

***Ofo* Symbol: The Sensory Implications for Peace Building in Asaba, Nigeria**

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Abstract

Ofo is known throughout Igbo land but the extent of its conceptualization and the degree of the recognition of its importance with the range of its usage are not uniform in all the parts of the region. These vary from one sub-cultural area to another. In Asaba, an Igbo town in Delta State, *Ofo* is a dominant ritual symbol that serves as alternative method for peace building. It occupies a central place in the traditional activities of the town. However, due to the influence of Christianity and modernization, many attribute the oblivious nature of *Ofo* to fetishes and some do not know that *Ofo* is used in Asaba community, thus, its significance seems diminished in the contemporary time and the wealth of meaning remains largely unappreciated. This has informed the curiosity of the researcher to examine the structure of *Ofo* symbol as alternative method for peace building in Asaba. Qualitative method is employed for analysis of data collected from primary and secondary sources while phenomenological approach is used to allow the symbolic object speak for itself. The methodology via sensory pole brought out some physiological phenomena of *Ofo* symbol towards peace building. Some of the findings from the sensory pole are family unit and unity, sense of sacred and anthropomorphic sense which are some of the elements of peace building in the traditional Igbo society. The understanding of these values of the symbolism of *Ofo* will remove the doubt of those who view *Ofo* as a symbolic object for negative actions and help people to appreciate and clarify the practices of traditional office of *Ofo* title holders.

Introduction

Ofo is a vital object of Igbo consciousness and ritual life. Its very notion as a ritual symbol connotes the conscious trapping of certain important ideas and meanings by the users. Its critical properties, particularly condensation and polarization, suggest its deep semantic web. According to Turner (1967), "The structure and properties of ritual symbols may be inferred from three classes of data: External form and observable characteristics; Interpretations offered by specialists and laymen; and Significant contexts largely worked out by the anthropologist" (p. 20). Thus, he advanced three levels of interpretation distinguished by their different contexts. These levels are: exegetical meaning, operational meaning and positional meaning.

The Igbo term *Ofo* is the proper name of two related objects. It immediately designates a particular plant species which grows in the Igbo area. Also, in a derived sense, it identifies the twig or branchlet from the wood of that tree. Both the plant and its sticks are equally referred to as *Ofo* (Ejizu, 1986). However, the application of the term *Ofo* to the branchlet dominates over its use for the plant itself on account of the predominance of the twig as a ritual symbol. It is pertinent to note that *Ogu* is an adjunct to *Ofo* (*Ofo na Ogu*). It is used as an appendage and complements the meaning being stipulated. It is in this context that *Ofo* as a dominant symbol will be applied in this work.

Dominant symbols possess two clearly distinguishable poles of meaning. Thus, we have sensory and ideological poles. At the sensory pole the meaning content is closely related to the outward form of the symbol. At this pole are concentrated those *significata* that may be expected to arouse desires and feelings. *Significata* are usually natural and physiological phenomena and processes. At the sensory dimension of *Ofo* symbolic object, the outward form has some implications towards peace building such as family unit and unity, sense of sacred and anthropomorphic sense. These physiological phenomena of the *Ofo* receive meaning through observation of man who is the only meaning seeking animal (*Homo symbolicus*). This is the base point of symbolic interactionism which extends to the interaction of man with the observable *Ofo* properties.

❖ The Family Unit and Unity

In the words of Elue (2007) "The family consists of a group of persons related by marriage or blood ties and generally living together in the same household" (p. 5). Assessing from the biblical perspective, he notes that the Bible uses several terms to express the idea of family. The most common is "*bayit*" which literally translates "house". In the New Testament, related words are "*oikia*" (family) and "*oikiakos*" (relatives) that is, members of the family group. The Old Testament uses a second term with the meaning "clan" or "family" (*mishpachah*). Thus, he concludes that what stands out is the idea of

house or household. On the same note, the Holy Father's Letter to Families recalls that "The family is in fact a community of persons whose proper way of existing and living together is communion: *communio personarum*" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24). The family therefore, is a house of a community of persons through marriage, blood ties, adoption, and other socio-religious common interest.

