

# THE ERI TRADITION(S) OF ORIGIN IN IGBO HISTORIOGRAPHY: REVISITING THE PROBLEMATIQUES AND CHALLENGES TO ORAL HISTORY

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## Abstract

Reconstructing the accounts of Igbo origin has remained a challenge for scholars due to the absence of a literate culture in traditional Igbo societies of the past. This situation has adversely affected the presentation of the histories of origin in Igboland. The reliance on oral traditions to solve this problem, on the other hand, is challenged by inconsistencies in various traditions on the same subject. This study, in the main, explored the Eri traditions of Igbo origin to resolve some issues arising therefrom, including his origin, his supposed offspring, primacy issues among his offspring, and to examine how historical objectivity can help the Igbo arrive at more agreeable traditions. Interviews were conducted and combined with archaeological findings and information from other sources to arrive at conclusions. The study, which was conducted in six main towns in Anambra and Kogi States, adopted descriptive, narrative, and thematic methods in its presentation. The findings would, supposedly, go a long way to revitalise certain cultural and traditional heritages of the people involved.

**Keywords: The Igbo, Eri, account of Origin, Oral Tradition, Historiography**

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## **Introduction**

One of the things that gives people a remarkable identity is the people's history, and in particular, the people's origin and order of existence. While the people's known origin gives them a sense of pride and, therefore, self-esteem, their order naturally establishes an order of precedence and procedure which provides ground for validation of events and the successful handling of affairs. The value of a people's origin and history is, therefore, an inestimable one. They constitute a store of memories and an action plan for the future.

The origin and the history of the Igbo have, for a long time, remained a straining puzzle and a source of debate for historians and other scholars. Professor Adiele Afigbo once lamented that "it can be claimed with much cogency, that of all African ethnic nationalities of about their numerical size and general dynamism, the Igbo are the least studied" (1981, 12). Part of the reason for this problem, as Afigbo and many others observed, is the absence of a literate culture among the Igbo until the imposition of European rule. One can equally point to the non-existence of a centralized state system with developed institutions for the preservation and transmission of oral tradition; that is to say, the loss of track on, or the manipulation of, oral traditions. Put together, these problems have undermined and jeopardised the efforts of many scholars to put meaningful records straight concerning the past of the Igbo straight. Also, as Alex Ugwuja has opined, "this uncharted nature of Igbo history excused the constituent communities of the Igbo nation to contrive diverse and sometimes irreconcilable accounts of their origin" (2015: 182).

The Igbo, like many other societies that experienced a very long pre-literate past, relies much, for a long time, on oral tradition for the historical reconstruction of such a past. In fact, except for a few pointers from available archaeological data, the Igbo, as a people, are typically at the mercy of oral tradition and its lapses for the reconstruction of their historical past for the period before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such traditions abound in various communities in Igboland. A most prominent of such traditions is the Eri tradition of Igbo origin. This tradition links a large number of towns and people to an ancient primogenitor, Eri. Incidentally, a number of contentious issues are woven around the core of this tradition. The origin of the man or the being, Eri, remains controversial, just as the exactness of his supposed progeny is contentious. Added to these is the issue of primacy among the offspring of Eri. There seems to be discord in the various presentations of their order of seniority. These issues have not been adequately investigated within the available sources and materials. Nor has it been logically analysed profoundly, using deductive and inductive approaches. The problem has thus left every group to cling to its own story, and scholars to the versions that easily come their way. What circulates at times in the official circle is nothing but a discordant tune. The situation raises a lot of problems in the reliability and the acceptability of the tradition in parts or whole. The controversies, however, do not cancel the elements of truth in the historicity of the figure, Eri, and his having been involved in the establishment of some towns and

communities directly or through his descendants. Nevertheless, the discordant tunes of any piece are usually the instruments that lead to the devaluation or destruction of such a piece.

