

**NGWUYI ARUA (INSTALLATION OF ANCESTRAL SYMBOLS) RITUAL  
THE BELIEF AND ITS RELEVANCE: A STUDY OF EZIMO COMMUNITY**

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**Abstract**

*The research studied Ngwuyi Arua ritual among the people of Ezimo community in Nsukka cultural area of Igboland. The work explored the extent to which the ritual has helped to curb conflict and maintain peace through the ancestral authority. This wholesome ritual is at the verge of extinction resulting from the misinterpretation that the ritual practice is fetish and idolatry. This paper affirms that such expression which originates from the Christians and some promoters of Western culture may be misleading. The ritual is not fetish or idolatry as claimed; it is a religious practice that traces and maintains the genealogy of the people which is an expression of family bond, sustentation of family and community consciousness, and puissance of harmonious relationship within the people and with the supra mundane. Ngwuyi Arua ritual which is historical as well as religious is aimed to ensure peace in the community and therefore ought to be sustained especially now that Igbo nation is clamouring for peace.*

**Keywords:** Ngwuyi Aruah, Ezimo, Belief, Igbo, Idolatry

**Introduction**

The age long conversation on African renaissance talks about going back to rediscover the lost African culture and tradition that fashioned African people; which has helped to maintain their socio-religious views. Kanu (2015) noted this when he said that “A discourse on African cultural renaissance is about the reawakening of fellow Africans to the need for cultural rebirth in Africa”. (p.389). Kanu requested for the reawakening of the fellow Africans; but this paper in addition to the reawakening of Africans, request also for the reawakening of non-Africans to the call for African renaissance. The reason is for the non-Africans to also see the relevance of African culture and how it can contribute to the world’s socio-cultural development. It was based on this that Ossai (2013) called people’s attention and wrote: “African renaissance” which this paper suggest would be

wonderful if African Traditional Religion is included as a teaching subject in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria ... and inculcate in them the African honest and authentic cultural heritage which will ensure nation building. (p.151).

African cultural renaissance is not a call for Africans to go back and embrace everything Africans, but to sieve and embrace the good African culture, leaving behind some ugly practices like killing of twins, human sacrifices and so on. Our call for African renaissance is not aimed to the blockage of cultural interaction, but a response to Hastings (1976) write-up on renaissance which says “rediscovering the wisdom of the ancestors, revaluing their ceremonies, reawakening their names, renewing their languages”. (p.43).

It was on this background that this paper studied *Ngwuyi Arua or Ngwuyi Nna* – (Installation of the ancestral symbols) in Ezimo community of Nsukka cultural area of Igboland as an instance of ancestral authority. It is important to state here that the term *Ngwuyi Arua* means the same thing with *Ngwuyi Nna*; so, in this paper the two terms could be used interchangeably and they mean the same thing.

The stages of *ngwuyi nna* are done in two or three categories depending on the clan concerned. For instance, when one becomes *Onyishi Umu-Ugwuowo* (the eldest man in *Umu-Ugwuowo* family) it is a tradition that he performs the *ngwuyi nna* ritual as *Onyishi Umu-Ugwuowo*. If the same man lives long and become the *Onyishi Umu-Ajima* (the eldest man in *Umu-Ajima* clan), he again will perform another *ngwuyi nna* ritual. And if the same man is very lucky and become the *Onyishi Amaogu* (Eldest man in *Amaogu* village), he is to perform the *ngwuyi nna* ritual as *Onyishi Amaogu*. In this case we can see that one person can perform *ngwuyi nna* in three categories. Note that *Umu-Ugwuowo* is an extended family within *Umu-Ajima* clan and *Umu-Ajima* is a clan in *Amaogu* Village of Ezimo community.

The process of this ritual is historical and as well as religious. Historical because the process traces the ancestors of the celebrant and religious because it shows the people’s unbroken connection with ancestors which is an expression of unified view of reality. According to Ossai (2018) “there is need to understand the meaning of unified view of reality. In African or specifically Igbo cosmology, the

term implies the reality unified, in other words the sphere of the physical and spiritual worlds is unified". (p.48).

In this paper, there are efforts to close the gap in world history which Trevor-Roper (1963), mistakenly said that Africa had none. "Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none; there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa". (p.971). So, this work on installation of the ancestral symbols in Ezimo also add to the historical developments of the people.

Ezimo people live within Uduledem part and are among the people of Nsukka cultural area of Igboland. Before the advent of Christianity, they were all committed to the traditional religion which includes the beliefs and practices in the ancestral credence. In this ancestral reflection, the people view the ancestors as needed authority to pilot the affairs of the society. Onuh (1992) remarked this point when he said:

The ancestors are evoked as the source of the traditional authority. Consequently, since it represents the absolute axiomatic values of the society in which the common good and common interest handed over by the ancestors, the traditional authority dispensed by the elders is the absolute in the traditional community; hence the political implication of the transitional rites among the Igbo. (p.165).

This belief system of the people is fast disappearing because of the misconception and misunderstanding of this ritual by some Christians. This and many other traditional religious activities of the Ezimo people which heads to extinction inspire the writer to embark on this study. Another reason for the study is for the people to see and understand that the practice of *ngwuyi arua* is not an evil practice as has been misrepresented by some people, instead it is means of recognition of the fore-fathers who took care of the economic and socio-religious aspects of the community and handed over to the younger generations. The practice is also the means of worshipping the supreme God.

### **Background to *Ngwuyi Arua***

In Ezimo, the announcement of death of an *onyishi* and even the seeing of the corps is done with reverence. According to Ossai (2014), "*Onyishi* refers to the oldest male in the extended family or the community". (p.87). When an *onyishi* dies, the person(s) present would call the attention of his children and other family members who then dress the corps with clean cloths and if necessary, cut the hair and so on so that the corps can look very neat and clean. In the pre-modern time when there were no injection, tablets or hospitals, every sickness was treated with traditional medicines of roots and herbs. And it was the herbalists who visits the patients in their homes to treat them.

