

## **Nri People and the Challenges of Preserving the Igbo Custom and Tradition: the case of Establishing an Igbo Traditional Centre**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The lifestyle in Nigeria is shaped by distinctive ethnic groups and their culture. Most times, people come together in centres, public spaces to experience their culture, lifestyles and exhibitions. These centres are in most cases, called cultural centres. Over the years, they have played tremendous role in societies by promoting the arts, history, religion, and heritage of different cultures and the way of life of a particular group of people or community. At Nri, a town in Anocha local government area in Anambra State, the people still maintains the culture and tradition of the Igbo people yet, with no physical structure that supports such. Nri is widely asserted to be the motherland and cradle of the Igbo ethnicity. The leader of Nri, is the priest-king in its truest definition, more of a ritualistic father figure with mystic powers, but no military authority. With the disappearing tradition of the Igbos' culture, and Nri particularly, the history of the people have been given very little attention as a result, a variable and sustainable eco-cultural tourism, through the use of museums, historical sites and cultural festivals, is needed for a logical prosecution of the war against the eradication of Igbo custom and Tradition.*

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**KEYWORDS:** *culture, museum, development laws, gathering, architecture, tourism*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In Nigeria, there are around 350 ethnic groups, and each has its own culture, yet they have been comprehensively separated into six culture territories, specifically; Hausa-Fulani, Tiv, Yoruba, Igbo, Bini and Efik-Ibibio. The nation has more than 50 dialects, more than 250 vernacular, ethnic allegiances, their language and distinct cultural heritage (Williams and Shenley, 2012).

Culture comprise of all the unique beliefs and attitudes which give shape to lifestyle, identity, arts and intellectual achievements of a group of people or community (UNESCO, 2009). Cultural identity is one's own sense of his culture; it is also defined as the influence one gains by belonging to a certain culture of group (Smith, 1991).

The lifestyle in Nigeria is shaped by distinctive ethnic groups. The three main ethnic groups being the Hausa, who are mainly in the north, the Yorubas, who are predominant in the south-west and the Igbos, are for the most part in the South-East. The Edo tribe is found in a geographical location between the Yoruba and the Igbo land. Other ethnic groups are around

and scattered all over the country. The Hausas are majorly Muslims and the Igbos are predominantly Christians, while the Yorubas comprises of both religious group. There are still some individuals amongst these tribes that practices traditional religion as well.

Ottaway (2010), defines culture as the outline of cultured conduct, and the result of the conduct, whose component elements are joint and spread by individuals of a society. The culture of a society is the lifestyle of its individuals; the gathering of thoughts and customs which they learn, share and transmit from age to age. Consequently, Ottaway (2010), argues that culture can be defined as the sum of the lifestyle advanced by individuals in their endeavors to discourse the problems of living in their condition. In this definition, culture gives worth to community, spirituality, financial, political, stylish estimations of individuals and therefore recognizes them from other individuals. Equally culture is identified with the estimations of a public as far as the general public's origination of what is correct or wrong, and what is appalling or wonderful.

Most times, people come together in centres, and public spaces to experience their culture, lifestyles and exhibitions. These centers are in most cases, called cultural centers. Cultural centers over the years have played tremendous role in our society by promoting the arts, history, religion, and heritage of different cultures and the way of a particular group of people or community. Communities have invested in this enrichment by building performing arts centers, museums, worship centers, heritage centers and libraries.

Ultimately, cultural centers tell the story of a particular people as it relates to their history which therein lies their religion, way of life, food, marriage, arts and music style, living conditions amongst other things. This is to say that these centers embodies and seeks to promote the history of such people.

The history of a people if well preserved and portrayed are usually tourist attractions for other people and those who want to learn about them. This can be termed, cultural Tourism. Cultural tourism is a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a tourism destination. These attractions/products relate to a set of distinctive material, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional features of a society that encompasses arts and architecture, historical and cultural heritage, culinary heritage, literature, music, creative industries and the living cultures with their lifestyles, value systems, beliefs and traditions.

In Africa, scholars have done a lot of work in depicting the history of Africa albeit, but there is still limited information portrayed accurately on the history and the lives of Africans as a people. This, to a very large extent can be attributed to the variety that exists in history and culture of the African peoples. The culture of Africa is incredibly interesting due to the fact that it varied, depending on which country one visits. The continent is home to diverse populations, many of which have been influenced by external factors. Each country has its own tribes, languages and cultural differences (Iiffe, 2007).