What could be at play in this tradition of origin is a case of politicking or insensitivity to objectivity in history. When records are not straight, when controversies abound in what binds people together, there are bound to be cracks in the relationships of such people, which in turn, may affect or destroy the conservation and maintenance of inherited treasures of culture and tradition. The Igbo people need greater unity and coherence based especially on standards established in well-informed and logical truths than on primacy established from political and or economic advantages, which can necessarily crumble when the political or economic pendulum swings to unfavourable sides. Thus, a review of the Eri tradition of origin, which seems to be currently the most widely accepted tradition of origin among the Igbo, is a necessary and worthy venture to exploit the possibility of revitalising the Igbo unity, cultural heritages, and traditions. This research work is, therefore, generally purposed to address the primacy issues in the Eri traditions of Igbo origin; their challenges for oral tradition, and a case for objectivity in History. At the heart of this study is the salience and challenges of oral sources in reconstructing the past.

The organisational structure of this article reflects, in the place first, some conceptual explanations. This is thematically followed by analytical reviews of the origin of and the historiographical debates on Eri, as well as those on *Umu Eri* (the offspring of Eri), and the seniority and primacy issues encountered thereof. Finally, a Conclusion puts together the opinion of this research work.

Many of the earlier Western writers, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, criticised the use of oral tradition as an embodiment of history. That disposition was compelled by the popularity of written documents in that age. Yet, there is no history of any people that was ever considered adequate or complete that did not engage oral tradition. Even in contemporary society, forms of oral tradition are still adopted in the preservation of important pasts. This possibly influenced John Myles Foley's view of oral tradition, as found in the *Britannica*, as "a dynamic and highly diverse oral-aural medium for evolving, storing, and transmitting knowledge, art, and ideas." He further states that, "It is typically contrasted with literacy, with which it can and does interact in myriad ways, and also with literature, which it dwarfs in size, diversity, and social function." In carrying out this research, one will rather toe the line of Agbodike, that:

Oral traditions are not only mere recountal by word of mouth of the remembered history of a people, it is also a presentation, in various forms, of the ideas and values of the society and of the ideological and spiritual patrimony handed down by the ancestors whose memory the present generation cherishes and reveres. (2004, p, 7)

By and large, the whole aim of the historian's work is to arrive at an objective rendering of the past. Objectivity, which refers to the historian not applying personal bias and sentiments in approaching their topic, rather standing for what is true, and the reality is the standard gauge of any historical research. From the point of view of historical objectivity, the writer should not be one-sided, personal, or partial. Historians have a varied understanding of the concept of objectivity. According to Kundra, "Objectivity means existing independently of perception or an individual's conception. It is undistorted by emotion or personal bias and is related to actual and external phenomena as opposed to thoughts, feelings, etc." (2017). The famous historian, E.H. Carr, was doubtful of absolute objectivity whereby the historian would be disinterested in his presentation of his facts. This is because the historian must often times, pass judgments based on his interpretations and convictions; and that is some form of bias. He observed, for instance, that "The historian does not sit in judgement on an individual oriental despot. But he is not required to remain indifferent and impartial between, say, oriental despotism and the institutions of Periclean Athens. He will not pass judgment on the individual slave-owner. But this does not prevent him from condemning a slave-owning society." (1984, p. 79). This situation does not water down the necessity of historical objectivity which implies being true to the reality. This is because, according to Carr, the historian "can rise above the limited vision of his own situation in society." The approach to the Eri tradition of Igbo origin should, therefore, count on this capacity of the historian "to rise above the limited vision of his own situation in society," in putting forward a history as close as possible to the truth.

### **Eri: Origin and Historiographical Debates**

The origin of the legend, Eri, has remained a contentious issue. Different versions of the Eri tradition and different scholars and analysts ascribe him different origins. This is quite understandable as one is dealing here with an age-long tradition that was retained for many centuries, only in the minds of individuals. Forgetfulness and even memory loss are normal occurrences in humans; thus, oral transmissions of traditions can hardly be rendered sound and complete. The reality of it is usually "add and drop".