And in the case of the *onyishi*, when they are sick, it was mandatory for their female children and other female relations to come and be taking care of them in their *ulo ufu* (Houses set aside for the *onyishi* to reside). If the sickness takes longer period, the children and the relations would be carrying out this responsibility by shifting, that is, they would be alternating themselves. As a result of this, it was difficult for an *onyishi* to die without any person being present. It is this responsibility that necessitated the *Ewu ngwo ogodo* ritual which is a pre-requisite to funeral rite in Ezimo. Ossai (2016) observed this:

The *Ewu Ngwo Ogodo* Ritual – Goat of the resting Bed stand. This rite is very relevant to the belief and practice of funeral rite where cow is a fellow up. This practice is common among the people of Ezimo, Obollo, Imilike and other communities around Udeni LGA of Nsukka cultural area ... to thank the Ada and other *umuada* for the tedious work of taking care of the deceased when he or she was in the sick bed and also the work of looking after the corps before burial. (pp. 38-39).

After dressing the corps of the *onyishi*, the eldest male child of the *onyishi* or the closest male relatives of the *onyishi* in company of other close family members would immediately go and perform minor ritual at the ancestral shrine and then remove the *Arua* (the installed ancestral symbols) and carefully put them in its box known as *Akpachi Arua*. And from there they carry the box to the house of another *onyishi* who is the closest relative to the deceased *onyishi*; he receives it from them and hide it at the *obu nna* (House of the ancestral shrine).

*Obu nna* is a house built specifically for the ancestral shrine. It is in this house that the ancestral symbols are installed; and after the installation, the symbols become shrine known as *Onu Arua*. It is at this ancestral shrine that the *onyishi* perform

morning prayer ritual known as *Ikpo ndi nna ifu*. This ritual is mandatory for every *onyishi* to perform every morning.

It is pertinent to note that it is in the house of the *onyishi*, who must have performed his own *ngwuyi nna* that the *arua* could be hidden. If the closest relative (*onyishi*) whom the *arua* is supposed to be hidden in his house have not performed *ngwuyi nna*, it would be taken to another close relative (*onyishi*) who must have performed the *ngwuyi nna* ritual. And in the worst case where the people who are supposed to take custody of the *arua* have not performed the *ngwuyi nna* ritual, then the *akpachi arua* could be taken to the village *onyishi* to keep.

According to A. Ugwuezugworie (personal interview, 30<sup>th</sup> Oct. 2020), in a situation whereby the village *onyishi* is yet to perform the *ngwuyi nna* ritual, the children of the deceased *onyishi* can approach the *Atama Omabe* – (Chief priest of *Omabe* deity) to take custody of the *arua*. If *Atama Omabe* is to take custody of the *arua*, he does not keep it in his house, but at the *Omabe* shrine. Ezugwuorie emphasized that, even though the *Atama omabe* can take custody of the *arua*, he does not open the *akpachi* (box) *arua* or try to see what is inside. He said any *Atama* who tries to do that would be stricken by the gods.

So, after the *arua* has been kept in a safe place, then the death of the *onyishi* could be announced publicly. People can start to cry aloud, official notification of the death known as *ozi onwu* would be sent out accordingly. During the notification, burial and mourning, the *arua* would be in its hiding place till when the next *onyishi* is to perform the installation ritual. The installation can be done on the *Izu Asaa* (28 days) or any time the new *onyishi* chooses if the office to be occupied is at the family level, but if the office to be occupied is at the village level, the tradition demand that the ritual must be performed on the *Izu Asaa*.

Earlier to the *ngwuyi nna*, the *onyishi* who is to perform the ritual would invite the entire *Umunna* – (Adult male relatives of the extended family) and officially inform them of his intension to install the ancestral symbols. If it is the village *onyishi* known as *Onyishi Ama* that is to perform the ritual, those to be invited to the meeting are the village *Oha* – (village elders).

In the meeting, despite whether the host is *onyishi Umunna* or *onyishi Ama*, there would be heavy entertainment of pounded yam and drinks. In the olden days the

drinks use to be palm wine only, but these days the drinks are of so many types, beer, stout, soft drinks and so on. The purpose of the meeting is not only to fix a date for the *ngwuyi nna*, it is also for those involved in the provision of the entertainment to be aware of the ceremony and therefore prepare for it.

In Ezimo community, despite the fact that the *onyishi* is the celebrant of the ritual, the individual members of the *umunna* have roles to play. The procedure is that every member of the *umunna* is to provide big calorie of pounded yam and some quantity of drink; and the celebrant make provision for the soup to be enjoyed the pounded yam with. All though the calories are not measured in kilogram, but the people have ways to measure it. It is either by viewing the sizes or by measuring it in a particular bowl or plate. However, in the recent times, members of the *umunna* do not present calories of pounded yam, instead they contribute money and buy yam. This contribution is also one of the means of participation in the ritual. Onuh (1992) noted this fact and said that "Ritual are staged events that follow a standard protocol whenever they are performed. They are social actions that require a group participation". (p.147).

### ***Inyo Arua* (Ritual Examination of the Ancestral Symbols)**

Few days to the *ngwuyi nna*, the *onyishi* (celebrant) perform an important ritual known as *Inyo arua*. The procedure is that the *onyishi* prepares sizable calorie of pounded yam with delicious soup, cola nuts, palm wine and any type of drinks and then visit the house of the person under whom the symbols has been kept. In a situation whereby the symbols were hidden at the *Omabe* shrine, the *Atama Omabe* would be informed of the ritual; then he and the other officials of the *Omabe* deity make themselves available for the *inyo arua* ritual at the shrine. The purpose of the food and drinks is to show appreciation to the people for the custody of the ancestral symbols during this period.

