

# *OBU*: The Sacred Homestead for Ancestor Veneration in Igbo Traditional Religion

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**Abstract:** The veneration of the Ancestor worship among the adherents of African Traditional religion has in Igbo land has been seen as a thing that is very sacrosanct in commemoration of both cults in the religious paradigm. The ancestors in the belief system of the Igbo serves as mediators to them through God, while in the religious worldview among the adherents of the African Traditional Religion, the ancestors acts as intermediaries in the extraterrestrial or spiritual landscape. The general believe among the Igbo about the sacred temple of *Obu* is that it is an ancient ritual centre for keeping and binding the brotherhood of Igbo communities together because Eri is believed to be their great ancestor that instituted it in Igbo cosmology. In this wise, through the mediation of its symbolism and cultural ethos, the ancient spiritual centre is so revered that it portrays *Ndi-Igbo* as the spiritual epicenter for the ritual convocation and reunification of other Igbo communities that make up the Igbo race through her ritualistic endeavour's. This paper focuses on the features or characteristics of *Obu* as the homestead for the ancestors in Igbo cosmology where religious scholarship is concerned. Through ethnographic method, this article will investigate how the *Obu* is being observed as a place for spiritual re-dedication and the evocation of the proud ancestry of Eri descendants and *Ndi-Igbo* in general.

**Key Words:** Ancestors; Canonization; Cult; Veneration.

*The homestead was a symbol of the world, a central arena in which the symbolic relations of persona and place were negotiated. The home was the nexus of symbolic and social relations among the living and between the living and deceased relatives of the household who continued to live as ancestor spirits.*

-David Chidester

## I. INTRODUCTION

### *The Problem of Semantics among the Igbo People*

Considering the various ritual uses, erecting of *Obu* or *Obi* has become an architectural edifice *Ndigbo* has turned to irrespective of the fact people that those engage in this act are basically Christians. Nonetheless, it is a place meant for traditional worshippers to meet and mediate with their ancestors. Thus, Okafor writes that *Obu* "come in various sizes and under different folk terminologies. Sometimes the folk terminology is determined by size, at others by usage" (1998: 183). The *Obu* or *Obi* has a conical shape and is open in the middle. The *Obu* appears in a great variety of sizes. The *Obu* is evidently widely seen in parts of Igbo land, but is most prominent in Anambra State. The *Obu* style of house in which it postulates or figures are basically seen around Aguleri axis,

the Igbo community on the *Omambala* River Basin of Southeast Nigeria and they call such conical houses *Obu* while communities in Awka axis equally call it *Obu* too. But other communities around Aguata and Nnewi axis refer to it as *Obi*, while the indigenous people of Onitsha refers to it as *Iba*.

It is these contextual and lingual contestations that made Joy Lo-Bamijoko (1987:23) to comment that "there has been always disagreement on the names". The Igbo of Anambra State call theirs *Obu*. The Igbo of Imo state calls theirs *Obi*. The only agreement among all the Igbo is that the small conical house which is called *Obi* by all when it comes to central Igbo linguistics. Lo-Bamijoko (1987:23) argues that to reduce this confusion, it "would be described in this study according to their sizes". However, the confusion of this nature could be considerably reduced if the generic term referring to a semantically definition of the house were distinguished from the vernacular term peculiar to a particular country or ethnic group. Nonetheless, to my own analysis, Achebe's (1958) reference to *Obi* instead of *Obu* is not a mistake but primarily it is a matter of language choice, terminology or semantics because "the traditional program of semantic analysis provides a set of meanings for the individual lexemes of the language and then provides a set of rules of composition whereby the individual meanings of the lexemes are combined to form the meaning" (Rumelhart, 1979:81). *Obu* is a locally made house made or constructed with mud with a thatch roof on in it in olden days and even today. It comes in different shapes and sizes and this depends on the description space in a compound and aerial view of the town.

