

**THE POLITICS OF IGBO ORIGINS AND CULTURE:
The Igbo-Ukwu and Nri Factors Reconsidered**

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ABSTRACT

Since the works of such colonial scholars as Arthur Glyn Leonard, Northcote W. Thomas, Armory Talbot and M.D.W. Jeffreys, followed by the epic archaeological excavations at Igbo-Ukwu and the subsequent works of M.A. Onwuejeogwu, the questions of which sub-group represent the original settlers of Igbo land as well as constitute the original bearers of Igbo culture have continued to revolve around the orbit of controversy.

Until the discovery and subsequent excavation of the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological sites, these issues had revolved around the Nri, also known as the Umunri, following the accounts of the colonial writers whose works were more ethnographically sensational than historical in objective and method. Although the Umunri thesis of Igbo origins and culture was originally applied in the interpretation of the Igbo-Ukwu sites, further historical researches proved the contrary.

It was this emerging evidence which revealed that, originally the Umunri were not of Igbo but of Igala extraction which consequently questioned the authenticity of the Umunri claims of primordial rights and privileges under the aegis of Igbo history and culture. It was on the basis of this twisted historical evidence the Igbo-Ukwu, from whose soil the artefacts were excavated, began the lay claims to the same primordial rights originally centered on the Umunri, thus giving rise to a stream of controversy on which the other sub-groups have either become co-contestants or biased arbiters. The present work therefore looks at this stream of controversy through telescopic approach of a historian of Igbo extraction.

INTRODUCTION

The history of a people is like the stream of life from which the character, form and structure of their identity, their backwardness and progress are drawn. It affords a people the platform on which to predict their future. Thus, just as every stream has a source, so every group of people has a beginning of a particular event of history, the course of a stream, the course of the history that event and the mouth of a river being like the end of the era of that particular event.

No nation or people who toys with the knowledge of their past expects a future built on a strong foundation of unity, identity, pride and sustainable development. In other words, the past is what gives the present the legitimacy of existence, and the present the platform to launch into the future. The carpenter hammering his wood is a graphic example of the importance of history as an impetus to human development. He has to pull his hammer backwards in order to push the nail into the wood, and the extent to which he pulls the hammer backwards often determines the force with which the nail is driven into the wood

Every group of people who desires progress must therefore look back into their past, their source, their course, and their successes and failures at a particular epoch, in order to inspire progress. The evidence is obvious with the cases of the world's most developed nations - the United States of America, Britain and other European nations, Japan, China, South Korea and India. Every scientific and technological advancement made by these people was based on the foundation of their pasts and studied with a pride of identity and cultural exclusiveness.

The question then is, to what extent have the Igbo shown commitment to the knowledge of and preservation of their historical heritage as compared to their Edo, Hausa, Fulani and Yoruba counterparts in the Nigerian project. Ironically while the Edo and Yoruba who had contacts with Europe and Christianity many decades before the Igbo, are elevating their historical and cultural heritages, particularly their deities, traditional music, sports, feasts and festivals to international status, the Igbo are busy destroying their time-honoured sacred grooves, like the case of the people of Awka-Etiti, raining curses on their deities, divesting the ritual sacredness of *Ozo* title-taking initiation process, de-solemnizing the emotional spirituality of their life-cycle - the rituals of birth, marriage, death and mourning, in the name of trying to be holier than the Pope in the business of Christianity.

Christianity must be married to a people's historical and cultural settlements, and not the vice versa. The way a man presents his identity to his visitor determines the visitor's conception of his personality. The Edo and Yoruba confronted the invading Christian missionaries with a strong conception of pride in their past and cultures and they were treated with exclusive respect, protected rights and privileges. The Igbo on the other hand presented themselves as a people with nothing valuable to offer to the invading Christian Missionaries as a compliment to the new ideas, hence they were treated as a people whose past and culture have no spiritual value, and it has remained so to the present day.

However, it is not yet late. The Igbo could begin at this stage to make amends – a stage of the twilight of their cultural heritage, a stage where it does not matter for both the educated and non-educated Igbo man to speak fluently in his dialect, write artfully in Igbo language and communicate with his family in Igbo. In this regard, one may be tempted to acknowledge the Anambra State edict on Igbo language usage as an important step towards that cultural *Uhuru*. But that is not enough. The Government and her sister-south East States should move a step further to introduce the history of the Igbo including their culture and folklore as compulsory subjects in both primary and secondary schools, notwithstanding the debilitating 6-3-3-4 educational system. This is because the wisdom of any man begins with the knowledge of self, and the knowledge of self can only begin with the knowledge of one's root, the *cemen fondu* of his past, which is his history.

