

**The 'Kauri' - Ego Kiri Kiri: Pre-colonial Cash and its  
Religious Usages Among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

The Kauri, Ego Kiri Kiri, the pre-colonial cash in Igboland of Nigeria and its usages in the religious, ritual and votive offerings in shrines, temples and in sanctuaries so widespread in the then Igboland is the focus of this article. Many had used their cash to placate the “gods of the ancestors” who they believed had prospered their “hands”. Ego Kiri Kiri became, no doubt, the essential commodity to implore the Eze Mmuos (Chief priests/esses) to plead the divinities to solicit their continued blessings. Our study adopts “the methodology of oral tradition” to reconstruct the historical trajectories of the Kauri and its pluriform usages in the religious houses across Igboland. The article concludes that the religious usages of the Kauri reveal Igboman’s conscious awareness of the nexus between spirituality and economic pursuits.

**Keywords:** sanctuaries, sacred relics, effigies, numismatic scholarship, pilgrims and devotees.

**Résumé**

Le Kauri, Ego Kiri Kiri, l’argent liquide pré-colonial dans l’Igboland du Nigeria et ses usages dans les offrandes religieuses, rituelles et votives dans les sanctuaires et les temples si répandus dans l’Igboland de l’époque est le sujet de cet article. Beaucoup de gens utilisaient leur argent pour apaiser les «dieux des ancêtres» qui, selon eux, avaient fait prospérer leurs «mains». Ego Kiri Kiri devint, sans aucun doute, la ressource essentielle pour implorer les Eze Mmuos (prêtres/esses en chef) de supplier les divinités et de solliciter leurs bénédictions continues. Notre étude adopte «la méthodologie de la tradition orale» pour reconstruire les trajectoires historiques du Kauri et ses usages pluriformes dans les sanctuaires à travers l’Igboland. L’article conclut que les usages religieux du Kauri révèlent la conscience qu’a l’Igbo du lien entre la spiritualité et les activités économiques.

**Mots-clés :** Sanctuaires, reliques sacrées, effigies, érudition numismatique, pèlerins et dévots.

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**Introduction**

Igboland, one of the largest ethnic regions in Nigeria, is located in the southeast between latitude 5-7 degrees north and longitude 6-8 degrees east of the Greenwich meridian<sup>1</sup>. Igboland occupies a landmass of about 15,800 square miles. The River Niger divides the area into two disproportionate parts. The greater portion comprises today’s southeastern states: Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia and Ebonyi. The smaller unit, west of the Niger, comprises the Niger Delta Region which includes

Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta states, in short, the oil rich basin of southern Nigeria from whose crude oil petro-dollar flows into modern Nigeria. As H.O. Anyanwu describes the area, “the Igbo territory sketches across the River Niger from the west of Agbor in Delta state to the fringes of the Cross River and runs roughly from north of Nsukka highlands to some parts of the Atlantic coast”<sup>2</sup>. The kauri shells, which had long been found on the warm Atlantic coastline of West Africa and picked up as items for ornament, had been unknown as cash in Igboland<sup>3</sup>. By that time, trade and business had been carried on with commodity money (barter). In this wide socio-cultural and economic estate, *Cypraea moneta*, the kauri, the glossy and usually brightly coloured porcelain-like shells of between one and three centimeters came to be adopted as a monetary system. Islamic oral accounts claim that the ubiquitous Arab traders of the trans-Saharan route introduced the kauri as currency from the Maldives in the Indian Ocean.

These oriental merchants had traveled from India with huge copies of the shells of these marine gastropods of the *Cypraeidae* family into West Africa. Shortly thereafter, *Ego kiri kiri* as it was popularly known and called became the main payment system used by the Igbo<sup>4</sup>, the speakers of the Igbo language throughout their seven sub-cultural areas within their territory in the daily “buying and selling of different commodities” to satisfy their needs. Besides, it was also employed as a means of exchange of services between the Igbo and their riverside neighbours before and after the abolition of slave trade in 1807. Since the time of Arab penetration into the region, extensive trade in fabrics, native textile materials, pottery, palm oil products and a limited incidence of slavery were carried on in these regions with the kauri currency. Thus, with the emergent kauri cash, enterprising Igbo merchants who had carried on extensive business transactions with the coastal dwellers<sup>5</sup> revolutionized fiscal operations in Igboland and came to establish themselves and their families as *Eze Egos* (Kings of money) who society nearly hailed as divines.

