

The Sacred Festival of Iri Ji Ohuru in Igboland, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the religious significance of the New Yams Festival (Iri Ji Ohuru) among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria. Secondary data for the study was collected from ethnographical information on the origin of the custom by some well-known Igbologists. An analysis of a major extant etiological myth about the revelation of yams in Igboland is provided. A phenomenological description of the *Emume* (festival), the primary datum as it directly presented itself to my consciousness when I observed one such festival in my village of birth, Umueze, Uzoagba in the Ikeduru Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria, in 2004 is presented. Interview schedules with some elders and a ritual master of this kind of traditional custom was conducted in the village on 12 April 2004 and 1–7 February 2006. To anchor the findings on the place of yams on solid ethno-history, a brief sketch of the migrations of the Igbo people, their religion and the legend about their progenitor, *Eri*, is discussed. The aim is to provide the socio-religious background for understanding the divine origin and the sacred nature of yams in the traditional belief of the Igbo people. Popular views on the value of yams as principal staple in Igbo gastronomic life as attested in contemporary literary works are related. Matters of great interest to phenomenologists such as the descriptive account of the festival, its ritual acts, the oral nature of the incantations, and the age of the participants are discussed. An effort is made to suspend critical judgment on the phenomenon's value and truth claims from the perspectives of my own present religious experience and tradition. In other words, I have permitted the structure and morphology of the ritual acts of the ceremony to manifest themselves for possible comparisons and contrasts by other Black and African scholars of a religious phenomenon like this in their own areas. In addition, the iconoclastic attitude of Western missionaries in nineteenth-century Igboland to customs and practices as *Iri Ji Ohuru* is discussed. The study counsels the Igbo to regard the cultivation of yams, even be it potatoes for those in the diaspora to work their gardens annually as a religious obligation. The socio-religious lessons of the ritual acts of the festival call upon leaders of Igbo Christianity to welcome the ritual stages of the rite in the Church's effort in contemporary liturgy as a means to boost the inculturation of African customs in the Church.

Keywords: *Igbo, Ahianjoku, ancestors, libation, masquerades, eschatological, epiphany, Igbology*

INTRODUCTION

Iri Ji Ohuru, though, an Igbo-wide festival, has its origin in the Igbo homeland and cultural world. Narratives on the festival are widely transmitted in Igbo oral history, tradition, religion and culture, but the intricacies of the structures of the

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festival are hardly known by most postmodern Igbo people, especially those who are staying in non-Igbo culture zones of Nigeria and in diaspora, such as in Britain, Belgium, Germany, France and the USA. The objective of this brief research paper is to attempt to fill a yawning lacuna in the contemporary Black history of ideas. An Igbo song of salutation and Traditional Prayer of Opening at an *Iri Ji Ohuru* ceremony is considered very important to start off the discussion that follows:

Umunna¹ Kwe nu! Haa!

Kwe nu! Haa!

Kwe zuo nu! Haa!

Nke Onye diri ya
Onye iro anyi biri, m'anyi biri
Ya bara Onye, bara Onye
Onye anwuna, m'ibe ya efula
Ogburu Onye n'onye ga-ala
Njo na njo zu kwara
Mma na Mma zu kwara
K,anyi rie Ji Ohuru afo nkea n' Udo
Egbe bere, Ugo bere,
Nke si ibe ya ebela nku kwa kwaa ya
Haa! (Amem)

English Translation:

Umunna Sing, Haa!

Sing, Haa!

Sing, All of You, Haa!

Let every person receive what is his or her due
May our enemies live, may we also live
Let progress and what is good reach to all
May no one die, may the fellow man not be lost
May he who kills another go with the dead
May evil be met with evil
May good be followed by good
May we eat this year's new Yams in Peace
Let the Kite perch and let the Eagle perch
That which refuses the other the right to perch, let its wing break
Haa!

¹ *Umunna* is an anthropologically and theologically rich word which loosely means "Brothers" – that is, all people who trace their origin from a common progenitor/ancestor in Igboland. The females are *Umunne*.

1. METHODOLOGY

A three-pronged approach has been adopted for this study: the documentary, the historical and the phenomenological. (1) In the documentary approach, much of the ethnographical information on the religious practices and customs, especially those related to the New Yams Festival, is derived from the works of other researchers working on the topic earlier. This involved a critical reading and assessment of their materials as sources on a culture that is so cherished but is nevertheless dying slowly out. (2) The historical approach attempts to unravel the religious tradition of the Igbo people of south-eastern Nigeria who, in spite of the onslaught of Western missionary activities in the land, still continues to see their traditional religion and culture as a treasure worth re-living if only it can be given a Christian orientation. Within such a frame, a dispassionate examination was conducted of their sacred past to decipher the raw ingredients of what counts as the “revelation” of the bounteous *Chukwu*, the High God of the Igbo, through the gift of yams. By this method, an effort was made to delineate the attitude of the shapers of the culture of the Igbo race as well as a wide range of religious beliefs and legends about yams in the Igbo agrarian world. This sort of historical enquiry, I agree with Ninian Smart, “involves depicting histories, but in a manner which involves empathy”². The ultimate aim is to generate comparisons as the transition from Igbo culture to the traditions of other readers. In particular, those in primal societies in East Asia and Oceania necessarily require a comparative approach in the study of their own traditional religions. (3) In using a phenomenological approach, I have attempted to focus on the data of the experience of the Igbo people of the rites associated with the Festival as they directly appeared to my consciousness during my participatory observation sessions at an *Ahianjoku* shrine in my own village. In this paper, I wish briefly to present my observations by way of an “eye-witness” description, to use Ninian Smart’s term, of “what the custom means” to the people.³ The phenomenological method has helped dispel some forms of ethnocentric views and prejudicial attitudes generated and spread about Igbo culture since the time of colonialism and the penetration of Western civilization. From this study, one can discover how Igbo New Yams Festival embodies the people’s cultural beliefs about nature, the progenitors, family and labour in an agrarian setting. The methods reveal that the complex but ordered mosaic of Igbo culture is the consequence of fundamental religious traditions, as is exemplified in the role of *Ahianjoku*, the yam deity.⁴

