



Original Research Article

Archaeology, Cultural Identity and the Politics of Interpretation among the Igbo of Nigeria: The Facts and Myths in Igbo-Ukwu Archaeological Excavations

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The present paper represents a historical approach to the re-interpretation of Thurstan Shaw's excavations at Igbo-Ukwu against the background of Onwuejeogwu's thesis of Nri hegemony. It should be recalled that Onwuejeogwu, an anthropologist, was originally detailed to carry out the ethnographic follow-up research on Thurstan Shaw's excavations at Igbo-Ukwu. This theory has posited that the culture-bearers of the three archaeological sites excavated by Prof. Thurstan Shaw at Igbo-Ukwu were the Nri sub-culture group of the Igbo. By this theory, which is based on M.D.W. Jeffreys' earlier theory of Umuonri cultural hegemonic hypothesis, Onwuejeogwu subsequently hazards the theory that whatever culture is defined today as Igbo owes its origin to the Umuonri, who by their own account of origin, migration and settlement were not originally Igbo in extraction but Igala, an ethnic group northwest of Igboland. This hegemonic theory thus in broader sense tends to question the authenticity of the Igbo identity of the artefacts excavated at Igbo-Ukwu. This position in consequence generated a heated historical controversy not only among Igbo scholars but also among the various communities associated with the interpretation of excavation sites. It is indeed part of this controversy that this paper intends to resolve using a historical approach.

Keywords: Igboland, Igbo-Ukwu, Archaeology, Nri, History.

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Article History

Received: 17th December 2020

Accepted: 17th February 2021

Published: 30th April 2021

Cite Article:

Nwaezeigwe, N. T. (2021). Archaeology, Cultural Identity and the Politics of Interpretation among the Igbo of Nigeria: The Facts and Myths in Igbo-Ukwu Archaeological Excavations. *Journal of Culture, History and Archaeology*, 1(2): 11-25.

INTRODUCTION

The Nri, known also as the Umuonri, are part of the northern Igbo sub-culture group. The major settlements that make up this sub-culture group include the Nri main which has a divine kingship as well as being the centre of ritual activities, Enugwu-Ukwu, Nawfia, Enugwu-Agidi, Nnokwa and Oraeri which also has another divine kingship. The Umuonri are an off-shoot of another wider sub-group called Umueri. The other towns that joined the Umuonri group to form the Umueri include Aguleri, Umuleri (Umueri), Nteje, Igboariam (Igbariam), and Amanuke.¹

¹Evidence of Ekegbeli Ajide, C. 75, Ozo title holder, farmer and wood carver, Okpu-Ivite quarters, Aguleri, 15 May, 1992.

Historically, the Nri were one of the many itinerant Igbo sub-groups that coloured the socio-economic and religious terrains of pre-colonial Igboland. The other sub-groups that engaged in itinerant rituo-economic activities include the Aro Oracular agents and slave traders, the Awka Oracular agents and blacksmiths, the Nkwere and Abiriba blacksmiths, the Umunoha and Ozuzu Oracular agents, as well as the Iusu Long-distant commodity traders.

The Nri on their own part were mainly known for their ritual activities which included *Ikpu-Alu* (cleansing of abominations) and external agents of Ozo title initiation ceremonies in which their roles mainly revolved round the tying of ankle-cord title insignia on the initiates. Thus the ritual content of their trade as well as their link with the Igbo process of socio-political differentiation roles would too soon place them on an exclusive social pedestal that consequently earned them the status of spiritual agents among their Igbo Kinsmen. This special reverence was quickly noted by the British Colonial officials after the conquest and imposition of colonial administration in Igboland; who were then burdened with the problem of seeking an appropriate means of placing the restive politically decentralized Igbo ethnic group under the indirect colonial rule system. Fascinated thus, the Colonial officials began to build a hypothesis of a pristine Nri Kingdom as the basic source of such overwhelming reverence.

One of the earliest European Colonial writers to initiate this hypothesis was Major Arthur Glyn Leonard who, in his work, *The Lower Niger and It's Tribes*, originally published in 1906, revealed to the inquisitive British Colonial officers the character of Nri activities. As he succinctly put it:

“The reference and precedence which is accorded to the Nri section by all the other Ibo clans proper in their vicinity, is evidence in favour of the belief which prevails among them, that the later are descended from the former. For when all the circumstances in connection with the matter are inquired into, it is quite evident that the homage in question has nothing whatever to do with considerations arising from social and commercial intercourse or from any question of martial or material supremacy because the Nri are now not only more or less scattered, but are in no sense either a powerful or war-like family; but on the contrary, because it is acknowledged that they are the highest representatives of sacredotalism in the Ibo race, an office carrying with it certain sacred attributes

which has undoubtedly been handed down to them as an ancestral heirloom by virtue of the law of primogeniture”²

Leonard however concluded by stating quite critically that:

“Yet with the exception of this proverb “the streets of the Nri family are the streets of the gods, through which all who die in other parts of Ibo land pass to the land of the spirit”, there are no conditions of any kind in support of this”³

Leonard's descriptive analysis being the earliest detailed account of Nri ritual activities soon became the point of reference by subsequent European Colonial writers and investigators, notable among them being Northcote W. Thomas, Percy Amaury Talbot and M.D.W. Jeffreys (Thomas, 1914; Jeffreys, 1935, 1936; Talbot, 1969). They were later followed by M.A. Onwuejeogwu who developed Jeffreys' hypothesis to the level of a theory of a dominant Nri culture, kingdom and hegemony among the Igbo (Onwuejeogwu, 1981), and then Thurstan Shaw whose interpretation of his archaeological excavations at Igbo-Ukwu was predicated on the same theory of Nri culture, kingdom and hegemony (Shaw, 1970). Onwuejeogwu's work was later followed by that of the present author, who critically reappraised the previous positions using historical methods and sources (Nwaezeigwe, 2007).

COLONIALISM AND THE GENESIS OF NRI HEGEMONIC HYPOTHESIS

The genesis of what is presently defined as Nri hegemony is traceable to the pattern of early British administration of Northern Nigeria. The British conqueror Lord Frederick Lugard had, on his penetration and eventual conquest of Northern Nigeria, discovered that it would be difficult, for want of adequate personnel and funds to administer the vast territory directly. Thus encouraged by the well-structured Emirate system of government in most parts of the region the British colonial *avant garde* resolved to introduce the indirect rule system. “Its essential features” as James Coleman puts it:

“were the preservation of traditional political institutions and their adaptation, under the

²Arthur Glyn Leonard (1906;1968). *The Lower Niger and its Tribes* London: Frank Cass, p. 34.

³Leonard, *The Lower Niger and its Tribes*, p. 34.

tutelage and direction of the British administration, to the requirements of modern units of local government" (Coleman, 1971).