During or after the entertainment, the person who is in custody of the symbol will lead the *onyishi* (celebrant) and show him the *akpachi arua*. Then the *onyishi* can open it and critically examine the symbols. This examination is very significant. It is during this examination that the *onyishi* can discover if there is any symbol or symbols to be replaced or added; and if there is any, he ensures that it is available before the day of the ritual.

It is important to note that in *ngwuyi nna* ritual, every ancestor of whom its symbol ought to be installed must be installed. What this mean is that every ancestor whose symbol ought to be installed must be available for intallation. There is no excuse or reason for any ancestral symbol that ought to be installed, not to be installed. So, the purpose of the examination is to ensure that the *ngwuyi nna* is perfectly done without any elision.

### ***Nchu Ura Ngwuyi Arua (Vigil for the Installation of the Ancestral Symbols)***

After the meeting in which the date of the *ngwuyi nna* was decided, *onyishi* conveys this date to the *umuada* through the *oga umuada* (the provost of the *umuada*) or *onyishi umuada* (the eldest woman of the *umuada*). On receiving this date, *umuada* who knew their roles in the ritual will call meeting and decide on how much money every *umuada* will contribute for the ritual.

In the night of the preceding day to the *ngwuyi nna*, the *umuada* (Adult female relatives born of different families traceable to the same ancestor) gathers at the *ulo ufu* to perform ritual known as *nchu ura ngwuyi nna*. From the money they contributed, provisions for many types of drinks would be made available for their entertainment while *onyishi* provides enough calories of pounded yam with delicious soup for them. In the soup there must be sizable pieces of meat. In fact, it is a ritual characterized by eating, drinking, singing and dancing.

*Nchu ura ngwuyi nna* is not just an avenue for *umuada* to come to eat and drink, it has socio-religious implications for the people. Socially, it is an opportunity for the *umuada* to come together as a family or relatives to socialize and discuss issues concerning them. Ifesiah (1989) observed this when he said "In a family, food at a times provide the best occasion for members of the family to come together, eat, plan, discuss and develop mutual love, sense of trust as well as personal involvement, and feel their mutual presence". (p.190). Though, *umuada* eat and drink, but the ritual gives them the opportunity to fraternize and discuss issues relating to the unity and peaceful relationship in their family and the community at large.

From the religious perspectives, *nchu ura ngwuyi nna* inspires the *umuada* and even other people to understand the position the ancestors occupy in the people's belief system. The *nchu ura* which amount to the *umuada* to come together for the purposes of the ancestors is a reminder that the ancestors deserve the veneration.

Another religious performance during the *nchu ura* is the ritual which is performed by the *Osebe Onyishi* (the next eldest man to the *onyishi*). In this ritual, the *Osebe Onyishi* joins the *umuada* to perform a specific assignment which is required of him by the tradition. This assignment is that the *Osebe onyishi* sleeps at the *obu nna* where the ancestral symbols were kept for installation. The purpose of this assignment is for the *Osebe onyishi* to keep watch as a mark of respect to the ancestral symbols.

### **Ngwuyi Arua (Installation of the Symbols)**

For the purpose of clarity, this paper discussed *ngwuyi nna* in two categories, first; *ngwuyi nna* in *umunna* (in the extended family) and *ngwuyi nna* in *Ama* (in the village level).

**Ngwuyi Arua in Umunna** – In the early morning of the day of *ngwuyi nna*, the *umuada* departs to their houses as that ends their own duties in the exercise. Then the *Osebe onyishi* also departs to his house to prepare for his second specific function.

At about 10 am in the morning, the *oha Ama* assembles at the village square, and there they would be told where the ancestral symbols to be installed are hidden. From there, the *oha* goes to the hidden place of the symbols and carry the *akpachi arua* and move to the venue for the ritual. When they reach at the threshold to the *ulo ufu*, they will stop and keep the *akpachi* on the ground.

The *onyishi* who is the chief celebrant of the day will meet them at the threshold and provide cola nuts, four or five tiny tubers of yam, cock and calabash of palm wine of about four liters. These items are used for a ritual called *ikele arua ala* (welcoming of the ancestral symbols).

The process is that the representative of the *onyishi ama* will carry out prayers. In the prayers he prays for the *onyishi* (the celebrant), the *Umunna* and the entire village. He gives thanks to the ancestors for the ritual and ask them to continue to protect the celebrants. After that, they eat the cola nuts, kill and roast the cock, roast also the yam and then eat them and drink the palm wine. At the end of this exercise, they carry the *akpachi arua* and enter the compound. In the compound they go straight to *Obu nna* and keep it.

During the ritual of *ikele nna*, the *Osebe Onyishi* comes back for another task; which is the entertainment of the *oha* who transferred the *akpachi nna* to *onyishi's* house. The tradition requires *Osebe Onyishi* to provide two big calories of pounded yam,



Egbu-oda manya (about 10 liters of palm wine), a cock and cola nuts. The purpose of the edible items is to thank the *oha* for the transfer of the ancestral symbols from its hidden place to the *obu nna*. After this entertainment, the *oha* goes back to their houses to rest and come back for the installation.

In the afternoon around 2 to 3 o'clock. The *oha* and the *egal* (young men) who are by the tradition obligated to attend the *nguyi nna* assembles at *onyishi's* house. The *onyishi* and his *umunna* presents many large calories of pounded yam which the members of the *umunna* have contributed for and well delicious soup financed by the *onyishi* only. This idea of contributing as a sign of communal responsibility was observed by Basden (1982) when he said "Every man must contribute his share in public festivals and all join in the subsequent carouses". (p.223).

