

Symbols and Their Symbolic Meanings Among the Igbo's in Traditional Religion

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Abstract

It is a known fact that every culture has the responsibility of describing reality, its origin and models of structural development as well as the hidden knowledge and truth about being. This responsibility is evidently illustrated, addressed or depicted in Igbo paradigm in form of symbols. Devoid of these symbols, signs and images, the traditional life experiences of the Igbo's will completely be void, abstract and meaningless because some of these symbols represented in tangible visible forms were believed to be real and living. The proper underpinning of these traditional symbols, signs and images of the indigenous people of Igbo's will go a long way in the full integration of the Igbo people's life and their immediate cultural ecology with messages they disseminate. It must be noted also that despite the significance of this integration, it must be informed that such symbols, signs and images are evidently limited in their transmission of reality. This paper investigates how symbols basically play significant roles in mediating and facilitating religious communication in Igbo Traditional Religion, giving rise to thought, interpretation, and symbolic meanings. In Igbo cosmology, symbols encapsulate so many things which are very distinctive thereby representing so many things and ideologies.

Keywords: Culture, Cosmology, Devoid, Evoke, Hidden, Ideology, Symbols & Symbolology.

Introduction

Clearly in behavioural of human psychology, it is a known fact that ideas simply emanates from experience or revelation (Nabofa, 1994:3). Man being what he is, is always eager or inquisitive to ascribe meanings to each of its experiences and it is this kind of attitude that actually stimulates man's instinct of curiosity from the known to an unknown, especially as it has to do with his religious awareness (Nabofa, 1994:3). In other words, he uses such religious ideas to elaborate rituals that inculcate decrees and doctrines "concerning the Nature of God, the Universal Being, Fatherhood and Beneficence of God, Eternity and Immortality of the Soul" (Akintola, 1992:2). Nonetheless, among all the things God created, it is only man that possesses that natural tendency or proclivity for creative powers in mental and psychic forms to reflect on his experience and express it with symbols, upon the fact that animals and plants have that power to reproduce themselves through natural methods or otherwise (Nabofa, 1994:4). Nabofa again asserts that:

Man is not only a symbolizing and

conceptualizing animal. He is also "meaning-seeking", but meaning can only be stored in symbols. Hence symbols constitute power resources liable to use and misuse. A society and its religion can only be understood through an analysis of the symbols by which its members communicate, worship, express their faith, evangelise, and manipulate relationships especially those involving religious beliefs (1994:21).

Nonetheless, Nabofa (1994:21) went further again to argue that by studying and learning about symbols in their religious contexts, we can find a kind of back-door approach to a deeper theological understanding of what the Africans actually believe, actually practice and actually say about their faith. The symbols makes you think says Paul Ricoeur (1971:404f). According to the book of Genesis:

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; man and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God

said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (Gen,1:27-28).

From the psychological point of view, Nabofa notes that:

Psychologists have often asserted that the only difference between man and the other animals, plants and minerals is that whereas man can engage in abstract thinking and attain to self-consciousness as well as engage in metaphysical analysis, animals follow their instincts and have not yet attained to that self-consciousness that gives rise to various forms of symbolization (1994:4).

Buttressing this further, Edwin Smith argues that:

Neglecting this fact, some writers make the mistake of supposing that the untutored Africa is incapable of abstract thinking. By changing *mu-ntu*, 'human being', into *bu-ntu* he expresses the ideas of 'manliness, virtue, humanity'. Yet, while well able to think abstractly, he prefers to put his thought and feeling into vivid concrete terms (Smith, 1966:10-11).

Nonetheless, Nabofa (1994:3) in recognizing the significance of concrete terms as symbols of religions asserts that "the metaphysics of any religion cannot be fully and adequately studied, grasped and appreciated without a fair knowledge of its symbolic forms and processes which normally emerged out of the illumination". Omijeh (1983:195) laments that "nowhere did early missionaries and Western writer's misunderstand African cultures and societies as in the rituals and symbolism". Sundermeier (1998:39) asserts that symbols relate to actual world and always have a material side; they can be heard, felt and imagined. He argues that because of their sensory character, they can speak to the emotional nature of human beings. They are satisfying; that is why it is in their nature to be accepted. They have to resonate with the feelings and value of the group and individual (Sundermeier, 1998:38-39). Nabofa (1994:77) argues that every scholar in the study of religion in Africa is aware of the fact that liturgical symbols, especially the non-physical ones, are enmeshed in the totality of African culture and that

African Biblical scholarship really appreciates the benefits derivable from the use of appropriate African symbols in interpreting the Biblical message to mediate and suite the African situation. Samuel Abogunrin (1991) asserts in justifying the commentaries and importance of some scholars for the African culture opined that:

While God exists totally free from culture, human beings are totally immersed in culture. But God from beginning has used human culture as the milieu to reveal Himself to mankind. In communicating his revelation to man, God has often submitted to cultural limitations because human beings cannot comprehend supernatural truths outside his own cultural understanding. Therefore, God has always revealed himself (sic) in terms of human language and culture. African religion and culture which shaped the lives of our fathers have continued to exert great influence on life in Africa. It therefore, means that biblical interpretation in Africa must take cognizance of this particular spiritual, cultural and intellectual milieu (Abogunrin, 1991:vf).

However, before we start the discourse on the concept of symbols, Ekeke (2010:6) argues that it is of paramount significance that we align our discussion on the symbolism to a theoretical framework to help us assimilate and understand in full details the orientation we are set to examine and in this wise, one main theoretical view that would be considered very vital would be the symbolic interactionism of George Mead which is a theory synonymous with symbols in social institutions of human interaction. Ekeke (2010:6) again asserts that "once we have conceptualized an object we can now think of that object even when that object is no more invisible. Therefore, the object is thought of symbolically". He argues further that symbolic conceptions and thought reduces this shortcoming of limited experience of human beings to what we actually see, hear, or fear, therefore concludes that almost all interactions between and among human beings are dimensions of exchange of symbols by presenting four primary and interrelated levels (Ekeke, 2010:6).

The first level is impulse and that "impulse which involves an immediate sensuous stimulation, the need to do something about it" (Ritzer, 2000:208). The second one is perception, and according to Ekeke

(2010:6) "George Mead sees perception as involving incoming stimuli as well as the mental images they create. People do not simply respond immediately to stimuli but rather think about and assess them through mental imagery. They also actively select characteristics of a stimuli and release among sets of stimuli". Ritzer (2000:208) argues that such a stimuli, may have several dimensions, and the actor is able to select among them.

