

***Ilo-Muo* Festival in Aguleri: A Study in Ancestor Veneration in Igbo Traditional Religion**

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Abstract

The ritual *Ilo-Muo* celebration is a festival for the veneration of ancestors that acknowledges their role as guardians as well as acts as a spiritual force that binds the clans and villages that constitute Aguleri in Eri kingdom. Through the mediation of ancestral worship and supportive rituals performed by the adherents of the traditional religion, the stability of the cultural brotherhood is secured. This festival is usually an occasion for jocundity and thanksgiving offered to ancestral spirits. People appear in their best and give of their best; the meals constitute an opportunity for communion between the ancestors and their “children”. This paper focuses on how this renewal of covenant relationships celebrated in all clans and villages is done to reinforce the ancestral brotherhood and to show how the Aguleri community uses this festival to uphold its leadership of other communities. The ritual festival of *Ilo-Muo* in Aguleri, “the cradle of Igbo civilization”, reawakens within Aguleri and the Igbo diaspora the culture and sustenance of ancestor veneration in Igbo Traditional Religion and cosmology.

Keywords: ancestor, brotherhood, deities, festival, *Ilo-Muo*, rituals

Introduction

The ritual festival of *Ilo-Muo* which is done yearly in July, called *Onwa Ise* by the indigenes, is an occasion for the commemoration and veneration of the ancestors as well as a spiritual conduit that binds or compensates the communities that constitute Aguleri kingdom. The festival offers every Aguleri person the opportunity of reestablishing contact with their ancestral home through its customary mediatory rituals. Its traditional religious performances also renew the unity and security of the extended brotherhood. It is a three day festival. 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 constitute an opportunity of communion between divinity and his 'children'.

There is also a renewal of covenant relationships between communities during the event; this is done to reunite their intimate brotherhood and to show how the Igbo communities use this festival to show their gratitude to their gods and ancestors for various reasons. The festival also commemorates Eri as the great ancestor, thereby under sacred ordination reasserting Aguleri leadership over other Igbo communities as the head of the Igbo race in diaspora.

Origin and Migration

Etymologically, the words *Ilo-Muo* is an Igbo coinage that means the veneration of the God(s) / ancestors and according to Nzewi (2000:25) the *Ilo-Muo* 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". According to Idigo (1990), Aguleri is a very large town situated at the bank of the river Anambra called *Omanbala* by the indigenes and corruptly nicknamed Anambra by the European Settlers. Despite being a largely nautical people who regularly traveled downriver to trade (Borgatti, 2003), Aguleri people are basically farmers. Their traditional way of life was so good and satisfactory that in recent times they have often been reluctant to abandon the land and move into the modern sector of the Nigerian economy (Idigo, 1955:2).

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 (Omorieg, 1989). Aguleri is a community of “one people – one destiny” (Arkin, 1989: xi). The origin of Aguleri people would be linked to the migration of Igbo race to this present Nigeria as a nation. One school of thought traces the origin of the Igbo people to that of the Jews who were believed to have migrated from Egypt. The words Igbo, *Ibo*, *Ebo*, *Heebo* are said to be a corruption of the name, Hebrew. As D. J Wiseman pointed out through the mouth of Ikeanyibe (1999:10), “the word Hebrew in Jewish language meant wanderer or a people with no secure place in society”, although Aguleri people are part of the larger Igbo group till date.

