
Igbo Symbols: Developing Aesthetic Values on the Igbo Child

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v18i2.16>

Abstract

Ndi Igbo are known by their symbols. Aesthetic relates to the principles of beauty and taste of an art. Aesthetics and Ethics often overlap to the degree that this impression is embodied in a moral ethical code. The symbols in Igbo land are of the ethical codes of the society that project its aesthetic values as such they have what they value as beauty in art or expression. Today, the average Igbo child has lost the grip of the meaning and value of these symbols. It is difficult for such a child to recognize and understand the meaning of such art, both as an expression and as an object. The writers therefore want to use this medium to awaken the interest and consciousness of the Igbo child about one of the African (Igbo) most valued culture, which is in symbols. The researchers attend this goal by reviewing related works and interviewed people. The findings of this work are that a lot of Igbo symbols abound and not much of them are transmitted to the younger generations. As a result, Igbo children do not use them or understand them as symbols rather they see them as ordinary words, expressions and objects. Therefore, the writers suggest that the Igbo child of today's aesthetic and value can be developed through symbolic treasure.

Introduction

Life is short and art is long said the ancients. This is why human societies have always attempted to sustain their cultural values by carefully preserving them through art – writing, sculpture,

moulding, carving, orality, etc. The posterity of these arts serves as a short cut to the benefits of actual life experiences. There has never been any society which has survived and flourished on totally arbitrary notions of good and evil. For any society to thrive effectively, there must be a degree of acceptance on what is good and bad and need to be transmitted from one generation onto another. This transmission of values starts from the early age of the generation next. Ndi Igbo are recognized by their traditional value structure. These traditional values are used to inculcate good morals and wisdom into the young ones. The Igbo thought or philosophy of life is preserved in their culture. This culture could be in form of belief, economy, politics, religion, ceremonies, symbols and language. The language could as well be in form of symbols as a way of non-verbal means of communication. The quantity of values procured by the younger generation determines the level of progress in the land. It facilitates witicism, sanity and respect for dignity.

The Igbo world view is a determinant in their life style. Their philosophy of life is exhibited in their carvings, thought, mouldings and all forms of art including symbols and symbolism. Therefore, it is very important to assess the young ones orientations in understanding cultural symbols and their values. Igbo symbols and other cultures should be admired for its all important values. It is pertinent to say that the educational impact on the life of the young ones in the society must be saddled with understanding the meaning of certain cultural and religious symbols and their aesthetic response in the upbringing of the Igbo child. Abakare (2009:3) maintained that culture embraces and associates with particular patterns of social behaviour expressed in semi-private language and distinctive dress and rules, roles and

identity – that must be automatically internalized so that, identity is socially bestowed, socially sustained and socially transformed. The implication of this explanation therefore encourages that the young ones must be educated or must be deep rooted in aspects of their culture (symbols) that will always remind them who they are. That is, their knowledge of Igbo symbols will be a mark of identity in the macro group of Igbo society at large. The intention of this work (research) is to provide the reader with a general knowledge of the aesthetics embedded in Igbo symbols.

Literature Review

Symbols literally mean anything which signifies something else. They stand for objects, actions, qualities not just for letters or sounds. A symbol is something that stands for something else. They suggest things beyond themselves. For example, flag, a logo, a trademark, a skull, a cross, colour, etcetera means another thing beyond their literal significance. It is another device of communication and aesthetic representation of fact. To a lay man, one may ask what is it about the Igbo symbols that make it so unique an entity that it demands a definition of its own aesthetic. The answer goes that Igbo symbols record or express many traditionally cherished values and ethical ideals in Igbo cosmology. In Igbo land, *omu* stands for war, *ojl* stands for welcome, *ofò* stands for leadership and so on. The most important feature of these symbols lies in their expression. That is, the ability to speak to man many things.

We use Igbo symbols to represent or recall some greater reality. Symbols are identity; the greater number of it that the young ones know, the more they identify themselves as responsible Igbolites and are aesthetically established. Igbo symbols have become a

necessary feature of the contemporary academic discourse, and an indispensable instrument in the formation of culture today. Strictly speaking, in order to define Igbo symbols, the questions of Igbo belief and Igbo identity are inevitable. A sound grounding for the Igbo symbolic treasure is urgent as it is necessary in the upbringing of any Igbo child. Some of the serious problems affecting the young ones today is their ill-informed knowledge of Igbo culture. And this type of situation is crying for home-grown solutions. The roles of educating the young in the meaning of symbols are to ensure they cherish Igbo values and culture while remaining in harmony with the Igbo heritage of humanity.

