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**“Omu Ngwo” (Omu-Furled - Tender Palm Frond) Symbology  
in Ikwerre, Rivers State**

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**Abstract**

*The furled young leaves of the palm tree are known as omu in Ikwerre language. It is an important motif among the Ikwerre. Ordinarily it has nothing of awe or fear attached to it. But when symbolically used as a communication medium, it attracts all the sacredness and fear that accompany sacred items. The use of omu as a sacred symbol among the Ikwerre is universal. The significance of omu has defied rejection by both modernity and Christianity. It is always laden with spiritual messages when put into use. Omu occupies very important position in the Ikwerre religious and social spheres. As one walks along the public and private roads, the sight of omu symbolically used is a common feature. Wherever omu is exhibited in its symbolic use, the observer immediately decodes the information and then appreciates the metaphysical richness of Ikwerre society. This study which took us to many places endowed us with the knowledge of how diversified the uses of omu are. This symbolic form is involved in maintaining the Ikwerre religious and social ethos, hence this paper. The focus of this paper therefore, is among the Ikwerre in Rivers State of the North Eastern Niger Delta Region.*

**Key words:** Tender, Palm Frond, Symbology, Sacred, Ikwerre

### Introduction

Omu is a symbol object in Ikwerre. To begin this paper, it is important to review some literature on what a symbol connotes. Cohen (1974, p. 26) defines 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 interpreter's consciousness and intelligence.

Molloy (2002, p. 8) expressed that symbol is something fairly concrete, ordinary and universal that can represent and help human beings intensely experience something of greater complexity. Otite (1979) sees symbols as "agents that are impregnated with messages and with invitation to conform and to act" (p. 33). Thus, when symbols are decoded in their social and cultural contexts, they are found to have both cognitive and emotional meanings. For instance the axe or the meteorite stones found in most of the cults of gods and solar divinities in West Africa convey the meaning and idea about the wrath of God and they also signify the purity of God and his impartial justice; in essence, what such symbolic forms inwardly remind and urge the devotee, especially the rural dwellers 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 of the shrines that house such symbols.

Morris (1945, p. 65) describes symbol as a sign that is produced by interpreter and acts as a substitute for some other signs for which it is synonymous, and he gave the example of wearing of black dress by a widow or some other bereaved person as being a symbol or some other signs or mourning such as weeping. Brown (1952, p. 143) expresses symbol as whatever that has meaning and the meaning is what is expressed by the symbol. For example, eagle feather is a symbol and symbolizes royalty and dignity.

Ejizu (1990) states that a symbol is "A thing recognized as normally typifying, representing or recalling something of great practical importance, by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought" (p.1). From this definition, any object, thing that is representing something of importance is a symbol to that particular people, for instance palm fronds, red fabric etc. Wotogbe-Weneka (2009, p. 99) describes symbol as a sign, number, letter, etc that has a fixed meaning, especially in science, mathematics and music. From this, it will not be an over statement to say that symbols are representative concepts, objects, ideas, or images which express and signify something else, other than that which is perceived or

observed in reality. Thus, symbols are mediums or channels, which act un-behalf of other things.

Whitehead (1974) describes religious symbol as “the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” (p. 127). This primary expression, mainly clothes itself in the media of action and words, but partly in art. But then, the way an experienced person expresses his perception of the sacred in symbols could be fallible contrary to direct experience of the holy which is infallible, that is why he further stresses that direct experience is infallible. What you have experienced you have experienced. But symbolism is very fallible in the sense that it may induce actions, feelings, emotions and beliefs about things which are mere motions without exemplification in the word which the symbolism leads us to assume.

Firth (1973, p.15) explains that in a symbol, there is concealment and revelation and that the essence of symbolism lies in the recognition of one thing as standing or representing another, the relationship between them normally being that of concrete to abstract, particular to general. Thus, this implies that symbols could actually convey information to the people in the communities or society.

According to Idowu (1973, p.73), who posits the fact about the use of material in symbols, that to the Africans, the material has no meaning apart from spiritual that informs the material and gives it whatever quality and meaning it has, the material therefore, can only be, at best, technically a symbol. It is the divine entity that is represented by the material act to which worship is rendered. The material symbol can rot away, destroyed, carried away, and can even be replaced, but not so with the divine being. Symbols may change, deity or his ministers remain.

### **Religious Symbology of Omu**

Omu is a sacred motif among the Ikwerre, therefore it has religious importance. Omu casts sacredness on many things. At the shrine of a divinity, it functions effectively; it is used in decorating many shrines and sacred places. This decoration is not necessarily for establishing beauty, but to establish sacredness and creates awe, and when the shrine is so clothed with Omu, it symbolizes that it has been especially set aside for religious purpose. At the entrance of a shrine, a bunch of Omu is used as a curtain. To this end, the priest of Owumini divinity Chief Eliezar Agwanwor (2013) informed us that if anybody tries to enter the shrine with any poisonous material, the effect is neutralized and rendered ineffective as the Omu touches the man. At the shrine of *Owumini* at Choba, we passed through such an entrance adorned with the Omu. And as one passes through the Omu, there is the feeling of ‘holiness’.

