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ONICHA (ONITSHA)

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ONICHA (Onitsha)
KINGSHIP
INSTITUTION

by

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Editor, Niger Herald, Onitsha.



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PREFACE

This monograph is excerpted from "East of the Niger", an unpublished study of Onicha Social Institutions. Like its parent it was based on researches conducted from 1948 — 1951.

Those who helped my investigations, and to whose memories I now pay my respects, were His Royal Highness, Obi Okosi 11, Chief Edmund Egbuna, the Ajie of Onitsha, Chief Neziyanya, the Ogene of Onitsha, Chief Kwentoh, the Gbosa, Mr. Phillip Aduba of Iyi-Awu Quarters, and my father, Nathan Ikegbunam Ifeka, whose copious notes on Onicha history afforded me inspiration and the desired springboard. I wish also to express here my immense gratitude to the only living helper, Mr. Ezenwa Ibegbuna Egbuji, the spiritual head of the Royal House of Chimedie, and a man of remarkable knowledge of Onicha folk ways.

In a preface to "East of the Niger" the following remarks were made: "in thinking of the local public, an attempt has been made to make this book less "academic", and by this I mean that it is not a consistent comparative study. It is rather a factual account based on a long and arduous research on Onicha folkways. If the general reader, or the professional social anthropologist, finds a resemblance between, for example, the kingship system of the Onicha people, and that of other societies, he is welcome to the delights of such discoveries. But I hope that the absence of such comparative indications throughout the entire book will not be taken as a relevant deficiency, nor as laziness, and undue parochialism on my part". The above extract is true of the present monograph.

What is stated here is an unbiased account of our kingship institution. When this research was undertaken there was no kingship dispute, hence no private interests to protect, and no facts to hide.

In recording the Udo rites during the induction of Obi Ofala Okagbue, it is hoped that the age-long kingship custom of Onitsha will be brought to life to the reader.

Sam Ifeka
OgboliEke Onitsha
3rd Oct. 1973.



"And in the calmest and most stillest night,
With all appliances and means to boot,
Deny it to a King? Then, happy, low, lie down!
Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown".

Shakespeare,
Henry 1V, part 11

Kingship, in Onitsha, is a sacred and unhereditary institution. The king in his own person was revered in such a way that his life, in principle and practice, was lived entirely apart from his 'subjects' in a seclusion which was almost monastic. At one time, as a result of this, it was the custom that the king must not be seen in public beyond his palace. This continued as long as it conformed with the duties of kingship; but now that the responsibilities of the king are much wider and cannot satisfactorily be discharged while preserving this habit of hallowed privacy it has been abandoned. Historically, the praise for perceiving the need to meet unavoidable contingencies within the frame-work of a settled way of life goes to Obi Sam Okosi I (1902—1931), the father of the late Obi Okosi II (1935—1961), who was equally, if not more, aware of its importance. In a way, therefore, the custom of kingship has changed, and it will be stated where changes have occurred, and for what reasons, if possible. It should be noted that the change is mainly in the aspect of public relations. In other spheres the concept of kingship is still in keeping with tradition.

Kingship is not absolute. The decisions of the king are subject to the sanctions of the Ndichie Ume*, and they see to it that he observes all the traditions, and expiates any violation with the correct ritual observance.

* First rank chiefs.

But while they do this they must not be thorns in the flesh of the king who must not be caused any sorrow, since on assuming kingship he has willingly dedicated himself as an orphan of the 'State'. This means that before anyone aspires to Obishop, his father must be dead ; for the simple reason that one cannot be above one's father — it goes without saying that no king can be deposed and his son chosen in preference. But in the regal-maternal relationship the concept of 'Orphanage' is nominal, in other words, the term 'orphan' must be read in parenthesis. In this context the King is regarded as an orphan for the reason that from the moment he retires into Iche Ndo (secluded devotion), in preparation for the coronation, he is estranged from his mother for all time. The reason for this might be to render maternal intervention in the affairs of the people impossible ; but this is hardly plausible. It is more likely that an explanation is to be found in the realm of the notion of the divinity of his person ; for this non-punitive ostracism of the royal mother applies also to the royal children and wives, but to a much lesser degree.

The wives and children live apart from the king, but while he can see the latter at all times, he can see the former only during the day. The royal household, as can be imagined from the foregoing account, excluded the wives and children. In these circumstances the theory of seclusion is nearly achieved in practice, except for the fact that the Obi has three servants, one of whom is his perpetual acolyte.

Kingship in Onitsha is essentially mystic. The King himself is regarded as a sacrificial victim, an object of atonement. This should be clear when we consider the peculiarities of the rites of initiation. However, the point that is to be stressed here is the attitude to kingship. The King is regarded as one who has denied himself practically all desirable things, and consequently a very unhappy person indeed. It is therefore believed that anything likely to cause depression must be excluded from his sight; accordingly, he must not see a corpse, or even a funeral procession. He is never wrong, but he can be cautioned. There is an illuminating adage to this effect : "Adama eze Ikpe ; ma asi eze



Above High-priestess of Obio performing her exclusive function during the coronation of INA UDO.

Here she is engaged in the hair-cropping rite of dedication and purification on the then Obi-Elect, Akukalia Ofala Okagbue before the Udo Shrine.

Assisting, on her right is the High-priest of Obio, Late John Ezeocha. (Died 20th Nov. 1971)

kpachalu anya, omalu na ikpe am'ia", ie. "Judgement cannot be entered against the King; but when he is advised to be a little more careful, then he will realize he is guilty". This is not merely an instructive maxim of court behaviour. It is invariably the language in which any dissident community couches its grievance against the king.

There are certain modes of behaviour which are characteristic of Onicha Kingship, and these are in most cases epitomised into very apt words. For example, the saying "**adafu eze onu**" means that the King's mouth cannot be seen while he is eating or speaking, and clearly explains why the king speaks behind the Azuzu (the royal fan) or while his acolyte stands between him and his audience. He also uses the horse-tail, the emblem of mediation, to shield himself.

The Obi embodies all virtues and the people regard him as a symbol of purity. This is outwardly testified by the fact that he always wears white clothes, except during the first day of the Ofala. (His life is one of exemplary self-denial. He sleeps on the floor of his house).

