

Journal of African History, Archaeology and Tourism (JAHAT)

E-ISSN 3049-9623 (Online); ISSN 3049-9615 (Print)

formerly

Journal of African History and Archaeology (JAHA)

E-ISSN 2753-3204 (Online); ISSN 2753-3190 (Print)

Indexed by EBSCO and SABINET

Volume 2, Number 1, June 2024

Pp 49-74

Sacred Sites of Abia North for Community-Based Tourism Development using Geospatial System Techniques

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31920/2753-3204/2024/v2n1a3>

***Ngoka, Paulinus Chukwuemeka**

Department of Hospitality Management and Tourism,

Michael Okpara University of Agriculture,

Umudike, Nigeria

Email: ngoka.paulinus@mouau.edu.ng

Dike, Michael Chukwugoba

Department of Forestry and Environmental Management,

Michael Okpara University of Agriculture,

Umudike, Nigeria

Adedoyin, Adedayo Joseph

School of General Studies,

Michael Okpara University of Agriculture,

Umudike, Nigeria

&

Amaechi-Chijioke, Juliet Ijeoma

Department of Hospitality Management and Tourism,

Michael Okpara University of Agriculture,

Umudike, Nigeria

Abstract

The main objective of this study was to identify the sacred sites of the Abia North Senatorial Zone in south east Nigeria and explore their potential for tourism development. The exploratory survey design was used. Personal observation and oral interviews with resource persons were used to obtain information on the subject matter. The authors relied on existing geopolitical structures such as autonomous communities, traditional institutions, and the priesthoods of the sacred sites for identifying and visiting the sites. Mapping of the study area was undertaken using the coordinates of the sacred sites as obtained using GPS. The present status of tourism use at the identified sites was ascertained. It was found that patchy tourism use was being made of the sites. No records of any forms of visitation were kept. Myth and secrecy shrouded the operations of the sites. It was opined that the kind of tourism development that can impact the economy of the area for inclusive growth and the welfare of the local people is yet to be conceived. Proper records of tourism visits by the operators of the sites; external involvement by government agencies and/or private investors in the operations of the sites were considered necessary to spur the needed investment in tourism development in the area for meaningful tourism activities that can impact positively on the economy and welfare of the local people. Respect for the sanctity of the inner operations of the sites was, however, deemed sacrosanct.

Keywords: *Sacred sites; Abia North Senatorial Zone; Community-based Tourism Development; Geospatial System Techniques*

Introduction

The present study carried out the identification and mapping of the major sacred sites of the Abia North Senatorial Zone using geospatial system techniques with a view to determining their potentials for community-based tourism development. Cultural practices related to religion and custom exist in many communities in the south-east geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Sites that serve as nexuses of such practices are often enunciated as sacred. Such sites or places that have one or more attributes that distinguish them as somewhat extraordinary, usually in a religious or spiritual sense, are often held to be sacred. They tend to evoke the feeling of some awesome, mysterious, and transcendental powers that merit special reverence and treatment. Sacred sites may be perceived as a site of fascination, attraction, connectedness, danger,

ordeal, healing, ritual, meaning, identity, revelation, or transformation (Sponsel and Casagrande, 2008).

A wide range of "natural" phenomena such as mountains, volcanoes, hills, caves, rocks, soils, waterfalls, springs, rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, swamps, trees, groves, forests, plants, animals, wind, clouds, rain, and rainbows, as well as similar marine phenomena such as parts of wetlands, mangroves, forests, estuaries, lagoons, beaches, islands, sea arches, sea grass beds, coral reefs, and tides, may often be considered sacred (Sponsel and Casagrande, 2008). In addition to natural features, sacred features may be associated with legends stories, or the histories of individuals or groups.

Nature and heritage tourism lean heavily on the natural environment (Lascurian, 1992). Lameed (2012) stated that tourism activity is promoted, conditioned, and influenced by environmental circumstances, and that the relationship between nature-based tourism and the environment is largely established through what is often called "environment quality". Hence, it has been suggested that nature tourism is inherently inserted into the ecological system with which it interacts. Consequently, tourism has provided a strong and valuable incentive to conserve plants, animals, and cultures that would have become extinct due to a loss of essence or relevance but for their tourism use. The protection of cultures, wildlife, and their habitats would thus be seen as useful and supportive of tourism and culture since tourism can hardly occur in the absence of the natural and cultural features that serve as the attractions that give meaning to the concept.

