



THE FAMOUS ODI CULTURAL FESTIVAL IN THE ANCIENT KINGDOM OF ULI

Ojimba Chinyereamaka Christian (PhD)

Department of History, Federal College of Education, Kano

Email: ojimbajab@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper is on the “Odi” cultural festival of the ancient Uli kingdom. This festival is a cultural celebration that is as old as the town of Uli itself. Odi festival was given its preeminence because of its cultural importance to the people of Uli. It was a traditional and cultural festival celebrated to offer thanksgiving and honour to the great goddess of Atammiri River for the protection of the lives and property of community members. “Odi” was to be celebrated once every three years in Uli. It was a week-long activity which included Ibeyi Nzu, Itipia Nzu, Igbo Ehi Atammiri, Ugaliga Nzu, Icho mma anu ahu, Iti Nmanwu an Igba egwu. Although the above activities are in Igbo language, the present paper clearly explains what each represents to the understanding of the non-Igbo people who may come across and become interested in reading it. The author chooses to write about this festival because it has not been widely given enough academic publicity it deserves. This is in fact the first attempt to write the “Odi” festival for the outside world to read. The first ever major attempt was purely written in the Igbo language, titled “EMUME IGBA ODI N’ULI NKE DI OKPURU OCHICHI IME OBODO IHIALA,” meaning in English, the celebration of Odi in Uli in Ihiala Local Government Area. This Igbo version was written by Ojimba Gladys Nnenna and published in 1991 by Alvana Press Owerri, Imo state. Therefore, this English language version will be significant and relevant not only to the people of the ancient Uli but to the generality of the people who are more interested in the culture and traditions of the Nigerian people. It is very important to note that this English version is not anywhere a translation of the Igbo version but should be regarded as a well-researched paper from the author and purely virgin as nowhere in the history of Nigeria can any come across any piece written about “Odi festival in Uli.”

Keywords: Cultural Festival, Odi Festival, Kingdom of Uli, Igbo Tradition

Introduction

In history, we create the picture of our ancestors and tell tales of how they lived and survived. In a wide sense, history is the story of what happened in the past, whether anyone wrote anything about it or not. It gives an account of what happened in the past, made up of oral tradition, observations and writings of the people in the period being described. The present paper on the famous “Odi” cultural festival happened to be fitted under this definition.



Uli town lies between 50⁰ and 60⁰ North of the equator and 60⁰ and 70⁰ East of the Greenwich. This town of historic importance is situated in the extreme southeast corner of Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. Uli lies in the forest region of southern Nigeria. It enjoys average rainfall and sunshine. The dry and rainy seasons are well-marked, (Ichie Gilbert Chude Okonkwo).

This paper is on the famous Odi cultural festival in Uli's ancient kingdom. Therefore, culture is the required ability of the people or a nation to recognize some aesthetic and intellectual achievements existing in the society and represented at various levels of civilization in its members. The ancestors of Uli have handed down certain beliefs and practices, which are very deep rooted in the society. Odi is one of the most outstanding cultural heritage of the Uli people. The Uli women were with the gift of painting the human body with black dye "Uri" to the satisfaction and taste of the community (Ojimba Gladys Nnenna, 1991). They were naturally proficient in the decorative art of their body. This was explained in detail in the one-week activities of the Odi festival under Icho Nma Anuahu – beautifying the women's body during the Odi festival. The paper is direct research of the author, and its worth noting that not much was known about the "Odi" festival due to poor attention given to it until the present author dived into it and explored facts concerning the Odi festival, a festival attracting great importance by the pagan segments of the community. It is worth noting that Christianity with its wide acceptance and spread even in the 21st century was not able to extinguish this culture as many people from Uli both at home and abroad now celebrate the "Odi" festival once every three years. Odi has come to stay and will not fade away due to Christianity.

The Famous Odi Cultural Festival of the Ancient Uli Kingdom

Odi is one of the major festivals in the ancient Uli town in the Ihiala Local Government Area of the present-day Anambra state. It is a three years cultural festival celebrated to usher in the town's new yam festival. It is a main program ceremony conducted by the worshippers of the goddess of "Atammiri". The Odi festival is as old as the Uli town, but historically no exact date has been noted as to when the festival began. It was a cultural activity handed over from generation to generation in the ancient kingdom of Uli. It is one of the traditional cultural activities in support of the "Omenala Igbo"- Igbo traditions.