The impression created in people's minds about the Obi with respect to his retired life and outward appearance, while good, is sometimes accompanied by superfluous inventions. It is perhaps natural that an object of wonder which contains elements of mystery does lend itself to myth. One of such popular fancies surrounding Onicha kingship is that the king is always light-skinned. This is a fallacy established by certain neighbouring Ibo towns from their misconception of the word Onicha.

They originally mistook the word Onicha for the word Aniocha (white land), thus ascribing a common etymological ancestry to both words, and from this evolved the proverbial saying: "**Ka njelu Onicha afurokwom Eze Onicha, mana amalum na oga di ocha (white)**". This means: "**When I went to Onicha ('white-land'), I did not see their king, but I am pretty certain that he must be light-skinned (ocha)**".

Needless to say, this 'colour code' identification is not vindicated by historical facts. It is true that the Obis from the line of Akazue were light-skinned, and also the late Sam Okosi I; nevertheless, Obi Okosi II was not, neither were many other Kings. The choice is not based on looks but on character; before one is selected for kingship one's morals must be exemplary, and emulative, one's personality prepossessing and ennobling, and one's deportment dignified. Debauchery, intemperance and other kindred evils are liable to disqualify a candidate.

COURT BEHAVIOUR :

The standard of behaviour in the (Ime Obi) palace is high, and any misdemeanour appertains to the sacrilegious. The precincts of the palace are, like shrines, treated as holy ground. Men and women paying visits must take off their head-gear as soon as they step into the entrance, just as they do before the shrines, and must remain bare-headed until they leave the palace. Both sexes do not sit together; there is one section for men, and another for the women. It is not necessary for anyone who wishes to see the Obi to have an appointment. When he calls at the Ime Obi he learns from the attendant whether it is possible to see the king, and remains at the Iba Afa until the King is ready to see him. He is then conducted to the throne, where he greets the king in the same manner as his conductor has done. The

usual way of greeting the king is by kneeling down before the throne and touching the threshold with the forehead. If the visitor is a woman, she then goes to the section of the Iba Afa reserved for women, until the Obi is ready to give audience. In giving audience he does not speak direct to him. An acolyte acting as an intermediary conducts the conversation between the Obi and the visitor to the audience.

THE ROYAL HOUSEHOLD :

The household is governed by three servants ; **Ngbaloto Eze (the naked servants)**. They are responsible for the King's needs ; one has already been mentioned as his perpetual shadow and interpreter. They are called the naked servants because they must be stark naked when ministering to the king, and they are usually very young boys. The heads of these servants are partially shaved in a traditional manner. Two of these servants are always in attendance during an audience, one acting as the interpreter, the other standing by his right hand and carrying the state sword, the Abani, or the fan, Azuzu.

The wives of the Obi also 'enjoy' their own exile. They do not leave their royal quarters, but friends and relatives can pay them visits, although they themselves cannot visit them. Their quarters are well away from the palace ; and male visitors can call to see them only during the day, with the permission of the King, and guided by one of the courtiers. In the Ime Obi there are four thrones, and each of these is at one end of the four reception chambers. The four reception chambers are :

(1) **IBA IFUFE** : This is a small building facing the playground or the arena where the Offala festival takes place. In the chamber the King settles public differences and disputes involving communities, in which case the outlying arena affords ample accomodation. It is in this chamber that the state throne is erected, and here the subjects pay homage to the Obi during the Offala. But perhaps this chamber is remembered better for the part it plays in the four holiest days during the year in the life of the Obi. It is the sanctuary into which the Obi retires during the Inye Ukwu Na Nlo ('stepping' into meditation) in preparation for the Offala. Here he undergoes four days and four nights of religious meditation, completely shut off from the outside world

and his family. He is annointed with white chalk, and garbed in a white toga. The whole purpose of this is to purify him spiritually, and the joy at this purification is reflected in the pomp, gaiety and merriment of the Offala ceremony.

(2) **IBA AFA**: This is a quadrangular open council chamber where the Obi normally gives audience to his own people and to visitors. Administrative matters are discussed with the three ranks of the Ndichie, but the counsel taken here is of minor importance.

(3) **IBA UME**: This is similar in construction to the Iba Afa. Here the Ndichie are received and major counsel taken. No one is given audience unless on a private mission. The Iba Ume is so called from the fact that the highest rank, the Ndichie Ume, are received there, and it is with this grade that the Obi takes major counsel.

(4) **AGBALA-EZE**: This is the last reception chamber. It is private, and exclusively for the use of the Obi and his family. No one else can proceed beyond the Iba Ume.

The outlying grounds of the palace are usually big enough to enable the minimum needs of the Obi to be provided for. The people are responsible for protection, and guards are provided for the palace. These guards are also the courtiers, and in recent years have acted as the court messengers and policemen. No one is allowed to bring arms into the Ime Obi.

THE DUAL FUNCTION OF THE KING: If it is constantly borne in mind that the King, apart from being a secular ruler, is also imbued with spiritual authority, the Onicha concept of kingship will seem less strange, and all the restrictions and taboos that surround his person and his family will then seem logical. If the person of the King is holy, it is natural that his sacredness should spread around him, just as the church spreads its own sanctity over its greying tombstones and precincts. If the Obi is a priest in his own home, it is also natural that this abode should be hallowed like a shrine. This idea of sanctity by association runs through the whole Onicha religious system. It is on that account that the home of an Ozo member is highly regarded, and much respect given to the Ndichie Ume. The implication of the religious functions of kingship is that the king is

Chief High-Priest, and therefore at the head of all religious functions in the community. But in keeping with his coronation vows he cannot take part in any public religious ceremonies, he therefore delegates his duties to another Okpala, or an Onyichie, accompanied by a representative who is dressed in a royal costume and wearing a red cap (okpu ododo).

The priestly duties of the Obi start very early in the morning at about five O'clock when the royal gong, and Ufie, is sounded. The King wakes, and offers sacrifice on behalf of the people. After this he repairs to the Iba Afa, ready to discharge his duties and receive the homages of the Ndiichie.

