

Cultural linguistic interpretation of masculinity in selected Igbo burial songs and rites

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Abstract

The instantiation of cultural conceptualization of death and masculinity in selected Igbo burial songs and rites through the framework of cultural cognition is the focus of this study. The Igbo ethnic group of South-eastern Nigeria are religious people who believe in the mutual and peaceful co-existence of dichotomous categories such as the living and the dead, the natural and the supernatural, the visible and the invisible, and the material and the immaterial. Masculinity as used in this study refers to the construction and enactment of some socio-cultural attributes, roles, behaviours and expectations that are considered appropriate for the male gender in Igbo traditional society. At the heart of Cultural Linguistics (CL), which this study adopts as its theoretical anchor, is the notion of cultural cognition, which supports an integrated understanding of the notions of cognition, language, and culture in the communication of social meaning in contexts. Cultural cognition is composed of *cultural schemas*, *cultural categories* and *cultural metaphors* that enable language users to express their bodily experiences and their knowledge of the environment. Previous studies on burials/funerals in most African societies have largely been explored from the perspective of ethnography without insights from thought and cognition hence, this study sets out to bridge the gap. The study adopts a qualitative approach to the analysis of primary data collected through participant observation and oral interviews. The study reveals that the Nnebukwu community and other communities

in Oru-Igbo of Imo State instantiate and reflect cultural conceptualization in cultural artefacts such as songs, oral narratives, rituals, and other social semiotic modes.

Keywords: Cultural Linguistics, masculinity, Oru-Igbo, Nnebukwu, Igbo burial songs and rites

Introduction

The instantiation of cultural conceptualization of death and masculinity in selected Igbo burial songs and rites through the framework of cultural cognition is the focus of this study. The Igbo ethnic group of South-eastern Nigeria are religious people who believe in the mutual and peaceful co-existence of dichotomous categories such as the living and the dead, the natural and the supernatural, the visible and the invisible, and the material and the immaterial. Here, we offer some background on how the Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria, like most African societies, believe in the existence of God and other supernatural forces that interfere and sometimes control the affairs of humans, and therefore, provide a base for the understanding of the cultural conceptualization of death and masculinity in selected Igbo burial songs and rites

The Igbo traditional society was a religiously conscious one prior to the advent of Western cultural and religious influences (Orjikwe, 2016). Kamalu and Ngwoke (2017) contend that the Igbo believe in the existence of the Supreme Being (God) whose powers cannot be challenged, but they also believe in the existence of other superhuman forces that are subordinate to the supreme God, but superior to

humans. The above represents the cosmic view of existence by the Igbo ethnic group or how the Igbo perceive their cosmic universe. Thus, existence to the Igbo, consists of dichotomous categories of the visible and the invisible or the tangible and the intangible or the physical and the spiritual. There are constant interactions between these realms of existence. As Orjikwe (2016, 76) posits, "...the Igbo cosmology is only understood in this interaction between man and the invisible world in his local environment, and for the traditional Igbo there is always this consciousness of divine control of various nature." Onwuejeogwu (1975, 7) argues that places within the Igbo culture area share an identical conception of the cosmos which categorizes the universe into four major departments: *Uwa*, *Mmuo*, *Alusi*, and *Okike*.

According to Onwuejeogwu, *Uwa* is represented by the visible world made up of *Igwe na Ala*, the firmament, and the earth. It is occupied by human beings (*Mmadu*), forest (*Agu*) and animals (*Anumanu*). *Mmuo* are dead ancestors, men who lived on earth and founded the lineages. This belief is anchored on the assumption that dead male members of the family still interfere in the actions and activities of the living members of their families. A dead person is *Mmuo*. *Alusi* are supernatural forces that may have attributes of humans but they are neither living human beings (*Mmadu*) nor dead human beings (*Mmuo*). He refers to them as "being-forces." *Okike* is the creator and is also called *Chi Okike* or *Chineke* or *Chukwu*. Metuh (1991, 24) in his own understanding of Igbo cosmology contends that the Igbo understand the world to consist of two realms. According to him:

All beings known to the Igbo belong to either of two worlds – the visible world (*Uwa*), and the invisible world (*Ala Mmuo*). The visible world is peopled by men and contains the material surroundings familiar to man. The invisible world is the spirit world. Here is the abode of the Creator, *Chukwu*, the deities, *Mmuo*, the spirit forces, and the ancestors, *Ndichie*.

The author also maintains that the world of human experience is seen as one fluid coherent unit in which spirits, men, animals, plants, and the elements are engaged in a continuous interaction. Thus, the universe as the Igbo know it, is full of spirits. The world is not limited to the material world of visible beings but includes the realm of invisible things. The Igbo also believe that life itself is a mystery and there also exist other mysterious beings that enjoy different kinds of relationships with human beings. These beliefs constitute an integral aspect of the Igbo worldview (Kamalu and Ngwoke 2017). Similarly, Chinwe Achebe (1986, 11) contends that “the Igbo universe... is conceptualized into three categories: “Elu Igwe,” “Ala Mmuo,” and “Ala Mmadu” ... the sky, land of spirits and the land of the living, each complementing the other.” She further argues that:

The typography of the spirit world is exactly the same as that of the world of the living. Life mirrors each other in both worlds. Both worlds are also contiguous with each other. Considerable and continuous contact exists between them; for “man journeys from the spirit land to the land of the living and back in an endless cycle of birth, death and reincarnation.” There is also, apart from the clearly defined land of the living and the dead, a precarious and nebulous territory, a kind of no man’s land where restless and unappeased spirits reside (Achebe 1986,11).