Cultural centers around the world are known for hosting cultural events, exhibitions and shows. Historically, the ZIL Cultural Center was a Palace of culture for the Proletarsky district, and then called the Palace of culture of "ZIS" (or the Plant Named after Stalin). It was later renamed the Palace of culture "ZIL" (or the Plant Named after Likhachev). In 1931,

a competition was held for the design of the new Palace of Culture. The project submitted by architects Leonid, Victor and Alexander Vesnin, who were also brothers, was selected as the winner (Shestakova and Kopteva, 2018).

The building was constructed between 1932-1937. Initially, it was part of the building which occupied the entire grounds of the former Simonov Monastery, Moscow, Soviet, which would be demolished. But there were protests. City authorities uncovered a letter reportedly written by the working class residents of the district, who were protesting the demolition. The letter was likely fabricated. Still, experts also protested. The well-known restoration architect Nikolai Vinogradov was dismissed from the Commission for the Protection of Monuments of the Moscow, Soviet as a result from his protest petitions. Yet, they did manage to stop the total demolition of the monastery although unfortunately the majority was destroyed. By the mid 1930's, only a few of the buildings remained. (Geetz, 2001)

The Vesnin brothers project, incorporated elements of the constructivist architectural style one of the schools of the Soviet avant-garde. However, the large scale of the construction and a number of the elements of its composition including its axial symmetry made it possible to talk about Art Deco influences characteristic of Soviet architecture in the 1930 through the 1950s.

The Vesnin family started their architectural practice before the revolution. In the 1920's they begin to experiment with artistic and constructivist elements in their designs. The ZIL Cultural Center building was constructed of reinforced concrete - a material that was in short supply for civil architecture projects in the Soviet 1930's. At that time, most building materials were devoted to the country's industrialization, and the construction of factories. As a result, the cultural centre opened in two stages. In 1933, the concert hall was opened, and the club facilities opened in 1937. A third part of the plan - a huge multifunctional theatre and concert hall for 4 000 people, was decided to be too expensive for construction.

The monolithic construction of the building would not require any insulation if it were not for the cold climate. The building has grey, insulated facades on the outside and smooth walls on the inside. Interestingly, the architects and constructivists never considered the color green indoors. This was because the greenery of the surroundings would be visible through large glass windows and walls (Trypson, 2002)

Construction of the building lasted for 6 years, continuing when architect Leonid Vesnin died in 1933. By December 1937, when construction was completed, the constructivist architectural style had fallen out of favor. It was replaced by Stalinist imperial architecture, which is sometimes referred to as Art Deco. Despite the fact the constructivist buildings were subject to heavy criticism and many architects of the period were repressed, critics found that the style of the community centre was adequate, as it turned out to be multifunctional and comfortable (Kuznetsov, 2019).

The authentic interior design of the building was preserved until the end of the 1940s. During the war the roof and the ceiling of the concert hall were damaged in the bombardment. When reconstructed in the 50's, columns, chandeliers and heavy drapes for the windows were installed. In the Khrushchev era, the architectural avant-garde was rehabilitated, and minimalism and simple forms became fashionable again. As a result, the architectural style of the Palace of culture ZIL became relevant again and became a kind of "textbook" for

architects. In the 1960's the cultural centre underwent renovations because technically it was already out of date. The Likhachev Plant sponsored the reconstruction which lasted for 10 years. The renovated building reopened in 1976. Most of the features of the building that we can see today are the results of the restoration works.

Today, the ZIL Cultural Center is considered a monument of cultural heritage of regional significance and is protected by the state. In the last few decades communities have begun to solicit the help of architects and engineers to restore the historical styles of their existing cultural centers while taking the opportunity to implement current trends as well as safety and accessibility codes.

The proposed cultural center will be located in Agu-ukwuNri in Anocha Local government area, Anambra state. The location and geographical area is known to be origin of the Igbo people. The Nri people still maintains the culture and tradition of the Igbo people yet there is no physical structure that supports such.

Nri is widely asserted to be the motherland and cradle of the Igbo ethnicity. It is also generally believed and widely accepted that Eri was the founder of Nri. The origin of Eri however, is vague. One theory goes that Eri was a divine being sent by Chukwu (God), to make peace, cleanse abominations and provide foods for the Igbo people. Thus in this theory, he descended from the sky (Obi and Nwawkwu, 2029).

