

The Metaphysical Understanding Of Road Junction As A Symbolic Sacred Space In Traditional Religion

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ABSTRACT:- In Igbo tradition, road junction is the convergent point of both the visible and the invisible beings in a particular locality. It is believed that in African Traditional Religion that it is where both negative and positive forces also meet. Thus it is symbolize negativity. It act as a spiritual conduit that binds or compensates the communities that make up African society 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. As a point of emphasis, road junction is an assumed sacred place strategically and naturally located at the middle of the roads and even in the confluence of rivers respectively and adherents of African Traditional Religion believed that such places are the abode of the spirits. This paper explores the reasons and the mysteries why the adherents of Igbo religion are prohibited to desecrate this particular spot. This paper also focuses on how the rituals that are associated with road junctions are carried out and why the renewal of covenant relationships between communities and individuals are done in this sacred space in order to reunite their intimate brotherhood and to show how the Igbo communities uses these sacred space to show their consummate loyalty to gods and great ancestors. It is the locality where its dramatic breakthrough into the world is commemorated. Sacred space, as the structured locality where man established the dominion of his gods, is the known space, the locality where the power manifests and repeats its revelation; it is the place where the gods has stopped in movement and has created. Wosien (1992:23).

Keywords:- Ancestor, Deities, Gods, Sacred, Space, Rituals.

I. INTRODUCTION

In African Traditional belief system, sacred places are ritual landscapes where ritual elders and the traditional monarch uses as an avenue or occasion to commune with the God[s], ancestors and significantly to commemorate their kingship, and also an occasion for the subjects to reaffirm their solidarity and loyalty to his Kingship, through paying of homage's and tributes (Idigo, 2002:24). Also, during this period, the indigenous people gather around the sacred places for rituals in honour of their God[s] and ancestors making such sacred places to become a "gentrified space of entertainment and recreation" (Ventakesh, 2006:110). It is the "center point of cultural activity and important source of innovation in music and other forms of performance" (Wolcott, 1974:83), that "create the most festive atmosphere possible and therefore the most enticing environment to attract the spirits to come" (Sager, 2012:38). Sharp (2001:51) argues that "this is the point where sacred sound and architectural space intersect contributes significantly to experience meaning in sacred performance". He asserts that it is in this situation that "sacred performance within sacred architectural space creates a new, unique dimension in the sound in order to make it symbolic" (Sharp, 2001:51). Nuckolls (1999:228) argues that "the term sound symbolism is used when a sound unit such as a phoneme, syllable, feature or tone is said to go beyond its linguistic function as a contrastive, non-meaning-bearing unit to directly express some kind of the meaning". Reichard (1950:257) asserts that it is in this kind of occasion/arena where sacred sound has the power to attract and exorcise evil, through mediation of "the performance of its good works that produce immunity against all evil influences" (Arkin, 1989:7). Nonetheless, according to Wosien: Sacred space offers a centre for communication with the power. It is the locality where its dramatic breakthrough into the world is commemorated. Sacred space, as the structured locality where man established the dominion of his gods, is the known space, the locality where the power manifests and repeats its revelation; it is the place where the gods has stopped in movement and has created. This site, by virtue of man's acts of worship, becomes a centre for communion. Outside this enclosed area, beyond the known world, is the realm of chaos, the terrifying unknown space where forms disintegrate (1992:23).

Wosien (1992:21) again argues that such sacred space like the sacred temples or shrines “symbolizes the union of time and space within evolution, the incarnation of timeless energy, which manifests in the dual aspects of nature”. Drewal (1975:18) asserts that such sacred place has “become a symbol of place at which the living and the spiritual can meet and unite”. It is in this kind of sacred shrines that Igbo communities shows their solidarity with the monarch, who makes himself available and accessible to be seen during his public appearances and cheered by his subjects. According to Katrina Hazzard-Donald (2011:196) in the perception of the Igbo people sacred shrine is “a sacred circle which represent a separate and sacred realm that connect one to the ancestors and reconfirm continuity through both time and space”. Wosien (1992:21) affirms that such sacred space becomes “zones where the sacred is experienced and worshipped. She stresses that “the beginning of both time and creation pertains to the centre. From this focal point manifestations radiate out in concentric rings. This universal experience has found expression in the many circumambulation rites and round dances of the sacred traditions of the world” (1992:21-22). Hazzard-Donald (2011:196) argues that within such sacred circle, the interaction between the spiritual fathers, the initiates and the Igbo communities are mediated through “sacred spiritual forces evidenced in spirit possession” (2011:196) and while in that state they see themselves as “hero’s whose knowledge, mystic power, wealth and prestige equals that of any man” (Guenther, 1975:165).