For the Igbo, there is a past which is anchored on a root. Call it the tap-root of their history, if you wish. That root is the source, the beginning or the genesis, whichever term one wishes to adopt. One does not need to ask who the Igbo are, because everybody now knows that the Igbo are the Igbo. In other words, they are what God has created them to be. But how they came to settle in their present geo-cultural homeland is what has bordered most people, both the historians and non-historians.

UMUNRI ORIGINS CONTROVERSY

In recent times quite a number of writings on the subject of Igbo origins have emerged on the scene of historical scholarship, most of them by non-scholars and non-historian scholars. They wear the garb of history but are in their forms, structures and analyses unhistorical, lacking in depth, proven sources, critical analyses and unbiased judgment. They fundamentally aim at

elevating one group in the course of Igbo history and cultural evolution at the expense of the others and, against the rules of historical writings, which subsequently gravitates into a riotous contest of primacy in the body history and cultural evolution of the Igbo.

Thus, instead of teaming up to develop a unifying ground for the study and understanding of the Igbo past, these people engage on building false historical castles on a foundation of mythological fallacies and fables engrained in prejudices and uncanny sentiments. The works of the likes of Michael Angulu Onwuejeogwu, an Ibusa-born anthropologist of Nri extraction², Emmanuel Ifesieh of Oraeri,³ I.C.K. Anadi also of Oraeri;⁴ and B.I.O Odinanwa of Ikenga-Nri;⁵ the Enuguwu-Agidi-born S.O.N. Okafor;⁶ C.M. Ezekwugo of Nnokwa, then of the philosophy of life fame;⁷ and of recent, Ambrose Nnalue Okonkwo of Agukwu-Nri;⁸ F.C. Idigo of Aguleri;⁹ Charles Ujah of Arochkwu,¹⁰ Hyacinth Ugwu Ezema of Edem-Nsukka;¹¹ and the most sensational of all, Cathrine Acholonu-Ulumba;¹² are all guilty of building the castle of Igbo history and culture on a foundation of false historical precepts, fabricated myths and fables, and unproven sources. To state the obvious, the Nri-Eri hegemonic concept on which these people built their thoughts on Igbo history and culture, and which has inundated the cultural and historical terrains of Igbo land is built on a shifting-sand of sensational falsehood, outright fabrications, and what could be referred to as mytho-biblical fallacy.

The claim that the Nri, Umunri and the Umu-Eri, whichever category one chooses to assign them, are the fountain-head of the Igbo in terms of both culture and historic origins, is a mendacious fabrication. The claim that they also are the anchor of Igbo-Jewish historical connections is a sensational fallacy. Above all, their often claim that the artifacts connected with the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological excavations are of Nri origins, and the land on which the excavations took place are historic Oraeri land, cannot be sustained by the circumstances of the origins, migration and settlement of the present Oraeri town.

The first premise which no doubt hinges on the origins of the Igbo, vis-à-vis the Umunri claims to be the original inhabitants of the present Igbo geo-cultural area, forms the bases on which the other premises can either be sustained or debunked. In approaching this, we begin by asking the question “Who are the Nri and where did they originate from?”. This is because, if somebody claims to be your leader, that person must be asked to state the basis of the claim. In other words, what are the bases of the claim that *Nri bu Isi Igbo i.e* that the Nri are the fountain-head of the Igbo culture group.

In concept, the term “Nri” is a title-name which is accorded to whoever assumes the *Eze – Nri* title (Nri Priest-Kingship). Thus, you have such past *Eze-Nri* as Tabausi Udene bearing the title-name *Nri Jiofo II*, Enwelani bearing *Nri Enwelani*. The term “Agukwu”-Nri” was therefore coined in reference to the abode of most past *Eze-Nri* in difference to the other half of the town known as Akamkpisi. However, it is worthy of note that “Nri” as the name of the present amalgamated communities of Agukwu and Akamkpisi, took effect only in 1940, precisely on December, 30th, during the Annual General Meeting of Nri Co-operative Society (NCS).¹³

This action to adopt Nri as their official name did not go down well with other Umunri towns, such as Enugu-Ukwu, Enugwu-Agidi and Nawfia. In his reaction, Chief S.O.N. Okafor of Enugwu-Agidi stated quite emotionally thus:

It is important to mention for the historians to note that Nri is not a name of a particular town in Umunri clan. I consider it in this wise, that Enugwu-Agidi, Enugwu-Ukwu, Nawfia and Agukwu town could if decided be called Enugwu-Agidi Nri, Enugwu Ukwu Nri, Nawfia Nri, as Agukwu town has abandoned her name Agukwu and registered Nri. Maybe, this is just a way of changing the history of Umunri or there is political motive behind the change¹⁴.