Another explanation of Eri's ancestry, however, was that Eri, was the grandson of the biblical Jacob, and his father was Gad, the 7th son of Jacob. Eri was a high priest to the pharaoh in Egypt. Before the scriptural mass Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, he sensed the impending onslaught of the Egyptians against the people of Israel his people, as the Egyptians increasingly grew envious. Eri, therefore left Egypt, crossed the river Nile and entered southern Sudan from where he entered Chad. From Chad, he crossed the Benue river and came to Lokoja, then traversed the river Niger and came ashore near the confluence of the Ezu and Omambala Rivers called Agbanabo or Ezu.

Na Omambala, here it was spiritually revealed to him that he was to settle (Afigbo, 1987). This location is present-day Aguleri, in Anambra State, though at the time it was not known as Aguleri. So Aguleri might have actually been the Motherland of the Igbos. This notion even becomes increasingly bona fide when you consider that in Igbo land, it is a well-known tradition that no man can break Kola nuts at a gathering when an Aguleri man is present. That honour is entitled to him.

Another fact to bolster this claim in most Igbo Communities, before a King is coronated, he must fulfil an age long tradition of visiting and paying homage to Aguleri, with his entourage where they spend a compulsory seven days visiting sacred places and making sacrifices to certain deities in shrines. Another pointer is the ObuGad Temple that is situated in Aguleri which was built by Eri, in honour of his father Gad. Eri, had two wives by the time he arrived at the Ezu Na Omambala confluence, Nneamaku, and Oboli, who were the first and second wife respectively. Nneamaku bore five children Nri-Ifikwuanim-Menri being the first son also known as Nri, Agulu, Ogbodudu, Onogu, and Iguedo, the only daughter, while Oboli the second wife bore only a child, Onoja (Onwuejeogwu, 1981)..

Onoja founded present-day Igala, in Kogi State. Eri's first son Nri-Ifikwuanim begot AgukwuNri, Enugwu-Ukwu, Enugwu-Agidi, Nofia, and Amobia. His sister Iguedo begot Ogbunike, Okuzu, Nando, Umuleri, and Nteje, which are known today as the UmuIguedo clan. Onogu begot Igbariam.

Eri's first son, Nri-Ifikwuanim, was a spiritual priest like his father. He left Aguleri and settled at a thick forest he called Agu-UkwuNri, which is the present-day Nri Kingdom. Here he engaged in hunting, farming and also performed priestly duties and demonstrated his spiritual prowess just as his father Eri, did in Egypt, by the cleansing of abominations, expert use of herbs and roots and giving honourable titles to his subjects.

When Eri died, Agulu took over leadership and that was how the Aguleri name came about. "Agulu" and "Eri" are often referred to being saying "AguluNwaEri" in Igbo language meaning "Agulu, the son of Eri". It was from that location that the Igbos multiplied, spread and founded other Igbo communities. When Nri-fikwuanim-Menri grew old and was nearing his end, it was not his wish to die outside of his ancestral home; therefore, he instructed his children to take him back to present day Aguleri. There he eventually died and was buried. Till present day, his grave site is still marked and can be seen at Okpu community in Ivite village of Aguleri. Oral history passed down from older generations in Aguleri tells of the magical springing up of three gigantic trees barricading the entrance to his grave, the trees are said to share a common root and are so enormous that to get a complete view one has to go back many miles (Eze-Uzomaka, 2013).

The traditional Igbo people believe Eri, had some form of powerful spiritual knowledge or powers. This might have contributed to the discombobulation of his person with time after he passed on. He was atypical, and the mystical ability he possessed must have aided to establish his character as he faded into time as some kind of supernatural, mystical being; hence, the school of thought which relates that he was sent by God and came down from the sky. He passed on this ability to his son Nri-Ifikwuanim, who founded the kingdom. Could it be that this was the bases as to why Nrikingdom, was such a revered kingdom spiritually by its subjects?

The Nrikingdom, operated a decentralized democratic and highly theocratic system of leadership over Igbo lands. Albeit most Igbo colonies already exercised a type of societal republic as opposed to a feudalistic system that involves a king with absolute or an enormous amount of authority over its subjects.

