



Celebrating the religion and personality cult of chinwuba onumba: The greatest sacred specialist in the tradition and hegemony of aguleri kingdom

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Abstract

In the traditional Igbo setting, exceptional men like Chinwuba Onumba of Aguleri Kingdom have featured prominently in the enterprise of magic and power play in pre-colonial era. Even when they did rise to power, their achievement was usually attributed to the mystical use of their bodies. This sexist attitude is clearly seen in the true story of Chinwuba Onumba of Aguleri, a celebrated sacred specialist of all times in Igbo land, who was arguably the only male sacred specialist in colonial West Africa (late 19th century) that was authorized and certificated to practice his ritualism with every impunity. His rise to fame and authority was attributed to his ability to utilize the power of the male body and his mystical powers to reveal the unknown to the colonial masters and his community into giving him the position. Chinwuba Onumba did not only use his power but his natural personal attraction was as well used as a strategy to reveal the unknown through the practice of trado-medicalism, where he met the controller of the land (the British). This article will explore this sexist attitude and, using some male hermeneutic keys, will try to analyse the phenomenon of male body power politics and the mystical power in Aguleri traditional experience that made him to be seen as a cult in Aguleri cosmology. The question is: can we always attribute the rise of men to power only to the way they use their bodies or to their own sheer intellectual and mystical ability?

Keywords: british, culture, power, religion, sacred, tradition

Introduction

A Brief History of Aguleri [Igbo] Religion

According to Isichei (1980:2) "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 guess 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, recall a man called Eri, sent from God, who lived there". Nzewi (2000:25) [22] affirm that sacred temple in which it figures lies in Aguleri – a farming/fishing Igbo community on *Omanbala* River basin of South-Eastern Nigeria".

According to Idigo, Aguleri is a very large town situated at the bank of the river Anambra called *Omanbala* by the indigenes and corruptly nick named Anambra by the European Settlers (Idigo, 1990:3) [14]. Idigo (1955:2) [14] asserts that "Aguleri people are basically farmers. Their traditional way of life was so eminently good and satisfactory that in recent times they have often been reluctant to abandon it by moving into the modern sector of the Nigerian economy". Nonetheless, since the beginning of this century, when Europeans began to penetrate, radical and constructive education is seriously pursued and this actually bring in development of small-scale industries, trading and manufacture (Idigo, 1990:1) [14].

Origin and migration

Strictly speaking, no one actually knows when Aguleri was incepted as a town but the history of Aguleri may have dated back to the early part of civilization and modernity in

Nigeria (Idigo, 1990:3) [14]. 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 where – "a site was excavated in Aguleri and radio carbon dates showed that it had been continuously inhabited for about 5000 years. There was no spectacular findings but it revealed ancient pottery, human bones and tools of stone" (Omorie, 1989:16) [26]. The origin of Aguleri people would be linked to the migration of Igbo race to this present Nigeria as a nation who are among the "Hebrew patriarchs from Mesopotamia to their new homeland in Palestine (Bright, 1981:23) [4].

Bright (1981:73) [4] again argues that "it is true that the position taken above, which is one that is widely held today, has been vigorously contested in recent years by certain scholars who maintain that the patriarchal narratives are more or less imaginative literary creations of a much later date [the early monarchy, or even the exilic period] with no appreciable stream of oral tradition behind them, and without real historiographical intention or historical worth". Eri and his entourage continued their migration southward until they finally settled at a place known to us today as Aguleri the ancestral home of the Igbo around 1303 B. C at the confluence of two rivers *Ezu* and *Omambala* - a tributary of the great River Niger (Eyisi, 2010:3) [8]. He argues further that in Aguleri today, there is a place called *Agbanabo-Ezu-na-Omanbala* [the confluence of the rivers, *Ezu* and *Omambala*, which form the Anambra River]. It is in place that Aguleri people have the highest sacred and revered shrine ever known in the cultural evolution / ecology of the community.

