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# ***Obu-Gad: The Sacred Temple of Mortality and Brotherhood in Aguleri Kingdom***

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## Abstract

In every empire or kingdom, there is a traditional mystical force that welds every community together be it Europe, America, Asia and Africa. In Igbo tradition, coronation of kings is viewed as a kingly festival especially when it comes to Kingship in Eri kingdom. In the coronation of any new king within Eri kingdom, especially the Nri King which takes place at *Obu-gad* alongside with the *Ududueze* the covenant pot of clay, the coronation will not take place. The excavating of this covenant pot of clay in the deepest depth of the confluence of two rivers (*Ezu na Omanbala*) is highly surrounded with mysteries up till today. This paper examines how this *Obu-gad* becomes an indigenous sacred temple of mortality that binds the Igbo communities in ritual symbology of brotherhood and serves also as an epicenter for global tourism site.

## 1. Introduction

In African Traditional Religion, sacred places are special and ordained places designated to the divine. A place like the *Obu-gad* in Aguleri cosmology symbolizes a special place for the union of time and space within the incarnation/evolution of timeless energy which in turn is of two folds which represents the physical and spiritual. In traditional Igbo paradigm, *Obu-gad* as a sacred institution has become a symbol of place at which the living and the spiritual can basically meet and unite especially as it has to do with the institution of kingship. Primarily, *Obu-gad* from time immemorial is believed to be a sacred shrine that represents a separate sacred realm that connects the Igbo's to their great ancestor Eri and reunite/reconfirm their brotherly relationship and keep it for posterity through both time and space. Such sacred space therefore becomes an epicenter for religious communication where the sacred is experienced and worshipped through the sacred ordination of ritual coronation of indigenous Igbo kings that repositions Aguleri as the head of the Igbo's diaspora.

## 2. A Brief History of Aguleri [Igbo] Religion

According to [24] “it is possible to visit Aguleri, and go away seeing almost nothing of the town at all. Most of the houses are set back from the road, and cover a wide area, in the classic Igbo pattern. And one may know the town well, and never guess its immense antiquity, for there is nothing visible to suggest it. Yet Aguleri, perhaps more than any other place, was the cradle of Igbo civilization. A long history encapsulated in mythology, recall a man called Eri, sent from God, who lived there”. Buttressing this, [44] affirms that sacred temple in which it figures lies in Aguleri – a farming/fishing Igbo community on *Omanbala* River basin of South-Eastern Nigeria”.

According to [26], Aguleri is a very large town situated at the bank of the river Anambra called *Omanbala* by the indigenes and corruptly nicknamed Anambra by the European Settlers. Despite being a largely nautical people who regularly traveled downriver to trade [11], Aguleri people are basically farmers. Their traditional way of life was so good and satisfactory that in recent times they have often been reluctant to abandon the land and move into the modern sector of the Nigerian economy [26], although, Aguleri people are part of the larger Igbo group till date.

## 3. Origin and Migration

Strictly speaking, no one actually knows when Aguleri was incepted as a town but the history of Aguleri may have dated back to the early part of civilization and modernity in Nigeria [26]. Since there were no written records, the dates of events, origin and migration of Aguleri people depended heavily on time-honoured legends, oral tradition, recent archaeological discoveries and excavations where – “a site was excavated in Aguleri and radio carbon dates showed that it had been continuously inhabited for about 5000 years. There was no spectacular findings but it revealed ancient pottery, human bones and tools of stone” [47]. The origin of Aguleri people would be linked to the migration of Igbo race to this present Nigeria as a nation who are among the “Hebrew patriarchs from Mesopotamia to their new homeland in Palestine [9]. Commenting on the history of the Israelites [9] again argues that “it is true that the position taken above, which is one that is widely held today, has been vigorously contested in recent years by certain scholars who maintain that the patriarchal narratives are more or less imaginative literary creations of a much later date [the early monarchy, or even the exilic period] with no appreciable stream of oral tradition behind them, and without real historiographical intention or historical worth”.