The respect that is given to the Obi follows him to his grave. The palaces and the precincts of deceased kings are usually left uninhabited for several generations, and are known as Okwu Eze (the King's grove). Even his widows are shown the greatest respect. It is contrary to custom to marry the King's widow, whatever the rank of the prospective suitor. In days gone by, the widow had to flee the land, as her presence would be a constant reminder of the King's death*.

The unfaithfulness of any of the wives of the Obi is high treason, and punishable by death*.

Finally, without by any means exhausting the effects of the King's sanctity on his position, it is perhaps necessary to stress its effect on his marital life, if only to place in the right perspective the immense sacrifice he has made. The custom that his wives can visit him only during the day, and cannot sleep with him during the night, is to enable the king to remain sacred all through the night, so as to be in a state of grace in the morning when he performs his religious duties.

* It is interesting to note that the taboo on the marriage of the King's widow was put to test about seventy years ago when the late Gbasuzo Onowu, former (Iyasele prime Minister) of Onitsha, the brother of the late Obi Okosi I, and uncle of the present King, wanted to marry Madam Obunse of Ogholi-Eke the sister of Idigba Nwabunie, and the widow of Obi Anazonwu. Gbasuzo was, however, not then the Iyasele, and even had he been he would still have been forbidden to marry her.

* The case of the same Obi Anazonwu does provide a proof. One of his wives, Ufasa, paid for her unfaithfulness when she was dragged to death by a raving mob.

RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES 1

In almost any aspect of the institutions where it may seem that an undue restriction has been placed on the Obi, there is always an offsetting and compensatory factor. For example, to counter-balance the rule that his wives did not leave their confines, a special market was held on certain days outside the precincts, and near the palace gates, to enable them to meet their fellow women, hear the latest gossip, and, of course, buy all they need. Concessions in the price of the commodities were made to the wives, and many things were given to them free. The Obi has the privilege of marrying anyone he likes, and may do so without paying any bride price; but the relatives of the wife thus married usually have good social advantages, such as respect and recognition. They receive favours on account of the marriage.

It is the King's right to confer the Ndichie title on anyone he judges fit, provided that the man in question wishes (and can afford) to take the title. He also honours deserving men by expressing his appreciation of their deeds in his palace before the public. In a case where the honoured man is an Ozo initiate the Obi adds a further Ugo feather to his cap. People are usually honoured for their public service*. He can suspend an Onyichie for any act of disloyalty or on public protest, but he cannot nullify his title, nor prevent him from benefitting from the rights of this rank.

1. It is merely a matter of convenience to head this paragraph thus. In a sense, it is meaningless to speak of rights and privileges in the face of all the restrictions mentioned above. In another sense, it is unnecessary to speak of them since they are cumulative and almost all-embracing. I shall therefore list all other incidental factors whose diverse nature render separate headings impossible.

* It is worthy of note that Zik (Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe) was thus honoured in 1951 for his political service to Nigeria.



It is the king's right to confer Chieftaincy title (Ndichie) on anyone he judges fit. Sitting on the IBAAFA throne, Obi Okagbue receives the Owelle-aspirant, Dr. the Hon. Nnamdi Azikiwe

For example, the right of sharing in the Initiation Fee of any initiate. The suspension more often entails prohibiting the offender from sitting in council with him and with the rest of the Ndichie, or from serving as a judge in the court.

The Obi has the right to make legislation, but this right is limited, as the sanction of the Ndichie and the representatives of the people (these are known as 'Ogbo nachi ani', ie. "The ruling age grade") is necessary. But the executive right is wholly in the hands of the Ndichie and the Orokwute (the heads of the juju cult), the latter being used as an 'instrument of terror', namely as a means of enforcing justice. The Obi has the right to make the decision to declare war on any town, and to retain the spoils of conquest.

He was nominally in charge of all agricultural lands, streams or market places, and made treaties and agreements on behalf of the people. He also received the benefits of these agreements, in the form of annual tributes or royalties.

It is the privilege of the Obi to compute the calendar and to fix the date of annual festivals with the help of the Ndichie, and also in some cases to be the first to celebrate these festivals, as in the Umato. During this ceremony, each of the Ndichie is bound to send to the Obi a basketful of maize (a hundred heads), or a tribute of one shilling in lieu.

It is also normal for the people in general to offer presents, usually the proceeds of their farm labour, to the King. The King is entitled to the sum of three pounds from any member of the Umu-Eze-China family who is being initiated into the Agbalanze. (The Eze Idis are entitled to the same sum of money from any initiate residing in their own quarters). Also tradition stipulates that any leopard or wild animal, such as a boar, an ele-

phant, a tiger, a manatee, an alligator or a gorilla which is killed, must first be sent to the King, who takes the royal share, comprising the head, the hide or the tusk, as the case may be. The rest of the animal is presented to the hunter together with many gifts. Killing a leopard is particularly significant, and the hunter is highly honoured for the achievement. The importance of this lies not only in the fact that much bravery is required to kill such a ferocious animal, but also in the implied analogy between the King himself and the leopard, which is regarded as the King of the forest. Consequently, by this feat, the hunter is regarded as one who has vanquished a 'king' in his own 'kingdom'. Further, an element of sophistication was added to this analogy. It then becomes necessary to hold an inquest on the leopard, to find out if the leopard killed was the real one, and not the king himself. There is however a degree of sanity in this practice, for the name leopard (Agu) is one of the numerous complimentary titles of the king. The hunter himself is very well rewarded for this feat, and honoured by the king by having Ugo feather stuck in his hair, or on his cap. This is a form of knighthood. He is also presented with two yards of white cloth and a quantity of gunpowder. A hunter who has killed a leopard, is known by the title of Ogbuagu (Leopard Hunter), and it is the custom for all the Ogbuagus in the community to celebrate their achievements once a year. This is the Ogbalido feast.

It is perhaps necessary at this juncture to examine all the traditional names of the King, and see what further light they can throw on the concept of kingship. As pointed out above, these titles are merely complimentary; although no doubt some of them, both in and out of context, sound somehow ridiculous. In the main, however, these names relate to the dual functions of kingship which has been mentioned above, viz: the religious and the temporal.