Ayantayo (2010:4) argues that "it is important to note that some of the communication systems are peculiar to specific societies because they are borne out of the people's culture, religious conviction, and experiences. Thus, their interpretation may vary from one society to the other. In any case, they do reveal the ethics of each society". Mary Nooter (1993:32) posits that considering of sacred and secular aspects, *Obu* as an African art in the context of secret knowledge provides a more nuanced understanding of both the art's function and its form. She asserts that not only would an outsider's view of art differ from an insider's, but interpretations of art by members of a given society would

vary according to age, gender, status, and many other factors (Nooter, 1993:32-33).

Although, we should not forget the fact that it is only in Igbo land one can still see the use of both the *Obu* and *Obi* as being used side by side as an indigenous terminology systems within which both play complementary roles because they are each a type of locally mud house. However, it is meant to showcase continuity in its use, symbol and official recognition in the place of its origin (Nnamah, 2002:8). *Obu* or *Obi* is the same house but only the sizes and the shapes differ and they play the same functions in what Idigo (2001:44) refers to as “Igbo autochthony” because “these facts are of great significance as they help us to put history and tradition in proper perspective” (Nnamah, 2002:7). Idigo (2001:46) argues that neither Aguleri people nor any group of people in Igbo land can convincingly claim this autochthony.

#### *The Position of Obu or Obi as the Homestead for the Ancestors in Igbo Cosmology*

*Obu* ranks as one the foremost cultures of the traditions bequeathed as *Ndigbo* by their forefathers. This is the practice of keeping and maintaining an *Obu* or *Obi* in a man’s compound. It is the outpost or ‘small hut’ that normally stands the test of time in a vantage position in the compound. It could be strategically positioned in the centre of the compound basically surrounded by other houses just like the olden days when our fathers married several wives. The surrounding houses or ‘huts’ usually belonged to the many wives of the titled man.

*Obu* or *Obi* could equally stand to be located in any other convenient place in the titled man’s compound. What matters is that a befitting building has been erected and called *Obu* by the man of the house, after all *Ndigbo* say that ‘*Afa onye baalu nkita ya ka oga aza*’. It is very imperative to reiterate here that there is no cultural standard or universal architectural form and shape an *Obu* or *Obi* must follow or take, nonetheless, it has to be functional. Depending on space availability, *Obu* or *Obi* could a one-room structure, large enough to accommodate a reasonable number of gathering of *Umunna* or other visitors, about 25 to 30 people at a roll or more. It could contain both the open room and an adjoining storage space for drinks, jars of palm wine and other either items (Nworah, 2020:54). *Obu* could have an adjoining room where certain kinds of guests could spend the night, or where even the owner of the house could overnight sometimes, usually on the days his deliberations with kinsmen and other visiting guests lasts well into the night (Achebe, 1958). According to Nworah, “modern day *Obu* come with adjoining kitchenette where kola nuts, garden eggs and food could be easily accessed. Some *Obu* now also have adjoining convenience and toilets etc. It is not common these days to find in some places one-storey building *Obu*” (2020:54).

It is a truism that olden days, the owner of the compound who must be a titled person in the village usually the first born male child in a lineage transfers ownership of the *Obu* to his

direct first male child, this continues in that order from generation to generation. In asserting one’s unambiguous position in relation to the heritage of chieftaincy, John Chernoff comments that “the inheritor places himself in an ambiguous moral relationship to the past chiefs, his ancestors. Chiefs are motivated by their knowledge of the deeds of their fathers and forefathers in whose place they have stand, and they measure themselves against the standards of the office they have inherited. In crisis, they think of the past chiefs who are now dead. Their elders will remind them of what such-and-such a chief did” (2000:264).

