

SYMBOLS AND SYMBOLISMS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIO-RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY: IGBO OF THE SOUTH-EAST

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Abstract

Psychology affirms the existence of symbolic functions rooted in the deepest part of human nature. Symbols appear to tie to the very existence of man. These intervene in all the relations of the individual with others and with the divine. A symbol treats of universal and identical structures of the human soul. It exists only as the conscious manifestation of an archetype in a concrete form, realized under the influence of factors external to the subject, such as culture, tradition, position in society, and so on. The more forces a symbol possesses the more it is burdened by the whole weight of a cultural and religious tradition and the more profoundly the roots emerge in an archetype form which it manifests with a total equalization. A symbolic creation is an encounter between a tangible, material object and the human spirit, which fills the object with an invisible meaning, a higher dimension. In African traditional societies, symbols are created to perform this function. This study examined the meaning of symbols in African traditional socio-religious communities. It adopted culture area approach. This means that, since Africa is very large with uncountable number of ethnic groups, the study focused on the Igbo ethnic group of south-east, Nigeria. And since what obtains in one culture may not be the same in another culture, the study adopted the subculture method of interpretation to avoid falling victim to error of overgeneralization.

Key Words: *Ikenga, Mgbo, ? gb?an?, Okike Ndiichie, ? f?, ? j?, Okpes?, Eri ?z?, Ogene*

Introduction

African traditional religious symbols are crucial tools used by individuals, communities and secret societies in expressing their ideas towards their pattern of life. Traditional symbols reveal the people's myths, beliefs and their thoughts. Since antiquity, Africans have used symbols as their major vehicle for expression. Prior to the advent of Christianity, certain symbols were predominantly in existence, symbolizing title holders, chief priests, medicine men, individuals, among others; for example, masquerades (*mm??*) depict the ancestors or living dead. Their major functions are to entertain the living during occasions and to make peace where there are quarrels; string worm (*eriri ?z?*) which is tied by *?z?* title holders indicates wealth and respect; *ikenga*, represents man's right-

hand and good fortune for the individual; animal skins (*akp?kp?an?*) represents abundance and strength; metal gong (*ogene*) is used to invite the neighbours or the community to a meeting; it is also used to call the attention of the gods, spirits and ancestors, and to inform the neighbours of readiness for sacrifice to the gods; *?f?* symbolizes justice.

In addition to the symbols mentioned above, there are a lot of others which need to be outlined and explained as this study progresses. These symbols were cherished and valued by traditional Africans as their means of communication with the deities, spirits, and ancestors and with the individuals. With the advent of Christianity, the economic, political, religious and social life of the people changed. Christianity had an adverse effect on the ancient

tradition and customs and even contributed in their collapse. Christianity came to Africa with a new faith different from the people's tradition and customs and tried to eradicate the beliefs and behaviour of the Africans. Christianity, in its new faith, used various measures to change the beliefs of the people. The means of eradication used by Christianity includes establishment of schools, hospitals, churches, among others. With this, therefore, the behaviour and superstitious beliefs associated with the Africans changed. Although Christianity introduced its own measures, belief in traditional symbols still exists, to a large extent, among Africans.

Based on the above background, this study is set out to highlight the various symbolic objects used in traditional Igbo society and the functions they perform. For example, these objects are employed in making peace between individuals or communities. They are also means of communication between the visible and invisible world, between God and man. The traditional Igbo dread them so much that, for example, if anyone holds *if* in his hand, he cannot tell lies or speak unjustly against another person.

It is the view of this study that if the contemporary Igbo man and woman go back to the cherished culture and tradition of the Igbo and incorporate them in their daily lives and activities, the society will be a better one.