In apparent reaction to the above tirade, the late *Eze Nri, Nri Jiofo II*, Tabansi Udene stated thus in what could be described as a move to spite the other Umunri communities and disable any stake they might have in the Nri hegemony project:

Nri is the land occupied by the two male sons of Menri (later simply called Nri) namely Ifikwuanim (father of Agukwu) and Namoke (father of Akamkpisi). Their sister left behind at Nkpume_Onyili-enyi (mighty stone) later renamed Enugwu-Ukwu (hill top) had children the fathers of Enugwu-Ukwu, Nawfia and Enuggwu-Agidi.¹⁵

It should however be recalled that way back in 1930, the renowned colonial anthropologist who carried out extensive study on the Umunri, Dr. M.D.U. Jeffrey’s, when equally confronted with the problem of what the term “Nri” actually stood for, stated *ipso facto*:

Whether Ndri is a proper name, or a common name, or was originally a title, cannot now be ascertained. Today, it appears to be a title. An Agukwu native with some education was asked his opinion on the meaning of Ndri, and he replied: “the king at Aguku is called Ndri: He alone has the privilege of being called by this name. It is really a title of address just as in Egypt the king was called pharaoh and in Persia,

*xerxes. You may say Eze-Ndri if you like, but Ndri is the correct title by which to address him and he alone may thus be addressed.*¹⁶

There is no doubt that the above account on the meaning of the term “Nri” made through Jeffreys in his words, “an Aguku native with some education”, seems to have resolved the contest over both the meaning and usage of the word. But most instructive in the whole body of the foregoing accounts, and which will be of vital importance to the next stage of our discourse, is the issue of the putative origin of Enugwu-Ukwu, Enugwu-Agidi and Nawfia, as raised by *Nri Jiofo II Eze-Nri* Tabansi Udene.

Eze-Nri Tabansi Udene had said that the founder of Enugwu-Ukwu, Enugwu-Agidi and Nawfia was a woman, the only sister of Ifikwuanim and Namoke, although he did not state the name of the woman. The questions that follows *in situ* are, first, who could have been the husband the said woman; because definitely, she should have been married to a man to have procreated the three communities? Second, what could have been the man’s name? Third, was the man living in that *Nkume-Onyili-enyi* location on the arrival of the two men, or was he brought from some where else to marry and settle with their sister there? In the view of the present writer, the answer to the above questions can only be deduced from the facts that revolve around the origins of the Umunri. In other words, who are the Umunri.

The Umunri, from ethnographic investigations today consists of all the group of communities that trace their origins from Menri, the putative second son of Eri: They include today the towns of Nri, Enugwu-Ukwu, Enugwu-Agidi, Nawfia, Nnokwa, Oraeri, and other outer settlements as Ogboli quarters, Ibusa, Umuakpanshi village in Umutei quarters, Illah, a number of quarters in Ogwashi-ukwu and quite a number of other petty communities swallowed by other large indigenous Igbo communities.

One remarkable character of these communities is their lack of the ingredients of antiquity of settlement in the accounts of their tradition of origins, migration and settlement. In other words, for a settlement to be described as being of ancient beginnings there must exist in her tradition of origins, an undiluted myth borne out of amnesia, a blurred migration account, and above all, an undisputed rights and privileges over the communities instruments of divinity, viz:- *Ofo, Eze-Ani* (Priesthood of the earth-force deity), primacy in customary rights and privileges, and most importantly, primacy of settlement.