The indirect rule system worked remarkably well in Northern Region, especially in those areas dominated by the Hausa-Fulani and allied groups. However when an attempt was made to introduce it in the southern part of the country, it met a political brick-wall. While it recorded minimal success in the Western part, in the east it met an outright failure (Coleman, 1971).

But Professor Adiele Afigbo has strongly frowned at both the claim that indirect rule was first introduced in Nigeria by Lord Lugard and that its first experience was in Northern Nigeria. He argued that against popular opinion, the system was instead first introduced in Nigeria in 1891 when the British introduced effective rule in the Oil Rivers Protectorate. Quoting an official Government instruction to the Commissioner and Consul-General Sir Claude Macdonald on the pattern of territorial administration to be adopted, Afigbo wrote:

"To guide him in the execution of his duties, the Foreign Office, under which this territory was being administered, issued 'general Instructions' defining the extent of his responsibilities. With regard to local government, this document asked Macdonald not to interfere unduly with 'tribal government' of the peoples of the protectorate, but allow the local chiefs to continue to rule their peoples and to administer justice to them in traditional fashion. The new administration, however, was to keep a vigilant watch over the chiefs and their functionaries in order to prevent injustice and check abuse" (Afigbo, 1972).

Although the present study is not intended as a critique of the indirect rule system, it is only instructive that one should observe the differing lines of opinion in respect of its geo-cultural adaptability. Be that as it may, the basic fact is that the system failed to work in Eastern Nigeria, much as it did in Northern Nigeria, and worked minimally in Western Nigeria. One basic reason for this failure was the lack of widely accepted centralized form of traditional administration. In supporting this basic fact, Afigbo himself has written:

"One striking characteristic of the Ibo, Ibibio, Ijo and Ogoja peoples at the time of British advent was their political decentralization.

There is no evidence that any of these peoples or sections of them ever evolved, or formed part of, even a loosely integrated empire or state of any remarkable size. Instead each of these peoples was split into a large number of tiny, politically equivalent and autonomous units. Though none of these units was either isolated or self-sufficient, each had its own names, its own land, its own shrines, and religious ceremonies, its own markets, warriors, political institutions and all those attributes which would enable it to pursue its own way in the event of estrangement from its neighbours. This lack of large-scale political integration by the Ibo and their neighbours has attracted the attention of many outsiders, administrators and professional Anthropologists alike" (Afigbo, 1972).

But as K. O. Dike earlier stated although:

"The social organization of the tribes south-east of the Niger- the Ibos, Ibibios, Ekoi, Ijaws, and Efiks has often been described as lacking in cohesion and as being low in the scale of political organization, especially when compared to the highly centralized monarchies and states of Western pattern. There is really no scientific basis for such comparison, as modern ethnographers have repeatedly emphasized" (Dike, 1956).

He further concluded by stating that:

"Beneath the apparent fragmentation of authority lay deep fundamental unities not only in religious and cultural spheres, but also, as has been indicated, in matters of politics and economics" (Dike, 1956).

This idea of "deep fundamental unities" underlying "beneath the apparent fragmentation of authorities", even though expressly noted much later, could indeed have been the basis for the Colonial administration's decision to send an army of colonial anthropologists to investigate the status of the Igbo society on that account. This was coming on the heels of the Aba Women's riot of 1929, which was a protest against the indirect rule system in Eastern Nigeria (Afigbo, 1966).

Based probably on the account of such earlier writers as

Major Arthur Glyn Leonard⁴, Northcote W. Thomas⁵, the Colonial administration commissioned a number of anthropologists, chief among whom was Dr. M. D. W. Jeffreys to investigate the possibility of a remote Nri political superintendence over a large portion of the Igbo territory. Jeffreys clearly defined the main objective of their mission when he wrote:

“...official instructions were that investigations were to be conducted with a view to administrative utility rather than from an academic stand point”.⁶

The point here is that because of the holistic content of the African culture, treating one aspect in isolation of the other or others is bound to create a faulty ground of analysis and eventual conclusion. Thus it did not come as a surprise that Jeffreys, after acknowledging the efforts of such people as N. W. Thomas, Archdeacon G. T. Basden, H. F. Matthews in addition to such Colonial District officers in Awka as Lynch, Lawton, John Ross and Tovey, concluded quite disappointedly in these words:

“None of these investigators discovered any organization that linked a number of towns under one administrative or executive head...”⁷

But it remains to be acknowledged and well commended that in the course of this intellectual voyage of political Eldorado by the colonial anthropologists, Jeffreys produced more than enough harvest of works in the form of intelligence reports, doctoral thesis, and scholarly journal articles which no doubt put him clearly on the saddle of the guru of Umunri colonial studies of his time. However, one of his shortcomings was his tendency to base the interpretations of his works on C. G. Seligman's contentious Hamitic hypothesis, which soon became the fulcrum on which later studies on the Nri stood, could not therefore be in doubt.

It should be recalled that Seligman has stated in his book, famous for its characteristic supportive stance on European colonialism in Black Africa that:

“The civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites, its history the record of these peoples and of their interactions with the two other African stocks, the Nigro and the Bushmen, whether this influence was exerted by highly civilized Egyptians or by such wider pastoralists as are represented at the present day by the Beja and the Somali.”⁸

That Seligman had profound influence on the outcome of Jeffreys' research on the Umunri could obviously be detected by his attempt to link the *Ichi* title facial scarification insignia to Egyptian origin, which he quite erroneously linked with the Nri. As he put it:

“The Ibo evidence in support of an independent invention is nil. The Umunri group claim to have migrated to the present sites from the north and to be a branch of the Igala. The Igala ruling group claims to have come from the Jukun and the Jukun derive from the east” (Jeffreys, 1951).

The major weakness of the above hypothesis by Jeffreys is that even among the Igala ethnic group the culture of *Ichi* facial scarification as well as social title institution do not exist. The only exceptions in this regard are the Ibaji sub-group of the Igala who, although claim Igala identity could rightly be described as Igala-Igbo in identity and origin by the fact of their bilingualism and extant Igbo cultural elements such as title-taking; yet without the *Ichi* title and scarification as part of their title complex.

THE NRI AND IGBO-UKWU EXCAVATIONS

The history of Igbo-Ukwu archaeological discoveries began in 1938 when a man called Isaiah Anozie, in the process of constructing a water cistern in his compound unearthed some strange bronze objects. This chance archaeological discovery soon attracted the attention of the public and subsequently the Colonial administration.

In 1958, that was twenty years after the discovery, Professor Thurstan Shaw was commissioned to carry out excavations on the site of those discoveries. He undertook this assignment between 1958 and 1964. On the whole, three sites were excavated, each with considerable presence of artifacts of great historical significance. The artifacts were

⁴ Leonard, *The Lower Niger and its Tribes*, p. 37.

⁵ Thomas, *Anthropological Report of the Ibo Speaking Peoples of Southern Nigeria: Part 1*, p. 50.

⁶ National Archives Enugu (N.A.E.): EP8766CSE1/85/4596/1931, ‘Awka Divisional Intelligence Report’ by M. D. W. Jeffreys.