² Smart, N. 1981, *Beyond Ideology: Religion and the Future of Western Civilization*, Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh, 1978–1980, (Harper & Row, San Francisco), p. 47.

³ *Ibid.*,

⁴ Echeruo, M.J.C. 1979, “A Matter of Identity”, *Ahianjoku Lecture*, (Owerri, Ministry of Information, Culture Division, Government Printer).

2. THE IGBO PEOPLE OF NIGERIA

A lengthy disquisition on the origin of the *Ndi-Igbo* (Igbo people) will become unwieldy for a paper on a religious practice. Much ink has been spilled both by Igbo and non-Igbo scholars in the arduous effort to chronicle the migration and settlements of the Igbo people⁵. It will suffice to briefly navigate the geographical location of Igboland in the light of the present homelands of the Ndi Igbo in parts of the south-eastern and Niger Delta areas of Nigeria. The settled areas are watered by four main rivers: the Niger, the Imo, the Anambra and the Urasi, all of which flow from the north and meander towards the south, emptying themselves into the sea. According to Uchendu,

Four distinct areas may be distinguished: the riverine, the delta, the central and the north-eastern belts. The riverine and the delta belts are served by the Niger and its tributaries; they are low lying, are heavily inundated during the rainy season, and are very fertile. The headwaters of the Imo and Urasi rivers serve the central belt, a relatively high plain which gradually fades into the Okigwe-Agwu plateau⁶.

These areas represent the food-basket of the Igbo nation where yam is eaten in many forms with style and relish. This geography helps to establish why *yam*, this ubiquitous crop that grows in abundance in this region of Nigeria, became a major staple for the people.

The cardinal place accorded to yam in Igbo oral and literary sources cannot be appreciated without a survey of some scholarly views on the *habitat* of the Ndi-Igbo as I have indicated in my methodology section. Romanticized by exotic legends and chronicled in European travel diaries, Igboland, the birthplace of many of Nigeria's ancient traditions and civilizations, is a region blessed with vibrant communities well recognized for their diverse physical and cultural traits, artistic creations, religious festivities and philosophies of life⁷.

According to V.C. Uchendu, the River Niger,

before it enters the Atlantic Ocean through a network of distributaries which characterize its delta, divides the Igbo country into two unequal parts. The greater portion lies in what was (in the post-colonial era)

⁵ Basden, G.T. *Niger Ibos*, (London, Frank Cass 1966); Uchendu, V.C. *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1965); Isichei, E. *A History of the Igbo People*, (London & Basingstoke, Macmillan Press, 1976); Afigbo, A.E.. *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*, (London, Oxford University Press, 1981), 20; Osuchuwku, P- *The Spirit of Umunna and the Development of Small Christian Communities in Igboland*, (European University Studies, Vol. XXIII/544, Frankfurt/Main, Peter Lang, 1995); Orji, M. O. *The History and Culture of the Igbo People (Before the Advent of the Whiteman)*, (Nkpor, Jet Publishers, 1999).

⁶ Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 1

⁷ Onwuejeogwu, M.A. *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom and Hegemony*, (London, Ethiopia Publishing, Company, 1981) 8–10.

called the Eastern Region of Nigeria, while a smaller triangular portion, west of the Niger, was part of Nigeria's fourth – the Midwestern Region⁸.

J.H. Greenberg asserts that the Igbo sub-group formed part of the Niger-Congo Kwa linguistic family who separated or detached themselves from their larger cousins in the area of the Niger-Benue confluence⁹. Uchendu's assertion that the origin of the Igbo remains a subject of much speculation that has come under critical reassessment in recent Igbological discourse is still worrisome. The well-known Igbo historian, A.E. Afigbo, asserts that for over 4,000 years now, the area referred to as Igboland has been inhabited by people¹⁰. Obiora Ike, a modern oral history researcher, corroborates Afigbo's assertion when he admits that the Igbo people, believed to have originated in the area of the Asseler regions and modern Khartoum (the capital of Sudan), "had migrated to their present location in the third millennium before Christ"¹¹. I wish to identify with Afigbo's well-researched information that the Igbo must have set out from the area of Lokoja now in the modern Kogi State of Nigeria.¹² But Peter Osuchukwu, who discountenances the trajectory of Igbo pre-history, agrees with us that Igboland, which is a vast chunk of the Nigerian polity, has long been located in the south-eastern Nigeria¹³. In pre-colonial times, and in the post-independence era, Igbo people, living in the east or in the west, have come to recognize their cultural and psychic identities have re-grouped under a non-partisan political union known as *Oha-Na-Eze Ndi Igbo* (a non-political association for the Igbo) as a strong organ through which they express their solidarity and common interests, and defend and promote Igbo peoples' well-being.