Conversely, it has been shown that the sacred shrines invokes the spirit possession on the initiates when visited and encountered by individuals and the community, this is why Koster (2011:177) asserts that “the community in this ritual is the victim, while other observers in the ritual serve as the symbolic representation of the community that needs healing, while simultaneously serving as witness to the ceremony”. In fact, to thinking of an African man, a sacred place is a “powerful medium for connecting to and accessing the effective power of spirits” (De Witte, 2008:692). Nonetheless, Ohadike (2007:10) argues that “it is hard for Africans to go into spiritual possession without the help of instrumental or vocal music” used and activated during such ritual consultation. Capturing the ritual consultation of the Yoruba ritual settings, Ilesanmi (1996:5) writing the on context of Yoruba women in the worship of *Orinlase* in Ilawe-Ekiti asserts that “before the ritual dance, they first pay homage to the deities individually and collectively. They kneel down, touch the ground with their heads almost in the...style without the other body gesticulations of...Then follows the praise song in honour of the deities”, thereby “creating an indelible impression in the minds of the individuals and communities, who also serve as a participating audience” (Ilesanmi, 1996:9). Echeruo (1975:60) argues that it is during this kind of ritual consultation in the typical traditional Igbo sacred that ritual “drama is the externalization of archetypal relationships and issues; that behind the action of every drama, whether of gods or men, there is an essentially philosophic and even cosmic argument or statement dependent on or derived from the analogy of an antecedent or generic mythos”. The chanting and songs used in sacred shrines during ritual ceremonies invoke the spirits and ancestors in other to “directs the king or the chiefs on dancing steps/skills to display during public outing to avoid mistakes and to enable them win public acclamations during their initiations in foot-work dances” (Ogwezzy, 1999 cited in Noun, 2009:79). Arguably, Ilesanmi (1996:5) asserts that it is during such ritual dance that “the deity himself possesses some of them, making them perform feats beyond the normal capacity of the generality of the people”. Nti (1990:115) argues that “as a dance of brave people, all parts of the body are used in the dance. The movements show sharp turns of the body, quick rising and falling linear and circular formations”. Noun (2009:112) affirms that “the music tells of heroism, valiancy and intrepidity. Only those who could brave the night could foot-touch the drum or ascend it. No coward, however rich, can dare it. The dance is only for the brave”. No wonder Guenther (1975:164) asserts that such “great dancers are widely idolized – especially by boys and youths adults – their song, their idiosyncracies of dancing and their exploits are talked about widely”, and in that form they are “searching for spiritual ideal” (Warren, 2006:106), and “personal identity” (Alford, 1988:51). Guenther (1975:164) argues that “to a large extent the wealth, prestige and glamour of the dancers stem directly from the dance and its inherent affective, integrative and moral power”. Nkosinathi (2010:128) writing in the context of Shembe’s new generation followers, argues that women accused men of using their new sacred dance style that was not taught by Shembe to attract women which is believed that if such sacred dance is performed incorrectly, the sacred dance would send or cause a person to go to hell. Kealiinohomok (1997:69) asserts that such dance “encodes and decodes myth and rituals and at the same time, danced rituals are always being invented, retrofitted, or re-invented either through revival or syncreticism”. Nonetheless, Nketia (1989:121) argues that the interaction that takes place on the ritual dance of the king during festivals like the *Ovala* festival is not “confined to musical behaviour that seeks to establish a relationship with the unseen or affirm the bonds of a common faith and shared values that bind members to ensure not only effective communication but also the required atmosphere for action and interaction”. According to Andreas Heuser, dancing of sacred music like the *Uvie* sacred sound “requires constant concentration, exact co-ordination and strict timing. It happens in on going repetitions of rhythmic and musical units that come close to a practice of meditation. The repetitive cycle, so to speak, harmonises all movements in the same control of action. The music has spiritual connotation and it is a way of interaction with the divine sphere” (2008:40). Sager (1993:106) argues that “the repetitions do not change anything, they only make it