⁷ National Archives Enugu, ‘Awka Intelligence Report’ by Jeffreys.

⁸ C. G. Seligman (1930; 1966). *Races of Africa* London: Oxford University Press, p. 61.

dated to about the 9th century A.D by carbon -14 relative Dating Method. These sites were *Igbo Isaiah* which was interpreted as a storehouse of ceremonial regalia, *Igbo Richard* – believed initially to be the burial chamber of an Eze-Nri; while the third, *Igbo Jona* was interpreted as a disposal pit (Shaw, 1970).

In interpreting the sites, Professor Shaw was faced with the problem of inadequate supporting ethnographic facts on the area of his investigation, as there was no immediate follow-up ethnographic study on the discoveries. Expressing this problem, Shaw wrote:

“A third difficulty at the moment of writing is that the ethnographic work in connection with the Igbo-Ukwu finds, which it is hoped would have been completed by now, has only just begun, with the result that its result cannot, unfortunately be incorporated in the volumes” (Shaw, 1970).

Thus, at the time the excavation report was published in 1970, it has no post-excavation ethnographic study on the artifacts. Indeed Shaw was to rely wholesomely on M.D.W. Jeffreys' earlier ethnographic hypothesis of Nri culture, kingdom and hegemony. According to this hypothesis, most of the significant aspects of Igbo culture were derived from the Nri sub-culture group, who were said to be of a different and superior racial stock among the Igbo⁹. Hence Shaw wasted no time in ascribing the Igbo-Ukwu finds to Umunri origin, a supposedly superior Igbo stock.

If we go by Jeffrey's hypothesis therefore, it simply means that every fundamental cultural strand of the Igbo owes its origin to Egyptian influence. In other words upholding the 'Hamitic hypothesis' as propounded by C.G Seligma. It was therefore not surprising to see Professor Shaw associating both the *Igbo Isaiah* and *Igbo Richard* with the office of the *Eze-Nri* (Nri- Kingship).

In interpreting the *Igbo Richard*, Shaw tries to draw parallel with the burial of a Red-Cap Chief from Ibusa, a town situated west of the River Niger, which was reported by the French missionary, F.M. Friedrich of the *Societies Missions d' Africain* (SMA) (Friedrich, 1907). He subsequently tries to interpret the burial chamber found in *Igbo Richard* as that of the *Eze-Nri* (Shaw, 1970). Shaw further goes to equally connect the articles said to have been stored in *Igbo Isaiah* to the Nri monarch. He thus writes:

“The parallels with what was found in the

burial chamber of Igbo Richard were as obvious as the differences are interesting. It is tempting to suppose that there has been a basic continuity of underlying ideas, but a modification of details in the course of centuries. Nor is it difficult to envisage the vessels and regalia found stored at Igbo Isaiah having been used in connection with the exercise of the office of an Eze-Nri in the past” (Shaw, 1970).

However, in subsequent report Shaw modified his interpretation to fall in line with the then emerging results of ethnographic investigations carried out by M.A. Onwuejeogwu, the anthropologist detailed to carry out the follow-up ethnographic studies on the excavations (Shaw, 1977). In this report, Shaw associated both *Igbo Richard* and *Igbo Isaiah* with the office of an Ozo title noble, although he still maintained the link between the *Eze-Nri* and *Igbo Isaiah*. Thus as he put it:

“According to Michael Onwuejeogwu the burial of an Eze-Nri both at Nri and Oreri was a less elaborate process than for other titled men, but very secretive and symbolic. The burial of Ozo man, and especially Okpala titled men in Oreri was a most elaborate process that involved pompous public burial in which there likely to be that of an Ozo man or that of an Okpala title Eze-Nri (sic). Similarly, it is not difficult to envisage that vessels and regalia found stored in the repository in Isaiah Anozie's compound as having been used in connection with the exercise of the office of an Eze-Nri or a very rich Ozo man” (Shaw, 1977).

However, being that the Ozo title system according to M. D. W. Jeffreys remained within the orbit of Umunri culture complex, there was no attempt by Thurstan Shaw to question the identity of the culture-bearers.

Although Thurstan Shaw's findings attracted a lot of varying reactions from a cross-section of African scholars after publication, among whom were A.E. Afigbo, Babatunde Lawal, M. Posnansky, and Frank Willet (Afigbo, 1971; Lawal, 1971; Willet, 1972; Posnansky, 1973), the issues raised by them, apart from having been answered in a subsequent writing by Shaw (Shaw, 1976), dwelt mainly on matters that revolve round the significance of the archaeological finds, dating problems, technology and economy. None of them however, ventured into the seemingly difficult ethnographic

⁹ Jeffreys, N.A.E.1/85/4596B, Anthropological Report on the Umundri Vol. II: 1932-1933.

aspect of the interpretations.

Be it as it may, it appears even more surprising to note that the expected follow-up ethnographic investigations carried out by Onwuejeogwu, later a Professor of Anthropology, which was the source of Thurstan Shaw's later re-interpretation, seem to have provided less supportive evidence for an independent Igbo interpretation of the site. Much of the evidence which quite often revolve round the office of *Eze-Nri of Nri town*, appear to be highly hypothetical when considered in the context of the existing body of historical evidence. Even within Nri settlement itself, where the two sections of the settlement- Agukwu and Akamkpisi have been engaged in a protracted tussle over the *Eze-Nri* stool since 1976, his thesis appears to be in contrast to the generally accepted tradition of Nri history.

From the accounts of Nri traditional historians, it was obvious that the Nri as a group were not the original settlers of the said historic Nri town, but met on arrival, a number of aboriginal Igbo groups in the location.¹⁰ The account equally revealed that at the time of the Umunri arrival the aboriginal Igbo groups were already fully developed in those aspects of Igbo culture later to be defined as originating from the Umunri immigrants, especially the *Ozo* title system and *Ikpe-alu* – cleansing of abomination. Thus contrary to the widely held view that the origin of the *Ozo* title in Igboland is traced to the Nri, the oral tradition of the people not only refuted the claim but goes further to name the first Nri to be initiated into the title by the aboriginal settlers.

B. I. O. Odinanwa, a local Nri historian was not mincing words in this claim when he wrote:

“The new arrivals were delighted to discover that the ‘ofò’ trees abound in Umudiana, and that the people were using the ofò for the same purpose as they the newcomers. It was then possible for this batch of Nri people to continue the performance of the title of ‘ichi’ ‘ozo’. The Umudiana supplied the ‘ofò’ while the newcomers supplied the ‘Alo’. With the ofò and the alo, Chief Okpobe from Uruofolo was the first person to perform the ‘ozo’ title and earned for his village the name ‘Uruofò-na-alo’, shortened as Uruofolo. Up to this date, anyone who wants to get the true staff of justice; ‘OfòNri’ must get it from Umudiana. *Ofò* got from any other place is

known as *ofòisi* (blind ofò) (Odinanwa, 1987)¹¹.