### **Methodology**

Early Igbo communities had no literary deposits but had preserved their traditions orally. In pre-colonial time, such traditions were preserved in the stories they told, in the wisdom they had shared in executing their mercantile and business enterprises and in the rituals they performed. Therefore, the methodology of oral tradition is considered essential to this study aimed at the historical reconstruction of the trajectories of the kauriin pre-colonial Igboland. Therefore, the study is

approached from the inter-disciplinary angle with the social anthropological method in the lead. Extensive library and field investigations which took consideration of the demographical, the geographical and even the archaeological data on Igbo commerce and industry have assisted us to uncover the fundamental harmony that was characteristic of pre-contact Igbo life and related cosmological orientation.

The research heavily relied on the following for its data gathering and interpretation: (a) extensive personal interviews with some twelve (12) randomly selected elderly persons from the core Igbo areas where the kauri had predominantly circulated as “hot” cash for exchange of goods and services. A folk music by a Women Dance Group from Owerri area of Igboland on the importance of the kauri was collected, played, transcribed and interpreted; (b) the kauri’s various employment at religious centers and cultic sanctuaries in Uzoagba (our hometown), Umuna Orlu, Adazi-Nnukwu, the Onitsha axis and Abri-ba-Ohofia areas in the northern cluster of Igboland are explored and described to demonstrate the religious and ritual significance of the kauri in the Igbo psyche. To appreciate the deep religious value of the kauri among the Igbo, twenty purposively selected aged persons, men and women in forty core communities in whose young days the kauri was used and who “saw” the local priests and priestesses perform at those shrines were interviewed; and (c), an average of four shrines, each with distinctively sculptured wooden images and sacred relics adorned with the kauri shells, which had existed since pre-colonial time as venues where the kauri had been used as divination consultation fees, sacrificial items, wall and floor decorative ornaments and votive offerings to divinities and as well as symbols of femininity, fertility and wealth have been studied and described. Secondary literatures were studied and Internet resources and information were accessed and utilized. In the conclusion, an anthropologically defensive critique is offered on the importance of redressing Igbo historical image in order to enhance contemporary numismatic scholarship.

### **1. The Reckoning Art of Ego Kiri kiri**

Among the Igbo, ego kiri kiri was counted in the following strings:

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| Isi Ego  | = six (6) kauri shells (6) was otu ego, that is, one. |
| Ego abuo | = 2 x Isi Ego (2 x 6), that is, 12 kauri shells       |
| Ego ato  | = 3 x Isi Ego, that is, 18 kauri shells               |

Ego ano	= 4 x Isi Ego, that is, 24 Kauri shells
Ego ise	= 5 x isi Ego, that is, 30 Kauri Shells
Ego isii	= 6 x isi Ego, 36 kauri shells
Ego asaa	= 7 x isi Ego, 42 kauri shells
Ego asato	= 8 x Isi Ego, 48 kauri shells
Ego itoli	= 9 x Isi ego, 54 kauri shells
Ego iri	= 10 x Isi Ego, 60 kauri shells

At the end of ten, the arithmetic changes.

Isi Ego into 11 places, that is, 6 kauri shells x 11 (66 shells) was called Ego motu

Isi Ego into 12 places, that is, 6 x 12 (72 shells) is Ego mabuo

Isi Ego into 13 places, that is. 6 x 13 (78 shells) is Ego mato

Nineteen Isi Egos is 114 kauri shells,

nineteen belu otu n'ogu Ego is 20 Isi Egos, that is,  $20 \times 6 = 120$ .

N.B: The prefix, ma- is a multiplication sign in Igbo language. So Isi ego, ma-ego iri n'ano means

$(6 \times 14) = 84$  shells and so on till eighteen.

Ogu Ego belu otu means, 20 Isi Egos (120) minus one Isi Ego (6 shells), that is, 114 kauri shells.

Isi Ego in 10 places, that is, Isi Ego ngairi, (60 kauri shells) is generally counted as Out Ukwu Ego.