better”. Until recently during the *Ovala* festival, *Uvie* ritual sacred dance like every other sacred dance according to Benjamin Ray is the main religious festival/ceremony of the Aguleri community “which they perform” (2000:28). Sundermeier (1991:50) argues that sound emanating from such sacred drum like the *Uvie* “encode...memory with ritual aesthetics, and crystallize historical knowledge in religious performance”. Davis (2012:166) affirms that the sacred drum dance performed there is traditionally a “dance of respect”. The king’s appearance on three different occasions respectively, in the kings square [*Amaeze*], “to dance savagely in the courtyard of the impertinent” (Gleason, 1980:165) and entertain his subjects during the *Ovala* festival marches Kuper’s unforgettable, wonderful and well illustrated description:

In this powerful costume, the king appears reluctant to the nation. He executes a crazy, elusive dance with knees flexed and swaying body. The movements are an intuitive response to the rhythm and situation, a dance that no ordinary man knows and that the king was never taught. The old teachers who trained him in all his duties explained: ‘We do not know it, we are not kings, it will come to you at the time’. Suddenly he crouches low and disappears into his hole, and the *tinsila* follow close behind picking up any bits that drop off the sacred costume, lest they be used by enemies to ruin the nation. The princes spring forward crying: ‘Come out, king of kings’. They draw back, pause, and sway forward. At last he responds. At his approach they return, enticing him to follow, but after a few steps he turns back and they close behind him again. Everyone is urged to dance. The *tindvuna* {royal assistants draw from the commoner clans} bring down their batons and shout: ‘Beat your shields’. The people dance with vigour, here more than at any other stage they keep their king alive and healthy by their own movements. The mime goes on with increasing tension, each appearance of the king making a sudden startling and unforgettable impact. His eyes shine through the feather as he tosses his head; his face is dark with black medicine, dripping down his legs and arms are black streaks-he is terrifying, and as the knife-edged grass cuts into his skin, he tosses his body furiously in pain and rage (Kuper,1947a:217-218).

Road Junctions: Abode of Spiritual Forces as Sacred Territories

In the true sense of it, these are creative and man-made art where “both the quick and the dead in each community traverse the most prominent road junction within their territory. Hence the undomesticated spirits and those that are considered to be intractable are invoked and sacrifice to at such places. The sacrifices of the intractable, ubiquitous and mysterious spirits, such as those of borne-to-die children and witchcraft, being taken to such places is informed by the idea that no matter how restless, wicked and intractable a spirit may be there is no way and day it will not visit the major road junction in its locality” (Nabofa, 1994:67). Nabofa (1994:12) again argues that such artistic symbols performs dual functions which includes religiously communicative and artistic and a typical example of this is *Mbari* cult that is being neglected in Igbo tradition and hegemony which is an embodiment of communication and artistic symbols respectively. No wonder Nabofa (1994:12) again opines also that “artistic symbols are those which are used in art form for aesthetic purposes”. Buttressing this further, Nabofa again comments that:

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

Arguably, (Nabofa, 1994:12) regrets that shrines of African traditional religion are replete with artistic symbols but it is a pity that most of these are being neglected, pilfered out and smuggled into Europe and America. The observation of Chinua Achebe in this respect may be worthy of note:

The purposeful neglect of the painstakingly and devoutly accomplished *Mbari* house with all the art objects in them as soon as the primary mandate of their creation has been served, provides a significant insight into the Igbo aesthetic value as process rather than product. Process is motion while product is rest. When the product is preserved or venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised. Therefore the Igbo choose to eliminate the product and retain the process so that every occasion and every generation will receive its own impulse and experience of creation. Interestingly this aesthetic disposition receives powerful endorsement from the tropical climate which provides an abundance of materials for making art, such as wood, as well as formidable agencies of dissolution, such as humidity and the termite. Visitors to Igboland are shocked to see that artifacts are rarely accorded any particular value on the basis of age alone (1984:ix).