In the area studied, a number of highly revered sacred sites have been in existence known to local communities but have not been properly studied and documented. The sites serve mainly for religious and cultural practices but have hardly any meaningful economic utility. The proper delineation and documentation of the sites through the present study might help to create a wider awareness of their existence and also highlight their potential as cultural and religious tourism destinations.

The present study sought to generate database information about the existing sacred sites, which can be useful for the planning and development of rural tourism in the area. It also sought to provide the opportunity for universal awareness of the existence and precise locations of the sacred sites with a view to creating public awareness of their importance beyond their traditional and religious significance and to enhance the process of creating environmental and cultural awareness and sensitivity, as well as the opportunity for the involvement of the local

people in environmental education and investment in the tourism potentials of their region.

Specifically, the study carried out the identification and mapping of the major sacred sites of the Senatorial Zone using geospatial system techniques. Satellite imaging for civilian use has been useful in precision earth data location and planning, applicable to many disciplines, including tourism. These technologies, often referred to as Geoinformation (GI) Science, have emerged as complementary techniques providing integrated solutions to the great deal of modern planning and development issues (Ayeji, O.O. 2006). Central to most forms of measurement and mapping is the Global Positioning System (GPS). This is a system in which a constellation of orbiting satellites emits radio signals that can be picked up at any point on the earth's surface by receivers that record the precise global position of the GPS device (Chigbu, Merejini, and Onukogu, 2013). The aim of this study was to utilise the capabilities of this technology in gathering information and mapping the sacred sites of the study area with a view to determining their potential for community-based tourism development.

In light of recent recognition of the critical role of traditional systems of natural and cultural resource conservation, which is beginning to gain scientific attention, and in view of the importance of biodiversity, ecosystems, and cultures to sustainable tourism, the present study identified and documented the existing sacred sites of the Abia North Senatorial Zone of Nigeria and went further to form impressions and suggestions for tourism development in the region.

The Study Area

This study was carried out in the Abia North Senatorial Zone of Nigeria. The zone comprises five of the seventeen local government areas of Abia State. They include Ohafia, Bende, Arochukwu, Isiukwuato, and Umunnoch. The zone is reputed to host highly reputed sacred sites known to the former Eastern Region of Nigeria and beyond. The zone and its sites have, in pre-colonial and post-colonial Nigeria, served as traditional religious and cultural destinations for arbitrations, petitions to the Almighty God (*Chukwuabiam*), thanksgiving, and worship. The local people are largely into subsistence land-based activities such as farming, hunting and traditional medicine practice. The rich businessmen and women of Abia State and Igbo land hail from this zone, but they mainly live in the cities, leaving the rural homeland deserted with little or no

economic opportunities. The development of rural tourism in the area can enliven the local economy.

Materials Used for the Study

- a) Global Positioning System (GPS)
- b) Wildlife camera
- c) Prismatic compass, and
- d) Interview proforma.

Methodology

The exploratory survey design was used for the study. Reconnaissance visits of the study area were undertaken to identify the sacred sites and establish the framework for the study by getting acquainted with resource persons that might be of assistance in the investigation. Existing geopolitical and cultural structures of the area, such as autonomous communities, traditional institutions, priesthoods, and similar institutions, were relied upon. The Abia State Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the National Commission for Museums and Monuments were approached for useful information on the subject matter. Community leaders such as traditional rulers, village heads, priesthoods, and other community leaders of the autonomous communities in which sacred sites were identified were relied upon to guide the authors through the sacred sites that existed within their domains, in addition to providing information on the essence and current tourism use statuses of each identified site.

The precise geographical locations by coordinates were determined and used to map the entire study area. The important sacred sites of the area were identified, which added to determining and documenting the geo-spatial data generated. The identified sites were classified by type, and the tourism values and use statuses of the sites were ascertained.

Requirements For Entering The Shrines Or Temples Of The Sacred Sites

The process for entering the sacred sites was essentially the same, save for variations in the amounts for the entry fee, layers of community leaders to consult, and other material requirements. Firstly, the intending