The titles that pertain to his temporal functions are:—

1. **Agu, "The Leopard"** (of the people). This metaphor, as mentioned earlier, is derived from the concept of the leopard as the king of the forest.
2. **Akameluigbo, "The hand that vanquished the neighbouring Ibos"** an appellation meant to recall the Onicha victories over the towns of Oze and Obosi.

3. **Ogbuonye-mbosi-ndu-nagu'ia**, "Lord of Life" is the general import of this aphoristic title; it means, literally, "one who destroys life at the very moment when there are abundant means to sustain and enjoy the very life".
4. **Onyenwe-Obodo**. "The Supreme Head of the community".
5. **Ogbondu-na-eji-ntu**: "The 'fire-eating' cannon"; in this metaphor the power of the king is likened to that manifested by the firing of the cannon.
6. **Okwueobe**: "He who has the last word". This title arose from the fact that the King while in council with the Ndi-chie, is the last person to make a speech or give his own opinion, and when he has done so, that opinion is indisputable.

The following titles relate to his religious functions :—

1. **Muo**: "All-knowing", Muo literally means "spirit". This attribute stems from the fact that the Obi is regarded as one who, by undergoing the ceremony of initiation (which is a symbolic death) has emerged as a "divine spirit".
2. **Ogbuefi**: "One who can sacrifice a cow". This title now generally applies to any member of the Agbalanze, although it originally belonged to the king. But there is still a difference in the meaning of the word when applied to the Agbalanze. As applied to the king, it means "one who has the right to sacrifice a cow before the shrine" as applied to the Agbalanze it means 'one who has killed a cow' ie. one who has provided a cow for sacrifice. It is the custom that the Obi is the only one entitled to kill a cow, either for himself, or for any other person in the community, during such religious ceremonies as the funeral rites of an Onyichie or of a member of the Agbalanze.
3. **Igwe**: "The heaven above", "the sky". It is meant to declare the majesty of the king. It may therefore read as "His Highness", or "His Eminence". This title is, however, the one by which the king is generally addressed. The rest of the titles of the king are used only by the Ndi-chie when they greet him.

However, there are other names of the Obi which on the whole seem to imply all that the foregoing names denote. The origin of these names is somewhat obscure. They are Agbogidi, Alamako, Aka-Enyi-ka-olu Ukwu'ia, Atu Nnu, Onyimonyi, and so forth.

Finally, before launching into an account of the initiation ceremony, it will be worthwhile to describe fully the traditional appearance of the king. His every day wear, as mentioned a little earlier, is white. His costume consists of large white cotton cloth (Agbo Ocha) and a white skirt rather like a kilt (mbenukwu). The former is worn as a toga, while the latter is worn along with the top part of the body bare. The king also wears another toga-like garment, known as **otogbo**. He is also entitled to wear his royal cap at all times: whether he is offering a sacrifice, or is sitting in council with the Ndichie. He is not allowed to wear any other type of dress except during the Offala, when he is usually dressed in robes of gorgeous colours in keeping with the mood of celebration*.

THE CORONATION CEREMONIES :

As kingship is elective, whenever the throne is vacant there are usually many contestants, but as mentioned before, the yardstick of eligibility is merit. In a family where the father was a king any of the children could contest the crown irrespective of age**.

The candidate for kingship first consults his family Okpala, his relatives and friends to brief them on his intention. The Okpala will offer prayers and sacrifices on his behalf, and there is also a purificatory ceremony in which he will be anointed with white chalk (Nzu). Henceforth he dons a white wrapper

* (See "Offala Festival

** There is no fee for kingship (as in the Ozo title). But the candidate must come from the Ikpala-Eze community, or what is known as Umu-Eze Chima. The other communities which comprise the descendants of the remaining sons of Abidogu Onishe, and various families of Onicha, were excluded from kingship, and instead were given the position of kingmakers. This dichotomy, although intended to temper the acrimony natural to disputes which always arise from the practice of elective monarchy, apart from its failure to achieve this noble purpose, has given rise to claim of undue precedence by one section and to complaints of eclipse by the other. It has..... led to the kingmaking communities' attempt to retain the post of Iyasele in their own communities in addition to their rights to have minor kings (Eze Idi). But it would not be misleading to think of Onitsha as a mere binary classification in spite of such extraneous elements as the Mgbalekeke family.

and retires into seclusion. This is the period known as ICHE NDO, and lasts for 28 days. From now on he will not be seen in public. His friends, relatives and supporters visit him and address him by the title of 'Igwe'. This is the period of great devotion, and while he himself cannot at this time canvass for supporters, he will send some of his community elders as delegates, first to the high-priests of various shrines to intercede on his behalf, and then with gifts to the heads of these communities in order to influence them in his favour. As there are usually many contestants, tension is naturally high, and the effort to please greatly intensified. The seeming success of one contestant often raises the competition to a fever pitch leading to open communal strife, heightened by machinations, double-dealing and recriminations. The contest sometimes drags on beyond the endurance of purse and spirit. But finally the candidate considered most suitable is selected: One with a noble character and presence. This is always a miracle. Some important factors which influence the choice of a candidate, especially when all the contestants are potentially eligible, are family history, with special regard to health, longevity and moral worth; and the relation of the candidate's community to the whole of the society. In this context a candidate who hails from a community noted for anti-social habits, belligerence, and high-handedness might have his chances of selection diminished. It is, as it were, the occasion when the "sins of the fathers are visited on the children". It is, however, important to point out that the financial status of the candidate does not, seemingly, influence the selection: even though it would be said of the king-makers that they do not discourage contestants from 'buying' their votes or favours, nevertheless they appoint one whom they think is suitable. The candidate chosen may be of any social rank. **In other words, it is immaterial whether or not he is an Ozo ie., a member of the Agbalanze, an Onyichie, or a commoner.** When the choice is finally made, and a proclamation made to that effect, the king-elect will henceforth lead the customary isolated life. He will, while waiting for the coronation, perform numerous sacrifices at various shrines as a token of gratitude.



Above:- The High-priest of Obio, and custodian of Udo Shrine, John Ezeocha.



Left:- A white cow, the symbol of the 'dying aspirant' being slaughtered before the shrine by the high-priest.