Buttressing this further, Ekeke (2010:6) asserts that George Mead calls the third level manipulation. He argues that sequel to the manifestation of the impulse with the object perceived, what follows immediately is action-taking with regard to the conceptualized symbol. The fourth and the last level according to George Mead is consummation and at this level that actor in symbolic interaction particularizes the specific objective of his choices of the many possible meanings or interpretations of the object, towards satisfying the original impulse (Ekeke, 2010:6). In another development, Giddens (1997:565) defines symbols as something that stands for, represents a person, idea, letter, figure, or sign that expresses a sound, a number, a chemical substance. The implication here is that, one symbolic form may be capable of several meanings or interpretations and this made Radcliffe-Brown (1969:142) to argue that whatever has a meaning is a symbol and the meaning or interpretation is what is expressed by the symbol, that is to say, the "translation, explanation, meaning or conceptualization of the sign-object would be in relation with a subsequent sign representing the same object" (Partmentier, 1994:5).

Strictly speaking, symbols vary among different class of people and worshippers and we should not forget the fact that the adherents of the diverse religions believe that they are not worshipping or rather venerating images associated with their religions, but invariably they are using them to stimulate the whims and caprices of their imagination to the proper act of worship (Okoye, 2011:52). This is why Wosien (1992:30) posits that "when a symbol is made to have finite meaning, as opposed to merely being a paraphrase of the mysterious, an approximation to reality, then it becomes an idol". Those who are in the field of Psychology of Religion will be most concerned with how symbols are used to manipulate, and how they actually influence the mind and behaviour of the believer (Nabofa, 1994:5). In fact, images, emblems or symbols are not end in themselves, but means to an end (Adelowo, 1990:162), no wonder all professions or religious bodies, be it traditional religion, Christianity,

Islam and other secular bodies expresses their experiences through symbols, while these expressions could be articulated and mediated in religious emblems, ideograms, icons, rituals, songs, prayers, myths, incantations, vows, customary behaviour and personifications (Nabofa, 1994:4). In this wise, Ezeanya (1994:8) opines that "one of the important customs of the Igbo people of Nigeria in connection with the birth of a child, is the naming ceremony. For the Igbo people, for the Hebrews, a name is not just a personal label for the sake of identity. It means much".

However, in indigenous religious practices the basic assimilation and understanding of these so called religious symbols makes itself to be comprehensive, rapid and compact to use, it equally assists in understanding and concentration during any kind of religious rituals to achieve divine essence (Nabofa, 1994:4). No wonder, when Christianity and Islamic religions came to Africa, because traditional religious symbols have their ambiguities and these could shroud their true meaning to the unwary, they branded those symbol as objects of heathenism, animism, idolatry, fetishism and so on (Nabofa, 1994:5).

Thus, according to Geoffrey Parrinder (1987:127) "such religious symbols are means of expression used by Africans, scriptures of a sort, in the arts which Africans developed and whose originality and power have been recognized by European artists such as Picasso, Epstein and Henry Moore". He argues that "painting and sculpture, in stone, ivory, brass, wood, clay, cloth and other materials have been used since time immemorial for daily purposes and for important representations. These express people's beliefs from the inside, though their interpretation by others is not always easy" (Parrinder, 1987:127). Because of the use of such derogatory terms by the Western and Arab scholars, visionary and articulated religious scholars, theologians and leaders of thought in various endeavours deemed it wise to consider giving this term symbol a definition, today the word symbol means an image, object that suggests or refers to something else (Hornby, 1995:1215). Thompson (1970:9) asserts that symbol is anything which exists for its purpose of pointing people beyond itself. Cohen (1974:26) sees symbols as "objects, acts, relationships or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings".

This concept of symbol made Clifford Geertz to conceive of culture as a text (Crapanzano, 1986:68-76) which serves as a vehicle for conception (Geertz,

1973:91). Kreinath (2005:102) argues that this implies that any form of ritual action can be seen as a kind of religious behaviour, which is approached through the lens of a broad linguistic model. Here, what this tries to point out is that we have various symbolic forms and that there is every possibility for one symbolic form to be given several meanings and such meanings would equally be given at different segments depending upon the ability and capability of the interpreter's level of consciousness and intelligence (Nabofa, 1994:6). However, Susanne Langer (1958:174) in her book *Theology and Life*, simply made a distinction between a mere sign and symbol and according to her, a sign merely or probably indicates a thing, while a symbol however represents it. Buttressing this further, Sundermeier argues that:

Symbol should not be confused with allegory. The law of analogy prohibits this. Allegory links up things which do not belong together, adding something to reality. Symbols, on the other hand, make visible the powers which belong together, and participate in each other. Nor should a symbol be confused with a sign. Signs are one-directional, unmistakable. Symbols condemn several aspects which are not fully explainable. Interpretation can change, without the previous interpretation losing its validity, even when its significance decreases. Different interpretations are not mutually exclusive. They have to be understood as supplementary, since each interpretation embraces only one level of meaning, be it social [as in social anthropology], legal, psychological or religious. Synchronising these levels is the essential task of the symbol (Sundermeier, 1998:39).

In one of his own contributions, to what symbols stands for, Carl Jung (1979:20) asserts that these are meaningless in themselves; they equally have acquired recognizable meanings through common usage or even deliberate intent. He further argues that:

What we call a symbol is a term, a name or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown or hidden from us... Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its

obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider "unconscious" aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it. As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason (Jung, 1979:20).

Mircea Eliade (1987:861) asserts that symbol reveals certain dimension of reality that would otherwise elude our knowledge and this deeper dimension is disclosed or revealed not only through the reflection of the interpreters of the symbols but in the "internal or innermost logic" proper to the symbols themselves. Radcliffe-Brown (1952:143) argues that whatever has meaning is a symbol and the meaning is what is expressed by the symbol. Nonetheless, Symbol by definition is communal that converts latent power into energy (Sundermeier, 1998:53).

Buttressing this further, Paul Ricoeur (1995:5) explains that "symbol as a multiple-meaning expression characterized by a hidden logic of double reference. Symbols are like signs in that they intend something beyond themselves. But whereas the sign possesses a relatively obvious and conventional set of denotations, the symbol's meanings are polysemic, difficult to discern, and virtually inexhaustible in depth". Benjamin Ray (1976:17) posits that mythical symbols and ritual acts are thus decidedly instrumental and they not only say what reality is, but they also shape the world to conform with, this reality. In this respect, religion plays an enormous role in African societies. He argues that archetypal symbols express a community's past and they structure collective rites for corporate benefit and in the traditional context religion cannot be a purely personal affair; the relation to the sacred is, first of all, a communal one (Ray, 1976:17). According to Sundermeier (1998:38) symbols, unfolds reality in such a way that it communicates reality. He argues that "there is no other reality than that accessible in the symbol. The symbol lives from unity, even when it is directed at the partial. It does not cry out from within reality, but emanates reality in such a way that participation becomes possible. It comes from the whole and unfolds it before us. The 'whole' is the world around, of which the invisible world is an essential part" (Sundermeier, 1998:38).