Then the food and the drinks would be shared into; one portion for the *oha*, another for the *egal*. And the third portion for the *Umunna* who assembles in one side to enjoy their own food and drink. When the *oha* and the *egal* is about to start the eating and drinking, the *onyishi* who is the celebrant of the day will leave and go somewhere within the compound and stay.

When the *onyishi* had left, the *oha* and the *egal* can start to enjoy their food and drink. Then after eating the food, while the drinking still goes on, someone would be sent to go and call back the *onyishi* for the commencement of the installation.

**The Installation:** Few minutes after the *onyishi* (the celebrants) have left, then the *oha* finishes their food and move to the *obu nna*. At the *obu nna*, the representative of the *onyishi ama* who has been authorized to perform the installation sits on a sacred stool known as *oche nna*; surrounded by other *oha*, brings the *akpachi nna*, keep it in his front and open it. He picks one symbol from the *akpachi nna* and pronounce, "this is" he mentions the name of the father of the celebrant, and peg it on the ground, after that he picks another symbol and pronounce the name of the grand-father of the celebrant. And in the same process he pronounces the name of the great grand-father and peg its symbol. The representative of *onyishi ama* continues in the same performance till the eldest ancestor of whom the ritual is performed on his name is pegged.

This process of pegging the symbol is imperative. The tradition require that the above sequence is followed. All the ancestor's symbol must be pegged in the ascending order from the younger to the older. Each time *ngwuyi nna* is to take place, the celebrant must ensure that the symbols of all his ancestors are available. It is the responsibility of the celebrant to ensure that any of the symbols that have

not been provided before are provided. This is one of the reasons of *Inyo Arua* ritual. It is during this inyo arua ritual that the celebrants would check if there were any symbol(s) to be provided and ensure that they are made available on the installation day.

This procedure of the pegging of the ancestral symbols in ascending order from younger ancestor to the older illustrates the genealogy of the *onyishi* (the celebrant). Jennings (1982) remarked this and said that "To participate in a ritual is to know how the world comes to be; and the most important ritual repeat the acts which founds the world". (p.12). Also, Uzukwu (1988) corroborated Jennings when he wrote:

Ritual is a pattern of behaviour which a group recognizes as its characteristic's way. Religious ritual has a creative impact in community. It is in and through this ritual action that the beings of the community come to manifest realization - "the participants discover who they are in the world and 'how it is' with the world". (p.96).

Just as Jennings and Uzukwu pointed out, *ngwuyi nna* in Ezimo community demonstrate to all the participants in the ritual which includes the *onyishi* (the celebrants), *umuada*, the *osebe onyishi*, the *oha*, the *egal*, the representative of *onyishi ama* and so on; how they come to be in the world, who they are, their positions, their functions in their *umunna* and even in the entire community.

For instance, if Mr. 'A' is the *onyishi* and the celebrant of the *ngwuyi nna* ritual, and Mr. 'B' is the father of Mr. 'A', and Mr. 'C' is the father of Mr. 'B', Mr. 'D' is the father of Mr. 'C', and Mr. 'E' is the father of Mr. D, and it continues like that till Mr. 'G'. And Mr. 'G' is the eldest ancestor of whom the *ngwuyi nna* ritual is performed to his honour.

The procedure is that the representative of the *onyishi ama* would first of all pick a symbol and pronounce it 'B' and peg it on the ground, after that, he picks another symbol and pronounce it 'C' and peg it. He continues like that till he pronounces the 'G' which is the oldest of the ancestors of whom the ritual is at his credit. It is important to note that the representative of the *onyishi ama* pronounces or call the symbols the names of the ancestors they represent. He does not refer to them as

symbols, but ancestors. It is also pertinent to say here that the symbols that represents the ancestors in Ezimo are made of iron. It looks like a small spear of which the tip looks like a pin which make it possible to be pegged strongly into the ground. It is, about 30 cm in length.



*Arua (Ancestral) Symbols*

**Note: Each of the symbols represent one ancestor. For example, if the ancestors to be installed are seven, the symbols ought to be seven**

***Ise Aka je n'Onu Arua (Dragging of Hand to the Ancestral Shrine)***

The pegging of the ancestral symbol is the most important or the most sacred instance of the *ngwuyi nna* ritual. Onuh (1992), noted that sacred instant is very important in every ritual and said "Although rituals are social actions, yet each ritual is characteristically bound up with the sacred, since the crucial moment that are dealt with by rituals are sacred moments". (p.147).

After the installation, the location or the place where the symbols are pegged becomes “Onu *Arua*” - the ancestral shrine. The place become sacred and highly respected altar. In fact, every member of the clan and even other people hallow the shrine. Discussing about shrine, Jegede (2015) wrote:

Human from time immemorial create shrines as practical devices through which the reality of the divine can be validated ... In a bid to localize or situate the divine so as to have direct access to them, Nigerians naturally create shrines. A shrine therefore is the meeting place of the material human and the spiritual divine. (p.123).

As observed by Jegede, after the installation of the ancestral symbols which is the establishment of ancestral shrine; it becomes the point of contact between the *onyishi* and the spiritual beings including the supreme being. The contact between the supreme being is through the “indirect worship” that would be explained latter.

Then the *onyishi* (the celebrant) who has been outside of the *obu nna* during the installation as required by the tradition would be called back. He returns to join the *oha* and the representative of *onyishi ama* (the village eldest man) at the *obu nna*, when he enters, the representative of the *onyishi ama* stands up from the *oche nna* for the *onyishi* (the celebrant) to sit. When he sits, then the representative drags his hand to where the symbols are pegged and place his hand on the symbol and then make pronouncement to him “*Arua Nna g ha*” meaning; these are the symbols of your ancestors. It is this dragging of the hand of the *onyishi* (celebrant) to the ancestral symbol that is known as “*Ise Aka je n’onu Arua*”.

