

Sustaining Human Spirituality through Culture: Example of Olili Onwa Isaa in Eziagulu-Aguleri

By

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Abstract

This paper emanated from a research conducted by the author on the significance of *Olili Onwa Isaa* of Eziagulu-Aguleri, a traditional community in Anambra State, Nigeria. The festival, which is one of the annual events in the town by which human spirituality is sustained through culture, is centred around ritualizing the *Ikenga* (“place of strength”), a two-horned male deity kept by the traditional Igbo man as a personal god, an embodiment of his ancestors, and the symbol of his power to acquire wealth and achieve great things. This is why there is an annual *Ikenga* festival in most Igbo communities. This paper is an academic study of the *Olili Onwa Isaa* festival of Eziagulu-Aguleri as witnessed by this researcher who was a participant-observer at the event.

Keywords: Aguleri, human spirituality, *Ikenga*, *olili onwa isaa*, festival

Introduction

The ritual festival of *Olili Onwa Isaa* (September) in Eziagulu-Aguleri is a commemoration of *Ikenga*, a spirit-force solely kept by the traditional Igbo man as a personal deity, as an embodiment of his ancestors and the symbol of his power to acquire wealth and achieve greatness. This festival devoted to the ritualized worship of *Ikenga* is known as *Ilo-Ikenga* in Aguleri cosmology. The *Ikenga* deity itself is a personified force found in nature; it can be very useful if properly controlled and very dangerous if mishandled. It is like electric wire. Here, the sacred carved wooden symbol of the *Ikenga* as a symbolic instrument is very often associated with spirituality in connection with powerful

confraternities. The *Ikenga* deity in some contexts refers not only to the spirit-force, but also to the “icons” used for its worship. In a nut shell, *Ikenga* deity is basically the “symbol of manly achievement in Igbo belief system”. In this festival, the deities are believed to return from travel (*Inata Mbia*) and wrestling matches are organized on stipulated dates for public entertainment. Two or three months before the match, the young men are fattened at great expense. They are cultured and trained to abstain from doing any kind of farm work during the period and are made to eat only corn food, yam food and other nourishing food about eight times a day. They even rise in the night to eat.

On the appointed day for wrestling match, the young men come out to the public square already thronged by spectators from the town and the neighbouring towns. The wrestlers look very corpulent and are adorned with black dye and fowl feathers which have symbolic meanings. If any wrestler is thrown down his family members would go on sorrowing, but if he pulls another down there will be wild enjoyment in the family (Idigo, 1990). Regrettably, Idigo (1990) comments that wrestling matches are not staged now as before for because some young men recourse to charms; besides that, it is alleged that witches have attacked some wrestlers in the fattening rooms, thereby reducing the number of young men who want to take part in the competition. Apart from these, young men now pursue education and productive work outside their home towns.

This festival, however, continues to act as a spiritual conduit by which the members of the community renew contact with their ancestral home, garner spiritual support via participation in religious rituals, and strengthen their cultural security and communal brotherhood. This festival 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 are made to become opportunities of communion between the ancestral deity and his “children”. Every indigene of Eziagulu-Aguleri village is expected to pay homage to this deity either directly or by proxy. This paper will discuss how this renewal of covenant relationship is done to renew the intimate brotherhood among Eziagulu-Aguleri people. It will also show how the Aguleri community uses this festival through the mediation of its rituals to reassert her leadership over other communities as the head of the Igbo race in diaspora reawakening the culture and sustenance of human spirituality in African Traditional Religion through commemoration of *Ilo-Ikenga* in Aguleri cosmology.

Origin and Migration

Etymologically, the words *Olili Onwa Isaa* emanates from the month of September which is the ninth month of the lunar calendar year among the Igbo where the God(s) are worshipped and it is called *Ilo-Ikenga* feast in Aguleri cosmology. According to Nzewi (2000:25) the *Olili Onwa Isaa* festival 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 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”. It is very important to note that Eziagulu is a quarter/village in Aguleri town.