Eri and his entourage continued their migration southward until they finally settled at a place known to us today as Aguleri the ancestral home of the Igbo around 1303 B. C at

the confluence of two rivers *Ezu* and *Omambala* - a tributary of the great River Niger [18]. He argues further that in Aguleri today, there is a place called *Agbanabo-Ezu-na-Omambala* [the confluence of the rivers, *Ezu* and *Omambala*, which form the Anambra River]. Here it is believed, Eri landed with his entourage before moving to settle in *Obu-Gad*, Aguleri. The *Obu-Gad* [that is Gad’s memorial palace] is apparently visible and this remains an epicenter for global tourism site in Aguleri town of Anambra state till date [18]. Commenting on the significance of this sacred place [23] argues that this place is very paramount because “it was at this point that Eri had a divine revelation that they had reached their ordained place of settlement”. It is on this position that [48] affirms that historically it is “from this point 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”. To ascertain the authenticity and significance of this site to the tradition, culture and hegemony of the Igbo people, [26] echoes that “this is why before any Nri traditional ruler is installed, the king is led to Aguleri where he performs sacrifices to the sacred temple of *Obuga* before being given the sceptre of authority or *Ududu Eze* by the Igwe of Aguleri”. This depicts that Aguleri people have a strong belief in the existence of one God, the creator of all things whom they call *Chi-Ukwu*, the Supreme Being, but ancestor worship is also practiced where the people offer sacrifices to their dead fathers [26]. In Aguleri tradition, the King is believed to serve as an earthly representative between God and people, and this demonstrated convincingly that the concept of God was indigenous to the Igbo religious tradition [30], which promises concrete blessings and protection [24]. Explaining further, [59] affirms that “the number of Igbo deities, spirits, and oracles is enormous and their anthropomorphous character is well recognized. He argues that “Igbo attitude towards the gods is not of fear but of friendship, a friendship that lasts as long as the reciprocal obligations are kept” [59].

## 4. Settlement

Eri, the founder of Igbo race [25] was among the migrants. He was believed to have moved and settled temporarily with his followers, in an area near the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers. From there Eri moved to the Anambra valley and quickly settled near the bank of the River *Omanbala* [corruptly called Anambra by the Europeans] at a place known as *Eri-Aka* near *Odanduli* stream, which is presently today located between Ivite and Igboezunu Aguleri respectively. Over time, Eri went out on war raids and captured many men and women and his settlement began to grow exceedingly [25]. According to [25] again “after the death of Eri, his off springs grew in number. To avoid overcrowding and to prevent a situation where all of them could fall prey in an attack which was then the order of the day, the son’s dispersed to different places of abode today. The

children of Agulu, the first son, remained in their grandfather's [Eri] abode, and together with Adamgbo's children, evolved the town, Aguleri. To Agulu's name was appended to his father's name Eri, making Agulu-Eri. Nonetheless, through the institutions of royal ordination and ceremonial rituals and spirit manifestation, Aguleri reasserted her authority over other Igbo's in diaspora to "represent the headship of Igbo race" [43]. Commenting further in this, [43] again asserts that "it is also very vital to mention here that Aguleri is strategically located at the point of origin of Igbo land from where Igbo land spread further into the hinterland". He argues that the significance is that Aguleri as a town, represent the boundary of Igbo land from where Igbo land stretched eastwards to the rest of its heartland [43]. This cultural expression is only typical of the cradle and for a boundary community it makes a stronger claim to originality [43]. More so, till date, Aguleri has retained the original Igbo form of writing that is compared with the Egyptian hieroglyphics is another good point to claim the originality for boundary community and all these marks Aguleri identity [43] which [37] refers to as a well "structured self-image". Writing on the importance of such great cities, [42] argues that an ancient town like Aguleri is "the birth place, ancestral home, and a historical centre of culture. Other areas, important as some have now become, are nevertheless derivative from tradition". Insofar as some of the areas deriving their art music from the great tradition of Aguleri became, themselves, "great centre's for the dissemination of musical culture, though geographically distant from its original place and surrounded by different local traditions, other areas remained little centers of the great tradition" [13]. Explaining further, [62] affirms that societies like Aguleri that are famous for different art formations such as sculptor, painting, carving, graphics and design equally demonstrate these arts on their musical instruments, but the *Uvie* ritual "dance overshadows sculptures, painting, architecture, and literature as the leading traditional art" [22]. Butressing this point [6] maintains that "most African sculptures appear to have been associated with religion, which pervades most aspects of African life. The religious genres included, votive figures, which adorned shrines, reliquary figures, charms, figures, stools, used in initiation to the cults. The apparatus for divination, dance staff, musical instruments and a variety of other ritual paraphernalia".

