

# **DIFFERENT RITUAL SYMBOLS IN IGBO TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND THEIR FUNCTIONS**

**Grace Ifeoma Otubah**

## **Abstract**

Symbols change in their value and functions and as a result of the changes in cultural appreciation. The change in the emphasis on the role of symbolism in general is partly consequence of cultural intellectual, social and economic transformation. All our actions are symbolic and we cannot do without interacting with each other and it is through interaction that our behaviour to life changes.

Symbol in a place may mean nothing to other people and symbol is what the people using it interpret. Maccuary (2001) says:

Clan or ethnic leaders generally put on old regalia and sit on the old stool or chair used by their predecessors. The regalia are usually made of skins of a Lion or Leopard which symbolizes the appreciation of the attitudes of this leaders, namely, to be powerful and fearless like the lion and calm, cool and precise in their decisions and action like the leopard.(p. 169).

## **Introduction**

Cohen (1974) defines symbols as “objects, acts, concepts or linguistic formations that evoke sentiments and emotions and impel men to action”. He further indicated where they occur, namely in “stylized patterns of activities like ceremonies, ritual gifts, exchange, prescribed forms of joking, taking an oath, eating and drinking together” (p. 9). Firth (1974) is of the opinion that ‘the essence of symbolism lies in the recognition of one thing as standing for another, the relation between them normally being that of concrete to abstract, particular to general’ (p.15). These definitions bring out the generating and receiving effects otherwise reserved for the object to which it refers. There are important aspects of symbolism according to Ifesieh (1989) ‘because the effects could go as far as changing the impressed objects in a remarkable and emotional way’ (p.125). He went further to state that symbol has at least dual characteristics, namely, that of concealment and revelation. Longergan (1972) in his own view states that “a symbol may be considered as ‘an image of real or imaginary object that evokes a feeling or is evoked by feeling’” (p.64). It then follows that symbols obey the laws not of logic but of image and feelings.

Symbols like ritual can be religious and cannot be religious. Zuesse (1979) states that “In terms of awareness, religion is not really the matter of the specific data of consciousness; so much as it is a matter of the value given them” (p.11). What makes the same cognitive content religious for one and not for another is the presence or absence of transcendental internationalities. Ifesieh (1989) defines ritual “as a socio-religious act capable of levels of meaning, which may be portrayed as a symbol of cosmic truth, yet, puts first the transcendental and cosmic level, as this uniquely forms the heart of every ritual action” (p.123). Ifesieh states further that “the sacred is an ontological reality and that man is able to become aware of it if only he wills; but then if he chooses not to recognize the sacred manifesting itself to him, he is equally free, but his conscious and intentional will not to confirm self transcendence with respect to the object of his sight does not mean the non-existence of that object image” (p.124). However, Kluckhohn (1979) defines

ritual “as that which serves to express the individual’s status as a social person in a structural system in which he finds himself for the time being” (p.66).

### **Characteristics of Symbols**

#### **a. 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, the **sickee** and hammer which are the emblems standing for Russia will not be meaningful without the history and knowledge of the Russian Revolution in 1917. Again, without the history and full knowledge of Christianity, the cross will become meaningless. More also, the crescent moon for Islam (Moslem) fixed feasts in relation to the appearance of the moon. It is very important because it was the moon that guided Mohammed to carry out his job. Without the history and full knowledge of Traditional religion, all the objects of worship such as ‘**ofo**’, **Amadioha** etc will become meaningless.

#### **b. Symbols are meaningful only when there is a consensus about the meaning:**

Symbols do not have meaning in themselves but have meaning as confirmed to them in the society. One country’s symbol may be meaningless in another country e.g. ‘cross’ may mean nothing in non-Christian countries.

In religion, no one can avoid the use of symbols nor should wish that it were possible to do so. There is indeed no conceivable way on which a symbol could ever be of any use to anyone who does not already have some kind of expressions of what it symbolizes. 1<sup>st</sup> October symbolizes Nigeria independent but to other countries they have nothing to do with first October.

In Igbo land when a female leaves to stay with her husband. The items that she would be given include the following:

- i. She-goat –symbolizing child bearing.
- ii. Broom – symbolizing keeping the house clean.
- iii. Mortar and pestle – symbolizing cooking food for her husband.

