

ỌFỌ: THE EMBLEM OF JUSTICE

By

Ifeinwa Cordelia Isidienu (PhD)

Department of Igbo, African and Asian Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Email: ifyisidienu@gmail.com

Abstract

This study focuses on ọfọ as a symbol of justice among the Igbo extracts of Eastern Nigeria. In the ancient days, ọfọ was held in high esteem as a symbol of justice compared to the present time. The natural urge for justice resides in humans. This instinct was also noticed among the Igbo people, as the holders of ọfọ were very cautious in matters relating to justice. However, most researchers have not paid an exclusive attention to ọfọ as regards to justice. Most people focus their interest on the meaning, nature and functions while some people perceived ọfọ as a sacred object of ritual service. Some scholars see ọfọ as a god of justice. It is also assumed that recently the use of ọfọ is perverted. The evidence is seen by so much injustice prevalent in the society. The study seeks to reposition ọfọ as a symbol of justice. It also explores its role in maintaining and preserving justice in Igbo land. The study adopts the descriptive research method. The study obtains its data through the use of oral interview and a review of literature. The findings reveal that ọfọ performs the role of justice among other roles. ọfọ is seen to be synonymous with truth, for justice resides with truth. In a way of significance, this study is expected to sway some Igbo people to the main purpose which ọfọ serves culturally in Igbo land. Furthermore, it is expected to generate the tendency for many Igbo people to strive for justice and cordial relationship.

1.0 Introduction

Man, by nature, desires equity. Treating all parties, rivals and disputants equally is of the most interest to humanity. This requires honest, just, adequate and reasonable judgment; that should be devoid of partiality, bias or favouritism in dealing with any dispute. According to Ifediuba (2009) “Unethical behaviour has pan cosmic effect on one’s children.” Igbo people are aware of the consequences of immoral act, and so try to be principled. They believe that an evil could be generational, ‘*nwanwa tota o tokwudo*’, that is, children grow up to suffer the evils done by their parents. Every Igbo man, therefore, tries to leave an upright life. Based on this, they ensure that their actions are justified. Among the Igbo, ọfọ symbolizes uprightness and justice. To live a just life is not a matter of enforcement; it is in their nature to be fair in any dealings with their fellow human beings.

Igbo people have different levels by which cases are judged. When these levels make decisions and pronounce verdicts, they are irrevocable. Any judgment agreed upon, holding the ọfọ, or, in order words striking the ọfọ on the ground, cannot be revisited. It is final. The ọfọ is the seal and so a symbol of justice. The underlying factor here is what the ọfọ and the holder signify. According to Nzomiwu (1999:100-101) “Through this tree the supreme being transmits his blessing to his creatures. The holder of the

earthly *ofọ* is believed to receive communications spiritually from the creator and has obligation to be just as the creator”.

Ofọ is not ordinary; it is sacred. The holder is the mediator between the people and the spirit world. Ogugua and Ogugua (2013:201) assert that “It is a sacred duty to hold *ofọ*, because it means holding the soul of a people; the being of the people, the future and the aspirations of the people.” Certainly, if the holders of *ofọ* try to thwart issues, the community or the people concerned will suffer greatly.

It is pertinent therefore to examine the role of *ofọ* in ensuring peaceful cohabitation among the Igbo for a more unified society. And in doing that, the research method to guide the study is the descriptive type. The review of related literature will take its turn. Thereafter, the analysis of the role of *ofọ* in Igbo Land will be done prior to the conclusion.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The Different Perception of the *ofọ* Symbol

Ofọ is a widely known symbol in Igbo community. It stands for various things some of which many scholars have viewed from different perspectives. The first group is the western scholars. Among them are M. D. W. Jeffreys, P. A. Talbot, C. K. Meek, A. G. Leonard etc. According to Leonard (1968:106) “*ofọ* is one of the trees available in every Ibo community... *ofọ*, the god of justice and truth on the Niger... is appealed to by those, who, having a grievance, consider that, right is on their side.” Leonard recognizes that *ofọ* represents justice and truth, but fails to realize that *ofọ* is not a god and so not an object of worship among the Igbo. In view of this, Arazu (2005:132) acknowledges that “*ofọ* is not a god. It is used to make contact with the ancestors and other benevolent spirits. It is used to speak authoritatively and without fear, to the living, the dead and the gods.” Talbot (1969: 138) states that *ofọ* is a god of justice and truth. He believes that the god of justice lives in *ofọ* tree. To him, *ofọ* represents a male strength which is used when cases are tried for utmost delivering of the right judgement. Talbot also describes *ofọ* as a god, as clarified above. Even at that, although *ofọ* represents justice, Talbot’s view does not express entirely the place of *ofọ* among the Igbo since *ofọ* meant a lot of things to Igbo people. Ezenweke and Ogada (2012:159) are aware of this as they gave this instance: “*ofọ*, the ritual symbol of the Igbo people of Nigeria, symbolizes, at the same time, ancestral presence, authority, uprightness, truth, agent of punishment and gerontocratic leadership”.