visitors would approach and explain their intention to the traditional ruler of the autonomous community in which a sacred site has been identified. Requirements such as kola nuts, drinks, and entry fees must be met. Upon arrival at the traditional ruler's palace at each site, preliminary screening of the visitors for spiritual purity will be conducted by the traditional ruler. It consisted of robbing of *nzu* (native white chalk) at the wrist of the visitor's right hand (Plate 1). By this, the traditional ruler can spot any person who has a bad charm on/or within himself; or has a bad intention, such as coming to challenge the oracle itself; or other bad intention(s) – in which case such visitor would be turned away and denied access to the oracle. Next, the traditional ruler contacts the priesthood of the site/oracle to be visited; who, in turn, makes their own demands that are often similar to those made by the traditional institution. An appointment for visiting the site/shrine/temple is then secured; which must exclude market days on which the particular site must never be visited. At the appointed date and time, the approved visitors assemble at the palace of the traditional ruler, from where they are handed over to the priesthood by the traditional ruler. The priesthood then leads the visitors to the designated sacred site. Sacrifices are said to be performed behind the visitors before the appointed date to obtain the permission of the oracle for the visit. Such sacrifices are considered necessary to guarantee a safe visit, not incurring the wrath of the gods; or attack by dangerous animals such as pythons, scorpions, or other dangerous creatures. As the approach progressed, the chief priest called out loudly to the oracle, announcing the approach of visitors and appealing to the oracle to allow the visit. The objective of the visit is echoed repeatedly, assuring the oracle that the visitors' intention was genuine. At the entrance to each oracle's shrine/temple, a last sacrifice is offered to the resident oracle by the priesthood (Plate 2) to screen each intending visitor for the last time for spiritual purity. All persons detailed to enter the shrine are required to participate actively in the rituals, including the eating of the kola nuts used for the sacrifice and drinking the gin or other drinks used for pouring libations. Each intending entrant to the shrine is required to pick a piece of the sacrificial kola nuts by himself from the ground eat the same with alligator pepper, and drink the gin or brandy offered in sacrifice from the same small glass cup in the presence of all the other entrants; that is, nobody can postpone his eating of the sacrificial items. Each entrant is further required to collect a piece of dry calcium carbonate (native white chalk - *nzu*) and rob the same at his right wrist. (When women are allowed, they rob theirs at the navel).

Any person with a bad charm on/or within himself, or is harbouring bad intention(s) would be screened out and denied access to the shrine. Person(s) who committed any abomination(s) such as murder, poisoning of people, witchcraft, perversion of justice, or sleeping with another man's wife would be screened out. Also, any male who had intimacy with even a legitimate partner(s) in the last twenty-four hours was also deemed unclean; but could be cleansed to join the visit through another cleansing process at his personal cost before entering the shrine/temple. The deity deems such persons to be unclean and would not want them to visit it. Apart from serving to obtain the permission of the gods, these last rituals also serve as a kind of fraternity among the visitors, the priesthood, and the deity in question. It is also a bond of assurance that no party shall harm any of the parties in the bond in any way.

Then, entrance into the shrine and aboard the oracle have specific rules; which may vary according to the particular oracle being visited. For instance, at Ibini Ukpabi (Long Juju), visitors led by the priesthood must all be barefooted and enter the shrine with the buttocks leading (Plate 3). The entrance into the temple located in a massive underground cave would not take people standing; so, they back the entrance linked to each other by bending down and holding around the waist of the person in front, and shifting backwards through a windy tunnel until the chain of people arrive at the judgement chamber, which is a large chamber of the shrine complex. Here, the chief priest gives a short lecture – explaining the chamber and the purpose it serves. Visitors are not allowed to enter certain chambers and tunnels of this shrine. Devices such as cameras, cell phones, or similar gadgets are not allowed into certain sections of the shrine; just as taking photographs is restricted to certain areas only. At Obu Nkwa in Asaga Ohafia, only men can enter the temple barefooted and bare-bodied. Only the private part of the body can be covered with trousers, shorts, or a wrapper. Even then, such dress must not be black in colour.

In all instances, the team returned to the traditional ruler's palace after the visit for further briefing and discussion with the traditional institution of the host community.

FINDINGS

Identified sacred sites were classified by type (shrine, heritage site, and other classifications, as the case may be) (table 1). Further, the

coordinates of each site were reported using GPS (table 2), which data was later used for mapping the study area (Fig. 1).