Conceptual Framework **Concept of Symbols**

Okeke (2008) affirms the same opinion as Haladus (1996) when he defines a symbol as “the living image of the way in which the world is

fanned. It is the primordial clothing of the archetypes, the very manner of their manifestation when it is transformed into symbols” (p. 18). Symbolic figures are at the same time, the projection of unconscious desires of man and the appointments of a determined religious meaning from a tradition. They unite every individual who formulates them into a mere ample religious community, in the common knowledge of the symbols. A symbol assures the mediation between the conscious and unconscious and stabilizes a relation between that which is hidden and that which is manifested.

In the opinion of Kalu (1978), “symbols are recognized as a sign of something, not a reproduction of nature”. Obviously, this opinion implies that symbols are not nature in themselves, but something that expresses a kind of message at any given time an eye is set on them. On African traditional symbols, Lambo (1977) asserts that “African traditional symbols are the emotional and intellectual peg on which tribal cultures hung spiritual truth”.

The above assertion shows that symbols express or communicate the emotional feelings of the society in which they are used. In line with the view of Lambo, Ilogu (1974) states that “the erection of the earthen or wooden images of gods and goddesses, the carved stools, masks and staffs as well as emblems of dead ancestors are the bulk of works of symbols in traditional idol”. This means that symbols in traditional religion could be noticed from several ways, performing varied functions, yet satisfying the human urge to ally with the

unseen order.

Thus, African traditional symbols have a serious link with the spiritual world which influences man. In line with this, Brain (1980) observes that “it would be wrong to deny the essentially religious context and symbolism of much African sculpture. Of course, some people are more religious than others. Among The Yoruba, for example, the most prolific of all African carvers, the largest conceptualization of symbol works are devoted to the cults of the various *Orise* or gods”. This observation by Brain implies that symbols serve as a means by which man conditions his feelings with his environment. Uzoagba (1980) stresses that “religious, visual symbols help to express in symbolic forms that which religion tries to teach”.

Symbols are crucial tools through which individuals, religious groups, and communities visualize their inner thoughts and feelings. To this effect, all religions accept the use of symbols in their religious practices because of the easy communication and message which symbols portray. Viewing the importance of symbols in religious faith and practices, Booth (1977) believes that “on no account should traditional religion be discussed without mentioning some aspects of symbols involved.” Really they have helped in making the religion of most societies more meaningful. Without symbols, the state of religion in various communities would have been a confused case. Elsner (1972) holds that “symbolic work was directed towards solving man's problem and bringing his condition to a more meaningful state”. In support of this, Arnold (1976) maintains that “art is both a form of communication

and a means of expression of feeling”. Thus, every work of symbol has its own message. Symbols are produced to serve some purpose. They are produced not simply for the sake of producing them. African traditional symbols are basically for a religious purpose. Leuzinger (1972) is correct when he asserts that “the first thing we look for today is the expression of spiritual ideas in a symbolically convincing form”. This, in effect, shows that in many African societies, the primary concern of the people is how their religious beliefs are represented in symbolic forms.

African traditional religious symbolists have fulfilled their requirements to an astonishing extent. What the African is trying to conceive is a new form, a tangible image for the many spiritual beings which inhabit his environment. The African traditional symbolists have succeeded in visualizing and making tangible, in symbolic forms, their religious values and concepts other than just myths.

Functions of Symbols in African Traditional Socio-Religious Community

African traditional religion revolves around symbolic formulae without which religious faith and observances become meaningless, misunderstood and incomprehensible. The traditional religious symbols play important role in the life of the adherents. The symbols acquire some spiritual force or authority that validates the basic beliefs of the traditional man and woman. The symbols can serve as means of reinforcing acceptable social modes of conduct. They symbolize the spiritual authority that eradicates social evils.

Since the ages past, symbols have seriously been in the service of religion. They have been useful means through which the adherents of traditional religion express their emotions. However, this means of expression by the traditional Africans was misunderstood by the early missionaries to Africa, and this misunderstanding led to the missionaries' misinterpretation of the traditional symbols as being mere objects carved from trees. Therefore, African traditional religion was described in derogatory terms, such as fetish, animist, paganist, idolatry and so on, showing the early missionaries' ignorance of content and context of the African traditional religion.