From the underlying facts of the last paragraph of the above statement, it becomes clear that the aboriginal Umudiana hold the ace to what constitutes the authority to grant the right to *ozo* title-taking. It should be further noted that Onwuejeogwu had stated in his major thesis on “Nri culture, kingdom and hegemony among the Igbo” that:

“Owing to the profound influence that Nri exerted on the development of some Igbo cultures, it is almost impossible to isolate what derives from Nri culture from what derives from other Igbo cultures. But it is generally accepted that the distinctive features of Nri culture are the Nri title complex, which is epitomized in a hierarchy of titles, such as the *Ichi*, *Ozo*, *Nmuo*, *Ifejoku* and the ideology of abomination... The Nri title complex and/or their religious ideology are found in one form or another, probably as a result of centuries of dissemination by the Nri people” (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

Onwuejeogwu's conclusion as stated above might have been strongly influenced by Jeffreys' hypothesis rather than the evidence of his fieldwork among Nri people. It could be recalled that Jeffreys in his account on the coronation of the *Eze-Nri* had stated:

“Most Igbo culture is derived from that of the Umundri, whose coronation ceremony has been described. This ceremony is found to have numerous points of similarity with that of the Jukun, the Igala, the Yoruba and the Bini. So close are these similarities that it is clear that they have had but one source... The Umundri tradition is that they came from the ruling stock of the Igala and are thus connected with the Atah of Ida” (Jeffreys, 1935).

But in another twist of evidence, even the originality of the

¹⁰ Prominent among these groups were the Umudiana (Adama) and Umunsekpe.

¹¹ This evidence is strongly supported by the evidence of Chief Christopher Nedum, c.77, *Ozo/Ekwu* title-holder, Umuejem kindred, Uruofolo Village, Akamkpisi-Nri, 10 February, 1992, among other informants.

aborigines of Nri settlement- the Umudiana, becomes an issue of debate following the claim by the people of Adazi-Nnukwu, the neighbouring border town to the south of Nri settlement, that the aboriginal Umudiana of Nri were in fact recent past emigrants from the Umudiana village of their settlement.¹² In supporting this claim, Chief Emmanuel Obi Ezekwe the then *Odu* (Traditional Prime Minister) of Adazi-Nnukwu stated:

“The Umudiana of Akamkpisi was founded by Adazi people. That was when our people were at war with Umuori people. The Umuori invited Ohafia warriors who invaded our people one evening and nearly exterminated the villages of Amaide and Umudiana to the extent that only about four families of Amaide now survive. As a result of this, part of the Adama stock crossed the Idemili river and settled in the present Akamkpisi-Nri”.¹³

The question then is, if Adazi-Nnukwu people claim that the Umudiana people of Nri migrated from their settlement and the same Umudiana of Nri were met in the Nri settlement by the Nri immigrants on arrival, what then are the bases of the said Nri fountain-headship of Igbo culture? This question, one believes will be answered in the course of the present study, but not without mentioning that even among the local Nri historians, Onwuejeogwu's thesis has never gone without questioning. This was evidently revealed in the course of the dispute over the stool of *Eze-Nri* between the people of Agukwu- the present seat of the kingship, and Akamkpisi- the original seat of the kingship. Both made up the two component quarters of Nri settlement.

Bemoaning an aspect of Onwuejeogwu's position on the Nri kingship list by way of a reply to the memorandum submitted to Nri kingship Dispute Peace Committee by the Agukwu quarters, the people of Akamkpisi submitted in part thus:

“M. A. Onwuejeogwu is the only author who made Ifikwuanim the first Eze-Nri. Can you imagine why? When he was carrying out his research before, during and after the

Nigerian civil war, he lived in Agukwu and got a lot of patronages from rich Agukwu elements (true or false)? In the preface to his book *Nri Kingdom and Hegemony*, he remarked that ‘a Nigerian philanthropist, Prince Reuben Tabansi, through Tabansi Motors Limited, made funds available to the University of Benin for the publication of his book’ (yes or no)? Could you not possibly confirm our fears that there might have been a conspiracy to install Ifikwuanim as first Eze-Nri whereas as far as we all know he is a fictitious Eze-Nri (yes or no)? Is this not a case of paying the piper to dictate the tune (yes or no)? I wish to tell you that Ifikwuanim was never crowned an Eze-Nri. When Agukwu people arrived Nri they met the Nri Namoke lineage already ruling for long as Eze-Nri. I wish also to tell you that the only *Ofo na Afo* used by Nri Buife were those handed over to him by Nri Namoke VII through the Adama people.¹⁴

Onwuejeogwu's problems appear to have *emerged* from his initial decision to under-take the investigations in Nri settlement, about fifteen kilometers north of Igbo-Ukwu, the actual site of the excavations. But granted that Onwuejeogwu, in obedience to the thesis of heliolithic cultural influence as propounded by Jeffreys, wanted to conduct his studies from the angle of Nri history and culture, a better logical point of take-off should have been Oraeri.

Oraeri is the other Umunri (Nri) settlement that has a version of *Eze-Nri* institution. It is situated about two kilometers from Igbo-Ukwu. There is also no evidence that Professor Onwuejeogwu, as shown from his numerous works, conducted ethnographic investigations in either Oraeri or Igbo-Ukwu. This being a very significant omission, one is therefore in no way surprised to find his interpretation bugged with irreconcilable evidence on Igbo history and culture.

It is striking to note that since the publication of Thurstan Shaw's work and the subsequent publication of Onwuejeogwu's follow-up ethnographic investigations, not much has changed in the general interpretation of Igbo cultural history. This no doubt appears to be traceable to the

¹² Fieldworks by the present author revealed that both Umudiana settlements of the two towns not only share common boundary, but lay claims to common deities located on this boundary.

¹³ Evidence of Chief Emanuel Obi Ezekwe, c.73, retired Secondary School Principal, Ozo title-holder and Odu-traditional Prime Minister of Adazi-Nnukwu, 12 August, 1991.

¹⁴ 80 (Eighty) Questions on Eze-Nri Dispute, By Akamkpisi Community (to be answered by Agukwu Section), Being a response to memoranda submitted by the Agukwu-Nri Community to the Committee on Nri Kingship Dispute, Umunri Clan Progress Union, 30 May, 1988.

absence of a follow-up historical study in the said post-excavation ethnographic studies carried out by Onwuejeogwu. Thus Onwuejeogwu's work, in spite of its numerous unresolved issues and historical flaws remained the basic point of references for the interpretation of Igbo cultural history.