Achebe describes how the Igbo and other groups perceive their universe as representing their worldview. Okoye (1980) affirms that the Igbo consider existence to be cyclical and endless. Thus, Sackey (2013, 151) describes worldview as:

...the way a particular people or society understands or perceives the world in which it finds itself. It embodies ideas and beliefs which human beings have about the origins of the universe, their relations with and obligations to other human beings, as well as the natural elements or ecology and cosmological phenomena.

Worldview therefore implies how a group perceives or thinks about their natural and social worlds including their figured worlds. Gee (2014, 89) describes a figured world as a picture of a simplified world that captures what is taken to be typical or normal. He argues that what is taken to be typical or normal, of course, varies by context and by people's social and cultural groups. In the same vein, the Igbo group as a patriarchal society, makes distinctions between the roles it assigns to the male and female genders or it expects from either of the genders within its cultural domain. Wardhaugh (2010) argues that gender as a social and cultural construct is not just a pool of attributes "possessed" by a person, but something a person "does". What a person does or says is determined by the norms of interaction and the norms of interpretation within and across communities (Kamalu, et al. 2022). This implies that societal norms and values define social roles and participation by individuals and groups in discourse situations.

Background: African religion, culture, and representations

The belief in the supernatural is an essential component of African ontology. As mentioned above, the Igbo believe in the existence of God, humans and other beings who maintain some level of interaction in the cosmic environment. As Orjikwe (2016,

152) puts it, "Just as any African, the Igbo is aware that he (sic) is socio-ontologically inserted into a mesh of intimate relationship with other beings, visible and invisible." This interaction with other entities consciously and unconsciously shapes and defines how the Igbo express their knowledge of reality and existence (see Opata 2005).

African folklore and discourses are rife with stories about spirits, ghouls, incubi, the grotesque, and other elemental powers that interfere in the affairs of humans. The African belief in the world of spirits is captured by Idowu (1991, 173-174) thus:

they are more often than not thought of as powers which are almost abstract, as shades or vapours which take human shape; they are immaterial and incorporeal beings. They are so constituted that they can assume various dimensions whenever they wish to be 'seen' – they may be either abnormally small or abnormally tall, fat or thin ... spirits according to African belief, are ubiquitous ... there are spirits which inhabit rocks, mountains and hills, forests and bushes, rivers and water courses.

Africans believe there are supernatural powers in every object in the environment.

This explains why they worship, revere, or dread certain entities. Mbiti (1991) makes a distinction between "Nature Spirits" and "Human Spirits". There are nature spirits of the sky and nature spirits of the earth. He corroborates Idowu's earlier statement that there are spirits that govern:

the earth, hills, mountains, rocks and boulders, trees and forests, metals, water in various forms (such as lakes, ponds, rivers, waterfalls and rapids, lagoons and river banks), different animals and insects, certain diseases, and so on (173-174).

The human spirits are the spirits of dead relations who still continue to perform diverse functions in their various families. Africans believe that death is just a transition to another plane or realm of existence. Hence, the dead still interfere in the affairs of the living.

The Igbo and most African societies (Mbiti 1991; Idowu 1991) believe in the existence of spirits and other supernatural powers. Even animals and birds can be possessed by supernatural powers and made to perform functions that violate their natural roles. In the African worldview, the border between the world of humans and the world of the spirit is fluid. This has been established in several African narratives and literatures, both oral and written (Kamalu 2009). Consequently, the recent focus of critical searchlight on the so-called (West) African magical realism by critics would reveal that the mode transcends the marvellous or fabulous literature of the Latin American brand (Kamalu 2009). Mbiti (1991, 79), justifying the presence of spirits and the supernatural in contemporary African literature, remarks:

By bringing spirits so much into oral literature, art forms and ceremonies, people familiarize themselves with spirits and therefore remove much of fear that they might otherwise feel for these invisible and ubiquitous beings.

The acceptance of the existence of the supernatural is embedded in the culture of most African societies. Sofola (1973, 3) posits that “culture mediates in the expression of man’s self or his attitudes and values” (sic). Thus, the verbal and non-verbal performances of the Igbo are forms of expressing their cultural orientations on diverse issues such as life, death, gender, class, religion, etc. Gender plays

crucial roles in the enactment of some of these performances. There are performances that are exclusively for males just as there are others that are exclusively for females. Yet, there are performances in which both genders perform varied roles as defined by the norms of interaction and interpretation of the community.

The traditional Igbo society has art performances and ceremonies that conceptualize their cultural and spiritual experiences. These art forms and ceremonies are cultural semiotic representations of the ideational and the social worlds of the group. The Igbo also have songs for every occasion such as birth songs for child naming, praise songs for individuals that deserve such on specific occasions or ceremonies, war songs during real conflict or its ceremonial re-enactment, funeral/burial songs during and after burials, initiation songs during passage rites and so on. Thus, different ceremonies or social situations call for different songs and performances.

The relationship between African traditional religion and animism

The concept of animism, rooted in the ideas of E.B. Tylor (1958), aims to explain the emergence of religion in human societies by attributing sacred or divine qualities to inanimate objects. Tylor's definition of religion as the belief in spiritual beings encompasses various expressions found in indigenous societies. While early European investigators (travelers, missionaries, explorers, and traders) labeled African indigenous religions as animistic (Harvey 2005), it is important to

understand the distinction between animism and animatism, which attributes vitality and agency to both animate and inanimate objects. African traditional religions, particularly among the Igbo and Ikwerre (a member of the *Igboid* linguistic group and part of the *Kwa* subfamily of a Niger-Congo family of African languages. Members of the linguistic group share identical cultural and linguistic commonalities), embrace a worldview where sacred objects and spirits are separate entities, giving rise to a spiritualized universe. However, contemporary perspectives have reevaluated animism, leading to the emergence of new spiritualities like neo-primitivism, which seeks to reconnect with nature and promote ecological sustainability (Harvey 2005).

