

# Art and Its Personifying Functional Power: The *Okpenshi* example

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## Abstract

Over time, the value of art has shifted with age and culture. The meaning or significance of some art objects have also either shifted or has become obliterated. The *Okpenshi* of Awka-Igbo cosmology, a highly significant visual expressive medium of the people, has not only shifted in value, but has also become obsolete in function, to the peril of its rich cultural paternity. This paper examines the *Okpenshi* in the light of its cultural value among the Awka-Igbo people in order to highlight its personifying functional power. The study employs oral interviews, library and ethnographic studies. It observes in *Okpenshi*, that art which has been produced by a certain generation need to survive in order to be appreciated in the context of its cultural value and to be available for future generations to study. The study recommends that for culture and artistic traditions to be preserved, the local environment should not be destructive to artworks either by omission or commission, while the use of durable materials of production by the artists should be encouraged.

**Key words:** Arts, Personifying, Functional Power, Okpenshi, Cultural tool, Sculpture

## Introduction

“Art has been produced at all times and in all places and by all peoples.” (Geitlein; 1998: 352). The above assertion is a fact of life that art is part and parcel of every society, especially for Igbo, south east of Nigeria and Awka, Igbo heartland, which Jeffreys in Aniakor (2002: 303) has described as the centre of Igbo art and related institutions, art is of prodigious practice. It seemed that right from the evolution of their culture, art was so intertwined with their world view and norms of life so much that it found expression in whatever they did - dress, play, family life, worship, birth, and even in death. Traditions abound for specific cultural behavior which the artist as the iconographer expressed in visual forms and images, such as have made scholars, insist that art is the visual language of culture. For the people of Awka cultural environment which comprise of several communities with a semblance of political hierarchy, the cultures of the people are given expression through signs and symbols which are clearly understood in the cultural environment where they were given expression. The fundamental make-up of the people was their obligation to community, encapsulated in their belief and maxim: *Igwe bu ike*, unity is strength. It is ironical that a people who seemed so individualistic can believe in solidarity with which communal life was run by some democratic process so different from modern day pretense in the cultural environment.

The Igbo religious belief was laden with notions of a Supreme Being, *Chukwu*, who is the giver of life and whose worship and exaltation form a major part of their worldview. *Chukwu* is the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things. Since human life, as reported by Kalu (2002: 356) is the pivot of the traditional Igbo cosmology, the description of *Chukwu* is always in

human semblance, and human life is revered. Therefore His omnipotence and omniscience are actively demonstrated with human attributes when the traditional priest of Umuawulu describes Him in the following manner; *Nwoke owholohwo anya no na Ngu igwe enezu mbala uwa anya*. Translation: Man-with-large-vacuous-eyes who stays-in-the-bowl-of-heaven-and-surveys the-full-span-of-the-earth at the same time. (Nkala 1982:71, 72)

According to Nathan Nkala, the priest has evolved an awe-inspiring picture of God with the key word, “*owholowho*”, which “is itself a phonon-aesthetic figure of speech more functional than onomatopoeia.” The rest of the verse does not just say that God is in the sky, but in the “bowl of heaven” from where He does not just look over the earth, but keeps watch with an overwhelming clarity. Mbiti’s (1969:48) description of African religion, therefore, as anthropocentric is not out of place. Human life is so valued that its preservation and increase is so vital in the Igbo philosophy (Onyewuenyi; 2002: 19). Little wonder then that the concept of human life going in cycles even after death, in a continuous going and coming back in a process known as reincarnation, forms the core of Igbo ontology. Of reincarnation, Aniakor (1984: 14) writes that “ancestors, *ndi ichie ala*, old people of the land, again become living people, *mmadu*.” In this way, existence is not only a physical thing, but also a spiritual matter, both of which significantly dove-tail into each other.

Although the features of life-after death are not clear in Igbo thought, their belief in that life is true and certain. Kalu (2002: 356) affirms that;

Ancestorhood (sic) is the clearest expression of the traditional Igbo belief in the after-life. It marks the fullest realization of personal salvation. This state is the preserve of good men and women who live out their full span of earthly existence in strict compliance with the corpus of norms of morality obtainable in their community. There are, however, two grades of ancestors: *Ndichie-Ukwu* and *Ndichie-Nta* (great and small ancestors)...The ancestors are the most benign ambassadors of their succeeding children in the spirit-world. They watch over the interests of their children, reincarnate in the young ones to ensure that their respective lineages are continued. The eldest living male in each level of the lineage structure constantly keeps alive the memories of the ancestors, pay them due respect by ways of libation, prayer, sacrifice, and especially by fashioning some symbolic objects to commemorate them.