## 5. The Sacred Temple of *Obu-Gad* and *Agbata Ezu na Omanbala* Rivers

To a community like Aguleri, according to [11] therefore, "a ritual is meaningful only if it is seen as repeating acts which were originally performed by the... the ancestors of the heroes at the beginning of time". In fact, in the course of these ritual festivals, "the village shrines are sanctified and rejuvenated for another year" because they are sacrosanct in all its ramifications [41]. Traditionally, sacred specialists in

ritual administration followed the craft from father to son, through several or even many generations, handing down their techniques and forms of sacred training, their quintessential experience and habitual shrines where application would be made to the gods and spirits [2]. An example of such shrine in Aguleri is the '*Otutunzu* shrine' – this shrine is strategically and naturally located at the confluence of *Omanbala* and *Ezu* rivers respectively and no citizen of Aguleri is allowed to fish in this particular location of the river because "they believed that the fish of the river were the children of the goddess of the river" [46].

## 6. Significance of Sacred Temple

It is on this note that [14] affirms that "there is no doubt that the river marks the border between two cosmic realms", where the "spiritual power or powers" [38] lay. Examining further, [53] describes "such sacred place as the home of powerful spirits, whom their leader often represented as a great king who lives in an underwater palace with mermaids and mermen as his attendants. From time to time he tries to flood the earth, and in some stories there may be links with Asian tales of a primitive deluge". As a point of emphasis, it is in this sacred shrine known as [*Agbata Ezu na Omanbala*], the confluence of *Ezu* and *Omanbala* rivers that Eri prepared and buried the covenant pot of clay called "*Ududu Eze*" which he handed over to Aguleri as the first son for the identification and coronation of kings among the Igbo speaking tribes in Nigeria [18]. In fact, the coronation ritual ceremony of an Nri king would not be complete if '*Ududu Eze*' is not handed over to the acclaimed king to be by the traditional ruler of Aguleri [25]. It is on this position that [38] describes such sacred or mythical pot as "the power house of power in the home or community". This sacred or mythical pot called *Ududu Eze* would be idiomatically compared to a griot which is described as a musical accompaniment/object without which, no celebration or ritual would be complete [5].

As a point of emphasis, it is significant to mention here that the claim of Aguleri as the cradle of Igbo civilization [24], and the head of the Igbo people is by virtue of being the first born of Eri, the father of the Igbos who at the death of his father, was given the scepter of authority to rule Eri settlement. Therefore, a centralized authority like Nri had no authority over settlements towns established by his offspring [25]. This sacred object which stands for authority, justice and leadership among the Igbo people serves as a binding force among the communities that constitutes Eri kingdom to their common ancestor [25]. These types of shrine serve also among the power points of expressing the believer's sense of the sacred and the orderliness of the divine realities [40]. It is on this ground that [27] describes such shrine as "primarily the face of the divinity. There the divinity is represented by the emblems which are regarded as sufficient reminders of his attributes". On this position, [35] pragmatically and symbolically, describes such sacred shrine as the "place where the heaven comes down to earth". Commenting on the significance of such places in African Traditional paradigm,

[38] posits that such places are as “they are, as they were spots where the spiritual come down to the earthly and the earthly is elevated to the spiritual”. Contemplating on this, [36] argues that such places are not for common or careless use, because they are considered to be sacred or holy. In this wise, [12] explains that such sacred place is inhabited by the dead, a domestic space in which the ancestors resides or visits. He argues that in ancestral ritual, death is not a barrier between the living and the living dead who continued to interact and communicate with the descendants [12]. In another development [45] observes that something magical happens at such a sacred place that triggers an unconscious memory and to learn about the world of sacred place is to learn about ourselves. He affirms that such sacred places and intersections are the locations where humans first erected temples, pyramids, shrines, churches and cities [45].