GIVING THE MANDATE :

It is the practice to formalize the appointment of the new King by giving him the symbolic mandate : the "Offor", which is a stick of about six inches in length, and two inches in diameter. All the representatives of the various communities will be present. The okpala of the King-elect community will initiate a religious ceremony, after which the Okpala (Omodi) of Obamkpa (Umuasele), who is the representative of all the Onicha Okpalas, will give the King-elect the mandate.

IJE UDO ; INA UDO (THE CROWNING CEREMONY) :

After the mandate is given, the king-elect will make preparations for the Ina Udo. This crowning ceremony formerly took four days. On the night of the first day the King is led to the Udo by friends and relatives, where he will continue to live the life of meditation, and to offer many sacrifices.

The Udo is a shrine which is used exclusively for coronation purposes. It is also known as Uve, and generally believed to be the place where the ancestral King of Onitsha was buried.

The shrine which is about two and half miles from the palace of the Obi is located in a sacred Grove about 600 yards south-west of the Dennis Memorial Grammar School Extension, off Onitsha—Port Harcourt Road. It is presided over by the high priest of Obio, the only surviving village out of the original nine villages of the Onitsha which bears its original name (although it is still a popular nostalgia to refer to Umuikem as Ubulu, and some part of Ogbeozoma as Awada).

The current custodian of the shrine is John Ezeocha, now fast advancing in age, but remarkably mentally alert.

The Udo is the shrine where all Onitsha kings had always been purified and where they "acquire their divinity".

The rites of the Udo Shrine have an uncommon esoteric significance. It is here that a new king actually inherits from his immediate predecessor, and from other past kings, drinking as



The Aspirant and the Udo Priest wait before the Shrine for the arrival of the priestess.



The Obi-aspirant sitting before the Udo shrine receives from the High priest of Obio, John Ezeocha, the 2 sticks of the Royal Ufe Gong, and also instructions on the significance and tradition of the Ufe.

it were, from their common fountain of divinity.

Here he undergoes his symbolic death, the dedication and surrender being his first burial ceremony—(Hence an Obi at his demise gets only one burial ceremony, the last Offala.

The last ceremony of dedication consists of a high religious rite, a consumation of twenty-eight days of continual sacrifices.

The 'King' is shaved completely, the hairs cropped closely to their roots in such a manner that his head looks like a polished dome. The hair that is shaved off is then offered to the shrine.

This function is performed by the Ada of the Obio community. After that she will annoint the King with white chalk (Nzu), and present him to the Okpala of the Obio family who will instruct him in the duties of kingship, decorate him with a white cap or biretta, and finally dedicate him to the shrine of Udo. when this is over the Royal Gong, the Ufie, will be sounded for the first time, thus proclaiming to the whole people far and wide that 'a new King is born'. This practice of sounding the Ufie is in conformity with the method adopted in settling the Kingship dispute when the Onicha people first arrived at their present abode.

The new King is then carried on the shoulder back to the people, still dressed in a loin cloth or "wrapper", and with his body completely covered with white chalk. He is first taken to the house of the highest in rank of the Ndichie Ume, where in the presence of the people he will demonstrate his willingness to serve them by submitting to the 'orders' which the Ndichie will give to him. (As the first in rank is the Iyasele — the Onowu — he will pledge his loyalty in his house; but should the stool of the Onowu be vacant he will pledge his loyalty in the house of the next in rank, the Ajie, and so on in descending gradation of rank).

These 'orders' are very simple : he might be asked to sweep the house, wash a basin, bathe a baby, or to make the fire. It is worthy of mention that an almost similar practice is found in western Nigeria especially among the Yorubas where the Ob-elect formerly underwent 'physical punishment of some sort' beating and minor ordeals amongst other things. This symbolic subjugation of the old personality of the new King, a practice which in a way reminds one of the Christian practice of 'burying the Old Adam' by the sacrament of baptism, seems to point to a concept common to African Kingship in general, namely, that the King is not above the people. After this he is blessed by the Ndichie and finally borne home shoulder-high, and enthroned in his own palace. A final oath is administered to him to the effect that he will rule justly and impartially. An Offala is held immediately to mark the coronation.

It is, however, in this context that the real significance of the Offala will be understood ; it is, in fact, a celebration to mark the end of a remarkably strict period of self-denial. An analogy may be found in the celebration of the feast of Ramadan by the Mohammedan world, which marks the end of the period of fasting or the Christian feast of Easter, which ends the forty days of fasting known as Lent. Another point worthy of mention is that it is not celebrated by the King-elect alone ; neither is the celebration the prerogative of one who has been given the mandate.

In the course of the contest for kingship, any of the contestants must end his period of Iche Ndo with an Offala celebration. These contestants usually celebrate on the same day. The quality of the ceremony : the audience, the gaiety, the number of dancers and performers, in a way point to the popularity of the candidate.

Nevertheless, it must be observed that it is not strictly traditional (I have so far no historical warrant to believe the contrary) for the contestants to hold the Offala on the same day. The only reason to assume that the procedure is as described is that it was vindicated in the last but one kingship dispute (1931—35) among the late kings, Obi Chukwude Okosi, Egbunike, and Nzewu.



Borne Shoulder high, the Obi is on his way to the house of Onowu to perform symbolic domestic chores.

Note the bowl of chalk from which he scatters his blessing.



The Obi mending a roof.



Based on the belief that the king is for the people and not the people for the king, the Obi-elect must demonstrate his willingness to serve his people by submitting to "orders".

Above: he is performing the domestic duty of fetching water with an earthen pot.

Below: Peeling a tuber of yam.





Above: The Obi-elect performing the traditional domestic chore of breaking fire-wood.



Left: The Obi-elect sweeping the precincts with a kitchen broom.

There is no fee for kingship ; but a certain amount of money is given to every king-making community, and a cow is also killed for each of them when a candidate has been crowned. If this gesture of gratitude is not made, the community reserves the right not to recognise him as their King.

DEATH AND BURIAL :

In keeping with the tradition of secrecy in which the affairs of the Obi are wrapped, his illness is never made public and the announcement of his death is considerably prolonged to enable several ceremonies which must precede his burial to be completed. His death is expressed by the metaphor : 'Igwe Ejiri' (The steel is broken), and that of the Onyichie is referred to as "Oke Osisi Erolu" (A mighty tree has fallen).

