

**RELIGIO-CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS OF NUMBER SYMBOLISM  
AMONG IDOMA PEOPLE OF NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

*The paper examines the religio-cultural expressions of number symbolism in Idoma Society. The concept of aluca, number is used in symbolic expressions of Idoma religio-cultural beliefs and practices. In contemporary times, some elders and some youths in the Idoma religious culture have shown ignorance of number symbolism or its uses. Therefore they are ridiculed or looked upon with suspicion concerning their real intentions. For instance, when items are given in even numbers for burial rites, instead of odd numbers and vice versa, such individuals prove their lack of knowledge of the use of number symbolism. The paper observes that even numbers are used for good purposes and odd numbers are used for evil purposes especially in burial rites or ceremonies in Idoma religious culture. The survey method is employed coupled with participant observation in carrying out this research and the theoretical framework upon which this paper is built is functionalism. One of the recommendations of the paper is that the religio-cultural expressions of numbers in the Idoma society and indeed other societies in the country need to be further researched on. In addition, the system can be used for encoding and decoding communications that have to do with security and intelligence gathering and other means of transmission of information.*

**Key Words:** Religio-Cultural, Expressions, Number, Symbolism and Idoma People.

**Introduction**

Man is the only creature who has the ability to reflect on his experience and express it with symbols. This creative power is part of the divine consciousness within every human being and it is this element of divine consciousness which distinguishes man from all other living things either in the animal or vegetable kingdoms. Symbols in African traditional religious cultures are overt expressions of the people's inner divine illumination. Furthermore, what distinguishes man from all other animals is his ability to symbolize memory, imagination and religious experience. Religion, science, art, myths, dreams and rituals are all manifestations of symbols.<sup>1</sup>

Many individuals in contemporary times in Idoma Society of Nigeria and indeed in most African societies cannot understand, use and interpret number symbols as a result of a number of factors such as the influence of Christianity and Islam and other Western influences like industrialization and scientific and technological breakthroughs that have re-defined the traditional African worldview and outlook to life which was before now, highly religious. Religion permeated all facets of human life and it is through the prism of religion that all spheres of life are seen and interpreted. Hence, the need to undertake a study in this area; to x-ray the concept, use, understanding and interpretation of number symbolism in the Idoma society.

The paper uses survey methodology in our investigation of the subject-matter and the theoretical framework of functionalism. Functionalism sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. This approach looks at society through a macro-level orientation, which is a broad focus on the social structures that shape society as a whole. This approach looks at both social structure and social functions. Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements namely norms, customs, traditions, and institutions. A common analogy, popularized by Herbert Spencer, presents these parts of society as organs that work toward the proper functioning of the body as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

The theoretical framework applied derives from the functionalism of Emile Durkheim. Society is made up of parts with different specializations which function to integrate society, and to maintain social solidarity. Durkheim states that the main function of religion as a social institution which involves a collective sharing of beliefs, is to unify people in a moral community. According to this view, religion creates and maintains social solidarity and as society lasts, so will its religion last.<sup>3</sup>

**The Concept of Number**

The conceptual understanding of number is known as *aluca* in the Idoma language. The Idoma people use *aluca*, numbers in every day life and interactions including trade and commerce, pithy sayings, proverbs, religious and cultural expressions. But for the purpose of this paper, we are going to

concentrate on the religious and cultural usage of number symbols in human to human and human to spiritual interactions as observed in the beliefs and practices of the Idoma. A number is a symbol or word used to represent a number. It could be a numerals or series of numeral used for reference or identification.<sup>4</sup>

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary of Current English*, number is a word or symbol that represents an amount or a quantity.<sup>5</sup> The notion of numbers and counting dates back to prehistory, and all tribes or societies, however simple, have some system of counting. With the invention of writing, symbols were found to represent the numbers. Different methods of representing numeric symbols were invented, but the most common one was the division in groups of ten. The numeric systems invented vary across time and place.

### **The Concept of Symbols**

Etymologically, the word symbol comes from the Greek *symbolon*. It denoted such tallies as the two halves of a broken coin which were exchanged by contracting parties of any to them which established a person's identity such as a soldier's badge or watch word. A symbol is something we can perceive and which we can connect to a meaning of significance.<sup>6</sup> 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.