At this juncture, it is note of worthy to reiterate here that any male child can still build or own an *Obu*, but after that, the person is expected to do certain ritual by killing a cow in order to invoke the spirits of his ancestors to come and guard the sacred homestead in Igbo tradition. To buttress this, in Igbo cosmology, any family that does not have a central *Obu* ‘*Nnukwu Obu*’ that fraternally joins them together in other to bring or cement that ancestral brotherhood are basically referred to ‘*Oru*’- meaning slave, Example, in Onitsha and Aguleri communities respectively, any indigene of these two towns has a specific sacred homestead call *Obi / Obu* whereby when any serious ritual or ceremony is to take place they move to ‘*Enu-Onitsha* or ‘*Enu-Obodo*’ in Aguleri respectively. The point here is that any family that does not have such a central homestead in their acclaimed communities is not a true son of such towns. Invariably, such families are hence regarded as ‘*Oru*’ – meaning slave and it is a stigma to such a family and to show how significant *Obu* is to the Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria, Nworah comments that:

*For large families where the male children have all migrated and erected their own buildings and Obu, leaving the ancestral Obu for the first born male, this Obu becomes the ‘Nnukwu Obu’, the big Obu where everyone still congregates for important family events and feasts.... When the children born by women in the compound return to perform the traditional ‘Igbo ewu nwadiana’, ‘killing of goat’, such rites are observed in the ‘Nnukwu Obu’. Also, though they may have erected their own Obu and migrated, the other male children are also encouraged to find opportunities to return to their ancestral Obu and sponsor some feasts. These keep the family stronger” (2020:55)*

However, due to what Nworah (2020:54) calls “changing family dynamics and land-locked nature of several Igbo communities, the practice now differ from community, and from family to family”. Again, according to Nworah “it is as a result of the intra-migration nature of *Ndigbo*, that you may hear some people say, ‘*Ka’ m puo Obi*’, meaning that the individual (not being the first male of child) migrates or leaves his father’s compound and purchases or inherits another piece of land where he erects his house and *Obu*. The new place becomes the person’s ‘*Ana Obu*’, especially in cases where the land is inherited and not purchased from a third party” (2020:54). While the former remains the

homestead (*Obu*) for the entire family. According to Chidester:

*Between homestead and chieftdom, however, sacred specialists offered their services to both. While the ritual work of the homestead head was involved in familial relations and the religion of the chief was involved in communal, political relations, the sacred specialist pursued professional relations with clients that could be drawn from either spheres. In this respect, diviners in particular held a marginal position in which they claimed access to spiritual power that could heal, protect, and strengthen either the homestead or the chieftdom, but that power belonged to neither domain because it was achieved through the specialized, privileged initiation and discipline of the sacred specialist (1992:5-6).*

For a titled man in Igbo land, *Obu* is practically the most significant and symbolic house in the compound because it is the homestead for ancestors where veneration takes place and where he hosts and entertains guests, hold family meetings and relaxes in the evening and weekends. As a point of emphasis, *Obu* is a specially place where an Igbo man who is a titled person brandishes his various traditional ritual and religious paraphernalia as an *Nze*, *Ozo* and Chieftaincy title staff like *Ngwu*, *Agiriga*, *Ikenga Okpesi*, *Arobunagu*, Red Caps and other traditional regalia including *okpu nkata* and so on. But we should take note the fact there are other ritual paraphernalia for ancestor veneration like *Nzu*, Kola-Nuts, Alligator pepper and bitter Kola are permanently kept in the *Obu* for ritual prayers for the ancestors whenever visitors pays homage. Commenting of on this, Nworah asserts that

*You will also find skins and skulls of animals hanging on the walls of the Obu to show victorious bush adventures, or other evidence of earthly material conquest. You may also find the pictures of his forefathers, gourds for drinking palm wine, wooden boards used in dismembering and sharing slaughtered animals such as deer's, goats and cows etc, shoulder sling bag that he uses to bring home his portions of meat and other items shared at Umunna meetings or other ceremonies. Other cherished items and artifacts will also be on display (2020:55).*