2.2 The *Ofọ* Symbol and the First Son

According to tradition *ofọ* is handed over to the first son during the burial of the father. It is always in the custody of the eldest son. It is, therefore, used to ensure justice and for the identification of the first son. Certainly, among many communities in Igbo land, *ofọ* is used to associate with the elders, ancestors and with justice. It has a great power in effecting justice in Igbo land. For instance, in testifying the truth of a matter, *ofọ* is used for oath taking. Here the accused swears with *ofọ*, beckoning on the ancestors to be his witnesses. On this ground, Nzomiwu (1999:106) has this to say:

Just as *ofọ* symbolizes the real but unseen power of the ancestors, so does it symbolize their more perfect justice. Perfect justice is

thus thought of as having its abode in the spirit world and ultimately in God. As *ọfọ* makes real the presence and the influence of the ancestors in every family and community in the same way does it make real, the necessity of justice for each community.

Actually, *ọfọ* is a sacred tree believed to have been planted by God; and is looked upon as a symbol of justice, authority, and a medium of communication to God and the ancestors.

2.3 Different Definitions By Different People

Many Igbo scholars have also defined *ọfọ* in different ways. Mbonu (1947: 28) states that “*ọfọ* represents truth, righteousness, law and authority among the Igbo.” Definitely, *ọfọ* stick is not ordinary because of what it stands for; the power embodied in *ọfọ* gives way for right judgement and life of uprightness. Odunukwe (2015) expresses that “*ọfọ* is one among the several cultic symbols, which the traditional Igbo people employ in performing functions of religious, political, ethical and social importance. It is a symbol of authority, honesty and righteousness.”

In fact, *ọfọ* touches every aspect of an Igbo man’s life. Apart from the physical *ọfọ* stick, every action of the Igbo revolves in *ọfọ*. Once an Igbo person feels that his actions are justified, the person has every assurance that he is upright. Within this state of mind, he fears no harm. The assertion, “*ẹji m nke onye?*” clearly states that once a person has not hurt anyone, that person has nothing to fear. This state assures him that he is in good relationship with man and with God. Here, *ọfọ* stands for right judgement, truthfulness, decent life, fairness, straightforwardness among others. It is assumed that the people’s moral code was based on it, and therefore communicates to the living and the dead. On this note, Njaka (1974: 28) opines that:

Ọfọ is the central symbol of the Igbo religion. In addition to being a staff of authority, it is an emblem symbolizing the link between *chukwu* and man, the dead and the living, the living and the unborn. The *ọfọ* also symbolizes justice, righteousness and truth.

Generally speaking, *ọfọ* unifies man with the visible and the invisible. It makes way for progress, strength, peace and harmony. It is therefore certain that the person with *ọfọ* is the one who is in good relationship with God, and actually ventures without mishap. *O ji ọfọ ga-ala*, meaning that one with *ọfọ*, will always be victorious.

2.4 *Ọfọ* as Guiltlessness

In support of the above, Igbo (2012:171) declares that “*O ji ọfọ ga-ana*” meaning; he who possesses the sacred *ọfọ* will always prosper in his adventures.” It is a general

belief among the Igbo that *ọfọ* is a traditional staff of authority, symbol of justice, truth and right living. Therefore *ọfọ* means that you are doing the right thing; whether or not one is holding the sacred *ọfọ* stick physically. However, in most cases every one claims that he or she holds *ọfọ*; as in this assertion- *onye elu ji ọfọ, onye ala ji ọfọ, so ọfọ ma onye ji ya*. Igbo proverb also states that *ngwele niile makpu amakpu a maghazi nke afo na-alu*. In this situation, it is only God who knows the person that is on the right part. As Ejizu (1986:122) asserts that “It was Chukwu himself who gave “*ọfọ*” to mankind to serve as a medium, and to signify God’s truth among men.” It is expected therefore, that every Igbo person should hold *ọfọ* in everything the person does; otherwise the person distorts the cosmic order. However a consequence follows afterwards. It is also worthy to note that the “holding” here could be physical or non physical as earlier stated, therefore whoever stands by the truth in relations with his fellow human being is actually holding *ọfọ* and will not be harmed in any way. For instance, two persons might have misunderstanding; one may say *Ejiri m gi ọfọ*. – I hold *ọfọ* against you on this matter. In view of this, Okodo (2009: 163) states that the real meaning of “I am holding a piece of the deuterium sticks” (*ọfọ*) is that “My actions are just and upright.” Ndubueze (2013) in support of this assertion states that “*onye o bula ga-eji ọfọ ga nakwu eziokwu*.” This means that whoever that will hold the *ọfọ* must be a truthful person. Igbo (2012:166) declares that “*ọfọ* is a symbol of right conduct.” For an Igbo man *ọfọ* represents justice and the idea of justice is integrity, equality, kindness and above all, reliability. These are the things that ensure societal harmony and progress.

