

## AN APPRAISAL IN THE USE OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS IN EXPRESSION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL BELIEFS IN NEKE COMMUNITY

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### **Abstract**

This paper is aimed at examining the use of religious symbols in Neke community in Enugu state, for the expression of African traditional beliefs and practices. Symbols more than anything else provide the primary stimulus for communicating the beliefs in Neke community. The paper seeks to examine the effects of traditional symbols in religious and cultural practices of Neke. It was discovered that the religious life of Neke community cannot be meaningful without the use of religious symbols. The paper recommends intensification of the use of symbols in other communities. This is in the sense that their various artistic traditions are drawn upon as sources of inspiration. These images have religio-metaphysical themes, which serves as the focal point of power, which links the African's physical world to his beliefs essence and existence. The paper makes use of primary and secondary sources information for data collection.

### **Introduction**

The place of symbol in the traditional, religious and cultural life of Igbo people and Neke community cannot be overemphasized. Cohen (1974) defines symbols as objects, acts, relationships or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings. This definition tries to indicate that there are different symbolic forms and that it is possible for one symbolic form to be given several interpretations and these interpretations could be given at different levels depending upon the level of interpreter's consciousness and intelligence (p.26).

Molloy (2002) expresses that symbol is something fairly concrete, ordinary and universal that can represent and help human beings intensely experience something of greater complexity. Otite (1979) sees symbols as "agents that are impregnated with messages and with invitation to conform and to act" (p. 33). Thus, when symbols are decoded in their social and cultural contexts, they are found to have both cognitive and emotional meanings. For instance the axe or the meteorite stones found in most of the cults of gods and solar divinities in West Africa convey the meaning and idea about the wrath of God and they also signify the purity of God and his impartial justice; in essence, what such symbolic forms inwardly remind and urge the devotee, especially the rural dwellers to lead a pure and honest life in order to avoid the wrath of God. They likewise urge the

believer to guard against perjury and falsehood when it comes to the question of settling disputes in any of the shrines that house such symbols.

Ejizu (1990) states that a symbol is “A thing recognized as normally typifying, representing or recalling something of great practical importance, by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought” (p.1). From this definition, any object, thing that is representing something of importance is a symbol to that particular people, for instance palm fronds, red fabric etc. Wotogbe-Weneka (2009) describes symbol as a sign, number, letter, etc that has a fixed meaning, especially in science, mathematics and music. From this, it will not be an overstatement to say that symbols are representative concepts, objects, ideas, or images which express and signify something else, other than that which is perceived. Thus, symbols are mediums or channels, which act un-behalf of other things.

Whitehead (1974) describes religious symbol as “the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” (p. 127). This primary expression, mainly clothes itself in the media of action and words, but partly in art. But then, the way an experienced person expresses his perception of the sacred in symbols could be fallible contrary to direct experience of the holy which is infallible, that is why he further stresses 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 motions without exemplification in the word which the symbolism leads us to assume.

It is important from the foregoing to note that there is concealment and revelation and that the essence of symbolism lies in the recognition of one thing as standing or representing another, the relationship between them normally being that of concrete to abstract, particular to general. Thus, this implies that symbols could actually convey information to the people in the communities or society.

According to Idowu (1973), who posits the fact about the use of material in symbols, that to the Africans, the material has no meaning apart from spiritual that informs the material and gives it whatever quality and meaning it has, the material therefore, can only be, at best, technically a symbol. It is the divine entity that is represented by the material act to which worship is rendered. The material symbol can rot away, destroyed, carried away, and can even be replaced, but not so with the divine being. Symbols may change, deity or his ministers remain.

### **Religious Symbols in Neke Community**

Neke is one of the five autonomous communities that make up Isi-uzo Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. It is traversed by the lines 6° 46N latitude and 7° 37E

longitude of the equator. The other towns within the Local Government Area are Mbu, Ikem, Eha-Amufu and Umu Alor. Their other surrounding neighbours are Obollo in Udeno Local Government Area and Nike in Enugu-East Local Government Area. Neke has satellite towns and settlements such as Onueme, Agudene, Ugwu-Akparata, Ugwu-Ochimkpu, Echiku, Obodo – Mbeze, Ekpurum, Ugwu-Adaka etc (Agbo, 2002).