Notwithstanding the incursion of modernity and Christianity in Igbo land, in the olden days, and even in some present day situations *Obu*, one can still find residues of symbolic animal blood and feathers on the *Obu* owners, *Ikenga* being evidence of pouring of libation, and sacrificing of offerings to gods and the person's *Chi* and this links it to ancestor veneration that is breaking boundaries on 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. Many still observes this ancient tradition and build *Obu* in their compounds. Some don't. However, to uphold our tradition Nworah advised that "*Ndigo* are encouraged to still consider erecting *Obu* alongside their magnificent houses in the villages" (2020:55). He went further to assert that "there are some who have notably taken this aspect of Igbo culture and tradition to foreign lands and have erected *Obu* in their compounds in Lagos, Abuja and in some other lands where they sojourn". (Nworah, 2020:55). It is believed in Igbo cosmology that *Obu* as a sacred homestead for the ancestors that communicating ancestor spirit, therefore, had to be addressed through ritual in order to reestablish a clear synergy of harmony between the living and the dead.

## II. WHO ARE THE ANCESTORS?

Ancestors are nearer to men than spirit and divinities. This is why they are referred to as living dead. They also have dual nature and dual languages i.e. they speak the language of the living and the dead that is of the spiritual kingdom. Ancestors can be highly localized, that is when there are ancestors for a whole community or many homes or a whole tribe. There are ancestors for family e.g. in Isoko we have it as '*Esemo*' which takes care of the children or the whole family in the spiritual world. In Isoko land, a married woman must not have sex with another man outside her matrimonial home and if she does, the '*Esemo*' i.e. the ancestors of the family will catch her and if she fails to confess, she will or may even die in the process. No wonder in Isoko land a woman once married cannot have extra marital sex or behave in bad way because the ancestors commonly known as '*Esemo*' is watching her steps day in and day out.

Although the functions of the ancestors depended on the Supreme Being, but it does not mean that everybody that died becomes an ancestor automatically. There are some basic qualifications such as old age, good character, living children behind, dying good death etc. Peace and harmony in the society is believed to be made possible or maintained by these ancestors. This is so because ancestors are believed to be capable of sharing two natures i.e. the living and the death. They stand next to the spirit and are our representative before them. Although, they are invisible, they are believed to still bringing out effective power as the living. These ancestors help to maintain cohesion in the society and protect their people from danger. They are the overseers of the activities of their families on earth. Thus, the ancestors are called upon at any disaster like epidemic, disease or obstructs of enemies from other tribes.

### *An Analysis of Ancestor Cult*

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human beings who had once lived and did a lot to improve their various communities, brought enlightenment humanity, greatness and fame their people. In fact, those who had lived an extra-ordinary, holy, heroic, exemplary and mysterious life on earth and were so much highly respected and regarded that when they died, they were elevated from the level of just ordinary human beings or ancestors to that of divinities. They are known as the living dead.

The ancestors are still believed to be still living after the death of the person. For somebody to become an ancestor, there are certain qualifications, criteria's or even requirements he or she has to meet like living a good life, raising of children, dying at a very old age and so on. Those who died prematurely are not referred to as ancestor but if they die young while defending their nations, they would be regarded as ancestors after certain rituals must be performed. Nabofa (1994:37) affirms that through the mediation and assistance of the traditional and spiritual elders, "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". Awolalu writes that "to qualify, such men and women must have lived well, attained an enviable old age before dying, and must have left behind good children and memory" (1976:54). Buttressing this point further, Metuh commented that:

*In many others, the funeral rites are absolutely necessary because they regarded as 'rites of passage' by which the dead are installed as ancestors. To these four requirements – old age; offspring; good moral and funeral rites, some societies add a fifth requirement - good death. Death after ripe old age is regarded as good and natural death, and in some places it is called 'Gods death'. Deaths before this time are regarded as unnatural, for which various explanations are given. There are dome unnatural deaths which are known to be punishments from God for one's sin in his life or in his previous life periods. Deaths by suicide, accident, leprosy, dropsy, small pox, epilepsy etc are regarded as bad deaths. Victims of such deaths are not given the full funeral rites, and consequently cannot become ancestors (1987:137).*