The conceptualization of *Ofo* is bound up not just with the terminology but more significantly with the meaning-content. It is pertinent to note here that *Ofo* in traditional Igbo thought, in close association with the structure of a typical twig, imports wholeness and individuality (Ejizu, 1986). Wholeness gives clue to family circle. This network of ideas and symbolic meaning have crystallized around the notion of *Ofo* on the basis of the observable manner in which pieces of dead and dry sticks naturally break off from their parent stock. This is because, *Ofo* branches are made of twigs joined or bound as it were by natural wax or gum, which could dry up to let loose the twigs. This natural process of gumming together and falling apart of *Ofo* twigs seems to evoke in Igbo thought an idea depicting how families grow and separate from the parent stock (Bentor, 1988). Yet the separation caused by establishing new family divisions, Bentor assures, does not weaken the large unit. The concept of lineage or family root is therefore drawn from the *Ofo* twig that is only part of the parent tree.

Ofo therefore evokes sense of family. Peace building is influenced through family latent values such as sense of belonging. Sense of belonging and to feel loved is one of the needs in family life. A need is something that is deemed necessary, especially something that is considered very important for the survival of the person, organization or institution. One of the dimensions for peace building in the society is to have sense of belonging and to feel loved, accepted and respected. The sense of belonging and to be loved takes the middle position in the hierarchy of human needs which is the central concept in Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization. Maslow (1966) proposed that human needs are innately given and exist in an ascending hierarchy. Going from the ascending order of human needs, the basic physiological needs such as food, cloth, sleep, and protection from extreme hazards of the environment must first be met. The second hierarchical stage entails the needs for safety and security. We need some kind of order, certainty, and structure in our lives. Once these are met the third need to belong and to love comes into play. Fourth in the hierarchy is the need for self-esteem which entails self-respect and esteem from other people. When all these needs have been met, the fifth and highest need emerges, which is self-actualization or the desire to become everything that one can become. There is equality in sense of belonging to make a happy home. Stressing on the importance of belonging in any institution, Joseph (2014) writes:

When social needs become dominant, a person will strive for meaningful relations with others. I want to love and to be loved; I need recognition; I want to be a useful member of the human family. We come to feel not only our own desires, but those of others, which become important and challenging to us. This is the level where we find the desire to help others (p.57).

Ofo as a unifying ritual object brings members of the family together as one in different levels. According to I. Uraih (personal communication, May 2, 2023) every family, every *Ogbe*, every *Ebo* in Asaba, sets apart a small piece of land as holy ground. Within the household, the holy ground is the *olulu mmuo* (the point of meeting between the two spiritual realms) with *Ofo* as a symbol of togetherness and belonging. Within the *Ogbe* and *Ebo*, the *ani* (holy ground) is often demarcated with a special tree called *Egbo*. *Mmuo ani* (the special spiritual principle of the land) is believed to reside there. The *Diokpa* and the community gather for worship (*ilo ani*) or to invoke *mmuo ani* for judgment (*isu ani*) against who has broken the community covenant, at the site of the *Ani* and also intensification of prayers for the group unity. This exercise promotes peace from the family circle.

❖ Sense of Sacred

Durkheim, (1912) while analyzing sacred versus profane distinction gave the description of the sacred as those things which the religious interdictions protect and isolate. Sacred phenomena are therefore considered extra-ordinary and set apart from everything else. *Ofo* is one of the religious dominant symbols considered as sacred in itself and used for sacred ritual functions. It is pertinent to note that the word "sacred" used by Durkheim and the word "holy" used by Otto is presented by Max Weber as charisma which marks out an individual like the custodian of *Ofo*. Weber (1947) defines charisma:

As a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional

powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader. (p. 358).

The concept of sacred as setting apart from other things captures the *Ofo* ritual symbol as a sacred object. The *Ofo* trees and their branchlets are regarded as sacred. It is a taboo for the *Ofo* tree to be used as timber or firewood. In some localities, women are prevented from plucking its branches or picking up any fallen twigs for firewood. This attribute of *Ofo* made it to be symbolical mummies (Jeffreys, 1956). According to C. C. Onwuegbuzia (personal communication, March 26, 2023) when asked “why don’t you cut the tree despite its age? The reply was that the tree grows without being troubled by men; it is a sacred tree. Another respondent, A. C. Okolo (personal communication, March 15, 2023) claimed that other taboos regarding the *Ofo* tree include:

- a) Bird does not perch on it
- b) No one should climb the tree
- c) No one should cut the branches, and

In most cases, only old men are allowed to touch it. When the tree was closely observed, one finds out that the branches are not made on one solid straight piece of wood. There are many pieces of wood in one branch and they are jointed at intervals. The old men only picked up these joints from the main stem when the branches were dried up. It is actually the joined stem picked up by the old men that is consecrated by the chief priest of the community as *Ofo* sticks. It is held in high esteem by the leader of the communities.