Having cross-checked both oral history and some extant local traditions, there is little doubt that all other foods than *yams* and *fish*, are the common products of that belt, which will have been brought along with the Igbo migrants when they journeyed towards their new settlements in the course of their dispersal. Roasted yam, for example, which was believed to have readily provided sustenance to the earliest settlers, caused yam to receive a beatification of a kind that is preserved in many Igbo beliefs, legends and sacred myths.

⁸ Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, 8.

⁹ Greenberg, J.H. "Studies in African Linguistic Classification: The Niger-Congo Family", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol 5, No.2, 1949, pp. 79–100.

¹⁰ Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 6.

¹¹ Obiora, Ike F. & Edozien Ndidi, N. 2001, *Understanding Africa: Traditional Legal Reasoning Jurisprudence & Justice in Igboland as a Basis for Culturally Rooted and Sustainable Development*, (Enugu, CIDJAP Publications, 2001) 20.

¹² Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*.

¹³ Osuchukwu, *The Spirit of Umunna*, 27.

3. IGBO RELIGION

I consider it quite *à propos* to treat Igbo religion here as a phenomenon which generated a world view from which the Igbo people have derived certain fundamental *Vorurteile – pre-judgments* – that have to a large extent determined their visions and horizons in life¹⁴. This religious epistemology and ontology may help us understand why *Iri Ji Ohuru* has been accepted as a sacred festival in the Igbo calendar. Like all other sub-Saharan Africans, the *Ndi Igbo* have dense religious traditions. The feeling of the sacred is quite a ubiquitous experience in Igboland. Obiora Ike and Ndidi Edozien have succinctly captured the situation. They state that:

The existence of the divine Being and the invincible spirit world is natural to them, and it seems obvious that this Being should have his mysteries because he surpasses human beings and the capacity for human reason. Religion imbues all of life and there is no split between faith and daily living. There is a great openness to mystery. The Igbo do not demarcate between a strictly material, sensual world and a purely spiritual world. In stark contrast to the dualism present in Greek antiquity and Western philosophy, the Igbo view life as a continuum that extends beyond the demise of the material self¹⁵.

These scholars tell us that religion, with its traditional symbols and beliefs, affects all departments of life “without positing any division between the sacred and the profane”¹⁶. The wrath of the gods is held in awe. Evil forests abound and are considered the abode of dangerous spirits, of malignant deities, and of marauding ghosts of wicked persons who have recently died. Such forests have something uncanny and eerie about them, and are not cultivated for yam planting. In many Igbo communities, people do not wander into such forests. Thus, for the Igbo, a religious perception of reality creates a sense of unity in life and directs every activity of an Igbo man or woman to the promotion and protection of ethical principles in the interest of the common good. In the traditional setting, there existed no possibility of a bifurcation between life and religion. It is therefore from this religious background that we can now examine the mythical account of the “donation” of yam as a major and most delicious staple to the Igbo, this forest people.

¹⁴ Onuh, C. O. *Christianity and the Igbo Rites of Passage: The Prospects of Inculturation*, (European University Studies, Vol. XXIII/462, Frankfurt/Main, Peter Lang, 19929, 12–16.

¹⁵ Obiora Ike & Edozien, *Understanding Africa*, 22

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

4. THE EZE NRI MYTH

The origin of yam, the chief among other important staples in Igbo country, is transmitted in a myth that articulates a revelation that Chukwu, the most powerful Spirit of the Igbo¹⁷ communicated to Eze Nri, the divine King of Nriland. Nriland is recognized as the cradle of Igbo civilization and the center of further dispersal. According to Ikenga Emezie Metuh, the mythical narrative goes like this:

Eri, father of Nri, and Nnamaku, his wife, were sent down by Chukwu, a sky God. When Eri came down from the sky, he had to stand on an ant-heap as all the land was then a morass. He complained to Chukwu, who thereupon sent him an Awka blacksmith to dry up the land. While Eri lived, he and his dependants were fed by Chukwu and their food was Azu Igwe, Fish from heaven.

When Eri died, this food supply ceased. Nri complained to Chukwu, but was told that in order to get food he would have to kill and bury his eldest son and daughter. When Nri objected, Chukwu promised to send Dioka from the sky to carve the *ichi* or facial cicatrization marks on the foreheads of the two children. After Dioka arrived and cut the *ichi* on the faces of the two children, Nri cut their throats and buried them in separate graves.

Three native weeks (twelve days) later, shoots appeared from the graves of these two children. From the grave of his son, Nri dug up *yam*. He cooked and ate it and found it so pleasing that he fell into a sleep so deep that his family thought him dead. When he awoke, he told his astonished family what he had done. The next day, Nri dug up cocoyams from his daughter's grave, ate them and likewise slept again. This is why yam is called "son of Nri" and the cocoyam called "daughter of Nri". The first-born son and daughter of Nri are marked to this day with the *ichi* to commemorate the event¹⁸

A longer version of this tradition informs us that Chukwu had ordered Nri to distribute yams, cocoyams and other food items given to him to all the people in Igboland.¹⁹ But Nri, with audacity characteristic of the Igbo, refused. Chukwu

¹⁷ Echema, A. Corporate Personality in Traditional Igbo Society and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, (European University Studies, Vol. XXIII/538, Frankfurt/Main, Peter Lang), 1995, 5.

