

THE SACRALITY OF MENRI [NRI] TOMB IN TRADITIONAL IGBO BELIEF

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ABSTRACT

In the depths of the human spirit resides an inclination or tendency to actually follow the same paths that has been long venerated by our ancestors. It is believed in African mysticism that travel is the spiritual food for the soul, especially when that spiritual journey takes us to another plane where our humble hearts illuminate. Journeys to sacred places like that of Menri tomb touch upon that which is significant to our spiritual inclination and humanity. These site seeing actually opens our mind set to the world around us, our whole history, the cosmos above and equally to each other. When one arrives at his spiritual destination, he find himself closer to his own personal/individual reality, not only in time, but in space. In Igbo belief system, something magical happens at the tomb of Menri in Aguleri that triggers an unconscious memory and to learn about the world of sacred places is to learn about ourselves. The journey to the Menri tomb which comes with its breeze of blessings after is highly surrounded with mysteries up till today. This paper examines how this Menri tomb becomes an indigenous sacred temple of mortality that binds the Igbo communities in ritual symbology of brotherhood and serves also as an epicenter for global tourism site in Igbo ontology.

Key Words: Ancestor, Aguleri, Nri, Sacred, Tomb.

1. INTRODUCTION

In African Traditional belief system, sacred places are ritual landscapes where ritual elders and the traditional monarch uses as an avenue or occasion to commune with the God[s], ancestors and significantly to commemorate their kingship, and also an occasion for the subjects to reaffirm their solidarity and loyalty to his Kingship, through paying of homage's and tributes. Also, during this period, the indigenous people gather around the sacred places for rituals in honour of their God[s] and ancestors making such sacred places to become a gentrified space of spirit invocation, entertainment and recreation. It is the center point of cultural activity and important source of innovation in music and other forms of symbolic ritual performances that "create the most festive atmosphere possible and therefore the most enticing environment to attract the spirits to come" (Sager, 2012:38). No wonder Sharp (2001:51) writes that "this is the point where sacred sound and architectural space intersect contributes significantly to experience meaning in sacred performance". Reichard (1950:257) asserts that it is in this kind of occasion/arena where sacred sound has the power to attract and exorcise evil, through mediation of "the performance of its good works that produce immunity against all evil influences". Nonetheless, according to Wosien:

Sacred space offers a centre for communication with the power. It is the locality where its dramatic breakthrough into the world is commemorated. Sacred space, as the structured locality where man established the dominion of his gods, is the known space,

the locality where the power manifests and repeats its revelation; it is the place where the gods has stopped in movement and has created. This site, by virtue of man's acts of worship, becomes a centre for communion. Outside this enclosed area, beyond the known world, is the realm of chaos, the terrifying unknown space where forms disintegrate (1992:23).

Wosien (1992:21) again argues that such sacred space like the sacred temples or shrines "symbolizes the union of time and space within evolution, the incarnation of timeless energy, which manifests in the dual aspects of nature". Drewal (1975:18) asserts that such sacred place has "become a symbol of place at which the living and the spiritual can meet and unite". It is in this kind of sacred shrines that Igbo communities shows their solidarity with the monarch, who makes himself available and accessible to be seen during his public appearances and cheered by his subjects.

According to Katrina Hazzard-Donald (2011:196) in the perception of the Igbo people sacred shrine is "a sacred circle which represent a separate and sacred realm that connect one to the ancestors and reconfirm continuity through both time and space". Wosien (1992:21) affirms that such sacred space becomes "zones where the sacred is experienced and worshipped. She stresses that "the beginning of both time and creation pertains to the centre. From this focal point manifestations radiate out in concentric rings. This universal experience has found expression in the many circumambulation rites and round dances of the sacred traditions of the world" (1992:21-22). Hazzard-Donald (2011:196) argues that within such sacred circle, the interaction between the spiritual fathers, the initiates and the Igbo communities are mediated through "sacred spiritual forces evidenced in spirit possession" (2011:196) and while in that state they see themselves as "hero's whose knowledge, mystic power, wealth and prestige equals that of any man" (Guenther, 1975:165).