The symbolic object referred to by Kalu is the *Okpenshi*, which is a three dimensional form carved in wood. It became a vital instrument of commemoration and worship in the community, and also a personification of a member of the community when that member was unavailable, whose presence was required in a situation. But not anymore, since its value in the context of culture has eroded and its visual forms extinct. This paper bemoans this development where the visual forms of Igbo group hitherto a significant emblem of identification of the culture has eroded in value, yet the cultural group anticipates sustainable existence as a cultural group, a people with a destiny.

### ***Okpenshi* as a Cultural Tool**

Unlike Mediterranean cultures, especially Egypt, whose view of life after death and rituals for the dead engage in elaborate efforts to preserve the physical body from decay, among the Awka-Igbo the notion of the dead as ‘living’ members of the group in the land of the spirits is engaged in a different kind of preservation. The dead ancestors were commemorated with a wood sculpture (Igboamazu; 2014). The sculptural image is known as *Okpenshi*, which forms the major content of a sacred altar.

*Okpenshi* is a cultural tool used to express the concept of dead ancestor hood and their roles as “ambassadors”, to use Kalu’s word, who must be honoured by the living. This form of religious obligation which traditional man evolved is often regarded as ancestral worship because of the significant role which fulfilled dead members of their lineage perform as mediators between them and

the unseen spiritual forces. These ancestors, in this case the known, are deemed to be closer to the Spirits, the unknown, being spirits themselves. The concept, as an abstract idea whereby ancestors are living members of the community in the spirit world became necessary to be concretized, and make tangible the intangible, for greater psychic impact. A sculptural image of the ancestor was depicted, in order to localize the ancestral spirit. Once the necessary sacrifices were performed, the sculpture ceased to be mere wood, but the ancestor whose spirit had been channeled to the piece. The spirit of the ancestor was believed to cease and inform the sculpture. Of this tradition, Cole and Aniakor (1984: 17) muse: "The practical purpose of art is to channel a spiritual force into an aesthetically satisfying physical form that captures the present attributes of that force." The wood then housed the spirit, and fully represented its attributes. The object received veneration daily in form of libations, smear of blood, feathers of birds along with spoken words of exaltation and petitions which were directed to *Chukwu* through the ancestor object personified.

In *Okpenshi*, sculpture became a visual essay of the personality of ancestors since the forms, culturally defined, were symbols built up, consolidated, understood and accepted over the years by the people. Although the rigidity of form-definition afforded the carver a degree of freedom in spontaneous use of his personal creative favor, what New Culture Viewpoint (1979: 2) refers to as "creating in traditional freedom."

The significance of *Okpenshi* as a cultural tool is evidenced by the fact that it was also the very first object in the hierarchy of personality cult objects which every male in the community acquired, and usually commissioned during *Amanwulu*, the kingpin of titles in Awka-Igbo. Every male citizen, as a matter of tradition, must be initiated into *Amanwulu*, without which he could not fully participate in the affairs of the community designated for sons of the land, including the *Ozo* title-taking (the highest title in the land). A variety of *Okpenshi* was commissioned during this period. Its import is signified by the fact that any initiate who for any reason failed to personally participate in the rituals of *Amanwulu*, including the processions along the major tracks of the community; his *Okpenshi* must physically feature in the activities. The nexus between the sculpture and the absent initiate, was that whatever treatment that was meted to initiates during the processions, must also be done to the sculpture, including *omu*-fresh palm frond and *ona-amanwulu*-ring of *amanwulu* that they must wear. At the end of the four days initiation rites, the absent initiate was as initiated as the other candidates because of the presence of his *Okpenshi* during the events. The production of sculpture within traditional societies such as the one where the *Okpenshi* thrived was therefore an expression of the belief of the cultural environment, the reason Edewor (2009: 70) describes art as also a cultural product within the cultural environment that gives form to it. The product served such utility purposes as described by Nwanna (2002) "Carved images...serve as abode of the spirits and thereby helping the African man localize and concretize the spirits so that he can now perform efficient ceremonies, involving rituals, to solicit their help." The object, as a cultural tool and product, reinforced cultural belief.

*Okpenshi*, in this way, served the socio-religious needs of the cultural environment. The usual display position of the object is the altar, be it of the family, of the kindred or community shrine where they were kept and libations poured upon them daily by the person designated to do that. As indicated earlier, the status of the ancestor determines the type of *Okpenshi* that personified him, be it *ndi-ichie ukwu ma-obu ndi-ichie nta* (great or small ancestors) and the hierarchy of the member of the community determines the type of *Okpenshi*-the great or small ancestors that adorned his altar which he venerated. The object therefore also functioned as a status symbol that ranked the one whose altar it adorned in the social hierarchy, validating his status.