E.B. Tylor's concept of animism arose from the belief that inanimate objects possess sacred qualities. It was an attempt to explain the development of religion in human society. Tylor argued that animistic beliefs originated from the concept of the soul, which explained experiences like dreams, trances, and death. Over time, the belief expanded to include animals, plants, and stones, mountains, hills, rivers, and groves providing a universal understanding of the natural world (Tylor 1958, 270-271, 320-325; Lambert 2020, 25-29).

Although early European investigators classified African indigenous religions as animistic (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979, 22-23), this fails to capture the complexity of these belief systems. The distinction between animism and animatism is crucial, as African traditional religions attribute agency and sacredness to both animate and inanimate objects. Rituals and ceremonies among the Igbo and Ikwerre

communities illustrate the deep sacred roots associated with objects like the *ófo* stick and the *ékpà óha* (sacred bag). In this worldview, the sacred and profane worlds coexist without demarcation, fostering an interconnectedness between the living and the dead, and the spiritual and manifest realms (Mbiti 1969; Ejizu 1985; Gbule 2011).

Contemporary perspectives and Neo-Primitivism

Anthropologists, environmentalists, and religious studies scholars have reevaluated the term animism, giving rise to "new age" spiritualities such as neo-primitivism.

Harvey (2005, xviii) defines "animisms" as theories and practices that emphasize living well in the company of non-human persons. In other words, it is the belief in spirits that recognizes personhood or rationality among the non-human animals, plants, objects, and natural phenomena with which humans share the world. From this perspective, neo-primitivism seeks to reconnect with nature, promoting a harmonious relationship with the natural world, wilderness, ecological sustainability, and biodiversity preservation. It responds to ecological disasters and calls to integrate primitive values and practices into modern society (Harvey 2005, 205).

Neo-primitivism faces criticism from cultural relativists who caution against romanticizing and idealizing indigenous cultures (Platvoet 2004, 47-52). Platvoet and his savants emphasize the importance of recognizing the diversity and complexity of indigenous societies while avoiding cultural appropriation and

assuming universal solutions. However, Cox (2017,163 {2007}) argues that neo-primitivism should not be seen as opposing modernity, but rather as a positive reevaluation of the world, aiming to enhance a holistic human life. Kalu (2001, 228) envisions this revalidation of animism as a covenant between humans and spirit forces, maintaining a ritual balance in our “fragile, enfolding, and nurturing ecosystem”.

The relationship between African traditional religion and animism is complex and nuanced. While early scholars labeled indigenous religions in Africa as animistic, this fails to capture the rich tapestry of beliefs and practices. African traditional religions embrace a worldview that attributes agency and sacredness to both animate and inanimate objects. Contemporary perspectives have given rise to new spiritualities like neo-primitivism, which seek to reconnect with nature and promote ecological sustainability. However, caution must be exercised to avoid cultural appropriation and simplistic generalizations. A nuanced approach, as suggested by Cox, could lead to a more profound understanding of animism's role in African indigenous religion and spirituality.

Patterns of traditional burial and funeral rites among the Igbo

Igbo communities or societies have different religious practices through which they commune and reconnect with God and other supernatural forces in their environment. Some of these practices may come in the form of prayer, sacrifice or ritual (Orjikwe 2016). Prayers, sacrifices and rituals feature as crucial aspects of

burial and funeral rites among the Igbo. In this study, our focus is on the rituals associated with burials and funerals in Igbo societies, so we begin by examining the concept and importance of rituals in traditional Igbo religion and culture. According to Orjikwe, ritual performances are indispensable features of religion among the Igbo without which there would be no religion. Orjikwe (2016) posits that in rituals, men act out the tensions they experience, bringing about a tense unity once more. He further argues that ritual:

...could also be described as a symbolic approach which embodies social relations, status or even the role of individuals within the society. It refers to the transcendental numinous reality and to ultimate values of the community or society. Religiously, ritual helps man to move into the ultimate realm and to establish a relationship with the unknown (Orjikwe 2016, 151).

This implies that ritual practices are the embodiments of religion in traditional societies. Ritual is therefore the way the individual and community help to maintain and sustain the order of the sacred cosmos. Consequently, Orjikwe contends that the traditional Igbo believe that through ritual, man says something about his inner religious awareness, his vision, and his beliefs about the cosmos. He further posits that the performance of one kind of ritual or another is the traditional Igbo way of regulating life and human existence as the "...ritual activities encompass the various phases of an individual's life cycle, from birth through naming ceremony, adolescent initiation, full adulthood, and title status, to death and passage to ancestorhood" (p.152). Orjikwe classifies Igbo rituals into personal rituals and community rituals. For special reasons and purposes, animals such as owls, parrots, rams, pythons,

vulture, tortoises, pigeons, dogs, chicks and cocks are some of the animals used by the Igbo in their ritual performances.

Mbiti (1969) perceives death as part of life's natural and inevitable rhythm. He opines that death stands between the world of human beings and the world of spirits, between the visible and the invisible. He observes that there are many, and often complicated, ceremonies connected with death, burials, funerals, inheritance, the living-dead, the world of the departed, the visit of the living-dead to their human families, reincarnation and survival of the soul. This, therefore, explains why the rituals connected with death are usually elaborate. The Igbo traditional society performs different rituals associated with death, but these rituals differ from one community to another. Different paraphrenia or objects are required for each segment of the process of burial. However, the nature and scope of rituals performed for the dead are sometimes determined by the age, gender, social class, and circumstances surrounding the death of the individual. Our focus in this study is on the cognitive and cultural framing of masculinity in the burial/funeral ceremonies of a male adult in Oru-Igbo society.