The action of using pieces of iron which sometime look very old as symbols or representatives of the ancestors; and even pronouncing or calling the pieces of the iron by the names of the ancestors seems meaningless especially to outsiders, but to the people who own this ritual practice it means a lot and very consequential. Onuh (1992) noted this and said:

Man, consciously or unconsciously performs series of actions and behaviour sometimes accompanied by words, and may even at face value seem irrational, yet are replete with symbolic meanings. Sometimes their intrinsic

connection to the spiritual realities may be perceived, or they may be hidden to an outsider. (147).

Just as Onuh said, the connection to the spiritual realities (ancestors) which are expressed in the *ngwuyi arua* ritual are hidden and misperceived by some people, especially some Christians; and when one makes efforts to explain to them, they will not even try to understand the action of the people, but conclude that the action is idolatry.

### **First Offering to the Ancestors by the Onyishi Umunna**

The sacrificial ritual is a type of sacrifice called “Thanksgiving and Communion Sacrifice”. This is the type of sacrificial ritual through which person(s) expresses thanks and at the same time commune with the supra mundane. Awolalu (1979) discussed about this type of sacrifice as practiced by the Yoruba people thus:

(Thanksgiving and communion sacrifice). This type of sacrifice serve as means of expressing thanks to, and of holding communion with, the supernatural Being or the divinities. The Yoruba sacrifice of thanksgiving is almost accompanied by fasting; the worshippers and the divinity (through the latter in invisible) share a common meal. In this way beneficial relation is established. (p.143).

Immediately after the *Ise aka je n’ onu arua* ritual, the onyishi would perform his first ritual or obligatory task as *onyishi*. This task is that the *onyishi* will perform *Igo Nna* – offering to ancestors. He does this by offering cola nut, palm wine, and food to the ancestors at the ancestral shrine. According to Madu (2004), sacrifice is of two types “In the popular sense, sacrifice means a renunciation for a motive for instance, a widow sacrificing all she has for the training of her only son. Ritual sacrifice has its strict and proper sense only in public religious worship”. (p.123).

Note that the sacrifice being performed by the *onyishi* in this situation is the later sacrifice explained by Madu; that is “ritual sacrifice”. The food for the offering must be pounded yam. This pounded yam must be provided by the *onyishi*. In short, the tradition requires that the *onyishi* must provide special pounded yam for this offering. The *onyishi* is by the tradition forbidden to perform this ritual with the pounded yam provided by the *umunna* or anybody. All the items; cola nut, palm wine, and the pounded yam must be provided by the *onyishi*.

After this first offering by the *onyishi* the people continue with their drinks. The *egal* start to sing and dance and other merriments follows. This carousing continues till when the people are tired; then they will all depart to their houses.

### **Second Offering to the Ancestors by the Onyishi Umunna**

In the night when everybody has departed to their houses, the *onyishi* performs another offering to the ancestors. In this offering, the *onyishi* (celebrant) who is the officiant is required to provide cola nuts, palm wine, cock and pounded yam. The process of this offering is that the *onyishi* moves to the ancestral shrine and sit on the *oche nna*. First of all, he prays to the ancestors and thank them for the successful installation ritual. He prays for the protection of his family members and the entire *umunna* and the community. In fact, he prays for everything he wants the ancestors to do for him and his people.

In the prayer, *onyishi* addresses the ancestors as if he talks to a father who was still alive. This is because in Igbo or African traditional belief system, the ancestors are believed to be present with their living people on earth. Driberg (1973) opined to this idea:

No African prays to his dead grandfather any more than he 'prays' to his living father. In both cases the words employed are the same, he asks as of right, or he beseeches, or he expostulates with, or he reprimands ... The Latin word 'Piets' probably describes the attitude of Africans to their dead ancestors, as their living elder. (p.64).

After this prayer, he offers cola nuts to the ancestors by removing the tiny lobe which is in the middle of the cola nut and throws it on the ancestral shrine. This lobe is symbolic; it signifies unity of the invisible and visible beings. Ekwinife (2003) noted this and wrote:

Igbo kola is symbolic (ranging from its morphology, colour to taste. Morphology, all the cotyledons including the tiny central axis and the shape of each cotyledon, symbolize one reality or the other ... the tiny central lobe uniting all the cotyledon belong to the spirit. it symbolizes the presence of invisible world with its beings in the midst of the visible. (p.109).

After the offering of the cola nus, the next is the palm wine which is offered in form of libation at the ancestral shrine. The wine in this ritual communicates the unification of the physical world and the spiritual world. The people believe that because wine intoxicates man (the physical being) to happiness, it equally intoxicates the ancestors (the spiritual beings) to happiness also; and therefore, in that happiness mood the physical and the spiritual are united. Ekwunife (2003) observed this fact "As a ritual agent, wine symbolizes abundance and fullness of life. It communicates the ontological bond between the ancestral beings and man, channeling it to wider cosmological perspectives of the Igbo world. (p.108).

Following the libation of the wine, *onyishi* immolates the cock. In this case, the cock is held on the ground before the ancestral shrine while the throat is cut with a knife by the *onyishi* and the blood gushes and outpour directly on the shrine. In situation where the *onyishi* is old or sick that he cannot hold the cock on the ground and cut the throat, he can be assisted. This assistance can only be rendered by men or even boys; by the tradition of the people women are not allowed to render this assistance. And even when the men are to assist, they must not do the cutting of the throat by themselves alone. At the worst situation, they raise and hold the hand of the *onyishi* and cut the throat of the cock with him.

Immolation is pertinent in this offering because life of animal is involved whereby the blood is outpoured at the shrine. Awolalu (1979) noticed this and wrote "Immolation: This is the climax of the whole rite of sacrifice". (p.174). When the cock is immolated, its chest feathers is pulled and with the blood poured on the shrine, it is gummed on it. This action is symbolic. Hens use its chests feathers to protect the chicken against dangers. Awalalu (1979) pointed this belief and said "for example, the chest feathers of a hen are believed to give protection when ceremoniously used ... a hen protects its young ones with its chest (that is, with its feathers)". (p.166).