Out Ukwu Ego x 2, is Ukwu Abuo (120 shells)

Out Ukwu Ego x 3 is Ukwu ato (180)

and x 4 is Ukwu Ano (240),

and x 5 is Ukwu Ise (300), etc.

Isi Ego ngairi in 20 places ( $60 \times 20 = 1200$  shells) counted as Ogu

Ukwu was known, for short, as Afia (or Ahia in Owerri Igbo dialect)

Ogu ukwu ego (1200) taken 5 times (6000) is Afia n'ise

Ogu ukwu ego taken 10 times, ( $1200 \times 10$ ) totals Afia n'iri (12,000 shells)

12,000 kauri shells constitute done bag of money in the days of our elderly fathers/mothers.

N.B: It has to be underscored that OguAfia was generally accepted as Otu-Akpa Ego. that is, one bag of kauri money.

Ogu ukwu ego taken 400 times is Nnu Afia, (that is, 480,000 shells; namely 40 bags of Kauri shells).

Afia nga iri: 1200 x 10 shells (12,000) equals Ogu Afia

Afia nga iri taken three times (12,000 x 3 = 36, 000) equals Iri-Afia n'Abuo

Afia nga iri taken 4 times (12,000 x 4 = 48,000) equals Ogu-Afia n'Abuo

That is, Ogu Afia n'Abuo. Is one bag of money in 4 places.

These figures represent a remarkable ingenious calculation system, which the Igbo, a preliterate acephalous race who had no western education and literacy by that period, had adopted to execute their fiscal policies and businesses. This golden age was before the arrival of the colonial masters with the British monetary system, namely the Pound Sterling.

## **2. The Kauri as Trading Cash in Pre-colonial Igboland**

Prior to the arrival of the British, Ego kiri kiri aided and abetted “the vitality of Igbo textile industry”<sup>6</sup>. In other words, kauri shells were so widespread in the Igbo country that its prevalence as cash suggests that there had existed “an extensive trade network in the ancient past”. Eventually the kauri became the cash that had provided for and supported the booming handwoven textile culture of the Akwete people in Aba division and among the Ndoki clan, the Nsukka people, well known for their textile craft and among the Afikpo, Abakaliki and the Nkanu clans who specialized in weaving and its trade.

During the early part of the British colonial administration of the Lower Niger, both the Sterling and the kauri were used concurrently in many areas of Igboland<sup>7</sup>. The exchange rate of Afia nga iri, that is, Ogu Afia, out akpa ego: 12,000 shells as one bag of kauri shells was between 2 shillings and one shillings due to the value of the commodities in question and how far inland the British Shilling had penetrated from the costal market posts and ports. In fact, in the early 1950s, the kauri cash, in spite of its numerality and weight, was still in full circulation throughout Igboland. By the time Nigeria gained political independence in 1960, the kauri was still known but had gradually begun to be displaced as legal tender by the British Pounds Sterling<sup>8</sup> Interviewees and some selected elderly persons we had contacted narrated that the kauri was essentially a payment system for most commercial dealings among Igbo business men and women and between them and the white company agents who represented, for example, the Royal Niger Company. This transactional value and importance of the kauri explains why its quality and quantity

denomination of 1200 shells was called Afia, which literally means market in Igbo language. The name suggests that 1200 shells of kauri was the mother of all the denominations for marketing and trading enterprises. For big time business people and cash madams who did business on the higher side, Afia nga iri, (12,000), that is, out akpa ego (one bag of money) was the generally accepted payment unit.

There are four market days that make up the Igbo week; namely Orié, Afo, Nkwo and Eke<sup>9</sup>. In Ikeduru Local Government Area where we hail from, the big markets where all sorts of goods, which the kauri purchased, are Orié Umueze of our village, Afo Uzoagba of our town, Nkwoimo in Amaimo and Eke Iho of Iho Dimeze. In Ahiazu LGA, of Imo state, Afo Oru was a great market well known for the buying and selling of dried fish. In Anambra state, Out Ocha at Onitsha on the eastern bank of the River Niger was famous. There are still in Anambra state hinterland Afo Nnukwu of Adazi-Nnukwu, Orié Toro in Enugu-Agidi and such others as Eketa market in Igbodo, western Igboland across the River Niger in today's Delta State, Nigeria.