### III. ROLES OF ANCESTORS

As the living dead, they have certain roles or functions they perform in the society. They are referred to as the custodian of morality. Africans generally believed that after death, the departed ones enter into the spiritual stage of existence. They are still actively part of the family which they have left physically by death. This belief is held because man is made up both perishable and imperishable nature and immediately man dies, the imperishable part of him which lives on after this physical body vacates the body. Africans believes that the ancestors are capable of living their normal life and maintain their physical features. In fact, because of the significance of the functional activities of ancestors in African cosmology, a

special alter or house is designated for them for possible veneration. No wonder David Chidester stressed that "one way of organizing religious elements into a system has been to regard African religion as a symbolic maps (1992:4). This is why Mbiti (1970:10) comments that "after the invocation of the ancestors, the focus of ritual action moved to man house of the homestead. The house was not merely a home for the living, but also a sacred place inhabited by the dead, a domestic space in which the ancestor resided or visited".

Nonetheless, stand next to the spirits where they are the representatives of the living. In African society, harmony is believed to be made up of the living and the dead and in other to maintain this harmony and pursue a right with the departed spirits, many societies in Africa see to the performance of rites and ceremonies which constitutes a link with the dead. Thus, the ancestors help to maintain coercion in the Society and protect their people from danger. They are over-seers of the life and activities of their families. They come to the aid of their people during calamities such as families, draught, pestilence and so on. They are called on any disputes example boundary disputes so that they can make peace between the warring parties. They help their people to ward off evils. They represent their people before those divinities who are the messengers of the supreme God and because they control the characters of their people, they are believed to be the people's morality (Metuh, 1987).

They bless people when they are obeyed and punish them for any misconduct. Therefore, their offspring make sure that they give attention to the observation of the rules and regulations binding their communities as dictated by the ancestors. They took them to a nice feast believing that the ancestors continue with the type of food they were eating while are on earth. With them as a result, the worshippers *Amadioha* divinity will now give to their ancestors who was a worshipper of *Amadioha* divinity what they eat while on earth. What the *Amadioha* does not like would not be given to those ancestors when he was alive and this is what we know as ancestral veneration (Mbiti, 1970).

The ancestors depend for their existence upon God. They are not of the same rank and file with God, they have no absolute existence of their own and they must definitely remain importantly connected or linked to HIM. They are intermediaries between God and man. They have become in course of time and space "the conventional channels through which God is approached" (Idowu, 1973. This had led to the assertion that Africans never approached God directly and that it is only in the moment of distress when all other aids have failed that Africans call on God. In fact, the correct interpretations of the position of the ancestors however is that they constitute a half-way house in which man's soul cannot have what I can call 'complete litmus test' because sufficiency is only ascribed to God. Ancestors are also only means to an end and not ends in themselves, it is only priest craft and the weakness of man's mind that have tried to make the ends in

themselves. (Idowu, 1973). John Mbiti described the roles of ancestors succinctly thus:

*They return to their human families time to time to share meals with them, however, symbolically. They know and have interest in what is going on in their family... They are and guardians of family affairs, tradition, ethics and activities. Offence in these matters is ultimately offence against the forefathers who, in that capacity act as invisible police of the families and communities (1973:83).*

Through this kind of “inner transformation” (Schipper, 1993:171), it is believed that ancestors have been “admitted into the community of elders” (Ozah, 2006:71). Here, it has been observed that the ancestors acts as an agent of social control in any traditional community, no wonder Omoregbe (1993:62-63) argues that they “provide guides for human conduct indicating certain things or certain ways of behaviour, which should be avoided and other things or ways of behaviour which should be adopted”, by “reminding people of their responsibility to conform to the wishes of their society” (Adejumo, 2013:44). Bloch (1987:278) argues that “because of the calendrical nature of the ritual, this social order became part of temporal and astrological order. This theme of social order is repeated again and again during the ritual”. Falola (2003:35) asserts that such ancestral social order invariably “serving as cultural agents to present African to Westerners while becoming a powerful tool to articulate the ideas of Pan Africanism that united blacks in different countries, also it received a wide affirmation as a socialist ideology based on long-established African values”.