Among the Aguleri, a popular tradition, as rendered by Bede Ivenso and as corroborated by Ike Manafa, has it that: "a mythical figure came down from the sky, sent by God and settled at the confluence of Ezu and Omabala rivers. The being was called Eri" (Interviewed on April 12, 2008). The same tradition has it that, "God also provided a woman called Nono, (meaning nne uwa - mother of the world) to be Eri's wife" (Manafa, interviewed on May 08, 1998). Among the Nri, Igbariam, Amanuke, and others, popular traditions on the origin of Eri, as recorded by Onwuejeogu (1981, 22 & 30), are in agreement with the view that Eri came down the Anambra River from the sky. Equally, one of the writers of Igbo history in the early 20th century, M. D. W. Jeffreys, while recording the Nri version of Eri's origin, stated that among the Nri, "The descendants of the

royal families live in Aguku and claim ancestry from a sky-being called Eri, sent down by Chiuku, a sun-god." (Jul., 1935, 346). Among the Igbariam, Thomas Chiezey remarked that, "Right from our childhood, we learnt that Onogu, the founder of Igbariam, was the third son of Eri, and that Eri came down from heaven at the confluence of Ezu and Omabala rivers, and finally settled at Aguleri" (Interviewed on April 29, 2017). Even at the dawn of colonialism, Western education, and literacy in Igbo land, the popular and more universal tradition of the origin of Eri among his supposed progenies held that Eri descended from the sky and landed at Aguleri, where he settled.

On the other hand, some works point to the origin of Eri in the Middle East, or more or less, ascribing to him a Hebrew descent (from the land of Israel). Such origin is what Sub-Saharan African scholars and historians, in particular, have come to regard as 'Oriental mirage' or the Hamitic hypothesis. In recent decades, the Hebrew descent of Eri gained much sympathy and support across Igbo land, and especially among the supposed descendants of Eri, and in particular, the Aguleri. The attraction to this opinion is encouraged by the Biblical account of Genesis 46:16, which mentions Gad and Eri, his son, among the descendants of Jacob. This account is equally repeated in Numbers 26:16, which lists the Eri clan among the tribe of Gad. The belief is further strengthened by the existence of an ancient sanctuary in Aguleri, called *Obuga*, which till today stands as the symbol of Aguleri's unity and a sanctuary for the offspring of Eri, and has also strongly come to be conceived as *Obu Gad* (Gad's temple). It has also been argued that there are a number of similarities between Aguleri, the other Eri-founded towns (and generally the Igbo), and the Hebrews when viewed through the lens of cultures. Granted, these coincidences are strangely striking, but the debate on 'Oriental Mirage' has, however, long been over-flogged. It is clear that today, no historian of value will agree with the 'Hamitic hypothesis' or the 'Oriental mirage' of Igbo origin (Afigbo, A. 1981; Ijeoma, O. J., 2010), as there are so many questions begging for answers.

More interestingly, in the internationally acclaimed work of Professor Catherine Acholonu, *Eden in Sumer on the Niger* (Revised Edition 2023), she used archaeological, linguistic and genetic evidences to demonstrate that Eri was the son of an extra-terrestrial being, Ea (Enki), that established the first settlement, *Eridu*, in the planet Earth around the Niger Delta, and also influenced the establishment of other early cities. She posited that the deluge in about 11,000 BC, submerged those early cities, leaving Eri-Idu, the son of *Eridu* (Enki), and his entourage as sole survivors, whose arc berthed in Igbo land at the end of the deluge, and began the Eri-Idu clan and empire that later shrunk to Idu-Eri Kingdom (2023, 5-19). If Acholonu's thesis is something to go by, then removing the mythological part of it that refers to an extra-terrestrial being since history deals with humans and facts, and accepting the part of berthing and establishing a settlement in 11,000 BC, the Hebrew descent of Eri is less probable since the Hebrew history is by far younger.