The Onowu immediately assumes the office of King, and will continue to act as regent until a new king is appointed. His immediate task is to relieve the king of the responsibilities which he has not fully discharged. Accordingly, he will see that all newly appointed Ndichie finish all outstanding installation ceremonies, if not he has to declare their titles null and void. But all the Ozo titles of the Umu Eze Chima for which the necessary ritual ceremonies have not been completed, must be nullified. When eventually the King's death is announced, every other second burial in the community will be suspended for a period of seven weeks (twenty eight days). As pointed out earlier, only one funeral ceremony is performed for the deceased king. Each of the Ndichie will pay their last respects with a band of musicians. When the mourning period is over, new candidates for the vacant stool will present themselves, and proceed accordingly. While the issue is still undecided the Onowu acts as regent. He can appoint new Ndichie, but the royal share of the title fee which he will receive will be kept until a new king is elected, when he will present both the royal share and the new initiates to the King.



**A titled woman,
a member of the Otu Odu
from whom the counsellors of the
Queen, "Ndi Otu Ogene" were chosen.
The traditional regalia of
the Omu is the same, but includes
the red cap, and the state fan, Azuzu.**

THE OMU (THE QUEEN):

One unique aspect of Onicha social institutions was the concept of Omu (The Queen). The Omu, was not, as one would expect, the wife of the King; but she was appointed by him. As the post was one of great honour and significance, the Omuelect was invariably a woman of considerable social influence, one who possessed the quality of leadership and commanded universal respect.

However, in spite of the fact that the Omu was subordinate to the Obi, there existed a parallelism between the institutions of Obishop and Omuship. The Omu was entitled to wear the royal red cap, and to possess a special kind of the royal musical instruments(the Egwuota, which is known as Izabu), and the state fan. She was entitled to celebrate the Umato and Ajachi festivals, and all other religious rites, including the Offala ceremony which took place a few days after that of the Obi. It was customary for the Omu to appoint her own Ndichie Ume with names identical with those of the king. Hence there were female Ajies, Odus, Ogenes, Onyas and Owelles. These counsellors were known as the 'Ndi Otu Ogene'.

The Omu and her counsellors presided over the affairs of the women: they looked after the various guilds, and represented the views of women on legislative matters to the Obi and the Ndichie. The Omu, like the Obi, appointed her own ministers from every community, and these were invariably the Adas* (priestesses). In this way it was not only possible to co-ordinate the activities of all the women but also to maintain religious and moral authority over secular affairs** Finally, it was the duty of the Omu and her ministers to give the women advice in domestic matters.

* This practice of appointing the Adas as ministers had led to some contemporary Adas being addressed by their ministerial names even though the custom of Omuship has, for nearly seventy years, been in desuetude.

** The Obi's appointment of an Ozo-priest to the post of Ndichie.

The Omu's official dress was a large white toga ; like other illustrious women she wore thick ivory bracelets on the wrists and ankles. She did not sit on the dais as the Ndichie do when they are in attendance at the palace, but near to the Obi, on her own 'portable throne' which was always carried before her by one of her male attendants. She was regarded as higher than the Ndichie.

THE OFFALA

The Offala is a royal festival. It has a special significance in the annual life of the Obi (the King), for it culminates the yearly four days and four nights of religious devotion which the Obi spends in a hut outside his chambers. This period is known as Inye Ukwu na Nlo, which literally means 'stepping into a dreamy trance'. It is in this respect an annual re-enactment of his coronation — spiritual retirement, (the Ina Obibi. In view of this, the Offala has come to be regarded as a 'coming out' ceremony. It is celebrated during the early days of October, when the work in the farms has been finished, and when all his subjects who reside in their farms are back home with their kin for the feast of Owuwaji. The Offala therefore takes place during a festive period, and the splendour and grandeur which attends the celebration, and which is unequalled by subsequent feasts, makes it live most in the memory of the Onicha people.

When the date of the ceremony has been announced from the Ime Obi (the palace) all the people are agog with preparation ; various communities prepare new dances, the Ndichie (red cap chiefs) their ensigns of royalty, and women fashion new bracelets, (this no longer obtains). The Obi issues invitations to the chiefs of all the towns which owe him feudal fealty ; each of which attends with homage and a retinue of music makers. During the morning of the Offala day, there is usually dancing and merriment in the town, and the boom of a cannon resounds at regular intervals.

The Inye Ukwu na Nlo starts at about 3 p.m. on an Oye day. The following routine is followed :



**The Iyasele, the Traditional Regent and Prime Minister,
Chief Phillip Anatogu, in his Offala Regalia.**

- (1) First day (Oye) — He retires into the hut.
- (2) Second day (Afor) — He stays in his house to celebrate the Ogbalido feast with the Ndichie.
- (3) Third day (Nkwo) — The day is spent in the palace. The advent of night-fall sees him returning to the hut.
- (4) Fourth day (Eke) — During the day he stays at the IBA UME. At night he comes back to the Hut. The Ada purifies him with a chicken, shaves him and prepares him for the Offala.

At about two O'clock in the afternoon, people begin to assemble at the Ime Obi (palace) to take their positions behind fences; about half an hour later what was a trickle of people has become a steady influx. As the place gets crowded, the spacious roads leading to it become almost impenetrable. The whole mass of people is now a vast illimitable sea of heads, heads which are so gorgeously adorned that the entire aspect is of an indescribable opulence. For the Offala has come to be regarded as a great social occasion of licensed vanity. Music from different bands fill the air, blending with the frequent peal of small cannons to create a gay carnival. Inside the Obi's arena itself one is confronted with a vast assemblage of eager spectators: a memorable spectacle of varied splendour. Women, bright and resplendent in jewellery and multi-coloured robes, never fail to catch the eye of their menfolk.

At about three O'clock the Ndichie begin to arrive in their gorgeous ceremonial robes, their heads adorned with crowns of brass and motley ostrich plumes. The robes themselves are embroidered with threads of gold, and richly decorated with every appropriate ornament. Every step taken by these animal splendours arrest universal attention. Their movements are solemn and slow. This is regarded as befitting their status. Behind every Onyichie follow his own band of drummers and acolytes, singing praise. At the threshold of the Iba Afa court the drumming ceases as the dominating rhythm of the EgwuOta (the royal orchestra) is heard. All the Ndichie will now dance to the Egwu Ota until the cannon which heralds the entrance of the Obi is fired.