Even though in the case of this sacrifice, cock is used and not hen, but the cock's feathers represent the hen's feathers; and it portrays the attitude of hen whereby it protects its chicken with the feathers. Investigations showed that the action of pulling the feathers of the cock and gumming it on the ancestral shrine explain the belief of Ezimo people. The belief of the people is that the pulling of the feathers and gumming it on the shrine is a reminder to the ancestors that they (the

ancestors) shall continue to protect them as hen protect the chicken with its feathers. After that, the carcass of the cock is prepared either by roasting/boiling or used to prepare soup.

When the food (pounded yam) is ready, and *onyishi* is served, before he eats, he sacrifices to the ancestors at the ancestral shrine through a process called *itu aka*. In the words of Ekwunife (2003) he said “the ritual is called *itu aka* (ritual offering of food to the spirit in general)”. (p.161). The action is that the *onyishi* cuts the pounded yam, dip it into the soup and throw it at the ancestral shrine.

This ritual of *itu aka* symbolize the communion between the invisible and visible world. The action expresses announcement of the presentation; and invitation to partake in the communion. This communion in the ritual food signifies the web-like relationship between the spiritual beings (the ancestors) and the physical being (man). Ekwunife (2003) remarked this:

As he throws the morsels of food out, ... with that gesture, the good spirits below the earth are summoned to commune with the family through the ritual food. It seems, therein lies the force of the ritual words: ‘kezuenu, lizuenu’ (share this among yourselves and let everyone partake). Such an interpretation does not exclude communion with the ancestors who form part of the members of the spirit world. (160).

Critical observation of this sacrifice by the *onyishi* clearly demonstrate the link between the ancestors and their children on earth. Today, despite the claim that Christianity have changed or overturned traditional religious practices in Igboland, the belief in the reality of the existence of the ancestors still occupy the views of both the Christians and non-Christian Igbo people. Ilogu (1985) noted this and wrote:

Christianity has not been able to destroy the belief in the existence of some unexplainable link between us and our fore fathers ... our recommendation therefore is that all Ibos, Christians as well as non-Christians acknowledge this link with our patrilineal ancestors in the pouring of libation and in giving of pieces of kola nut. (pp.218-219).

In fact, the *ngwuyi nna* ritual in Ezimo serve as a reminder to the people about those who founded the clans, the villages or the community. And it may not be right for the people not to think of those who procreate them into the community. The position of this paper is that Igbo people can be Christians and at the same time recognize the existence of ancestors. Ilogu (1985) even argued that one cannot



believe in the Christian view of communion of saints without acknowledging the ancestors:

We cannot fully believe in the communion of saints and resurrection of the body without seriously thinking of our common humanity with those who had begotten us ... many do no longer have any roots in the community, the Christian church in Igboland must not help to destroy existing roots of the people's belonging. (pp.219-220).

### **Ngosi Ala Umunna (Presentation of the Family Land)**

The next day after the *ngwuyi nna, umunna* assemble again at the house of the *onyishi* to officially show and hand over the family land to him. This practice of showing family land to the *onyishi* is obligatory. According to M. Ossai (personal communication, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021), even if the *onyishi* know all the family lands and its boundaries, the process of showing the land to him ought to be done. In his words, the process is to fulfil the traditional obligation of the official hand over of land in line with *ngwuyi nna* ritual. According to him, by the official hand over of the family land, the *onyishi* take the possession of the land and its resources in confidence and therefore answerable to the ancestors.

After showing the lands and its boundaries to the *onyishi, umunna* converges again at the *ulo ufu*. *Onyishi* will provide cola nuts, drinks and food to entertain the *umunna* for showing him the family land. And after that the *onyishi* could be addressed as *Onyishi nwe ala nwe mma* meaning the eldest man who is in custody of the family land and family ancestral shrine.

### **Ngwuyi Arua Ama - Installation of the Village Ancestral Symbols**

Immediately an *onyishi* dies, the ancestral symbols would be transferred from the house of the immediate passed on *onyishi* to the house of another *onyishi* who must have performed the *ngwuyi nna* ritual. At the place, the symbols are hidden in the *obu nna*. It is after the transfer of the symbols that the death of the *onyishi* could be made public.

Unlike the *ngwuyi arua* of the *umunna* which has no deadline, the *ngwuyi arua* of *onyishi ama* takes place after the *Izu Asaa* (28 days) of the burial of the late *onyishi*. The tradition is that when an *onyishi ama* dies, the incumbent *onyishi* perform the *ngwuyi arua* ritual on the *Izu Asaa* of the burial of the immediate late *onyish ama*.

In the process of *ngwuyi nna* ritual by *onyishi ama*, the incumbent *onyishi* does not call a meeting to fix the date or send messages to the *umuada*. This is because everybody is aware of the requirements by the tradition that the *ngwuyi nna* ritual

must be performed on the *Izu Asaa* after the burial the late *onyishi*. In the same way the responsibilities of everybody in the village which includes the *osebe onyishi*, the egal the *umuada* are known. Their responsibilities are the same as it is in *ngwuyi arua onyishi umunna* as explained above.

**Inyo Arua:** The process of *inyo nna* by an incumbent *onyishi ama* is the same with the process of *inyo nna* by *onyishi umunna* as explained above.

**Nchu Ura Arua:** The process is also the same with process of *nchu ura arua* during the ritual by *onyishi umunna*. However, in this case, it is the *umuada* of the entire village that come for the *nchu ura* and not only the *umuada* of the *umunna*. During the *nchu ura arua*, the *osebe onyishi* also attend. Just like in the *ngwuyi arua* at *umunna*, the *osebe onyishi* ought to be present to perform the same ritual as narrated above.