It has become evident that the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological discoveries have become the major historical pedestal on which subsequent studies on prehistoric Igbo society are anchored (Acholonu-Olumber, 2009). The need for a further look at the evidence in line with emerging evidence, seems necessary at this point in time. The first problem to be determined in this respect is to find out the actual bearers of the culture which was manifested by the unearthed artifacts at Igbo-Ukwu. Could it be said that the bearers of that elaborate culture were of aboriginal Igbo extraction, or could they be said to constitute a small group of civilizing missionaries as could probably be represented by the immigrant Nri stock, who suddenly appeared from somewhere or nowhere to impose their supposedly superior values on the aboriginal Igbo hunter-gatherer group?

From ethnographic accounts of earlier European scholars, as well as the accounts of native Nri themselves, the present Umunri (Nri) sub-culture group was originally of Igala stock. The Igala culture-group occupies the north-western limit of the Igbo culture area east of the Niger. M.D.W. Jeffreys had in an earlier account expressed this issue of Nri-Igala extraction in affirmative (Jeffreys, 1951). In supporting the same position J.S. Boston noted:

"The northern Umunri villages say that the clan was founded by a man called Eri who came to the Anambra area from Igala country, and settled at Aguleri... Eri's first son, Nri left his father's home to found the town that bears his name, and other sons founded the remaining towns in this group" (Boston, 1960).

From the above explanations it is therefore obvious that Nri and related group of settlements were actually of a non-Igbo extraction traceable to the Igala. As Boston rightly pointed out, it is generally agreed that Aguleri was the first point of settlement by Eri - the putative ancestor or rather leader of the immigrant Igala group.¹⁵

The town of Aguleri like many similar Igbo communities is not homogenous in origin. This is notwithstanding the fact that the settlement took its name after Eri (Agulu-Eri). Oral evidence collected among the people show that the majority

of the inhabitants have no claim of descent from Eri, but rather trace their origins from other sources.¹⁶

The settlement is made up of three distinct quarters *Ivite, Ikenga and Ugwu-na-Adegbe* in order of seniority. These three quarters also tend to conform rather strikingly to three distinct origins. From the evidence by the present author, it was discovered that Aguleri is made up of an aboriginal group who were already in occupation of the settlement before the arrival of the other groups. This group today inhabits the *Okpu* village in *Ivite* quarters. It should be noted as well that the seniority of *Ivite* quarters to the two other quarters- *Ikenga and Ugwu-na-Adegbe* is accepted on account of the aboriginality of *Okpu-Ivite* village. The evidence further points out that the other *Ivite* villages namely, Umunoke, Ameru, Isiokwe, Umuengalagu, Abo and Umuawulu on their own respective accounts were later immigrants from the surrounding villages, in addition to some of them being captives from inter-community wars.¹⁷

On the origins of *Ikenga* quarters, the evidence points to Igala land. The account claims that the two main villages of the quarter, *Igbezunu and Umunkete* were respectively founded by Eri and Onoja Oboni, another legendary Igala warrior.¹⁸ Both Eri and Onoja Oboni according to Boston, were linked with Igala military expeditions against the Igbo of the Anambra river valley. Both villages proudly proclaim their Igala origins through Eri and Onoja Oboni respectively to this day. In agreement to this assertion, a local Aguleri historian, M.C.M. Idigo wrote:

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

¹⁶ Oral evidence collected by the present author between 29 July, 1991, and May 16, 1992 tend to confirm this.

¹⁷ Evidence of Ekwoba C. Ikeli, aged C. 65, Traditional medical practitioner, Okpu village, Ivite Quarters, Aguleri: May 15, 1992.

¹⁸ Evidence of A.E Idigo, aged C. 68, Paramount ruler of Aguleri, Ezi village, Ugwuna Adegbe Quarters, Aguleri: 29 September, 1991.

¹⁵ Jeffreys, "The Umundri Tradition", 120.

adopted the language" (Idigo, 1955).

Finally, Ugwu-na-Adegbe quarter which comprises of the two villages of Ezi and Enugu is said to be peopled by later immigrants from such surrounding settlements as Omasi, Nsugbe and Urada.¹⁹

The second settlement which origin and character are to be considered is the main Nri town. Like Aguleri, this settlement also exhibits a heterogeneous character in origins. The town constitutes two distinct quarters, namely: Agukwu and Akampisi. Ethnographically however, the settlement is made up of three groups of distinct origins: the aboriginal group, the earlier and later immigrants.

The aboriginal group is represented by the Umudiana kindred of Ekwenanyika village, also known as *Adama* and Umunsekpe kindred of Diodo village, both of Akampisi section, while the rest inhabitants of Akampisi constitute the earlier immigrants. On the other hand, the Agukwu section is made up entirely of later immigrants. Both immigrant groups trace their origins to Eri, while the aboriginal groups claim autochthony.²⁰

It should also be recalled that M.A. Onwuejeogwu in discussing the Igbo communities that have lost their memory of origins made specific mention of those in Aguleri and Nri settlements. He thus stated:

"According to the myth, Eri on arriving Aguleri met an autochthonous group who had no living memory of their origins, ... Autochthony which is the claim of origin from the spot of present habitation by a maximal lineage generally named Umudiana (Children of the earth) is found in many ancient Igbo towns such as the Umudiana in Nri town who claim they were there during migration to the present town called Nri. The Umudiana also claim "amnesia" which means they recall nothing of their origin" (Onwuejeogwu, 1987).

Having shown evidence of earlier settlements in both Aguleri and Nri, the two most historically significant Umueri settlements, before the arrival of Eri, attempts will therefore be made to ascertain the probable period of Eri's migration

to Aguleri. So far, there seems to be no strong evidence supporting Professor Onwuejeogwu's attempt to assign Eri's period of migration and settlement in Igboland to between AD 648 and AD 1041 (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

Beside his highly questionable generational approach in designing an Nri historical time-chart, in which he used the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological ninth century A.D. carbon-14 relative dating point as his bench-mark period, the entire exercise appears to be loaded with a quantum of disturbing body of inconsistent evidence in the allocation and placement of the said dates. For instance, at one stage he assigns 900 AD as the period of Eri movement. Yet in another it is put at AD 800 (Onwuejeogwu, 1981). Furthermore, Eri movement was in another place put at 948 AD while the periods running before AD 948 were treated as pre-Eri (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

However, it should be noted that M.C.M. Idigo, the Aguleri-born local historian had earlier put the period of Eri migration and settlement to Aguleri at about three or four centuries ago in contrast to Onwuejeogwu's dating. Idigo's estimate therefore appears to be more realistic, since it is backed with some collaborative historical evidence. Furthermore, Onwuejeogwu's dating system is further flawed by the fact of the non-existence of any archaeological evidence from both Aguleri and Nri settlements supporting the ninth and tenth century A.D. dating periodization. Moreover, there appears to be no strong evidence of antiquity of settlement in these two settlements beyond the evidence suggested by oral tradition.

Surprisingly, being that M.C.M. Idigo was of Aguleri royal family, one should have expected him to support the artificial lengthening of Eri period as a way of advancing their right to the traditional kingship. But he did not do that.²¹ Idigo's position was conclusively supported by Professor O.N. Njoku, a historian who worked on the pre-colonial economic activities of Awka Blacksmiths and Oracular agents.