Here it is believed, Eri landed with his entourage before moving to settle in *Obu-Gad*, Aguleri. The *Obu-Gad* [that is Gad's memorial palace] is apparently visible and this remains a tourism site in Aguleri town of Anambra state till date (Eyisi, 2013:3). Igwah *et al.* (2014:1) ^[15] argues that this place is very paramount because "it was at this point that Eri had a divine revelation that they had reached their ordained place of settlement". Onwuejeogwu (1981:22) ^[25] affirms that historically it is "from this point each settlement pursued its own separate existence and development, owing allegiance to Aguleri, where the collective ancestral temple of Eri still stands to this day". This site is complete and genuine evidence demonstrating the root of the black ancestral home of the Igbo people in diaspora which actually supports the recent archaeological discovery. To ascertain the authenticity and significance of this site to the tradition, culture and hegemony of the Igbo people, Idigo (2001:42) ^[13] asserts that "this is why before any Nri traditional ruler is installed, the king is led to Aguleri where he performs sacrifices to the sacred temple of *Obuga* before being given the scepter of authority or *Ududu Eze* by the Igwe of Aguleri". This depicts that Aguleri people have a strong belief in the existence of one God, the creator of all things whom they call *Chi-Ukwu*, the Supreme Being, but ancestor worship is also practiced where the people offer sacrifices to their dead fathers (Idigo, 1990:60) ^[14] 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) ^[19], which promises concrete blessings and protection (Isichei, 1980:4). Uchendu (1965:101) ^[32] affirms that "the number of Igbo deities, spirits, and oracles is enormous and their anthropomorphic 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) ^[32].

Settlement

Eri, the founder of Igbo race (Idigo, 2001:72) ^[13] was among the migrants. He was believed to have moved and settled temporarily with his followers, in an area near the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers. 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) ^[14]. According to Idigo (1990:3-4) ^[14] again "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 some scholars like Afigbo in his article 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 of the ancestral home that be his right, and settled in an open plain named Agukwu (1983:8) ^[2].

Reviewing this assertion, I must say that this paragraph is highly mitigated; filled with fabricated liars, 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 under inheritance traditional laws and customs of the Igbo that the first son must take over his father's house after the death of his father. Now, for Afigbo to claim that Nri is the first born of Eri is unsubstantiated; fallacious and totally unacceptable which is tantamount to academic fraud / deceit and I advise that he should carry out his research properly. No wonder Williams (1988:79) ^[34] warns that this kind historical formulation about inheritance is "misguided and wrong, but that such crookedness must finally be rejected out of hand". Nonetheless, through the institutions of royal ordination and ceremonial rituals and spirit manifestation, Aguleri reasserted her authority over other Igbo's in diaspora to "represent the headship of Igbo race" (Nnamah, 2002:9) ^[24]. Nnamah (2002:9) ^[24] 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". He argues 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 (Nnamah, 2002:9) ^[24].

This cultural expression is only typical of the cradle and for a boundary community it makes a stronger claim to originality (Nnamah, 2002:9) ^[24]. More so, till date, 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) ^[24] which McAdams (1988:18) refers to as a well "structured self-image". Neuman (1980:12) ^[23] argues that an 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 art music from the great tradition of Aguleri became, themselves, "great centre's for the dissemination of musical culture, though geographically distant from its original place and surrounded by different local traditions, other areas remained little centres of the great tradition" (Capwell, 1993:96) ^[6].

Uzoagba (2000:38) affirms that societies like Aguleri that are famous for different art formations such as sculptor, painting, carving, graphics and design equally demonstrate these arts on their musical instruments, but ritualism and the practice of trado-mediocalism "overshadows sculptures, painting, architecture, and literature as the leading traditional art" (Horton, 1963:112) ^[9]. This is the reason why it is believed that visually everybody in and Aguleri axis is a potential native doctor. No wonder then Bascom (1973:11) ^[3] maintains that "most African appears 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”.