Buttressing this kind of non-challant attitude towards such significant and symbolic artifact [*Mbari* cult], Geoffery Parrinder attests to the observation and affirms that:

The panorama of life is well illustrated in the *Mbari* ‘decorated’, houses which Igbo people of Nigeria have traditionally erected at special times. These were temporary temples, built at the specific command of a god, but never repaired after construction and soon falling into disrepair. The central figure of such temples is *Ala*, the great Mother Goddess, the spirit of fertility, and guardian of the dead which as they are buried in the earth are said to be in her pocket. Some of the statues of *Ala* with a child in her arms have been compared to Italian Madonnas or the Egyptian Isis with her son Horus (1987:128).

The picture of total negligence and complete ruin Achebe and Parrinder are painting here calls for urgent reorganization, rejuvenating and revitalization of all the artistic symbols in Igbo land in particular and guard them for cultural integration and transmission of indigenous knowledge for posterity irrespective of modern civilization because such “exotic objects have been given value as art and culture” (Clifford, 1988:12). On this, Idigo (2001:180) warns “let me remind the Igbo nation that like the Christian religion, the Igbo traditional religion believes that life is a continuum. Our dead ancestors are not dead and gone. Their souls are living. Our pioneer fore fathers are still living. We must overcome our shortcomings in order to attract their blessings. If we do not, the likelihood is that we shall continue to be haunted and disunited”. Affirming this assertion, Hakan Rydving (2004:101) exhorted the Igbo nation by advising them “to stand firm in their beliefs and not desert the customs of their ancestors”. Buttressing this further, Idigo (2001:178-179) argues that “the neglect of the historical knowledge is to a nation what the loss of memory is to human beings. The Igbos should therefore be prodded to take a renewed interest in their history in order to understand why they are in this current state”. This is because according to Achebe (1958:143) “our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes”. On a general note, in traditional religion of the Igbo people artistic symbols are invaluable resources encoded with learned pattern of behaviour, ideas, and beliefs shared among a people and socially transmitted from one generation to another (Sofola, 1973:ix). Put in another way:

Most African sculptures appear to have been associated with religion, which pervades most aspects of African life. The religious genres included, votive figures, which adorned shrines, reliquary figures, charms, figures, stools, used in initiation to the cults, the apparatus for divination, dance staff, musical instruments and a variety of other ritual paraphernalia (Bascom, 1973:11).

Road Junction as Shrines of Ritualistic Symbols/Centres

These symbols like the *Uvie* sacred drum are the ones that have to do with the items or materials used to perform certain rituals or ceremonies like *Ovala* especially for religious instruction and initiations (Nabofa, 1994:18). In that sense, Nabofa (1994:14) again argues that such symbols do not only aid to communicate, they are equally means of preserving knowledge, religious and historical occurrences; more so, it is in this vein that ritualistic symbols are the most valuable means for passing on the tradition and culture of a people from generation to generation. Here, it is very imperative to remind ourselves of Carl Jung’s (1979:93) observation that “cultural symbols are those that have been used to express eternal truths”, and that are still used in many religion today. According to Nabofa (1994:12) “ritualistic symbols are sometimes used to instruct the devotee in certain principles... [sic]. Ritualistic symbol are those that are used either in a ritual itself or to evoke a ritual in the mind of the initiate”. Such symbols basically have gone through series of metamorphosis or transformations and even a long process of more or less conscious development, and have thus become collective images accepted by Western societies (Clifford, 1988:12). However, ritualistic symbols no matter how old and transform or modified they may be, still retain much of their time honoured or original symbolic sacredness and numinosity or spell which can ultimately still evoke a deep emotional response in some of those who had acknowledged them (Nabofa, 1994:14). We often say that African traditional religion is primarily written everywhere (Metuh, 1987:12) and this is true because every traditional African community like Aguleri is “replete with the symbols of their religion and those who have eyes to see and ears to hear can symbolically experience and notice them in their cultural context” (Nabofa, 1994:14) during such festival like the *Ovala* where the *Uvie* sacred sound features prominently. According to Nabofa (1994:14) again man’s creative activities, actions, emotions and self-expressions are basically symbolic in themselves, but somehow they are based on symbols which are used to preserve trado-religious knowledge and the mythical history behind them. Nabofa (1994:14) further maintains that the physical images however found in indigenous shrines, verbal expressions also used to convey a religion’s theology and other cultic elements basically portray or stand for something, which has resulted from the creative activity of a particular geographical and cultural setting like Aguleri community. More so, they not only communicate, but are equally significant tools or meduim for man

to satisfy his quest and need to express himself and actually preserve and transmit the experience of the past to posterity (Nabofa, 1994:14).