¹⁸ Metuh, E. E. God and Man in African Religion: A Case of the Igbo of Nigeria, (London, Geoffrey Chapman), 4–5.

¹⁹ Apart from this widespread myth, there are other pocket narratives that explain the origin of yam in different parts of Igboland. One such legend known among the Afikpo people in today's Ebonyi State states that "the yam was the reincarnation of the first son of an Afikpo woman sacrificed on the orders of the oracle, Ibini Ukpabi" (Echeruo 1979: 9). To my mind, this is an etiological account contrived to give credence to the legend about the growth and

had to enter into a deal with him. Chukwu conferred on him the sole right of ritual cleansing of every Igbo village and community of all Nso Ala (abominations) committed in it, of crowning and installing kings, and of tying Ngwulu, ankle cords on candidates for Ozo-title. He also conferred on Nri and his descendants the privilege of making Ogwu-ji, (yam medicine) for Igbo communities living in arid and impoverished areas to ensure a rich yam harvest each year. In return for all these priestly services, all beneficiaries in Igboland paid the people of Nri annual tribute through their Dibia(s) (medicine-men). As a result of this God-man covenant, all Umunri people can travel unarmed through out the length and breadth of Igboland without any fear of personal molestation or attack or theft of their property²⁰.

The etiological narrative of the *Iri Ji Ohuru* ritual is shrouded in mysticism and esotericism. The scientifically minded and rational persons would have problems with some of its components. But the fact remains that here we are dealing with myth – a narrative that celebrates the acceptance of events that had originated at a time that lies outside ordinary time²¹. The gift of yam to the Igbo lies in a distant past and it has been portrayed as an event that happened within a mythical framework. Some of us today, if we were Nri, the progenitor, would no doubt have vowed, instead of killing our children, to let hunger destroy us.

The myth nevertheless conveys a number of messages. Apart from its conferment of divine kingship and spatial hegemony to the Nri kings and their descendants,²² the myth accords the yam and its species a sacred status that carries with it an immense aura of traditional reverence, honour and adoration reserved only to yam by the Igbo since time immemorial. Chinua Achebe alludes in *Things Fall Apart* to the reverence and social economic value that the Igbo, rich or poor, attach to yam when he portrays Okonkwo's visit to a *Di Ji* (a prosperous yam cultivator), Nze Nwakibie, to loan some yams to sow in his farm. Okonkwo's request to Nze Nwakibie reads:

'I have come to you for help,' he said. 'Perhaps you can already guess what it is. I have cleared a farm but have no yams to sow. I know what it is to ask a man to trust another with his yams, especially these days when young men are afraid of hard work. I am not afraid of hard work. The lizard that jumped from a high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did. I began to fend for myself at an age when most people still suck at their mother's breasts. If you give me some yam seeds I shall not fail you.'

abundance of yam in the Afikpo-Abakaliki riverain area of Igboland in the West African coast.

²⁰ Echema, Corporate Personality in Traditional Igbo Society, 57, n.48; 72–75.

²¹ Manus, C.U. 2002, "Gender Bias Against Women In Some Sacred Narratives: Re-Reading the Texts In Our Times", in Ojo, A. (ed.), *Women And Gender Equality for a Better Society in Nigeria*, (Lagos, Federal Government Press), 63–82; 68–71; Parrinder, E.G. *African Mythology*, (London, Oxford University Press, 1975); Soyinka, W. *Myth, Literature and the African World*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976).

²² Parrinder, E.G. Divine Kingship in West Africa, *Numen* 3, 1956, 111–121.

Nwakibie cleared his throat. ‘It pleases me to see a young man like you these days when our youth have gone so soft. Many young men come to me to ask for yams but I have refused because I know they would just dump them in the earth and leave them to be choked by weeds. When I say no to them they think that I am hard-hearted. But it is not so. Eneke the bird says that since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching. I have learnt to be stingy with my yams. But I can trust you. I know it as I look at you. As our fathers said, you can tell a ripe corn by its look. I shall give you twice four hundred yams. Go and prepare your farm²³.

In this piece alone, the word “yam” is employed at least six times, not to mention the number of cognate pronouns in Nwakibie’s positive response. Though a novel, from the text there is an indication that ‘Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop’ in the Igbo world where yam title rites are performed and during which time special titles such as Eze Ji (yam chief), Di Ji (expert yam cultivator), Mbazu Igwe (iron digger), Oji Aka Eri Ala (a specialist hand-weeder of the land) are usually conferred on men who have distinguished themselves as great yam farmers and keepers of large barns (Oba Ji). In addition, the yam’s nutritional constituents that had disposed Nri to fall into sound sleep are still acknowledged by local and international dieticians. A Yam-spirit (Ahianjoku or Ifejoku) was established to take charge of this product of life sustenance.²⁴ The stealing of yam is taboo in the entire Igboland. Digging up planted yam-seedlings is an abomination against the yam deity and Ala, the Earth Goddess, on and from whose bowels the yam grows. Like digging up a buried relative, it is a crime that angers the gods. The findings of one prominent Igbo researcher have attested that the ancestors created the gods and goddesses (especially those of yams and cocoyams) to promote communal morality and to generate wealth and good fortune in society²⁵. Annually, yam comes into the barn at harvest time and goes back to the farm at planting time. This cyclical process constitutes the object of the annual ritual acts of fecundity, generation, and regeneration. Yam’s earliest return in the lunar calendar months of July-August as New Yam (Ji Mmiri) is generally celebrated. The Igbo call it Iri Ji Ohuru. Though a simple ceremony, it is very much respected and annually celebrated all over the Igbo nation. In the next sub-section of this paper, I will present my research findings on how the rite is usually performed in most Igbo communities.