Makumba (2007:125) asserts that Today Africans are becoming more conscious of their African identity... How? For instance, could the important themes of African personality, African unity, negritude, African humanism, African socialism, African consciencism and authenticity be re-worker in our society today to help cultivate an environment favourable for the progress of our people? No Igbo man will deny the fact that an Igbo man who has been exposed to classical western education as the basis of his academic training will always be influenced by the thought categories and patterns of that way of thinking, consciously or otherwise; which happens to be the case with the majority of Igbo scholars today. And as such, the children of these days are denied that cultural orientation which in turn affects the way of life of our young generation. It is not lost to the keen observer that every beginnings of Igbo culture are enshrined in oral sayings of which symbols are eminent.

Abba (2014:8) says: “The Igbo have characteristics for identification of Igbo what make them the Igbo (Igbo people). Igbo

people are Africans. An Igbo man carries or imbibes within himself that religious believe and sensibility, and this is indispensable in identifying Igbo identity.” This is to say that when any Igbo child is religiously brought up in identifying some aspects of the symbols in Igbo land and what they stand for, the child will carry along the values derivable from the knowledge. Since symbols are means of interacting with one another through objects, actions, words, gestures; the young ones should store them up to enable them convey meaningful messages and interacts on abstract level. Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty. Hornby (1954:43) states that aesthetics is the creation of expression of what is beautiful especially in visual form, fine skill or aptitude in such expression.

Lending credence, Cole and Amakor (1984:35) believed that:“Every work of art is the product of social and historical conditions of its creation”. Once the work of art is created, it also begins to shape man’s social conditions as well as history. Since symbol is something we can perceive and with which we can connect a meaning or significance, it is necessary to teach the young the interpretations of such symbols. Recently, the current trends in life through globalization have erroneously affected the interest of people (Igbo) from attaching importance to issues such as symbols and their significance. Notably among such detractor is the Christian religion. (A Religious form of worship by the western world which sees the practice of some traditional religion Igbo land as fetish). This singular reason accounted for the lost of value attached to these symbols. Again, the communication form in today’s world that has elevated English language as a “Powerful” language has equally reduced the use of indigenous language (Igbo as the case may be). The drawing of Igbo language into English

language made younger generation to abhor the use of Igbo language effectively as their elders and parents equally strive to please their loved ones by using foreign languages, thereby, neglecting the application of this symbolic words/objects in their form of communication. This is the reason why it is very pertinent to redress the situation before it is too late. “Ka ewepụ aka enwe n’ofe ka ọ ghara [ghọ aka mmadụ”.

Theoretical Framework

Symbolists believed that art should represent absolute truths that could only be described indirectly. Thus, they write in a very metaphorical and suggestive manner, endowing particular images or objects with symbolic meaning. This is to say that this theory moves an individual to be hostile to plain meanings and declamations. In ancient Igbo, most sayings are metaphorical and the use of proverbs makes room for witticism. That is why popular saying goes “Onye atụọrọ ilu ma kọwara ya, ego e ji luọ nne ya furu ọh[a”]. He who is spoken to in proverbs and the proverb is interpreted, then the mothers dowry is useless. The Igbo symbols are not allegories intended to represent, they are instead intended to evoke particular states of mind. The type of feelings symbols evoke in our mind appeals to us. That is, there is some kind of aesthetic beauty when words or object signifies something else. The knowledge of that signified gladdens the heart. From early Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, they felt that aesthetically appealing objects were beautiful and objects of such incorporate proportion, harmony and unity among their parts. This is to say that an observer is subjected to use his previous knowledge and develop a particular method of encoding or decoding data. This is closely related to the principles of algorithmic information theory and minimum description length.

That is to say that symbolism can make one to enjoy simple proofs with a short description in their formal language. The aesthetic value and its judgment rely on our ability to discriminate at a sensory level. It examines our affective domain response to an object or phenomenon. It is on this background that the writers want to remind the readers and young ones to develop the spirit of appreciating the Igbo culture and values and also to embrace indepth relationship of objects and what they stand for.