Table 1: Sacred Sites Identified in Abia North Senatorial Zone of Abia State, Nigeria; their classifications and statuses of tourism use

S/No	Sacred Site	Community located	Classification of site)	Tourism Use Status
1	Ibini Ukpabi (Long Juju)	Arochukwu	Temple /heritage site	Sparse
2	Ulo Chukwu Cave (Chukwu Obioma Residence	Alayi in Bende Local Government	Shrine /heritage site	Sparse
3	Chief Okoroji house	Arochukwu	Men's house (Obu)/ Heritage site	Sparse
4	Obu Nkwa Monument	Asaga, Ohafia	Men's house (Obu)/ Heritage site	Sparse
5	Obu Chukwu monument	Elu Ohafia	Men's house (Obu) monument	Sparse
6	Aro oracle	Aro, Uturu	Hill/ mountain shrine/Heritage site	Sparse
7	Uturu Cave	Aro Uturu	Shrine/heritage site	Sparse

Briefs On The Sacred Sites (Table 1)

Destination 1: Ibini Ukpabi (Long Juju) Of Arochukwu

In pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria, Ibini Ukpabi was the most prominent oracle in the former Eastern Region of Nigeria, reputed for its sacred sense of mystic beauty (Abdulraut, 2021). This oracle served and still serves as a centre for arbitration used to judge the perpetrators of crimes. Tales have it that back then, in the old kingdom of Arochukwu, Ibini Ukpabi, at the height of its prowess, was the most powerful deity in the entire Eastern Region, and the entire people of this region paid reverence to this Aro oracle. This was during the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Being a kind of Supreme Court whose judgement was final, Ibini Ukpabi was an oracle of the Aro Confederacy of what is now south eastern Nigeria. It was known among the British as the 'Long Juju'. Ibini Ukpabi was used to settle cases, particularly those of murder, witchcraft, poisoning, and family disputes. (Chidume and Nmaju, 2019). The oracle was paramount throughout the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The losing party, in any case, never went home to rejoin their families but was traditionally destroyed and consumed by the oracle (Kanu, 2021). Later, the priests of Ibini Ukpabi developed a preference for selling the losing party into slavery instead. Hundreds of people visited the oracle, and

many did not return. Their communities were usually made to believe that the oracle had devoured any losing party that visited it.

The Aros, centred in Arochukwu, were able to manipulate their central oracle, Ibini Ukpabi (Long - Juju) in such a way that it became the judicial machinery in every Igbo community. Trusting in the efficacy of the oracle, people in dispute visited to settle their scores. The guilty victims became property of the oracle, which was eventually sold into slavery or retained as domestic servants of the Aro priests.

Those on trial would be led into the temple complex and made to wander through its tunnels, waiting to face the judgement of Chukwu Abiama (the Supreme God). It was here that you would find the throne of judgement- the dark presence of "the Holy of Holies" (Chidume and Nmaju, 2019). Those found guilty walked into dark tunnels, and those found innocent went back to their relatives.

Another feature was the hill of rags, where the condemned were instructed to undress and leave their clothes before they disappeared into the tunnels around the hill. The long juju slave, route is a dark kilometre-long series of tunnels. Also included in the features of the oracle was the red river, where it was said that as the guilty disappeared, the Aros would colour the river red to give people the impression that the condemned had been consumed. The red water flowing down the stream would be a sign to the relatives that the victims had been devoured by the oracle.

However, stories have it that through another feature known as *Iyi-Eke* - an outlet to the European beach along the Cross River, which later became the government beach, blindfolded victims (those found guilty) were led to waiting boats that took the enslaved to Calabar, where they were sold into slavery for onward transmission to the West Indies. According to Kalu (2021), "those found guilty never went back to their families".

Thus, the Aro dynasty dominated the then-Eastern Region of Nigeria through their great oracle, Ibini Ukpabi. Aro settlements spread throughout Eastern Nigeria and beyond; through which network they were able to control the area. As earlier noted, the Long Juju (Ibini Ukpabi), which symbolised Aro influence across Igbo land aided them in to build an economy sustained by the slave trade which they controlled as the sole middlemen in the entire eastern Nigeria.

However, the sacred stronghold of Ibini Ukpabi was to be destroyed by the British; as their quest for colonial power and control of the slave trade after it had been outlawed prompted the British to wage war on the

Long Juju and the network it had established in the region through what came to be known as the Anglo-Aro War of 1901 - 1902.



Plate 1: Preliminary screening of the visitors for spiritual purity by the traditional ruler before admitting them for their mission. It consisted of robbing of *nzu* (white chalk) on the wrist of the visitor's right hand by the traditional ruler. Any person with a bad intention or evil charm with or within him, or who is spiritually unclean, will be screened out. Photographed by the authors.



Plate 2: The Chief Priest offers sacrifice and pours libations at the entrance to the shrine. All persons billed to enter the temple join in eating the sacrificial kola nuts and drinking the brandy used for the sacrifice in a bond of fraternity with the priesthood and the oracle. Photographed by the authors.