²³ Achebe, Chinua, *Things Fall Apart*, (Heinemann Educational Books, Ibadan, 1958), 15–16.

²⁴ See, V.C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, 1965) 98–99. It is noteworthy that the Yoruba have something similar: *Orisa Oko*: “the deity of the farm, fields, garden, planting, harvest, agriculture and natural fertility”. Cf. *No Author, Music, Dance and Yoruba Culture*, Exhibition Guide, (National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Alesinloye, Ibadan, 2002), 49.

²⁵ Onwuejeogwu, M.A. “Nri, The Holy City”, in Isichei, E. (ed.), *Igbo World*, (London, Macmillan, 1977), 27.

5. EMUME IRI JI OHURU (THE RITUAL CEREMONY)

Iri Ji Ohuru is a thanksgiving festival otherwise known by different names among various sub-ethnic groups in Igboland. The ceremony is variously known as *Emume-Ifejioku*, *Iwa-ji*, *Ime-Ahiaolu*, *Emume-Ahianjoku*, *Iro Ofo* or *Ofala*. According to Uchendu, “each community holds the rite on its market day”²⁶. The rite is celebrated in many Igbo villages in the form that follows: the *Okpala*; that is, the eldest *Oji Ofo* (a person who is held as the most upright and just; the one who commands moral authority in an Igbo community) is the recognized ritual head. The rite is usually performed under an *Ukwu-Egbu* tree, an *Ukwu Abosi*, or an *Ogirisi* tree. On that day, the most fattened yam tubers donated by an accomplished *Di Ji* (*expert yam-cultivator in the community*)²⁷ are displayed. A huge cock, several kola-nuts, kegs of dry gin and jars of palm-wine, alligator peppers and other small ritual items such as *nzu*, (white chalk) *nchara*, (yellow chalk) *edo* (red chalk) are gathered. The ritual master cuts one new yam tuber into four pieces, at the same time praying:

Ji Ohuru nke afo a, anyi n' egbuwa gi taa ta
New Yam of this year, we are cutting you this day
Anyi n' awa gi nga nno,
We are slicing you into four pieces,
Anyi ahula k' i na acha ziri ziri.
We have seen how whitish you are.
Njoku nwe ji, gbara oso bia Njoku,
the yam deity, run come
Gozie ji a, mee k'otu ji muta ano,
Bless this yam, may one tuber become four
N'oba onye obula n'ime anyi.
In the barn of every one of us.
Ndi-ichie lere nu ji ohuru, soro kwe nu rie.
Ancestors, behold the new yam, share the eating with us.
Haa! Amin!

On a four-branched *Otiri* stick, (a red milky stem), the leader sticks the slashed new yam pieces, saying:

Otiri aja, osisi di mma, otutu aja ama ama!

²⁶ The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria, 99.

²⁷ See, F.C. Ogbalu, *Omenala Igbo: The Book of Igbo Custom*, (Onitsha, University Publishing Company, 1979) who, in his Chapter 31, *Ike Ji Arondizuogu*, pp. 90–94, informs us that “Emume nke a bidoro n' obodo Aro Chukwu otutu aro gara aga” – the festival had started many years previously in Aro Chukwu land”. This oral history informs us of the origin of the four market days (Eke, Orié, Afo na Nkwo) in the Igbo week. The days represent the ritual acts performed day after day during the festival that lasts for four days among the Aro. I am inclined to regard this narrative as another genre of etiology composed and widespread to confer on the Aro a high pride of place above the rest of the Igbo.

Otiri the sacrificial plant, beautiful tree, well known sacrifice bearer
Obu aja, anyi etigbuwe ibe ji ohuru ndi a
Carrier of sacrifice, we have stuck unto you these slices of new yam
N'aba gi anno ndi a, bugara ha Igwe,
On your four branches, carry them to Igwe (the Sky god)
K'owere obi ebere mee ka ji anyi agbanwu la,
So that in his mercy he would not allow our yams to wither away
Ka mmiri n' asu, ka ji anyi rue nne buru ibu
So that rain would fall, so that our yams would bear plenty.
K' anuri buru nk' anyi n' afo nkea.
So that we shall rejoice this year,
Haa! Amin!

Then he cuts the throat of the Oke Okpa, (the cockerel), smears the blood on the floor of Nwa Ala Ubi (the yam spirit) shrine. While doing this, he prays:

Ahianjoku Ji, Nwa Ala Ubi, udo o, udo diri gi!
God of Yam, Yam spirit, peace, peace be unto you
Nke a bu Ji Ohuru, Nke a bu okuko anyi nyere gi,
This is New Yam, this is cock we have offered to you.
Bia rie Ji Ohuru k' anyi si eri ya taa
Come to eat New Yam, as we are eating it this day,
Gozie anyi, gozie ezi n' ulo anyi, n' ubi anyi,
Bless us, bless our families and our farms,
Nye anyi Ji n' uju, mee k' obodo anyi
May you grant us plenty of harvest, let our community
Ruputa Ji n' ukwu, nweta Ndi Di Ji n' obodo anyi,
Reap yams in plenty, raise us expert yam owners,
Ndi ogaranya, ndi bara eze site n' olu Ji.
Men of timber and caliber, people who are enriched by their skill in yam production.
Haa! Amin!
Amin!²⁸