Among the Oru-Igbo people, the patterns of burial/funeral of a full adult man in demonstration of masculinity are in three stages, namely; *Igba-agma* (enactment of war dance/actions), *Iwayi ife n'anya* (incision of powers into the eye), and *Igbaji-amara* (breaking of the paddle). Buchanan (2010) sees masculinity as being culturally defined and varies across time and geography. At the surface level of signification, it encapsulates traits, attitudes and behaviours traditionally ascribed to men by

society. However, at the deeper level of signification, it implies how men are constrained to conform to the cultural expectations of the society. The cultural expectations of Igbo men are different from that of Egyptian men. Similarly, the Igbo group has different social expectations and roles for male and female genders of the society. Holmes and Wilson (2017) make distinction between sex and gender. While sex refers to categories distinguished by biological characteristics, gender is more appropriate for distinguishing people on the basis of their socio-cultural behaviour, including speech. The three main levels or processes by which the Igbo demonstrate masculinity during burial/funeral rites performances will be properly discussed as results later in this study.

Theoretical considerations

Sharifian developed the concept of Cultural Linguistics (CL) which is chiefly concerned with the notion that there is an intrinsic link between language, culture, and conceptualization. Sharifian and Palmer (2007), Sharifian (2011), and Sharifian (2017) explore the relationship between language, culture, and conceptualizations. Sharifian (2011) used the term “conceptualisation” to refer to fundamental cognitive processes such as *schematisation* and *categorisation*. Schematisation refers to a process that systematically selects certain aspects of a referent scene to present the whole, disregarding the remaining aspects. Categorisation on the other hand is a process by which distinct entities are treated as somehow equivalent. To Sharifian, these processes culturally lead to the development of *schemas* and *categories* (p.3). Sharifian

posits that the human conceptual faculties derive from various sources of experience, including bodily and environmental, which enable new experiences to be made sense of and organized (p.24).

The notion of cultural conceptualization ties with Cultural Linguistics. Sharifian argues that Cultural Linguistics benefits from insights in cognitive linguistics (and other related disciplines) and its analytical tools are shaped by cultural schemas, cultural categories and cultural metaphors. Similarly, Sharifian and Palmer (2007,1) posit that “language is a cultural activity and, at the same time, an instrument for organizing other cultural domains. Speakers take account of discourse situations, which are structured by culture.” This implies that the ways societies perceive or conceptualize phenomena such as corruption, illness, health, political activities, relationships, death, burials and funerals, and so on are culturally, linguistically and cognitively mediated (Kamalu et al, 2023). At the heart of the theoretical framework of Cultural Linguistics is the notion of “cultural cognition”, which affords an integrated understanding of the notions of “cognition” and “culture” as they relate to language (Sharifian 2017,2). Cultural cognition is composed of *cultural schemas*, *cultural categories* and *cultural metaphors*. Thus, the categories embody group-level cognitive systems such as worldviews. Cultural conceptualization or cultural cognition can be instantiated and reflected in cultural artefacts such as paintings, rituals, language, and even silence (Sharifian, 2011). This implies that cultural tokens such as songs, silence, paintings, sacred objects, rituals, oral narratives and others are embodiments of cultural conceptualization or cultural

cognition. The instantiation of cultural conceptualization of death and masculinity in the burial/funeral rites and songs of the Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria is the chief focus of this study.

Methods

The data for this study were collected from the scenes of burial/funeral ceremonies in Oru-Igbo through participant observation and oral interviews. The primary data for study were gathered between January, 2020 – March, 2023. The researchers and their two informants witnessed and participated in fifteen (15) burial/funeral ceremonies during the period. The events were carefully chosen and prominence was given to burial/funeral ceremonies that their processes were in full conformity with the required tradition of the Oru-Igbo people. This study is qualitative in nature. Its research objectives are realized through the following research questions:

(1) How is masculinity encoded in the burial/funeral practices of the Oru-Igbo people? (2) What is the social semiotic signification of the burial/funeral paraphernalia/objects used by the Oru-Igbo people? (3) To what extent are funeral songs verbal forms of construing human existence and masculinity among the Oru-Igbo people?

The Oru-Igbo people of Imo State in South-eastern Nigeria participate in different religious practices in a manner peculiar to their linguistic and cultural history. The phrase, Oru-Igbo (Jell-Bahlsen 2008), refers to the Igbo cultural group that inhabits the geographical space around the famous Oguta Lake near the

confluence of the rivers of Niger and *Urashi*. The communities on both sides of the Lake include Oguta, Ezi-Orsu, Orsu-Obodo, Nnebukwu, Nkwesi and Mgbele. These communities share a cultural commonality and dialectal similarity that give them a distinct identity different from that of other Igbo communities in the Southeast. In this study, we are concerned with the processes or rituals involved in the burial of an adult man.

All adult men in Oru-Igbo as in other parts of Igbo land are not accorded the same scale and nature of burial. The nature of rituals to be performed during the process of death and burial is determined by factors such as the age of the man, his wealth, the titles held and traditional cult groups he belonged to while alive, and lifestyle among others. These social factors determine if the dead man deserves a decent or proper traditional burial/funeral or not. Adult men are usually buried by their surviving age-grade members with the full support of the immediate and extended families of the deceased, the entire village, and other well-wishers who may have one link or the other with the deceased and his family.