In the olden days, Afo Nnukwu was so famous that Ndi Igbo (Igbo people) came from far and near with textile materials, their cash crops and handcrafts to sell and thereafter bought other different types of commodities. Ndi Izuogu, all the way from Ideato Local Government of today's Imo State, the heartland of Igboland traversed the Igbo country to sell, on a large scale, items like fabrics, mbalari (umbrellas), gun-powder, den guns, anklets, Igbo hand-woven clothes and cosmetic ornaments and head-gears for women, warriors and titled men. Bags of the kauri were made and lost. The merchants of pottery from Enugu-Agidi in today's Anambra state tramped down to Afo Nnukwu with assorted shapes of earthenware and pottery. Here, the kauri cash was judiciously made and sporadically spent. Later in the annals of the local people, the fame of Afo Nnukwu was replaced by the rising Orié-Toro market. As the name goes, toro, one-third of a shilling, indicates that buyers and sellers at this market freely accepted the concurrent exchange rates of the Isi Ego, six kauri shells as the equivalent of three pence, a British unit of money which facilitated easy deals that could not have been so quickly transacted in other parts of Igboland<sup>10</sup> Due to the cheap rates of exchange at Orié Toro and its location, it attracted people from places like Enugu-Agidi, Abatete, Ogidi, Nnobi, Igbo-Ukwu and from present-day Imo state, big time merchants from places like Umuna, Orlu and round about Owerri as well as traders from Enyigugu, Olakwo, Ngor, Etche and Ndoki found their way to Orié

Toro. And even from far-flung places like Aba-Ngwa, Ibeku, Isiukwuato, Ohafia and Atriba, the Igbo people known for their mercantile prowess criss-crossed the territory with their bags of kauri buying and selling<sup>11</sup>. At Onitsha on the bank of the Niger and further inland, Oguta on the Lake, commodities like gun-powder, singlets, textile materials, spirits, gins and smoked fish constituted significant trading items on which kauri bags were profusely used in exchange of the goods; and especially foreign goods like royal walking sticks, hats and bottles of dry- gin which the agents of the Royal Niger Company had imported from the United Kingdom<sup>12</sup>.

Among the Igbo, women readily made money too. Many women engaged in small-scale commercial enterprises, which brought cash into their home-steads. Some carried their wares on the head to the markets where they were disposed of and with the kauri cash made there, they bought and brought other items home for another day's market. Ogbukagu informs us more on this daily routine style of market business : The disposal of a commodity at one market was immediately followed by purchase of another item at that same market for sale at another market the next day or so. These "itinerant" women traders were ever busy chasing after different kinds of commodities. They were not specialist tradespersons. Any item was as good as the other in so far as it could yield some handsome gains. Therefore, these women went about their daily business trips in quest of money day after day in a period when the roads were rough and unpaved; when there were no modern means of transport; when the bridges were not solid and when the Aro kidnappers lurked in every nook and cranny ever ready to pounce as kidnappers on unsuspecting persons. The dogged quest for money, in whatever currency it is known has been typical of the Igbo be they men or women. For these and other reasons, some Igbo people are pejoratively known as Akwa n'ebere ego (Criers for money)<sup>13</sup>. However, it is said that many of the women traders were mindful of the enormous costs borne by their grooms and their families to marry them. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it could take upward of 100, 000 kauri shells (8.3 bags), that is akpa ego asato n'ugwu to marry a young girl into the home as wife<sup>14</sup>.

The desire to replenish what had been spent on her head, had fired the zeal to struggle to make wealth to enhance their entrepreneurial and social standing in the society; especially to teach the youths the spirit of enterprise as well as to their fellow women; particularly the lazy ones. To corroborate the above findings, the Obi Wuru Otu Women Dance Group from Ihiagwa, today in Owerri North Local Government

Area of Imo State had, by 1978, waxed a record, Nwanyi Ma Obi Diya (The wife who knows the heart of her husband) in which a piece on the value of Ego Kiri kiri, the kauri cash was articulated in song in Owerri Igbo dialect. This piece commemorates and celebrates the currency's historic importance in the socio-economic life-world of the Igbo. The first stanza runs like this:

Ego nna anyikpara n'uwambu, o O wu ego kiri kiri 2x	The money our fathers made in the olden days were ego kiri kiri 2x
go akpara mbu. Ego ejiri luo nu nne muru anyi ni 2x. Igbo je akpo ya ojomma 2x Owerri n'ahu nna Anyi amarala s'ego abala Owu ozugbo mmanu bara aba Onye ogazirile, a ya nwe mba	The money made in the olden days. Money used to marry our mothers 2x. The Igbo call it „beautiful“ 2x People of Owerri have you heard Though we now know money is found everywhere Yet not everyone is rich But he who succeeds, control the speech.

*Interpretation of the Text*

Our field work assistants revealed that this piece of folk music; especially one like this created by the womenfolk, confirms most of the data exposed above. Ego kiri kiri was generally accepted as the popular name of the currency. It was so lyrically idealized, fondly admired and so much sought after. This appraisal from Ihiagwa, in Owerri North LGA spread so evocatively to the southern environs, reached Ikeduru and Mbaise clans to Ibeku and Mbano areas up to Adazi-Nnukwu to Onitsha; and to the people who lived along the bank of the River Niger, to affirm that the kauri cash was prodigiously over-valued and adopted as the paramount cash despite the availability of other metals. In the fringes of the northern Igbo conglomerates reaching out to places like Abiriba and Ohofia, local but shrewd Abiriba tradesmen and merchants who conferred it the title, Okpogho – the innumerable cash, held ego kiri kiri supreme. It was the chief cash sought after and made use of by the industrious Igbo men and women in pre-contact period. Abakaliki people traded in their salt, fishes and yams with Ego kiri kiri. Its widespread nature, its porcelain and shinny beauty earned it the exalted folk nickname, Ojomma; especially in the Owerri Igbo commercial zone. Apart from its trading qualities, the



folk piece informs us that kauri became the money which rich Igbo families gave out or received as valuable bride-wealth paid to cement marriage contracts between themselves and the families of their wives. Apart however from the social and contractual purposes of the bride-wealth, the real aim was to provide the families from where young and able-bodied women have been taken into early marriages the means to begin or expand their business undertaking<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, ego kiri kiri was the cash made before modern mints had arrived on the shore of Igboland. The musical piece intimates us further that even though there now abound plenty of nouveaux riches in Igbo society, the days when ego kiri kiri circulated there were few who could make it n'uzo kwu oto – through just means. Those persons and their families become the 'voice-full' in their communities, the Aka jiAkusand the Ogaranyas, the successful people. This was the class who had made Igboland a rather highly aspiratiivel and achievement-oriented society our generations are today born into.

### **3. The Religious Usages of the Kauri in Pre-colonial Igboland**

Since time immemorial humankind had employed different types of money to consult diviners, fortune-tellers, to offer sacrifices, to perform rituals in shrines and sanctuaries, to make votive offerings and to pay tithes. Indeed, the kauri shells had been used to support the religious practices of Igbo people who were, by that time, generally adherents of the indigenous religion. Many had vowed various shapes and denominations of the kauri as votive offerings to market divinities and several domestic deities. The kauri decorations at the Mbari Huts (a religio-social mini museums in central Igboland) are meant to depict the image of Ala, the great Earth-mother goddess regarded as a giver of life, a protector and supreme judge<sup>16</sup>. In the huts are strategically distributed the effigies of local progenitors, powerful ancestral relics and the statues of lesser divinities. These icons were held as harbingers of wealth, prestige and fecundity to devotees. The cultic vestments of priests, priestesses and their shrine floors in many parts of the Igbo hinterland were laced with kauri shells to lend the clerics and their sanctuaries the aura of conjurers of prosperity and good healthcare providers to devotees. Most divination devices were mixed with kauri shells. In some localities, the oracular calabash and pots were adorned with kauri shells to provide the rattle sounds the diviners interpreted to clients as messages of fortune or misfortune. Indeed, they were the hermeneutists - the Okara Mmuos, the Okara Mmadus - of their communities just as Hermes was in the pre-Christian Greco-Roman polis.