Any of these incantations may be sung, chanted or simply be said aloud during the ceremony. In other variants of the ceremony as practised in other Igbo communities, the master blesses and thanks *Chukwu* (the Igbo High God) who has given yam to the Igbo people. In some other villages, the ritualist may evoke the spirits of *Ndi Ichie* (ancestors) and pray them to continue to intercede with the homesteads in their quest for *Vital life* to promote longevity and prosperity in the community. He acknowledges *Ala* the *Mother* of peace (udo), of fertility

²⁸ The three oral texts were recited to me by two elders: (Pa Onyeocha Udenkwo and Pa Njoku Amadi; aged 72 and 77 years respectively) on 1–7 February 2006 when I made another visit home to enquire further about the form and nature of the festival and its liturgy before the advent of Christianity in the village.

(omumu) and as the custodian of morality in the land (*Onye nchekota omume oma*) “and the controller of fortune and economic life”²⁹. He prays to the yam deity, *Ahianjoku* to continue to prosper the growth and cultivation of yam in Igboland. With other prayers for good health, protection against diseases and infertility of land, people and domestic animals, he terminates his rogatory imprecations with the pouring of a libation, at which moment he faces his cup *homewards*, a ritual act that indicates that the wish of the blessings prayed for should directly come homewards to meet all and sundry in the larger community at the point of their needs. All the people show their approval with an extended chorus: *Haa!* (Amin).

At this point, the elders and shrine attendants retire with the immolated cock and the remaining portions of the sliced yam. Some slices are roasted and eaten hot with red palm oil. The rest are boiled with the chicken for the elders to consume as New Yam Pepper Soup (*Ira Miri Ji Awayi – drinking the pepper soup of sliced yams*) as a commensal food. This is the end of the communal ritual part of the festival. It is known as *Iwa-Ji* or *Ira Ibe* among some Igbo sub-groups³⁰.

From the structure of this ceremony (*emume*) one can see that it is an adult male ritual that takes place in an open space under the shade of a sacred tree often located at the exit of or the entrance to the *Ogbe*, the kindred house-clusters or village. The festival marks the beginning of the first harvest and the eating of new and fresh yams in most Igbo homesteads. It is an appeasement ritual with thankful prayers in a rite marked by the slaughtering of live animals, the pouring of libations and the invocation of the ancestral spirits and the local divinities. The presence of women at the shrine ground is forbidden. The explanation of the physical absence of women at the ritual ground can be deduced from the mythical narration of the origin of yam in the Igbo socio-religious world view, which tells that God only gave a man the “gift” of yams. In addition, Igbo society has been highly patriarchal and yam was regarded, as my sources above have indicated, as a man’s chief crop.

The climax of the thanksgiving ceremony is the cooking and commensal consumption of boiled yams with chicken-pepper soup. Women cook the food and prepare *Ugba* (*Oil beans*), while the men bring palm-wine. The youths clear the village pathways. There is much drinking and eating in groups. Privately, every adult male in the community performs his own ritual to the extent that he can afford in his own home. Family-groups are involved in the prayers, singing, eating and drinking. Goats and rams are killed on the day. *Umuada* or *Umumgboto* (that is, daughters of the community married in other villages) also attend. Echema rightly attests that the *Umuada* group is “a very powerful and strong force to reckon with” in Igbo society³¹. They grace the occasion with their husbands and children. Many of them bring food and wine to their

²⁹ Echeme, Corporate Personality in Traditional Igbo Society, 11.

³⁰ Onumarekwu Agwamba, April 2004.

³¹ Echema, Corporate Personality, 32.

immediate relatives. Guests come from neighboring villages as the ceremony is not performed on the same day throughout Igboland. The day is greeted with jubilant celebrations. Communal and musical entertainment groups and masquerade troupes display their dances and acrobatic skills. It is really a thanksgiving celebration in which the whole community participates³². This happens because “the traditional Igbo culture is community oriented”.³³ As *Umunna*, a people who “trace their unity to a single ancestor”, they re-validate their unity by worshipping and sharing food together³⁴.

6. THE REACTION OF THE MISSIONARIES TO THE *IRI JI OHURU* CULTURE

The missionaries who came to Igboland in the late nineteenth century encountered this annual festival with mixed feelings. They frowned on its manifestations and wondered why it attracted practically all members of the community. For this and other customs, they considered the Igbo to be beyond the pale of God’s salvation. The *Iri Ji Festival* was among the cultural practices considered to be incompatible with the doctrines of Christianity. They insisted that the land must be Europeanized before Christianity could take firm root. So they undertook a systematic iconoclastic approach to eliminate or suppress Igbo traditional religious practices. One of their strategies was to introduce Western education through the so-called “bush schools” built in remote villages³⁵. According to Fr. Lejeune, a French missionary at Onitsha, “he who has the school has the nation and the key to the people’s future”³⁶. But when the farmer’s son went to school, he learned so brilliantly that instead of destroying his culture, education opened his eyes and made him a protagonist-cum-political jingoist. Men like late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chief Mbonu Ojike, Mazi Alvan Ikoku and Dr. Michael Okpara emerged from the “bush schools” to join hands with other notable Nigerian freedom fighters such as the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo in the south-west to pioneer the struggle for Nigeria’s political independence. The missionaries least expected this occurrence.