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, Idigo (1990:60) affirms that these deities owned in common but there are individual deities whom each person keeps and worships through the carved wooden images or idols.

Significance of the Festival

Olili-Onwa Isaa is the ritual commemoration of ancestor worship in Eziagulu-Aguleri. It is very significant to reiterate here that the festival has common link to the *Ilo-Ikenga* feast which is usually commemorated in September. No wonder then, Peters (2002:23) asserts that such sacred

feasts are believed to be done 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 feasts 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 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). In other words 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 *Olili Onwa Isaa* through *Ilo-Ikenga* feast in Eziagulu-Aguleri “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”. No wonder Leith-Ross (1965:293) made an observation that “an Igbo attends communion at the same time as he believes in the potency of traditional magic; he ties up in the same handkerchief the Rosary and the traditional talisman and plants side by side in the garden around his new cement and pan-roofed house the hibiscus of civilization and the *ogirisi* tree of pagan family rites”.

Here, one can see clearly struggle in the area of sacred space; urban anthropologist, historians and religious scholars have theorized that the intersection of religiosity and urban space is through mediating on religious practices of sacralization of the city or city space (Parish, 1994). In this wise, Chidester & Linenthal (1995) conclude that sacred space is inevitably a contested space. From this assertion, one can say tersely that Aguleri as an uncontaminated indigenous community in Igbo land embraced Christianity centuries ago but has never alienated herself from traditional religion. In that wise, through the mediating rituals that are involved in the commemoration of *Olili Onwa Isaa* festival in Aguleri as the ancestral head of the Igbo, it is evident to validate romantically the return of the god(s) through the ritual festival of *Olili Onwa Isaa* in Igbo land. This is why Ejizu (2002:116 & 126) affirms that in Igbo land, special religious activities, like the festival of *Olili Onwa Isaa* — *Ilo-Ikenga* in Eziagulu-Aguleri, the commemoration of the return of the deities 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 called *Olili Onwa Isaa* was designed as a unifying force for the Aguleri people both at home and elsewhere. It features religious ceremonies, agricultural trade fairs, dancing and musical entertainments and of course wrestling to name but a few. All these serve to strengthen and demonstrate the bond of union that kept Aguleri together. Thus, *Olili Onwa Isaa* festival was initiated by Eri himself in a form of a miniature, yearly ritual celebration to thank the gods for his somewhat spiritually activities over the humans. It is a one week ritual activity that is held every September annually. 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 priests in-charge of the community shrine. On this ritual celebration of *Olili Onwa Isaa*, Margaret Mead (1972:231) comments that it is on this month of September 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 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).

Salamone & Mbabuike (1994:211) argue 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 Religion where Christendom poses a great threat for its survival.

Nonetheless, it is very significant to say here that the kind of food eaten and offered in this type of festival by the members of Eziagulu-Aguleri community during the yearly thanksgiving celebration for commemoration of their God(s) 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”.

However, this festival is also symbolic because it shows the strength, position and leadership of the King among his subordinates and entire community due to the fact in the communal mode theory according to McAdams (1988:81) this kind of relationship are understood as egalitarian. In fact, during this festival of *Olili Onwa Isaa — Ilo-Ikenga*, there is this kind of concept of communal ideology that brings together every Eziagulu-Aguleri person—man and woman, old and young, titled and non-titled, working together for the common goal, betterment and progress of the festival and Aguleri community as a whole. Uchendu (1965:103) affirms that “there is a great emphasis on communal cooperation and achievement. The communal character of the Igbo must be traced to the formative influence of their traditional social patterns, the influence of their nucleated residence pattern, and the ideological urge to get up”. He argues that “the ideal of cooperation, illustrated in work groups, credit associations, and title-making societies, pervades all aspects of Igbo culture” (Uchendu, 1965:103). No wonder, Hobart et al (1996:239) describes this concept as “mutual-aid activities to the advantage of the village or [sic] community”, in which the festival is sometimes the affair of a whole town.

