

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE AND USE OF CULTURE IN THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIETY: THE STUDY OF IGBO SYMBOLS AS A PARADIGM**

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### **Abstract**

Africans in general and Igbo people in particular are blessed with some cultural artifacts which help and direct them to live in accordance with their traditions. It has been observed that because of civilisation and western education, they have abandoned some of these cultural artifacts which helped them in their daily lives in the past. This has created many problems to them. One of the things which distinguish man from all other animals is his ability to symbolise memories, imaginations and religious experience. A symbol operates because it bears a relationship with the symbolised things and these place limits upon its use. The Igbo as an ethnic group in Nigeria is widely known, not only because of its largeness but also as an ethnic group that is endowed with rich cultural heritage. Igbo culture is full of many symbols which have much significance and effects to life. It is true that Nigeria has many other ethnic groups but the culture of Igbo people ranging from material to non-material aspects give proper identity that distinguishes Igbo people from other ethnic groups in Nigeria. This study therefore aims at giving clear identification and definition of Igbo culture symbols and their significance and effects to Igbo cultural life. This will help the present Africans and Igbo people to understand the importance of these symbols and their uses in their daily lives, which will also help to minimise the negligence of their cultural observances.

### **Introduction**

Symbols are anything used to represent, express and stand for an event or situation. They are short expressions for the identification of an object or situation. Symbols transmit messages as well as focus the mind on an idea. It is an object used to typify or represent quality of something else and abstract ideas. Symbols direct or guide our behaviours and are used to show an event of past, present or future. This involves using function of the human mind. Religion, science, art, myths, dreams and rituals are all manifestations of symbols. Etymologically, the word symbol came from the Greek word “symbolon” which denotes such tallies as the two halves of a broken coin, which were exchanged by contracting parties.

Cohen (1969:215) defines symbols as “objects, arts, relationships or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings.” This shows that there are different symbolic forms and that it is possible for one symbolic form to be given several

interpretations and these interpretations could be given at different levels depending on the level of the interpreter's consciousness and intelligence.

Otite (1997:179) opines that symbols are agents, which are impregnated with messages and with invitations to conform and act. When decoded in the social and cultural contexts, symbols are found to have both cognitive and emotional meanings. A symbol is something, an idea, a sign, a ritual or a behavioural pattern that stands as an outer representation of an inner essence or experience of the unconscious.

Furthermore, Nabofa (1994:6) sees symbol as an overt expression of what is behind the veil of direct perception. It is quite usual for a perceiver to express his inner experience sight or visions and mystical or religious experience in symbols. It should be noted that a word is a symbol, and a word can be either written or spoken. Myths, proverbs, and parables are very powerful and endure symbols.

### **Characteristics of Symbols**

Not every object seen or used for representation can be generally accepted by a community. A symbol can be generally accepted in a community for uses when it has the following characteristics.

1. Symbols are meaningful through the setting in life: In order to understand the full implication of symbols, it is necessary to appreciate the given situations of the people for whom the symbols are useful. For example, without the history and full knowledge of traditional religion, all the objects of worship such as *ofo*, *ikenga*, etc., will become meaningless.
2. Symbols are meaningful only when there is consensus about the meaning: Symbols do not have meaning in themselves but have meaning as conferred to them in the society.
3. Symbols in effect are mediator and givers of meanings of things and events: Symbols convey to people the full meaning and presence of given objects and calling for the best in us in using the object.

### **Different Groups of African/Igbo Symbols**

For a better understand of the subject matter, it is quite proper and expedient for us to attempt a classification of the symbols of Igbo culture. Some of the classes are- animal symbols, ritual symbols, number symbols, royal symbols, ancestral symbols and cultural symbols.