Cohen defined symbols as "objects, acts, relationships or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings". This definition tries to indicate 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 upon the level of the interpreter's consciousness and intelligence.<sup>7</sup>

Nabofa defined 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 enduring symbols.<sup>8</sup>

Otite perceived symbols as agents which are impregnated with messages and with invitation to conform and act. When decoded in the social and cultural context, they are found to have both cognitive and emotional meanings. For instance, the axe of the meteorite stones found in most of the cults of God and solar divinities in West Africa convey the meaning and idea about the wrath of God and they also represent the purity of God and His impartial justice.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the sight of such symbolic forms inwardly reminds and urges the devotee, especially the cruel and the savage to lead a pure and honest life in order to avoid the wrath of God. They likewise urge the believer to guard against perjury and falsehood when it comes to the question of settling disputes in any shrine that houses such symbols. Jung defines a symbol as:

What we call a symbol is a term, name or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown or hidden from us... Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider “unconscious” aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it has led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Role of Symbols in African Traditional Religious Culture**

Nabofa<sup>11</sup> has come to acknowledge the fact that symbols play the role of mirroring social and religious reality but they also play other roles such as the maintenance of order and coherence, communication, and the preservation of knowledge to be transferred from one generation to the other. Man needs order and coherence in whatever he does and this is achieved largely by the use of symbols. Perceptions, emotional and religious experiences are put into symbolic forms which could be in form of language, works of art, icons, music, prayers and incantations during ritual drama. Symbols are used as very powerful instruments for indoctrination to maintain order in some African societies.

One of the embracing role of symbols is that of communication. The need for inter- and intra-person communication could be regarded as the most important factor that generated the emergence of symbols. Human beings are always communicating their thoughts, feelings and experiences not only to other persons but also to themselves. We quite often use symbols to transmit some basic ideas and principles of our inner-selves. Cultic symbols feature in what might be called self-communication.

### **Number Symbolism Among Some African Communities**

Number four according to Mbiti is sacred among the Nandi, number six is sacred to the Shona while the Jie people usually sacrifice six cattle or oxen to God. Both the Akamba and Vugusu have taboos attached to number seven, which the Akamba refer to as “the seven of dogs”. The number nine is sacred to the Baganda, and all their gifts, offerings, sacrifices and sacred vessels must number nine (or the multiple). Counting people and livestock is forbidden in many African societies, partly for fear that misfortune would befall those who are numbered, and partly perhaps, because people are not individuals but corporate members of society which cannot be defined numerically.<sup>12</sup>

Number symbolism in Ogboni confraternity is replete with the number three. In normal Yoruba custom this is an obnoxious number. Three is known as *eeta* in Yoruba parlance, and literally means “casting away” or complete rejection. They do not want to be cast out hence do not appreciate the use of that

number. They do not offer three things to a person, especially a guest, if such is done, it will be interpreted to mean that the host is casting his guest or any other person away. However, members of the Ogboni society take pleasure in giving three items to fellow members. They do this in order to distinguish themselves from non-initiates. They regard themselves as different from all others as such they do things in their own special way which is quite the opposite of the usual manner.<sup>13</sup>

At a given time as may be directed by the Apena, the head of the Ogboni fraternity, the members offer three kolanuts, three packets of alligator pepper, three rats and so on for some special rites. Apart from the fact of identification, members of the Ogboni society like every other Yoruba person attach some special importance to the number three. It shows the three stages in human life: the first is the period of his departure from the spiritual realm to be born on earth, the second stage is when he is in this mortal life and the last is his death and transition to being an ancestor.

In Yoruba religious culture and understanding, *eeta*, three symbolizes strength, unity and oneness. The Yoruba practice in re-enforcing the strength of a measure of rope or twine, three strands of the same are wound over the other to make a stronger piece. It is easier and quicker and indeed much more possible to use three pieces in this way than with any other number. A cord of three strings is not easily broken. And this is another symbolic way that members of the Ogboni conceive and decode the number three. By using three symbolic forms and processes, members of Ogboni would be encoding into the consciousness of their members, the principle and doctrine of unity.

### **Religio-Cultural Expressions of Number Symbolism in Idoma Society**

This is the use of *aluca*, number to express religious beliefs and practices. Number is also known as numerology. In Idoma religious culture, even numbers are used for good purposes and odd numbers are used for bad purposes or an issue that involves death or burial rites. Field studies among the Idoma of Benue State, Central Nigeria reveal that even numbers symbolize good life, peace or are used for good intentions or purposes, whereas odd numbers are associated with, or symbolize, death, evil or misfortune. That is why an Idoma would not give any odd-numbered gift, for instance, three, five, seven and the like.

One of our respondents, Agbo Okpokwu<sup>14</sup> says the expressions of number symbols are varied and many. When an Idoma person during a conversation says *ekpotu yin wea ke*, which translates to "my thought or mind is one on this issue", what the person is saying is that he or she does not have a reservation on the subject matter being discussed. When the person says *ekpotu yin wea epa*, meaning "I am having double thoughts on this issue", this expression shows clearly that the person in question is having reservations about what is being discussed. A person that is said to be *ukpoku nu wea ke* meaning the person's bone is one, signifies that the person is very strong or has

tremendous physical strength.