The first and third researchers are natives of Oru-Igbo and thus familiar with the cultural and linguistic practices of the group while the second researcher has deep cultural knowledge of most Igbo and Ikwerre societies. The researchers carried out an ethnographic investigation of the traditional burial of adult men in some Oru-Igbo communities, particularly the Nnebukwu community. Nnebukwu was chosen as a case study because it is, historically, the first community to settle on the southern part of the Oguta Lake and also a great symbolic custodian of the culture

and traditions of the Oru-Igbo people. The researchers also involved the services of informants: Mr. Ifeanyi L. Onumonu and Prince Stanley U. Okoroji (informants gave verbal consent for their identity to be mentioned in print) in gathering vital information on the subject matter under investigation. In addition, the researchers together with the informants, interviewed the late Chief Raymond N. Okonkwo in 2020 on the subject matter while the only three surviving members of the oldest age grade (*Otu-Oyibo* 1) in the community; namely *Aranze* Prince Raymond Nwanegbo Nnani, *Ogene* designate Mike Ebinonwu Ossai and *Nnowu* Victor Chukwudi Eze were interviewed in 2023. All the respondents are in their 90s and gave the researchers permission to mention their names in print.

This study adopts content analysis as its research design. Content analysis is either qualitative or quantitative and can be conducted with any written material, from documents to interview transcripts, and can be applied to large numbers of texts (Sándorova 2014). Wigston (2009) contends that a qualitative content analysis, which this study adopts, tends to be more critical in nature and can be used when we need to penetrate the deeper layers of a message, such as in semiology or narrative analysis.

Results

Cultural-cognitive appraisal of traditional burial/funeral rites in Oru-Igbo of

South-eastern Nigeria

Burials/funerals are *event schemas* or *event schematic* in which different societies have their own patterns of representation. Burial/funeral events are determined by the cultural practices of a society. A complete traditional burial/funeral in Oru-Igbo of an adult man has three main stages, namely, *Igba-agma* (enactment of warfare), *Iwayi ife n'anya* (incision of powers into the eye) and *Igbaji-amara* (breaking of the paddle). These three stages are crucial in the enactment of rituals associated with masculinity among the Oru-Igbo people. More importantly, these three stages are social semiotic patterns of representing ideation among the group. Each of these stages has the items required for its performance and its social meaning, and significance in context. It is the belief of the Nnebukwu people and other communities in Oru-Igbo that departed members of the family may not be well received by their ancestors if the rituals associated with each stage of the transition rites are not satisfactorily carried out. There have been reports of departed members or relatives being starved, kept outside in solitude or denied some of their rights and privileges because certain rites were not performed at their burial/funeral. And until the appropriate rituals are performed, such members or relatives will continue to wander restlessly in the inter-spaces or inter-realms between the living and the dead. It is important to mention that since the Igbo traditional society has different expectations and roles for male and female genders, so it has different cultural practices or rituals in the enactment

of masculinity or femininity during burial/funeral ceremonies. Gender roles and practices for burials/funerals are culturally defined.

The Igba-Agha ritual performance or enactment of war

Igba-agma which literally translates to dance of war involves the enchantment of different war songs, while brandishing war instruments such as locally manufactured guns, cutlasses, machetes, clubs, sticks and green leaves by groups related to the dead man. *Agha* means war in the Igbo language. This ceremony is performed before interment or formal burial. It is therefore a pre-interment activity. *Igba-agma* is usually initiated by the kindred (*agma-umunnadi*) of the deceased man who chant war songs and dance from one end of the family space to another in search of their departed brother. The kindred of the dead man will continue with the chants and dance until the age grade members of the dead man take over (*agma-umuotu*) from them or both groups (*umunnadi* and *umuotu*) merge their forces into a dervish and ferocious one. *Agha-obodo* (*agma* of the entire community) is performed when the deceased is a village/community head. The *igba-agma* ceremony sometimes gets fervent and violent during which valuable economic trees/plants like plantain, banana, pear, orange in the vicinity get prematurely chopped down or plundered by the invading warriors, particularly the younger men involved in the war dance. Domestic animals like goats, dogs or chicken that stray into their path during the dance are not spared, they are brutally killed amidst applause from spectators, without any form of compensation to their owners. It is not quite clear why

economic trees and other plants, and animals are cut down in such ferocious aggression during the dance but it can be inferred that the plants/trees symbolically stand for imaginary enemies falling in the heat of battle/war while the animals are spoils or booties from war. The destruction therefore becomes a metaphorization of valour and masculinity. Another justification for the performance's violent nature is that war is a violent act and every adult man is expected to be a fighter or warrior. Culturally and cognitively, *Igba-Agha* ritual performance symbolically frames the life of an adult Oru-Igbo man as war.

As the chants and dance peak, the family of the deceased presents the group with a cock (*okeokpa*), a gagged and bound dog (*nkita*), and a ram (*ebulu* or *ebule*). The presentation of the animals animate the ferocity of the dance. One of the war songs chanted at this stage of the ceremony as a demonstration of valour and masculinity includes:

Igbo	English
Singer: iyo-ho	Singer: iyo-ho
Chorus: iyo!	Chorus: iyo!
Singer: iyo-ho	Singer: iyo-ho
Chorus: iyo!	Chorus: iyo!
Singer: <i>onyende mere mma?</i>	Singer: Who did good?

Chorus: <i>anyi mere mma mere njo iyo!</i>	Chorus: We did both good and evil iyo!
Singer: <i>onyende mere mma?</i>	Singer: Who did good?
Chorus: <i>anyi mere mma mere njo iyo!</i>	Chorus: We did both good and evil iyo!