Settlement

Eri, the founder of Igbo race, was among the migrants and he was believed to have moved and settled temporarily with his followers in an area near the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers (Ikeanyibe, 1999:11 & Idigo, 2001:72). From there Eri moved to the Anambra valley and quickly settled near the bank of the River *Omanbala* [corruptly called Anambra by the Europeans] at a place known as *Eri-Aka* near *Odanduli* stream, which is presently today located between Ivite and Igboezunu Aguleri respectively. Over time, Eri went out on war raids and captured many men and women and his settlement began to grow exceedingly (Idigo, 1990:3). Eyisi (2010:4) asserts that “by the 1280 B. C they had fully established the first Igbo settlement in Aguleri with distinct culture, religion, tradition and language”. Idigo (1990:3-4) argues that “after the death of Eri, his off springs grew in number. To avoid over-crowding and to prevent a situation where all of them could fall prey in an attack which was then the order of the day, the son’s dispersed to different places of abode today. The children of Agulu, the first son, remained in their grandfather’s [Eri] abode, and together with Adamgbo’s children, evolved the town, Aguleri. To Agulu’s name was appended to his father’s name Eri, making Agulu-Eri. It is pertinent to mention here that scholars 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 lies, 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 that under inheritance traditional laws and customs of the Igbo’s that the first son who is the heir under its sacred ordination must take over his father’s house (*Obu*) after the death of his father. Nonetheless, for Afigbo to claim that Nri is the first born of Eri is heinous, and fallacious, which constituted an academic fraud and it is totally unacceptable and it is advised 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 of wrong notion or formulation about the Igbo inheritance policy is “misguided and wrong, but that such crookedness must finally be rejected out of hand”.

However, through the institutions and mediation of royal ordination and ceremonial rituals and spirit manifestation, Aguleri reasserted and repositioned in this way to her authority over other Igbo communities in diaspora to “represent the headship of Igbo race” (Nnamah, 2002:9). Paul Nnamah (2002:9) again asserts that “it is also very vital to mention here that Aguleri is strategically located at the point of origin of Igbo land from where Igbo land spread further into the hinterland”. As a point of emphasis, Aguleri has as an ancient cultural community has been commemorating this festival in honour of Eri but only recently that the *Ohanaeze Ndi Igbo*, a pan Igbo group seeking for identity construction has officially instituted this ritual festival in the lunar and ritual calendar of the Igbo custom and tradition in order to honour Eri as the progenitor of the Igbo race. In reaffirming this position,

Nnamah, (2002:9) comments that the significance is that Aguleri as a town represent the boundary of Igbo land from where Igbo land stretched eastwards to the rest of its heartland. Arguably, this hegemonic and cultural expression is only typical of the cradle and for a boundary community it makes a stronger claim to originality (Nnamah, 2002:9).

More so, till date, for the fact that Aguleri has retained the original Igbo form of writing that is compared with the Egyptian hieroglyphics is another good point to claim the originality for boundary community and all these marks Aguleri identity (Nnamah, 2002:9) which McAdams (1988:18) refers to as a well “structured self-image”.

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 there are individual deities whom each person keeps and worships through the carved wooden images or idols.

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

Ancestors are nearer to men than spirits and divinities. This is why they are referred to as the living-dead. They also have dual nature and dual language that is 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 is ancestor for a whole community or many homes or a whole tribe. There is ancestor for the family. They are ordinary 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).

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) writes 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 during the *Ilo-Muo* festival 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 where ancestors are venerated by 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.

Significance of *Ilo-Muo* Festival in Connection With Ancestral Veneration

Coming to the ritual importance of *Ilo-Muo* which is the ritual commemoration of ancestor worship in Aguleri, Igbo religion, it is very significant to reiterate here that the festival is a celebration of yam feast. After its celebration, yam becomes the chief food or in many cases the only food-stuff of the people. The festival lasts for about three months and any family which takes cassava or potato during this period is regarded not only as being very poor but as going against a vital custom of the town (Idigo, 1990). This is a type of festival in which members of Aguleri community have a yearly thanksgiving celebration for good and bumper harvests and they commemorate good yields in food crops especially yam because traditionally, cultivation of yam is associated with Anambra – Aguleri people (Onwuejeogwu, 1981:22 & Isichei, 1983:24) in which they are classified as “yam zone” (Coursey & Coursey, 1971:447). In Igbo land as a whole, it is believed that yam is the king of all the food crops (Achebe, 1958:26-32) while Basden (1966:389-390) describes it as “Igbo staff of life”. According to Nti (1990:2 & Idigo, 1990:62) such festivals that are celebrated by other Igbo communities to show that yam is the core food stuff in Igbo land are *ifejoku*, *Iwaji* or *Otite* and such festivals usually takes place in August yearly. Adelowo (1990:166) argues that the main difference between worship on the sacred day and worship during the annual festival is that, there are more pronounced and elaborate programmes connected with annual

celebrations. Buttressing this further, Adelowo affirms that:

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

It is very important to reiterate here that Aguleri as an ancient kingdom since immemorial does not commemorate the *Iwa-ji* festival because it is a new cultural development introduced in Igbo ritual calendar by other Igbo towns that does not have real kingship institution. But in order to accommodate the Christians, the name *Ilo-Muo* in Aguleri cosmology have been christened "*Ilu-Ubi*" meaning to clear the farm by the Christians in their midst in order to be part of the cultural festival. It is on this position that Neuman (1980:12) argues that 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". Insofar as some of the areas deriving their cultural ritualism from the great tradition of Aguleri as the cradle of Igbo race became themselves, great centres for the dissemination of culture, though geographically distant from its original place and surrounded by different local traditions, other areas remained little centres of the great tradition.

It is during this period *Ilo-Muo* festival that the adherents of traditional religious initiates, *Ndichie* and *Ojiana* whom Shelton (1971:xix) refers to as "spiritualized forefathers", "in the precise order of their position within the social hierarchy" (Lincoln, 1989:55) performs certain rituals that surround the *Ilo-Muo* in the ritual conclave '*Obu*' which is symbolically the centre of the place, "where the ultimate power of the community rests". In this kind of ritual *Ndichie* and *Ojiana* acts as the father or elder to his subjects,

and he actually says so during the ceremony, which depicts the “paradox of the general symbolism of authority” (Bloch, 1987:285). Nicholls (1988:199) affirms that it is during this period that a “chicken is sacrificed and its blood and feathers are daubed on the instrument and it is fed with the fresh blood of animals” and placing some portions of food on the wooden symbol (*Okposi*) that represents the ancestors with the belief that this will maintain the relationship between the living and the dead and the messages it convey may be shrouded in secrecy.

In this form; the *Ilo-Muo* festival is commemorated liturgically through an orderly sacrifice. Hubert & Mauss (1964:97) comments that “sacrifice is a procedure which mediates in establishing a communication between the sacred and the profane worlds, by the intermediary of a victim, that is, a consecrated thing which is destroyed in the course of the ceremony”. Robbins (1998:289) argues that “in every sacrifice an object passes from the common into the religious domain, it is consecrated. The subject who sacrifices communicates with the divine. Sacrifice modifies the condition of the person who performs it”. Drewal (1975:17) asserts that “the ritual process is dominated by symbolic movements and sound and the participants take their cues visually as the ceremony unfolds”. This might mean that the ritual elders would have been the appropriate person to perform this ritual. Price (1987:57) asserts that “the ceremony is an important part of the symbolism that defined the imperial house and rooted its power in tradition” of the Aguleri people.

In Aguleri culture, *Ndichie* and *Ojiana* are not only political leader, but also ritual functionaries. In other places, their positions are seen as that of the head of a family. They are the head of the clan. They are the mouth-piece of the ancestors. The living sees them as the representative of the ancestors who were the founders of the society and custodians of its traditions and customs. In this capacity, they “mediate between the living and their ancestors, and presides at the ancestral rites in honour of the founders of the society” (Metuh, 1987:210). Ukpong (1983:198) asserts that on such occasions “it must be accepted then that these sacrifices are meant for the spirits. And if evil spirits can demand and have

sacrifices for themselves, good spirits must likewise be thought to be capable of demanding and having sacrifices themselves”. For Gusdorf (1948:87 & 67) in this sense, “sacrifice realizes a kind of commerce between man and the gods, but the economic sense of this commerce masks in reality a deeper sense”, or “sacrifice puts us in the presence of a paradoxical form of exchange”. Robbins (1998:289) argues that “there is a tendency to think of primitive religion as economic in nature, which modern religious sensibility, even as it projects its own conception of commercial exchange onto primitive culture, claims to go beyond”. Van Beek (1994:221) asserts that “the rites performed may be simple, but often are not, and in any case their application calls for specialized and secret knowledge. Even if the rites are simple, it may be much safer to have a specialist performed them”, in order to “consider the validity of this formulation” (Turner, 1968:269). Lugira (1999:74) argues that “rituals take place during celebrations and festivals for the purpose of thanksgiving, purification and communion. Their performance helps to link humanity with super humanity”.