However, this concept of symbol is seen as, a recognition of one thing as standing or representing another thing (Firth, 1973:79). Tillich (1959:54) asserts that "symbols are similar to signs in one distinctive

respect: both symbols and signs point beyond themselves to something else" when "it finds acceptance in the group consciousness" (Tovey, 2004:12). On a general note, symbol from the above definitions given would be seen as a hall-mark of an idea, a logo, a sign, a ritual or perhaps a psycho-behavioural pattern that stands out as an overt representation of an inner experience or essence of the unconscious (Nabofa, 1994:7). Symbols themselves represent the continued role of tradition (Gibson & Dunbar-Hall, 2006:396). Symbols always contain something of them, sometimes strongly, sometimes faintly (Sundermeier, 1998:38). No wonder Montgomery (2016: 17) asserts that "most Africans used the symbol of the master as a cloak for their own spirits". To sum up this, in traditional religious practices and systems, Uvie an Igbo idiophone would be described as a "hallmark of symbol of dignity, royalty, respect" (NTI, 1990:86) in the tradition and hegemony of the Aguleri people of Anambra State because of various functions it performs.

Types of Symbols

As we have various definitions of symbols, the same way we have an endless variety of symbols too but in traditional religious thought patterns and cultic activities, for us to have a deeper knowledge of these symbols, we should equally, have an understanding of these symbolic forms and processes which would help us have a deeper insight into their symbolic referents (Nabofa, 1994:10). Of the endless variety of symbols, eight categories may be singled out for special attention and these include:

- a. Arbitrary Symbols
- b. Associative Symbols
- c. Evocative Symbols
- d. Artistic Symbols
- e. Ritualistic Symbols
- f. Communicative Symbols
- g. Artificial Symbols
- h. Natural Symbols

Arbitrary Symbols: According to Amos Agunbiade in his book symbol: *Communication gadget in the church*, symbols are "found in nature but are established by decree. The sign of plus or addition "+" in Mathematics or the staff notation used in music may also be referred to as steno-graphic or code symbols" (2004:5).

Associative Symbol: Agunbiade (2004:5) again argues that "the symbol and its meaning complement each other either naturally or because of some historical

antecedent. Thus a key is natural and almost inevitable symbol of authority because of its association with ownership or stewardship. The dove and the olive branch stand for peace, no doubt with reference to the story of Noah". Arguably, the key given to Peter in the Holy Book by God actually is believed to represent or symbolize power or authority and according to the gospel of Saint Matthew, it reads:

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Mathew, 16:17-20).

Evocative Symbols: In another development, Agunbiade (2004:5) asserts that "symbols in this category suggest their meaning by producing certain attitudes and feeling rather than the direct statement. For instance, when a lurid green colour is employed to suggest envy".

Artistic Symbols: In the true sense of it, these are creative and man-made art works like the Uvie sacred drum because it "is carved from a log of wood and regarded as a symbol of the community" (Okafor, 1998:183). Nabofa (1994:12) argues that such artistic symbols performs dual functions which includes religiously communicative and artistic and a typical example of this is Mbari cult that is being neglected in Igbo tradition and hegemony which is an embodiment of communication and artistic symbols respectively. No wonder Nabofa (1994:12) again opines also that "artistic symbols are those which are used in art form for aesthetic purposes". Buttressing this further, Nabofa again comments that

Every Mbari cult is usually erected in a conspicuous place and near the shrine of the particular divinity in whose honour and gratification it is being established. It attracts a lot of audience from neighbouring towns and villages when the job is completed. It acts as the people's information centre. When it is newly completed it acts as the community's newsroom for several days and months. After a

while it would remain as the people's archives where they go to consult and obtain inspirations, ideas and information about many aspects of their religious thinking and practices. As Christians and Muslims obtain inspiration from their Holy Books: the Bible and the Quran respectively, likewise the traditional Igbo person receives inspiration and knowledge from the myriads of symbols that are replete in the Mbari cult (Nabofa, 1994:49-50).

Arguably, (Nabofa, 1994:12) regrets that shrines of African traditional religion are replete with artistic symbols but it is a pity that most of these are being neglected, pilfered out and smuggled into Europe and America. The observation of Chinua Achebe in this respect may be worthy of note:

The purposeful neglect of the painstakingly and devoutly accomplished Mbari house with all the art objects in them as soon as the primary mandate of their creation has been served, provides a significant insight into the Igbo aesthetic value as process rather than product. Process is motion while product is rest. When the product is preserved or venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised. Therefore the Igbo choose to eliminate the product and retain the process so that every occasion and every generation will receive its own impulse and experience of creation. Interestingly this aesthetic disposition receives powerful endorsement from the tropical climate which provides an abundance of materials for making art, such as wood, as well as formidable agencies of dissolution, such as humidity and the termite. Visitors to Igbo land are shocked to see that artifacts are rarely accorded any particular value on the basis of age alone (1984:ix).

Buttressing this kind of non-challant attitude towards such significant and symbolic artifact [Mbari cult], Geoffery Parrinder attests to the observation and affirms that:

The panorama of life is well illustrated in the Mbari 'decorated', houses which Igbo people of Nigeria have traditionally erected at special

times. These were temporary temples, built at the specific command of a god, but never repaired after construction and soon falling into disrepair. The central figure of such temples is Ala, the great Mother Goddess, the spirit of fertility, and guardian of the dead which as they are buried in the earth are said to be in her pocket. Some of the statues of Ala with a child in her arms have been compared to Italian Madonnas or the Egyptian Isis with her son Horus (1987:128).

The picture of total negligence and complete ruin Achebe and Parrinder are painting here calls for urgent reorganization, rejuvenating and revitalization of all the artistic symbols in Igboland in particular and guard them for cultural integration and transmission of indigenous knowledge for posterity irrespective of modern civilization because such "exotic objects have been given value as art and culture" (Clifford, 1988:12). On this, Idigo (2001:180) warns "let me remind the Igbo nation that like the Christian religion, the Igbo traditional religion believes that life is a continuum. Our dead ancestors are not dead and gone. Their souls are living. Our pioneer fore fathers are still living. We must overcome our shortcomings in order to attract their blessings. If we do not, the likelihood is that we shall continue to be haunted and disunited". Affirming this assertion, Hakan Rydving (2004:101) exhorted the Igbo nation by advising them "to stand firm in their beliefs and not desert the customs of their ancestors"

Buttressing this further, Idigo (2001:178-179) argues that "the neglect of the historical knowledge is to a nation what the loss of memory is to human beings. The Igbo's should therefore be prodded to take a renewed interest in their history in order to understand why they are in this current state". This is because according to Achebe (1958:143) "our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes". On a general note, in traditional religion of the Igbo people artistic symbols are invaluable resources encoded with learned pattern of behaviour, ideas, and beliefs shared among a people and socially transmitted from one generation to another (Sofola, 1973:ix). Put in another way:

Most African sculptures appear to have been associated with religion, which pervades most aspects of African life. The religious genres included, votive figures, which adorned

shrines, reliquary figures, charms, figures, stools, used in initiation to the cults, the apparatus for divination, dance staff, musical instruments and a variety of other ritual paraphernalia (Bascom, 1973:11).