Some symbols represent themselves e.g. the Eucharistic that represent Christ and Christ himself. These symbols survive in a culture by way of transmission. It is transmitted from generation to generation.

#### **c. Symbols Provide Plans for Action and our Relationship to Object with Similar Level.**

Symbols provide plans for action of how we should relate ourselves to objects and to all other objects to which we attach similar level. Similarly, when we label an individual a criminal, we do more than just attach a label, we also provide ourselves with instructions as to how we should treat the person. It is the definition attached to these symbols which primarily determine human behaviours. Man acts on the basis of the way he defines a situation. It is the individual definition of the world around him which is real to him and these definitions are transposed. For example, Arinze (1970) states that “**Osu** is symbolically immolated and is then left to live on as a child or slave of his **alusi**” (p.91), after dedicating the victim to the shrine, the victim is held strongly. One ear is cut off him and his blood is sprinkled on the special part of the shrine containing the symbol of the spirit. This is the symbolic immolation. Hence forth he is an **Osu**, a living sacrifice.

#### **d. Symbols in Effect are Mediator /and Giver of Memory of Things and Event**

Symbols convey to us the real meaning and presence of a given object and calling for the best in us in using the object. The use of symbols is based on the principle of complementation. It requires the association of certain consensus idea in order to fully express what is meant by them. It has both an esoteric (healing) and exoteric (revealing). The discovery of its meaning pre-supposes a certain amount of active co-operation on the part of the group that agrees upon its meaning. The symbol is intended primarily for the circle of the initiated and it involves the acknowledgement of the experience that it expresses.

In its intermediary function symbols operate in a process of vetting, and revealing truths. Symbols help to bring about not only an interpretative knowledge of the word and meaning of life but also afford access to sacred reality. To this extent, the sacrament of the last supper which is the liturgical and ritualistic mystery in Christianity affords us an example of highly developed form of a complex symbolic action.

Secondly, in the book of Genesis, the Lord God formed man out of dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Theologians have often understood the meaning of this in a symbolic sense, thus man being made of dust stands for his solidarity with the rest of nature while his having breathed into his nostrils the divine breath of life stands for his participation in a spiritual realm that paradoxically co-exists with the solidarity with nature.

#### **Functions and Meaning of Ritual-Symbolism**

For the function of the meaning of ritual-symbolism to be worthwhile, one has to take cognizance of their role.

1. The primary function of meaning should be COGNITIVE. When we know something, we become somehow what we know. Lonergan (1972) states that “the cognitive sphere takes us out of the infant ‘world of immediacy’ and places us in the adult’s world, which is actually the world mediated with or by meaning” (p.72).
2. Efficiency: A normal human being will never work aimlessly. Ifesieh (1989) in support of this states that “Before an Igbo man carves Ikenga or Ofo, or both, he first intends imagines, plans investigates possibilities, weighs pros and cons before it is finally finished” (153). This achievement is brought about by efficiency and this efficiency is achieved when certain combinations have come into play.
3. Constitutive function of meaning: Language according to Longergan (1972) is “constituted by articulate sound on the other hand and meaning attached to that sound on the other hand” Longergan went further to state that “In the same constitutive manner, social institutions and human cultures have meanings as sine qua non intrinsic components”.
4. Cumulative: What “A” means is communicated to “B” inter-subjectively, symbolically, artistically, linguistically, incarnate so that individual meaning becomes common meaning and common meanings have histories behind them. Ifesieh (1989) is of the opinion that “the study of history, which ritual-symbolism is a part of , on basic to human science and, also that meaning and function of meaning enter into the very fabric of all human living, though they differ from place to place, culture to culture, and from age to another”.

Ritual-symbolism does give revealing insights into things that they can ease the conscious penetration into other levels and dimensions quite beyond our empirical realm. In doing this

according to Ifesieh (1989) it expands our perceptions and resultant response and thereby opens a new background to our cognition and much better judgment on the peculiarities and universals of different ritual-symbolic activities which, when, fully grasped for teleological not only of this but of other worldliness.