Some others trace Eri's origin to Igaland. These include M.D.W. Jeffreys, who, though acknowledged in his earlier work (1935), that the Nri regard Eri as a "sky being", later took a turn to allude to Eri an Igala origin (Jeffreys, 1956, 120). There is even an Aguleri man, Late M.C. M. Idigo, among others. Idigo narrated that, "A warrior and hunter called Eri migrated with his followers from Igaland and settled near the bank of the river Anambra .... He built his camp called Eri-Aka near Odanduli stream, a place which lies between Ifite and Igboezunu Aguleri" (Idigo, 1990, 3). This assertion from Idigo formed a point of reference for many scholars, including O. N. Njoku and Nwankwo T. Nwaezeigwe.

In his book, *The Igbo and their Nri neighbours*, Nwaezeigwe argued that, "A lot of historical and ethnographical indicators suggest that the origins of the Nri or Umunri as they are traditionally called, could be traceable to Igaland" (2007, 71). Part of those indicators include his claim that the Ata-Igala (king of Igala) exercised tremendous influence over parts of Igboland; the statement of M. C. M. Idigo referred to above; and that Jeffreys' reference to Eri as a "sky-being" could have been his misconception of the Igbo word *enu* to mean sky, whereas it could mean "up, hill, north, or sky". Nwaezeigwe preferred to interpret the reference that Eri descended from *enu* to mean from the north, and thus, from Igala. He also found support for his Igala claim from Onwuejeogwu and from the information obtained from some informants who claimed that Eri met some aborigines at Aguleri when he arrived there. He further strengthened his argument with Professor Onwuka Njoku's claim that Eri, ... was in fact a former Ata-Igala (king) of Akpoto dynasty, who was sacked from the throne by an invading Benin army led by a Benin prince named Aji Attah, a brother of Oba Esigie. He was consequently forced to flee southwards, using the advantage offered by the Omambala river. He finally settled at the present town of Aguleri situated on the east bank of the river (2007, 80)

Nwaezeigwe also alluded to a presumption "that the term (Eri) has no relationship with or meaning in Igbo language, nor is the term used as a personal name in other Igbo sub-culture zones. But on the contrary, among the Igala, Eri is both a personal name and the name of a town" (2007, 82). He made other claims that need not necessarily be listed here for want of space.

Still on the proponents of Igala origin of Eri, Chief Labaran Yahaya Oyigebe of Abejukolo in Igaland, who prides himself as a key narrator of Igala history, told that royal squabbles at Idah in 1588 led to the "... dethronement/abdication of the then Attah Idah (Ogala Eri) of Igalamela. Eri in Igala is an Elephant tusk. The dethroned Ogala Eri, through the instrumentality of Oba Ozolua, went on self-exile to the NRI Kingdom, where he founded Aguleri between the Confluences of two Rivers in 1598." (May 15, 20125). Just like Chief Oyigebe, some Igala history and culture promoters claim that most towns and parts of Igboland were

founded by the Igala, and in particular, by Onoja Oboni (an Igala warrior) and his associates.

Those who propagate the Igala descent of Eri would appear to overlook certain facts. In the first place, M.C. Meze Idigo, an indigene of Aguleri, whose assertion most scholars in this line of thought refer to, did not use enough historical sources and methodology in arriving at the conclusions reached in his book. His book can easily pass as a collection of oral traditions. His work was probably based solely on the tales of his cousin, Igwe Raphael A. Idigo II, who was renowned for his diplomatic prowess. Yet the fame of Idigo II does not necessarily qualify his narratives as credible, for the information contained therein has not been corroborated by other sources. Again, if Idigo's view was held by these historians on account of his being of royal descent, then that amounts to an error of judgement for the fact that *Ezeship* (kingship) in Aguleri traditionally resided with the Umuezeora lineage of Enugwu Aguleri, while the Idigos are from Umuala-Eziagulu Aguleri. The Idigo dynasty was the result of their patriarch, Onyekomeli's fame, which brought the warrant chief to his son, Nwanne Idigo, at the dawn of colonialism in Igboland.