We take for example the myth of Awka tradition of origins, which clearly suggests that the present town of Awka is an ancient town in the present Igbo geo-cultural area. Amanke Okafor had recited this account thus in quite an erudite manner:

The Oka people believe, up to this day, that in all Igbo land they are the most ancient nation, and that no other nation surpasses them in antiquity. They believe that others took the names of their gods from them, as well as the names of the days of their week-Eke, Oye, Avbo and Nkwo. Whether their claims can be made out, is for future researchers to settle. Suffice it to say that Oka as a town is very long in history. When the Onitshas came, the Okas were there. When the Nris came they were there... when Oka history began, that is, when account began to be given of their activities, these Ifiteana people were living in Oka town as three distinct groups, under the names of Urueri, Amanyiana, and Okpo, respectively. They had emerged by them from Primitive conditions, and had become a civilized and technological society. Who they were, where they came from (if they came from somewhere), who their ancestors were, are not known. Oka simply said of themselves that they were of Ifiteana stock-Ebe Anyi (Our stock). At the beginning of their known history, the Ifiteani people had their existence in what is presently Oka town, whose boundaries have not changed over the years.¹⁷

The above account of the Awka myth of origin is remarkable in the sense that the Ifiteani are recognized and revered as the autochthonous settlers, the original people met on the land by the others. This account is not exclusive to Awka alone. Quite a number of similar ancient Igbo communities fall within this category, which could be defined as the category of primary settlers of Igboland. Those communities who Joined Ifiteani people from somewhere without clear knowledge of where they came from belong to the category of secondary settlers. While those who later come after Awka has developed into a full independent community constitute the tertiary settlers. An example of the tertiary category of settlement in Awka is the Umudioka village of Agulu quarters, which, according to Professor O.N Njoju was founded by one Ichida, a skilful carver and *Ichi* expert from Umudioka village in Neni town.¹⁸ On the other hand, the Umudioka village in Neni from where the said Ichida migrated, according to a local historian from Neni, migrated from the present Umudioka town in Dunukofia clan, which is now constituted into an administrative Local Government Area. As P.C Muodeme succinctly put it:

In the South-central part of Neni town spreads out another village known as Umudioka. The founder of this village migrated from Umudioka in Idemili Local Government Area.¹⁹

In other words the Umudioka village in Neni town forms part of category two settlers. While the main Umudioka town falls within the primary category like Awka town.

Going by the foregoing body of premise, what category of settlers could the Umunri be placed, in the context of the body traditions of Igbo Origins, migration and settlement. To answer this question one has to move a bit backwards in time and strike a deal of balance of origins between the wider Umueri sub-group, of which Aguleri, the Umunri, Igbariam, Amanuke and the Umuiguedo, on the one hand, and the other Igbo-sub-groups within the vicinities of the settlements on the other.

Today, Aguleri claims to be, not just the head - town of the Umueri group of towns, but of most striking, that of the entire Igbo nation. The question is, how could this claim stand on its feet and for how long, in the face of monumental historical and ethnographic body of evidence that speak the contrary? Ethnographically, and historically, the town of Aguleri is made up of three major quarters of distinct origins. They include in the order of seniority, Ivite, Ikenga, which constitutes the villages of Igbezunu and Umunkete, and Ugwu na Adegbe, also known as Enugwu and Ezi villages.

Here, the Okpu Village of Ivite quarters represents the aboriginal or what we earlier defined as the primary settlers, and this Ivite claims that they were already there when Eri and other groups came to join them. Eri, definitely an Igala warrior, is said to have founded the present Igbezunu village of Ikenga quarters, while the other half, Umunkete was founded by the followers of Onoja Oboni, another Igala warrior who invaded Aguleri many years after Eri. Similarly, the Umuezeora kindred claims to have migrated from what they referred to as Idu-Ime which translated could mean the old Bini kingdom.

In categorizing these settlements, it becomes obvious that while the Okpu Ivite maintains the category of primary settlers, other constituent villages of Ivite quarters, Igbezunu, and Umuezeora kindred of Enugwu village constitute the secondary settlers and, Umunkete the tertiary settlers. Beyond the issue of settler categories however, the question of the ethnographic identity of Eri forms the fundamental course of arriving at the truth of the matter. In other words, if Eri is connected with the founding of Igbezunu village, and the same village is characterized as Igala in

Aguleri tradition, then it becomes obvious that Eri was never of an aboriginal Igbo identity but of Igala extraction. The positions of many Aguleri and non-Aguleri writers are obvious on the matter.