2.5 Types of *Ọfọ*

Among the Igbo different types of *ọfọ* exist, they range from family, kindred, village, towns *ọfọ*, among others. Ogugua and Ogugua (2013:202) on different types of *ọfọ* state that “For Green although the deities have *ọfọ*, the one usually borne in mind by the people is *ọfọ* – *umunna*- the family *ọfọ* which reflects or mirrors the moral code of the people.” It is not everyone that has the power to hold *ọfọ* in Igbo land. It is, therefore, clear that it is the heads of these various segments that hold *ọfọ* among the people. It is obvious, therefore, that, in Igbo land *ọfọ* is closely associated with justice. It is expected that the holders of *ọfọ* in various units such as family, kindred, and so on should exercise their authority with truthfulness and justice. Isidienu (2013) referring to the holders of *ọfọ*, avers that “All discussions, decisions and judicial matters are in their hands. These leaders should be upright and impartial. Each should hold his *ọfọ* in matters of decision; none is expected to hide evil in order to avoid the punishment of the gods”. As a matter of fact, it is believed that the *ọfọ* does not only punish anyone who swears by it spuriously but also punishes the holder who gives an unjustified verdict.

According to Uwalaka (1996: 7-8) “*ọfọ* is the chief dispenser of justice and consequently the chief coercive power which ensures that the rules’ and customs of the village are observed.” She continued, “*ọfọ* has a right not only to administer but also the right of life and death.”

3.1 The Role of *ọfọ* in Administrating Justice

The function of *ọfọ* is to ensure love, peace and harmony among the people in the community. *ọfọ na-egosiputa eziokwu*. *Ọfọ* signifies the truth. It is to have faith, that is, if one is not liable of the crime being accused, he or she will have faith that nothing

will happen to him or her. It means that one's conscience is very clear, therefore whatever evil planned against that person cannot harm him or her. It was gathered that, *Mmadu bu ofo. Onu aka nri bu aka nnagha*. *Ofo* among the Igbo is regarded as the symbol of peace like National Assembly's mace. The use of *ofo* ensures that true justice takes place and also helps for the truth to prevail and in the same way stands for fairness and righteousness. Mbonu (1947:28) states that "*ofo* represents truth, righteousness, law and authority among the Igbo." *ofo* is a wooden object believed to be so powerful in punishing those who commit atrocities against the land. It was gathered that *ofo* actually stands for justice and also gives real justice, but nowadays there is perversion. It was also observed that, *ofo* is used these days with mixed feelings because of Christianity and secondly deception and long throat, also, in the past, law breakers cannot hold *ofo* because it will kill them.

Ofo is used during serious issues. It is involved in more serious cases between families and kindred. According to Ilogu (1974: 18) "*ofo* is used for swearing in all grave cases; it is used by an ozo to attest solemnly to the gravity or truthfulness of what he say." In actual fact *ofo* is used to exonerate the righteous, used by the people when nothing but only the truth is required; used to swear in order to ensure justice. *Ofo* can be referred to as live and let others live, *egbe belu ugo belu, nke si ibe ya ebena nku kwaa ya*. It was also gathered that *ofo* is used in taking oath before a shrine. Uwulaka (1996: 11-12) asserts that

"In the event of a recalcitrant offender refusing to accept the verdict of the lot, a more solemn procedure is resorted to. This involves the taking of a solemn oath in which each party affirms his innocence before the *ofo* shrine. This is accompanied by a very dramatic ritual during which the *ofo* elders knock the ground in unison with their sacred sticks while chanting a chorus of curses.

Actually *ofo* is used to demonstrate cleanliness of hand. It was gathered that those who hold *ofo* is the most elderly man in the family, kindred, village and community. They use it to bless or otherwise in serious cases that are difficult to resolve. But the eldest persons must stand on the side of the truth for it to be effective. It should be noted that *ofo* is used when people are speaking the truth. *Ha na-aku ofo na- ana mgbe o buna e kwubili okwu*. In support of this assertion, Ejizu (1986: 63) affirms that "*ofo* is used to seal all important decisions or family, kindred and lineage members which are aimed at fostering the peace and harmony of the community."

It was also gathered that *ofo* is a piece of wood recognised by the community to have the power of justice (*eziokwu*). It stands for justice, equity and fairness in any deliberation. It was accrued that *ofo* ensure that the truth must be spoken. *Ka e kwuo eziokwu*. It is believed to be a symbol of truth and justice' and so used to enshrine justice. *Ka eziokwu wee puta*. The *ofo* which is a sacred symbol is also used to determine innocence. *E ji ofo ama onye aka ya di ocha*, and was a symbol of authority and righteousness. *ofo* functions as a staff of office for peace and justice. It is the strength of a leader and strength of the community. According to Uwalaka (1996: 11)

“Each ọfọ stick is the permanent possession of each ọfọ holder and symbolises his empowerment.” The person holding the ọfọ in the community is highly honoured and any pronouncement made by him is binding or irrevocable.