Consequently, Nabofa (1994:14) further argues that religious symbols especially those connected with religious and cultural festivals like the *Ovala* festival are re-enacted and it is used to teach and aid in memory remembrance of historical and significant events and doctrine of the faith. He affirms that in this context such ritualistic and symbolic object like the *Uvie* drum is very significant in aiding, instructing and shaping the minds of the younger generations about the sect they belong (Nabofa, 1994:14). Buttressing this further, Nabofa (1994:14) again asserts that most cultic activities that feature prominently during indigenous festivals in community like Aguleri are sacred ritual activities during which some significant historical events that relate to the people's belief are re-enacted, reconstructed and revitalised. Analytically, to elucidate more on this, a young, palm fronds used during solidarity march for the King during the *Ovala* festival in a traditional community like Aguleri carries so many religious and symbolic under tones, primarily, it symbolises sacredness in its entirety (Nabofa, 1994:54). We should take note of the fact that, in Africa and Nigeria in particular, one major aspect of Nollywood's contribution in all these is in the representation of religio-cultural rituals as a basic aspect of communalism (Uwah, 2010:87). This depicts the capability of film directors and producers to connect familiar symbolic language of these cultures into their film productions, especially to avail the experience of communal liminality (Animalu, 1990:46), cultural integration and nostalgic egalitarianism among proximate audience-who are mainly Nigerians and Africans (Uwah, 2010:86).

Road Junctions as Spiritual Epicenter and Abode for Ritualism in Igbo Religion: The Igbo Perspective

This paper examines and equally predicates these ritual items used for ritual enhancement of road junctions from the Igbo cosmological paradigm in order to bring out their symbologies and ritual implications through an ethnographic method to demonstrate that ritual is part and parcel of decoration of some shrines in Igbo land for them to effectively work ritualistically as it is believed to have been imbued with ancestral mystical and spiritual powers in traditional religion of the Igbo people.

These types of shrine serve also among the power points of expressing the believer's sense of the sacred and the orderliness of the divine realities (Nabofa, 1994:45). Idowu (1969:128-130) describes such shrine as "primarily the face of the divinity. There the divinity is represented by the emblems which are regarded as sufficient reminders of his attributes". Mary (2002:121) pragmatically and symbolically, describes such sacred shrine as the "place where the heaven comes down to earth". Nabofa (1988:78) posits that such places are as "they are, as they were spots where the spiritual come down to the earthly and the earthly is elevated to the spiritual". Mbiti (1975:144) argues that such places are not for common or careless use, because they are considered to be sacred or holy. Chidester (1992:10) explains that such sacred place is inhabited by the dead, a domestic space in which the ancestors resides or visits. He argues that in ancestral ritual, death is not a barrier between the living and the living dead who continued to interact and communicate with the descendants (Chidester, 1992:11). Olsen (2004:13) observes that something magical happens at such a sacred place that triggers an unconscious memory and to learn about the world of sacred place is to learn about ourselves. He affirms that such sacred places and intersections are the locations where humans first erected temples, pyramids, shrines, churches and cities (Olsen, 2004:13).

As Lovell (2002:23) has pointed out, "such territory or space is characterized both as a metaphysical domain, and as a terrestrial entity. Deities are believed to dwell in another plane, but also need to have their presence manifested and anchored on earth in order for humans to propitiate them properly". Such sacred space to use Reg Saner's phrase is "capturing" (1987:723). Weightman (1996:59) argues that "as sacred places are created, an inner light outweighs outer darkness and a spiritual journey commences". Falola & Essien (2007:xiii) argues that divine powers that radiates and exudes from this kind of sacred place "creates a broad-based spiritual cesspool that provides other forms of spiritual protection". Peters (2002:23) asserts that such sacred centers are believed to be where "many deities were understood to meet a variety of human needs and when some needs are met, the status quo is maintained; when other needs are met, there is transformation of individuals and societies to new states of being"

Brown (2004:164) posits that such places 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's in diaspora. It is on this position that Macdonald (2004:317) argues that 90 per cent of the indigenes like that the Igbo "identify themselves as Christians, but at the same time they continue to assert the tradition and hegemony of their ancestors". It is believed in African Traditional Religion that road junctions cannot be avoided because such a sacred place leads the spirits to wherever they wants to go, "henc most sacrifices meant to appease wicked and mysterious powers are performed there" according to Nabofa (1994:67).

