

# Community Media as Agency of Preservation and Promotion of Traditional Religious Practices of Ikorodu: *Oriwu Sun* Newspaper as Case Study

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## Abstract

*The Yoruba people express a deep sense of religiosity which finds expressions in various traditional religious practices that connect the socio-political and economic realities of the people. With the introduction of Islam, Christianity and colonialism, traditional religious institutions and practices were subjected to a multidimensional onslaught threatening the preservation and continuity of these traditional religious practices. While several traditional religious practices in many Yoruba communities were abandoned, some communities such as Ikorodu, a coastal area of Lagos State, southwest Nigeria, devised means to preserve and promote traditional institutions and practices through the agency of community media championed by the Oriwu Sun. Established in 1985, this newspaper has been at the forefront of preserving and promoting traditional institutions and traditional religious practices through excellent coverage and reportage of various traditional events in the Ikorodu community. Based on extensive field survey, this paper interrogates the roles of Oriwu Sun in the preservation and promotion of traditional religious practices in Ikorodu. It examines how the newspaper contributed to the changes that characterized the traditional space in Ikorodu. The paper argues that through the instrumentality of the community newspaper, traditional values and practices of Ikorodu were preserved and the misconception about traditional religious practices were corrected thereby enhancing the acceptability of the practices within and outside Ikorodu community.*

*Keywords:* Ikorodu, Lagos State, religious practices, preservation/tradition, Oriwu Sun

## Introduction

The Yoruba have a rich culture of religions. It is held that traditional Yoruba society is devoted to the daily worship of one god or the other.<sup>1</sup> These gods known as *Orisa* or *Irunmole* are believed to serve as intermediaries and to intercede between the people and the Supreme Being (Olodumare).<sup>2</sup> For instance, in a typical Yoruba settling, decisions and actions are taken after due consultations have been made, particularly *Ifa*. The essence of this consultation is to elicit the full support of the Supreme Being. In his analysis of the traditional Yoruba religious practices, Bola-ji Idowu posits that “religion has been a system of values, beliefs and mores which the people in a given society have devised, concocted and conceived to explain their existence and essence in a way.”<sup>3</sup> He adds that “the internalization of religious

values creates a sense of identity by which those who adhere to it come to be associated with and ultimately known.”<sup>4</sup> Before the advent of Islam and Christianity, the Yoruba had well-developed and articulated religious systems which regulated their daily personal and collective human engagements. These include the worship of Ogun, Sango, Osun, Oya, Egungun, Obatala, Oro, Ajagemo, Sonpona and other Yoruba gods and goddesses. However, with the coming of Islam, Christianity and colonialism which ushered in Western civilisation, traditional religious practices in Yorubaland were subjected to a multi-dimensional onslaught by the combined forces of these external bodies. This led to the decline in traditional religious beliefs, practices and extinction of some traditional religious practices in many communities in Yorubaland. Islam and Christianity, to gain converts into their folds, specifically targeted the beliefs and practices of the Yoruba people, labelling them “pagan”, ‘satanic’ among other obnoxious phrases aimed at disorienting the people on their traditional religious practices. Their attempt at disorienting the Yoruba people was not without resistance, as the traditional adherents tried to preserve their practices and this is exemplified in the Yoruba folk song, as a response against the onslaught on traditional beliefs and practices. The song goes thus:

Àwa ó ṣorò ilé wa o (x2), / èsin kan kò pé - ó ye (x2) ká wa ma ṣorò. / Àwa ó ṣorò ilé wa o.

[We will perform the rites of our lineage / No religion says / We should not perform the rites. / We will perform the rites of our lineage.]

The folk song above is a reflection of the desire of traditionalists to hold onto their traditional religious practices despite immense pressures from adherents of Islam and Christianity. While they failed in some places, leading to the complete abolition of traditional religious practices, they succeeded, in other places such as Ikorodu community, where they adopted new strategies to resist, preserve and promote their practices as will be shown subsequently in this paper.