As [34] has pointed out, “such territory or space is characterized both as a metaphysical domain, and as a terrestrial entity. Deities are believed to dwell in another plane, but also need to have their presence manifested and anchored on earth in order for humans to propitiate them properly”. Such sacred space to use Reg Saner’s phrase is “capturing” [58]. Interrogating further, [64] argues that “as sacred places are created, an inner light outweighs outer darkness, and a spiritual journey commences”. Throwing more light on this, [20] argues that divine powers that radiates and exudes from this kind of sacred place “creates a broad-based spiritual cesspool that provides other forms of spiritual protection”. On this notion, [54] asserts that such sacred centers are believed to be where “many deities were understood to meet a variety of human needs and when some needs are met, the status quo is maintained; when other needs are met, there is a transformation of individuals and societies to new states of being”. In another development, [11] posits that such places are where traditional religious ties tend to compensate the communities like those ones that make up the Eri kingdom “through mediation for the loss of their contact with their ancestral home and with the built/support in religious rituals and cultural security of their extended brotherhood”. It is on this note that [28] argues that it cannot be denied that the entire community, including the 82% who are said to be Catholics, hold great ancestors like Eri in high esteem probably not as a deity, but purely as an ancestor of the community, a great grandfather of high dignity whose influence is still currently felt in the town politically, socially and religiously. In Igbo cosmological paradigm Eri’s sacred shrine *Obu-gad* is a symbol of brotherhood and unity among the Igbo communities. No wonder then that scholars like [40] asserts that

It attracts a lot of audience from neighbouring towns and villages when the job is completed. It acts as the people’s information centre. When it is newly completed it acts as the community’s newsroom for several days and months. After a while it would remain as the people’s archives where they go to consult and obtain inspirations, ideas and information about many aspects of their religious thinking and practices. As Christians and Muslims obtain inspiration from their Holy

Books: the Bible and the Quran respectively, likewise the traditional Igbo person receives inspiration and knowledge from the myriads of symbols that are replete.

Reacting on this, [19] posits that “the ruling dynasties in the various states forged relationships with one another by promoting brotherhood relations and the cordial relations among them were sometimes explained in affinal relationships”. Commenting on this [25] regrettably comments that in those days, other Igbo communities come to Aguleri to offer sacrifices in the sacred temples to request for one favour or the other and that helped the family houses where most members have converted to denominations of Christianity” and to maintain the link with their root but since their massive conversion into Christianity, these activities became extinct, only Nri keeps to this norm. Explaining further, [54] argues that “many traditional sacred centers are the centers for particular peoples in their particular geographical and historical circumstances...a sacred center today has to be the center of the entire expanding universe as well as the center of our own lives. That is a big stretch for some traditional ideas”. Commenting on the significant import of such shrines in indigenous contemporary Africa [33] asserts that “such shrines are maintained today even in also “similar ancestral alters are still maintained in the palace [8]. Reacting this notion, [40] argues that such “shrines in traditional Africa are connected with the homesteads. These are places where family religious activities are carried out. It is in such places that the traditional beliefs and culture are first transmitted to the notice of the young ones in the family”. No wonder [57] affirms that “the medicines used at the shrines are produced in the palace (sic); thus in original ritual boundaries which...served to coordinate rites of pollution removal at the palace for the chiefdom as a whole”.

According to [35] “this means giving territorial expression to the battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and as it were establishing Heaven on Earth”. She argues that as it is in traditional religion like the whole Igbo religion, the efficacy of prayers requires the mediation and the annexation of a sacred space or shrine [35], which [3] describes as the “shrine of mortality”. Buttressing this [3] again argues that in the esoteric sense, it is simply the depository containing all the basic cult objects of religious veneration; and it is, in fact, the place where worship is offered, and devotions paid to the Deity, the Supreme Being of Creation. Continuing with the argument, [3] again stresses that “the shrine of mortality accordingly, in this process of spiritualization, that is, of moving man away from his sensuous nature into his bliss and eternity of spirit, is fitted into place as a continual reminder to the initiate that the spiritual nature he desires to acquire or rouse in himself, can be roused fully and effectively only after the philosophical death of his sensuous or carnal personality”. Reaffirming the spiritual value of this kind of sacred place, [55] asserts that prayers, offerings, and sacrifices therefore require the construction of sacred space, where the forces of the invisible ‘other’ world can be brought into this world and effectively

controlled. This is the reason why [63] affirms that such “sacred structure space, facilitates orientation; provides the framework for worship, and transform chaos into cosmos, thus making human life possible”. Commenting on this, [40] argues that “such sacred places of worship provide geographical points of reference to religious beliefs and practices. They indicate the physical points of contact between the beings in the supra-sensible realm and those in the physical plane. Most of the shrines and sacred places in Africa are etiological. They teach theological, historical and moral lessons. In most cases, the myth, legends and stories that are told around them have little or no historical foundations. Nevertheless, they are valuable resources for transmitting and concretizing religious concepts and lessons, in both time and space”.