Conversely, it has been shown that the sacred shrines invokes the spirits of the God(s) and ancestor on the initiates when visited and encountered by individuals and the community, this is why Koster (2011:177) asserts that "the community in this ritual is the victim, while other observers in the ritual serve as the symbolic representation of the community that needs healing, while simultaneously serving as witness to the ceremony". In fact, to the thinking of an African man, a sacred place is a "powerful medium for connecting to and accessing the effective power of spirits" (De Witte, 2008:692).

Brief History of Aguleri

According to Isichei (1980:2) "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 and never guesses 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 (Omoriegic, 1989:2). 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*, and *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”.

Origin; Migration and Settlement

Strictly speaking, no one actually knows when Aguleri was incepted as a town but the history of Aguleri may have dated back to the early part of civilization and modernity in Nigeria (Idigo, 1990:3). 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 where – “a site was excavated in Aguleri and radio carbon dates showed that it had been continuously inhabited for about 5000 years. There was no spectacular findings but it revealed ancient pottery, human bones and tools of stone” (Omoriegic, 1989:16). The origin of Aguleri people would be linked to the migration of Igbo race to this present Nigeria as a nation who are among the “Hebrew patriarchs from Mesopotamia to their new homeland in Palestine (Bright, 1981:23). Bright (1981:73) again argues that “it is true that the position taken above, which is one that is widely held today, has been vigorously contested in recent years by certain scholars who maintain that the patriarchal narratives are more or less imaginative literary creations of a much later date [the early monarchy, or even the exilic period] with no appreciable stream of oral tradition behind them, and without real historiographical intention or historical worth”.

Eri and his entourage continued their migration southward until they finally settled at a place known to us today as Aguleri the ancestral home of the Igbo around 1303 B. C at the confluence of two rivers *Ezu* and *Omambala* - a tributary of the great River Niger (Eyisi, 2010:3). He argues further that in Aguleri today, there is a place called *Agbanabo-Ezu-na-Omambala* [the confluence of the rivers, *Ezu* and *Omambala*, which form the Anambra River]. Here it is believed, Eri landed with his entourage before moving to settle in *Obu-Gad*, Aguleri. The *Obu-Gad* [that is Gad’s memorial palace] is apparently visible and this remains an epicenter for global tourism site in Aguleri town of Anambra state till date (Eyisi, 2010:3). Igwah et al (2014:1) argues that this place is very paramount because “it was at this point that Eri had a divine revelation that they had reached their ordained place of settlement”. Onwuejeogwu (1981:22) affirms that historically 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, Idigo (2001:42) 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 sceptre of authority or *Ududu Eze* by the Igwe of Aguleri”. This depicts that Aguleri people have a strong belief in the existence of one God, the creator of all things whom they call *Chi-Ukwu*, the Supreme Being, but ancestor worship is also practiced where the people

offer sacrifices to their dead fathers (Idigo, 1990:60). In Aguleri tradition, 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).

Eri Marriage and His Children in Brief

Eri, the founder of the Igbo race, was among the first 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; Idigo 2001). 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 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 (Idigo, 1990:3). Eyisi asserts that “by the 1280 B. C they had fully established the first Igbo settlement in Aguleri with distinct culture, religion, tradition and language” (2010:4).

A wanderer and a warrior called Eri, the founder of Igbo race (Idigo, 2001:72) was among the migrants. He was believed to have moved and settled temporarily with his followers, in an area near the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers. 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). Idigo (1990:4) again affirms that “Eri was married to Nono who bore for him six sons namely Agulu, Menri [Nri], Onogo [Igbariam], Ntemeje [Nteje], Nsugbe, Amanuke and a daughter called Adamgbo. Having only one daughter, Eri refused to give her out in marriage but housed her to bear children for him”. According to Idigo (1990:3-4) again “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. This is because he doesn’t want his father’s name to be forgotten”. Menri’s children settled at Nri and later expanded to Umunri communities. Onogu’s off springs took their residence at Igbariam while Ntemeje’s children lived at Nteje, and later dispersed into some parts of Asaba and Anam (Idigo, 1990:3).