Already testified by many, the Igbo are a highly religious people<sup>17</sup>. Theirs is a polytheistic religion with beliefs in numerous deities. Apart however from this, in the Igbo world, both men and women are aware of the existence of Chukwu, the Supreme Being. The Igbo do not doubt that at the apex of the ontological order is first and foremost Chukwu, followed by the major and minor divinities, the spirits and the ancestors. These forces are believed as vital-forces generated by Chukwu, Onye Okike, the creator God, who is the overall controller of both the visible and invisible worlds<sup>18</sup>.

According to Ogbukagu, “each of these worlds impinges on each other; often the visible world is further conceptualized as having an underworld, the abode of the dead, ancestors or spirits”. In this light, the worldview of the traditional Igbo is conceived in a two-tier structure: Ala-Mmuo and Ala-Mmadu – the spirit-world and the human-world<sup>19</sup>.

In Igbo traditional belief, death is not depicted as the end of a person but a mutation from one form of existence to another form. As the principal researcher had elsewhere noted, “the dead constitute part of the social world”. Practical experience in many parts of Igboland strongly indicates that communion and communication are transacted between the living and the dead, that is, the spirit beings and the humans. The living members of the community “are the trustees of the dead and continuity of customs among the dead is a task that must necessarily be accomplished” by the living. Hence “periodic rituals and ceremonies” remain good links between the living and the dead who, in the past, had instituted these legacies. Sacrifices are one of the commonest acts of maintaining cordial relationship with the ancestors in the invisible world<sup>20</sup>. Here, we strongly wish to reaffirm what the principal researcher had elsewhere stated that “this faith in personal immortality is expressed in a number of ways, one of which is by respecting the dead, by giving pieces of food to them, by giving them their share of kolanut each time it is broken and by pouring out libation to them during community gatherings, a practice which still survives” At this juncture, we wish to crave the indulgence of the reader to take attention to our description of four cultic shrines with the images of deities where the kauri and other religious objects are profusely employed as essential elements for rituals and worship used to placate the beings in the ontological worldview described above.

### **3.1. Odu-Eke Uzoagba Shrine**

Odu-Eke was the principal divinity in Uzoagba Ofo Asato, that is, Uzoagba of eight villages. The divinity is housed in its shrine, which was located at the Eke market ground at Uzoagba (our hometown) in Ikeduru Local Government Area (LGA) of Imo State in Igboland. The shrine is situated on the west corner of Uzoagba closer to Umueze and Umuomi villages and on the northwest; it is closely bordered by Amambaa village. A distinguished priest, Onugbere Opara Uwandu from Umueze, the head kindred of Uzoagba assisted by three powerful Dibias (medicine men) who represented Ezen'Omi, Ebikoro and Ofa, the original sons of Uzoagakwa Onye Aku (the wealthy person does not miss his way) was credited with the positioning of Odu Eke divinity and its shrine at the Eke market square, the central market of Uzoagba.

All the priests from the major villages and kindreds were involved in the regular ritual activities at the Ihu Odu Eke (the shrine/altar of Odu Eke)<sup>21</sup>. Eze-Mmuo Onugbere was known to have consolidated the divinity by inviting a famous and powerful Dibia Nri, a medicine man from Nri, a town regarded by all the Igbo as the cradle of Igbo race and their religious citadel<sup>22</sup>, to enact the divinity and its shrine in Uzoagbaland. The Dibia and his acolytes buried roots of mystical trees, some red-blood-like plants (Otiri) and ogrisi together with several physically concocted charms composed of varied items both mentionable and unmentionable such as dried heads of rare birds, reptiles and animals. The Kauri, several golden and silvery objects were included in the Aja (sacrificial heaps) which had produced very dreadful phenomena known to have resulted in different functions at the site. Since that time, it has come to be believed that the divinity serves to protect the life and well-being of the constituent villages of Uzoagba. The protective, curative and magical fame of the shrine became boundless to the extent that people outside Uzoagba territorial limits regularly flocked to patronize the cult for worship and consultation. Most of the devotees brought with them akpa ego kiri kiri (bags of Kauri cash) to beseech Odu Eke 'spatronage for grant of wealth, health, longevity and fertility. Besides Kauri shells were charged visitors and pilgrims who had come to seek one favour or the other from the shrine and from those who had received answers to their rogations. In the olden days, Uzoagba had earned great respect and prestige due to this "holyland" and its famous deity. The oracle was second to Igwe-ka-Alaof Umunnoha in Mbaitoli LGA of Imo State. His chief priest controlled the functionaries at the sanctuaries of the smaller divinities in Uzoagba villages including the appointments of their priests.