Every symbol is a visible and active sign which is revealed as a bearer of psychological and social forces (Okeke, 2008). Therefore, symbols have the capacity of creating a tie, a relation between men. In this sense, symbols determine a social act, a communicability that has a real value only if comprehensible and perceptible by a whole group of men. Man interprets and transposes the immediate experience, which he has of things. He gives a meaning, a sense to the phenomena, which he establishes. He is a being that symbolizes. That is, he seeks the meaning of everything. In seeking the meaning of everything, man establishes the symbols.

The symbols awaken the institutions; they present the analogical meanings formed more or less spontaneously in the human spirit and are bearers of an immediate meaning. It is, therefore, a language, which acts at the same time in and upon psychic material, and through

which man feels, before understanding or expressing it rationally, his own immediate experience. The symbol is a thing which besides the appearance, which it presents to our senses, makes something diverse in itself come to the thought.

Symbols render the divine visible. In this sense, it unites man to a totality in which he sees the sign of the sacred. Aquinas (1982) says, "In the symbol one seeks to go to the things of the faith with all the intensity of the act of the believer. The act of the believer does not stop at what is expressed, pushes itself to the reality in itself". Therefore, the symbol entails an invisible meaning, and it is precisely in this hidden meaning that man reaches the primary meaning of the object, interpreted based on the cultural, social, and religious milieu.

Symbolic Objects and Their Uses in Igbo Socio-Religious Community

At this juncture, this study will investigate the various symbols cherished and valued by a traditional African, their uses and effects on the people's lives. In doing this, the study will adopt culture area approach and subculture method of interpretation as stated in abstract. This method is very significant so as to interpret the symbolic objects as they apply to a particular culture. Therefore, the study will concentrate on various symbolic objects obtained in Igbo socio-religious community, with particular reference to central sub-cultural Igbo area, which include: Igbo-ukwu, Aguluezechukwu, Agulu, Nnokwa, Nnobi, Adazi-enu, Adazi-ani, Adazi-

nnukwu, Alor, Eziowelle, Abacha, Umudioka, Ukpo, Ifitedunu, Abatete, Ogidi, Obosi, Abagana, Ozubulu, Ukpok, Oraifite, among other towns that fall within this axis.

Symbolic objects are very significant in the lives of traditional Africans and their religion. These symbols or objects are either carved from special trees or moulded from the soil. Some of these trees in Igbo community are, ?f? (Detarium Senegalense), ?j? (Iroko), *Ogilisi*, *Akp?* (Silk Cotton Plant), *Ngwu*. The Igbo traditional symbols are carved from these trees. Some of the symbols include *Ikenga*, *Mgbo*, ?gboan?, *Okike ndiichie*, ?k?k? *ndiichie*, *Ngwu ?z?*, ?f?, *Oj?*, *Okpes?*, *Agw?*, *Nzu*, and ?m?.

Ikenga

This is a small doll carved out of ogilisi wood into any shape. There are different types of *ikenga* but one thing is common with them. This symbolic object symbolizes the achievement of a man as an individual as distinct from his achievement through his lineage group. Metuh (1985) describes the function of *ikenga* aptly. According to him, it "symbolizes the strength of the right arm, success in farming, fishing, hunting, title taking, having many children, or success in war".

In Onitsha, the *Egbotree* (New-bouldia tree) is used for making *Ikenga*. It might be carved into the form of a bust of a man with two horns in place of ears. *Ikenga* is carved into small or big shape as one wishes (Okeke, 2012).

Mgbo

This is a wooden material, usually carved out of Iroko tree (?j?). It is cylindrical in shape and of any size. Mgbo is erected in *obu* (palace/hut), in front of the ancestral shrine. Different traditional motives are carved on the body of this object or symbol. Mgbo represents the pillar of the house. In a building or shrine where this object is discovered, some religious objects are certainly there.

?gb?an?