### **Why Ritual-Symbolism is Used in Igbo Traditional Religion**

1. It makes traditional religion alive and more meaningful.
2. It acts as external expression of inward religious attitude.
3. It helps us to transcend this worldliness and meditate it.
4. It helps us in understanding deeper the ritual and essential constitution of ritual-symbolism in the practice of religion.
5. For awakening religious and conscious intentionality.
6. For exorcising fear and establishing confidence.
7. For bridging a gap between the sacred and profane.
8. Ritual-symbolism helps and prepares us for reaching the sacred in order to harness every possible significant reservoir of its sacredness for man's salvation.
9. It is a means of reaching the unknown.
10. For establishing communicative equivalence between man and supernatural forces.
11. As a process of helping non-ritual-symbolic specialists in setting their problem with natural and super-natural forces.

### **Types of Symbolic Expression**

Symbols can be expressed either exclusively, or inclusively, and in doing so, we can make distinctions amongst three types of symbols namely:

- i. Visual symbols
- ii. The diagrammatic symbol
- iii. The linguistic symbol

#### **1. Visual Symbols**

One of the visual symbols is like diagrammatic and emblematic. These may be images or objects of any kind, example cycle or the disc it symbolizes for us the star or sun or the universe. The spear may symbolize the earth or the four cardinal points. The wreath or knot may indicate joy, death, sadness, festival (the colour of the cloth used in the church is monody meaning mixture of joy and expectation.

During baptism we use white candle meaning joy, purity for the child and the parents. Red symbolizes priestly status and also life and death (a court judge puts on red when delivering a case involving either life or death in the court).

Urines symbolize festivity. Moove symbolizes pertinent, sorrow, remorse, connected with this is pictorial symbolism. Cross symbolizes suffering.

Societies develop new blue prints of life and religion hollows these blue prints. Each acquisition of blue pursuit of his religious instrument he has made cultural objects and has also used cultural symbols and symbolism. Man has also endeavours to explain these objects and patterns hence the symbolic language involved in religion, examples of these areas are: the star of David,

baptism with clothes and water, buildings for worship, ofo, Ikenga, chaplet, medals, holy water, cross, sacred store of the Moslems, sacred songs, poetry, the Holy Bible, Koran, traditional dirge, holy oil, candle, incense, even tomb of people.

### **Symbols of the Following Visuals are as Follows**

#### **Kolanut**

Kolanut symbolizes appreciation and acceptance. Ogbalu (1970) is of the opinion that Kolanut is presented to a visitor first before any discussion. He went further to say that “it is the first thing to present to a deity before any other offering or request is made” (p. 17).

#### **Ofo**

*Ofo* is a symbol of justice among the Igbo. Green (1964) defined *Ofo* as “a cultural symbol which is widely used among the Igbo” (p.5). Arinze (1970) defined *Ofo* “as a symbol of authority which descends from the ancestors, and guarantee of truth” (p. 16). Arinze concluded that “at its first consecration, it has all the appearances of a charm, but its most important aspect is its symbolism of ancestral authority when it has been handed on to the first son (Okpala) for several generations. Nzomiwu (1999) states thus “the piece of *Ofo* lying in the forest is not of much significance but when it has been consecrated and duly handed over to one who has been consecrated and duly handed over to one who has been customarily initiated or to be head of the family, it assumes a special significance and dimension” (p. 100). Horton asserts that *Ofo* has been set aside by God (Chukwu) as a symbol of truth and of all the oaths sworn in an Igbo Community that taken upon *Ofo* is the most binding.

#### **Ikenga**

Arinze (1970) sees Ikenga as “the personification of a man’s strength of arm which has everything to do with his good future” (p. 16). Ikenga, continued Arinze, is personal to a man and its symbol is split at the person’s funeral.

In conjunction to this Metuh (1981) described Ikenga “as a deity whose role is very similar to that *chi*. It symbolizes the strength of a man’s right hand, so that a man’s right hand is sometimes called Aka Ikenga” (p. 70). Ikenga is a carved image with two horns, sitting on a stool, with a drawn sword in his left hand and a human skull in the other.