Empirical Review

In the course of writing this work, the writers reviewed an unpublished Ph.D Dissertation of Igbokwe (2013) on Igbo cultural symbols. Igbokwe accounted for the poor attention given to symbolic knowledge by both old and young in Igbo land. He enlisted different symbols associated with religious and cultural beliefs of the Igbo as well as their significances. He is of the view that even adherents of modern religion should be educated and sensitized to avoid a misinterpretation of what symbols stand for. According to him, symbols communicate information of all categories and significance, from the purely social and physical to the moral order. Igbokwe's work dealt mainly on the religious and cultural symbols in Igbo land. But the present work intends to discuss even words or expressions that are symbolic in Igbo land.

Classification of Symbols

Symbols are of different forms. There are public and cultural symbols. Conventional symbols relate to those symbols that connotes the same meaning all over the world. For example – the cross, skull peacock, eagle, rising and setting sun; colours like red, pink, blue, black, white etc, all mean the same thing to everyone in the world. Cultural symbols stand for belief, identity, religion,

signs and moral values of a given society. According to Nwaorgu (2001:3 and 7) cultural symbols are: Something which expresses or stands for people's beliefs, identities, traits, moral values, ethical ideals, virtues, religion, signs, sacrifices, arts and civilization. Example; *ofonaogu*, ashes, colours, *omu*, tribal marks, carved stools, masks, crosses, etc. The cultural symbols stand for common traits or virtues among people of the ethnic group. Ndi Igbo have so many symbols in words and objects that they use to represent things. For them, symbol means a sign or that which indicates and at the same time, reflects a part of faith made by the Igbo people among themselves to sustain their society. Igbokwe (2013) identifies: cultural, religious and plant and animal symbols in Igbo land as the different kinds of symbols we have.

Some Symbols and their Meanings in Igboland

1) *Oj* (kolanut acuminata): In the Igbo traditional settings; *oj* permeates all aspects of life; political, social, economical, and religious. A lot of respect is accorded to it for its diversified importance. The implication is that nobody eats the kola-nut anyhow or casually like any other fruit. In its unique position in the cultural life of Igbo people; *oj* symbolizes the following: communion, life, hospitality, reconciliation, unit peace, and sealing of covenant. That is, *oj* means custom that unites the Igbo people (*omenaala jikotara Igbo*) (Nwadike, 2007). Accordingly, Osuji (2009:44) affirms this when he says: "Kolanut symbolizes peace, respect, goodwill, acceptability, settlement of quarrel and in fact anything that stands for love and unity." That is why kolanuts are used for every occasion in Igbo culture and it is one of the most surviving cultural practices of the Igbo man". Kolanut is an all important symbol associated with ndi Igbo. It is celebrated and

forms the basis or bedrock of Igbo traditional ceremonies, its cotyledon and their numbers stands for something. It is usually believed that a kola *Acuminata* with four cotyledons represent the four market days in Igbo land and that is an indication that is a good one representing the four economic days of the people. Okekenta (2012:9) identified the five cotyledon piece of *ojl* as to represent *ojl uba* and *omumu*. This symbolizes procreation, good luck and useful abundance. While a kola (*ojl*) with one cotyledon, that is, is not divided into pieces, such should not be eaten. It is believable that majority of our children does not know all these and as such could make mistake eating the ones that are forbidden to be ate. Therefore, it is good that young ones should always be trained in this direction.

2) *Ofo* (Staff): This is known as a symbol of authority in Igbo land. Nnabuchi in Aghamelu and Asomugha (2009:221-222) described *ofo* as “the Igbo man’s spiritual base through which the forces of nature are harnessed procreated, sustained and dissolved. It is therefore their symbolism of attuning with the all-embracing creative energy.” Morally, *ofo* is a spiritualized moral agent and the philosophical world view for code. They have more than physical power to wreck havoc on enemies. Nwaorgu (2001:5) defined *ofo* as “a ritual, moral, social, legal, political and linguistic symbol of justice... *ofo* is the Igbo identity for leadership”. The most important aspect of *ofo* is found in its symbolism of ancestral authority when it has been handed on to the firstborn son (*Okpara*) for several generations. An Igbo child who is aware of the principles of *ofo* inheritance may carelessly live out his life. But if from beginning a child is thought the value of *ofo* as authority and must be handled by a person of just character; the child will be very conscious of his moral ethics believing that it is only the

upright that leads others or that “an ọfọ holder should/must guide his words, thoughts and deeds.