### **Transfer of the Village Ancestral Symbols**

During the *nchu ura arua*, while the *umuada* are drinking and dancing, the *oha* assembles at the village square and from there goes to the house where the symbols are hidden and carry the box (*akpachi nna*) to the house of the *onyishi* (celebrant). Unlike the transfer of the *umunna* symbols which are taken straight to the house of the *onyishi* and kept at the *obu nna*, the ancestral symbols of the village (*ama*) are transferred first to the threshold to the house of the *onyishi* and kept there till the next day.

In the morning of the next day (the day of the installation), after the *umuada* have departed to their houses, then the *oha* assembles again at the threshold to the house of the *onyishi* to complete the transfer of the symbols. *Onyishi* provides cock, palm wine, cola nuts, and pounded yam to the *oha* at the threshold. These items are used to performed the *ikele nna ala* ritual meaning welcoming of the ancestors. In this ritual, it is the eldest of the *oha* who is the closest relative to the *onyishi* that performs the *ikele nna ala* ritual. He does this by offering the cola nut, the palm wine, the pounded yam and the cock (by immolation) to the ancestors at the threshold. After this ritual, then the *oha* carries the symbols in its box to the *obu nna* and retire to their houses to prepare and come back for the installation.

### **Installation of the Ancestral Symbols**

At about 2 to 3 o'clock, all the *oha* and the egal who are entitled to attend the ceremony assembles at the *onyishi's* house for the installations of the symbols. The assemblage speaks loud of the oneness or the affinity that result from this ritual

activity. The action of the people shows community consciousness in Igbo world view.

Wash (1988) noted this relevance when he discussed about rites and said “Rites and stories hold communities together and point them towards their future. As a group of people becomes self-conscious and protective about its identity”. (p.3). The same thing was also the view of Onuh (1992) about ritual when he said “Another value of rituals consists in their solidarity reinforcement of the community”. (p.148). These expressions point to the fact that rituals which includes the installation of the ancestral symbols in Ezimo community is a unifying factor or action that interconnect beings vertically (between the spiritual and physical beings) and horizontally (between the physical beings).

Just like the *ngwuyi nna* by *onyishi umunna*, it is the responsibilities of the *umunna* of the *onyishi* (the celebrant) to provide the food and drinks for the entertainment. After eating the food, while they are enjoying the drinks, the *oha* will call for the installation. At this stage, it is only the *onyishi* who have performed their own *ngwuyi nna* ritual are entitled to enter the *obu nna* where the installation takes place. Other *oha* who are not *onyishi* and even the *onyishi* who have not performed their own *ngwuyi nna* ritual are not entitled to enter the *obu nna*. These people who are not entitled to enter the *obu nna* can stay at the door and peep from there. These class of people are called *oha onu obu* – elders at the door; meaning elders who are not entitled to enter *obu nna*.

**Installation of Symbols by Slave:** In the olden days it was the duty of slaves to install the ancestral symbols of *onyishi ama*. It is important to note that slaves were only found in two villages in Ezimo which are Amaogu village and Amallaogbo village. During this period, when other villages had need for installation of ancestral symbol, they used to seek for them from either Amaogu or Amallaogbo.

However, after the abolition of slave trade following the coming of Christianity and colonial administration in Igboland which to some extent overturned slave mentality, things changed. As a result of this change, it was not compulsory for slaves to carry out the installations.

**Installation of Symbols by Woman:** Following the development that toppled the slave mentality; and efforts to search for substitute to slaves that can carry out the functions of the installation of ancestral symbols, the *oha* consulted the diviners to ascertain who the gods have chosen. According to A. Ugwuezugwuorie, (personal communication, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021), it was through this divination that a woman, Nwada Odo Nwa-Eya Owo-Eze was discovered to have been chosen by the gods

for the installation of ancestral symbols of *onyishi* ama of Amaogu village, of Ezimo community. A. Ugwuezugwuorie who could not give account of whether there was any other woman who have performed this function before Nwada Odo said that she has been performing this function for many years. However, at the time of this research, it was discovered that the said Nwada have died since 23<sup>rd</sup> of November, 2016 and was buried on the 24<sup>th</sup> of November, 2016.

The question today is, when will the *oha* Amaogu village seek the replacement of Nwada Odo Nwa-Eya Owo-Eze through the diviners especially now that the majority of the people claim to be Christians who frown at anything traditional religion?

**The Installation:** In the same procedure of the *umunna*, before they enter the *obu nna*, for the installation, the *onyishi* (celebrant) will leave the arena of the installation and go and stay anywhere in the compound. In the *obu nna*, the person who is to do the installation sits on *oche nna*. The installation follows the same process like in the installation of *onyishi umunna*. That is starting from the immediate father of the *onyishi* (celebrant) to the grand-father, great grand-father and so on. After the installation, the location where the symbols are pegged becomes the *Onu Arua* - ancestral shrine, then *onyishi* would be called back to the *obu nna*, hence; *Ise Aka je n' onu nna*.

### *Ise Aka je n' onu Nna*

When the *onyishi* enters the *obu nna*, the person who did the installation stands up from the *oche nna* for the *onyishi* to sit, he then drags his (*onyishi*) hand to the ancestral shrine and make pronouncement to him. For example, if it is *onyishi Amaogu*, the pronouncement would be “*Arua Amaogu ha*” meaning “this is Amaogu ancestral shrine”. After the pronouncement, the *onyishi* become eligible to perform rituals at the ancestral shrine.