Omemala Igbo or Igbo tradition, according to Peter Ejiofor, connotes the lifestyle of a particular community based on their belief, or the way of people's character based on their dressing, religious beliefs, eating methods and observing certain rules that guide the totality of their ways of life.

The Uli people usually celebrate the famous and well cherished 'Odi' festival once every three years. Traditionally, Odi was celebrated in commemoration and in thanksgiving offering to the goddess of Atammiri Uli, a special thanksgiving for the protection of their lives and for the bumper harvest recorded by all. Usually, it's a big occasion in every family. The most elderly person in the family will begin the day with blessings with "Ofo", calling on his great-grandfathers in the lineage to come and take the kola nuts and, at the same time, pour out palm wine on the ground for them to come and drink.

The "Odi" festival had not been given wide publicity because it was peculiar to the culture of the Uli ancient kingdom, and because of being a pagan culture and many people in Uli town are mainly Christians-predominantly catholic, the festival had been pushed to the background, but because it was as old as Uli town itself, it is still practiced or celebrated by the Atammiri worshippers. This



research concerning 'Odi' and Uli traditional culture will be very significant to the present-day generation of youths who may not have even heard anything concerning the 'Odi' festival because of their Christian belief.

According to Nzeako (1979), he was of the opinion that certain Igbo traditional cultures will not be allowed to fade away and that certain omenala-traditions of the Igbo culture that cannot be allowed to be stories that were not documented for the future young Igbo youths. He cites "Odi" as one of those cultural activities that have great value and are traditionally so important to the lives of the Uli people. He pointed out that such other traditions as "Ime Obi Umuaka", "Ime chi naagu", "Iri ji ohuu", "Iru Mgbede", and oriri Ihejioku are very important festivities in Uli ancient kingdom. It is true that "Odi" is being celebrated only in Uli town but other festivals are celebrated by the surrounding towns, near Uli, like Ihiala, Isseke, Mgbidi, Egbu, Amoka, Ibi, Awonmama, Uburu, Amaofuo, etc.

Ilogu (1985) argued that the festival of "Odi" in the ancient town of Uli was a three yearly festival done in the central village playground. This, according to him, signifies that as much as it was a pagan ceremony, there was nothing absolutely hidden concerning it as it did not contradict anyone's religious faith in any form. He still emphasised the fact that there were different ways people worshipped their God. This was one of the ways different families in Uli worshiped their god. Odi is one of the ways the Uli ancient kingdom worshipped their god through sacrifices and general thanksgiving to the goddess of Atammiri, representing the spiritual being. One major significant thing about the Atammiri was that the people of Uli or even visitors to Uli don't kill a particular snake called "Eke Atammiri." It is forbidden for anyone to kill the snake of the Atammiri, and when they accidentally kill the "Eke", the person will do all the traditional burial ceremony required for the proper burial. A very long list will be given to whoever that killed the Eke Atammiri from the Umuezike, Umuolie Eziana Uli, who are the custodians to the goddess of Atammiri to pacify the gods by presenting the sacrifices of "Aja" to the gods.

Basden was of the view that in dealing with the object of worship, especially those which are more less public property, some limitations must be out upon the word "worshiped" while there are wide variety and number of objects animate and inanimate, which held as "sacred", these are revered from fear of unexpected consequences should they be injured or destroyed rather than from any desire to worship them. The above view of Basden was in total support of the Uli people concerning the worship of Atammiri and their great regards and respect for killing Eke Atammiri.

Cows were sacrificed to the Atammiri River goddess. Such cows belong to nobody but the god of Atammiri or to the Umuezike, Umuolie Eziana Uli, who are the main worshippers of the Atammiri goddess. In some other Igbo land, some people are worshippers of some animals like cows, sheep, monkey, snake and tortoises. This accounts for the facts of importance attached to "Ehi Atammiri" – cows sacrificed to the goddess of Atammiri River. During the period of odi festival, a number of the cows sacrificed to Atammiri were killed by the head of the Atammiri worshippers. The Uli people believed the gods of Atammiri protect people's lives, which is why whoever killed Eke Atammiri will or must conduct the burial ceremony exactly the same way as human burial.