3) Ogu: This is a symbol of innocence, in Igbo land. Ogu is usually acquired at the instance of a diviner. Anyanwu in Uwa nd[Igbo (1989:105) says that “Ogu represents the spiritual force of truth and justice; it is only the upright man who may be considered eligible to hold an emblem for the dispensation of these virtues”. Ogu is also a moral and symbolic agent in the Igbo philosophy of life.

4) Ikenga: Ikenga could be defined in terms of form and concept. In this sense, Ikenga is associated with masculinity, strength, endeavour, success, uprightness, integrity and ancestry. It is a symbol of personal strength and progressiveness The leaders of the body of Christ on July22, 1999 as quoted by Nwaorgu (200 1:243) defines Ikenga as... the Igbo god of personal strength and achievement to which our traditionally minded forebearers attributed their success in various realms of endeavour. It is artistically presented as a two-horned carving which in any art form, is an idolatrous object, by every standard.

5) Mbari: This is a symbol of culture and aestheticism among the Igbos. It is as old as the Igbo race. Kalu (2008:1) describes it as “a mini museum of artefacts containing various forms and representations of the visual arts. Some are carved, others moulded. Continuing, he said that “the Igbos sustained their sense of identity, beauty and aestheticism through these arts”. The Mbari is usually situated at the village square with various symbols displayed in art forms to represent and make references to man, his culture and nature.

6) Mmṛnwu (Masquerade): The masquerade in Igbo symbolizes disciplinarian and it goes to buttress the slogan (e nwere nnukwu mmanwu nwee otimkpu). (Nnukwu mmanwu pṛta obodo (otimkpuawara ọsọ). Okodo, (2009:258) in Aghamelu and Asomugha described the Igbo masquerade as “a representation of the forefathers of the people among the living. Is a representative of the dead ancestors of the people”. The Igbo masquerade goes a long way in enforcing discipline in the Igbo society.

7) Mam[wṛta: This is the goddess of River in Igbo cosmology. It is usually a symbol associated with extreme beauty and fairness. Usually a very fair and beautiful woman is referred to as Mam[wṛta. In the present dispensation of Christianity, it is a demonic symbol. A woman/girl who exhibits an ungodly behaviour is referred to be possessed by mermaid or the marine spirit(mam[wṛta)

8) Ah[ajiokṛ: This is a symbol of the god of yam festival. It usually marks the harvest of yam. Yam like kolanut is highly respected and preserved. It has many taboos attached to it as well. Some great and successful yam farmers before the proliferation of different types of occupation caused by modern civilization and technology were highly regarded as rich men in the community. Therefore, the Igbos from different towns and villages thank their God/god for his protection of the people and for giving them bountiful harvest at the beginning of yam harvesting. Presently, an annual lecture in Imo State, referred to as Ah[ajiokṛ lecture; is an important institution of intellectual harvest about issues on Igbo culture and civilization. It is an instrument for cultural capacity building for the Igbo man and woman.

9) Oj[(Iroko): This is the iroko tree. It is the king of all trees as It's greatness in height and size. The iroko tree (oj[) symbolizes greatness in height and prowess. That is why this adage goes that "osisi ukwu daa, umu nunnun eju oh[a". This is because the oj[is the "osisi ukwu" in Igboland; the umbrella tree where the birds perch and they are not easily harmed by their enemies as a result of the great height where they are. Again, it harbours as many birds as possible. Therefore, whenever a bread winner of a family dies; he is referred to as a fallen oj[(iroko) tree. Umunnun eju oh[a means the birds will scatter. That is the children of the dead man (iroko) will be in trouble. Example; ofonaogu, ashes, colours, omu, tribal marks, carved stools, masks, crosses, etc. The cultural symbols stand for common traits or virtues among people of the ethnic group. Ndi Igbo have so many symbols in words and objects that they use to represent things. For them, symbol means a sign or that which indicates and at the same time, reflects a part of faith made by the Igbo people among themselves to sustain their society. Igbokwe (2013) identifies: cultural, religious and plant and animal symbols in Igbo land as the different kinds of symbols we have.