Plate 3: Entering the Long Juju Temple with the buttocks leading. In all instances, the Chief Priest at the rear leads.

Photographed by the authors.



Plate 4: The research team and the Ibini Ukpabi priesthood pose with His Royal Majesty, Eze Kanu Okereke Kanu, the Ibom isii of Arochukwu Ancient Kingdom, at his palace after the visit.

Destination 2: Ulo Chukwu Obia Oma Ancient Cave (Alayi Ancient Cave)

The Alayi Ancient Cave is held to be the home of *Chukwu Abiama* (the Almighty God). It is believed that *Chukwu Abia Oma* resided in the cave for some time before continuing his journey to Arochukwu, which became his permanent residence.

In Amankalu Alayi, in the Bende Local Government Area of Abia State, Nigeria, God is believed to have dwelled in a house of stone (happyprincelog, 2019). <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alayi>. Alayi Community is a suburban town in the Bende Local Government Area of Abia State. Alayi lies about 100 kilometres from Aba, a commercial city in eastern Nigeria; approximately 100 km from Owerri Airport; and 32 km from Umuahia, the capital city of Abia State. Alayi is divided into two sections, Akoliufu and Amankalu (happyprincelog, 2019; Ufere, 2021).

An earlier appointment had been kept with the traditional ruler, the Nkalaukwu of Alayi. The traditional ruler had notified the elders and priesthood about the author's coming. At his palace, we waited for *Eze's* deputy, who oversees the section of the community where the cave lies, until he arrived. After a brief introduction of the authors to the chief, he led us to the village of Umuirem, which was his domain. In his house, we waited for two elders who served as the priests of the shrine and who would lead the way to the site. The older of the two men presented kola nuts (Plate 5), broke the kola, and poured libations. He prayed the gods to remove any danger(s) that may lie in our way, so long as our mission was genuine.

Then we set out with the traditional ruler of Umuirem, with the two elders leading. We drove to a point where the car could no longer go due to the termination of further motorable track roads, packed under the canopy of trees, and trudged on. After crossing a sparkling clean stream, according to the traditional ruler's narrative, young girls of the community used to camp for some market days for some necessary rituals that cleansed them before they could move into their husbands' homes. Upon crossing this stream with its swift current, whose depth got to our waist level, we commenced climbing up a hill through rugged terrain into another forest, but had to stop under the forest canopy to perform the final sacrifice and screening before descending a gigantic pinnacle of granite into the cave's entrance. At this point, a large volume of sparkling cool spring water rushed out of the rock and headed down

the steep slope. Our guides helped themselves to drink from the tempting spring, and shortly after, we joined after ascertaining from our guides that we too could drink (Plate 6), using our palms as scoops.

Then, the authors went between two large pinnacles of rock into and round a corner of the cave, supporting ourselves with hands and grabbing on projecting roots of trees above us till we entered a large chamber described as the judgement chamber. An oval vent on the roof sent light into this chamber which led into another narrow chamber said to lead to “God’s bedroom”. Several of the other tunnels were dark and flooded. There were tunnels into which nobody was allowed. The traditional ruler told us a story of adventuring white men whose dog wandered into a certain prohibited tunnel, after which the dog was never seen again.



Plate 5: Visiting the Alayi Ancient Cave: presentation of kola nuts by an elder at the residence of the traditional ruler of Umuiem, which is a newly carved-out section of the Alayi autonomous community. Normally, a lump of dry chalk (*nzu*) comes with the kola. The *nzu* symbolises peace, a covenant between the host and the visitor(s); a welcoming mind.

Photographed by the authors.



Plate 6: Entrance to the cave. Sparkling, clean spring water rushes out of the rock at the entrance to the cave. The traditional ruler drinks. Adventure weary and thirsty research team members were yet to help themselves with the tempting sparkling spring water after ascertaining from their guides that they could join in drinking, using their palms to scoop the water. Photographed by the authors.

Destination 3: Chief Okoroji House

Chief Mazi Okoro Orji was a slave dealer, hunter, farmer, and also a warrior of the ancient Arochukwu kingdom. Due to his trade and exploits, he came into contact with the Europeans in the 18th century. He traded with Europeans using trade by barter. He exchanged slaves for objects, which were kept together as collections. As a community leader, he built the house as a meeting place. The house has a temple, which was headed by him as the chief priest. His collections included, but were not limited to sculptures, bronze and brass bowls, manila bangles, brass, iron, and cowries as currency; ceramic wine jars, jugs, gallons, assorted receptacles, and ornamental things. Others included lanterns, gin bottles, canon guns, bells, rattles, dane guns, padlocks, animal skins and skulls, musical instruments, slave chains, hand cuffs, yokes, and so on. This *Obu* (men's house) and temple are sacred in every respect. Women are never to set their feet into this *obu* during their monthly menstrual periods because the house is sacred and women are deemed to be

unclean during their monthly menstrual periods. In this house, the chief priest performed rituals every morning, which commenced with the washing of hands, prayers to the gods and ancestors of the land, the breaking of kola nuts, and the pouring of libations to the gods.