#### **Igwe/Amadioha (Sky Deities)**

Igwe shows in form of thunder and is against undetected criminals. Metuh (1981) describes Igwe/Amadioha as “the agent of *Chineke* against undetected criminals He expresses his power and anger in thunderbolts and lightening” (p. 64). In order words, thunderbolts and lightening symbolize Amadioha.

#### **Anyanwu (Sun)**

Anyanwu symbolizes wealth and good fortune. In conjunction to this Metuh (1981) states “**Anyanwu** is regarded in a special way as a deity bringing wealth and good fortune” (p. 64) Metuh (1981) went further to say that “a diviner would recommend a sacrifice to Anyanwu to someone who is in habit of dissipating his wealth” (p.64).

### **Ala (Earth Deity)**

Metuh (1981) described Ala as “the owner of men, alive or dead” (p. 66). He pointed out that Ala is the most important deity in Igbo public and private cults, for she is the giver of fertility to men, animals and crops. He argued thus: men are born on earth, they feed on the products of the earth and when they die, they are buried in the earth. In other words Ala symbolizes fertility.

### **ii. Diagrammatic symbol**

It 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 sculptural representations of the sacred or religious object: Ikenga, Amadioha, Ofo and Cross.

### **Gestural and Physical Movement**

Gestures and body movement play an important part in religious ritual and in religious conduct of men. Such behaviour and gestures derive their meanings from the relationship to the sacred. Procession of sacred dancing for example Corpus Christi and procession of masquerades during festivals are done not only to signify appearing before the sacred presence but also to enhance the sacred power. Hand movement are widely used in ritual and liturgical action, blessing of the congregation, raising of the sacred bread with hands or raising of kola nut in case of traditional performance. These performed according to the soul that regulates gestures which accompany prayer and blessings: for example, by raising his hand in prayer, the worshipers approach the realm of the heavenly God.

By kneeling down in prayers, the worshippers approach the realm under the mould and also demonstrate humility, bowing down expresses reception and acceptance of sacred word of leader. Kissing and embracing symbolizes acceptance, love and giving oneself to the other.

### **Influence of Man’s Environment on Religious Symbols**

#### **a. Nature**

From man’s experience of nature itself in the universal his attempt to master the world in religious term influence is created. In the depiction of natural happenings, plants and animals may blend into one another as in the symbolic circle of the Mesopotamian God, Tammaz in which the tree of life is combined with figures of shepherd. They represent the presentations and generation of life and also nature as a sacred power. Heaven and earth are depicted as a dually related pair which generally is theistically personified as a man and woman. Mother earth ‘**ana**’ is a central figure of many myths. She is the mistress of fertility and of death. Rocks and mountains in many places have formed the symbols of thunder and rain. In Igbo land, **ofo** is a symbol of justice. This **ofo** is a tree growing in Igbo- land. In Yoruba- land, **shango** iron is the symbol of their God.

#### **b. Human Relationship**

Here the roles of father and mother form the basis of this influence. The mother image is closely bounding with earth symbolism, vegetation, agriculture, fertility, reappearance of life and the human cycle. The father image is usually associated with spear of heaven, authority, dominion

age, wisdom and struggle. The image of the ruler, king or master expresses the power of an authority of the deity. Even the structure of the world of the God is explained in the terms of feminine of father, mother as a trinity of divine twins.

### **The Nature of Symbols (Types and how they look like)**

A symbol is something which stands for something else. A representation which does not aim at being a reproduction of the original copy, example in the country we have something which in every school of learning in special occasion i.e. flags, brochures, foods that we eat and some marks in utensils. There is no inherent (natural) relationship between a symbol and what it stands for. Any symbol can be used to refer to anything else. It is the name that we give to these things that makes them symbolic. There is a problem in this because two people may use the same symbolic objects to refer to quite different things. Therefore, in order that a symbol may become meaningful to any society, there must be conscientious about what it stands for. Individuals and societies themselves define symbols. That is therefore what gives symbols their name. Symbols have meaning only because they agree that a particular symbol is going to be used to refer to a particular thing and meaning arises as a result of social interactions.

### **Symbols has provide plans for action**

The symbolic word 'chair' for example informs us how we should relate ourselves to that wooden object and to all other objects to which we attach similar meaning.