Recent anthropological studies among the pre-literate societies have revealed certain common properties or nature of religious symbols, such as the pervasiveness of symbols which makes them relevant to life and the world in general and their ability to have many referents at once. This implies that the simplest symbols or ceremonies are charged with multiplicity of meanings about the social relations of the people involved. Victor Turner (1961) uses the term “multi-vocality” to describe such symbols.

The history of symbolism, according to Jaffe (1994), shows that everything can assume symbolic significance. For example, natural objects like stone, plants, animals, mountains and valleys, sun and moon, wind, water or man made things such as boat, cutlass or even numbers, triangle, cross, are all symbolic. Jaffe says that man, unconsciously transforms object or forms into symbols, therefore endowing them with great psychological importance and expressing them in both his religion and visual art.

In Neke traditional society, symbols can be classified into the following groups, namely, natural, artificial communication, artistic and ritualistic. Natural symbols are mainly the result of some past experiences or consciousness, for example, thunder and lightning are natural occurrences, which in Neke tradition symbolize the wrath of God.

Artificial symbols are created by an individual or a group to represent ideas. Such symbols usually relate to a believer’s own experience. For example, among the Igbo of Nigeria, the Ofo (a ritual instrument and a staff of office) symbolizes authority and at the same time an earthly representative of the ancestors of the people.

Communicative symbols are those that are used specifically to communicate knowledge and information. We are aware that all symbols communicate, but this category includes those which are intended purposely to convey concepts, ideas and emotions. For instance, when young palm fronds are placed on the front of a moving vehicle in Neke, they invoke in the minds of the people the presence of a corpse and apply necessary caution. Ritualistic symbols are used to instruct and indoctrinate the devotees about the article of their faith and it is mostly liturgical. For example, in many parts of Neke, young palm fronds symbolize sacredness and when used to cordon off a place, it means that such an area has been declared “holy” and set aside from the profane.

However, artistic symbols are those that are used for aesthetic purpose. This is a common feature in most shrines in Africa. In Neke, religion permeates all segments of life, and all artistic symbols are involved in ritualistic activities.

In Neke tradition, symbolic art objects and processes are used in expressing religious ideas and beliefs. Objects which are used to communicate religious truth include,

**Cowries:** They symbolize prosperity. Cowries are among the cultic items found in the shrine. It is the belief of Neke people that the water divinity releases such wealth from the sea for those who believe. The importance of cowries cannot be underestimated in African traditional society. In fact, among Neke, no traditional marriage and burial rites is complete without the use of cowries. Cowries symbolize the bride's wealth which the man pays during marriage rites; they also symbolize the money the departed soul will use to transport itself to the spiritual world. Moreover, they symbolize piety and ritual purity.



**Kolanut (Oji) {Cola Acuminata}:** In Igboland, it is believed that kolanut is the first fruit tree that God caused to grow on the land. To eat it is always an act of commensality with God (chukwu), land (ani) and spirit beings (ndi mmuo). Thus, it is an indispensable medium of man's regular interaction with God and the spirit beings. Because, at every turn, an Igbo man has recourse to the spiritual elements, the ritual breaking, sharing and eating of the kolanut (iwa oji), becomes the most pervasive phenomenon in Igbo land and a priceless commodity among them.

In Igboland, oji is a prerequisite for proper social visiting. For an Igbo man, its presentation by a host to his guest is a most cherished act of hospitality. It is proper etiquette for a host to apologise to his quest for not serving him kolanut. Kolanut is a basic element in Igbo land especially in Neke traditional acts of worship like prayer (igo mmuo), offering (ilo mmuo), establishing ancestral shrine (inyedo mmuo), placating vital forces that serve as agents of mortality (iru alusi), making sacrifice (ichu aja), divination (igba afa), cow-slaughtering (igbu efi). It is used to invite God to come in the midst of celebrants and/or worshippers, thereafter, the nut is broken and eaten as an act of

commensality with them (Nzekwu 2002). Also, in Igboland, talks are neither begun nor agreements sealed if the parties involved do not break, share and eat kolanut.

When disputes are settled, the settlement is sealed with the breaking of a kolanut, the pieces of which are shared out among and eaten by members of the feuding parties. Kolanut is an item of tribute payment (Ife nru) and also, an initial sacrificial ingredient as no sacrifice is performed without kolanut, its size notwithstanding.