During “ritual sacrifice, Omu is like the chalice that bears the food for the divinities and ancestors” The Omu is woven into sacrificial basket, especially

sacrifice of propitiation. This type of sacrifice is often dropped in the sacred forest or cross-roads. Similarly, in Igbo, during the initiation of a traditional medicine man the *avo agwu* - traditional basket for the *agwu* divinity is sanctified with Omu. It is tied round the basket. In this way, the basket is made sacred. The *dibia* (medicine man) carrying the basket clinches Omu in his mouth. This symbolically sanctifies him, and he is thus set aside. He is supposed not to talk to anybody and nobody would want to talk to him. There is no exchange of greetings. He is in this state in union with the spirits and the ancestors.

Members of some secret societies use the Omu to separate themselves from the uninitiated. They make a circle with Omu where the members stay, and no non-initiate is allowed to enter such a circle. It is exclusively for the initiates. In initiation into the Obonie cult in Ubumini are put in Omu enclosure as holy people set aside for the purpose.

#### **Omu as Symbol of Sacredness**

Omu can communicate and reveal strict sacredness. When death occurs in a compound very close to a major road, the road users are symbolically notified that death has occurred and that area has become sacred. In this capacity, the road users especially vehicle drivers are to drive with caution. In this way too, omu symbol is a symbol of communication to both the human and the spiritual.

A car or lorry that is conveying the dead is hung with the Omu. In this context, the omu is believed to have calming and controlling effects over the spirit of the dead, and other spirits that may venture to counter the movement of the vehicle. One of our informants elaborated very much on this. He told us that “any vehicle conveying the dead must bear the Omu otherwise the spirit of the dead and other spirits would become violent and this could cause much disaster”. The Ikwerre believe that no spirit would interfere in a hostile manner with anything to which the Omu is attached.

#### **Omu as Symbol of Danger**

Omu symbolism can communicate danger. In this context, when a tree is being cut down, travelers are alerted of the impending danger by pinning hunches of omu at the two ends leading to where the tree has fallen. When this happens, road users become cautious in their approach.

Again if a tree is rotten and nobody knows when it will fall down, the Omu is used to communicate danger to the road users. In this way Omu becomes red - colour symbolizing danger. If a road becomes eroded and there is the possibility of its sinking and thereby threatening road users, Omu is the symbol used to communicate such inherent danger.

### **Omu as Symbol of Ethical Control**

The symbolism of omu extends to social control of ethos. It thus enforces ethical norms of the society. Anything on which Omu is placed is automatically sacred and dreaded or avoided. If the Omu is placed on a bundle of wood, nobody would touch or remove it. The presence of Omu symbolizes that only the owner would tamper with it. It also symbolizes the presence of the spirits on that bundle of wood. Anybody attempting to steal it is said to be taking a risk. When fruit trees, such as pea, orange, and mango, bring forth fruits and the owner of any of them feels that people may tamper with their fruits, he may tie Omu around the tree stem. This action is believed to safeguard the fruits, because nobody would climb the tree to harvest them.

If a bunch of Omu is dug in a bush, nobody would enter into it to pass human excreta or to gather wood. Such bush is regarded as sacred or set aside. It becomes automatically considered to be under the sacred guidance of the earth-divinity, a divinity which according to Olumati (2013), the Ikwerre considers to be the ethical controller of the community. It is a common belief among the Ikwerre that Omu attracts the spirits as magnet attracts iron, so it is a symbol of the presence of the spirits, especially the spirit of Ali - the earth deity in Ikwerre.

### **Socio-Religious Symbolic Functions of Omu**

Omu as communication symbolic form is capable of communicating different things at different occasions at any moment and the Ikwerre understand the information encoded in it. Omu is used as a symbol of summoning one before a traditional ruler or council for a peaceful settlement of any disputes. The summoning can also be before any divinity. In this capacity, the Omu accompanies the summons's fees. It is on the strength of this that the Ikwerre describe summoning one before a traditional council, traditional ruler or shrine as Ome-Ogbu or ome-ikpe that is; pointing with the Omu. What happens is that the summons fee is accompanied by one leaf of Omu. When the Omu is presented, the arbiter must take it very serious. By the presentation of Omu, it is believed that the spirits have been alerted, such action creates fear in the mind of the person so summoned and there can be no toying or perjury with such a case. It is symbolically an invitation to make peace, hence the people say-

*Nnye nyere Omu choro udo,*

Meaning; *one who gives Omu wants peace.*

Any one who neglects the Omu when given is believed to be inviting the anger of the divinities and the ancestors. In the years before 1902 when the “long juju of Arochukwu” and “Igwe ka Ala of Umunoha” were in force in Ikwerre, anybody

presented with Omu by the messengers from Chukwu or Igwe ka Ala would know that he must appear before the deities without failure.