This is a symbol usually oval in shape. It is also carved in circular form. It has no definite size. It is carved out of Iroko tree. It serves as tray with which meat is shared as the name implies.

Okike Ndiichie

It is a symbolic object made from an elephant tusk. Traditional medicines are prepared and put in this tusk. Then the tusk is tied round with rope obtained from root of a tree and wrapped with white cloth. *Okike* is a name derived from *Chukwu okike* (the creator God). *Okike* represents a family, village or community strength or progress. It is observed that in Igboland, most of the people named *Okike* are usually strong, wealthy and progressive in their life.

Ngwu ?z?

It is a metallic symbol or object obviously tall, round and rod-like. It is owned by ?z? titled men. It is also seen in the shrine of a big family. *Ngwu ?z?* is fashioned in a way that it has crown on the top, at the middle it has a bulged belly and the bottom is usually shaped like a spear by which it stands on the ground. It shows

sign of wealth.

Ojī

This is a ritual object made of a metal. In most cases, it has small gongs and at times, rags and white feather are tied round the handle area. The small gongs jingle when the *Ojī* is struck on the ground and the noise interprets the passing of a titled man, a traditional priest and/or a fearful masquerade. The native doctors or the sorcerers use this object to pin down evil spirits when performing their ritual activities.

? f?

? f? designates a particular plant which grows in the Igbo area. Both the plant and its sticks are equally referred to as ?f?. When fully grown, the plant could tower to some sixty feet high, and bulk to some three feet in diameter in its main trunk (Ejizu, 1986). A. Ikemelu (personal communication, November 20th, 2007) says that, “it is believed that *Chukwu* purposely created this tree to be sacred, and by the manner its branches fall off unbroken, it symbolizes the way families grow up and establish new extended families and lineage”.

The traditional Igbo do not cut off ?f?. This is because it is believed that ?f?, as a tree, is sacred. It is also believed to be a symbol of truth, unity, authority and even destructibility. ?f? is regarded as a mediator between the spirit of this world and the underworld. It mediates between man and the supernatural (Okeke, 2013).

Okpes?

This represents the ancestral spirits. The ancestors are called *Ndiichieor Ndi Okenye*. They are represented by pillars or staffs, placed inside the hut or outside

the compound. These pillars or staffs face outwards to watch the compound; hence they could be regarded as the invisible police of the family. Food is presented to these pillars and wine poured on them, traditionally. That is, libation is made to them so that the ancestors may have their share. They play the role of intermediaries between the minor deities and the Supreme Being on behalf of the family.

? k?k? Ndiichie

This is a ritual object made of calabash wrapped with white cloth. The medicine man prepares the concoction and put inside the calabash. A small bell is attached at the bottom of the calabash which jingles whenever the *okuku* shakes. Individuals can have their own *okuku*, which is known as *Awele*. It is believed that *okuku* is a symbol of strength. It gives the owner the strength to perform his duties.

Okuku helps for progress in business. Witches also have their own *okuku* which helps them to suck the blood of their victims. It *stands* as the store house of power and strength. The owner offers sacrifice to it.

Agwu

Agwu is believed to be a type of spirit that manifests itself in an individual who is possessed. It is a deity which is beyond the knowledge of Igbo people. Certain abnormalities that take place in the life of a person are attributed to *Agwu*. Okeke (2017) describes these abnormalities as “one who is fond of not knowing how he or she uses his or her money or one who gets brain-fag without any observable cause”. When such a thing is noticed constantly in one's behaviour, a way is

sought. Some inquiries are made; rituals and other ceremonies are performed, known as ritual of *?r?/?l?*, *agwu* so that *agw?* may set the person free. Those rituals are observed in the shrine of *agwu*.

The symbol of *agw?* is made with a pot fixed in the ground and encircled with sticks. Added to this pot and sticks are a few feathers from a young chicken as well as some white chalk. A normal person can set up his own *agwu*. The special function of *agw?* is to protect the owner in every way, either when working, playing or fighting. This symbol is set up for special reasons on the advise of the *dib?a* (medicine man).

