleri connection is avoided by some Igbo scholars in order to give them the opportunity of projecting Nri as the head of the Igbos. This is why Ojukwu (1998:39) maintains that “recently some respected personalities have written articles and given speeches or interviews in which facts were deliberately distorted and banalized. Such intellectual dishonesty is at the root of our leadership crisis in this country”. Idigo (2001:179) affirms that “the truth is that Eri is the founder of Igbo race”, or “the father of the Igbo people who migrated from the east – Hebrew who must have introduced a theological hegemony in Igbo land” (Utazi, 2005:11). Udeani (2007:11) argues that “the view that Nri-Awka is the spiritual and ideological dispersal centre of the Igbo is primarily based on the claims of the clans in this area”.

Nonetheless, in times of oath-taking most Igbo communities will ask the holder of the *Ofo* to assemble with their *Ofo*, the suspect must swear and this implies that oaths and *Ofo* plays vital functions as sanctions (Okere, 2005:108). Holders of *Ofo* are given special respect in the community, this is because it is believed that they are carrying or holding a symbol of both blessing and cursing (Ekeke, 2012:9). Onunwa holds that:

When the king, who is also a priest in a particular way] strikes the *Ofo*...on the ground [*ala*] in a ritual of intercessory prayers. It is ritual in which the *Obi* strikes the great *Ofo* on the ground to bless his subjects, and offers thanks to the Supreme Deity and other gods on behalf of himself and his subjects for blessings bestowed on them in the previous year (Onunwa,1990:53).

Bloch (1987:272) argues that “the symbolism of authority must therefore not be just a matter of following a transcendental model, but also of compromising with this model to make it relevant to this life. It must involve a contradiction which allows for the reintroduction of real existence into what still remains the ideal”. According to Onwubiko (1991:xi) the essence of these [represented] rituals are that they embody the values of the people, they documented the traditional education of the people, the songs, symbols, signs, proverbs and riddles, and works of arts. More so, resonating with the idea is the insight of Real (1996:48) on what he terms ‘mythic rituals’, these according to him “connect us with our historical past and our physical environment. They establish order and define {...} values in culture”.

CONCLUSION

The sacred temple of *Otutunzu* through the mediation of its ritual excavation of the *Ududu Eze* for the ritual coronation of Igbo Kings especially for the Nri community has become a significant factor in African Traditional Religion ecumenism has failed to conquer through the ritual visitations of the Igbo Kings who tends to profess Christian religion in diaspora while remembering their great ancestor Eri and locating their identity respectively. Equally significant is the clear fact that through the annual festival of the coming of Eri “*Obibia Eri*” an ancestor commemoration, the sacred temple of *Otutunzu* at Aguleri is visited while its ritual

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purification is renewed and through the sacred ordination of Aguleri as the first son of Eri, Aguleri has taken her rightful position as regards the tradition, culture and hegemony of the Igbo's in diaspora. *Otutunzu* the sacred temple for the coronation of the Igbo monarchs is a sacred shrine that reintegrates; reunites and reinforces the binding spiritual forces of the Igbo race which promotes Traditional Igbo Religion and breaking the wall Jericho where it is claimed that Christendom has taken tap root.

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