Similarly, the colonial administration in Yorubaland affected the traditional religion in so many ways that the damages transcended the era and shaped the post-colonial activities of traditional religious activities in many communities in Yorubaland. In Ikorodu community, for example, one fundamental effect of colonial administration on traditional institutions and practices was that, as part of the features of colonial rule, the appointments of the *Oloja*, the traditional head of Ikorodu was known then and other important chiefs were subjected to the final ratification of the colonial government. This was reinforced through the Appointment and Deposition of Chiefs Ordinance which was later amended in 1930.<sup>5</sup> Owing to this Ordinance, the power of the *Osugbo* in the final selection of the community

ruler was whittled down. In January 1919, Akintelu was appointed as the new Balogun of Ikorodu on probation for one year. His work and conduct were satisfactory to the colonial administration and his appointment, thus, confirmed on January 28, 1920.<sup>6</sup> Moreso, the performances and observation of traditional religious practices during this period were greatly hindered. For example, Akintelu appointed by the colonial officials initially carried out his duties in line with the dictates of the colonial authority. This invariably affected the traditional space as religious practices were quietly observed because he was on probation and wanted to please the government. As a result of these onslaught, Ikorodu as well as several Yoruba communities adopted different strategies to respond to the threat one of which was the adoption of the community newspaper in the preservation and promotion of traditional religious beliefs and practices.

### **Ikorodu: An Overview of Geography and Historical Tradition**

Ikorodu is a prominent coastal community in Lagos State of Nigeria. The community is situated at a distance of approximately 36km North of Lagos. It is bound on the South by the Lagoon (Ebute) where a light terminal port of the Nigerian Ports Authority is situated. The northern part of the town shares a common boundary with Ogun State, while the eastern part has a common boundary with Agbowa town in the Epe Division of Lagos State. Ikorodu is a gateway to the inter-land of Nigeria. It also serves as the western portion of the Ijebu country, a general area locally referred to as Remo. Ikorodu was the southern end of one of the two Ijebu routes that linked Lagos and the hinterland. Ikorodu community is the main town of Ikorodu Local Government Area of Lagos State. The current Ikorodu Local Government is bounded in the east by Agbowa-Ikosi in Epe Local Government. In the west, it shares a border with Kosofe Local Government at Odo-Ogun (Ogun River). To its north is Ogijo in the Shagamu Local Government of Ogun State, while its southern boundary is terminated by the Lagoon. Ikorodu is located at about 3° 18' E longitude and 6° 22' N latitude. It is situated within the equatorial rain forest belt.<sup>7</sup>

Like other pre-literate Yoruba kingdoms and states, the early history of Ikorodu is contained in numerous Yoruba traditions of origin, myths and legends. One of such popularly and generally accepted traditions states that Ikorodu's ancestors descended from the Remo stock of the Yoruba tribe and settled in a farm named Okorodu.<sup>8</sup> Ikorodu is said to have been founded by Olusoga, a warrior-hunter and prominent trader with enormous wealth and followers. Olusoga left Orile Offin in Sagamu with his brothers, Lasuwon and Sekumade, who were also hunters and his followers. While Lasuwon and Sekumade joined the journey as escorts, Olusoga never planned to return. His motive was to go far away from home. This was why he left with his followers including diviners, healers and slaves. On getting to a

particular land with *Odu* plants, Olusoga was said to have exclaimed “Okò Odu re” meaning this is a land of *Odu* plants. As a result, he ordered his followers to settle which explains how they came to establish their settlement in “Okò Odu” which was later anglicized to Ikorodu.