Ritualistic Symbols: These symbols like the Uvie sacred drum are the ones that have to do with the items or materials used to perform certain rituals or ceremonies like *Ovala* especially for religious instruction and initiations (Nabofa, 1994:18). In that sense, Nabofa (1994:14) again argues that such symbols do not only aid to communicate, they are equally means of preserving knowledge, religious and historical occurrences; more so, it is in this vein that ritualistic symbols are the most valuable means for passing on the tradition and culture of a people from generation to generation.

Here, it is very imperative to remind ourselves of Carl Jung's (1979:93) observation that "cultural symbols are those that have been used to express eternal truths", and that are still used in many religion today. According to Nabofa (1994:12) "ritualistic symbols are sometimes used to instruct the devotee in certain principles... [sic]. Ritualistic symbol are those that are used either in a ritual itself or to evoke a ritual in the mind of the initiate". Such symbols basically have gone through series of metamorphosis or transformations and even a long process of more or less conscious development, and have thus become collective images accepted by Western societies (Clifford, 1988:12). However, ritualistic symbols no matter how old and transform or modified they may be, still retain much of their time honoured or original symbolic sacredness and numinosity or spell which can ultimately still evoke a deep emotional response in some of those who had acknowledged them (Nabofa, 1994:14).

We often say that African traditional religion is primarily written everywhere (Metuh, 1987:12) and this is true because every traditional African community like Aguleri is "replete with the symbols of their religion and those who have eyes to see and ears to hear can symbolically experience and notice them in their cultural context" (Nabofa, 1994:14) during such festival like the *Ovala* where the Uvie sacred sound features prominently.

According to Nabofa (1994:14) again man's creative activities, actions, emotions and self-expressions are basically symbolic in themselves, but somehow they are based on symbols which are used to preserve traditional religious knowledge and the mythical history behind them. Nabofa (1994:14) further maintains that the physical images however found in indigenous shrines,

verbal expressions also used to convey a religion's theology and other cultic elements basically portray or stand for something, which has resulted from the creative activity of a particular geographical and cultural setting like Aguleri community. More so, they not only communicate, but are equally significant tools or medium for man to satisfy his quest and need to express himself and actually preserve and transmit the experience of the past to posterity (Nabofa, 1994:14).

Consequently, Nabofa (1994:14) further argues that religious symbols especially those connected with religious and cultural festivals like the Uvie sacred drum during which historical events like the *Ovala* festival are re-enacted and it is used to teach and aid in memory remembrance of historical and significant events and doctrine of the faith. He affirms that in this context such ritualistic and symbolic object like the Uvie drum is very significant in aiding, instructing and shaping the minds of the younger generations about the sect they belong (Nabofa, 1994:14). Buttressing this further, Nabofa (1994:14) again asserts that most cultic activities that feature prominently during indigenous festivals in community like Aguleri are sacred ritual activities during which some significant historical events that relate to the people's belief are re-enacted, reconstructed and revitalised. Analytically, to elucidate more on this, a young, palm fronds used during solidarity march for the King during the *Ovala* festival in a traditional community like Aguleri carries so many religious and symbolic under tones, primarily, it symbolises sacredness in its entirety (Nabofa, 1994:54). We should take note of the fact that, in Africa and Nigeria in particular, one major aspect of Nollywood's contribution in all these is in the representation of religio-cultural rituals as a basic aspect of communalism (Uwah, 2010:87). This depicts the capability of film directors and producers to connect familiar symbolic language of these cultures into their film productions, especially to avail the experience of communal liminality (Animalu, 1990:46), cultural integration and nostalgic egalitarianism among proximate audience who are mainly Nigerians and Africans (Uwah, 2010:86).

Communicative Symbols

We should not forget the fact that there are some categories of symbolic forms that are classified into communicative, ritualistic, artistic and even evocative. Perhaps, that is the reason why Nabofa (1994:12) asserts that communication symbols are those that are used specifically to communicate knowledge and

information. Moemeka (1998:133) argues that Africans communicate communalistically and by this claim he pinpoints the indicators of communalism to include 'religion as a way of life' in people's daily encounters. In both verbal and non-verbal communications, Moemeka (1998:133) again asserts that "communalistic acts are engaged in to confirm, solidify and promote social order and in such cultures, communication is always a question of attitude towards one's neighbour {...} closely tied to communication rules designed to ensure communal social order".

Artificial Symbols

These are the types of symbols that is believed to be imbued with natural powers and they carry a potent aura of sacredness and religiosity in the minds of the people that recognise them to be the embodiment and epitome of their spiritual guardians simply because of the mythological and ritualistic embellishment that have surrounded them from time immemorial (Ejizu, 1986:2). Nabofa (1994:11) argues that "artificial symbols are created by an individual or a group to represent notions of their own. Such symbols usually relate to their own particular experiences and may mean nothing to any other group of persons". Ejizu (1986:34) affirms that "a typical example of this is *Ofo*, which is a ritual object of Igbo consciousness and ritual life, and in Igbo tradition and customs; an *Ofo* bearer is believed to be the earthly representation of the ancestors of a particular community". According to Onunwa (1990:53) *Ofo* is a sacred stick of office and authority held by kings, chiefs or family heads. Iheanacho (2005:111) opines that "*Ofo* is a ritual instrument which symbolizes lineage headship and sacred authority". Broadly speaking, in traditional Igbo culture, according to Ekeke (2012:9) "*Ofo* depicts that one has the support of the ancestors and deities of the land as he sits on the throne as the king, head or family representative. It shows that the person in question is not a usurper but is the actual person according to lineage/tradition qualified to carry the mantle of leadership or sit on the throne or occupy that position". To buttress this point further, Idigo, succinctly opines that:

Owing to the itinerant nature of his priestly duties Nri was given powers to hand *Ofo* to community leaders in different Igbo settlements as he travelled far and wide in the course of his duties as the priest and traditional doctor of Igbo people. This is why before any Nri traditional

ruler is installed, the king is led to Aguleri where he performs sacrifices to the sacred temple of Obuga before being given the sceptre of Authority or *Odudu Eze* by the Igwe of Aguleri (2001:42).