Artefacts of Igbo antiquity such as the *Ikoro* (giant gong), carved objects, *ofo* (symbol of spiritual authority), and sculptural paintings and materials abound in this temple, such that it has been a national monument since 1963. The temple also served as a centre for arbitration. Visitors to the temple include people seeking solutions for spiritual problems, occasional tourists, and researchers. However, no records of visits, for whatever motives, were kept.

Destination 4: The Obu Nkwa (Men's House) In Asaga Ohafia

The Obu Nkwa (Men's House) is located in Asaga Ohafia in Ohafia Local Government Area of Abia State, Nigeria. It is the Omo Ukwu of the Ndiezera clan. Omo Ukwu is a temple adorned with intricately carved objects. Painted on its walls are a series of geometric patterns. Twenty-two life-sized objects are lined in its interior. Essentially, it served as a meeting place for preparation for the new yam festival and a centre of adjudication for the clan before the British colonial administration introduced the court system in the area. The temple is still used today for settlement of cases involving *umunna* (kingsmen) and other out-of-court settlements. It is headed by a chief priest, who is the spiritual head of the temple (Plates 7 and 8). There is a shrine in the temple, but the entrance is highly restricted. Some shrine objects are kept in a raffia box kept in the temple. No one is allowed to put on an upper garment or any black apparel into the temple, including the chief priest. There are elevated earth seats laid with mats on which people may sit. Visitors are restricted from sitting on certain seats within the temple, and no foot wear is allowed. As of June 2021, the temple was run by a blind 103-years-old chief priest (Plate 7). The Chief Priest was said to have been blinded by a python many years ago when he mistakenly entered the temple while in an unclean state. His son has been taking him around since then. The temple has three small entrances that one would have to bend sufficiently well enough to squeeze through each of them before entering the shrine; the last of which was poured with freshly slaughtered animal blood used for sacrifice, and by the tiny size of this last entrance, the barefooted visitor would have to place his feet on this sacrificial blood to be able to enter. Only people found to be spiritually clean can

be allowed into the temple. The temple is essentially for arbitration; but is also occasionally visited by tourists and researchers. The temple is as old as the community itself. *Omo Ukwu*, as it is locally known, was declared a national monument in 1963. No records of any forms of visitation are kept here.



Plate 7: The blinded 103 years-old Chief Priest of Obu Nkwa. He was said to have been blinded by a python several years ago after he entered the shrine while in an unclean state.



Plate 8: The Chief Priest pours libations to welcome the visitors.
Photographed by the authors.



Plate 9: Way to the shrine lying within walking distance from his residence, the blinded Chief Priest is led by the hand.
Photographed by the authors.



Plate 10: The Chief Priest sitting at his usual seat inside the temple – a mat on a raised earth platform. No other person is allowed to sit in that position.
Photographed by the authors.

Destination 5: Obu Chukwu Monument in Elu Ohafia

The Obu Chukwu at Elu Ohafia is a kind of men's house. Obu, in Igbo mythology, is a sacred house where men resided. In the distant past, before the arrival of Europeans and Christianity on Igbo soil, fire was preserved in the Obu, nurtured with ambers of wood. The Obu is considered holy and sacred, and the man's wives or other women are restricted from entering the obu during their monthly menstrual periods. The Obu in Elu Ohafia is preserved as a monument by Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments. This Obu presents a marvel of traditional architecture in the art work preserved by the

roofing craft. It preserves various collections, such as palm wine jars, *ikoro* (giant gong), precious objects, cowries, and idolised objects.