One informant told us that in the past years, young men and aspirants to the service of Odu Eke spent time and energy to scrub and to decorate the four walls that enclosed the shrine. It was usually decorated with human skulls killed in inter-communal wars, those of cows and goats immolated at the shrine as victims sacrificed to the divinity. The skulls were neatly arranged in rows interspersed with kauri shells followed by skulls of animals killed by hunters on a lower case further interspersed with white and red chalk-drawn symbols often quite difficult to exegete.

The task of scrubbing the walls was said to have frequently been carried out by women artists – Ndom aka nka- who were carefully selected and commissioned by the leaders of the Odima Women Age Grade, a classic Uzoagba women dance troupe. For this regular assignment, the honourable ladies had employed red earth, ajaocha, greenish chalk, anunuu nzu, yellow chalk, edo and black charcoal, unyias decorative paints. These local materials were combined with urio, native cement, to plaster Kauri shells on the floor and the lower ends of the walls of the shrine. The scenario thus created could not be anything but beautiful though quite often the sanctuary gave itself out as an esoteric appearance which visitors to the shrine often had both admired and feared.

### **3.2. Okwu Afo Nnukwu**

Okwu Afo Nnukwu, still in existence, is a very popular and historic shrine of Afo Nnukwu, which housed the capricious divinity of the Adazi Nnukwu people in today's Anambra state of southeastern Nigeria. Okwu Afo, shrine is a large edifice made up of two separate cubicles within the same enclosure. The first unit, respectively known as Afo Nwoke (male section) houses the core deity and Afo Nwanyi (female section) is where women under the leadership of the priestess perform their own religious worship and rituals.

The male chamber is located on the right hand side of the shrine. In its center, lies buried an artistically carved wooden board known in Igbo as Azu of which some 50 cm is projected into space. Afo Nwanyi, on the other hand, is built of a heap of mud in a pyramidal shape whose height is about 105 cm with a surrounding circumference of 330 cm. Both projections are constructed as altars where men and women individually or as groups offer their sacrifices when the need arises. The altars are decorated with certain bizarre images (nkwa) that represent the oracular deities. The altar of Afo Nwanyi is spread with large quantities of white chalk, nzu. Devotees and pilgrims who come to the shrine customarily take home with them some pieces of

the nzu from the female section. They smear the chalk on the upper-eye-lids as make-ups in order to attract suitors looking for wives to marry ‘to make’ children for the community. Kauri shells are freely spread around the ritual mound and the priestess and her acolytes sprinkle water on the surface of the ritual table. The purpose is to let Afo Nwanyi (the female divinity) see the need to regularly grant wealth, life and fertility to adherents and worshippers. Several carved effigies of lower status such as statuettes or votive figurines are housed in the premises as ritual objects. They present uncanny view that can transform the beholder to the underworld.

### **3.3. Mbanugo**

This is a carved life-size effigy of an apotheosized hero found in shrines of many Igbo communities. The prodigy is about 130.5 cm in height. It is generally the tallest of the wooden images made to represent divinities in Igboland. Mbanugo, the god of influence and affluence in Igbo pantheon is well known among traditionalists. The look can be very horrific and appalls the young; indeed a true son of his father, Afo Nwoke, the numinous artifact, despite the colonial administrators’ ill-willed declaration that the Igbo were “without any arts and crafts worthy of attention” is quite ubiquitous. Its face is usually smeared with cam-wood paste uri, and the eyes are coated with white chalk, nzu. It is richly draped and wears a beaded necklace, interspersed with the thick white kauri moneta shells, a brass cap on the head and a pair of ivory anklets on the left hand. Its presence depicts real affluence typical of an aristocratic Igboman of those days. Its phallic structure is manly and thus etched to represent male manhood as symbol of dominance and generative power. In most community shrines, the penis is covered with a white piece of cloth often tied around the waist to symbolize perhaps, restraint and ascetic culture among the Igbo.