Source; “Anambra StateIndigenes Italy”, [4].

**Figure 1.** An artistic impression of ‘Ancestor Eri’ the man who is believed to be the progenitor of the Igbo race.

Insofar as this invisible energy web also correlates with known areas of anomalies in gravity and space-time, it has been postulated that different dimensions exist simultaneously and that an electromagnetic web of energy interlocks all things on this planet [45]. Commenting on the mysticism of this sacred place [32] affirms that “because of this power, which is dangerous or beneficent according to those property of one’s approach, non initiates avoid sacred places, while those with the proper ritual knowledge—especially medicine men—may make pilgrimages to pray, to renew their ritual equipment and the efficacy of their prayers, to obtain medicinal plants, and to collect sanctified soil and water”.

However, these festivals overlap irrespective of their nature, every festival is preceded by ritualistic ceremonies and some festivals that are seemingly social have ritual underpinnings/sections in them and similarly, ritual festivals that are seemingly solemn and serious have social dimension too [41]. But unlike the other sacred places in Aguleri which are strictly used for rituals and other festivals, the sacred place of Obu-gad is either for “social and religious occasions” [1]. This is because the excavation of Uduhueze alongside the rituals involved in the coronation of Igbo Kings are performed around the tomb of Eri the progenitor of Igbo

race and the co-joined three mystical trees that symbolises the affinity of three brothers which comprised of (Aguleri, Nri and Arodi) situated at the shrine of Obu-gad. No wonder [23] echoes that “Obuga is a place for spiritual re-dedication and the evocation of the proud ancestry of Eri descendants and Ndi-Igbo in general. It is a sacred place for royal empowerment and self-purification”

These are the types of sacred places that are believed to be imbued with natural powers and they carry a potent aura of sacredness and religiosity in the minds of the people that recognize them to be the embodiment and epitome of their spiritual guardians simply because of the mythological and ritualistic embellishment that have surrounded them from time immemorial [15]. Explaining further, [39] argues that “artificial symbols are created by an individual or a group to represent notions of their own. Such symbols usually relate to their own particular experiences and may mean nothing to any other group of persons”. Writing on the sacredness of the this indigenous symbol of the Igbo’s [15] affirms that “a typical example of this is Ofo, which is a ritual object of Igbo consciousness and ritual life, and in Igbo tradition and customs; an Ofo bearer is believed to be the earthly representation of the ancestors of a particular community”.

According to [50] Ofo is a sacred stick of office and authority held by kings, chiefs or family heads. Writing on the symbology of this sacred object, [28] opines that “Ofo is a ritual instrument which symbolizes lineage headship and sacred authority”. Broadly speaking, in traditional Igbo culture, according to [16] “Ofo depicts that one has the support of the ancestors and deities of the land as he sits on the throne as the king, head or family representative. It shows that the person in question is not a usurper but is the actual person according to lineage/tradition qualified to carry the mantle of leadership or sit on the throne or occupy that position”. Writing on that context, [25] succinctly opines that:

Owing to the itinerant nature of his priestly duties Nri was given powers to hand Ofo to community leaders in different Igbo settlements as he travelled far and wide in the course of his duties as the priest and traditional doctor of Igbo people. This is why before any Nri traditional ruler is installed, the king is led to Aguleri where he performs sacrifices to the sacred temple of Obuga before being given the scepter of Authority or Odudu Eze by the Igwe of Aguleri.