Responsibilities of Council of Elders

Heads of families, *Ndichie* [council of Elders], and *Ojiana* were responsible for the administration of Aguleri at the inception of the town, they made laws for the town, formed native courts and adjudicated over cases (Home Call of HRH Eze Idigo iii 1995:3) ^[11]. This native authority declared wars when necessary and made peace when appropriate (Idigo, 2001:118) ^[13]. For the maintenance of law and order in the town and for the execution of public projects and assignments, the authority delegated or assigned duties to the various age grades (Idigo, 1990:57) ^[14].

Chinwuba Onumba

Not minding the contestations and historical paradigm of Chinwuba Onumba in Aguleri tradition, it has been widely noted in African art literature for his magical and mystifying role through the mediation of its ensembles. No literature I have found has discussed this celebrated spiritual specialist of his time known as Chinwuba Onumba of Aguleri origin as a natural, traditional and magical doctor. Elaborate designs and complex compositional ritual functions of this sacred and revered spiritualist are much encountered in the ritual trado-medicalism of the Aguleri people of Igbo origin of South-eastern Nigeria. This paper explores a unique type of man known as Chinwuba Onumba with mystifying ritual herbalism in the Omambala river basin of the Igbo.

The Chinwuba family of Umuawunu village is one the most revered, oldest and largest surviving family in Nigeria which “began as far back as the middle of the 19th century” (Home Call of Eze Idigo iii, 1995:7) ^[11]. A famous and powerful leader the son of Chinwuba by name, Onumba entitled Ogbuanyinya Chinwuba Onumba of Ivite-Aguleri rose in power and influence through the mediation of spiritualism and divination. Clinging to the tradition of charismatic leadership (Bright, 1981:231) ^[4], which “rested solely in those personal qualities of leadership” (Bright, 1981:167) ^[4], the powerful Chinwuba Onumba embarked on many exploits and adventures not only to expand his spiritual landscape but to heal people held in bondage in Aguleri and its environs. Born during the second quarter of the 19th century into Chinwuba family in Umuawunu, Onumba was the progenitor of the Chinwuba family. Scholars has observed that he was an outstanding personality and was described alongside king Jaja of Opobo and Olaudah Equiano as one of the great heroes of the 19th century in Igbo history, who represented himself as having an exalted status in “Eboe” (Isichei, 1976:98 & Carretta, 2005:9) ^[12, 5].

Though, Chinwuba Onumba who was transformed from just a natural native doctor and magician “was by no means the most powerful” personality in and around the *Omambala* axis in the present Anambra state as an “African god” in the socio-sacral space (Onyeama, 1982:43) ^[28]. In fact, Chinwuba Onumba was noted for his courage, success as a native doctor, and as a “charismatic figure who wielded the power to mobilize his people against a predictable threat” (Ohadike, 2007:20) ^[27]. Hylton (1995:36) ^[10] affirms that “his authority in representing both their identity and the imperative of maintaining their heritage” was not doubted and “was not afraid to challenge the secular authorities”

(Ranger, 1968:451-452) ^[30]. This attests to the fact that Chinwuba Onumba was a natural leader, an enigma and “a man of the people” (Achebe, 2012:161) ^[1]. Holistically, as an adult, he used his prowess and acclaimed supernatural abilities to transform the lives and destiny of the human race in some parts of Igbo land and beyond and also he was a highly revered witch doctor and priest that was why he was being celebrated as the greatest native doctor of his time “on account of his great interest in traditional religion and magic” (Idigo, 2001:159) ^[13]. This singular personal characteristic actually according to Weber (1968a [1947]:49) ^[33] commanded him “complete personal devotion of his followers”.

Asmarom Legesse (1994:321) ^[17] affirms that such personalities like Chinwuba Onumba as “charismatic figures make use of *communitas* as laboratory within which they hone their ideas, fashioning new ways of relating to their followers as well as to the rest of humankind”. Taking a look at the genealogy of Chinwuba Onumba descendants will apparently show that every listed family bore a single nomenclature. Analytically, the great significance of this is that the Chinwuba Onumba as the only certificated native doctor of his time in the entire Igbo land for over a hundred years is evidently one of the longest and populated family in the world today. No wonder Nnamah (2002:7) ^[24] argues that the “rise and fall of kingdoms usually mark the demise of most monarchs and to have remained the ruling house unbroken, speak volume in terms of acceptability, love and respect the people of Aguleri” have for the upcoming generations of Chinwuba’s family for what their patriarchy did. This surely is an “enviable track record compared with that of the kings of Europe and England” according to (Kaplan, 2004:189) ^[16].