### ***Oriwu Sun*: Historicizing the Emergence and Growth of a Community Newspaper**

The media have come to play an ever more prominent role in social and cultural life since the emergence of the so-called “mass media” in the late nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Before that time, even though the media through which social and cultural knowledge was shared (oral transmission, ritual performance, writing, visual representation, and printing) were vital, they were more tacit and transparent about the processes they enabled. Today, in a range of social and cultural contexts, the media are foregrounded, even determinative.<sup>10</sup> The rise and growth of the newspaper in Nigeria is inevitably closely associated with the work of the Christian Missions and with the consequent growth in general literacy. The origin of newspapers in Nigeria started in the 19th century when the European missionary from the Presbyterian church, Reverend Henry Townsend, established the first printing press in 1854.<sup>11</sup> Five years later, the first newspaper called *Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Ara Egba Ati Yoruba* was published. This newspaper was published every 15 days with a circulation of 3000 copies and cost 120 cowries, which could be equated to one penny. The major subjects which *Iwe Irohin* covered were mainly focused on the church. In the 1860s *Iwe Irohin* appeared in two languages: English and Yoruba but by the end of the decade, due to the expulsion of Europeans from Egband, the newspaper went out of business. Townsend opened the newspaper for a reason. First, he wanted to popularize the reading habit among the Egba ethnic stock and Yoruba generally. Second, the media served as a powerful tool to propagate the Christian religious doctrine. Even though the newspaper closed within 10 years of its operation, *Iwe Irohin* attained its aims and prepared the ground for the development of the printing press and community newspaper in the region. Community newspapers help finetune the worldview of the populace, giving them a voice and making them aware of the decision-making processes at the central level. Realising this, the founding fathers of Nigerian politics, Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe established provincial newspapers which served as the springboard for the establishment of public radio and television stations in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>12</sup> Some of the community newspapers that have operated in Nigeria were packaged for exclusive audiences based on the language of expression, for instance, *Udo-ka* (Ibo), *Amana* (Hausa) and *Isokan* (Yoruba), while others cut across states such as *Community Concord*, owned by Nigerian businessman and politician, late Chief

Moshood Abiola. Others were specific to a locality like *Nigeria Mirror* and *Confidence* and *Idemili Voice* in Anambra State; *Ebonyi Times* in Ebonyi State, *Evening Times* and *Oriwu Sun* in Lagos State; *Village News* in Ogun State; *Ikale News* in Ondo State; Zaria-based *Gaskiya Tafti Kwabo* in Kaduna State amongst others.<sup>13</sup> Others include *Ibadan News*, *Oke-Ogun News* and *Oloye News* all in Oyo State and *Remo Star* in Ogun State.

### Interrogating the Role of *Oriwu Sun* in the Promotion and Preservation of Ikorodu's Traditional Religious Practices

*Oriwu Sun* was launched on 25th of April, 1985 by Monzor Olowosago, an indigene of Ikorodu, to sensitize, inform and educate the people of the area, thus, empowering them to participate actively in the development of their district.<sup>14</sup> The newspaper was not the first community newspaper to be established in Ikorodu as account indicate that newspapers such as *Providence News* and *Ikorodu News* were both founded in 1980 and 1983, respectively.<sup>15</sup> However, *Oriwu Sun Newspaper* emerged in the community and changed the trajectory and pattern of community media relations through its coverage, quality reportage and regular publications. As a result, within a short period after its establishment, *Oriwu Sun Newspaper* became the flagship community newspaper in the Ikorodu community and played critical roles in the preservation and promotion of traditional religious practices in Ikorodu in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>16</sup>

One fundamental role played by this community newspaper in the preservation of traditional religious practices was to announce and publicise traditional festivals and rituals in the community. Through this, members of the community became aware of forthcoming traditional festivals in the community and what was expected of them. For example, in the July edition of the newspaper in 1986, captured below, the paper announced the traditional “Agemo Festival” and wrote about the history and importance of the festival to the people of Ikorodu. The edition of the newspaper also published the *oriki* (praise chant) of Agemo as follows:

Eso ara Idowa, Omodagure, / Omo Alagemo Abijo wenne, / Omo Afarenren kalu, /  
Omo Onikule Ade wure, / Omo Alarepon'se owunole, / Omo Aje toju ole Jegbonre”.

[Eso from Idowa, descendant of Dagure, / descendant of Abijo the magnificent, /  
descendant of Afarenren, / the descendant of he who comes home / with a splendid  
crown, / the descendant and bringer of wealth.]

No doubt, with the publication of the Agemo's *oriki* in its 1986 edition, the *Oriwu Sun Newspaper* succeeded in preserving that aspect of the people's tradition, an identity that dignifies adherents and worshippers of Alagemo in Ikorodu. Also, by

publishing and documenting the oral tradition and folklore of the people, *Oriwu Sun Newspaper* invariably gave the traditionalists and adherents of Agemo a sense of belonging at a time when the mainstream media failed to give them exposure and positive reportage. The same edition also featured an interview with the head (Araba) of Ifa priests in Ikorodu, Chief Wahabi Sadiku Efuape. In the introduction of the interview, the newspaper states that:

No. 3, Ademoye Street, Ikorodu, is a traditional healing home in Ikorodu with a difference. The house is tucked somewhere in the obscure part of Igbogbo road. It doesn't take so much of an effort to locate it, as everyone living in the area knows the traditional healing home facing the Police Barracks on Igbogbo road. It is the house of Araba of Ikorodu, the Chief Priest of Ifa worshippers in the town. He became the Araba of Ikorodu on April 16, 1983. Since then, he has been performing all rituals as may be directed by the Ifa Oracle in town.<sup>17</sup>

From the above extract, two inferences can be drawn. First is the fact that the Araba operates a traditional healing home that was known by everyone living around the vicinity of Ikorodu. Secondly and more importantly is the specificity of the period when Chief Efuape was installed as the Araba. This is important because traditional installations and ceremonies are usually lost in the annals of the past because of the absence of written records. Therefore, by specifying the date of Chief Efuape's installation, the *Oriwu Sun* succeeded in documenting his time as the Araba of Ifa worshippers of Ikorodu.

Significantly, the *Oriwu Sun* became the platform through which the observation and celebration of traditional festivals were reported. This, indeed, was a great means of preserving and promoting traditional religious prac-



Fig. 1: Extract page from Oriwu Sun of July, 1986. Source: Photo by author at Oriwu Sun archives, Odogunyan Road, Ikorodu.

tices in Ikorodu because the mainstream media at that time showed no interest in stories that did not align with the interest of the metropolis. Their reportage was mainly on stories that attract readership and patronage and since stories on traditional religious practices do not attract patronage, the mainstream media does not feature them. In the few cases where they have to feature such stories, it is reported as an obnoxious practice hindering modern development and civilization. Hence, *Oriwu Sun Newspaper* came to the rescue by providing a platform for a comprehensive reportage of traditional religious practices in Ikorodu. For example, in the September 1986 edition of the newspaper, the paper reported how Oba Oyefusi and Iyalode Alokolaro thrilled spectators at the Ogun festival in Ikorodu which is celebrated as a carnival that enhances the bond between the king, his chiefs and the people. Through the festival, Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, is appeased with sacrifices for the protection of all dwellers in the Ikorodu community. The newspaper, in its introductory paragraph on the publication, states that: “the enthusiasm was tremendous, the attendance spectacular as the Ikorodus celebrated the Ogun festival which took place at Ejina last September. Echoes of the grand festival reverberated far and wide. The young, the old, the handicapped and representatives from adjoining towns such as Sagamu, Agbowa and Lagos came in their hundreds.” The paper went further to describe the festival in the following ways: “it was like the Silver Jubilee Independence Anniversary which was ten days away. Thirteen traditional chiefs, Ogboni and other title holders added colour to the event and boasted its significance.” This report by the newspaper gives a clear insight into the value and significance of the Ogun festival to the people of Ikorodu.

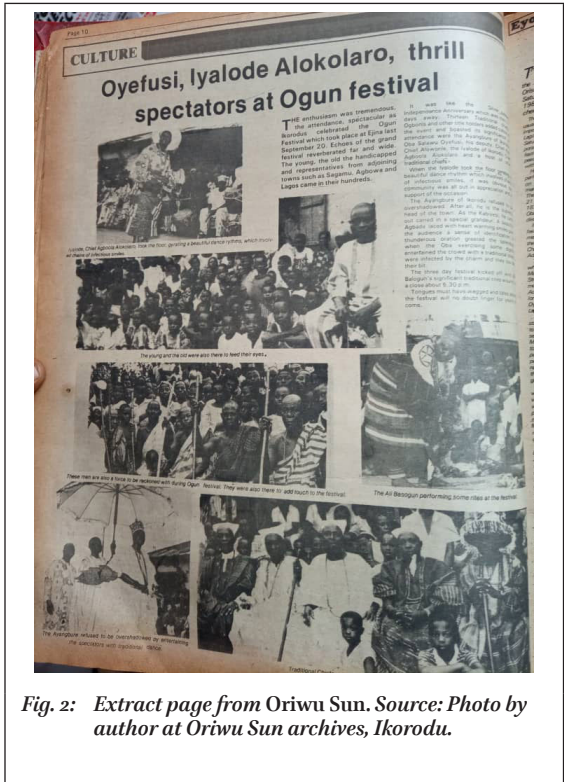


Fig. 2: Extract page from *Oriwu Sun*. Source: Photo by author at *Oriwu Sun* archives, Ikorodu.