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), and in order wards 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 his coming “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”. From this assertion, one can say tersely that as an uncontaminated indigenous community in Nigeria, the Igbo who had embraced Christianity centuries ago has never alienated herself from traditional religion. In that wise, through the mediating rituals that are involved in the use of road junction, the Igbo communities through the sacred ordination it is evident to validate romantically the return of the god(s) through the ritualistic activities that involves road junctions in traditional African societies. This is why Ejizu (2002:116 & 126) affirms that in Igbo land, special religious activities that are associated with road junctions are “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”.

Confluence of Agbanabo Ezu-na-Omambala rivers a Case Study of Natural Road Junction in Aguleri – Igbo Cosmology

The ritual festival called *Olili-Obibia* Eri was designed as a unifying force for the Igbo’s both at home and elsewhere. It features religious ceremonies, agricultural trade fairs, dancing and musical entertainments. All these served to strengthen and demonstrate the bond of union that kept both Aguleri and his dispersed brothers together. Thus Eri festival was initiated by Eri himself in a form of a miniature, yearly ritual celebration to remember his arrival at *Agbanabo Ezu-na-Omambala* rivers) and to thank the gods for his successful arrival and somewhat agricultural activities. It is a three day ritual activity that is held every 10th – 12th November. . No wonder then that Nabofa comments that such places “are as well considered as prominent covens of witches and wizards. Propitiatory and appeasement sacrifices are the one mostly carried to road junctions while those of votive, thanksgiving and foundation are performed in the regular shrines dedicated to God, divinities and ancestors. Thus road junctions symbolizes negativity” (1994:67).

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 priest’s in-charge of the community shrine (*Obu-Gad*). The water from the *Ezu-na-Omambala* Rivers celestially blessed is one of such sacred thing given them to carry to their places of sojourn. It is has been observed that such sacred water serves as a “psychological devices for communicating and personalizing religious ideas” (Nabofa, 1994:46) and the idea is that the carrier of such water believed that “he has been insulated against all possible unwholesome external influences” (Nabofa, 1994:51). On this ritual celebration, of *Olili-Obibia* Eri Margaret Mead (1972:231) comments that it is on this month of November 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”. It is during this period according to Nzewi (1979:170) that “the incumbent principal religious officiant and his assistants set about procuring objects for the sacred rituals or ceremonies of the festival. It may be necessary to repair, renovate or rebuild the shrine house or temple or to prepare the shrine or temple grounds”. The rituals performed in this symbolic sacred space gives total abstract visual representation to significant moments in Aguleri community during such ritualistic endeavours and cultural history, while basically articulating esteemed values, nourishing and maintaining the Aguleri identity (Nnamah, 2002:8).

In fact, the scenario of this event is better experienced than to be 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:x). Salamone & Mbabuie (1994:211) argues 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 where Christendom possesses a great treat for its survival.

Obu-Gad: A Natrual Sacred Space, Projecting Olili-Obibia Eri Festival in Aguleri Paradigm

In this wise, it is very clear here to say that *Olili-Obibia Eri* as an indigenous ritual festival that is breaking boundaries of Christendom where it is believed that the gospel has achieved an amazing success in Igbo land while, the walls of pagandom is claimed to have collapsed Jericho-wise. Nonetheless, Ali Mazrui regrettably laments that:

No African country has officially allocated a national holiday in honor of the gods of indigenous religions. All African countries, on the other hand, have a national holiday that either favors Christian festivals [especially Christmas], Muslim festivals [such as Idd el Fitr], or both categories of imported festivals. The Semiotic religions [Christianity and Islam] are nationally honored in much of Africa; the indigenous religions are at best ethnic rather than national occasions (1991:69-70).