Furthermore, ọfọ among the Igbo is used to settle secret cases and punish offenders and was highly revered. Igbo people respect ọfọ and they bring it out during serious deliberations so that the parties involved can tell the truth and will not tell lie. They use it whenever an issue that requires high level of sincerity is to be judged. It was gathered that the deviant person is called upon to hold ọfọ, it was believed that if he or she is innocent, nothing will happen to him or her; if not there will be repercussion. The person will be given the ọfọ to swear by it. It was observed that Igbo people also make incantations with the ọfọ stick. According to Ejizu (1986:64) “In many parts of Igbo land, ikpo ọfọ is the greatest form of oath.” He continued “all the ọfọ are piled together for the person taking the oath to carry. When this is done certain rituals and incantations are rendered.” By carrying the ọfọ, the carrier has no option than to say the truth because he or she knows the implication of telling lies.

On the other hand *ndi Igbo na-eweta ọfọ oge ikpe iji choputa eziokwu. A na-eti ya n'ana mgbe e kwusilu okwu.* The eldest man is the custodian; he therefore uses ọfọ in his hand in making pronouncements, prayers, blessings and curses. It was gathered that ọfọ is a sign of finality in judgement, and that irrevocable decisions are actualized with it. The use of ọfọ enhances the people to say the truth. It ensures that justice has been done to any case, to avoid, bringing it up as untreated or a case not treated well. Therefore, when saying the truth before God and man, that is where ọfọ works in particular. *ọfọka e ji ikpe ikpe kwu oto. ọfọ e tiri n'ana eziokwu di ya. (eziokwubundu).* In view of this Uwalaka (1996) affirms that the elders after pouring curses on the culprits clinches with the statement *onu mmadu bu onu chukwu* and also justifies the curses by affirming that *onye eziokwu nwendu.* ọfọ is therefore presented in times of dispute resolution. Uwalaka (1996: 8-9) states that

Before ọfọ undertakes to act as arbiter in a case, it usually makes its demands on the parties seeking mediations. The parties involved usually consult the leader of the ọfọ men who announces to them the demands which the ọfọ has imposed on them and which must be fulfilled before ọfọ lends ear to their complaints. Usually, for the settlement of a land case, each of the disputing parties is expected by ọfọ to produce a cock, a male dog, four kola nuts, four alligator pepper, four jars of palm wine and a bottle of homemade gin, eight dishes of fufu.

It is worthy of note that the demands of ọfọ is usually in fours or four doubled, four as the Igbo ritual number depict the four Igbo minor market days or four doubled which explains the Igbo major market days. These are Eke ukwu, eke nta, Afo nta, Afo ukwu, dgz. Ọfọ is therefore a confirmatory instrument. It is also used in settling family

ouarrels, marriage misconducts among others. If one is given the *of*, then one has the right to do what one should do. It is an indication of justice, peace, unity, and that, one is also calling the ancestors to witness, therefore used as the greatest sign of authority and justice.

It was further observed that *of* is a symbol of authority and evidence of justice. It is the dignity and prestige of the community, so it rules the community. *of* is an authority of truth. It stands as the final say. *of* is for transparency, it stands as a symbol of justice and a powerful instrument. For instance, according to Uwalaka (1996) if a case is to be tried through *of* lot system, a cock will be strangled and left to dance between the disputing parties, until guided by *of*, it falls at the feet of the offender. Since *of* is held to be infallible, it therefore gives a valid verdict. In actual fact the role of *of* shows that final declaration has been taken and it is irrevocable.

On the other hand *of* is used against the guilty. Whenever the chief priest raises it, it means that all cases have been ruled. It is used to ensure that truth is prevailed; that is the reason for its use for oath taking. *of* is used for last orders, after resolving cases. It is therefore an emblem used in fighting for justice.

4.0 Conclusion

This study observed that *of* is symbol of justice among the Igbo extracts of Eastern Nigeria. In the ancient days, *of* was held in high esteem as a symbol of justice compared to this present time. The natural urge for justice resides in humans. This gives rise to the use of *of* in giving judgement and determining the truth. It was discovered that the Igbo people, as the holders of *of* are very cautious in matters relating to justice. Recently, the use of *of* is perverted. The evidence is seen by so much injustice prevalent in the society. The study therefore justified *of* as a sign of justice and not a god as many authors wrongly postulated. The paper also explores the role of *of* in maintaining and preserving justice in Igbo land.

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