In deconstructing Nwaezeigwe's deductions on the origin of Eri, one cannot ignore his mention of Ata Igala's influence on parts of Igboland. Suffice it to say that the Igbo/Igala relations were, more or less, one of mutual influence that resulted in power dynamics, diffusion, and hybridization of cultures. It must, therefore, not be simply qualified as a source of origin. Again, Nwaezeigwe's deconstruction of Jeffreys' application of "sky-being" to Eri as a misinterpretation of the word *enu*, which he claimed meant 'hill' or 'north', demonstrates a paucity in the grasp and mastery of Igbo language. Across Igboland, the word *enu* or *elu* clearly translates in English as 'up', 'on top', or 'high'. 'Hill' is simply *ugwu*. Phenomenologically, *enu* could serve as a synecdoche for different word combinations such as *enu ulo* (roof top or the building top), *enu igwe* (heaven or up the sky), *enu ugwu* (up the hill), and so on. However, in Igbo language, in terms of geographical location, the 'north' could agreeably be translated as *ugwu*, but never as *enu/elu ugwu*; rather, one can use *mgbago* (ascending), thus, *mgbago-ugwu* (north or up north), and then, *mgbada-ugwu* (south or down south). Thus, Jeffreys' was no misinterpretation when he used the sky-being to qualify the Umu Eri expression that "*Eri si n'enu daa*." This can either mean that he came down from the sky or that his origin has been forgotten.

Furthermore, Nwaezeigwe said that he made his assertion on Eri's origin based on the information he obtained from some informants at Aguleri and among Umunri. One contends here that the reliability of such information depends on the status of the informants. One thing common in practically all Igbo towns, and possibly across the globe, is the naturalization of immigrants in their new abode. If the informants are descendants of such immigrants, their information is usually less reliable. Again, the background of an informant can condition the information he or she gives; as will be demonstrated below in the case of Idigo's account.

Finally, on the position of Nwaezeigwe that Eri has no meaning in the Igbo language, and is not borne by any person in Igboland as a name; this does not signify its foreign nature, rather, it depicts the sacredness of the name. If Eri came down from the sky as his descendants claim, or was an extra-terrestrial being as asserted by Acholonu (2023), his people could then view him as a god, and thus, bearing his name as it is could be seen as sacrilege. This could as well be the case in Yorubaland, where no one or particular town bears the name Oduduwa, the supposed founder of the Yoruba race, who similarly is claimed to be a sky-being. The above reasons, therefore, deconstruct Nwaezeigwe's necessary Igala origin of Eri.

Another interesting fact against Eri-Igala is that, among other towns acclaimed to have been founded by Eri progenies, their popular traditions refer to Igala as an offspring of Eri. This is true of the traditions of Aguleri, Umunri, Igbariam, and Amanuke. Moreover, Igala traditions tell that the Igala nation, as it is, is a product of three different ethnic groups: the Igbo, the Jukun, and the Yoruba. When Fidelis Kwazu interviewed Mr. Ojeni Odogwuja during an annual festival performed by the Atta of Igala, Odogwuja said that, "Onoja, founder of Igala, was one of the entourage of Eri. He migrated from a settlement with Eri in the East and founded Igala" (July 26, 2001). Even Nwaezeigwe, who ferociously propagated the Igala origin of Eri, acknowledged the strong Igbo influence on Igala. He stresses that;

The same equally applies to the Achadu-Igala, the traditional Prime Minister of the Igala kingdom, whose origin is traced to an Igbo hunter of that name, In other words, for someone of Igbo extraction to have

become the founder of the Achadu dynasty goes only to prove the extent of influence the Igbo could have exercised among the Igala at that time.