In sum, the regalia with which it is adorned make it wear an exotic appearance that benumbs the female beholder. In short, Mbanugo is Agbala, a deity before whom devotees tread very cautiously. It is believed by many Igbo that Mbanugo can punish people for unjust deeds and do prosper up-right persons.

### **3.4. Ogwugwu Afo**

Ogwugwu Afo is a female deity in many Igbo localities. It is represented by a carved wooden figure of 126.3 cm in height. It (she is the divinity generally cultivated by titled women in most Igbo clans in pre-Christian times, though many still worship it (her) in rural communities. She is portrayed with, ichi, a tattooed face and wears an impressive and stylish hair-do decorated with shiny kauri shells known

among Igbo women as Isi Okpo and with okpogbu, a brass bangle, on her legs. The figure bears two succulent large breasts in between which runs a dark greenish mark that stretches from the chest down to the navel. Below this point is a buxom female genital organ etched in between the laps over which, for sake of decency, a small white wrapper is tied. The eyelids are stupendously stained with oze or uhe (purple colours) and nzu, white chalk.

Thus represented in her beauty and with a feminine delicacy, this divinity is a benevolent being, which protects women's interest in an overtly patriarchal society as that of the Igbo. Women, in their turn, return unalloyed obedience, love, respect and honour to her by means of their regular worship. On her festival day, young women drape their waistlines with kauri shells and beads and parade themselves through the village streets. On a chosen Afo market day during the festival, they march around the effigy with chants and songs. The curators as well as her priests are always women. Indeed Igbo religion was gender-sensitive.

### **Conclusion**

This study on kauri has, *inter alia*, tried to help us re-conceptualize the historical image of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria; especially their culture, spirituality, social economic and mercantile endeavours during the pre-colonial era. It has also provided us the impetus to confront European pseudo-scientific racism, which had, for a long time, been masked under the cloak of the "white man's burden"; a concept, which had led some British armchair anthropologists and social historians to equate human civilization with Europeanization<sup>23</sup>. This is still the view defended in recent times by Britons like Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper of Oxford, who asserts that any study of African history and culture before the coming of the Europeans was to "pry into the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe".

Again, the findings from this research into the place of the kauri in pre-colonial Igboland dismiss the Euro-centric faulty assumption of the nature of traditional societies as static and incapable of undertaking long distance trade. Indeed, the significance of the kauri cash, its widespread circulation and religious usages draw attention to the fact that no serious differentiation was made between economic, religious and political activities of Africans as had hitherto been imagined by European explorers, traders, missionaries and administrators. The

ubiquitous flow and use of the kauri had generated greater wisdom in fiscal management, which had accounted for the emergence and existence of a vast number of affluent Igbo families in the so-called “Dark Continent” before its discovery and eventual rape.

The various religious usages of the kauri go along way to explain the innate dispositions of the ordinary Igbo man and woman as *homines religiosi*. This phenomenon explains why the Igbo readily converted to Western Christianity when the missionaries arrived. In their new-found faith, they seek unfettered spiritual satisfaction, holistic deliverance and salvation in Christ than in their ancestral divinities.<sup>58</sup> Thus, as Matomah Alesha correctly asserts, the kauri, “is humanity’s hidden story that is relevant today especially for those who desire to integrate spirituality and commercial interests”. The study further reveals that the British Pounds Sterling was introduced, among other things, as a symbol of British competition against the kauri. The suppression of the Kauri, a people’s native currency was to exaggerate the importance of the British presence in the colonial period. From this point of view, it may well be argued with others that the abolition of the Kauri had served British political will to usher in a “naked imperialism designed to create the best atmosphere for the social, political and economic rape of Africa”<sup>24</sup>. In sum, this paper reflects an exploratory essay written to draw the attention of contemporary scholars of African Religions to the fallacies British numismatic scholars have been so inclined to entertain about African monetary past. We have made this effort in order to re-claim the social economic past of the Igbo people and to re-position the will of an enterprising race in sub-Saharan Africa in the history of ideas. Here, we wish to stress that research into Igbo monetary and economic past and religion has proven the view of Professor OkonUya right when he admits that one can no longer claim that “Africa has no history and culture”.

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