Udo (2008:6) argues that “as character makes for good social relations, it is laid upon every members of community to act in such a way as to promote always the good of the whole body”, and “thereby partly creates the image of orderly antithesis” (Bloch, 1987:287). Ekeke (2013:12) argues that ethics in African traditional society is what a person does in accordance with the established norms which contribute to the welfare of the whole community. Opoku (1978:168) affirms that at the same time, such misdeeds, however, can bring calamity to his immediate family, extended family, his lineage and the entire community, and to avoid the shame that his misdeeds would bring to the entire community, every African [Aguleri person] try as much as possible to live good life.

Ogbu (2010:19) affirms that from the injunctions and messages that it is believed to given by the ancestors through the mediation of the spiritual elders, it tries “to recover social credibility and wholesome impact on local community” of the community and in this way it solves “the social and psychological well-being of individuals” (MacGaffey, 1994:243), and by this method also, the ancestors “tells it as it is by asserting its social relevance in the community” (Adejumo, 2013:46). McAdams (1988:217) posits that it is through the ancestors that “personal and societal solutions enable individuals and societies to take ontological,

epistemological, and ethical stands in the face of ambiguity”. Young (2003:29) argues that “it can also be used more metaphorically, as a way of describing how the individual or group can be transformed by changing their sense of their own place in society”. Okafor (1994:189) affirms that Igbo people turn sacred place *Obu* “into metaphors for conveying their feelings and emotions and for giving oral spectrum description”. Turner (1968:21) posits that such sacred place is regarded as a magnificent place “for expressing, maintaining, and periodically used in cleansing a secular order of society without strong political centralization and all too full of social conflict”.

It is in this wise that Popkin & Stroll (1981:1) defines ethical code of conducts that are grounded in *Obu* as a sacred place for Igbo people as “a code or set of principle by which men live”. The veneration of ancestors, promotes “social justice, peace, and strivings for harmonious coexistence” (Daniel, 2010:24). Askew (2006:15) idiomatically describes ancestor veneration as “a silence that echoes loudly”, “which has become a primordial reservoir of moral obligations” (Ekeh, 1975:100). Pinkerton (2011:191) asserts that “its unique transcendence is paradoxically grounded in an earthly embodiment, and the...is itself, somehow corporeal”. It therefore entails that the concept of ethics in traditional African society “is in living to avoid shame in any family or community (Ekeke, 2013:13). The main moral dilemma involved in Igbo society still continues to be ancestral belief. According to Nzewi et al (2001:93) the concept of encoding ethical lingual text on a music instrument derives from instituting authority voicing in a worldview that processes openly disseminated information for particular, cognitive audience. They argue that the essence is in its imperative transcendental attributes, which empower it to coerce conformity in issues of societal engineering and human management (Nzewi et al, 2001:93).

In African Traditional Religion, ancestor veneration provides “a symbolic system that supported the authority of elders and initiates in the homestead” (Chidester, 1992:11). It is on this positions that Nabofa (1994:19) connected/interpreted this ethical values to the notion that wisdom belongs to the elders and describes the ancestors as “the voice of the elders which invariably is the voice of wisdom”, that “reminds an initiate of his responsibilities and obligations to his fellow members” (Nabofa, 1994:14). Writing from the context of traditional Igbo society Christopher Ejizu sees the ancestors as those “who assure the traditional Igbo hope of an after-life, as the most being ambassadors / intermediaries of their living members in the spirit-world” (1986:18). No wonder then Idowu (1973, Mbiti, 1977 & Metuh, 1983) described the ancestors as the living dead.