Destination 6: Aro, Uturu Oracle

The Aro Uturu oracle is a mountain oracle whose shrine is located at the peak of a mountain escarpment in the Aro Uturu autonomous community in Abia State, Nigeria. The Aro oracle is reputed for its presumed ability to confer spiritual powers on seekers of power. People afflicted with spiritual problems also visit the oracle for solutions and healing. The oracle is situated on a mountain escarpment, seemingly of volcanic origin, – judging from the rocks around the hill, which, from personal observation, bear evidence of igneous intrusion. Looking into the terrain from the Okigwe – Afikpo highway, the whole area seems like a single rock projection into the Uturu plain; but upon entry into the village lays a whole landscape dissected by valleys with flourishing springs and streams running in-between arable and woodland. Led by the Chief priest of the oracle and climbing for hours on end through an existing foot path, one comes face to face with the *Nkvwume olu annu*, consisting of a rock outcrop that appears like the severed neck of an animal projecting outward in a slanting position to some two meters. This is where visitors stop for a while and remove their shoes for the priesthood to perform some sacrifices to the oracle and obtain its permission to visit the shrine, which lies just some metres further uphill. The temple consists of a rock cliff with a groove that looks more like a crescent dug into the rocky hill. The grooved platform provides a somewhat flat surface; the inner part of which contains a number of idolised objects. The outer part of the flat platform, looking downhill, is forested and provides a resting place for visitors who would have been exhausted from hours of climbing. The priesthood, at this point, explains the workings of the shrine and entertains questions and brief discussions with visitors. To the left side of this shrine lies a rock cave at high altitude that holds water during the rainy season. Only a few visitors would dare to climb into this cave (Plate 12). Anyone tipping off in an effort to enter or exit this cave would just crash kilometres downhill and would hardly survive the accident. Further, visitors climb to the peak of the hill, from where one can have a view of the surrounding plains as far as the naked eye or binoculars can reach. The vegetation of the slopes is alpine, ranging from derived savannah at the top to woodland and rainforest towards the base of the escarpment. According to the chief priest of the oracle, visitors to the

oracle include seekers of spiritual power; the sick, seeking healing; and occasional tourists and researchers. The oracle is reputed for its power-conferring prowess and is visited from throughout Nigeria and West Africa (Igudu, 2021). No record of any form of visitation is kept by the operators of the site.



Plate 11: Foot wears are not allowed beyond this point (now close to the shrine).

Photographed by the authors.



Plate 12: At the shrine of the oracle
Photographed by the authors.



Plate 13 : Climbing into the rock cave by the lead author. The Chief Priest was already inside.
Photographed by the authors.

7. UTURU CAVE

The Uturu cave is located at the foot of the Aro mountain escarpment. It serves essentially as a temple for arbitration, tourism, and occasional visits by researchers. Disputes are settled by an oracle that resides in this cave. Parties in dispute consult the priesthood of this oracle, and an appointment is struck for the parties to appear at the cave. The priesthood lets them in, and after some rituals a verdict is delivered. In this oracle, both winners and losers go home alive.

The Uturu cave is also reputed as a tourism destination, especially in recent years. Individual and team tourists, as well as researchers visit the destination. The floor of the cave is flooded during the rainy season. Of recent, an investor has built a hotel called Uturu Cave Hotel close to the Uturu cave, thus adding colour and impetus to this cave destination.



Plate 14: Entrance into Uturu Cave.
Photographed by the authors.

Discussion

Although some degree of tourism already occurs in the area, it is generally patchy and, at the present scale, is incapable of impacting the economy or improving the quality of life for the locals. None of the sites had tourism in mind for their existence; hence, the sites are yet to be developed as tourism destinations put in place for meaningful tourism activities. The infrastructure of the area in terms of roads and other tourism infrastructure and amenities is yet to be put in place. No records of any form of visitation were currently kept including tourism visits. Traditional institutions, community leaders, and the priesthoods of the sacred sites just collect entry fees and other requirements that are directly related to traditional worship and stop at that. They have little, if any, economic idea or life improvement motive for their communities through the sites. The motives for operating the sites are essentially ritualistic and cultural. No form of formal planning or external involvement in the operations of the sites is in place as of the present. The inner operations of the sites are shrouded in mystery and secrecy. Entry into any of the layers of the priesthood is entirely through succession. This renders any formal forms of cooperation with the public or other external bodies difficult. Consequently, efforts at developing the sites into formal tourism destinations that can impact the economies of the local communities seem yet to be conceived.

From the foregoing account, however, it can be deduced that Abia North Senatorial Zone hosts ample sacred sites that have potential for tourism development. Cultural, religious, and historical tourism enthusiasts can find exciting experiences in this area if it is developed for tourism.