No wonder Frazar (1922:131a) affirms that from “certain festivals of the ancients, we may be able to detect the equivalents of our May Day, Whitsuntide, and Midsummer celebrations, with this difference, that in those days the ceremonies had not yet dwindled into mere shows and pageants, but were still religious or magical rites, in which the actors consciously supported the high parts of gods and goddesses”. This kind of negative attitude towards Africans and their culture from public space/existence throughout Africa, with the recent singular exception of The Republic of Benin, speaks volumes about identity construction and reconstruction in Africa (Chicago Tribune, 1996:8). Mutua (1999:171) argues that the status of indigenous religions within African states cannot be understood without resort to the nature of the colonial state. Ayisi (1972:70) affirms that ethnic festival like the *Obibia Eri* festival “besides being a national festival, it is also a calendrical festival because it occurs annually like the Christmas season”.

Adelowo (1990:166) in his article “*Rituals, Symbolism and Symbols in Yoruba Religious Thought*” 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 point further, Adelowo again 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 significant to say here that the kind of food eaten and offered in this type of festival by the members of Aguleri community during the yearly thanksgiving celebration for commemoration of ancestor Eri 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, Falola (2003:147) posits that through this kind of commemoration of ancestor like Eri “the ruling dynasties in the various states forged relationships with one another by promoting brotherhood relations and the cordial relations among them were sometimes explained in affinal relationships”. This is to counter the claims that “the gospel in Igbo land achieved an amazing success where the walls of pagandom collapse Jericho-wise” (Ayandele, 1973:126). Also, in order to counter the belief that the retreat of the African gods is rather obvious do to the waves of nationalist resurgence at various points in time that made them to accept the verdict, arguably through the ritual ceremony of the *Olili-Obibia Eri* -- commemoration of Eri in Aguleri, it has been observed that this ritual somehow and “romantically sought to re-plant the gods back firmly in African’s firmament” (Ogbu, 2002:1). Although, Idigo (2001:177) regrettably comments that in those days, other Igbo communities come to Aguleri to offer sacrifices in the sacred temples to request for one favor or the other and that helped to maintain the link with their root but since their massive conversion into Christianity, these activities became extinct, only Nri keeps to this norm. Idigo (2001:179) further argues that “the Eri and Aguleri connection is avoided in order to give them the opportunity of projecting Nri as the head of the Igbos. But the truth is that Eri is the founder of Igbo race”.

Notwithstanding all these controversies and to put the record straight, Aguleri through the sacred ordination still becomes the ancestral home of the Igbo race (Boston, 1960:55). It is in this sense that one can say tersely that there is a ritual synergy between the sacred temple of *Obu-Gad* and ancestor commemoration of the coming of Eri (*Olili-Obibia Eri*) which serves as a binding bond between all the Igbo people in diaspora as a sacred space for brotherhood and mortality. In so far as there is a ritual synergy between *Obu-Gad* and Eri, therefore it stand to say that *Obu-Gad* would be described as the sacred temple of the spirits of the royal

ancestors situated in the homestead of Aguleri. It is imperative also to note here that such temple is an embodiment of ritual communication where symbolic ritual festival that surrounds the coming of Eri has been neglected for some time now by the Igbo's which suppose to be a source of inspiration and knowledge where people can receive myriads of blessings from their great ancestor. Arguably, (Nabofa, 1994:12) regrets that such shrines of African traditional religion are replete with artistic symbols but it is a pity that most of these are being neglected, pilfered out and smuggled into Europe and America. Writing in the context of *Mbari* house a replica *Obu-Gad* and the ritual relation with the *Olili-Obibia* Eri, the observation of Chinua Achebe in this respect may be worthy of note "visitors to Igbo land are shocked to see that artifacts are rarely accorded any particular value on the basis of age alone (1984:ix).

On a general note, in traditional religion of the Igbo people festivals like the *Olili-Obibia* Eri and sacred temple of *Obu-Gad* are invaluable resources encoded with learned pattern of behaviour, ideas, and beliefs shared among a people and socially transmitted from one generation to another (Sofola, 1973:ix).