In the time of inter-village wars, omu can be used to symbolize surrender by the party holding it. In this way the message is, "I am no more continuing with the war", let us make peace. During such wars, ambassadors who could be Rumuakaha, (a name a man is called in his maternal home or Rumurinye, is the daughter born in the community but married out). These groups of people enjoy wide privileges among Ikwerre, can pass through the warring villages unattached provided they hold omu, anybody who attacks such ambassadors was believed to incur the anger of the divinities and spirit of the ancestors. In this circumstance therefore, omu is a symbol used to broker-peace in Ikwerre.

When omu is placed over or on any disputed object or land, it is symbolically a call for arbitration. When this is done, the contestants to the disputed object or land are barred from encroachment until the matter is impartially and amicably determined. It is the omu that casts this spell of mystic authority. Among the Ikwerre, when a piece of land is to be used for building, omu is pinned on it to declare it out of bonds for any act of desecration. It is evidence that such land is set apart for a special purpose. And no one in his right mind would tamper with it in a way. Omu puts a stamp of 'nazrite' on many things.

Omu also symbolizes strength and joy. In Ndele/Ikwerre ethnic nationality of Rivers State, when one is dancing especially the 'Obuni' dance, the dancers would clinch omu in their mouths. In this circumstance, omu symbolizes saturation of strength or power. In the same way in some areas of Ikwerre, when a woman is nursing a child, the room where she stays is tied with omu, and the symbolism here is that of joy and not danger. It could also be a warning to those who do not go near new born babies to keep off.

When a community is infested with criminals and attempts are made to rid such society of such criminals, omu plays very important symbolic role. At the centre of the town, a temporary enclosure is made with omu. All those suspected as criminals are put in the enclosure made with omu. From there they would appear for trial. In this capacity, omu closure has the symbolic meaning of a police cell or guardroom. Anybody put into the omu enclosure would know that a "*prima-facie*" case has been established against him.

A man in omu enclosure is like one under religious ban. We could see that omu has a great deal of symbolic connotations and uses. It is used to communicate the presence of a sacred place or object, to set aside a sacred place or object, for peaceful settlement of any dispute, and for keeping criminals in check. And more importantly as a general symbol of communication.

### Conclusion

*Palm fronds (Omu Ngwo)*, as we said earlier, does not have so much negative effect towards its usage. In Ikwerreland, palm fronds are tied in almost all the shrines in Ikwerre communities. In Ikwerre religion, palm frond symbolizes sacredness and it is regarded as garment for some divinities.

Wherever palm fronds are spread in any part of Ikwerre land, it shows that such place has been dedicated to a divine being. Also, when palm fronds are tied around a piece of land, this of course shows that such land is under dispute and means that no activities are to be carried out on that particular piece of land. For example, farming, building or sporting activities. When palm fronds are tied on a mango tree or any other trees, it shows that such trees should not be touched (untouchable). Initially, when palm fronds are tied on a moving car or boat it is assumed that a corpse is being conveyed. Palm fronds are used in traditional burial in Ikwerre communities, wrestling and masquerading. Palm fronds also serve as warning to people who are not familiar with some sacred places in their community.

Western influence on African culture has brought tremendous changes in palm frond symbolism which has affected many religious beliefs in Ikwerre communities. Today, people do not often use palm fronds to tie in front of vehicles to indicate the presence of corpse rather they use ambulance and siren, initially, when palm fronds are tied to an orange tree or mango tree etc. no one dares to pluck such fruits because of the palm frond symbolism. But today, the sacredness of palm frond has been replaced with profanity. The rate of criminal activities has increased in Ikwerre communities in that even though one ties palm fronds on farmland, criminals still go into the farm to steal some of the farm produce. The degree of sacredness of religiosity attached to the use of palm fronds has drastically decreased. Only very few elderly persons in rural areas accord palm fronds with sacredness.

However, some Ikwerre recalcitrants who flout the use and importance of this “Omu Ngwo” are sometimes visited with one sickness, suffering, misfortune or the other. In the past, some who had profanised the omu symbolism had confessed to the cult of ‘*Ndichie*’ ancestors which the omu symbolizes and are set free after appropriate sacrifices were offered to the gods in order to ward off their anger.

Notwithstanding, the arrival of Christianity in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Ikwerre meant the introduction into the relatively stable traditional religious framework of an alternative view of the world, a rival cosmology and a different way of understanding the place of creation. It would be worthy of note that these missionaries were African slaves who had obtained their freedom at the hands of their European masters and who had grown up to admire the western culture and civilization. The mission of these converted westernized blacks in Nigeria at large

and Ikwerre in particular was a total Christian proselytization of the people, to win the souls of the benighted and barbarous people to Christ. Therefore, the Christian missionaries in Ikwerre saw the traditional Ikwerre who respect the “omu *Ngwo*” as sinners and discouraged them from associating themselves with such objects which they misconceived as “fetishes”. Thus, this in turn reduces the power, importance and symbolism with which the traditional Ikwerre used to place on this “omu *ngwo*” sacred object. In most cases, the palm trees in which the omu grows were cut off as a result of industrialization brought about by western education and urbanization.

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