#### *Obu the Homestead for the Ancestors: Upholding Patriarchy*

It is very significant to note here that in Igbo traditional belief system women cannot become ancestors except men. That is why *Obu* occupies a big place in Igbo culture and tradition

and the *Obu* space, even if small is thus deeply respected. In fact, the concept of *Obu* is patriarchal in the custom and tradition of Igbo people. No wonder Nworah opines that “women don’t have much role in the *Obu*. It is not a place they are expected to lounge. *Obu* essentially is a place for men. Perhaps the womenfolk may not like hearing this but that is the way it is, and the way it has always been. We don’t know if that is the way it will continue to be, Women are however expected to attend to the needs of visitors and the man of the house in the *Obu* providing food, drinks and other necessities” (2020:55).

*Significance of Obu as a sacred Homestead for the Ancestors in Igbo Cosmology*

The importance of *Obu* in Igbo cosmology is evidently seen in certain Igbo expressions for example, ‘*Nze ako na Obu*’, meaning that a titled man will never not be found in an *Obu*. ‘*Obu du ulu*’, a firm Igbo believe in the fertility, efficaciousness and effectiveness of an *Obu*. ‘*Obu zo ba onwe ya*’ meaning, let the *Obu* fight for or protect itself, especially in cases where certain individuals have committed sacrilegious acts against the *Obu*. Equally, there is an underlying insinuations and presumptions that the *Obu* will always protect from harm all those have family affinity with the *Obu*. There are certain rites and rituals that must be regularly observed in other to keep the *Obu* active and alive. That is why Nworah agrees that *Obu*:

*Is not a mere building one locks up and not warm up occasionally. By warm up, it means that on a regular basis, there should be activity in the Obu, eating, drinking, feasting and hosting even on a small scale especially during Easter, Christmas, New Year, New Yam and other celebrations including local community festivals. This is the reason why Ndigbo say that ‘Ana emedo Obu emedo’, meaning that we must always hold certain functions, perform certain rites and rituals in the Obu. ‘Obu ama nchi’, meaning that we will not hear the last of the Obu. ‘Obu ga adi’, the Obu will ‘live’ forever. Where the owner of an Obu does not dwell in the village, the expectation is that he must always send money across to those ‘on ground’ to feast Ndi Umunna during the mentioned feast and ceremonial periods. This will be done in his name and on his behalf and is generally considered acceptable to the ancestors” (2020:55).*

It is on this note that De Heusch (1994:233) affirms that *Obu* as a sacred place “marks the border between two cosmic realms”, where the “spiritual power or powers” lay (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”.

*Agbata Ezu na Omanbala], the confluence of Ezu and Omanbala rivers the Homestead for the Ancestors and the Spirits*

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). In fact, the coronation ritual ceremony of an Nri king would not be complete if ‘*Ududu Eze*’ is not handed over to the acclaimed king to be by the traditional ruler of Aguleri (Idigo, 2001:42). 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). 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 a transformation of individuals and societies to new states of being”.

*Obu-Gad a Symbolic Homestead for spiritual re-dedication and the evocation of the proud ancestry of Eri descendants and Ndi-Igbo*

Being one of the oldest homesteads in the history of mankind in Igbo cosmology, *Obu-Gad* still remains the symbolic edifice in the minds of every Igbo man especially the Aguleri people. It is because of this believe system that made Brown (2004:164) to posit that such places are 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”. Ilesanmi (1996:2) argues that it cannot be denied that the entire community, including the 82% who are said to be Catholics, hold great ancestors 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. In Igbo cosmological paradigm Eri’s sacred shrine *Obu-gad* is a symbol of brotherhood and unity among the Igbo communities. No wonder then that scholars like Nabofa asserts that