(2007, 72)

Such a powerful position makes it more probable that the Igbo played a prominent role in the establishment of the Igala kingdom or its kingship. No wonder Onwuejeogwu could boldly declare; "I do not hold the view that Aguleri or Nri people are Igala" (1981, 30). Invariably, the advent of Christianity and its belief might have influenced Idigo's claim of Igala origin for Eri. M. C. Meze Idigo and his cousin, Idigo II, might have seen it as against their Catholic belief to ascribe a mystical transformation to Eri. Aware of Igala contact with Aguleri, they, therefore, saw it as a plausible place of descent for Eri.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that in Aguleri, there is a place in Umuekete, Igboezunu (Umuekete Igala), where, it is said, was the last abode of the Igala before they left Aguleri. On the other hand, there is no such place in Igaland where Eri or his descendants were said to have migrated from. This makes it more probable for Igala to have migrated

from Aguleri than vice versa. Again, archaeological excavations at Igala habitation in Umuekete Igboezunu and excavations in three areas of Igalaland, selected for their historical status among the Igala, did not reveal evidence of older settlement in Igalaland than Umuekete. What is more, the dates obtained on Umuekete sites and artefacts turned out to be older, and in some cases, up to about two centuries older (Cf. the plate below). Moreover, Umuekete is not the earliest point of settlement in Aguleri, and thus, further excavations might prove Aguleri to be far older. One will rather agree with the much more universally accepted Umu Eri tradition of Eri's origin, that Igala is a descendant of Eri, than vice versa. Be that as it may, the origin of the legendary Eri remains controversial and speculative. It is, however, not so probable that he was brought down from the sky. It does appear that the memory of his origin has become obscure.

B. The following radiocarbon dates have been obtained from Ojewo Ata Ogu (Igala) (Stone 1968a):

Table 6

Ata Ogu Mound Idah	655 ± 95 BP (AD 1495 ± 95)
Calibrated AD date	AD 1438 ± 168
Ata Ogu Mound Idah	
VIII G(S) spit levels 13, 14	410 ± 95, BP AD 1540 ± 95
Calibrated AD date:	AD 1455 ± 168

The two dates – one from the lower and the other from the upper layers – range between the 13th and 16th centuries A.D.

C. The following dates have been obtained from the Umuekete site (processed by the Institute of Physical and Chemical Research, Wako-Shi, Saitama, 351, Japan):

Number	Provenance	C14 dates (yrs. B.P.)		YEARS 5730	AD 5568	CALIBRATED DATES:	YEARS 5568
		Based on half-life of 5730	5568				
N-3134	AI Level 7	710±75	690±75	1240±75	1240±75	1303±180	1322±130
N-3135	AI " 8	480±80	465±80	1470±80	1485±80	1428±188	1434±86
N-3136	AI " 14	395±85	380±85	1555±85	1570±80	1473±195	1480±195
N-3137	AI " 7	325±80	315±80	1625±80	1635±80	1538±188	1555±188
N-3138	AI " 9	475±65	460±65	1475±65	1490±65	1490±164	1436±164

Source: (Oguagha & Okpoko, 1984, 37)

### Umu Eri, the offspring of Eri: Seniority and Primacy Issues

As earlier noted, the identification of the exact offspring of Eri is yet another item of controversy. Even within the same town, among the supposed descendants of Eri, there exist accounts of a varied number of children and varied personalities. One version in Aguleri, as presented by Nnalue Ameke (Interview on October 23, 2012), has it that the children of Eri are six, including Agulu (Nnamenyi), Menri, Igbo, Enuike, and their sister, Uluwa, plus their step-brother, Igala, born from another marriage. Another version, as presented by Ike Manafa, narrates that,

Eri begot Nnamenyi also known as Agulu (the founder of Aguleri); Menri, (who begot the Nri);

Igbo who was also called Onogu (of the Igbariam, which means *Igbo arigolu* [Igbo has come to stay]); Oba, (the father of Nteje, Urada, Nkwelle, the Ogodos, and so on); then Igala (also referred to as Onoja in some narratives) and Enuike (the founder of Amanuke seen as a corruption of *Ama Enuike*), and a daughter, Uluwa, also called, Adamgbo (*Ada m gboo gboo*-meaning, my daughter from the earliest time), all are in the order of seniority (Okafor & Kwazu, 2024, 12).