In Igboland, a kolanut that displays four cotyledons is associated with abundant blessings as it is with Igbo market days. The ones with three cotyledons are identified as oji ikenga and signify power, strength, physical clout and good fortune. Five cotyledons hold out possibility of extra luck to all who may eat it. Six cotyledons reflect fertility (omumu), the gift of children and a peaceful family. Seven or more cotyledons are rare, when noticed; they may be replaced (Nwana 1997).

In Neke, the presentation of kolanut involves only prime numbers. A hostess may only present one, two three, five, seven or nine kolanuts, the exact number depending on the occasion or the status of guest. A non titled visitor is served a minimum of one kolanut. It is however, normal to present him with two nuts, one of which is broken and eaten, then while the other one represents “when kola gets home, it tells who presented it”. When the visitor is an Ichie/Nzeh (ozo titled man) or a non titled elder, he is served a minimum of two kolanuts. At a gathering of kindred, clan or community elders, only a maximum of seven kolanuts may be presented. The Igwe (the king) alone can make presentation of nine kolanuts.



**Colour codes, clothing and its symbolic meaning:** Colours are symbolical and hence, subject to several interpretations from one time to another and from one culture to another. They convey ethical messages to people whenever they are used in certain circumstances. The colour red has a strong association with blood and fire. It is therefore, a colour that is coupled with emergency and danger. In Igboland, it is seen as a danger when it is placed on an object, article, and property e.t.c. For example, in traditional Igbo setting, farm owners are fond of placing a red colour cloth, or any object on their farm

land indicating, “Don’t enter” or “don’t steal” to prospective thieves (Webster 1948). Whoever sees the object will not enter the farm land or tamper with objects with red colour, or any object placed on them. Failure to do so is to either die instantaneously or experience other untold danger which may involve shedding of blood of the victim. This colour does not only create psychological fear to a potential thief, but also inculcates the principle of discipline and responsibility in Igbo society. The warning that one should not enter to steal made stealing (which is a moral vice) less common in traditional Igbo society.

While colour red is associated with danger, colour white symbolizes purity, love, joy, glory. It is a general belief of the Igbo’s that love is the core moral value which others surround. Because the colour white symbolizes purity, many people both within and outside religious circle use white clothing to indicate righteousness, purity, cleanliness, open-heart e.t.c. In traditional religion, some divinities, especially, Ojedi shrine in Onitsha is associated with white colour as the shrine is painted white and the worshippers wear white clothes for adherence of pure heart and character.

Colour green stands for peace in Igboland. Thus, whenever green leaves are carried by group of people, it symbolizes peace. Peace is an important moral value in Igbo society because it means freedom from quarrel, strife, disorder, violence, hostility or war. Precisely, green is an atmosphere of calmness, security and safety.

In Neke community, just like anywhere in Igbo land, the sight of a man or woman putting on sackcloth that could be black or white as the case may be communicates that the man or woman is mourning the death of his or her spouse. When the mourner loses other relatives, the sackcloth is different as he or she would not likely put on its top and down but might just put on only the top or the down.

**Canon Shots (Nkponani):** Canon shot in Igbo land generally marks the happening of great events. The sound of canon shot when fired signifies to people from far that a ceremony is going on somewhere or that an aged person is dead or being buried. Sometimes, it is used in occasions such as visit of an important person. It is commonly used during New yam festivals, funeral ceremonies, Ofala festivals in Neke to welcome the Igwe, when he is about to parade round the palace and when he is about to leave the palace.

**White Chalk (Nzu):** Nzu is a symbol of peace and harmony. When nzu is presented in Igboland, it is to signify and to convey some friendly affection as opposed to ill feelings. It symbolizes cleanliness and purity of the presenter’s mind towards his visitor and the place it is found.

The presence of *nzu* in a shrine shows that such a place is sacred and should be revered. The same thing could be said of places where they are found, like an herbalist medicine house. Of course, they are kept in a conspicuous corner for visitors to see easily.

The *nzu* is more often than not presented first to a visitor and it is to indicate in no unmistakable terms that the person is most welcome. The visitor further accepts the *nzu* and draws four parallel lines on the ground to show the four days of the week-Eke, Oye, Afor, and Nkwo. Prayer is then offered with the *nzu* and the prayer usually, is that within four cyclic days, they would be sustained in good health and energy.

However, an occasion might arise when the *nzu* is presented to a visitor and he declines the offer. The information passed across in this nature is that something is wrong or that the person has an ax to grind with the supposed visitor. This happens when the visitor and the visatee has had some quarrels over an issue which had not been settled amicably. It is only when the matter has been harmonized that the visitor can then accept his hospitality by first accepting the *nzu*.