HOMAGE TO A NEW KING



The Ndiiche Ume (Cabinet chiefs) paying their homage to the new Obi. Left to Right above — Chief Anatogu, the Iyasele, Chief Mbanefo, the Odu, Chief Nwokedi, the Ogene, and in saluting stance, Chief Orofo, the Late Owelle.





His Royal Highness, Obi Onyejekwe, parading during his last Azu Ofala (2nd day) in October 1966.

Amidst the booming noise and the restless curiosity generated, the Obi and his retinue emerge from the Iba Ume. He is dressed in full ceremonial regalia, for which the former magnificence of the Ndichie is merely an apology. The Obi is attended on each side by two acolytes, who are dressed in ceremonial red robes, and carrying the state swords (Abani) on their raised hands. He himself, his Abani poised in his right hand, the Nza (horse tail) in his left, strides in slow majesty, now this way now the other, acknowledging the vociferous greeting of his people. After about two minutes he will retire to the state throne of the Iba-Afa, before which the Ndichie will advance in descending order of rank to pay homage.

The throne room is one of the happiest efforts of Onicha decorative art. On the walls are grotesque engravings of men and animals, and incidents painted in various colours on a background of white. Inside, the ceiling is festooned with brazen ornaments, and richly-embroidered tapestries. The throne itself, a dais, is lavish with costly cloths and curious flayings of wild animals, and huge elephant tusks.

The next cannon shot will bring the Obi into the arena followed by the Ndichie who will be chanting the traditional ceremonial tune of "Ewo-o Ewo-o". He will parade as far as to the centre of the arena, and then will return to his throne to receive the homage of visiting vassals, the members of the Agbalanze society and other important members of the community. At this stage music will be supplied by various bands present. Troops of women dance about and chant laudatory tunes to the Obi, acrobats and magicians show their skill, while age-grade societies heighten the splendour with their elegant costumes and graceful dancing.



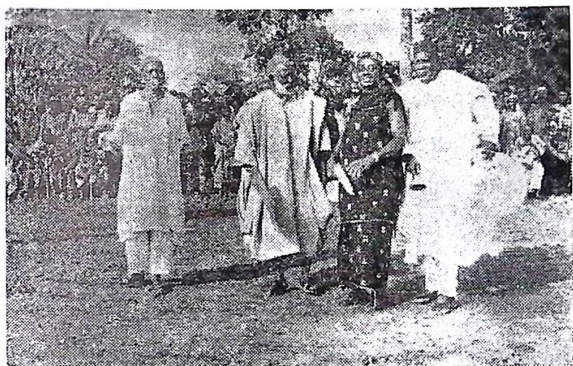
An Onyichie Ume, Chief Isaac Mbanefo, dancing his homage to the Obi during the Azu Offala (2nd Day)



An Ase grade Society dancing before the Iba Afa in homage to the Obi during the Azu Ofala (2nd day of the Ofala)

At the third and final cannon shot, the Obi will emerge from the Iba Afa. As this is the last parade of the day, he will go round the arena, to see and be seen by all. By this time the arena is in near pandemonium as people jostle one another in their effort to have a good view of the Obi and to be seen by him, an act which was supposed to bring good fortune. Children climb up the trees, and fortunate ones are borne shoulder high by considerate elders. As the Obi parades about in the customary zig-zag manner, the crowd follow his movements. After about a quarter of an hour he will retire into an inner throne room, the Iba Ume, where he will receive the homage of his relatives. At about six O'clock in the evening the Offala comes to an end: but a "little" Offala known as Azu Offala is held on the next day.

INDUCTION OF OBI OFALA OKAGBUE ON THE
NIGHT OF NOV. 25, 1970 SEQUENCE OF UDO RITE.



The presentation of the Obi-Elect to the people of Onitsha at Obi Ikporo Square, Onitsha. Left to right: The Agba of Onitsha, Chief Omekam; the Ogene, Chief Nwokedi, the political Head of Okebunabo, the Obi-Elect and Chief Edibos Okolonji, the Ojiba of Onitsha.

At 7.15 p.m. on Wednesday Nov. 25 Akukalia Ofala ended his period of Iche Ndo, and accompanied by over 1,000 men departed for Udo. He arrived the shrine at 8 p.m. (Obi Onyejekwe during his own induction got to the shrine at 5 p.m.).

SEQUENCE OF RITES

(1) COMMENDATION RITES:—

Presentation to the priest by the Obi-Elect of 1 bottle of liquor, 10 kola nuts, 4 gallons of palm wine, and one white cock. Prayers and libation followed, after which the white cock was delivered to the shrine, untied and let loose on the surrounding precincts, as a symbol of the aspirant's final commitment.

Next the priest intoned the nominal roll of kings who had been before the shrine: from Chima Ogbuefi, Navia, Tasia, Chimezie, Aroli, Omozele, Chimedie, Ijeleke, Olisa, Udogwu, Akazue, Diali... Onyejekwe, "and now you Akukalia Ofala Okagbue". The kola was then broken, offered to the Obi-Elect, and the rest distributed. Libation was poured before the shrine to the spirits of the passed kings. Akukalia Okagbue was called upon to receive the drink.

(2) PURIFICATION RITES:—

The Aspirant offers a piece of new white cloth to the priest. The priest covers the shrine with the cloth. A large basin of powdered white chalk is provided. This is blessed, after this the altar is profusely spread with the chalk. The aspirant then offers a piece of solid white chalk, which the high priest deposits on the altar beside his offer.

A bottle of liquor is presented to the priest. Again he intones a homage to past kings who had been dedicated to the shrine. Libation is poured, and the aspirant called upon to commune with his predecessors.

The titled-men are invited before the shrine to partake of the drink. Wine is then passed to all and sundry.

DEDICATION OF THE ROYAL GONGS:—

The two Royal Gong's, the Ufie, together with the two sticks for striking them, are brought before the shrine, and dedicated with libation.