Conclusion

The study set out to identify the key sacred sites in the study area and map the entire area to show the precise locations of the identified sites. From the findings, it can be suggested that if tourism development is to be achieved in this region, action is required from quarters far away from the sites or zones. Thus, there is a need for reorientation of the local people into accepting the involvement of external focus at the sites while respecting the sanctity of the sites and their inner circles. The relevant government agencies at the local, state, and federal levels of government need to be co-opted to put in place the necessary infrastructure and tourism amenities in the area. Private entrepreneurs that may have the

capacity and interest in developing the destinations and putting them on the tourism map of Nigeria should also be encouraged. That can translate to employment for the youth of the area and the creation of opportunities for small businesses such as transportation, food vending, photography, souvenir production, and the growth of the film, entertainment, and hospitality industries. There is an endless list of possible gains if the sites can be developed into sustainable tourism destinations.

Documentation of visitations to the sites is very important to generate baseline data that can serve for formal planning of the destinations to attract government and/or external influence if the economic effects of tourism are to be borne in mind. The attention of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments and UNESCO should be drawn to the existence of these sites for possible classification as national and world heritage sites, as the case may be.

This study was supported by the TETFund Institutional Research Fund Award [grant number FNH/02/18].

Acknowledgements

We most sincerely express our gratitude to our affiliation, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, for recommending this study for sponsorship by TETFund. We are highly thankful to TETFund for awarding us a grant [number FNH/02/18] for this study. Barrister A. Amaramiro of the College of Legal Studies, Abia State University, Umuahia campus, who was the Secretary General of *Aro Gburugburu*, for his valued assistance in linking us to the relevant community leaders during our field work in Arochukwu.

Mr Ogar, Julius Martins of the National War Museum Umuahia, is highly appreciated for his valued assistance in linking the authors to the traditional institutions of Alayi, Arochukwu, Asaga Ohafia; and Elu Ohafia. Dr. Kalu Emmanuel Okechukwu of Gregory University, Uturu, is also appreciated for his invaluable assistance in linking the authors to the priesthood of the Aro oracle, Uturu.

We appreciate all community leaders and members of the priesthood of the various oracles, shrines, and cultural institutions that we studied. We will continue to appreciate His Royal Majesty, Eze Okereke Kanu Okereke, the Ibom Isii of Arochukwu Ancient Kingdom, for his assistance and also for the useful information and hospitality accorded the authors during their study of the Long Juju. Our gratitude also goes to His Royal Majesty Eze

Ufere of the Alayi Ancient Kingdom for his immense assistance that enabled us to study the Alayi Ancient Cave. We shall hardly forget all others—too many to list in this report—who willingly rendered various forms of assistance towards the successful completion of this study.

References

- Abdurauf, A. Abdulrahman (2021). The long Juju of Arochukwu, Blueprint Ltd., Abuja, February 6 2014, <https://www.blueprint.ng/the-long-juju-of-arochukwu/> accessed October 26, 2021.
- Ayeni, O. O. (2006). A Multimedia GIS Database for planning Management and promotion of sustainable tourism industry in Nigeria. Shaping the Changes XXXIII, FIG congress Munich, Germany 8-13, 2006.
- Chidume, C. G. & Nmaju, U. U. (2019). The Aro Hegemony: Dissecting the Myth and Reality, *Journal of Tourism and Heritage Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336616771_The_Aro_Hegemony_Dissecting_The_Myth_And_Reality
- Herbert Cole (1983). Nigeria, Asaga, Ohafia: Obu Nkwa (Men's House): Interior with details of standing figures <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.12018175> accessed October 12, 2021.
- Igudu, M. (2021). Chief priest of Aro oracle, Uturu, oral literature.
- Kanu, O. K. (2021). His Royal Majesty, Eze Ibom Isii of Arochukwu Ancient Kingdom, Oral literature.
- Lameed, G. A., & Adetola, J. (2012). Species-diversity utilization of salt lick sites at Borgu Sector of Kainji Lake National Park. In G. A. Lameed (Ed.), *Biodiversity enrichment in a diverse world* (pp. 35 – 63). Manhattan, NY: In Tech Open Access.
- Lascurain, H. C. (1992). *Parks: The International Magazine Dedicated to Protected Areas of the World*, 3, 31-35.
- Sponsel, L. E. & Casagrande, D. (2008). Sacred places and biodiversity conservation. In: *Encyclopaedia of Earth*. http://www.eoearth.org/article/Sacred_places_and_biodiversity_conservation
- Ufere, D. M. (2021). His Majesty, the Nkalu Ukwu of Alayi , the traditional ruler of Alayi Ancient Kingdom, oral literature.