Table 1. *Igba-agma* song

The social meaning of the song implies there is no sentimentality or morality in war. When the family of the deceased feels the need to stop the dance, *igbo-agma* (cessation of hostilities) they present the group with some drinks. The items presented are used to pacify the warriors to cease hostilities and formally bring to an end the first phase of the ceremony or ritual. The cock, dog, and ram would be needed at subsequent stages of the ritual performance.

Interment and Iwayi ife n'anya or incision of powers into the eye

The second segment of the ritual is more intense and emotional because it leads to the commitment of the remains of the deceased to Mother Earth. According to the Oru-Igbo tradition, certain symbolic rituals involving the use of some specific ritual objects or items must be observed before interment can take place. The ritual that takes place in the process of interment is known as *iwayi ife n'anya*, which literally means incision of powers into the eye. *Iwayi ife n'anya* is a sacrifice of blood. The

ritual is performed over the remains of the deceased by his age-grade members while chanting evocation songs intended for the situation. A cock, a dog and a ram are required for the rituals to be complete and potent. Each of these animals has symbolic meanings in the cosmic universe of the Igbo society in general. Thus, the cock, dog and ram which were presented by the family of the deceased during the *igba-agma* stage of the ritual are now assembled for the sacrifice of blood involved in the *iwayi ife n'anya* ritual. The *iwayi ife n'anya* ritual is usually led by the closest friend of the deceased among his age grade members.

The cock (*okeopka*) is the first animal to be killed at this stage of the ritual exercise. The cock is usually the most available animal used for rituals and sacrifices in Igbo land. Orjikwe (2016) observes that the blood of a cock is used for several purposes which include appeasing some deities and spiritual forces, and reactivating some occult powers and practices. During *iwayi ife n'anya* ritual, some of the blood of the cock is poured out as a libation to the ancestors and other supernatural forces to seek kind admittance and passage to the spirit of the deceased into the realms of the ancestors while a little of it is sprinkled on the remains of the deceased. Taken together, the blood of the cock is intended to cleanse the dead man of whatever impurities and prepare him for his final journey into the world beyond. Besides the cleansing and reactivation purposes the cock serves, it also has a strong cultural signification in the imagination of the Oru-Igbo people. In most traditional societies, the cock serves as a timekeeper who announces the birth of a new day and sometimes the end of the day. Rural communities rely on cock crows to plan and

regulate their daily activities. Since death is not seen as the end of existence, it is believed that the cock will continue to remind the dead man of his duties and responsibilities as a member of the family. The cock in this context, therefore, symbolizes time consciousness in the performance of responsibilities.

The dog (*nkita*) is the next ritual object in the rites of passage. The Igbo group use a dog for different ritual purposes. Orjikwe (2016) recalls that a dog is a strong and aggressive animal used in Igbo traditional sacrifices for insight into the spirit world (*iwa ke anya*) because the Igbo believe a dog has the perceptive skills of seeing spirits and other presences not visible to the human eye. The blood of a dog is also used for the activation of *ofo* (*iwa ke ofo*) and for special sacrifice to *Agwu* deity. In all contexts, the dog is perceived by the Igbo as an animal that can see beyond the material world and also has the physical power to ward off intruders, both humans and non-humans from unwanted spaces. In all the circumstances above, the procedure for killing or sacrificing the dog differs from situation to situation and from culture to culture. In Nnebukwu community and other parts of Oru-Igbo, the procedure of the sacrifice during the ritual of *iwayi ife nánya* is accompanied by a special song that expresses the social meaning of the ritual being performed. The song goes thus:

Igbo	English
Singer: <i>Anya nwadike rara obara</i>	Singer: Eyes of a warrior come and drink blood
Chorus: <i>Anya!</i>	Chorus: <i>Anya!</i>
Singer: <i>Anya Nwadike rara obara</i>	Singer: Eyes of a warrior come and drink blood
Chorus: <i>Anya!</i>	Chorus: <i>Anya!</i>
Singer: <i>Anya bia rara obara</i>	Singer: Eyes come and drink blood
Chorus: <i>Anya nwadike bia rara obara anya!</i> Chorus: Eyes of a warrior come and drink blood, <i>Anya!</i>	

Table 2. First *iwayi ife n'anya* song

The chants are rendered with the same strength, dervish and stamina as during the *igba-agma* ritual because it is a war song. The song is chanted repeatedly while the ritual of sacrificing the dog lasts. The ritual does not involve killing the dog by severing its head from the body as in most cases. In *iwayi ife n'anya* ritual, the dog is gagged, and its limbs restrained with a strong rope while the officiating individual uses a sharp knife to pluck out the two eyes of the dog amidst the fervent chant of *anya nwadike rara obara, anya*. The dog wriggles and shrieks in pain during the procedure. Each of the eyes plucked out from the dog is deposited in the casket/coffin beside the remains of the deceased. The blood that gushes out from the empty sockets of the dog is poured out as libation while some are sprinkled on the eyes or remains of the deceased.

The procedure of the ritual is a signifier of social meaning in the cultural context of the Oru-Igbo people. First, the eyes of the dog are used for the ritual because a dog is regarded as a spiritual animal that sees far beyond human eyes. In this context, the deceased is being consecrated as part of the ancestors, thereby enabling him to see farther beyond the sights and instincts of humans. The sacrifice of blood therefore implicitly appropriates the perceptive skills of the dog and maps them on that of the deceased. This implies that the deceased, now part of the ancestors, can now see what happens in his family and intervenes when necessary. Blood is also a life-giving force and, in this context, implies that the departure of the dead man is a transition to another level of existence. Second, dog is an aggressive animal used in warfare, hunting and protection of the household. This sacrifice metaphorizes the dead man and other men as war beings and frames life itself as a battle. Dog in the context of the rituals signifies the several battles men fight in the process of survival and becoming.