A respondent, Stephen Adoyi <sup>15</sup> gives a classical scenario of requirements for burial rites or ceremonies in the Otukpa district of Idoma society. The presentation of items for the rites by inlaws and other persons has to be in odd numbers. Such items are *eme* (kolanuts) in odd numbers that would be appreciated by the receiving party; one keg of *ezeari* (palmwine); one, *ewu* (goat) of any colour; tubers of *esi* (yams), one bag of *oma* (salt) and one gallon of *anorore* (palm oil). These items would be presented on the day set aside for burial rites by the inlaws. He further states that in marriage rites, kolanuts presented have to be in odd number. The symbolism behind this belief and practice is to ensure that the couple will not depart this world at the same time. Traditional marriage rites are the only occasion that warrants the use of an item in odd numbers.

Another respondent, Odinya Ocheme <sup>16</sup> gave his views on the use of number symbolism in the Idoma society. He says when a man or a woman is referred to as having *ekpoku ahe* (one bone) that means the person is a very strong man in terms of physical strength and if a man or a woman is referred to as having *ekpoku epa* (two bones), it means the person is a weakling in terms of physical strength. He goes further to say when a person remarks "*onyiro eke ke hamu ma*" (only one man is living here), it means that only one man who is spiritually strong is living in that vicinity.

Another respondent, Samuel Oduma <sup>17</sup> says the use of number symbols in religio-cultural expressions in Idoma Land in general and Igumale district in particular are indications that the person using or expressing them has knowledge of the traditional religious culture of the people. He gave a scenario of where a group of persons or elders are discussing some important issues and somebody that is not from Igumale or a person that is not supposed to be privy to what they are discussing comes to the arena or gathering, a person or elder from the group discussing would remark "*ano e jera tsile*", which translates into our number is complete and one is remaining. Once this is said, it is expected that every body should automatically stop discussing that particular issue or change the topic of discussion because the person that is referred to as 'the one that is remaining' is not supposed to be part of the discussion or have knowledge of what is being discussed.

Apart from its use in the religio-cultural context, numbers in Idoma society are also used in secular settings. However, the secular usage of number is not the focal point of this paper. The vast majority of the expressions of numbers take their cue from the rich reservoir of the religio-cultural beliefs and practices of the Idoma people and such expressions are symbolic in nature, hence the value of this study.

### **Recommendations**

The religio-cultural expressions of numbers in the Idoma society and indeed other societies in the country should be researched and documented on and used for encoding and decoding communications that have to do with security and intelligence gathering and transmission of information.

Parents and other custodians of knowledge in the Idoma society and indeed all other African societies should endeavour to teach their children, wards and all and sundry the proper use of the religio-cultural expressions of number symbolism in order for them to understand and communicate their the beliefs and practices appropriately. This will guarantee the continued existence of a vital part of their belief system and practice inspite of the various influences that have impacted negatively of the Idoma religious culture.

### **Conclusion**

Man being a symbolizing animal can only communicate through symbols – verbal or non-verbal and material and non-material symbols. These communicative elements of symbols bring themselves to bear on human activities. There are numbers that either represent good that is, even numbers or numbers that are evil, that is odd numbers in the Idoma society and many other African societies. The significance of a symbol according to Nwaorgu is not unlimited. A symbol operates because it bears a relationship with that symbolized. This lays a limit upon its use. Religious symbols are used to convey concepts concerned with man's relationship with the sacred and also his social and material world.<sup>18</sup>

Mbiti says there are many kinds of symbols. They are found often where art is found, since they are part of art. Some are represented by insects, birds, animals, certain trees, figures or numbers, shapes and colours of all kinds, masks and carvings and the like. He states further, that each people has its own symbols, whose meanings are generally known to almost everyone. But there are other symbols which can only be interpreted by a few individuals as, for instance, symbols used in initiation, divination and secret societies. Religious ideas have created many of the symbols, and in turn the symbols themselves help to communicate and strengthen religious ideas.<sup>19</sup>

There are many types of symbols in various African traditional religious cultures. Some of these are animal, number, ritual, ancestral and cultural symbols. Symbols perform different important roles in African Traditional Religion and Culture. They are thus very significant aspect of African traditional Religion.

**Notes and References**

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13. See Nabofa Pp. 13-16.
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15. Oral interview at Otukpa District of Idoma Land with Adoyi Stephen, 52 Years Old.
16. Oral interview at Otukpa District of Idoma Land with Odinya Ocheme, 70 Years Old.
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18. See Nwaorgu P. 2.
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