The fact that the newspaper compared the Ogun festival of Ikorodu to the then forthcoming Nigerian silver jubilee independence anniversary

sary of 1st October, 1986 is a reflection of the great value placed on the festival by the Ikorodu community. Similarly, on page 22 of the 1989 edition of the newspaper, it was stated that “30,000 spectators swarm Ejina to watch Agemo festival.”<sup>18</sup> This establishes the fact that the Agemo festival is a prominent festival in Ikorodu that attracts thousands of spectators across Ikorodu.

It is instructive to state that *Oriwu Sun Newspaper* also reported the tensions and crises that characterized the traditional institutions and traditional religious practices in Ikorodu. For example, the newspaper published the crisis that occurred in 1989/1990 which was an altercation between Oba Oyefusi and some of his chiefs, on the one hand, and the Apena and some Osugbo Chiefs, and Oba Oyefusi, on the other hand, which led to the suspension of Apena from the Osugbo cult.<sup>19</sup>

The crisis, according to the newspaper, started when the Ayangburen ordered the suspension of the Apena, Chief Andu Oguntimehin from Osugbo over what the Oba termed the Apena’s “public misbehaviour”. Chief Oguntimehin reportedly got on Kabiyesi’s nerves for promoting one of his chiefs without consulting the Kabiyesi as the custodian of tradition. He, therefore, declared the appointment and promotion null and void. The Apena was said to have challenged the suspension, arguing that the Kabiyesi had no right to ban him except the Oluwo of Ikorodu (the head of the king makers). Another crisis that plunged the traditional space in Ikorodu was the duplication of traditional titles and offices in 1996 and 1997. *Oriwu Sun* publication in September 1997 captured this succinctly as seen below:



Fig. 3: Extract page from Oriwu Sun of February 1990. Source: Photo by author at Oriwu Sun archives, Ikorodu.



During this period, there were controversies and acontests over who was the legitimate title holder of Alase Onire, Iya Oloja, Baba Oloja, Lagbins, Baale Isele, Baale Aga and Idasos (all Igunoko leaders). As a result, he said to claim the Alase Onire, two women for the Iya Oloja, two men parading themselves as Baba Oloja, two Lagbins, two Baales of Isele, one of the major quarters of Ikorodu, two Baales of Aga and two people claiming to be the leaders of Igunoko. This crises of duplication of titles, *Oriwu Sun* attributed to a multiplicity of factors with religion as a major factor. For example, the genesis of the Iya Oloja tussle could be traced to the refusal of Alhaja Olowooribi to accede to the demands of tradition. Traditionally, as part of the rite of passage and installation, the Iya Oloja of Ikorodu is expected to undergo some rites. However, Alhaja Olowooribi declined on the strength of her belief as a devout Muslim.<sup>20</sup> That refusal lost her the Iya Olojaship as tradition demands while a new candidate Chief Omoniyi Apetu was installed after all traditional rites had been performed and observed. This generated controversy in the community as members of the Muslim Community installed Alhaja according to Islamic rites, disregarding traditional religious practices, and used their influence to seek the recognition of the state government which recognized Alhaja Olowooribi as the Iya Oloja of Ikorodu rather than Chief Omoniyi Apetu. This crisis pictures the struggle between tradition, religion and modernity and it shows how power is used to relegate traditional religious practices. Eventually, Chief Omoniyi Apetu was recognized by the government after two years of damage had been done already.

Regarding the duplication of the Alase Onire, the priest of the Onire Masquerade, the Kabiyesi installed a new official for the title of Alase Onire in the person of