The Aguleri-born M.C.M. Idigo settled this matter of Igala home-base of Eri Thus:

The Aguleri people originated from Igara (sic) and migrated to their present abode about three or four centuries ago. The leader Eri, a warrior, took his people on a war expedition, and after long travel and many fights, established his camp at Eri-aka, near odanduli stream, a place which lies between Ifite and Igbezunu Aguleri. Eri with his soldiers went out regularly from his settlement to Urada, Nnadi and other surrounding towns on war raids and captured many of the inhabitants. These were the Ibo-speaking people and by mixing, with them, and inter-marriage, the immigrants adopted the language.²⁰

In 1960, that was five years after the publication of Idigo's treatise, the European anthropologist who carried extensive research on the Igala kingdom, the Nsukka and Anambra river valley communities of Igbo land, J.S. Boston, re-echoed the same position asserted by M.C.M Idigo. Thus, J.S. Boston noted:

The northern Umunri villages say that the clan was founded by a man called Eri who came to the Anambra area from Igala country, and settled at Aguleri...Eri's son, Nri left his father's home to found the town that bears his name, and other sons found the remaining towns in this group²¹.

Strikingly enough not even Professor Michael Onwuejeogwu in his infinite sentimental attachment to the project of Nri Kingdom and hegemony could deny the obvious fact of Eri's origin from Igala land. In his clear words, Onwuejeogwu stated:

According to the myth, Eri on arriving Aguleri met an autochthonous group who had no living memory of their origins.... Autochthony which is the claim of origin from the spot of present habitation by a maximal lineage generally named Umudiana (Children of the earth is found in many ancient Igbo towns such as the Umudiana in Nri town who claim they were there during migration to the present town called Nri. The Umudiana also claim "Amnesia which means they recall nothing of their origin."²²

By the above revelation, Onwuejeogwu had not only confirmed the historical fallacy of Eri primacy with respect to Aguleri origins, migration and settlement, but provided an inkling of what will be expected in respect of the Umunri. But before then, a stop-over at Igboariam (Igbariam) is a pertinent step towards the core-centre of the claimed foundation-headship of Igbo land.

Onogu, the putative third son of Eri was said to have founded Igboaniam. But this is not true. The truth is that when Onogu, whether a son or follower of Eri, which ever applies, moved from Aguleri to Igboariam, he met an indigenous Igbo owners of the land called the Nudu. Today Igboariam remains divided on ethno-historical lines between the Igala elements represented by Onogu, and Igbo elements represented by the Nudu.²³

From the foregoing account, it is clear that Eri migration from Igala and subsequent settlement at Aguleri stands for the secondary settlers category, while the migrations of the Onogu, Amanuke and Umunri groups constitute the tertiary settlement category. On the other hand, the issue of Umu-Iguedo, those communities said to have sprung up from the only daughter of Eri called Iguedo and which includes Awkuzu, Ogbunike, Umuleri or Umueri as they presently call themselves, does not appear to be much relevant in the thrust of the present study. This is because it is acknowledged by the same Eri tradition that Iguedo was married into existing Igbo communities, thus debunking the claim of Eri primacy of settlement. In other words, there were already existing and flourishing Igbo communities at the time of Eri's arrival, which afforded his daughter the opportunity to be married among their hosts.

Having gone so far in respect of the origin and identity of Eri, one can now proceed to look at the situation in the present Nri town. By ethno- historical classification, Nri town is made up of two major sub- communities namely, Agukwu and Akamkpisi. Each of the two sections has three quarters each. For Agukwu, we have Obeagu, Uruoji and Agbadana. While in Akamkpisi we have Uruofolo, Ekwenanyika and Diodo. The settlement is also characterized by three distinct groups with distinct origins. These include the aboriginal Igbo settlers represented by the Umudiana village in Ekwenanyika quarters and Umunsepe village of Diodo Quarters; the Umunri group consisting the rest, except the Umuochogu village in obeagu quarters of Agukwu, which traces its origins from the neighbouring Nimo settlement.

For the Umunri group, the first set of people to join the aboriginal groups were the Akamkpisi, who were said have first, settled at Achalla-Isuana, that is the present Achalla town, after leaving Aguleri, before shifting further to their present abode. The decision to leave Achalla

arose out of a disagreement over the marriage of one of their leaders to an Achalla woman called Odomma.