According to Njoku, Eri's mission was not just an ordinary expedition as suggested by Idigo, but that of a fugitive in search of a place of refuge. On his account, he connects Eri with a tussle over Igala kingship with an invading army of Benin kingdom, in which he subsequently lost out. He writes:

"Explicit evidence indicates that Eri or Eriigala was an Idah of the Akpoto (Okpoto) dynasty. He was ousted from the throne by a

¹⁹ Ekwegbeli Ajide, age C. 75. Years, Ogbuenyinya title holder and wood carver, Okpu village Ivite Quarters, Aguleri, 15 May, 1992.

²⁰ Hon. Dom Ozumba, aged C. 68 years, elected local Government Councilor, Umudiana kindred, Ekwenanyike Quarters, Akamkpisi-Nri, 7 December, 1991.

²¹ M.C.M Idigo was the son of the former paramount ruler of Aguleri and Uncle to A.E Idigo, the paramount ruler at the time of the fieldwork. He was blind and died in May, 1993.

Bini prince Aji Attah, sometime before C.1507... Eri's final destination was Aguleri, a settlement located at the Anambra Adada river confluence in the Anambra valley. Idigo is thus correct in stating that Eri came from Igala to Aguleri about 400 years ago. Onwuejeogwu's dating of Eri to C. 948 AD is simply out of the questions" (Njoku, 1988).

From the foregoing therefore, it appears that Onwuejeogwu merely lifted Professor Shaw's ninth century radio-carbon dating of Igbo-Ukwu archaeological finds and simply constructed the genealogy of Eri, which has little or nothing in common with the archaeological discoveries. The fact that Eri as a procreative factor had no genealogical connection with the various autochthonous groups in both Aguleri and Nri settlements further substantiates the views of Idigo and Njoku.

However, two other settlements of historical importance in regard to the present study are Igbo-Ukwu and Oraeri. These are the two settlements that claim ownership to the sites of the archaeological excavations. Both settlements claim their ancestors as the bearers of the Igbo-Ukwu culture. The Oraeri lay claim on the basis of having earlier occupied the sites of the excavations, before they were driven to their present site by the Igbo-Ukwu (Shaw, 1977). They also assert that since they are of Nri subculture group, who are in some circles erroneously regarded as the founders of the Ozo title system, the artifacts could have been created by their ancestors.

It is likely also that it was on the basis of this later assumption that Onwuejeogwu, who traces his ancestral origin to Nri, adopted the ninth century periodization of Eri migration and settlement.²² The possibility therefore is that Onwuejeogwu's historical link with Nri might have to some slight degree influenced his interpretations. But the most circumstantial evidence that appears to surround the issue of ownership of the site was the fact that neither of the traditions of origin of the two settlements shows strong evidence of long and continuous occupation to support its link with the age of the sites.

The position of Oraeri as an off-shoot of Nri settlement has been widely discussed by several writers.²³ Several versions of Oraeri oral tradition are in agreement that the

settlement, which is sandwiched between four neighbors appears to be the most recently established among the host of Nri settlements.

In the same token, there is no dispute as to the assertion that Oraeri's immediate neighbors- Adazi-Enu, Igbo-Ukwu, Agulu-Uzoigbo, and Ichida were already established before the coming of the group that subsequently founded Oraeri.

According to an Oraeri writer Dorothy Okeke, the present site on which Oraeri is built originally belonged to Adazi-Enu. The account further holds that the mother of Avo the putative founder of Oraeri was a native of Adazi-Enu and that it was on account of that relationship that the site was given to Avo to settle by Adazi-Enu people (Okeke, 1991).

By the popular version of this tradition, Nri Namoke, the Nri king whose wife and two children were banished for allegations of ritual misconduct, was married to an Adazi-Enu woman. It happened that when they were eventually banished, they fled to Adazi-Enu, where they were subsequently received and given the present site of Nnokwa town to settle. However, when their women died, the younger son- Avo was said to have fled to the present site, then a forest belonging to Adazi-Enu, where he was granted the permission to settle and consequently founded the present Oraeri settlement.²⁴ Thus the two sons of *Eze-Nri* Namoke were to found the present towns of Nnokwa and Oraeri respectively. Interestingly enough, both towns share boundaries with Adazi-Enu. Okeke explains this further:

"When the funeral (their mother's) was over, it was said that Avo wrapped Ofor, Alor and Otunsi securely and sneaked out in the dark leaving words that he would soon be back after an important errand in the neighbourhood. He fled to Adazi-Enu his mother's land and was given land in the present site where Oraeri people are living today, in the centre of Igbo-Ukwu, Agulu-Uzoigbo, Ichida and fixed on the spot now called Nke Ejiofor and set up his hut" (Okeke, 1991).

There is therefore no doubt that the assertion made above clearly weakened Oraeri's primordial claim to their present land and subsequent historical link to the archaeological sites of Igbo-Ukwu.

On Igbo-Ukwu, one will also attempt a brief look at its tradition of origin, migration and settlement to attempt to

²² Onwuejeogu hailed from Ogboli Quarters, Ibusa town West of the Niger. The Ogboli people trace their ancestral root to Nri.

²³ In addition to the works of Jeffreys and Onwuejeogwu, see also E.I. Ifesieh (1989) *Religion at the Grassroots: Studies in Igbo Religion*, Enugu: SNAAP Press.

²⁴ Evidence of Fabian Idemilika, c.60, businessman and Ozo title-holder, Diodo, Akamkpisi-Nri. 31 January, 1992.

ascertain their primordial link if any, with the archaeological sites in their settlement. Although the settlement by its structure of tradition of origin seems quite older than Oraeri in occupation, that again does not validate any historical claim to the archaeological finds. Igbo-Ukwu tradition claims that one Igbo, the founder of the settlement migrated from an unknown location with his brother Amaekwulu, who founded another settlement. This tradition did not specify their original point of migration, but only spoke of a distant place (Ezenibe, 1977).

However, one thing is clear: there is no distinctive cultural trait special to Igbo-Ukwu which is exclusively identified with the archaeological finds apart from the surrounding Igbo settlements. So in effect, Igbo-Ukwu also lacks any basis to institute a strong and exclusive historical claim to the artifacts excavated from their land. However, Igbo-Ukwu's link to the artifacts when weighed on the scale of available historical evidence appears to be more plausible than the suggested Nri-Oraeri link.

But one very distinctive riddle which surrounds Igbo-Ukwu's claim and which is yet to be unraveled is the fact the original name of Igbo-Ukwu was simply 'Igbo' before the 'Ukwu' a suffix meaning 'big' was added just at the twilight of European colonialism. This was done in order to differentiate it from the now generic use of the term 'Igbo' as a distinctive identity of the culture group. The one unresolved question in this regard is therefore, how come the same settlement on which the excavations took place bears the name 'Igbo'?