On this note, David Chidester (1992:17) ^[7] affirms that like every other sacred specialist, Chinwuba Onumba’s “herbalist’s pharmacopia was primarily derived from plants and animals, but those medicines were prescribed according to rules that might be called a ‘poetics of healing’ that symbolized healing power through the similarity, contact, or association of the medicine with whatever effect was desired”. This practice of herbalism which is the method of using herbs, roots-seeds, barks of trees and some other elements in the treatment of disease and or to achieve some which could be beneficial to man was what actually made Chinwuba Onumba to be famous as a personality of cult in the area of African Traditional Religion in Aguleri cosmology. This is the why scholars believed “indigenous mystics believe that only a person endowed with particular spiritual insights and inclinations” would be able to decode, interpret and disseminate the messages being produced by such ritual herbs (Srivastava, 2007:4) ^[31]. Oral tradition has it that:

There was a time when some strangers visited Chinwuba Onumba in his house at Aguleri for spiritual assistance in other to help revive or resuscitate one of their relatives who sick. They pleaded to Chinwuba Onumba to assist their brother but he frankly told them that their sick brother has died already without any divination art. He told them that there was nothing he could do. Amazingly, they hurriedly went back home only to meet their brother dead. So out of annoyance and frustration they sued Chinwuba Onumba to court at a place know as Olamme (the place where tourist garden is situated) presently in Aguleri today. During the court proceeding,

the then district officer (a British man) called O'Connor asked Chinwuba Onumba to proof his spiritualism by telling the court how many seeds that are there in the calabash. Without wasting time, Chinwuba Onumba told the court that the calabash contained seven seeds. To their greatest surprise, when a gauge was brought and was caught into two the court counted the seeds and they were seven seedlings as predicted by Chinwuba Onumba. Immediately, Mr. O'Connor issued a certificate of practice in traditional religion to him as the only recognized and authentic sacred spiritualist in that region making him a personality cult. This singular act in such a religious experience attracted followership which made him a demi-god in Igbo land (Okechi, Personal Communication, 2019) ^[29].

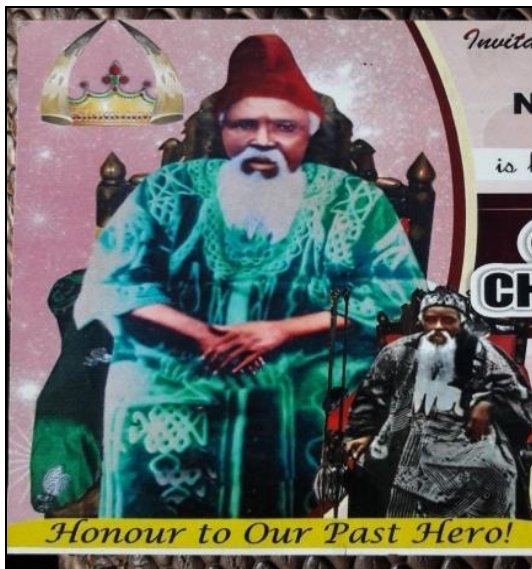


Fig 1: The Man Chinwuba Onumba, the progenitor of Chinwuba dynasty. The greatest sacred specialist of our time in Aguleri Cosmology (Courtesy of Madukasi Francis Chuks)

It was this religious experience and expression that actually made Chinwuba Onumba the greatest sacred specialist ever in the history of Igbo land especially in Aguleri cosmology. In such form of “religious experience and expression” (Thomson, 1994:89) ^[17], or what Muller (1966:407) refers to as “genuine mystical experience”, Chinwuba Onumba became the only authorized and certificated sacred specialist of his time and because of this position scholars have equated him to Nostradamus, the man who saw tomorrow. Over time, like Onyekomeli according to Idigo (2001:161) ^[13] “he was greatly feared. No one dared to confront him in a dual or in a quarrel. No decision is taken without his consent”. Equally significant is that a personality cult was instituted around him and this made Aguleri to become an epicenter for spiritualistic endeavours for people seeking spiritual succor.