However, Peters (2002:25) argues that "many traditional sacred centers are the centers for particular peoples in their particular geographical and historical circumstances... a sacred center today has to be the center of the entire expanding universe as well as the center of our own lives. That is a big stretch for some traditional ideas". Kaplan (2000:122) asserts that "such shrines are maintained today even in also "similar ancestral alters are still maintained in the palace (Blackmun, 1997:150). Nabofa (1994:45) argues that such road junctions are assumed to be shrines in traditional Africa societies that "are connected with the homesteads. These are places where family religious activities are carried out. It is in such places that the traditional beliefs and culture are first transmitted to the notice of the young ones in the family". Rowlands (1985:208) affirms that "the medicines used at the shrines are produced in the palace (sic); thus in original ritual boundaries which... served to coordinate rites of pollution removal at the palace for the chiefdom as a whole". According to Mary (2002:111) "this means giving territorial expression to the battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and as it were establishing Heaven on Earth". She argues that as it is in traditional religion like the whole Igbo religion, the efficacy of prayers requires the mediation "this means giving territorial expression to the battle between the forces of good and the forces and the annexation of a sacred space or shrine (Mary, 2002:111), which Akintola (1992:38) describes as the "shrine of mortality".

Akintola (1992:38) again argues that in the esoteric sense, it is simply the depository containing all the basic cult objects of religious veneration; and it is, in fact, the place where worship is offered, and devotions paid to the Deity, the Supreme Being of Creation. Continuing with the argument, (Akintola, 1992:40) again stresses that "the shrine of mortality accordingly, in this process of spiritualization, that is, of moving man away from his sensuous nature into his bliss and eternity of spirit, is fitted into place as a continual reminder to the initiate that the spiritual nature he desires to acquire or rouse in himself, can be roused fully and effectively only after the philosophical death of his sensuous or carnal personality".

Ray (1993:268) asserts that prayers, offerings, and sacrifices therefore require the construction of sacred space, where the forces of the invisible 'other' world can be brought into this world and effectively controlled. Wosien (1992:23) affirms that such "sacred structure space facilitates orientation, provides the framework for worship, and transforms chaos into cosmos, thus making human life possible". Nabofa (1994:45) argues that "such sacred places of worship provide geographical points of reference to religious beliefs and practices. They indicate the physical points of contact between the beings in the supra-sensible realm and those in the physical plane. Most of the shrines and sacred places in Africa are etiological. They teach theological, historical and moral lesson. In most cases, the myth, legends and stories that are told around them have little or no historical foundations. Nevertheless, they are valuable resources for transmitting and concretizing religious concepts and lessons, in both time and space".

Insofar as this invisible energy web also correlates with known areas of anomalies in gravity and space-time, it has been postulated that different dimensions exist simultaneously and that an electromagnetic web of energy interlocks all things on this planet (Olsen, 2004:13). Jett (1995:41) affirms that "because of this power, which is dangerous or beneficent according to those property of one's approach, non initiates avoid sacred places, while those with the proper ritual knowledge—especially medicine men—may make pilgrimages to pray, to renew their ritual equipment and the efficacy of their prayers, to obtain medicinal plants, and to collect sanctified soil and water".

However, the ritual functions of these shrines overlap irrespective of their nature, every shrine is preceded by ritualistic ceremonies and some shrines that are seemingly social have ritual underpinnings/sections in them and similarly, ritual shrines that are seemingly solemn and serious have social dimension too (Nti, 1990:3). But unlike the other traditional shrines that are personal in Igbo land which are strictly used for rituals and other ritual shrines owned collectively by a community, the shrines ensemble are either for "social and religious occasions" (Adegbite, 1988:17).

II. CONCLUSION

A lot of mysteries are revealed through rituals in road junctions in African Traditional Religion which encourages the devotees and adherents to hold on to the divinities. When sacrifices are performed, it brings spiritual inspiration and relief to man. The origin and belief in the efficacy of road junction is a mystery, but their importance cannot be over emphasized in African Traditional religious circle. People pay homage to such places and make all sorts of sacrifices with the belief that prayers and supplication would answered. There rituals cannot be replaced by anything in the world. A world without road junctions will face trouble. This is because of the important position they occupied in worship. Man was made to worship the Supreme Being and the worship is not complete without road junction in the thinking of an African man. It is undeniable that African Traditional Religion reached its pinnacle in this aspect through the mediation of its ritual participation from either the adherents and even some Christians which ecumenism has not collapsed its formidable wall 'Jericho wise'. This invariably becomes a significant success in the maze of cultural ecology in Igbo Traditional where Christendom possesses a great treat for its survival.

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