Nzu

This is a block-like whitish object, like chalk excavated from the ground. It is a sign of holiness in Igbo society (Ogbalu, 1979). It is used as kolanut. For instance, if there is no kolanut, an elderly man or woman gives it to his/her visitor to deposit or mark on the floor or ground as a sign of welcome and love and it is not handed on hand; it is rather dropped on the ground for a person to pick for marking. If the visitor marks *nzu*, it signifies that he is happy and that his visit is with love (Nzeako, 1981).

In the central sub-cultural zone of Igboland, women do not mark *nzu* just as they do not break kolanut. Pregnant women chew the white chalk (Okeke, 2012). It is believed that white chalk (*nzu*) strengthens the child in the womb. Women who visit the new born baby are given the white chalk to paint their face, neck and chest.

Chalk (*nzu*) marking is a form of prayer, which one does silently. In marking, one

wishes oneself, as well as others good luck and asks one's fore-fathers to help one in life and in one's undertaking. *Nzu* is also used in sacrifice. The offerer presents the *nzu* in sacrifice so that the spirit will joyfully receive his prayers (Okeke, 2012).

? mú

This is the tendril of the palm tree (*nkwú*). It is got from the palm tree. Various groups and individuals use ?m? in their various activities. ?m? symbolizes danger. If ?m? is placed in front of someone's house, or sent to someone, it signifies either danger or certain behaviour one ought to abstain from. ?mú is also used to signify that something has gone wrong. It also used in conveying a corpse from one place to another.

Ogene

This is (metal gong) the product of a black-smith. There are two types of metal gong. They are single and double gongs, some metal gongs are set apart for shrine use only. The type used in a shrine is known as *ogene alusi/arusi*, *ogene dibia*, and so on. The metal gong, at times, bears feathers which indicate that it has been receiving sacrifices.

The *dibia* (*medicine men*) uses *ogene* to call the attention of the gods, spirits and ancestors during divination and sacrifices. It is also beaten to inform the neighbours of the readiness of sacrifice to the gods.

Ikoro

It is a hollow-block of wood carved from an iroko tree. This hollowed-out instrument whose sound goes a long distance is very vital for spread of

information. It serves as traditional radio, television and telephone. It is used chiefly for spreading of information for certain ceremonial purposes and at sacrificial festivals, summoning meetings and various announcements like proclaiming war and the death of a renowned person. It is also used as a musical instrument. The traditional ruler dances to *ikoro* during his *ƴfala* festival.

ƴ kù

This is an earthen bowl made of clay. It serves as a plate with which food is served to the deity. Human beings also use it in eating, though there are certain bowls set aside for shrine only.

Oche ƴ z?

Oche ozo (ƴz? stool) is a sacred stool carved from an iroko tree. It is specifically meant for the title holders (*Nze na ƴ z?*). It is personally owned and it is used by titled men only. Women do not sit on it. If a woman sits on it, then crime has been committed by her. The chief in the town carries it as a paraphernalia during chieftancy rites.

Conclusion

Basden (1982) says that “no object in itself is worshipped by the Ibo; it is sacred only as the habitation of a spirit”. Symbols in African traditional religious conception are not worshipped; rather they are concerned with and serve as means of communication and communion between the living and the dead. Symbols portray a variety of appearances of the metaphysical or spiritual beings into the physical or natural world. They serve as significant objects through which the visible meet with the invisible. Traditional Africans create symbolic objects to depict the

closeness of the invisible beings to them. In other words, to affirm that the supernatural beings, which include the deities, spirit forces and ancestors are close to them in their day to day life activities.

Without symbolic objects, there is no doubt that the content and context of African traditional religion will be meaningless. Though this religion had been misunderstood and misinterpreted by the early missionaries, symbolic objects have given and continue to give a concrete insight about the world beyond

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