### **The Object: Material, Forms and Iconography.**

The forms of the sculpture were definite visage which imagery and style, in Aniakor's (2002: 313) words, remained "iconic in conception." They were highly abstracted forms which had repeated shapes at both ends that joined at the centre which was imbued with incisions that were reminiscent

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of Igbo forehead markings, *ichi*, which were emblems of high office as well as political authority (plate 1). The other versions (plates 2 and 3), which were commissioned during *amanwulu*-kingpin of titles, did not have such markings, signifying the social rank of the ones they personified.



Plate 1; Title: *Okpenshi Ndiichie- Ukwu*, Artist: unknown, Medium: wood (*Ogilishi*), Size: 18 ins x 5 ins. Date: unknown, Photo by the author.

The sculpture, as a rule, must stand on one end while the other identical end received libations and other stuffs with which the ancestor was venerated. The age and status of a particular ancestral spirit reflected on the sculpture, bedecked with libations and remnants of all the items it received over time through veneration. Nwanna (2002: 50) describes the outlook of such African carvings as “covered with partitionation as a result of encrustation caused by libation materials poured on them, particularly blood.”



Plate 2  
Title: *Okpenshi Amanwulu*  
Artist: unknown  
Medium: wood (*ogilishi*)  
Size: 11 ins X 4 ins  
Date: unknown  
Photo by the author



Plate 3.  
Title: *Okpenshi Amanwulu*  
Artist: unknown  
Medium: wood (*ogilishi*)  
Size: 9ins X 4ins  
Date: unknown  
Photo by the author

The wood sculpture was always commissioned for production. Rarely did patrons buy them off from a shelf or some market place where they were displayed for sale as is common in modern societies. Its production was a serious business as the notion of creativity in the Igbo traditional society was a famed practice of endowed members of society who were predestinated. The one who predestinated them remains the Supreme creator, *Chukwu okike*, which is an apt description of God the creator.



Plate 3; Three varieties of *Okpenshi*. Photo by the author.

The use of wood, *ogilishi (Newboldia Laevis)*, as the material of production had reasons. One was that *ogilishi* was believed to be spiritually potent and attracted habitation by spiritual forces. The stem also bears leaves that have cleansing potency. Two is that wood is a common material of artistic production because of its availability. Traditional carvers enjoy to cut, chip and gouge away its fibrous tissue with ease and define the forms which must appear as tradition demanded.

### **Degeneration of Cultural Value**

The cultural value which *Okpenshi* embodied is lost as only history could exhume its significance in its cultural milieu. Several factors were responsible for this deprivation of the appreciation of its cultural dynamics in situ. First among them was westernization, which crippled most African traditional practices, especially art forms. Traditional religion which was the springboard for the production of images which serviced it gradually became obsolete as a result of the activities of 19th century-missionaries in Africa (Igboamazu, 2011). Edewor (2009: 74) observes that “since westernization was synonymous with Christianity, authentic traditional art suffered neglect as its patrons thinned out in millions.” Such objects as *Okpenshi* were no longer produced because they were no longer necessary, having lost its value.

Another factor which was responsible for the deprivation was that most of the objects did not survive because they were rendered in materials that were not durable. As a result of the organic nature of wood, it is not a durable material for artistic production. Although the objects were mostly indoor sculpture kept within the confines of the family and lineage or village altars, they did not survive for long. This is because wood is prone to attack by insects, especially termites, which eat away its fiber. Cold and heat distort its defined forms, water rots it and fire consumes it, unlike permanent media such as bronze and gold.

Also, the hostile environment which traditional arts witnessed during colonialism with its accompanying westernization/Christianity was not helpful to their preservation. While some art forms were carted away by thieves and their foreign collaborators, most others were destroyed by local converts, further diminishing their sustainability.

### Conclusion

In *Okpenshi*, traditional art forms which revealed the cultural environment that produced them, who they were and what they believed in, have scarcely been made available for future generations to appreciate its cultural significance, and for study. Apart from the loss of crucial iconographic details of art forms such as the *Okpenshi*, art suffered much neglect as a result of its inability to be preserved owing to the factors of unfavorable cultural environment, as well as use of production that were not durable. It is true that the people of Awka-Igbo were known for their prodigious involvement with art, studies reveal that their art forms as in the case of *Okpenshi*, are but fragments of their forms isolated from their functional environment. This study has attempted to provide a palliative highlight of *Okpenshi* as it functioned in Awka-Igbo in order that it may be preserved and provided for generations to study and appreciate.

Geitlein (2005: 352) affirms that the cultures examined most fully are not even those in which the most or the best art was made, but the one whose art has been found or preserved. Not only are the art forms found in museums away from their functional environment for which reason substantial value has been lost as a result of the separation, but also they are in danger of extinction since they are no longer produced. The ones that have survived are faced with deterioration for the less durable materials with which they were produced. The study recommends that for culture and artistic traditions to be preserved, the local environment should not be destructive to artworks either by omission or commission, while the use of durable materials of production by the artists should be encouraged.

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