Onwuejeogwu (1981:87) asserts that it is during this ritual coronation journey that the acclaimed Nri King would "stay four days at Aguleri in Obuga to receive the blessing of Eri and to collect a lump of clay brought from the bottom of the Anambra rivers by divers". Also, it is through this mystical journey during the coronation of an Nri King by the Aguleri that (Jeffreys, 1935:347 & Onwuejeogwu, 1981:87) affirms that there is a divine injunction that the candidate is ordered to "go to Aguleri, obtain your *Odudu* and may you return safely to rule your people". Jeffreys (1935:348) again asserts that during such coronation rituals "a spirit-seeker is consulted for the most propitious days to raise the *Odudu*. A sacrifice is made on the river-bank, the future divine King points his *Ofo* over the water and prays that all dangers be removed. Where upon a man plunges in and brings up the *Odudu*. Feasting and rejoicing now follows. The candidate has proved his godhead". More so, in times of oath-taking most Igbo communities will ask the holder of the *Ofo* to assemble with their *Ofo*, the suspect must swear and this implies that oaths and *Ofo* plays vital functions as sanctions (Okere, 2005:108). Holders of *Ofo* are given special respect in the community, this is because it is believed that they are carrying or holding a symbol of both blessing and cursing (Ekeke, 2012:9). In this perspective, Onunwa holds that:

In Onitsha, when the Obi [king], who is also a priest in a particular way] strikes the *Ofo*...on the ground [ala] in a ritual of intercessory prayers. It is ritual in which the Obi strikes the great *Ofo* on the ground to bless his subjects, and offers thanks to the Supreme Deity and other gods on behalf of himself and his subjects for blessings bestowed on them in the previous year (1990:53).

It is on this position Bloch (1987:272) argues that "the symbolism of authority must therefore not be just a matter of following a transcendental model, but also of compromising with this model to make it relevant to this life. It must involve a contradiction which allows for the reintroduction of real existence into what still remains the ideal". According to Onwubiko (1991:xi) the essence

of these [represented] rituals are that they embody the values of the people, they documented the traditional education of the people, the songs, symbols, signs, proverbs and riddles, and works of arts. More so, resonating with the idea is the insight of Michael Real (1996:48) on what he terms 'mythic rituals', these according to him "connect us with our historical past and our physical environment. They establish order and define {...} values in culture".

Natural Symbols

These are such objects created by God like rivers, animals, plants, forest wood, groves, mountains, hills, valleys which later became totems to certain groups of people in an environment (Mbiti, 1970:109). Such natural symbols are generally acknowledged and believed by a people who share identical beliefs that they are thus imbued with potent spiritual and symbolic qualities (Nabofa, 1994:11). From the perspective of Gareth knight (1983:273) "if a group meditates upon a constructive image sufficiently intensely, it will become imbued with power and knowledge which will remain available for another group at a later time, who will be able to draw this form as if having an independent existence of its own". Nabofa (1994:11) argues that "it is plausible that most of the African divinities associated with mountains, hills, valleys, lakes, rivers, ocean, sacred, groves, forests, trees and animals especially those which have become totems, must have come into being through this kind of deification and mystical impregnation".

Summarily, for the fact that the history of symbolism shows that everything created by God[s] and the ones craftily produced by man can assume symbolic significance, the Uvie as an Igbo idiophone of indigenous sacred sound falls under the category of ritualistic; communicative and artistic symbols which invariably symbolizes royalty, dignity and respect (NTI, 1990:86). Also, we should not forget the fact that as religion permeates all segments of life in traditional Africa, every symbols be it associative, evocative, communicative or artistic, are seriously involved in ritualistic activities (Lugira, 1999:6). In fact, Uvie sacred drum would equally be regarded as a cultural symbol which is used to express eternal truths and always used in performing certain religious activities through the mediation of its sound. The Uvie sacred drum as a work of art, culture and symbol is "an outlet through which religious ideas and injunctions are expressed" (Nabofa, 1994:47). This is the reason why

Olusanyin (1993:54) asserts "that symbols reflect every kind of emotion in the human mind and radiate religious pleasures".

Functions of Religious Symbols

Having made mention of certain functions the Uvie play in a traditional society like Aguleri, we have also various functions of religious symbols in general. Here, Ekeke (2012:7) argues that in African traditional religion, symbols serve as the vehicle through which religious meanings are conveyed and interpretations established to help clearer understanding. Religion plays both positive and negative roles in our own contemporary society (Raiya & Pargament, 2007:754), and because of this, some people can die willingly because of religion (Personality Spirituality.net, 2012:1). Buttressing this point further, Clifford Geertz (1973:130) argues that "it is not only positive values that sacred symbols dramatize, but negative ones as well. They point not only towards the existence of good but also of evil, and towards the conflict between them"

From my observation and experience, it has been noticed that "millions are held fast in the chains of religious and scientific dogma, and millions more are stranded in the vast no-man's land between religious and scientific thought, crucified in an attempt to serve both a master and a mistress absolutely (Janus, 1960:11). Religion has various functions either manifest or latent in maintaining absolute peace and harmony in every society and these functions are the foundations with which it co-joins all elements of a people's culture and leads them to the total advancement and emancipation of that culture (Nabofa, 1994:15). According to O'Dea (1966:6) "religion gives moral, spiritual and emotional support, comfort and assurance in times of uncertainty and disappointment. It promotes the social reconciliation of social deviants who are alienated from society's goals and norms and so on". It is on this position that Nabofa (1994:13) argues that we can understand that sacred sound like the Uvie through its religious mediation that has to do with the divine and revelation and this revelation will somehow be put inform of symbols which are fully impregnated with symbolism and symbolic meanings. When symbols are used they try to evoke in human minds deep emotions, mirror religious and social reality and these easily spur and motivate them into taking certain action consciously or unconsciously (Nabofa, 1994:13). Consequently, among the various functions of religious symbols are: "maintenance of order and coherence in

the society, for communication, preserving knowledge to be transferred from one generation to the other; for experiencing inner feelings, and eternal truths; for remembering important events; as aids in meditation; and for the promotion of spiritual development" (Nabofa, 1994:13). In anything a person does, there must be order and coherence if one wants to achieve positive result and this is done basically through the use or means of symbols (Nabofa, 1994:13). Psychologically, sense perceptions, emotional and religious experiences/revelations are put into symbolic forms which could be metamorphosized in forms of facial expression, gestures, music, icons, language, and works of art, prayers and incantations during ritual process (Nabofa, 1994:13). According to Nabofa (1994:13) "to ensure order and meaning within a given cult or religious sect, symbols are therefore used as very powerful instruments for indoctrination, that is, as tools for impressing religious dogma in the mind of the devotee which will, of course, make it easy for the leaders to organize and control those who are under them in the same sect". Symbols like the sacred sound of the Uvie and its ritual dance are equally used as an agent of identification in community like Aguleri especially among the initiates.