This performance of ritual at the ancestral shrine conveys the intrinsic link between the people of Igboland or Africans in general and their ancestors which expresses the people's belief. Parrinder (1969) observed this when he wrote “Not only are the ancestors revered as past heroes but they are felt to be still present watching over the household, directly concerned in all the affairs of the family”. (p.115). In agreement to the view of Parrinder, Idowu (1979) said “The ancestors regarded still as heads and parts of the families or communities to which they belonged while they were living human beings ... The ancestors remain, therefore, spiritual superintendents of family affairs”. (p.184). Also, Madu (1997) remarked

“The ancestors for example, who inhabits the underworld can at times visit their families in the world of men”. (p.5).

### **First Offering to the Ancestors by *Onyishi Ama***

Immediately the *onyishi* sit down at the *oche nna*, he begins his first offering to the ancestors at the ancestral shrine. This immediate offering of sacrifices to the ancestors at the ancestral shrine describe the unbroken or continual link between the ancestors and their living family members on earth. It is the practice by which children serve their parents food and drinks that is being expressed or continued in this offering. Ela (1988) observed this fact and wrote:

Drinks and food offered to the ancestors are symbols ... of the continuity of the family and this permanent contact. In the African mind, these offerings express an attitude that is unchanged by death, which is the passage into the invisible. Accordingly, the African always behaves as if the ancestors were still living. Offering one’s dead father a meal is a simple act of filial piety. (p.19).

In the same way that the tradition forbids the *onyishi umunna* to perform this offering with the food and drinks provided by the *umunna*, so also *onyishi ama* is forbidden. The compulsory items for the offerings are cola nuts, palm wine, pounded yam, cock and other items could be added if the *onyishi* wishes. The tradition requires that all the items to be used for this offering ought to be provided by the *onyishi* and not from the ones provided by the *umunna*.

### **Second Offering to the Ancestors by *Onyishi Ama***

The process and the procedure of this sacrifice which bring the ritual to end is the same with the offering by the *onyishi Umunna* as explained above. All the items of this sacrifice which are offered to the ancestors at the ancestral shrine are symbols that symbolizes one thing or the other as explained above during the discussion on the second sacrifice by *onyishi umunna*.

It is important to note that the offering is not for the symbols as claimed by some Christians, but for the spiritual beings which the symbols represent. Critical study of the prayers during this sacrifice unfolds that the officiant asks the ancestors to

intercede for them (the physical) before the supreme being whom they call *Ezechitioke Abiama*. Quarcoopome (1987) reflected this:

The components are interrelated because the world is under a unitary control. The whole structure links man with God. For example, ... The ancestors are personal beings with intimate relationship to man and so they act as intermediaries between the living and the divinities and God. (p.44).

Ogbukagu (2008) agreed with Quarcoopome and said:

Ancestors are worshipped or venerated through different means including effigies (images) representing them in other spirit world. The prayers offered to these images and other objects of worship are really not directed to them *per se*. This can be seen from the views expressed by Smith as quoted: ... is that the ancestral spirits are intermediaries who relay the prayers to Him. Him meaning God. (pp.402403).

The expressions of Quarcoopome and Ogbukagu make the writer to refer to the sacrifice by *onyishi* to the ancestor as "Indirect Worship". According to Mettuh (1999), "'Indirect Worship' may be defined as worship responses - the prayers, oblations or sacrifices addressed to God through the intermediaries of another spiritual being, be it deity or ancestral". (p.149).

### **Ngosi Ala Ama (Presentation of the Village Land).**

The process and the method of the presentation of the village land to the *onyishi ama* is the same with the presentation of land to the *onyishi umunna*. The only different is that instead of the *umunna*, it is the village *oha* that does the presentation.

### **Recommendations**

1. African traditional religion ought to be introduced as a teaching subject in primary and secondary schools to acquaint our children with the right knowledge about the religious practices.
2. The critics or the faultfinders of the African traditional religion should try to delve into the significance of the religious practices before condemnation.
3. The sustainability of *Ngwuyi Arua* ritual is commended for its significance on maintenance of peace in the community.

4. The adherent of African traditional religion should see the belief in *Ngwuyi Arua* ritual as quest to becoming ancestor and therefore a motivation to live a moral life.
5. The paper urges the scholars of religion especially the African traditional religious scholars to embark on more research studies on every aspects of the traditional religious rituals to re-orientate the people on its relevance.

## Conclusion

To understand the fact in the practice of Igbo traditional religion depend on-the -spot investigation; and those who ought to go into it should study it to know the truth, and not a study with bias. It has been discovered by many scholars that some people pretend not to know the truth about the African traditional religion. For instance, many know that there is nothing wrong in the practice and belief towards the ancestors, but they continue to condemn it. Idowu (1976) noted this false appearance and said this:

There is a proverb in Yoruba to the effect that there is none so difficult to wake as one who is only pretending to be asleep. If a person has made up his mind not to see the truth, nothing can wake him to it. (p.92).

This paper has presented *ngwuyi arua* as essential in understanding the ontological and cosmological belief of Ezimo people towards the ancestors. It is on this regards that the social, economic, political and religious actions embedded in *ngwuyi arua* ritual is understood as a key for one who becomes *onyishi* of a clan or the village.

Our position is that Igbo people should continue to acknowledge their ancestors. In fact, for Ilogu (1976), ancestors should be celebrated this same day with Christian's celebration of All-Saints-Day. He wrote:

If the non-Christians Ibo towns and villages will agree to fix their big celebration in honour of the ancestors on All-Sanits-Day, then all should have a big celebration indeed ... The Ibo belief in continuity with the ancestors, together with the symbolic honour to them through libation, can provide for Christians together with All Saints- Day, moment for such thought and prayers both for our ancestors in the faith as well as our ancestors in flesh and blood. (p.219).

*Ngwuyi arua* ritual is also an expression of family or community consciousness. It tells how the Igbo families or communities demonstrate Mbiti's popular saying "I am because we are and, since we are, therefore I am."

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