When festivals like *Iri Ji Ohuru* and others continued to challenge the colonialists’ interests, they contrived another tactic to exhibit their negative attitude to Igbo culture. They created separate communities for newly baptized people. This was intended to shield them from contamination by local cultures. The Roman Catholics set up such “homelands” in Aguleri and Obosi as well as

³² Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast*, 99.

³³ Osuchukwu, *The Spirit of Umunna*, 33.

³⁴ For a detailed ethnological information on *Umunna/Umunne* in Igbo life and culture, see Peter Osuchukwu, *The Spirit of Umunna*, 33–49.

³⁵ Uchendu, *The Igbo of Southeast*, 4.

³⁶ Eneh, E.S. “Evangelization in Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province: An Appraisal”, in *The Insight*, Vol. II, No. 2, 1985/86, 4–6, 4.

in other surrounding villages near Onitsha and called them “Christian Villages”. Such villages were far removed from the people and made politically autonomous from the surrounding traditional villages. The Protestants called their own projects “Mission Villages” but located them within the traditional villages around their church compounds. The people who were settled in the so-called “Christian/Mission Villages” were forbidden to have contact with their non-Christian kith and kin. They were mandated to put into practice “Christian behavior” which most of the time implied living like Europeans and adopting European ways of doing things. But the real purpose of these ‘Christian cells’ was to create a Christian civilization in Igboland that would eventually hasten the breakdown of the traditional social order and the eventual demise of the people’s culture. But adherence to such religious festivals as *Iri Ji Ohuru* and *Ikwa Ozu Nkwa n’Abo* (Second Burial) promoted the emergence of a class of stragglers from the “cell” centers. These true “sons of the soil” constantly sneaked out into the traditional villages to participate clandestinely in the local ceremonies. Their activities reflect the tenacity with which the average Igbo holds to the *Iri Ji Ohuru* custom and its festival. Indeed, *Iri Ji Ohuru* and others like it created conflicts and tensions between the traditional villagers and the missionaries. Once again, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* graphically depicts and epitomizes this “chance encounter between Europe and Africa during the imperial-colonial period”³⁷. *Iri Ji Ohuru* and Igbo people’s *long throat* for new yams could be regarded as practices and values that ruined the establishment of the exemplar “mission villages” in the colonial church east of the Niger.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FESTIVAL FOR OUR AGE

At this stage, we can ask the question: what may be the social significance of this festival in the age in which we live and have our being, particularly in present-day Nigeria? This sort of existential question is occasioned by the fact that for many Igbo people, *Iri Ji Ohuru Festival* ranks as the most esteemed of Igbo festivals. On July 26, 2003, Nzuko Umuigbo (Gathering of Igbo Children) Germany e.V. celebrated *Iri Ji Ohuru* in the diaspora. In the USA, Igbo businesswomen and businessmen, students and their African American friends who identify themselves with the Igbo people perform the festival annually. In Houston, Texas, alone, where the Igbo number more than half a million, the festival is enjoyed as at any Igbo community in eastern Nigeria. On August 13, 2005, the Igbo Community in Belgium held a rousing social gathering in cooperation with the representatives of the City of Antwerp and in the presence

³⁷ Killam, G.D. *The Writings of Chinua Achebe*, Studies in African Literature, London, Heinemann, 1982 Reprint, 2.

of the Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the Kingdom of Belgium, Mr. Clarkson Nwakanma Umelo and his entourage to celebrate *Iri Ji Ohuru*, at which occasion I was invited to officiate as the “ritual cutter” of that year’s new yam. Thus, the ceremony has become a worldwide festival. It can therefore be argued that an outstanding aspect of the festival is the fascination it exercises for all Igbo people throughout the world. The celebration depicts the Igbo race as a religious people, a people who annually acknowledge their duty to return gratitude to *Chukwu*, their God, for providing them with such a gratuitous gift as yam, a major food that satisfies their gastronomic requirements by ensuring their physical and material well-being. The festival reminds us that the Igbo people cherish the bounteous gifts of nature; especially those products that have sustained their lives over the years and have enriched some members of their community, enabling them to become *Ndi Ogaranya bara Eze* (rich and wealthy men) in traditional Igbo society before the advent of British currency and a market economy.

Furthermore, the *Iri Ji Ohuru Festival* reminds us that every Igbo man or woman has a religious obligation to cultivate yams, however small and whatever the species. The annual appearance of *Ji Ohuru* proclaims an eschatological message in the Igbo religious world. It reminds the Igbo that life’s cycle is like that of a yam tuber. Like humankind, the yam lives on in the barn (*Oba*). When planted in the ground it rots, yet it regenerates and produces new tubers. Like yam, the Igbo recognize humankind’s trajectory in life to be born, to grow, to reach maturity and old age, to die and to regenerate among one’s own as a necessary fact. For the Igbo, there is a strong belief in life-after-life. The phenomenon directs attention to the Igbo belief in the cyclic return to new life. This culminates in a belief in re-incarnation. This has generally been acknowledged by contemporary Igbologists as the epicenter of Igbo ontology. The Igbo believe that one who has died at a ripe age and who had lived a morally upright life returns at birth as a baby to her or his family members, especially to married sons and daughters. The belief is validated by the names: *Nnenna (mother of the father)* – a girl born soon after the death of the father’s mother is believed to be her reincarnation, *Nnanna (father of the father)* – a son born soon after the demise of the father is believed to be the reincarnated father: *Amaeshi (the gate of the home shall not be closed)* – a boy born soon after the death of the father who is believed to have come to continue the family’s lineage. This mystery has been challenged by Christian orthodoxy and eschatology to the chagrin of many Igbo theologians.