Here, Nabofa (1994:13) argues that "for brothers and sisters to easily identify or mark themselves out, one's each of them sees anyone wearing or putting on such an emblem or insignia that actually tallies with theirs, would easily know who is who in any gathering". Nabofa (1994:13) again asserts that "in order words, members of the same sect are easily identified and welded together by religious symbols in consequence of their strong belief in the divine being, whose attributes the symbols they are wearing represent". Again, symbols would be used as a medium of communication whether secular or religious and on this aspect, Nabofa affirms that:

The need for inter and intra-personal communication could be regarded as the most important factor that generated the emergence of symbols. Human beings are always communicating their thoughts, feelings and experiences not only to other persons but also to themselves. We quite often use symbols to transmit some basic ideas and principles to our inner selves. This is where the meaning and essence of cultic initiations could be well appreciated (1994:13).

On the basis of this, Iheanaocho (2005:111) gives another example of this symbol as the Ofo symbol in Igbo land which stands for or symbolises authority. However, from the observation of Christopher Ejizu:

Ofo is a typical Igbo religious ritual symbol. Through the characteristic human process of symbolization, the ritual stick achieves a transmutation of awareness from personal and social levels to a symbolic and transcendental one. By juxtaposing in one single formation the grossly physical and the structurally normative, the organic and the social and investing them with spiritual power, the ritual symbol serves to transform the intellectual and emotional framework of the people and thereby focuses and mobilizes their behaviour. The fore-going is in the main, the fundamental rational explanation for the significance of the *Ofo* symbol in Igbo traditional life (1986:13-14).

Such symbols would also be used to remind adherents of some of their articles or elements of their faith, this is the reason why Nabofa (1994:14-15) posits that "symbol may be a graphic presentation of a doctrine, a law or a principle, which impresses that particular idea in the mind of the devotee so that he could easily understand and remember it". Psychologically, religious symbols like the Uvie drum help the Aguleri community especially the initiates to be "consciously enlightened or aware of essence of God's or divine presence" (Nabofa, 1994:15). Symbols therefore are as voices which whisper to us of what is beyond (Agunbiade, 2004:6). He argues that they must be the influence which purifies the heart and elevate the thoughts and feelings above the sense, and must minister to the Godward movement of the soul (Agunbiade, 2004:6-7).

The use of symbols to recall social values is especially pronounced in commemorative rituals (Bourdillon, 1990:349) and this is very glaring as far as ritual ceremonies are consigned in Aguleri tradition where the sound of the Uvie sacred drum is used to "transmit some primary principles and ideas to individual inner-selves" (Nabofa, 1994:14). More so, this is the area where the symbolic meaning and essence of sacred cultic initiations would be well appreciated because cultic symbols often feature most prominently in ritual activities and here a good illustration is an edan image which constantly reminds a member of Reform Ogboni Fraternity of Nigeria of his vows,

responsibilities and obligations to his fellow initiates (Akintola, 1992:15). Buttressing this further, Nabofa (1994:39) asserts that "each of the edan images has different meanings, while the male symbolizes wrath and wrong-doing, the female edan represents peace, happiness and friendship and compulsion which constitute the power and authority of the society". Akintola (1992:35) affirms that "this principal cult object symbolizes the undying spirit of mankind's primordial parents' edan kii ku ni ilede, as the philosophy is commonly expressed".

Dangers of Symbols

From the previous section, we have seen ample and good significances of symbols to enable one achieve positive results but also we should not overlook the tendency or probability that symbols would be equally manipulated in such a way to be detrimental to people that has myopic mentality (Idowu, 1973:124). Nabofa (1994:17) affirms that "we should not overlook the fact that they could be as well manipulated in such a way as to be detrimental to the short-sighted and the unwary, those who have shallow, mechanical and strait-jacketed faith, and in religiously pluralistic communities". The total abuse of an object or symbol of worship does not basically mean that it is useless or a vain thing but a situation where by worship of the divine is absolutely confined to the symbol of any kind, then, idolatry sets in unobtrusively (Idowu, 1973:123). Idowu again observes that:

Is not an end in itself but a means to an end. As its function is symbolic it has meaning beyond itself. The main purpose of such a symbol is to aid men's perception, concentration, and to be constant reminder of the divine presence. This has been age-long in the history of religion. Thus a religion is not necessarily idolatry simply because it uses material representations of the cultic-objects. And yet, there is a sense in which symbols of any kind of material representation do constitute a grave danger to religion and religious men's mind in its weakness especially, where it is exploited by priest craft, very easily ignores the delicate line of demarcation between the reality represented and what is primarily only a symbol (1973:123ff).

Now, I shall try to discuss in brief some of the

dangers or negative characteristics of symbolism as a concept. Some religious symbols like the Uvie are simply used by some cultic functionaries and traditional leaders as instruments of repression and thus to rubber-stamp their authority and power over the less privileged ones, especially women, minors and non initiates (Nabofa, 1994:18). In the tradition and culture of the Igbo people, the Uvie is highly prized and as such in this patriarchal tradition there are restriction put upon women, non initiates and the children insofar as they are prohibited from touching the Uvie or from dancing to it tune. This is the reason why Joy Lo-Bamijoko (1987:23) affirms that "in Afikpo area, women are still not allowed to see or listen to these instruments while they talk" and they are not allowed to touch or carry them. Reed & Hufbauer (2005:135-136) argues that through such sacred drum like the Uvie, the Igbo concepts of gender are articulated and the restriction of women through such sacred sound is tied to ritual and political authority.

To buttress this point, in Igbo land, the Nri people are reported to have used their symbol of Ikenga to exercise hegemony and cultural influence over the other Igbo people (Onwuejeogwu, 1973:87-95). Idigo (2001:133) affirms that it is a known fact that Nri was the priest and traditional doctor of the Igbo people and for that he travelled far and wide due to the nature of his profession among other Igbo communities. However, that does not make Nri to exercise his hegemony and cultural influence over Aguleri because (Idigo 2002:179) argues "that the Eri and Aguleri connection is avoided by some Igbo scholars in order to give them the opportunity of projecting Nri as the head of the Igbo's. The truth is that Eri is the founder of of Igbo race", or "the father of the Igbo people who migrated from the east – Hebrew who must have introduced a theological hegemony in Igbo land" (Utazi, 2005:11). Udeani (2007:11) argues that "the view that Nri-Awka is the spiritual and ideological dispersal centre of the Igbo is primarily based on the claims of the clans in this area". Onwuejeogwu (1981:168) affirms that "the Nri Kingship has a deep and long connection with Aguleri". According to Onwuejeogwu (1981:114) again "in the first level only the temple of Uga was formed. It was the temple of Eri, in Aguleri. All successors to the throne of Eze Nri must visit the temple of Uga during the coronation to perform the rituals of presentation, re-enactment and integration". He argues that "the political significance of the temple s generally uppermost in the minds of the Nri traditional elite, the *Ozo* titled men"

and it is during this period the "Ufie sacred music sound/played day and night for one year in the Kings palace" (Onwuejeogwu, 1981:114 & 87-88). Insofar as the scepter of authority given to Aguleri by his father Eri – the father of Igbo race is a representation of the divine which has its ritualistic functionalities embedded in it, this marks Aguleri as "the repository and custodian of genuine tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983:8). Buttressing this further, Idigo (2001:50) affirms that "in Igbo land kola-nut is broken with a lot of rituals. In a mixed gathering of Igbo's no Nri man breaks kola-nut in the presence of Aguleri man. The Nri man respects the seniority of Aguleri and gives him the honour to break kola-nut as the head of Eri family". Ikeanyibe (1999:12) affirms that "in any complete gathering of the Igbo's Nri may have the right to break the Kola-nut only if Aguleri is not represented" because Eri the father of Aguleri was the founder of Kola-nut (Idigo, 2002:19). Idigo argues that:

At the death of Eri, the scepter of authority was given to Agulu the founder of Aguleri who took over the mantle of rulership of Eri kingdom as the first born of Eri. [sic] Nri the last son of Eri and the priest in Eri family of six sons and a daughter, was the only son who immediately on migration and founding his community at Agulu-Ukwu established a centralized authority after obtaining the Odudu Eze from king Agulu of Aguleri (2001:42).

To establish this fact too, during the pre-colonial era in Africa, secret societies were used as instruments of classical traditional administration, as opined by Tamuno & Horton (1969:37) that "they provided legitimation for their activities and acted as a powerful sanction for compliance with their orders". Also, one significant point we should note here is that "the secret societies play both religious and political roles in some cases" (Adelowo, 1990:167), in this wise, Lucas (1948:121) in connection with Oro guild, asserts that "the guild possesses great political power. In the days of independence of Abeokuta, members of guild formed the majority in the political council known as the Ogboni council". The most important aspect of these organizations is that they engage in a lot of communication activities and in some cases, members get advanced information on policy matters before the government officially makes its stand known (Wilson, 1987:95). The idea is that this could be regarded as a

contributive factor to the prevalence of tribalism, sectionalism and nepotism in Nigeria because when their members contravene any law of the state or are in dire need of anything or position, they use their other signs and symbols to achieve it, thereby encourage bribery and corruption manifesting themselves in nepotism and favouritism (Nabofa, 1994:40 & 45). Norris & Inglehart (2004:194) asserts that membership to such organization is significantly associated with various indicators of civic engagement, including social attitudes and political behaviors. They argue that "available database is inadequate to determine the causality in these associations which requires panel surveys, but a process of mutually reinforcing reciprocal causation is probably underlying these relationships, whereby 'joiners' enjoy a positive sense of political and social trust for being members" (Norris & Inglehart, 2004:194). Nabofa (1994:36) maintains that "members of secret fraternities, like all other human groups, use symbols to achieve various purposes which include preservation of knowledge, communication both overt and covert, maintenance of order and discipline, instructing, meditation, concentration and for promoting psychological and spiritual development". Basically, one important key point to note here is the synthesis of religion and politics in traditional Yoruba land (Adelowo, 1990:167).

Insofar as, they were able to use certain groups of people mainly made up of adult males in such mapped out community who fulfilled certain requirement of age, probity, influence, wisdom and or even wealth to cap it, nonetheless, these initiates as members of the secret societies were then able to use their symbols to impose authority, order, decorum and meaning in their diversified environs (Nabofa, 1994:45). Symbols are equally used as tools for religious teaching, communication and indoctrination (Nabofa, 1994:78). No wonder Nabofa again points out that:

As they are capable of promoting true and endearing lessons so they are used for false and fanatical dogmatization. Priest craft quite often promotes the use of cultic symbols for irrational dogmatization which will in turn yield untested and blind faith. Those who have been caught in the web of such unbridled indoctrinations are usually found wanting when they are confronted with the theological, psychological and philosophical explanations for their dogma. Myths, folkore and ritual drama are some of the most powerful symbols that are used to promote

sectarian dogmatization which may lead to fanaticism (1994:17).

Religious symbols would act as agents of conflict, although, from the study of the concept of symbolism, we have gathered that symbols function as unifying factors among members of the same organization or sect (Nabofa, 1994:20). Nabofa (1994:20) further stresses that they can equally serve as objects of hate, racism and a medium of conflict, disintegration and destruction especially in such a pluralistic society in which each adherents of different faiths are doing everything possible in terms of evangelism to win more converts than the other. In this vein, each of them is scrambling to have a maximum share of interest as it has to do with the nations economical and political cakes (Nabofa, 1994:20). The illustration of Michael Nabofa again would be worthy of note:

In a plural society in which both the Christians, Muslim and adherents of African Religion alike parade their different cultic symbols in a mutually offensive manner to the members of other faiths, it is quite likely that, instead of such symbols engendering unity among member of the community they would cause serious frictions and disintegration. To drive this point home, in more recent times in Nigeria the words Sharia and Organization of Islamic Community [O.I.C.] has generated much debate in the country. Though they are judicial and political terms, ideas and issues, they have been conceived by most Nigerian Muslims as symbols of an ideal Umma or Islamic state, contrary to the most Nigerian Christians' views that they are symbols of politico-economic domination as well as religious subjugation (1994:20).

Frankly speaking, any time these two terms are mentioned in Nigeria, it changes the entire ambience to that of a nation "sitting on a keg of gun powder awaiting explosion that would end up in total disaster or complete destruction anytime soon" (Ateba, 2013:1). No wonder Awolowo (1947:47-49) affirms that "Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographic expression. There are no 'Nigerians' in the same sense as there are 'English', 'Welsh' or 'French'. The word 'Nigeria' is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not". In fact, according to Oluyemi, (1989:45) another analogy is the issue of religious crisis that took place at the University of Ibadan between 1985 and 1987 as it

has to do with the cross of the Christian faith alleged to be obscuring or blocking the vicinity of the Mosque of the Moslems which generated a great heat and tension within the University Campus but equally all over Nigeria. Then, there was a scenario where the whole Christians in the country solidly supported the Christian community in the University Campus to see that the cross was not removed or destroyed. Invariably, there was a total and classical solidarity among the Moslems all over the country who agitated that the cross must be removed from its present place so that it would not block or obscure the view of their members as they faced the symbolic east. From the above, one would see that because of the "grasshopper mentality" (Idowu, 1973:80) of some religious fanatics, the shallow, myopic and fanatical interpretations given to such symbols would bring about religious bigotry, acrimony, disunity and persecution in a pluralistic society like Nigeria (Geertz, 1973:199).

Inter-Relationship between Religion, Symbols and Culture

The concepts of religion, symbols and culture would be said to be inter-twined or inseparable and in religion especially, the two most significant elements are the experience of religion and its expression (Nabofa, 1994:8). Nabofa (1994:8) again argues that in religious scholarship, there is a very big difference between "the experience and expression of religion", nonetheless, all religions deals with belief in the existence of superhuman beings and its divine essence (Mbiti, 1975:76).