The pro- group were later nicknamed Di-Odo *mma* (Odomma's husband's) group, which is represented today by Diodo quarters. On the other hand, the Agukwu group joined the other marriage groupss later after having settled and lived at Ugbene from where they derived their name, Agukwu-Ugbene, which is a reference to the area of their original settlement at Ugbene. From all indications therefore, the Umunri group of the present Nri town belong to the category of tertiary settlers. It is also evident that all the cultural vocations, rights and privileges the Nri claim today to exercise over and above the entire Igbo, name them –Ikpu-alu (cleansing of abominations) ritual roles in ozo tilte institution, and Igu-Aro were original Igbo institutions being performed by the Umudiana before the arrival of the Umunri group from Achalla and Ugbene respectively.

The priesthood of the Idemili deity was also in the hands of the Umunsekpe people before the arrival of these people. In fact, it was in recognition of the primacy of settlement of the Umudiana people that the Umunri gave them the Igala title-name of Adama, which in Igala Language and tradition means first-born or what the Igbo call *Okpala*. Even the institution of *Eze-Nri*, came into existence through the institutional inspiration of the aboriginal Igbo settlers, the Umudiana, who originally used the kingship as a means of servicing their rituo-economic needs. In this respect the Eze-Nri was initially appointed by the Umudiana to over-see the activities of the Nri ritual agents, who in turn made returns to the Umudiana (Adama). This fief relationship is born by the saying, *efesie Nri, Nri efee Adama* (After homage has been paid to the Nri, the Nri in turn pays homage to the Adama). In other words, the practice of Ikpu-Alu was of Igbo origin which was in part later bequeathed to the immigrant Nri group. Even the Igu-Aro ceremony in both tradition and practice is the preserve of the Umudiana group. *Eze-Nri* himself was in both tradition and practice an institutional ritual pawn to the Umudiana both living and dead, hence the saying, "*Adama na-eri Nri ekpe* (Adama the inheritor of the Nri)

It is of further importance to note also that this same Umudiana (Adama)group of Igbo aborigines are found in Adazi-Nnukwu, the southern neighbouring community to Nri. Adazi-Nnukwu, which historically belongs to Okotu clan, of which Adazi-Ani and Adazi-Enu are the other members, is today made up of three distinct groups – the autochthonous or aboriginal group represented by the Umudiana (Adama) village of Nnukwu quarters, the Adazi group represented

by the larger part of Nnukwu and the entire Amolu quarters, and the Abba group represented by Amata quarters.

In fact, not only does the Umudiana (Adama) village share common boundary with that of Nri town, her people are recognized by the other two groups as the owners of the land. This is because they were already settled in that location when Nnukwu, the youngest and most robust son of Okotu left Adazi-Enu to join them. Both Umudiana and Nnukwu groups were also already settled in the same location when a group of hunters from Abba in the present Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra State came to hunt at the vicinities of *Ezu – Idemili* or what is popularly called Agulu Lake. They subsequently settled with them, hence they adopted the name, Amata, which was derived from *Amanta*, meaning Hunters’ settlement. It was based on this primacy of settlement that the other two groups resolved to adopt “Adama” as the title of their king. The Adama of Adazi-Nnukwu also shares with their Nri counterpart the same if not greater ritual roles pertaining to *Ikpu-Alu*, *Ichi-Ozo* and other related rights and privileges.²⁵

Having so-far established that the Nri people, the present dominant inhabitants of Nri town, as in the case of Aguleri and Igbariam, are not of aboriginal Igbo stock, but rather belong to the category of tertiary settlers of Igboland, the claim of their fountain-headship of the Igbo culture complex becomes void in history, delusive in concept and bankrupt in the sacraments of Igbo belief system. The concept of *Nri bu isi Igbo* (The Nri are the fountain-head of the Igbo) does not therefore stand the test of ethno-historical facts on ground. But if the Nri were to claim this position by virtue of their historical association with the Umudiana-Adama, as in the case of Adazi-Nnukwu, it should have been considered as a relative fact, although which could have equally been questioned accordingly. But the irony of this claim of primacy is that even the tertiary immigrant Nri themselves, using their superior economic and intellectual endowments now claim the contrary over the aborigines of the land. This emerging claim is unprovenly summed up in the recent mytho-historical book by the Nri-born Ambrose Nnalue Okonkwo thus:

*The people from Umudiana are also called Adama. They are the people that are responsible for removing abomination (Nkpu alu) in Nri town. Their mother came from Agukwu Nri, a daughter of a king and that is the reason we from Agukwu call them Adama meaning “Umunwa di ana”.*²⁶