The herbalists as well use *nzu* for easy recognition. Once the *nzu* is smeared on the one corner of a person's eyebrow, the communication is that he is an herbalist and can come to the service of anybody on demand. It also communicates the message that they see the other half of man which the ordinary man cannot see. *Nzu* is also used when a woman delivers a child. In this case, it is served in both a plate or clay dish and the person who has come to pay homage to the newly born baby and the mother smears it on the palm or on the neck to show that he came to wish them good.



**Smoke:** Smoke in Igboland signifies emergency. For instance, when somebody dies, smoke is set so that the community would assemble at the village square immediately. Also, when a chief or eminent person in a community is sick which is in doubt whether he will recover or not, smoke is set to assemble the people of that community.

**Ofo (*Detarium Senegalense*):** Ofo is symbolic in Igbo land. It is a peculiar stick that falls from a tree called Ofo tree. The tree is never made or fashioned by man. Everything

about it is designed by nature and cannot be altered. Ofo is an embodiment of truth and honesty; it endears one in a position of trust.

According to Nzekwu (2002), an Ofo holder is not expected to tell lies. Anything said or any testimony given in a case by anybody holding Ofo is regarded as the truth and it is unquestionable. It is believed that people who hold bad intentions or malice against their fellow human beings are always afraid to touch or come near Ofo.

The mere presence of Ofo carries a lot of aura and has many communicative messages. Anybody seeing Ofo being brought in any gathering knows that it is only the truth that is demanded by the members present. The office of the head of the family (okpala) is founded upon Ofo. Functionaries who interact with spiritual elements derive their power upon inheriting the relevant Ofo. In Onitsha, there are different kinds of Ofo- Ofo okpala, Ofo dibia, Ofo isi ada, Ofo ndi ichie, Ofo eze, Ofo omu and so on (Nzekwu 2002).



The most cherished and dreaded of all the religious symbols in Neke community is **omu**. (palm frond)

**Omu** is the furlled young leaves of the palm tree. It is an important motif among the Neke community. Ordinarily it has nothing of awe or fear attached to it. But when symbolically used as a communication medium, it attracts all the sacredness and fear that accompany sacred items. The use of omu as a sacred symbol among the people is universal. It is always laden with spiritual messages when put into use. Omu occupies a very important position in Neke religious and social spheres. As one walks along the public and private roads, the sight of omu symbolically used is a common feature. Wherever omu is exhibited in its symbolic use, the observer immediately decodes the information and then appreciates the metaphysical richness of Neke community. According to Uchem (2007), palm frond is one of such expressive actions used in the Igbo cultural context to convey lots of meanings.



In certain circumstances, they are used to express meanings like: very grave danger, when an individual has trespassed into another person's property (land or artifacts), to express the presence of death or bereavement, the presence of a corpse in a place. When hung round a square or market or any other place, it expresses that entrance is forbidden; it is also a sign of supernatural depicting shrines, medicine man, soothsayer's place or where traditional rituals are performed or that one is going to be performed, the beginning of farming season festival celebrated with the presence or appearance of various masquerades.

It also express secrecy by holding a little palm frond between the lips; to express readiness to execute somebody, a criminal or to show that the death sentence has been passed on him and he is dressed in shreds of palm fronds with elders and the executor carrying a palm frond each between their lips; to express public disgrace to a criminal for corrective purposes. He is dressed in shreds of palm fronds with snail shells and ridiculing objects tied to the fronds, that person is covered with and paraded round the community; a masquerade wearing palm frond expresses that it is a dangerous one, and would want to challenge anyone who dared him to a test of fetish practices; if put in front of a compound, it connotes that somebody has just died but no condolence visits are yet allowed till the inmates are ready.

It is also, an expression of social authority, when it is tied on trees with fruits depicts that nobody should touch any of the fruits on the authority of the community executed by community masquerades; it is also used to express beauty- as when a young man who is notorious for being too choosy of would be 'brides' is called to order and challenged by his father or elders of the community to choose among the palm fronds the best one. He is unable to select the best from the heap of palm fronds. Thus, he is called to order that physical beauty is not the only requirement for a blissful marriage.