It is pertinent to mention here that scholar like Afigbo (1983:8) in his article titled: “*Traditions of Igbo Origins: A Comment*” 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 that Aguleri is the first son of Ancestor Eri. It is also a known fact under inheritance traditional laws and customs of the Igbo that the first son must take over his father's house after the death of his father. For Afigbo to claim that Nri is the first born of Eri is unsubstantiated; fallacious and totally unacceptable which is tantamount to academic fraud / deceit and I advice that he should carry out his research properly. This is the reason why Ogbu (2002:6) comments that “the prominent nineteenth—century figure whose reputation has obscured the fact that he did not carry out any field work among the so called primitive peoples”. No wonder Williams (1988:79) warns that this kind formulation about inheritance is “misguided and wrong, but that such crookedness must finally be ejected out of hand”. It is very significant to make it clear here that under the historiography of the Israelites, Menri (Nri) occupies an enviable position of the Levites in Jewish tradition as a sacred priest that cleanses and abolishes heinous sins in Igbo cosmology.

Nonetheless, through the institutions of royal ordination and ceremonial rituals and spirit manifestation, Aguleri reasserted 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”. He 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 (Nnamah, 2002:9). This 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, 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”. Neuman (1980:12) argues that an ancient town 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”.

Aguleri as a Symbolic Sacredspace in Igboland

The tomb of Menri is strategically located at Okpu quatres of Ivite in Aguleri – a farming/fishing Igbo community on *Omambala* River basin of south-Eastern Nigeria. 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 a transformation of individuals and societies to new states of being” seeking the ritualistic breeze of blessings.

Significance of Menri Tomb in Igbo Cosmology

The tomb of Menri as a symbolic sacredspace in Igbo cosmology serves as a sacred place where traditional religious ties tend to compensate the communities like those ones that make up the Eri kingdom “through 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” (McCarthy Brown, 2004:164). It is significant to note that the entire Igbo community, including the 82% who are said to be Christians, hold great ancestors like Eri in high esteem probably not as a deity, but purely as an ancestor of great Igbo nation, a great grandfather of high dignity whose influence is still currently felt in every 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). On this note, Falola (2003:147) posits that “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”. Nonetheless, as part of the coronation ritual ceremony among the Igbo Kings (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 favour 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”.

This is simply because of her “ancestry religiosity, rooted in relations of belonging to family, village or neighbourhood” (Mary, 2002:108). Primarily, the Nri people come to Aguleri to collect the *Ududu-Eze (Ofor)* and to pay homage to the sacred tomb of their later father and other deities whenever they want to have a new King (*Eze*) without which the coronation ceremony will not be validated.



Figure 1: Some Arts and Cultural students of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University on cultural visit to the Sacred Tomb of Menri at Okpu-Ivite, Aguleri 2020 (Courtesy of Madukasi Francis Chuks).

The picture of total negligence among other Igbo communities here calls for urgent reorganization, rejuvenating and revitalization of such sacredspaces in Igbo land and guard them for cultural integration and transmittion of indigenouse knowledge for posterity irrespective of modern civilization because such exotic sacredspaces have been given values to our culture. 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”.

2. CONCLUSION

Paying of homage and veneration of ancestor Menri (Nri) tomb is part and parcel of the symbolic ritual rites that must be performed by the acclaimed new Eze elect of the Nri community in order receive the special breeze of blessings from the spirits. Without this as part of the mystical journey the ritual coronation ceremony would not be complete this why the Nri people still obey and follow the ancient norms. The tomb of Menri is strategically located in Okpu, Ivite Aguleri. This is a special spot where the spiritual come down to the earthly and the earthly is elevated to the spiritual. The mystical comes alive in the sacred tomb of Menri. The coronation ceremony of the newly Eze Nri community is symbolically enriched with cultural knowledge with its epic collection of the locations that have shaped the spiritual foundation of Aguleri / Nri connection. It is very significant to note that we visit the relics of mankind’s glorious past to remember our own. We have not lost sight of God(s) and moral reasoning. Therefore, with our quests, I can safely say we are bettering societal values; we are helping future generations to discover their roots. On a general note, in traditional religion of the Igbo people such sacredspace like the tomb of Menri is an invaluable resource encoded with learned pattern of behaviour, ideas, and beliefs shared among a people and socially transmitted from one generation to another and this through special sacred ordination marks Aguleri to be the head of the Igbo race.

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