- i. **Animal Symbols:** Animals constitute human food and their importance is obviously great (Mbiti, 1999:50). Africans in general and Igbo people in particular have many religious associations with them. The buffalo and lion, for instance are associated with God by the Langi and Turu, who consider them to symbolise God's manifestation in His immanent aspect. The Hindu also respect and venerate the cow. In many myths of African traditional societies, the tortoise or chameleon symbolises the messenger who brought news from God that men should die. The dog, on the other hand, symbolises the messenger who should have brought news of immortality or resurrection, but

lingered on the way and the other slow animal overtook it and got to God first and delivered his message of death. Again, the spider, though a small creature, appears in many myths and stories. Among the Akan and Ashanti, the spider symbolises wisdom. For that reason, God is given the title of “AnanseKokroko” which means the “Great Spider” that is the “Wise One”

Likewise in Igbo land, some animal parts or bodies symbolise so many things in their culture. Animal parts like elephant tusk, eagle feather, animal skin etc., are very strong animal symbols.

- ii. **Ritual Symbols:** According to Mbiti (1991:131) ritual is a set form of carrying out a religious action or ceremony. It is a means of communicating something of religious significance, through symbol, word or action. Therefore, a ritual embodies a belief or beliefs. Through rituals, people not only practise their religion but also communicate it to the younger generation. Also Nabofa (1994:9) says that ritual symbols result from the spiritual and psychic experiences of the people. A close study of ritualistic symbol in African tradition will reveal that it is first rooted in an experience of emotion and it is then used to express the experience or a concept that is associated with it. For instance, a man may experience the purity and holiness of the divine, he then uses objects, such as white chalk, white powder or a white piece of cloth or white dress to overtly symbolise or represent the divine experience he has. In addition, ritualistic symbols are the most valuable means for passing on the culture of a people from one generation to the other. In devotional rituals, diviners use water, mirror, lobes of kola nuts, cowries, a glass of gin, shells etc. to achieve their purpose.

In Igbo land, some of the ritual symbols used are, kolanuts, palm tendrils, red clothes, white clothes, black clothes, white chalk etc.

- iii. **Number Symbols:** This is the use of number to express religious facts and beliefs. It is also known as numerology.
- iv. **Royal Symbols:** These are symbols of representations of the ruler or king or chief of a community or society. Many symbols are used in connection with the office of the ruler. For instance, the making of a sacred fire in the palace symbolises the nation’s health, the use of sceptres for authority. The Igbo people’s range of artifacts visually reveals a vast number of symbolic representations of motifs especially on their items of royalty such as the modern throne (Ogbu, 2005). The results of these symbolic forms are seen in numerous modern artifacts of Igbo people especially on their modern thrones as contained in Ogbu (2005). He noted that the configuration of Igbo modern thrones, their qualities and associated symbolic motifs and accumulations around them occur with frequency in Igbo areas of Anambra State. Furthermore, Okafor (2005) opines that thrones are instruments of power which Igbo traditional leaders use in carrying out their political activities such as presiding over political matters. They are also used in performing religious functions such as the breaking of kolanuts and offering of sacrifices and prayers to the ancestors. Thrones are also the essential

symbols used in the maintenance of social order and festivals involving ceremonies such as the coronations and “Ofala” festivals.

- v. **Ancestral Symbols:** Respect for the elders is often exploited and used as a symbol of repression and authority. For instance, in most traditional African societies the elders of every family or community are regarded as the representatives of the ancestors, who are some of the acknowledged spiritual guardian of the community. They are also believed to be the cohesive factors of the society and guardian of morality within the group. As part of the African traditional ethical behaviour, the young ones are quite often indoctrinated to accord due respect to these symbolic representatives of the ancestors and do not flout their authority lest they incur the wrath of the ancestors. Some of the ancestral symbols include the following: ikenga, amadioha, anyanwu, ala etc.
- vi. **Cultural Symbols:** Nwaorgu (2001: 3) defines cultural symbols as something which express or stand for people’s beliefs, identities, traits, moral values, ethical ideals, virtues, religions, signs, sacrifices, arts, civilization and the likes. Some materials along the line of cultural symbols include the following: wooden drum, wooden gongs, grey hairs, palm tendrils, cowry etc.
- vii. **Diagrammatical Symbols:** This type of symbols captures and mediates the experiment of any given reality. The pictures may represent a part or a whole a complete entity. Symbolic expression of a religious experience by means of a painting has a long history. Sculptural representation of the sacred or religious object has its origin in the religious cult. They help to narrate a story or sacred history. Here are some sculptural representations of the sacred or religious objects: ikenga, amadioha, cross etc.
- viii. **Gesture Symbols:** Gestures and body movements play an important role in religious ritual as well as in religious conduct of men. Such behaviour and gestures derived their meanings from the relationship to the sacred. Procession of masquerades during festivals are done not only to signify appearance before the sacred presence but also to enhance the sacred power. Hand movements are widely used in ritual action, raising of kolanuts to bless them etc. Again by kneeling down in prayers, the worshippers approach the realm under the mould and also demonstrate humility. Bowing down expresses reception and acceptance of sacred word of a leader.