In Neke, Omu is the major costume of the Odo masquerade, therefore women are forbidden to touch it in the entire community. There are mystical symbols in Odo Masquerade. The people of Neke were said to have decided that they would not procure normal masquerades that are made of clothing as most other clans do. They needed a masquerade that would be intimidating, scary and fearful to behold. The people were also said to have felt that masquerades made with clothes cannot resist arrows, spears, machetes and clubs, especially when attacked from a close range. The spears of palm trees are used in making Odo, especially the

Omu or Igu-nkwu usually the new ones that are yellowish in colour. They are usually used to cordon off areas termed to be holy or sacred, demarcate area that is under contest, indicate that a deity is in charge of the area, object or property where it is placed, etc. It is these yellow coloured spears of palm trees that were used in making the masquerade. The

preparation of one Odo is tasking; it requires strength, skills, time and total commitment. The preparation of an Odo is done by youth and usually at night when people are deeply asleep. The initiates of Odo masquerade climb palm trees with sharp double edged knives and rip-off fresh palm fronds quietly. Bundles of newly harvested palm fronds are taken to the Odo forest (Uham) for processing. Next, tough forest climbers are cut to be used in constructing the head and shoulder skeleton of the Odo. The processed yellowish leaves are tied and fixed on this skeleton. The length and bulk of any Odo masquerade depend on the height and strength of the man who would carry the completed mask and regalia. The head of the completed Odo is painted with various colours; red, black, blue and yellow. The ugliest of all the Odos are Okurenkpume (fire cannot consume stone) because its face is painted black. And it got that name because it was said to have been set ablaze during the Nigerian – Biafran civil war (1967-1970), but it was not consumed. It was said to have acquired its black face as a result of the fire. The two flagships of the Odo deity in Neke carry many feathers on their chests usually stuck there with the blood of chickens and goats sacrifices to them. The head is also stuck with the long feathers from the tails and wings of sacrificed chickens. These dreaded Odo flagships are Nchuma and Okurenkpume.

All other Odos (the lesser odos) owe allegiance to these big two. Each of these Odos has its own messenger. For Okurenkpume, Ngbavuru is his messenger, while Nchuma has Bakawu as its messenger. Both (Nchuma and Okurenkpume) have one “wife” called Ogorozhi and it is the most beautiful of all the Odo masquerades. In one Odo year, Ogorozhi will return with Nchuma, in another Odo season, “she” will come with Okurenkpume. But in addition, Okurenkpume, has a young messenger called Adaka. Every other odo in all the villages has an Adaka each which is majorly covered with Omu.



### **Recommendations/Conclusion**

Symbols are used as a very powerful instrument for indoctrination to maintain order in African societies in general and in Igbo land in particular. One of the embracing roles of symbols is that of communication. The need for inter and intra-person 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. Symbols are quite often used to transmit some basic religious ideas that are spiritual property of cultural community that own them. Symbols also help to preserve knowledge, historical and religious occurrences. It is in this sense that the ritualistic symbols are the most valuable means for passing on the culture of a people from one generation to the other. Such symbols normally have gone through many transformations and even a long process of more or less conscious development, and have thus become collective images accepted by civilized society. Religious symbols especially those connected with religious and cultural festivals during which historic events are re-enacted, aid the memory of historical and important events and doctrines of the faith. In this context they are very essential in teaching and instructing the younger generation about the sect to which they belong. It is therefore very important to keep these symbols in mind as Igbo people and as Africans so that we will help to propagate our culture.

In a more logical sense therefore, I would recommend that the use of traditional symbols should be upheld. The sacredness of most of our cherished ritual symbols is gradually eroding away. Take for instance, the Palm fronds (omu). Wherever palm fronds are spread in any part of Neke land, it shows that such place has been dedicated to a divine being. Also, when palm fronds are tied around a piece of land, this of course shows that such land is under dispute and means that no activities are to be carried out on that particular piece of land. For example, farming, building or sporting activities. When palm fronds are tied on a mango tree or any other trees, it shows that such trees should not be touched (untouchable). Palm fronds are used in traditional burials, wrestling and masquerading. Palm fronds also serve as warning to people who are not familiar with some sacred places in their community. Western influence on African culture has brought tremendous changes in palm frond symbolism which has affected many religious beliefs in Neke community.

The Africans as a people have a philosophic system which may not necessarily be same with other people. Indeed, the traditional African concept of figures, statuettes, and all other artistic expressions may be perceived as functional in their own rights. These serve symbolically as catalyst for traditional African religious beliefs and symbolic thoughts.

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