According to Francis Arinze (1970:8) "subjectively, religion is the consciousness of one's dependence on a transcendent Being and the tendency to worship Him. Objectively, is the body of truths, laws, and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent Being". Thouless (1924:66) affirms that religion is a felt practical relationship with what is believed as a superhuman being or beings. Burnim (1989:53) argues that "the unified conceptual framework also embraces the idea of change, of transformation – the process of becoming something different from what was before. Through attitudinal adjustments, often triggered by verbal cues, physical structures can be spiritually transformed. Through a union of various cultural signs and symbols, individuals can be led to an experience of altered states of being". From the above, an understanding of the essential variables of religion, those are the experience of religion

and that of the overt expression of that experience would enable us easily to appreciate more fully the relationship between religion, symbols and culture, nonetheless, symbol would be defined as an overt expression of what is behind the veil of direct perception and it is quite usual for a perceiver to express his inner experience, sight or visions and mystical or religious experience in symbols (Nabofa, 1994:6). The experience of such religious revelation of the divine essence is simply related to a total confrontation with what Rudolf Otto (1973:5ff) calls the numinous or the unnamed – something with a clear over plus of meaning which is inexpressible or ineffable or too great and elusive for words to describe.

According to Otto (1973:5ff) "the experience of the numinous leads one to a kind of self – evaluation which evokes in one a feeling of self- abasement and dependence. The Holy also combines the attributes of that which causes a sense of awesomeness, eeriness, daunting, self-abasement and inadequacy with a sense of an attractive and often irresistible magnetism". He describes the sum total of the whole experience as chartering moment of spiritual illumination – meaning an awesome and enchanting mystery (Otto, 1973:5ff). For the fact that man has under gone such mystical experience, then he would like to express such experience with certain representations which is liable to fallibilities and it is no wonder why Whitehead (1974:6) argues that "direct experience is infallible. What you have experienced you have experienced. But symbolism is very fallible in the sense that it may induce actions, feelings, emotions and beliefs about things which are mere notions without exemplifications in the world which the symbolism leads us to presuppose". Before man demonstrates, represents or symbolizes his inner religious experience or feelings there are certain variables which has to do with the state of his mind at that point in time and such are his level of consciousness, mental readiness, physical condition, moral-disposition, geographical and social awareness (Nabofa, 1994:9). These are some of the reasons why we have seemingly various artistic and cultic symbols all over the universe with religious background and religious undertone which are invariably impregnated with meanings and through such art we can know another's view of the universe (Roomaaker, 1974:11). Bascom opines that:

It is a part of man's learned traditions and customs, a part of his social heritage. It can be analyzed in the same way as other customs and

traditions, in terms of form and function, or of interrelations with other aspects of culture. It presents the same problems of growth and change, and is subject to the same processes of diffusion, invention, acceptance or rejection, and integration. It can be used, like other aspects of culture, for studies of these processes of those of acculturation, pattering, the relation between culture and the environment, or between culture and personality (1953:286).

More so, in traditional African society, artistic works, religion, cultic symbols would be described as outlets, mediums and mobile vehicles through which religious ideas are expressed (Nabofa, 1994:47). They reflect every kind of emotion in human mind and radiate religious pleasures (Kinni-Olusanyin, 1993:54). Ezeanya (1986:28) argues that "it may serve the purpose of remembering heroic activities of a particular hero or a sign of gratitude for life and services of the hero which should serve as a model to others". Nabofa (1994:47) holds the view that "the artist is indeed the spokesman of his community since he expresses what is held by the corporate groups". Insofar as all these artistic works and symbols are fully impregnated with symbolic meanings which has certain moral teachings they inculcate and disseminate in the society, nonetheless, Herskovists (1961:451-456) posits that all these serves as a medium of expression of thought, feeling, emotion and idea, which mostly have moral undertones. Invariably, for the fact that a member of the society who actually got involved in the religious experience with its expression, and perhaps it is in this religious expression that man came up with most works of art which are part of people's cultural heritage/evolution (Geertz, 1973:37). It is very imperative to understand that religion, symbols and culture are inter-related, and this is why Nabofa maintains that:

Cultic symbols are thus used to link religious experience with its expression and it is in religious expression that we find most works of art, theology, myths, and rituals of all kinds. Thus, man cannot express his inner religious experience and feelings without symbols. In other words, worship and all other cultic activities cannot be affected in the absence of symbols. That is, we cannot have religion without symbols. There is no belief system that is devoid of symbolic representations or ideograms. Symbols are classical repositories of African religious languages and experiences (1994:10).

According to Ekeke (2012:7) "religious symbols are very significant because they arouse in the individual similar response to those whom they are addressed. All symbols have the same characteristics and basic functions (Iheanacho, 2005:102). Ekeke (2012:7) argues that they are a bridge, which connect and link up religious ideologies, experiences, expressions and focus of the organization or group. He asserts that in religion, symbols stimulate the religious organization or group: the person speaking, as well as his audience and by doing so, the theoretical process of symbolism rekindles individual's own action (Ekeke, 2012:7), "according to his religious experiences, perceptions, and patterns" (Iheanacho, 2005:102). For the Africans, symbolism are representations of grasping, encoding, and interpreting spiritual perceptions and connotations, through material and visible clear facts of nature and individual experience Ekeke (2012:7). Iheanacho (2005:109) argues that Africans have no unilinear ways of symbolizing and understanding religious experience. McAdams (1988:227) asserts that "religious experience and religious belief are perceived as crucial elements in the building of a personal identity, often giving birth to emotionally charged experiences and through going crisis in ideology when old values and orientations are abandoned and suitable replacements sought". It is on this position that Falola (2003:35) argues that "those who urged for the survival of traditional institutions did not always consider the changes already introduced by Europeans because Western education and ideas

supplied many of the key ideas and issues to employ in looking at African tradition".

Conclusion

Having examined the religio-cultural import of signs, symbols and images among the Igbo people, it has been observed that the place of religio-cultural signs, symbols and images be it carved or molded among the Igbo people is at the very core of their traditional religious worship, religious communication and cultural practices. Devoid of these signs, symbols and images, the traditional life experiences of the Igbo's will completely be void, abstract and meaningless because some of these symbols represented in tangible visible forms were believed to be real and living. The proper underpinning of these traditional signs, symbols and images of the indigenous people of Igbo's will go a long way in the full integration of the Igbo people's life and their immediate cultural ecology with messages they disseminate. It must be noted also that despite the significance of this integration, it must be informed that such signs, symbols and images are evidently limited in their transmission of reality. However, I can tersely say earnestly that Igbo's are symbol-using people because from what we have observed so far in this paper, Igbo culture and tradition is an epitome and embodiment of symbols and symbolism which can be demonstrated in their day to day activities be it religious or secular do to the fact that very deep and knowledge of these aesthetics is necessary for decoding their meaning.

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