*It attracts a lot of audience from neighbouring towns and villages when the job is completed. It acts as the people’s information centre. When it is newly completed it acts as the community’s newsroom for several days and months. After a while it would remain as the people’s archives where they go to consult and obtain inspirations, ideas and information about many aspects of their religious thinking and practices. As Christians and Muslims obtain inspiration from their Holy Books: the Bible and the Quran respectively, likewise the traditional Igbo person receives inspiration and knowledge from the myriads of symbols that are replete (1994:49-50).*

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”. 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 the family houses where most members have converted to denominations of Christianity” and to maintain the link with their root but since their massive conversion into Christianity, these activities became extinct, only Nri keeps to this norm. 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 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”. Reaffirming the spiritual value of this kind of sacred place, 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 transform 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 lessons. 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 sacred places in Aguleri which are strictly used for rituals and other festivals, the sacred place of *Obu-gad* is either for “social and religious occasions” [1]. This is because the excavation of *Ududueze* alongside the rituals involved in the coronation of Igbo Kings are performed around the tomb of Eri the progenitor of Igbo race and the co-joined three mystical trees that symbolises the affinity of three brothers which comprised of (Aguleri, Nri and Arodi) situated at the shrine of *Obu-gad*. No wonder Igwah et al (2014) echoes that “*Obuga* is 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”

These are the types of sacred places that are believed to be imbued with natural powers and they carry a potent aura of sacredness and religiosity in the minds of the people that recognize them to be the embodiment and epitome 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, in traditional Igbo culture, according to Ekeke (2012:9) “*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:

*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).*

Onwuejogwu (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”. Also, it is through this mystical journey during the coronation of an Nri King by the Aguleri that (Jeffreys, 1935:347 & Onwuejogwu, 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 (1935:348) 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”. Through this Kingship ritual, Onwuejogwu (1981:168) affirms that “the Nri Kingship has a deep and long connection with Aguleri”. Idigo (2001:179) argues “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 Igbo”.

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 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”.

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 to form the shrine of Nri, Menri”. He argues that during coronation of the their King “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 “*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” (Hobsbawim & Ranger, 1983:8).

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 in community like Onitsha:

*When the Obi [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”.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The general believe among the Igbo about sacred temple of *Obu* is that it is an ancient ritual centre for keeping and binding the brotherhood of Igbo communities together because Eri is believed to be their great ancestor that instituted it in Igbo cosmology. In this wise, through the mediation of its symbolism and cultural ethos the ancient spiritual centre is so revered that it portrays *Ndi-Igbo* as the spiritual epicenter for the ritual convocation and reunification of other Igbo communities that make up the Igbo race through her ritualistic endeavour’s. Summarily, it has been observed that *Obu* is 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; self-purification and show casing global tourism for Anambra State of Nigeria. For the fact that the ancestors in African Traditional Religion and the saints in Christianity have been described by different visionary scholars as the living dead and that both play the role of intermediaries in the two world religions, therefore one can sarcastically and firmly say that they converged there. But in the area of its divergence, it has been observed that in African Traditional Religion, once somebody that qualifies to be an ancestor dies, he automatically becomes an ancestor once the full burial rites has been consummated without undergoing any other process or processes. *Obu* is a sacred homestead or place in the compound of an Igbo man in Igbo cosmology. There are great ones (*Oke-Obu*) that served many generations and has been used by many paternal heads among the Igbo. It is believed that their spirits are still hovering and protecting the *Obu* and its present inhabitants. It is advised that no one should never steal or tamper with family edifice, ritual treasures and artifacts deposited in the *Obu*. Many who have tried or attempted such have been afflicted with spiritual misfortune. After all, the *Obu* is believed to be capable of looking after itself. That is why it said in Igbo idiom that ‘*Obu di Ulu*’ and ‘*Obu na azo kwa onwe ya*’. The departed beloved ancestors that protect such homestead ‘*Obu*’ attained such status because of the divine essence in them, that is, the soul. In other words, it is not the physical body that is being deified rather, it is the divine essence that is being recognized and translated into the spiritual realm to which it really belongs.

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