Some Symbols and their Meanings in Igbo land

10) Cock-crow: - This is a symbol of time usually associated with the cock. Whenever and wherever the cock appears in a logo, art or writing, it signifies that it is morning or time to do something.

11) Ukwu Aziza: The bundle of broom is symbolic. It shows togetherness, unity and cleaner. The broom, in their tiny nature; tied together as one is used to sweep dirt and rubbish. As they do

this work, they live no stone unturned. This is possible as a result of joint effort.

12) *Ọmụ*: In Igbo land, *ọmụ* is place in farms, land or in anything that is under dispute signifying “carviet emptor” as layers will put it. It is an indication that if any ventures to go there, trouble will ensue. Therefore whoever sees where *ọmụ* is used to make barricade should not trespass for the avoidance of trouble.

13) Red Colour: Red indicates danger. That is, nobody should near the scene. If the persons does, it may lead to death, some will use red coloured cloth to the on their possessions they do not want anybody to touch. Future to adhere to such type of symbolic language is bound to fall into danger.

14) *Virginity*: This indicates moral life, purity etc.

15) *Nudity of Young Girl*: Nudity of young girl utter purity and innocence.

16) *Akpụ*: (Cotton tree): They are highly polymetaphoric. This type is not easily accessible to man. In the olden days they believed that if a warrior prepares to go to war and embraces the tree any bullet directed to him will not touch him but rather the tree will absorb it. Therefore, in some towns like Igboukwu they call it *oghomgbọ*.

17) *Ụdara*: Grows and provides popular fruits of Igbo land. It brings success. It symbolizes fertility, procreation and abundance.

18) Mmanya Nkwụ: Relevant in every ritual, social and religious practices in Igbo culture. It is synonymous with oji.

19) Ose oj[(alligator pepper): It has a stimulating effect. It also accompanies the kolanut.

20) Ogirisi (*Newbouldia Laevis*): Important ritual plant in agwu cult. Feature more regularly at the shrine than any other plant. Its equivalent is the oha.

We also have symbolic animals in Igbo land. Animals like Vulture signifies death/decay, snake-deceit, tortoise – cunning, frog-laziness, clustered bees – bad omen, snail – slowness, dog-prostitution, and bat – witch/wizard, etcetera. These animals whenever they appear in one's dream or gather in one's house uninvited, one should know their meaning and implications. So many Igbo symbols abound; but the limits of this paper could not avail the researcher opportunity to list and explain all of them.

Aesthetic Implication of Symbolic Knowledge on Children

Art, belief, faith, may be abstract but if it is expressed symbolically, may be understood more. For instance, the roped pot is a symbol of archeological period of Nd[Igbo. It portrays wealth, and aesthetic. When children become conversant with the meaning of symbols, they are bound to benefit in the following measure. Most symbols are carved, decorated, painted and/or moulded. As such it appeals to the eye. It becomes an object of beautification for instance painting of a woman with a child breastfeeding shows the mother's responsibility to her new born baby. Schooling is incomplete when learning did not take place. Therefore; there will be no change in the behaviour of the young

ones when they do not understand the meaning of symbols. Symbols could be a form of amusement. For instance, a drawing or painting of a person with closed mouth and finger placed on the lips and one part of the face is widely mouth opened. At a glance it may appear funny but at another instance, it may indicate that silence is preferred to noisemaking.

Conclusion

It has been observed that symbols serve as code of conduct as well as a standard yardstick for measurement which members of a society look up to. So many Igbo symbols in art or expression have been wiped away by the encounter with western cultures but despite the colonial experience of cultural invasion, some Igbo symbols have kept their vitality. Values for Igbo symbols will enable a person identify himself with the people's culture. Our survival depends on our ability to explain the hidden treasures in the world and ensure that they are maintained for posterity. Makumba (2007:131) has this to say: The individual finds meaning only in the community and outside. It is nothing and has nothing. The community makes people into what they are socially, psychologically and morally. It gives one identity and all that matters in life. Were the community to withdraw its "sponsorship" of an individual, such a one is left suspended in no-man's land. Therefore the writers suggest that some of these symbols though affected by the new trends in development be represented in art-motifs. So that, wherever they are seen, it will remind us of our backgrounds and also speak to foreigners about us. They can also be made for decorations and in turn boost the economy of the people when they are sold beyond Africa.

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