Whether to the Agukwu people *Adama* means *nwadiana* as stated by Okonkwo, or first-born, as earlier stated by the present author, is immaterial at this stage of our inquiry. The fact that Ambrose Okonkwo acknowledges the right of the Adama to *Ikpu-alu* shows that the Nri themselves agreed

they are not the original custodians of *Ikpu-alu*. Ambrose Okonkwo also confirms this fact of the Igala origins of the Nri when he again wrote, “the son of the first Nri was the first *Atah* of Igala until his death”.²⁷ This also further disables the claim of antiquity of Nri settlement in Igbo geocultural area, because the origin of the Igala kingship, particularly the *Atah* title only began with the conquest of the Igala kingdom in early 16th century by a Benin Prince named Aji *Atah*, who subsequently adopted the title of *Atah*. This dynasty was later overthrown by the Jukun dynasty that sits on the Igala throne today. This again brings us to the question of dating the so-called Nri kingdom and hegemony to 9th century A.D. by Onwuejeogwu, which by extension tries to link the Nri concept with the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological finds. If this is the case, what then becomes of the claims of the Oraeri that the excavated archaeological artifacts from Igbo-Ukwu ancestrally belonged to them.

Basing his argument on Thurstan Shaw’s interim report on Igbo-Ukwu archaeological excavations, the Oraeri-born Roman Catholic Clergy and academic Rev. Fr. Professor Emmanuel Ifesie wrote:-

*Another historical reason is the apparent Igbo-Ukwu archaeological site. In fact, it belonged to Ora-Eri people and was formerly inhabited by them but were conquered in war and driven away by Igbo-Ukwu people...It is a historical fact, proved by archaeological finds that what were dug out from the site belonged to Nri culture.*²⁸

Sensational though this Oraeri position could seem to sound, it does not in any way collaborate with the foregoing facts surrounding the origin, migration and settlement traditions of the Eri group. In fact, if Nri people fall within the category of tertiary settlers, Oraeri falls within what could be described as later settler category. Even the issue of Nri culture could not even arise, because what the Nri regard today as their culture is in fact elements of aboriginal Igbo culture which they got in contact with only after they had joined the aboriginal Umudiana. Thus, like the other Umueri settlements, Oraeri originated from Igala land. This fact is clearly supported by the unity of regalia between the *Atah* of Igala and the *Eze-Nri* of Oraeri, exemplified by the *nwatu-ona* – the lion-faced bronze insignia of office hung over their necks respectively. Any suggested remote link between Oraeri and the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological facts cannot therefore be sustained. This is strongly supported by the circumstantial tradition of Oraeri origin, migration and settlement in their present abode.

The origin of Oraeri was intrinsically linked with the crisis of kingship in Diodo - Akamkpisi, Nri, which consequently led to the subsequent appropriation of the *Eze-Nri* stool by the four quarters of Agukwu-Nri up till date. Both Avo, the progenitor of the present Oraeri and Nnokwa-Ike, the progenitor of the present Nnokwa town were banished with their mother over a case of abomination concerning a slaughtered cow. Their mother who hailed from Adazi—Enu consequently fled to her people for protection. She was given a piece of land at the present Nnokwa town to settle with her two sons. Both brothers however parted ways on their mother's death when Avo was said to have collected the *nwata ona*, the *Eze-Nri* insignia of office and fled to the eastern border of Adazi-Enu where he subsequently settled. Thus, in effect both Oraeri and Nnokwa occupied their present places of abode only by the fact of their maternal connection with Adazi-Enu.²⁹

In other words, if Eri according to Idigo, migrated to Igboland between three and four hundred years ago, which translated in historical periodization could not have exceeded the 15th century A.D., the question of dating the so-called Nri kingdom and hegemony to the relative period of the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological finds could not arise in any form.

One is not however saying with historical certainty that the said artifacts belonged to the ancestors of the present Igbo-Ukwu people. But in the same vein, one cannot deny the fact that Igbo-Ukwu settlement belongs to the category of the aboriginal settlers like the case of Awka. Igbo-Ukwu tradition of origins, migration and settlement merely claims that one Igbo, the founder of the settlement migrated from somewhere in the company of his brother, Amaekwulu, who subsequently founded another settlement which could not be remembered or located. Igbo-Ukwu tradition like that of Awka, Okpu-Ivite, the Umudiana of both Nri and Adazi-Nnukwu, as well as the Nudu of Igbariam is therefore strongly infected with amnesia, which often occurs as a consequence of long continuous settlement.