In this version, Oba and Onoja were said to be born of a second wife, Oboli. On the other hand, the UmuNri tradition, as told in Agukwu and as reported in Jeffreys (1935) and Nwaezeigwe (2007), talks of five Children from the first wife, including Menri, Agulu, Onogu, Ogbodudu, and an only daughter, and that a second wife of Eri gave birth to Igala. Again, the Igbariam tradition already referred to has it that Eri had six children, including Aguleri, Menri, Onogu, Ogbodudu, Onoja Oboli, and Uluwa (the only daughter). The Amanuke story, as told by many, including Nweke Nwachukwu, the *Ezeani* (the priest of the Earth deity), Amagu, Amanuke (Interviewed on March 09, 2025), mentions five brothers, including Nri, Aguleri, Igbariam, Igala, and Nuke (Amanuke), as well as a sister. He was, however, uncertain of their order of seniority. However, another informant, Odoegbunam Ekemezie of Eziamaka Amanuke (Interviewed on January 26, 2025), has it that Aguleri was the first son of Eri, followed by Nri, Igbariam, Amanuke, and lastly, Igala.

Here again, one encounters a discordant tune among the supposed siblings on the exact children of Eri and their order of primacy. On the number of his children however, the discord is only a minor one, stemming from two issues: one is the partial acceptance of the Igala people that their founder descended from Igboland/Eri, and the second is the inclusion of a sixth son, Oba, in one of Aguleri versions of the tradition. Nonetheless, apart from the Igala, the rest acknowledge these six; Aguleri, Menri, Onogu, Ogbodudu, Onoja Oboli, and Uluwa, as siblings. It becomes, therefore, more convenient and sensible to settle for these six children of Eri. For the issue of primacy among them, various writers had adopted whatever they found convenient. However, it is hereunder settled through the application of the critical method of inductive and deductive reasoning on available facts and data. It is surprising when extolled historians refer to Nri as the first son of Eri without due criticism. For instance, Afigbo stated that,

... there can be no doubt that Agukwu, as the Okpala or the descendant of the first son of Nri who was also the first son of Eri, and therefore... houses the 'big ofo' ... of ... the Umueri tribe, harbours the 'soul' of the entire group, and in that sense may be regarded as 'the heart of Igbo nationality'.... (1981, 37)

There is no need, however, to enumerate all with such a view. Yet, such viewpoints cannot be accepted without some scrutiny. Chief Madubuchi Onwuegbuke observed that,

It is only that too much academic pursuit these days make people turn the truth upside down. That is why some of them claim that Nri is the elder to Aguleri. But the elders of Nri (the very old ones among them) had explained this to Nri youths, that Aguleri is the older (Interviewed on (April 04, 1995).

A more critical assessment of the facts on the ground seems to give greater credibility to the primacy of Aguleri among his siblings.

In the first place, it is a general phenomenon throughout Igboland that the first son of every family inhabits the father's *obi* (Temple). When Jefferys was told that Aguleri, a second son of Eri, remained on the home settlement, he did remark that "this is against the practice found throughout Igboland where the *Okpala* remains in his father's compound and inherits it and the family *Obu*" (Okafor, 1995, 14).

Afigbo made a close remark to this while appraising the present Agukwu settlement, and he wrote, "But this raises the question why a community of great farmers would abandon a fertile area like Aguleri for their present habitat. It could not have been as a result of war, for there is no trace of this in the traditions of either the Nri or Aguleri" (1981, 48). Afigbo, unfortunately, did not follow up on the question that he raised to a probable logical conclusion. But it is a fact that the founder of Aguleri remained at their father's *obu* and at the same time being the custodian of the ancestral shrine (which only the eldest son keeps in Igboland), as well as the guardian of Eri's only daughter, Uluwa, while the other sons migrated to found new settlements. These are pointers that Nnamenyi (Agulu) was the first son of Eri. What is more, only Agulu attached the father's name, Eri, to his name, thus Aguleri.