The Practice of Magic and Medicine

Every human being wants to enjoy life in abundance. All his activities are aimed towards achieving a total well being and he wants to be delivered or saved from all unhappy situations in life. In order to achieve this total well-being he resorts to religion and the practice of magic and medicine, all of which are interrelated. Here we shall concern ourselves more with the practice of traditional medicine.

Medicine has been defined as the “art of restoring and preserving health”. The main purpose of medicine is to help the body to help itself. Medicine is curative when it helps the body to return to its normal states; and it is preventive when it builds up bodily resistance against infection by toning up its organs. It is this whole process that had been described as trado-medicalism. No wonder then that Mbiti comments that:

The medicine man takes preventive measures, in addition, to assure the sufferer that the trouble will not come again. The measures also involve religious steps and observances. Therefore the medicine man serves as a religious leader, who performs religious rituals in carrying out his work. ...It is believed that their medicine not only cures the sick, but also drives away witches, exorcizes spirits, bring success, detects thieves, protects from danger and harm, removes the curse, and so on (1975:152-153).

Trado-medicalism is a word coined by Dr. J.O Mume in 1972 as discreet expression to identify the African traditional system of medicine. It is a distinct system of healing based upon the African cultural philosophy of health and disease, tied up with a universal law. It is a complex word which is derived from two English words namely; traditional and medicine; which simply means Traditional Medicine. According to Mume:

Trado-medicalism is the methodology and mechanics for treatment of human diseases as applied by our forefathers, and which has been practiced by the succeeding generations over the years”. Trado-medicalism can briefly be described as a system of treating diseases by the employment of the agencies and forces of nature. It is a distinct system of healing based upon its own philosophy of health and disease. Its modern practice is based upon the empirical knowledge and a broad foundation applied by the ancient healers (1976:14).

Its theories are founded upon the apothecial wisdom of the ancient. It may be defined as an art, science, philosophy, chemical, mental and spiritual laws, for the restoration and maintenance of health and the correction of bodily disorders. For relief and cure, it makes use of nature’s most beneficent forces and agencies on the theory that under conditions of natural livings, the body is a self-recuperating organism.

In order to be able to be of good service to the community the practitioner of trado-medicalism must be familiar with the ethics of his clients, learn to detect by spiritual diagnostic means, signs, how and when, and where departure from the normal or natural path has taken place and then applies his knowledge and skills, aided by the various kinds of trado-medical treatments, to help bring about a return to the normal or natural situations. The traditionalists believe that is nature that has heals and cures, while the doctor of trado-medicalism interprets nature’s laws for the patients to confess his sins which the traditional doctor believes are causative factors of most diseases. Traditional doctor does not confine his treatment to any one method. He employs as any methods as possible which are embodied in the traditional methods of healing in order to effect lasting cure. There are ten branches of traditional

healing as follows: Herbalism, Hydro-therapy, Massage and Bone-setting, blood-letting, Dietetics, Fasting, faith-healing and Psycho-therapy, Surgery and Health-therapy.

Conclusion

From the above, it has been observed that Chinwuba Onumba through his exceptional qualities has become the natural native doctor, a magician in Aguleri cosmology, which endeared him an enigma and personality cult in the history and tradition of Aguleri culture through the mediation of its ritualism and herbalism. Also, because of his personal contact with the British, he was able to position himself in Igbo tradition and Aguleri cosmology as the man that brought civilization, modernity and development which made him to be regarded as [Nostradamus] the man who saw tomorrow in Eri Kingdom of Aguleri. All these endeared him the only certificated native doctor of his time.

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