### **Significance and Effects of the Igbo-African Symbols**

These groups of symbols mentioned above have their significance and effects in African and Igbo culture. Some of the significance and effects will be discussed below under those symbols.

1. **Animal Symbols:** Some animals in different communities symbolise different things. For example, Langi and Turu people associate buffalo and lion with God. Hindus also respect and venerate cow. In Igbo land, Idemmili people venerate python, Awka people venerate monkey, Ogbunike people venerate tortoise, and so many other people in Igbo land. Their beliefs were that these animals in one way or the other have helped them in time of need and trouble which made them to start

venerating them. It was discovered that any violation in the veneration of these animals or killing them affects the defaulters adversely.

2. **Ritual Symbols:** In Africa and in Igbo land, ritual symbols, are very significant and effective in higher devotional rituals, which may involve higher mystical exercises such as divination. Symbols aid the devotee in deep meditation and concentration.
3. **Number Symbols:** There are some numbers that are very significant and effective in African and Igbo culture. These number symbols in their belief system have great significance and effect on anything it is associated with. The effect may be positive or negative. These number symbols are very much represented in the lobes of kolanuts. Everything Igbo people do has reference to kolanuts. For this reason, they attach so much significance to kolanuts. The most important numbers in Igbo numerology are three, four and seven. These numbers are very significant and effective in Igbo culture.
4. **Royal Symbols:** Some of the royal symbols are the throne, human symbols, animals and birds symbols, emblems etc. Royal symbols are the symbols of swords, thrones, royal title paraphernalia which signify the royal dignity of the monarchs themselves who are known as Igwe in the Igbo culture. The monkey symbol signifies the agility of a leader. The eagle feather signifies innocence and purity, the movement chameleon signifies caution, a virtue that is expected of a leader.
5. **Ancestral Symbols:** Ancestral symbols include all kinds of ọfọ, all kinds of ikenga, Amadioha (sky god), Anyanwụ (sun god), and Ala (earth deity). Ọfọ signifies authority and an emblem that links “Chukwu” and man, the dead, the living and the unborn. Ikenga signifies strength and power. Amadioha symbolises justice, Anyanwụ symbolises wealth and good fortune and Ala symbolises morality, purity and fertility.
6. **Cultural Symbols:** The cultural symbols include kolanuts, wooden drums, wooden gongs, grey hairs, palm tendrils, and cowry. These symbolise life, unity, peace, prosperity, joy, sorrow, bad omen, festivals, rituals etc.

## Conclusion

Symbols are used as a very powerful instrument for indoctrination to maintain order in African societies in general and in Igbo land in particular. One of the embracing roles of symbols is that of communication. The need for inter-personal and intra-personal communications could be regarded as the most important factor that generated the emergence of symbols. Human beings are always communicating their thoughts, feelings and experience not only to other persons but also to themselves. Symbols are quite often used to transmit some basic ideas and principles of our inner selves.

Symbols also help to preserve knowledge, historical and religious occurrences. It is in this sense that the ritual symbols are the most valuable means for passing on the culture of a people from one generation to the other. Such symbols normally have gone through many transformations and even a long process of more or less conscious development, and have thus become collective images accepted by civilised society.

Religious symbols especially those connected with religious and cultural festivals during which historic events are re-enacted, aid the memory of historical and important events and doctrines of the faith. In this context they are very essential in teaching and instructing the younger generation about the sect to which they belong.

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