Writing on the ritual process involved [48] asserts that it is during this ritual coronation journey that the acclaimed Nri King would “stay four days at Aguleri in Obuga to receive the blessing of Eri and to collect a lump of clay brought from the bottom of the Anambra Rivers by divers”. Also, it is through this mystical journey during the coronation of an Nri King by the Aguelri that [31] & [48] affirms that there is a divine injunction that the candidate is ordered to “go to Aguleri, obtain your Odudu and may you return safely to rule your people”. Commenting on the process of the symbolic ritual festival, [31] again asserts that during such coronation rituals “a spirit-seeker is consulted for the most propitious days to raise the Odudu. A sacrifice is made on the river-

bank, the future divine King points his Ofo over the water and prays that all dangers be removed. Where upon a man plunges in and brings up the Odudu. Feasting and rejoicing now follows. The candidate has proved his godhead". Through this kingship rituals ordination, [48] affirms that "the Nri Kingship has a deep and long connection with Aguleri". Lamenting on this [25] argues "that the Eri and Aguleri connection is avoided by some Igbo scholars in order to give them the opportunity of projecting Nri as the head of the Igbos".

This is why [49] maintains that "recently some respected personalities have written articles and given speeches or interviews in which facts were deliberately distorted and banalized. Such intellectual dishonesty is at the root of our leadership crisis in this country". Buttressing this further, [25] affirms that "the truth is that Eri is the founder of of Igbo race", or "the father of the Igbo people who migrated from the east – Hebrew who must have introduced a theological hegemony in Igbo land" [61]. Reacting to this notion, [60] argues that "the view that Nri-Awka is the spiritual and ideological dispersal centre of the Igbo is primarily based on the claims of the clans in this area".

Writing on the ritual significance of this sacred temple especially during the ritual coronation of the Igbo Kings, [48] states that "in the first level only the temple of Uga was formed. It was the temple of Eri, in Aguleri. All successors to the throne of Eze Nri must visit the temple of Uga during the coronation to perform the rituals of presentation, re-enactment and integration", and this is done "in order to receive blessings from Eri and to collect a lump of clay brought from the bottom of the Anambra river which would be used to form the shrine of Nri, Menri". He argues that during coronation of the their King "the political significance of the temple is generally uppermost in the minds of the Nri traditional elite, the ozo titled men" and it is during this period the "Ufie sacred music sound/played day and night for one year in the Kings palace" [48].

Insofar as the scepter of authority given to Aguleri by his father Eri – the father of Igbo race is a representation of the divine which has its ritualistic functionalities embedded in it, this marks Aguleri as "the repository and custodian of genuine tradition" [21].

Nonetheless, in times of oath-taking most Igbo communities will ask the holder of the Ofo to assemble with their Ofo, the suspect must swear and this implies that oaths and Ofo plays vital functions as sanctions [51]. Holders of Ofo are given special respect in the community, this is because it is believed that they are carrying or holding a symbol of both blessing and cursing [16]. On this position, [50] holds that in community like Onitsha:

When the Obi [king], who is also a priest in a particular way] strikes the Ofo...on the ground [ala] in a ritual of intercessory prayers. It is ritual in which the Obi strikes the great Ofo on the ground to bless his subjects, and offers thanks to the Supreme Deity and other gods on behalf of himself and his subjects for blessings bestowed on them in the previous year.

Writing on the symbology of this, [7] argues that "the symbolism of authority must therefore not be just a matter of following a transcendental model, but also of compromising with this model to make it relevant to this life. It must involve a contradiction which allows for the reintroduction of real existence into what still remains the ideal". According to [52] the essence of these [represented] rituals are that they embody the values of the people, they documented the traditional education of the people, the songs, symbols, signs, proverbs and riddles, and works of arts. More so, resonating with the idea is the insight of [56] on what he terms 'mythic rituals', these according to him "connect us with our historical past and our physical environment. They establish order and define {...} values in culture".

## 7. Conclusion

The sacred temple of *Obu-gad* is an ancient ritual centre for keeping and binding the brotherhood of Igbo communities together because Eri is believed to be their great ancestor. In this wise, through the mediation of its symbolism and cultural ethos the ancient spiritual centre is so revered that it portrays Aguleri as the spiritual epicenter for the ritual convocation and reunification of other Igbo communities that make up the Igbo race through her ritualistic endeavour's. Summarily, it has been observed that *Obu-gad* is a place for spiritual re-dedication and the evocation of the proud ancestry of Eri descendants and *Ndi-Igbo* in general. It is a sacred place for royal empowerment; self purification and show casing global tourism for Anambra State of Nigeria.

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