It is however important at this stage to state that the discovery of historical relics either below or on an existing settlement does not necessarily suggest ownership or historical connection. To say the least, the relative unstable nature of pre-colonial Igbo society associated with frequent inter-community wars and constant slave raiding often led to part or whole migration or displacement of whole communities. Thus, the possible characteristic fluidity of pre-colonial Igbo society might no doubt make difficult any attempt to pin down the direct descendants of the bearers of the said artifacts.

In accepting Onwuejeogwu's report, Shaw wrote:

"The researches of Michael Onwuejeogwu into the possibilities of finding surviving parallels to the excavated objects have proved extremely interesting. They suggest these objects belong to a highly symbolic and ritualized cultures still existing in the present Awka, Udi, Okigwe and Orlu, but centred around two cores: the one core at Nri and the other at Oreeri, the neighbours of Igbo-Ukwu" (Shaw, 1977).

However, in looking at Shaw's basis of interpretation, one should first try to identify those artifacts that provided the basis for the notion of an Nri culture. In respect to this, Shaw used the burial chamber found in *Igbo-Richard* as well as the coiled bronze snakes and human bronze figures with *Ichi* scarifications on their faces. Relating to these relics, Shaw wrote:

"The coiled snakes which occur in some of the Igbo-Ukwu finds parallel the occurrence all over the area of the taboo against the killing and eating of the python. The facial scarifications shown on a number of the bronze are similar to the facial marks (Ichi) still to be found all over the area, although the pattern is not identical; the closest resemblance is the type that spreads down the neck and cheeks, still to be found on living human faces at Umana and Ebenebe, northeast of Awka. Women do not normally have these facial scarifications, but the exception to this is the eldest daughter of an Eze-Nri, perhaps this gives special significance to the occurrence on the bronze alter-stand, of a female figure with *Ichimarks* on the face" (Shaw, T. 1977).

Looking critically at the above statement, it is necessary to re-emphasize that one is not disputing the fact that these artifacts as inferred, are paralleled to the present occurrences and practices among many Igbo communities. The point of disputation is the claim which attempts to link these cultural relics to the Nri and their Priest-king.

From one angle, Shaw's association of the bronze coiled snake figures with the totemic python (*eke*) is quite in agreement with both historical and contemporary evidence. The python is still revered to this day by both traditionalists and Christians among the highly Christianized Igbo of Onitsha and Awka districts.

The python is dedicated to a river goddess named *Idemili*. The *Idemili* river took its source from the *Ezu-Idemili* (*Idemili* lake), also known as *Ezu-Oyetolo*, but popularly called *Agulu* lake. The river drains into the river Niger few kilometers south of the commercial city of Onitsha. It meanders through many core northern Igbo Communities carrying with it the totemization of the python. The degree of influence the deity has on these communities could even be noted in the still existing strong belief that the deity possesses retributive powers against anyone who accidentally or deliberately kills the sacred python. In fact the killing of the snake up to this day is strongly regarded as a

serious act of desecration of the sacred ancestral land and attracts severe sanctions from the community.

Earlier attempts by Christian missionaries to either reduce or wipe out this influence met with stiff resistance which could have led to massive opposition against early missionary activities. Chinua Achebe on two instances literarily dramatized how early Christian anti-python zealots were successfully resisted even among fellow adherents (Achebe, 1958, 1969). In that way therefore, totems have persisted to this day in nearly every Igbo community.

The Nri settlement not only belong to the sacred python communities, being situated at the northern bank of the *Ezu-Idemili* (Agulu lake), but also possess an *Idemili* shrine like most of the associated communities. But the striking fact about the *Idemili* shrine at Nri is that its origin and priesthood are associated with one of the two aboriginal groups- the Umunsekpe, met by the pioneer Nri immigrants on arrival. Jacob Anaedu, the traditional head of the Nsekpe kindred pointed out that the immigrant Nri groups possess neither the right to the deity's priesthood nor that of initiating the priests.²⁵

It is also striking that Onwuejeogwu in his numerous writings on the Nri and related groups did not draw any relationship between the Nri Priest-king (*Eze-Nri*) and the *Idemili* deity with its coterie of priests and adherents scattered within the communities under its influence. This should have gone further to sustain his description of *Eze-Nri* as the head of Igbo religion. Furthermore, it is worthy of mention that among the communities of the Anambra river valley, especially Aguleri and surrounding settlements, which were the points of earlier Nri settlements, neither the *Idemili* deity nor the associated sacred python is either worshipped or revered. The Igala people, among whom the Nri group originated do not equally claim any link to both the *Idemili* deity and sacred python.

Given the foregoing, it becomes apparent that the attempt to interpret the bronze coiled snake images in terms of what is called "Nri culture" cannot be sustained. Since the Nri have no exclusive historical and religious links with the *Idemili* deity, the coiled-snake object in question should therefore be seen in the broader context of aboriginal Igbo culture, history, and religion.

The second aspect of the interpretation concerns the *Ichi* facial scarifications. This is an insignia of one of the Igbo social titles known by the same term. It could be recalled that Jefferys linked the origin of this title to the Nri by way of outside influence. Its association with some bronze figures

excavated from Igbo-Ukwu archaeological sites thus only attempted to provide the basis for a straight-jacket interpretation of the bearers of the Igbo-Ukwu artifacts. Agreeably therefore, both men only confirmed Jefferys' earlier position, *vis-à-vis* the Nri, and subsequently foreign connection.

Among the Igbo of the Awka, Onitsha and Agbaja subcultures, the *Ichi* scarifications represent the insignia of the *Ichi* social title, one of the titles of the lower rudder of the Ozo title system. The Umudioka people, an Igbo subgroup of professional carvers and sculptors had the exclusive and traditional rights to perform the *Igbu-ichi* (ritual cutting of the face) ceremony on any intending initiate to the title.²⁶

The town of Umudioka which is situated some few kilometers east of Onitsha and about twenty kilometers northwest of Nri town, like the later was the home of one of the itinerant pre-colonial Igbo groups that eventually established satellite settlements in different Igbo communities in the course of their ritual activities. On the origin of the Umudioka settlement in the Neni town, P.C. Muodeme wrote:

In the south-central part of Neni town spreads out another village known as Umudioka. The founder of this village migrated from Umudioka in Idemili Local Government Area. The name explains itself. Umu means children. Dioka means an artist. The name therefore means children of an artist or artistic or artistic children (Modeme, 1985).

On the origin of the Umudioka settlement in Awka town, O.N. Njoku explains that it was founded by one Ichida, a skilful carver and *Ichi*-cutter from the Umudioka village in Neni town, whose expertise in the trade earned him the "honorific *Nwadioka-artist par excellence*" (Njoku, 1988). Each *Ichi* title-taking community was either associated with the main Umudioka town, or any of its satellite settlements nearest to it. Thus, the Nri man taking the *Ichi* title went to Neni town to invite the Umudioka man there to cut the *Ichi* insignia on his face for a fee. Onwuejeogwu agrees with this tradition when he wrote that 'a specialist facial artist from Umudioka lineage in Neni, a neighboring town, was called in to perform the task and was paid' (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

Umudioka settlement from both historical and ethno-

²⁵ Evidence of Jacob Anaedu, aged C.90 years. Okpala of Umunsekpe kindred, Diodo Quarters, Akamkpisi-Nri, 31 January, 1992.