Whether the artifacts beneath the present Igbo-Ukwu town were used by their ancestors or not, is immaterial at this point of our inquiry. The commanding fact is that, unlike the Oraeri and their Nri and Umunri kinsmen who are engaged in a perennial conflict of identity between their Igala origin and their Igbo identity, the Igbo-Ukwu are primordially of Igbo origins, and the unearthed artifacts works of the primeval Igbo society, of which the ancestors of the likes of the Igbo-Ukwu, Awka, Okpu-Ivite-Aguleri, Nudu of Igbariam, Adama-Umudiana of Nri and Adazi-Nnukwu might have been part of. In the same token, could it also be an irony or circumstance of

history that it was in a town originally named “Igbo”, then “Igbo-Nkwo” and now Igbo-Ukwu, that the most remarkable evidence of the antiquity of Igbo socio-economic, political and technological advancement was revealed.

CONCLUSION

It is the position of this paper that the history of the Igbo cannot be effectively and critically reconstructed by the art of vain-glorious fabrication of non-existent facts, mutilation of the scanty available evidence and politicization of the question of Igbo Origins. This is the bane of Igbo historical research. The past is the anchor of the present from which lunch into the future. If the anchor is built with faulty materials, definitely the platform cannot be sustained for too long, in which case the strength and confidence with which one hacks his way into the future becomes equally uncertain.

The historian has laid the framework on which the onerous search into the riddle of Igbo origins could be discovered. These are anchored on what is called the three theories of Igbo origins. This includes the autochthony theory, which claims that the Igbo people did not originate from anywhere but here in Igbo Land. This theory is supported by the evidence of antiquity of settlement as evidenced by the traditions of the Awka, Igbo-Ukwu, Okpu-Ivite, Nudu-Igboariami, and the Umudiana of Adazi-Nnukwu and Nri respectively. It is further supported by archaeological evidence, such as the Igbo-Ukwu excavation by Thurstan Shaw and those done by D.D. Hartle across the Length and breadth of Northern Igbo land.³⁰ The geological study of fossil remains of human activities and forms like the one done by Adebisi M. Sowunmi of the University of Ibadan is also a contributory evidence to the study of a people's antiquity of existence³¹.

The secondary theory is what is referred to as the Niger-Benue confluence theory. This theory is based on the linguistic affinity of a group of ethnic groups whom linguistics classified as the Kwa sub-family of the Niger-Congo language family of Africa. Working in concert with what are called glottochronology and lexico-statistics, this theory explains that as far back as five thousand years ago, the Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Idoma, Igala, Igbira, Igede, and Bassa, among others were a group of people speaking one common language around the vicinity of the present Lokoja. From there, they were said to have dispersed, and as they dispersed, separated by distance, they began to develop distinct dialects, which in time metamorphosed into full blown distinct languages. The proven evidence in support of this theory is found in the occurrence of a number of common words with the same meaning among these languages.

Finally the third theory is the popular claim of Igbo-Jewish origins. It posits that the Igbo might have originated from the Jewish nation, given the remarkable similarities between certain

elements of Jewish culture, and those of the Igbo. However, this theory appears to be most abused by what could be described as the mad rush into junk historical writings in the bid to claim Jewish identity. It baffles the present writer that the Nri, including the Eri group led by Aguleri, even the Aro, should be the vanguard of Igbo-Jewish origins, when they themselves have a crisis of Igbo identity complex.

Be that as it may, the three theories have their respective evidence of sustainability as historical platforms for resolving the riddles of Igbo origins. But beyond the subject of their historical utility, they, if properly applied, could be effective instruments of building sustainable unity and pride among the Igbo in the case of autochthony theory, drumming up support for wider Igbo economic and political projects among the various ethnic groups connected with the second theory, and at the international level, the third providing the Igbo with international alliances.

This paper therefore concludes with the clarion – call: let the Igbo revisit the issue of their past without prejudice to either what the Pope in Rome or the Archbishop in Canterbury would say. Because their present identity can only be sustained by the evidence of their past, which gives them the relevance of existence in the present political project called Nigeria. The editorial words of the *Lagos Times* issue of July, 2 1882 are instructive:

*We respect and reverence the country of Wilberforce and Buxton and of most of our Missionaries, but we are not English men, we care Africans and have no wish to be other than Africans.*³²

NOTES

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