Puett (2005:82) argues that “regardless of what existed before the sacrifices, the consequence of sacrifice is the creation of a hierarchy of ancestral and divine forces defined by living humans”. He posits that “belief is crucial here, and belief in the efficacy of the rites is crucial as well. But the belief in what pre-existed the rituals is not the belief that is relevant. What is relevant is the belief that ritual is a product of humans: human sages created it, and order of divine power is thus a result of that creation” (Puett, 2005:82). Gilbert (1987:302-303) notes that for the elders and ritual specialists “such ritual expresses the cosmic order on earth; and on that account, to the people of ... the performance of rituals pertaining to Kingship must be seen to be unchanging and so confirm to their sense of ethnic identity and history, the past that validates the present”. By this approach, the traditional Aguleri culture, hegemony and symbolism are shaped into a ceremony in which the primary objective and philosophical leadership were annually reinvigorated, rejuvenated and reaffirmed through the institutionalization of the *Ilo-Muo* festival in Aguleri. *Ilo-Muo* festival is aimed at returning Aguleri to its time-honoured

attributes of being a peaceful and peace loving community, an attribute for which she has been associated with from time immemorial.

In fact, from a careful observation of African ideologies and ways of life, there seems to be a divided approach and loyalty among the Christians and Muslims, a clear case is that, as Africans, the Africanness bestowed in us by God will spur us to act as Africans by omission or commission, no wonder Nabofa (1994:110) argues that many of these people who claim to be professing only either of these two foreign religions are at heart still attached to their indigenous beliefs. That is the reason why Udobata Onunwa (2002:67) writes that “the death of the traditional religion is not yet in view, despite previous military onslaught against it. The story of the missionary activities in Nigeria, and particularly in Igbo land could be said to be that success, yet the religious situation in the society creates the impression in the mind of a critical analyst that most people accepted Christianity consciously or otherwise without understanding the deeper implication of their actions”. Onunwa (2002:87) again comments that the Igbo therefore had become socially enlightened but superficially converted to Christianity and their rate of absorption of the teaching of Christ and application of the same to life is poor. He further argues that the Igbos benefited materially from the missionaries but did not benefit sufficiently from the spiritual values they impacted.

Nonetheless, the deeper spiritual roots were not greatly touched which made some traditional beliefs to be retained, but no formal cult exists in many places (Onunwa, 2002:87). 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”. According to Idigo:

Ancestor worship is also practiced in Aguleri and the people offer sacrifices to their dead fathers. Besides these deities owned in

common, there are individuals deities which each person keeps and worships through the carved wooden images or idols. Each man has his *Ikenga* which the god of luck, *Chi* which protects the owner from harm, *Ukwu* which is to safeguard travelers and *Agu* a god from one's parents-in-law which will make the son-in-law wealthy (1990:60-61).

But it is very significant to note here that this *Ilo-Muo* festival is solely practiced by pagans (Idigo, 1977). *Ilo-Muo* is a festival of ancestor worship or veneration which stands as a thing of pride both for the town and for the deity...thus a visible reminder of the covenant between the villagers and their god (Ray, 2000:31). This is why Marleen de Witte (2008:702) comments that *Ilo-Muo* festival "as a traditional religious practice of place making, the festival reinforces people's bond to territory and safeguards land fertility and urban safety by pacifying the local deities with prayers and ceremonial offerings". This is why Idigo wrote that it was Eri who introduced the cultivation of yam in Igbo land according to Igbo traditional metaphysics (2001:119).

Conclusion

Through the annual festival of the coming of *Ilo-Muo*, an ancestor veneration, 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's in diaspora. *Ilo-Muo* 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 Aguleri, although other Igbo communities have changed it to *Iwa-ji* festival in order to accommodate the Christians so to say invariably, 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 depict and sustains their quest for identity construction is contained and managed ritually. *Ilo-Muo*

festival is an avenue to showcase a nations culture, norms and lifestyles to the outside world which in turn brings about socio-religious and socio-political integration among the stakeholders.

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