The aspirant is then instructed on the significance and tradition of the Ufie:

"The first Ufie is to be sounded at 4 a.m. You, Okagbue, will wake up, have your bath, and sit yourself on your throne. You will call for kola, and then say prayers for the whole Onitsha Ebo-Itenani. At the second Ufie, (5 p.m.) you will begin to give audience".

The Ufie was then played for the first time.

At this stage the priest recalled the names of notable Ufie Drummers of old: namely, Onyenyionwu Omodi (who drummed for Okosi 1) and Asagwali Omaikpo (who drummed for Obi Anazonwu).

Another white wrapper is handed over to the priest by the aspirant and then deposited on the shrine. A goat is then offered, and killed before the shrine by the high priest. Wine is also offered for libation.

The goat is divided into three parts: one portion to the Umu-ezechima group; one to the Ugwu-na-obamkpa, and the lion share to the officiating priest.

A FINAL RITE OF TRANSLATION:—

At the first crow of the cock the final rights of translation commence. A white cow, a symbol of the 'dying' aspirant, is then offered to the shrine. The aspirant is asked to rise before the shrine. The high-priest initiates the killing of the cow. He then approaches the initiate, divests him of his white wrapper, and then invests him with the white wrapper previously deposited on the shrine.

The aspirant is then seated before the shrine and suffusely anointed with white chalk from the large bowl.

The Priestess advances to the shrine, and shaves the Obi. The hair is handed over to the high priest, who deposits it amidst prayers and incanations on the shrine.

The Ufie drums are sounded.

The installation is over. A new king is born!

A LIST OF ONICHA KINGS :

ADO PERIOD

1. SHEKIYI :—

2. ABIDOGWU (alias ONISHE)

Father of the nine sons who were the founding fathers of Onicha-Ebo-Itenani.

1. EZE CHIMA : The Founder, son of Abidogwu-Onishe.
2. OBI CHIMUKWU : From Ogbembubu community, and son of Mbubu-Ozi, a grandson of Eze Chima. He acted as Regent for Oreze, the first son of Chima, who was the Okpala.
3. OBI CHIMA OGBUEFI : The first real King of Onitsha. During his minority Chimukwu and Dei acted as Regents. He came to the throne at the death of Oreze. He was the youngest son of Chima, and had a very long and glorious reign. He expanded the eastern boundary of Onitsha to the town of Obosi. It was during his reign that the first Obosi war took place.
4. OBI NAVIA : From the Ogbeodogu community. A grandson of Chima. During his reign what is now tradition in 'court behaviour', namely, the practice of distributing kola-nuts among the audience by the king's servant, was initiated. The Oze war also took place. He made a plan to extend his territory as far as the whole of Obosi, and in pursuance of this plan he posted Nkabu (after a swift debacle of Obosi warriors) to Obosi to collect annual tributes and feudal fealty. However, this plan failed because of its prematurity.
5. OBI TASIA : From the Ogbeodogu community and a grandson of Eze Chima. He died as Regent.
6. OBI CHIMEZIE : Of Ogbembubu and grandson of Chima. The activities of Eze Awuma.
7. OBI AROLI : Son of Chima-Ogbuefi, the founder of Umu-Eze Aroli community. He lived in Igalla throughout his youth. It was during his reign that the Umu-Idokuse from Igalla immigrated to Onitsha. Also the arrival of Umu-Olosi.

8. **OBI OMOZELE** : The eldest son of Aroli. He was nicknamed 'Agadi Ga-Eme-Gini', which means "What can an old man accomplish". This arose from the fact that he came to the throne at a very advanced age. Incidentally, his reign was among the wisest. He was remarkably farsighted and reputed to have a keen practical intellect. He incorporated the Egugu cult which by that time the Umu-Idokuse immigrants had brought from Igalla into Onicha Jurisprudence.
9. **OBI CHIMEDIE** : Son of Aroli. The first Ogidi war and civil war between Egbema and Ubulu communities.
10. **OBI IJELEKPE** : Son of Chimedie. War between Egbema community and the people of Nkwelle. The second Obosi war.
- 1825 —
11. **OBI OLISA** : Son of Aroli. A very unpopular King who had a very short reign.
- 1830 —
12. **OBI UDOGWU** : Son of Ijelekpe. Second Ogidi war.
- 1851 — 1873 —
13. **OBI AKAZUE** : Son of Udogwu. Civil war between Obankpa and Umudei. Civil war between Modozie Odu of Umudei and Obi Ezeoba (Ogene) of Umu-Olosi.
- 1873 —
14. (a) **DIALI** : Son of Akazue. Died as Regent. disputed succession with :—
- (B) **ENENDU** : From Ogbendida community. Died as Regent. Arrival of Okwuma. Civil war between Ogbe-Ozala and Ogbe-ndida communities as a result of a disputed succession with Diali. Because of this civil war it was ruled that no king or Ndichie should ever be selected from the Ogbe-ndida branch of Umu-Eze Aroli.

— 1874 — 1899

15. OBI ANAZONWU: Son of Akazue. Nkpo war. Civil war between Umu-Eze Aroli and Umu-Idokuse (Obikporo). The activities of the Akpali Society of Umu-Eke.

— 1900 — 1931 —

16. OBI OKOSI 1: POPULARLY REFERRED TO AS Obi Sam Okosi. A descendant of Obi Chimukwu. The first baptized christian king. He had a very long reign. A peace-maker. His modernism and involvement with the catholic church was successfully resisted by the entire Onitsha people.

— 1935 — 1961 —

17. OBI CHUKWUDE OKOSI 11: Son of OKOSI 1. Widening of streets in Onitsha. Introduction of local Government. At one breath a progressive and a traditionalist. Extremely young at heart. Fatherly and approachable. Died 1961.

18. OBI JOSEPH ONYEJEKWE: From the house of Chimedie. 1962—1970.

OBI ONYEJEKWE: Is now almost universally wrongly regarded as the 19th Obi of Onitsha. This is on account of the mistake in counting in Dei who was on account of a brief interregnum a very popular regent.

19. OBI OFALA OKAGBUE: — —1970—

A wider conception of the role of the traditional ruler as reflected in goodwill tours within and outside the state. Galvanization of individual potentials into communal effort: vis-a-vis Onitsha Development Fund.