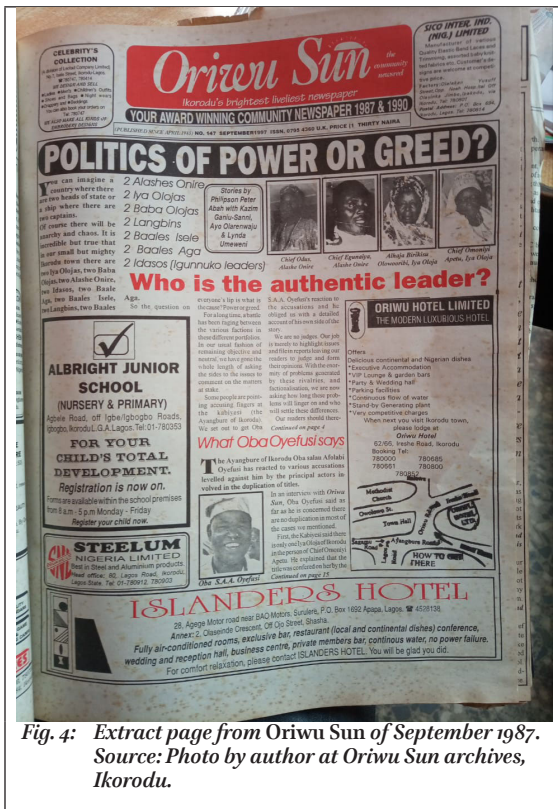


Fig. 4: Extract page from Oriwu Sun of September 1987. Source: Photo by author at Oriwu Sun archives, Ikorodu.

Chief David Egunaiya after the occupier of the office, Chief Odus, failed to release the Agemo Onire (Onire egungun) for five years due to his personal grievance with the Kabiyesi.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, Chief David became the recognized Alase Onire after the Onire Maquerade was not released for five years to perform its statutory rites. From the above roles played by the newspaper in the traditional landscape of the Ikorodu community, it is expedient to interrogate how the newspaper contributed to the changes that characterized the traditional space. Given this discussion, there are several ways that the media affect traditional religious institutions and practices. First, the media increasingly set the context for religion and spirituality and help define their terms in contemporary life. The 1989 report that 30,000 people swam Ejina to watch the Agemo festival in 1989, for example, both invoked a public debate about traditional religious faith and presented a new set of images through which that aspect of the Agemo's story would be understood in the future. The fact that the paper reported and emphasised on the figure of 30,000 people gave the traditionalists a sense of fulfilment but displeasure to members of the Christian and Muslim community. Drawing from the above, Alhaji Monsor, the publisher of Oriwu Sun, stated this clearly that;

After that publication, we received a number of reactions from all groups. To the traditional people, it was commendation because they felt pleased by the report but for my Muslim brethren, it was condemnation. In fact, for some days, I was seen as a bad Muslim and I remembered that one particular imam on sighting me inside the Mosque one Friday, used it for his preaching and I was just smiling... because, for me, I was doing my job as a professional journalist and my religion won't affect that.<sup>22</sup>

Two implications can be deduced from this statement. One is that the press report was unbiased. Although the publisher was a Muslim, the paper gave a true picture of the traditional festival. Two was the fact that the publisher became stigmatized by fellow Muslims for using his platform to give a voice to the traditionalists. Another effect of the press in the traditional religious landscape which brought changes in traditional religious practices is that in this and many other ways, traditional religion can no longer control their own stories if they wish to be present in the public sphere and public discourse. The terms of reference, the language, the visual and linguistic symbols, and the conditions under which religion becomes public are all matters determined by media practice. Traditional religious groups and individuals can remain separate from this process, but they then surrender opportunities to be part of the public culture. Even groups that aspire to separation, such as the Eluku, find it increasingly difficult to do so.

## Conclusion

From time immemorial, the media has been an important source of information and a platform for canvassing and defending one cause or the other. Every religion in the world depends on one form of the media or another to proselytize, preserve and promote their religious traditions and practices. In Yorubaland, before foreign contact, traditional religion was also promoted through traditional media such as the town crier who goes from place to place to announce days of traditional religious practices. However, with the coming of the Europeans and the spread of western civilization, traditional religious practices and traditional media were subjected to physical onslaught and condemnation leading to the decline and extinction of its practices. However, with the popularization of the printing press in Nigeria and emergence of the educated elite, community newspapers became part of most Yoruba communities. With the proliferation of community newspapers, community practices and culture that were hitherto not reported in the mainstream media became the focus of the community newspaper which is a reflection of what *Oriwu Sun Newspaper* established in 1985 exemplified in Ikorodu. It contributed greatly in the preservation and promotion of traditional religious practices in the community and made the Ikorodu community aware of the beauty of its age-long traditions.

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