The communal get-together and the sharing of food together that *Iri Ji Ohuru Festival* re-enacts reflect the typical Igbo communitarian experience of the philosophy of *Umunna wu ike* (power is great when we are together). Communal eating remains a cherished value among the Igbo people. It is through eating together that Igbo people come to renew their commitment to the primacy and sacrosanctity of the blood bond and the significance of consanguine relationships in the kin group. He who refuses to eat together with his *Umunna* is looked upon as dubious and malicious (*Opa nshi*). It is in eating and drinking

together that the Igbo celebrate their sisterhood and brotherhood ties. It is at such gatherings that they know persons who are deviants in the community.³⁸ This spirit of solidarity and sharing in commensal meals have made the Igbo well disposed to accept the Christian doctrine of Holy Communion preached in Igboland by missionaries. In this sort of festivals, yams, oil beans, meat and palm wine are drunk by the living in communion with the living-dead (the *Communio Mortuorum*). Both commingle and share the fruits and products that God has planted in Igbo farm- and forest land. In such community gatherings, the people join hands with their priests to bless the Igbo world for continued human reproduction and terrestrial fertility. In re-enacting the ancient festival, the Igbo people honour God, the creator of the Earth to whose abode all shall be retired/committed at death and the wish for a *Redivivus*.

What values does this festival portend for the contemporary Igbo people in the Nigerian socio-economic and religio-political spheres? Many are the proverbs, folk tales, legends and wise sayings associated with yams among the Igbo. Proverbs that epitomize pre-literary philosophies and Igbo identification with nature need to be rediscovered for our age. The psychodynamics of primary and oral cultures of the Igbo with no knowledge whatsoever of writing and where the thought forms of primary orality made explicit in the ritualist's incantations reveal the distinctive psychodynamics of the orally constituted mind of the Igbo in preference of those of the technology of writing and modern print. This phenomenon remains a value that Igbo oral culture can lend to African scholars in literary criticism and the textual hermeneutics of the Bible, as is being done by Western biblical scholars.³⁹ Igbo orality stands out as a viable means of reconstructing an ancient heritage in order to assist the contemporary woman/man in their quest for a truly oral hermeneutic in life (Manus 2003)⁴⁰. In addition, the discovery, cultivation and communal eating of yam are activities fully loaded with ideological principles. And these inherent principles have epistemological values that the Igbo must constantly be made aware of in order to boost their quest for leadership in the contemporary Nigerian polity. The Igbo whose ancestors had been fed with yams instead of dependence on "fish from heaven" cannot grow lazy in the contemporary social

³⁸ Chinua Achebe so graphically articulates the experience when he depicts the foible of that Igbo man who, after assiduously dismantling a mound of pounded yam (fufu), discovers with a welcoming salutation, his friend who was engaging from the other side.

³⁹ B. Gerhardsson, *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (CN 20, Lund: Gleerup/Copenhagen, Munksgaard 1964); W.H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1983; K.E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Critical Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984); O. Anderson, "'Oral Tradition', Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition" in *JSNT Sup 64* ed. H. Wainsbrough, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991) 17–58; S. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT 123: Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

⁴⁰ C.U. Manus, *Intercultural Hermeneutics in Africa: Methods and Approaches*, (Nairobi, Acton Publishers, 2003)

political culture in spite of whatever doping effect yams may have. Today, the Igbo must stand on their feet to re-claim their ancient heritage in Nigeria. A major lesson of the *Iri Ji Ohuru* ceremony is that the Igbo man/woman must strive to excel in any enterprise she/he invests her/his talents in. The bountiful production of yams in ancient Igboland with crude implements reminds her/him of the industry and diligence that had hardened the sinews of her/his ancestors. This is the reality that enabled the Igbo progenitors to inspire later generations with the spirit of hard work. The industry of the *Di Ji* of yesteryears must be replicated in various skills and expertise the postmodern age requires of the Igbo. They must join the course being championed by the latest advancements in biotechnology required to revolutionize modern agriculture, cultivation and marketability of yams. To achieve this ambition, the Igbo must curtail over-dependence on oil, since the present oil-driven economy in Nigeria can easily be subverted by unexpected winds of change tomorrow. In fact, the unstoppable crises in the Niger Delta, the main oil-producing region in Nigeria, are definite signs of the time and a “hand-writing on the wall” of woes if agriculture continues to be neglected.

The socio-religious and theological lessons of the epiphany of yams in the Igbo world are indeed far-reaching. The cyclic character and destiny of yam reminds Igbo Christians of the implications of the Christian doctrine of Holy Communion, the Resurrection and *koinonia* (fellowship) that characterize a community gathering around the Table of the Lord as a People of God in Africa. As members of an increasingly inculturating Church, the gregarious components and structure of the rite yearn for adaptation and assumption into the Christian liturgy so that the *Iri Ji Ohuru Festival* can become fully Christianized to prosper the liturgical activities of the Basic Christian Communities in the Igbo Church during the annual festival months.

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