

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND USE OF CULTURAL SYMBOLS IN THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIETY: IGBO SYMBOLS AS A PARADIGM

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Abstract

It is often thought that Africans, and the Igbo in particular, are disposed to abandoning their local lifeworld in preference for western systems of life. In recent times, it is generally believed among the Igbo that there is an erosion of cultural values, especially those that constituted a veritable source of human existence in the past thus giving rise to a somewhat cultural crisis in the Igbo society. It would be assumed that one of the things that distinguish humans from all other creatures is their ability to symbolize memories, imaginations and religious experience. A symbol operates because it bears a relationship with the symbolized and this places a limit upon its use. The Igbo as an ethnic group in Nigeria are influential in a number of ways: while their population constitute one of largest (among the Yoruba and Hausa ethnic groups in Nigeria), their entrepreneurial spirit has been widely acknowledged across Nigerian ethnicities. Igbo culture is replete with symbols of varying significances. This paper therefore aims to give clear identification and definition of Igbo cultural symbols and their significance to Igbo modern life. In the course of this research, a descriptive method of research was adopted where I interacted and interviewed some Igbo people across age, class and gender. The result obtained lends insight into the significance of symbolism in Igbo everyday existence while also mitigating the negligence of cultural observances and its aftermath in the event of discordant modernities in contemporary life.

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 serve in transmission of messages as well as focusing the mind on an idea or ideal. 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 upon the level of the interpreter’s consciousness and intelligence.

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Otite (1997:179) states that symbols are agents, which are impregnated with messages and with invitation to conform and act. When decoded in the social and cultural context, 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 enduring symbols.

Characteristics of Symbols

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

*Symbols are meaningful through the setting in life: In order to understand the full implication of symbols, it is needful 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, white chalk/clothe, kola nut etc will become meaningless.

* Symbols are meaningful only when there is consensus about the meaning: Symbols do not have meaning in themselves but have meaning as confirmed to them in the society. And this meaning must be generally accepted by the community in question, it is not an individual matter.

*Symbols in effect are mediator and giver of meaning of things and events: Symbols convey to people the full meaning and presence of a given object and calling for the best in us in using the object.

Different Groups of African/Igbo Symbols

In order to make for a more meaningful study 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:** Animal constitutes 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 symbolize God's manifestation in His immanent aspect. The Hindu also respects and venerates the cow. In many myths of African traditional societies, the tortoise/chameleon symbolizes the messenger who brought news from God that men should die. The dog, on the other hand, symbolizes the messenger who should have brought news of immortality or resurrection, but

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

Likewise in Igbo land, some animal parts or body symbolize so many things in their culture. Animal parts like elephant tusk, eagle feather, animal skin, and animals like, python, tortoise, monkey, snail 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 act 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 an 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 a spotless white object, such as a white chalk, white powder or a white piece of cloth or robe to overtly symbolize or represent that divine quality he has experienced. 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- kola nut, fresh palm frond, red cloth, white cloth, black cloth, white chalk, etc.

- iii. **Number Symbols:** This is the use of number to express religious facts and beliefs. It is also known as numerology. In Igbo land, there are numbers that are very significant and are associated to the Igbo people daily life and observances. Such numbers include: three, four, five and seven. Each of these numbers is a symbol of one thing or the other. For instance, three signifies “Ikenga” that is “Strength”. A kola nut that has three lobes is said to be “Qj[Ikenga”. Also four represents the four Igbo market days and each day is a symbol of the spirit it represents. The number five is a symbol of affirmation during prayers or rituals and the number seven is a symbol of how many times a man will reincarnate in life before he stops. These numbers are not ordinary numbers and as such should not be joked with or neglected.
- iv. **Royal Symbols:** These are symbols of representations used in connection with 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 keeping of a sacred fire in the palace symbolizes the nation’s health, and the use of scepters is for authority. The Igbo people’s range of artifacts visually reveals a vast number of symbolic representations of motifs especially