The leader of Nri, is called the "EzeNri" in the Igbo language which translates to "king of Nri". He is a priest-king in its truest definition. He is more of a ritualistic father figure with mystic powers, but no military authority.

Over the years, the kingdom of Nri, grew large and has its capital at Igboukwu. Due to the fast-paced development that the people were a part of and witnessed, they soon owned a currency and developed banking systems. Their economy was primarily agriculture and traded hunting games as well.

Nri, quickly became a haven for runaway slaves, and outcasts (osu) were welcomed. Although the Nri, people did not control all Igbo lands, their influence was visible over all Igbo territories and beyond, thus all activities, both cultural and traditional, were held in Nri.

Their leadership was void of dictatorship. The king managed the trade routes, diplomacy and also possessed authority over religious matters. To become a king was not limited to the descendants of Nri, but through a divine selection. However, the chosen one was mandated to go through rituals to prove himself worthy to Chineke (the creator of the universe), must be from Eri, his mother would die a few days or weeks after his birth, and must have no father alive. His ritual involves a celebration as though he is dead, symbolizing death to himself as he now belongs to the spirits and the people. Then finally he must visit Aguleri, before he is crowned. Every year, a festival called the Ancient Iduu Cultural (OliliObibiaEri) festival is organised to celebrate the arrival of Eri, at the Agbanagbo-Ezu-na-Omambala (Confluence of Ezu and Omabala rivers). This festival was initiated by Eri, and is still celebrated.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The topical issue of focus is the cultural center (tourism) or better said, the architecture of a cultural center as such, the authors laid emphasis on qualitative research method that considered previous works on the subject matter.

## **FINDINGS**

In Nigeria, culture centers and the history of the people have been given very little attention and as a result, it is still in an incipient stage despite the rich knowledge, history and values at its disposal which ought to be exploited to far greater potential and benefits. It becomes necessary that a cultural center and one which can house tourist and scholars is made available. Traditionally, Agu-ukwuNri still maintains the culture and tradition of the Igbo people yet, without a structure and well established facility for the preservation and promotion of the traditional Igbo culture. This, notwithstanding the University of Ibadan's efforts in building and establishing a museum there. Being said, the community needs a cultural center for tourism, preservation of Igbo culture and tradition.

Cultural centres are becoming more popular around the world, as technology like the internet makes the world feel more connected. More and more people are becoming interested in other cultures in addition to wanting to share their own. Cultural centers are fast becoming a primary ways of bringing communities together, They often hold classes and cultural events, which bring numerous volunteer opportunities. Volunteering opportunities bring people closer, make them feel good, and attract the younger ones. Primarily, at the centers, classes are held to teach the community about their cultural heritage, and in most cases, through the use of events, festivals, and workshops. They have often been known to be a great ways of understanding each other within the community. Knowledge is absolutely power, and it will bring community members together in a fun and constructive environment, which not many other things can do. These centers provide a unique experience, and a way to step outside of one's comfort zone and mingle with others.

## **Conclusion**

As noted by Ukpere and Wabah (2018), a variable and sustainable eco-cultural tourism business through the use of museums, historical sites and cultural festivals, is a veritable tool for the logical prosecution of the war against unemployment, youth restiveness and security challenges; poverty; high income disparity; unfavourable balance of trade and payments; rural inaccessibility and underdevelopment (Adewale, 2012; Adebayo, 2009; Mowfort & Munt,

1998; Britton, 1982). Along the same line, for Igbo and the people of Agukwu, Nri, keep growing with the understanding of their heritage and traditional values, a centre needs to be established and build for them. They should be encouraged to pay attention to their historical past through preservation of their records and activities in a museum setup.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

With the changing and the contemporary trend in western life styles, the people in Nigeria and especially, the Igbo people are adopting the western and European ways of life detriment to their custom and tradition. In other for the Igbo custom and tradition not to be extinct, a great number of the Igbo people are putting together, programmes that will be educating and creating awareness on the importance of maintaining and restoring the custom and tradition of the people. In that effort, emphasis is focused on the building and establishing cultural centers in major areas of the Igbo society.

With the interest in technology, a lot of people are becoming interested in local culture and tradition and one way of encouraging that is by the introduction of cultural centers, where the people will be educated and awareness created on the significance of preserving one's custom and tradition.

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