Osuagwu (1985) emphasized that whoever killed any of the above-mentioned animals, especially in the case of the Uli ancient kingdom, is believed that you have killed the gods they serve and therefore,



be ready to receive the fight of the gods they serve and therefore be ready to receive the fight of the gods who will retaliate and fight back.

Brief History of “Odi” Festival in Uli

The Igbo people believed to recognize a person based on his character and behaviors and the traditions and culture of the person. Odi is not a cultural festival the Uli ancient kingdom celebrates once every three years for thanksgiving and honour of their spirit river goddess of Atammiri for its protection of lives and property and for them to witness another three years for the “Odi” ceremony.

The “Odi” festival is one of the traditional festivals loved by the Uli people for its cultural importance to them. During “Odi” festival the adherents to this culture use Odi festival to appease the gods of the land and the goddess of Atammiri Uli to continue to strengthen their faith in upholding the Odi festival and to bring back all those members who had decided not to continue.

During the week to celebrate the Odi festival, the spiritual head of the worshippers of the Atammiri, who is the main custodian to the goddess of Atammiri will announce to all the kindred and clans in Uli that the week is purely for the Odi festivities and they will line up the activities to be followed. Nzu – the traditional and cultural segment of raw white mud will be given to all. Nzu signifies purity showing that everybody about to celebrate the “Odi” will have a clean mind.

On the main day of the Odi festival, the chief priest or the spiritual head will take his seat and start the day with blessings from our great grandfathers and pour a libation of palm wine and blessing of kola nuts. Odi was used to thank the god of the land. There was nothing like Christianity; as a result, many people believed in tradition, and the people of Uli usually celebrate the odi festival in the eighth months of the year of every three years.

“Ika odi” – fixing the actual day/date for the celebration of the Odi is one of the most important activities of the Odi festival. It was the elderly and the chief priest of the goddess of Atammiri that would join hands to culturally calculate to know the exact date to fix the date in the eighth month of the year, precisely on the 18th of August.

IMA ULO EGWU ODI

Ima Ulo egwu odi means selecting one of the most beautiful women in the community with a sweet melodious tone to sing the odi song very early in the morning. This is very important because she acts like a town crier by announcing the date of the Odi festival to the hearing of all. She will sing the Odi signature song.

The song goes like:

Odi, Odi Odi

Odi anu odi azu

She will sing the song three times in the very early hours of the morning. The song signifies that anu –meat, azu, fish will be used in large quantity to celebrate the Odi, including the killing and sharing of the Ehi Atammiri- the cow sacrificed to the goddess of Atammiri.