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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 was contained in Ogbu (2005). He noted that the configuration of Igbo modern thrones, their qualities and associated symbolic motifs and accumulation 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 to carry out their political activities such as presiding over political matters. They are also used to perform religious functions such as the breaking of kola nut 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, Yam 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 in general and Igbo people in particular, 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: ofo, Ikenga, amadioha, anyanwu, ala, etc.
- vi. **Cultural Symbols:** Nwaorgu (2001: 3) defines cultural symbol as something which expresses or stands for people’s beliefs, identities, traits, moral values, ethical ideals, virtues, religion, signs, sacrifices, arts, civilization and the likes. Some materials along the line of African and Igbo cultural symbols include the following: qj[, wooden drum, wooden gongs, grey hairs, yellow palm frond, cowry.
- vii. **Diagrammatical Symbols:** This type of symbol captures and mediates the experiment of any given reality. The pictures may represent a part or an eye may represent a complete human being. Symbolic expression of a religious experience by means of a painting had a long history. Sculptural representation of the sacred or religious object has also origin in the religious cult. They help to narrate a story or sacred history. Here are some African and Igbo sculptural representations of the sacred or religious objects: ofo, Ikenga, amadioha, okpesi etc.
- viii. **Gestural Symbols:** Gestures and body movement play an important part in religious ritual and in religious conduct of men. Such behaviours and gestures derived their meanings from the relationship to the sacred. Procession of masquerades during festivals are done not only to signify appearing before the sacred presence but also to enhance the sacred power. Hand movements are widely used in ritual action, raising of kola nut to bless it etc. Again by kneeling down in prayers, the worshippers approach the realm under the mould and also demonstrate humility. Bowing down expresses

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reception and acceptance of sacred word of leader. All these are symbols in Africa and in Igbo land.

Significances and Effects of the African/Igbo Symbols

These groups of symbols mentioned above have their significances and effects in African and Igbo culture. Some of the significances and effects are discussed below:

***Animal symbols:** Some animals in different community symbolize 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 belief was 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 in the olden days or killing them affects the defaulter(s) adversely.

***Ritual Symbols:** 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.

***Number Symbols:** There are some numbers that are very significant and effective in Igbo culture. These number symbols in their belief system have great 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 kola nut. Everything Igbo people do has reference to the kola nut for this reason; they attach so much importance to kola nut. The most important numbers in Igbo numerology are three, four, five and seven. These numbers are very effective and hold certain ritualistic import to Igbo the cosmology. For example Igbo market days are four in numbers namely Eke, Oye, Afo Nkwo. Similarly, the seven often feature in most Igbo folk tales as an ominous metaphor in the narration of danger.

***Royal Symbols:** Some of the royal symbols are the royal throne, human symbols, animals and birds symbols, emblems etc. Royal symbols are the symbols of swords, throne, ozo title figures in their official regalia which signify the royal dignity of the monarchs themselves who are the (Igwe) decked out in their equally opulent regalia, empowered by their various insignia of office. In the animal and bird symbols, the monkey symbol signifies agility and in extension that of a leader. Eagle feather signifies innocence and purity, chameleon signifies cautious, a virtue that is expected of a leader, the cow head is a symbol of prestige.

***Ancestral Symbols:** Ancestral symbols include all kinds of ofo, all kinds of Ikenga, Igwe/Amadioha (sky god), Anyanwu(sun god), Ala (earth deity). Qfo signifies authority and an emblem that links “Chukwu” and man, the dead and the living and the unborn. Ikenga signifies strength and power. Igwe and Amadioha symbolize justice, Anyanwu symbolizes wealth and good fortune and Ala symbolizes morality, purity and fertility.

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* **Cultural Symbols:** The cultural symbols include the kola nut, wooden drums, wooden gong, grey hairs, yellow palm frond, and cowry. In Igbo culture, these symbolize 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 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. 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 ritualistic 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 civilized 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. It is therefore very important to keep these symbols in mind as Igbo people and as Africans so that we will help to propagate our culture.

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