Pen – writing

Bed – lying down

Chair – sitting down

Chairs are things upon which we sit. Similarly when we label an individual a criminal, we do more than just attach a label to him. In fact, the word criminal, also provides for us how to adjust ourselves to him. It is the definitions which we attach to this symbol which primarily determine human behaviour. Man acts as the basis of the way he desires a situation. Therefore, it is man's own definition of the world around him which is real. Therefore, from these observations, the child in the environment is taught what to see and what not to see either by default or design. He learns what to believe and what not to believe. He pays attention to things that the community/ group has taken as important and pays less attention to those things that the group feels that is not significant. In short, most people adopt the label and definition which are part and parcel of their culture.

Symbolically, religion is looked at as an instrument of man's self consciousness, the evidence of his work. Through his work, man portrays life symbols and from there man trespasses himself, from mere assertion, the words phrases, actions, conceal, their meaning from ordinary life situation to which they are used.

It is important therefore for us to understand or to be aware of the tremendous influence of culture as means of behaviour. Culture is entire social heritage of man, his way of life, his acquired learned ways of behaviour, his behaviour pattern which he inherits socially.

### **Symbolic Language and Symbolic Representations**

We cannot exist without some reflection on the world of our existence. Though man can give ordinary or verbal explanations to objects and natural occurrences, the secret important of the universe comes forcefully through symbolic usages. It is through symbols that the world of human beings becomes transparent and in this way the transcended is apprehended and task which could have been impossible to achieve. Water for example symbolizes the universal sum (totality) of vitality, spring, origin, reservoir, life, and example the Christian baptism. And also in some funeral ceremonies water is used (may be in concoction). For the Christian, a baptism is a sacrament because it was instituted by Christ, but symbolically it is something that helps us to relive the symbolic death and resurrection of life, the fall and rise again of human existence.

There is the universality of symbols. Symbols are bound throughout the human world (all the religion in the world) even in non-religion) symbol is a common phenomenon to mankind (common symbol) and through the symbols the sacred is made alive. No nation has been able to destroy its symbol. In some parts of the world, the earth is called the mother because of its fertility.

Therefore, certain ceremonies, prohibitions, rules and regulations are decreed in the relationship between beings and the earth. As ordinary woman bears child and its emotionally attached to the child so also the earth produces things and protects them. For the religious men the appearance of life is central mystery of the world. Life comes from somewhere and finally departs from this world just as trees come to life and dies so also human beings come to life and vanish away.

### **The Nature of Religious Symbolism**

The Christian apostolic creed for example is symbols. The creed for example is a symbol of belief. For it is an attempt to express the language in faith situation. The whole creed hangs together as one expression of an idea. Suppose we take one of the clauses singly it may not convey the totality of the whole situation implicit. What is important in that statement is for us to interpret in the light of what we know of the total history of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the problem of symbolic language is that it says more than is possible through near literal appreciation. It is important therefore for any good student of religion to think deeper before purging into an interpretation of Religious symbolic. Example, if I say Papa God, I mean that God does the work of father for me. He has fatherly care and love for me.

We daily in our life express ourselves through symbolic language. Example a bow of the head, a nod of the head, salute, winking of the eye, raising of hands, embracing each other, crying, laughing clapping of hands, daily we do that. It is to be noted that such observances had no significances in themselves. They acquire meaning and significance from circumstance in which they are performed. So in the Christian life, for example, there is one particular ceremony (Eucharist) that is more important for a Christian and it is full of particular gesticulation, endless sign of the cross and consecration, kneeling down, praying etc. When you see a cross in the alter, it is the symbol of the whole life of Christ on earth.

The more lively the religion, the more complex its symbolism has to be for it is through this way that it secures what protection it can get against the every present danger of literalism which is found in the life of any religion.



## **Conclusion**

In African religiosity, religious symbols have various purposes. They evoke the presence of God and the ancestors among the people. They bring to mind for the people the lineage of their ancestors in order to build up consciousness of their particular ethnic group and its traditions. They are especially important to remind the leaders that they are the medium of God and the ancestors in the life of the people who should uphold in the community all the proper values and traditions.

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