The third animal used for the ritual is **ram** (*ebulu/ebule*). Ram is used in religious ceremonies by different religions for different purposes. Orjikwe (2016) opines that Igbo culture uses it for rituals by those taking *Ozo* titles and during the burial of titled men and warriors. He also observes that its blood is used for the activation of *Ikenga* personal deity while its flesh is offered as a sacrificial meal to the *Amadioha* deity. *Ebulu/ebule* is a strong and energetic domestic animal known for its huge stamina for endurance and perseverance. There is the belief that it resists being led by men but follows women quietly. Among the Oru-Igbo communities, the ram

is one of the ritual paraphernalia used in the burial of an adult man. The ritual procedure signifies the importance of the object in the cosmic imagination of the Oru-Igbo people. The way the Oru-Igbo people offer the sacrifice is symbolic and significantly different from that of other Igbo communities. The ritual process signifies the social meaning of the performance in the community's consciousness. First, the limbs of the animal are restrained with rope while the age grade performing the ritual chants:

Igbo	English
Singer: <i>Nyirim obu- o</i>	Singer: Endurance!
Chorus: <i>Nyirim obu</i>	Chorus: Endurance
Singer: <i>Nyirim obu- o</i>	Singer: Endurance!
Chorus: <i>Nyirim obu</i>	Chorus: Endurance

Table 3. Second *iwayi ife n'anya* song

While the song peaks, the person selected to lead the ritual pierces open the rib region of the animal with a sharp cutlass or machete. He then proceeds by inserting his right hand into the chest cavity of the animal through the hole created in search of the heart of the animal while the animal wriggles in pain but never bleats as

bleating would signify the inability to endure pain or persevere in the face of harsh experiences. Once he locates the heart of the animal, he plucks it off with a sharp knife amidst wild enchantments from spectators. The removal of the heart of the animal while it is still alive does not terminate its life as it continues to resist death. Part of the blood is poured out as libation to the ancestors while some are sprinkled on the remains of the deceased as a form of purification for the journey to the other end of the world.

The ritual has a deeper level of cognitive and cultural signification in the creative universe of the Oru-Igbo people. The ram's silent and philosophical endurance of pains conceptualizes men's ability to endure severe hardships and pains in the journey through life. The silent endurance of pain by the ram encodes the true definition of masculinity in the language and thought of the Oru-Igbo people. To the Oru-Igbo group, manhood means the ability to endure different adversities without complaints like the ram. The peculiar procedure of the ritual encodes the many narratives of struggle, pain, and perseverance a man goes through in life. Thus, only adult men who lived up to the expectations of their community are accorded such rites at death. The remains of the deceased are buried immediately after this stage of the ritual.

Igbaji-Amara ritual or the breaking of the paddle

This stage comes a day after the interment of the remains of the deceased man. At this stage, the age grade members of the deceased gather in his compound to accord

the dead man his last respect as a member of the age grade. The ritual paraphernalia for the ceremony is a paddle, a he-goat, and a four-yard wrapper/cloth used to fasten the he-goat to the paddle. In all, the items have their semiotic signification in the cultural context of the Oru-Igbo people. *Amara* means the specially carved medium-length wooden pole with a flat wide part at one end used to move wooden canoes on the river or lake. The Oru-Igbo people are riverine people whose daily activities and cultural practices revolve around the river or lake. This explains why most of their narratives are about the water.

At the *Igbaji-Amara* ritual, all the surviving members (male and female) of the dead man's age grade arrive his compound dressed in their best traditional attires. The deceased's best friend or any other member of the age grade who must have shared common experiences with the deceased would lead the ceremony by dancing with the paddle with the he-goat tied to it. Although female members of the age are physically present they are forbidden from dancing with the paddle. They can sing, clap, eat, and drink whatever that is presented to the age grade but they cannot dance with the paddle and the he-goat. That aspect of the ritual is exclusively reserved for the male folk. All the male members present take turns to dance with the paddle once but only the best friend of the deceased is permitted to dance twice: first and last.

The dance step on the occasion is unique and involves paddling an imaginary canoe on an imaginary river or lake while the seated members of the age grade sing, clap and cheer the paddler on. While dancing, the member who has the floor

narrates his struggles in life. It could be about how he paddled goods amidst storms from Oguta to the Kalabari or Degema communities of Rivers State. It could be about his journey of survival to distant lands like Cameroun or Equatorial Guinea. This type of narrative is known as *Akuko-mgba ama*, which literally translates to an informative story or narrative. This is derived from the assumption that the narrator is providing his audience with aspects of his life experiences that were previously unknown to them. During the dance, the man who has the floor may also use the opportunity to brag about his unique personal achievements which none of his age grades could attain. He could be the first to attend a secondary school or a university, the first to become a professor in his community or among his age grade, the first to buy a bicycle, motorbike, or car in the community or among his peers, the first to kill a goat or cow for his age grade and so on. This is known as *Itu-aka* (bragging or boasting) among the Oru-Igbo people. Ordinarily, the Oru-Igbo people frown at bragging, particularly when situations do not call for it but this is one occasion where tradition permits men to brag about their achievements in life. The best friend of the deceased performs the last dance. While dancing with the paddle, he recounts his closeness to the deceased, talks about the common challenges both faced when the deceased was alive and how they surmounted them, and narrates the vicissitudes of life encountered by the deceased. He breaks the paddle (*Amara*) to the admiration and loud applause from the audience once he is done with the dance and recounting of their common life experiences. The song rendered during the *Igbaji-amara* ceremony is called *Oji Erena* and goes thus:

Igbo	English
Singer: <i>Oji erena</i>	Singer: Iroko tree/wood never decays
Chorus: <i>nde oma, nde oma</i>	Chorus: Good people; good people
Singer: <i>Anyi ji oji kwara ugbo</i>	Singer: We made our canoes from iroko tree/wood
Chorus: <i>nde oma, nde oma</i>	Chorus: Good people; good people
Singer: <i>A-yen-ye oji erena</i>	Singer: A-yen-ye iroko tree/wood never decays
Chorus: <i>nde oma, nde oma</i>	Chorus: Good people; good people

Table 4. *Igbaji-amara* song

Oji-erena is the only song repeatedly chanted as all the male participants dance, paddle, and tell their life stories to the audience. The performance allows individual participants to demonstrate their peculiar ways and skills of handling the paddle in different situations while on sail. The diverse skills individual paddlers exhibit while paddling the imaginary boats usually draw shouts of excitement, applause and praise from the mixed audience.

The song and the paraphernalia used in the ritual are social semiotic representations of the socioeconomic activities of the Oru-Igbo people and their perceptions of human existence. The paraphernalia has symbolic meanings that encode how the Oru-Igbo people conceptualize their ideational and cognitive experiences and their understanding of the world around them and inside their

heads. At the surface level of signification, the paddle signifies that the Oru-Igbo people are riverine people who earn their daily living through fishing, trading and farming at *Ugada* waterfronts and other waters. At the deeper level of signification, however, the paddling of the imaginary canoe across the lake or river signifies the transition of the deceased to the next level of existence. Thus, the Oru-Igbo people conceptualize death as a journey across the river or lake in a canoe. This indicates that most of the socioeconomic and spiritual lives of the Oru-Igbo people are closely tied to the water or river. This claim is also evident in the *Oji Erena* song. At the surface level of meaning, the song celebrates the assumed strength and durability of the iroko tree, and the canoes made from its trunks. At the deeper level of signification, it celebrates the incorruptibility of the spirit of the deceased which is now in transition to another realm of existence across the river. The song is also evocative in that it encodes a prayer to the spirit of the dead to preserve the living just as the iroko tree survives for long. The chorus of the song signifies the positive attitude of the people to the communion between the living and the dead. The he-goat tied to the paddle symbolizes manhood and doggedness because a he-goat is never tired of being in pursuit of what to eat in life. Similarly, the adult man never gives up in the pursuit of his daily sustenance. Again, the he-goat tied to the paddle spiritually symbolizes the spirit of the dead being ferried across to the supramundane world across the river or lake. The cloth/wrapper used to tie the goat to the paddle stands for adulthood or the maturity of the deceased. In all, this shows

how the Oru-Igbo people try to come to terms with the phenomenon of death, existence after death, and masculinity.

Discussion

Construal of Masculinity

This research reveals that the Nnebukwu Community and other Oru-Igbo people of Imo State, Nigeria use burial/funeral practices to express masculinity explicitly. The group uses the opportunity of burials/funerals to provide an explicit definition of what it means to be called a man in traditional Igbo society. In a patriarchal society like Igbo land, male children are valued and cherished more than females. This is based on the assumption that men never depart from their families even in death. While alive, a man lives within the family homestead to procreate and sustain his lineage. At death, the Igbo believe that the dead man's spirit still interferes in his family's affairs. In Igbo land, most social and cultural practices that demonstrate "manliness" are elaborate to demonstrate the premium placed on masculinity. Women play marginal roles in some of these ceremonies. This, however, does not mean that female members of the family are treated as less human. They are loved and valued, but they have their roles clearly mapped out by tradition. This study shows that each of the three stages of the burial/funeral ceremonies makes metaphorical and philosophical statements about life on earth and life in the world beyond as a man. Women play peripheral roles during the various stages of the

funeral rituals of adult men. The assumption is that men are in a better position to narrate and enact their own experiences. This role is reversed during the burial of adult women.

Social Meaning of Burial Paraphernalia/Objects

The ritual objects used in the burial of a man are carriers and signifiers of social meaning in context. All the objects used at each of the stages of the burial communicate the social experiences of the lives, beliefs, and attitudes of the Oru-Igbo people to the realities of human existence. Some of the objects remind the audience of the vicissitude of life experienced by men in the process of becoming, while others remind humans that life is transient. In all of this, the objects remind humans that true masculinity is constituted by perseverance, doggedness, endurance, and consistency in the face of adversities and life challenges.

Songs as Verbal Expressions of Experience

This study shows that the songs rendered in the process of burial/funeral ceremonies have deep philosophical meanings that reinforce the rhetoric on masculinity. The songs metaphorize men as fighting beings, as enduring beings, and as adventurous beings. These are the rare characteristics that men possess that separate them from the opposite gender or any other being. The songs thus narrate and celebrate the victories a man secures in the various battles of life, the risky ventures he undertakes to survive, and the hard times/challenges he experiences in the battlefields of life.

The songs also encode the ideology of the passage of time in the lives and affairs of humans.

Conclusion

This study has tried to establish that cultural schemas, cultural categories and cultural metaphors enable the Oru-Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria to express their knowledge of the material and immaterial worlds around them. The study reveals that the Oru-Igbo people, just like most African traditional societies, use their cultural cognition, which manifests in songs, oral narratives, rituals and other semiotic forms, to express ideation on gender, identity, age, social class and intergroup relationship. This study shows that cultural conceptualization enables the Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria to frame or demonstrate masculinity and gender roles during the traditional burial/funeral of adult men. Cultural conceptualization engenders discourse and social interaction among group members, enhancing social integration and cohesion. This study, therefore, reinforces the argument that language, culture, cognition, and society are inextricably tied in the construction of social meanings and experiences in contexts.

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