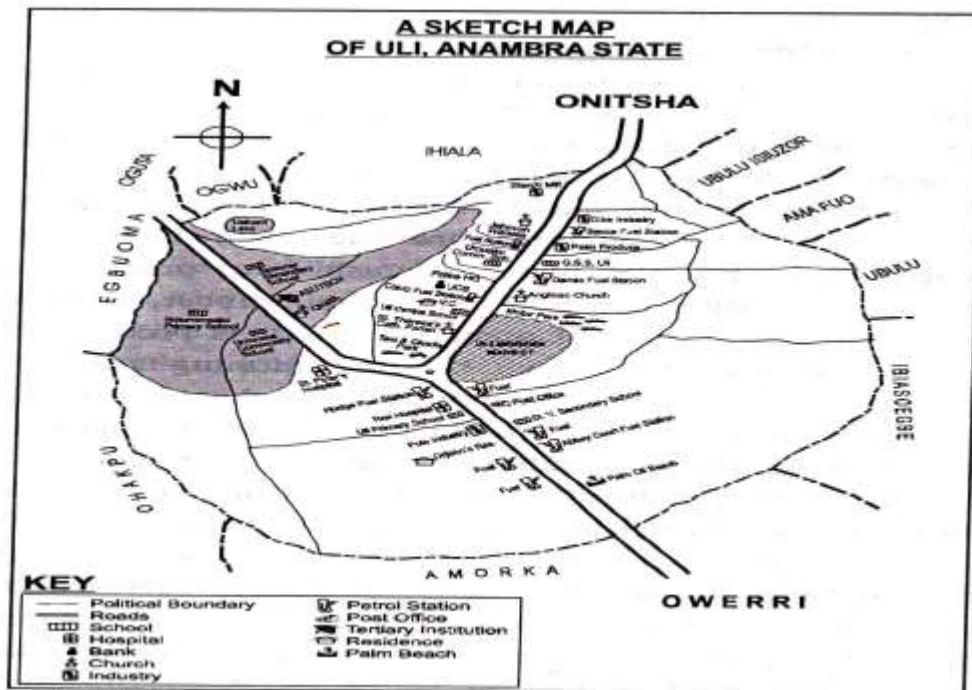


Figure 1. A Sketch Map of Uli, Anambra State

IBEYI NZU

This is one of the cultural activities to be wisely done before the real odi day festival. During this period of Ibeyi Nzu in Uli, there will be no burial ceremony or even cry when a person dies within this period except after the Odi Festival.

ITIPIA NZU

This is one of the major activities observed within the Odi period. Like in Ibehi Nzu, where there will be no burial of the dead because it is forbidden or taboo to cry or conduct a burial ceremony. Itipia Nzu is lifting the ban and empowering the community to do burial ceremonies of the dead. During this period, the community will cry on hearing the death of a relative and have the power to fix a burial ceremony.

IGBU EHI ATAMMIRI

Atammiri has been the spirit god protecting the land of Uli, and the Odi festival celebrations rested on Atammiri. Ehi is a cow in the Igbo language, and Ehi Atammiri is a cow sacrificed to the god or goddess of Atammiri. During the Odi festival, Ehi Atammiri is a cow that will not be killed by anybody from Uli. It will be a person from Umuezike Eziama Uli who are the custodians of Atammiri's goddess who have the right to kill the cow. If, by attempt, any other person kills the



Atammiri cow, if the person does not die, he will run mad. After killing the cow, all the meat will be sent to the Chief Priest, who will share the meat to the concerned members.

UGALIGA NZU

In Uli ancient kingdom, Ugaliga Nzu is a period between Ibeyi Nzu and Itipia Nzu, as explained above. During the period, there will be no rainfall except only sunshine. This will give especially women the opportunity to participate fully in the weekly activities as explained in this paper.

ICHO MMA ANU AHU (Beautifying the Woman Body)

Women love beautifying their bodies and can spend any amount to see that they are beautiful. That is why during the period for the celebration of the famous Odi festival in Uli, it was compulsory that Uli women use “Uri” Indigo in decorating and beautifying. “Uhie” is another local cosmetic used during the Odi festival in Uli. “Uri” and “Uhie” were major cosmetics the women used in painting their legs, hands, belly and their faces with traditional hair plaiting and appearing in purely special traditional “Odi” attire. All these are activities packaged in preparation for celebrating the “Odi” festival in Uli.

ITI MMANWU (Masquerade on Stage Performance)

Odi festival could not be complete without masquerades to entertain the community. Major masquerades like – “Otawarikpo”, “Kompini”, “Nwakannya”, “Ohiaagbara”, Akapu. The major fire brand masquerades that entertain people in the community are mentioned above. The presence and outing of the masquerades make the “Odi” festival very special that some Uli in diaspora returns home to celebrate the Odi festival.

IGBA EGWU – Traditional Dance

Odi can be celebrated with the traditional dance, mainly from the women folks performing to entertain everybody in the community. The dance will always be in the evening from the hours of 4 pm – 7 pm. The traditional women dance brings the entire week activities of the Odi festival to an end in the Uli for that period.

Figure 2. Uli Masquerade Performing on the Village Square



References

- Basden G. T. (1983) *Among the Igbos of Nigeria*. Lagos: University Publishing Company.
- Ejiofor PNO (1984); *Cultural Revival in Igboland*. Onitsha: University Publishing Company.
- Eziama Uli Students Union (1979) Magazine. "Zamac." Ihiala: Deo Gratics Publishers.
- Ichie Gilbert Chude Okonkwo; "URI" History, Life, Culture and Customs of a People. Ogui New Layout, Enugu: El-Damak Publishers.
- Ilogu Edmund (1995); *Christianity and Igbo Culture*. Onitsha: University Publishing Company.
- Ojimba Gladys Nnenna; *Emume Igba Odi N'Uli Nke Di Na Okpuru Ochichi*, Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State. Alvan Ikoku Printing Press, 1991.
- Osugwu B. I. N.; *Ndi Igbo Na Omenda Ha*. Benin City: Ilupiya Press Limited.