Also, in Aguleri, a common knowledge is that a band of returnees Umunri to their ancestral land, settled prominently in Okpu village in Ivite Aguleri. Worthy of note is that even in the presence of these Nri remnants who are also recognised as such in any gathering at Aguleri till today, Umungalagu-Ivite always takes the first share of anything as the oldest, and as obtained all through Igboland, before Okpu can take any share. It was also said that *Eze Nri* (King of Nri) crowned other *Eze* (kings) in Igboland, and that "Igbo Land according to Major Leonard, pay annual tribute to *Eze Nri* and happily Aguleri was not among the list of such towns he compiled in 1895" (Obadiengwu, 1990, 5). What is more, before the Nri crowns an *Eze*. The *Eze-elect* must go to Aguleri to perform some sacrifices, including a she goat and a hen, at the graves of both Eri and Menri; the sacrifice, which must be supervised by the eldest man or his representative, of each of the three main villages of Aguleri, before the sacrifice is deemed valid. After this, the Nri will present the *Eze-elect* to the entire Aguleri at Obuga Palace of Aguleri. It is also an Aguleri man

who hands the *ofo* (from an *ofo* tree believed to be the original *ofo* tree, and which sheds no leaves, no matter the season; and is believed to be found only at Aguleri) to the *Eze*-elect, a function reserved for the eldest person in Igboland. Again, an Aguleri man would collect the *Ududu Eze* from the Anambra River and hand some over to the *Eze*-elect. These processes remained the order of events in the crowning of *Eze Nri* for a very long time. They stayed one month at Aguleri.

Some support the primacy of Nri because Nri crowned the kings of other towns, and the Nri had the prerogative of acting as priests, especially for cleansing the land of abominations across Igboland. Regarding this, it must be noted that Nri never crowned the king of Aguleri; rather, Aguleri had the prerogative of performing the key rites of *Eze Nri*'s coronation, without which the Nri would not have a valid king. And on the ground of being a priest, it is evident among Umu Eri and across Igboland, that the office of a priest is by divine selection and not by being the firstborn. The only priesthood that is the prerogative of the first son is that of keeping the father's *obu/obi* (shrine). In this case, among the Eri offspring, Aguleri is uncontestedly the custodian of their father's shrine.

It is more credible to accept that Aguleri is the first son of Eri, and thus, it was in line with this that M. A. Onwuejeogwu wrote:

The history goes to tell how the children of Eri migrated to different places .... Agulu remained at Aguleri . . . each settlement pursued its own separate existence and development, owing allegiance to Aguleri where the collective ancestral temple of Eri still stands to this day (1981, 22).

### **Conclusion**

What is obvious in the traditions presented herein is that a number of towns in Igboland project a certain legend, Eri, as their primogenitor, who was either an extra-terrestrial being or whose origin has become obscure. Even though most of the traditions point to Eri's five sons and a daughter, the various traditions mildly disagree on issues of primacy. Despite some remarkable analysis made in arriving at certain demonstrable and justifiable conclusions, for instance, adopting the primacy of Aguleri over his siblings, the revealed discords prove further the weaknesses of oral tradition as a historical source. What is conspicuous here is that the loss of memory and distortion of facts arising from human nature will continue to rock the veracity and reliability of oral traditions, insofar as humans remain the key channel. Arguably, this will also continue to remain a dark shade in the relationships among the sister towns and will inadvertently be a clog in the survival and validity of cultural traditions, where primacy and memory play vital roles. This is already affecting the coronation of *Eze Nri* in line with laid-down traditions. This, equally, remains a challenge to historical objectivity, justifying Carr's assertion that "History is a series of accepted judgments." Nonetheless, historians should be conscious of their role in providing a guide in shaping the future based on

bringing alive the significant memories and lessons of the past, and so, endeavour to be as objective as possible.

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