²⁶ The Umudioka were the major itinerant professional Igbo carvers in Pre-colonial era. They are found today in their main town of Umudioka, and as part-settlements in the towns of Awkuzu, Neni and Awka among others.

graphic evidence has therefore no link with the Nri. The fact that the Nri depended on the Umudioka for the rites of *ichi* initiation puts a strong question mark on the claim that the *Ich*i forms part of the 'Nri cultural complex.' The other aspect concerning the *Ich*i concerns the bronze female figurine with the *Ich*i markings on her face. Associating this with the first daughter of *Eze-Nri* (Nri Priest-king), Onwuejeogwu states:

"The ownership of this title is mythically attributed to *Eze-Nri*, as stated in the mythology of the origin of yam. The first son and daughter of any *Eze-Nri* born after his coronation are marked with *Ich*i marks seven days after their birth. The female and male dwarfs in *Eze's* palace are also marked. Similarly all sons of Nri men are marked with *Ich*i. This mark is the mark of royalty that may be executed on wood, pottery and on walls. The *Ich*i title confers on the child the rights of a full citizen and to become an emissary of *Eze-Nri*. By beginning to keep the taboos he has begun to obey the supreme authority of his state, and has taken the second step towards becoming a political figure" (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

One may begin by stating that the assertion that both the first son and daughter of the *Nze-Nri*, including the dwarfs were marked with the *Ich*i insignia is not supported by the evidence. In the first instance, *Ich*i forms part of the lower stages of the social title system. As one of such titles a man could take in his father's life-time, most parents who had the means to initiate their male children did so. Furthermore, as the rites involved a high degree of loss of blood during the process of scarifications, it was often advisable to be taken at one's stage of tender age.

The fact that *Ich*i title ranks among the lower stages of the title system means that before anybody could attain the apex *Ozo* title, he must have taken *Ich*i title with the attendant facial insignia. Thus, against Onwuejeogwu's assertion, *Ich*i facial insignia conveys no special ritual rights or political privileges. Instead it shows that the normal title-taking process in ascending order was properly followed. Moreover *Ich*i title holders like every other social title stratum have their role, rights and privileges exclusive to them.

Although Jeffreys stated that the first daughter of an *Eze-Nri* was marked with the *Ich*i, drawing inference from the Yoruba of Abeokuta, Onwuejeogwu failed to re-examine the claim, since among the Yoruba, the only facial scarification that looks close to the *Ich*i is the Oyo Yoruba type and not that of Abeokuta. His claim that the last dwarf to be

associated with the *Eze-Nri* of Agukwu-Nri, who died in 1970, bore *Ich*i title insignia was never supported by the evidence. Furthermore, as Jeffreys pointed out, among the people of Awgu, both men and women received *Ich*i marks (Jeffreys, 1951).

But even among the people of Awka environs of which the Nri fall within, the involvement of women in *Ich*i had nothing to do with the title and roles of the *Eze-Nri*. In fact, in these communities a woman could be allowed to take the *Ich*i title under a particularly defined and exclusive circumstance. This circumstance normally arose when a family was unable to produce a male child to continue the family generation tree. Such a man often implored one of his daughters to stay back at home unmarried as 'man' of the house, and continue to bear children for her father under concubinage arrangement. Once such a daughter was selected the father often proceeded to initiate her into the *Ich*i title society as a form of initiating her into manhood. By that act of conversion to a 'titled man' she could no longer leave her father's ancestral compound to another man's house as wife. All the children thus produced by her through her concubine belonged to her father. In supporting this tradition F. C Ogbalu stated:

"Tattooing is not a special title but every male is expected to do it before he proceeds to Ekwu or Ozo-Ulo title; in some places before the person gets married. It consists of scarification of the upper and side parts of the face with artistic lines which remain permanent. The artist who does this is Nwadioka who usually hails from Umudioka in Onitsha province. The people of Umudioka are highly skilled in this art and they travel far and wide unmolested to meet their clients. Tattooing is not known everywhere. In most places where it is known, only men do it but there are one or two places where women also do it".²⁷

As the foregoing accounts would seem to reveal, the claim of an exclusive connection of the *Ich*i with the Nri has no strong historical and ethnographical evidence to sustain it. Thus it has become clear that both the *Eze-Nri*, his first son and daughter, including his dwarfs had no special ritual link with the tradition of *Ich*i scarification. It is also interesting in this case to note that *Ich*i as a title does not exist in Aguleri town, the Igbo home base of Eri. The Igala culture group in the

²⁷ F. C. Ogbalu (nd) *Igbo Institutions and Customs Ontisha: University Publishing Co.*, p. 35.

same vein has no connection with the concept of *Ichi* much less being a title among them. One is therefore left in great wonder as to how the Nri might have originated the title when it never existed in their ancestral home base.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, a resume of some salient points concerning the position of this work are hereunder raised. In the first instance, a comparison of the approximate period of Eri migration and settlement with the age of the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological sites shows a very high degree of disparity in time and space. Whereas the age of the Igbo-Ukwu sites is put at the ninth century A.D., available evidence put Eri period at around the seventeenth century A.D. Onwuejeogwu's attempt to link the Eri period with the age of the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological discoveries was therefore not borne by the evidence.

Secondly, the Igala origin of the Nri subgroup certainly tends to put certain ritual claims by the latter into question. Since it has been established that the Nri were originally of Igala ethnic stock and that there is no evidence of link between those commanding features of the Igbo-Ukwu sites and the Igala culture, it therefore becomes evidently erroneous to describe them as features of an Nri culture. The Igala, from all available evidence do not possess the tradition of social title taking and other related rituals as practiced among the Igbo. The exception, here however are the Igala-Igbo speaking communities known as the Ibaji, who live at the south-western fringe of the Igbo-Igala borderland, and whose culture is an admixture of Igbo and Igala features. Among these people, title-taking in the form of the Igbo Ozo system is the major feature of their social strata.

On both ethnographic and historical bases therefore, there is nothing worthy of reference as 'Nri culture' or 'civilization' as it relates to the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological sites. It is on the basis of this that the present work posits that the reference to the Igbo-Ukwu archaeological artifacts as representing the strands of 'Nri culture' cannot be sustained. The Igbo-Ukwu archaeological sites from the character of their artifacts appear to be more of Igbo origins than imported culture either through the Nri group or any other agent. Although it is difficult at the moment to pin down the actual bearers of the culture, the fact remains that they represent distinctive elements of Igbo culture.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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