Buttressing this affirmation further, Eiseman (1990b:72) explains that such remarkable moment requires collective participation in almost every aspect of political, social, economic, and religious life, where the community members are bound together, and that it is very imperative for community like the Eziagulu-Aguleri to engage in such group

projects for the welfare of their community. It is during this period that the entire ‘Agulerians’ especially Eziagulu quarter who are native-born and those who are foreign show what Nnamah (2002:8) describes as the “spirit of *Ogbagidigidi*”— by this I mean the spirit of strong solidarity among themselves and in support of Aguleri.



Figure 1: This is the picture of the *Ikenga* sited inside the ritual arena during the *Olili Onwa Isaa* festival.

At this festival, a well-fed man, appointed through *oracular* divination after certain rigorous ritualistic endeavours, carries the carved wooden symbol of the *Ikenga* deity on his head while displaying the ritualistic strength of the god(s). It is in this form that the ritual symbolism of the auspicious body of the deity and realm still persist in native belief which has power and influence on the believers. In celebration, the youths dance around the entire village with rhythm and music that emanate from *Ogene Anuka* – the bell orchestra that stir the crowd into frenzy mood. The drums beat and the flutes sound and the spectators hold their breath. The music style is a factor that basically adds an embellishment to the flora, fun, enthusiasm and fantasy.

The pomp goes on, the unconscious emotion, nodding of heads and waving of hands, a sight which can be better felt than described. This is because its powerful effects defy analysis. Thus, it is easy for the on-lookers during such display to assess the devotees taking part in the real ritual drama rehearsing their exploit. The idea is that the entire indigenes of Eziagulu-Aguleri especially the able bodied men will collectively run round the whole village in solidarity making great ululation, dancing and chanting Aguleri *Enyi - Mba* to showcase their absolute support for the

town and shout the glory of the deity and Aguleri at the top of their voices.



Figure 2: This is the picture of a well built man carrying the *Ikenga* during the *Olili Onwa Isaa* festival.

This kind of tense atmosphere has been described “as periods of relaxation to moments of peak activity” (Wilson, 1992:337). Also, it is in this kind of festival that Bright (1981:166) asserts that “the tribesmen would gather on stated occasions to seek the presence of [sic] and renew their allegiance to him, and also to adjust matters of controversy and mutual interest among the tribes”. This is also a restatement and a re-affirmation of oneness of Aguleri and a moment of expression of their love for Aguleri their fatherland. Interpretatively, such occasion “serve as a catalyst in cementing people’s solidarity” (Dube, 1996:110), and in other words the community “are dancing on the shoulders of their ancestors” (Glocke & Jackson, 2011:6). Through the mediation of such ritualistic relationship in the cosmology of Aguleri paradigm there is an “ordered hierarchy from deity to man” (Rowe, 2008:32).

Conclusion

Through the annual festival of the deities said to return from travel (*Inata Mbia*), an ancestor commemoration, and through the sacred ordination of Aguleri as the first son of Eri, Aguleri has taken her rightful position as the true head of Igbo race as it regards the tradition and culture of the Igbo in diaspora. *Olili Onwa Isaa* in Eziagulu-Aguleri is a ritual festival that reintegrates, reunites and reinforces the binding spiritual forces

which ecumenism has not succeeded in breaking its wall Jericho wise in Igbo land thereby buttressing the notion that the god(s) in African Traditional Religion have returned. Reinforcing this notion, it is very significant to note that there is a struggle over sonic and sacred space in this kind of ritual festival between the adherents of African Traditional Religion and that of Christianity. Equally significant is the fact that the death of African Traditional Religion is not near because this kind of ritual festival where the notion of brotherhood is cemented among the Igbo race which invariably depicts and sustains their quest for identity construction is contained and managed ritually.

Olili Onwa Isaa is an avenue to showcase a nation's culture, norms and lifestyles to the outside world which in turn brings about socio-religious and socio-political integration among the stakeholders. The more the celebrations of traditional festivals like that of *Olili Onwa Isaa*, the more tourists, foreigners and visitors are likely to watch or participate in this search for true brotherhood and quest for human spirituality.

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