More so, *Ofo* tree is perceived by the traditional Igbo as a special revealer of the sacred. The structural features of the plant seem to have particularly recommended the tree to the traditional mind which might have sensed in these ‘extra-ordinary’ features indications of special divine presence. Borne out of an experience which is at once personal and religious, *Ofo* tree thus qualified to become a hierophany. It acquired a value by participating in a reality that transcends it, and in the words of Mircea Eliade “became saturated with being”. Singled out from the rest of the vegetable life, *Ofo* became endowed with a meaning other than itself and became involved in the traditional Igbo man’s desperate effort to disclose the foundations of things, the ultimate reality.

Also, when *Omu* is tied on *Ofo* tree to mark it as sacred object, it is pertinent to note that the tree or plants are sacred essentially for the sacred reality they represent which the symbolic object *Ofo* points toward. This representative idea is made clear by Eliade (cited by Aguwa, 1995) that:

No tree or plant is ever sacred simply as a tree or plant. They become so because they share in a transcendental reality, they become so because they signify transcendental reality. By being consecrated with the *Ofo*, the individual profane plant species is transubstantiated. (p. 56).

To the primitive mind, nature and symbol are inseparable and there is mysterious relationship resulting from the sacredness of such plants or trees. Hence, Aguwa (1995) observes that such a tree as spirits inhabit becomes their emblem, at the foot of it, offerings are made to them and people make ejaculatory prayers as they pass by.

Although the sacred order which *Ofo* reveals is a structure of the cosmic perception, it is not evident on the level of immediate experience. Rather it is a meta-empirical reality. This is the transcendental realm of supernatural beings which forms part of the traditional cosmology. Through the uniquely human process of symbolic thought *Ofo* points to that transcendental centre of all reality, and also makes present to the senses the supernatural beings which are part and parcel of that order.

On the same hand, *Ofo* tree and its brachlets are held sacred in Asaba community, just like the whole of Igbo land. Thus, there are taboos which hedge them round in most areas. The *Ofo* tree is not ordinarily cut with knife. Neither is any part of it put into any other use than as a ritual object. In some parts of the community even the land area around the *Ofo* tree is prohibited to women. One of the respondents to this study in Asaba, A. Okolo, (personal communications, March 15, 2023) notes that birds do not perch on *Ofo* tree and it is not brought out except for serious reasons and it is forbidden for women. This is to show that it is sacred and reserved by nature. Due to the native sacredness of *Ofo* many traditional people would consider the rite for transforming the ordinary twig, or any other structural form of the

symbol into an effective ritual object, as an act of commissioning, not a consecration as such, since the object is sacred ab initio.

Also in Asaba, to create this sign of sacredness, *Ofo* is always rubbed with nzu (white chalk and white cloth). The white chalk which is always found in every shrine and there it symbolizes the sacredness of the shrine is also a ritual mystical object for clearing the eyes ritually for the spiritual exercise of *igo ofo ututu* (morning prayer) and it symbolizes purity of moral intention. It serves a passport for cordial interaction with the spirit world.

Therefore, *Ofo* as a sacred ritual object reserved by nature is a potent force for Justice, peace, authority and retribution. These values promote peace building in every society. Thus, it creates sense of awe and reverence. With these values latent in *Ofo*, the menace of cultism was averted in Asaba in 2019. As a sacred object and revealer of most sacred Being, it commands respect towards peace building in traditional setting.

❖ Anthropomorphic Sense

Most of the *Ofo* are represented in stick form while others are made in bronze and iron. Whichever format it is made depicts arts and aesthetic. An art is a medium that brings forth aesthetic. *Ofo* as instrument of expression of value, symbols, whether as object or words, are great tools in the hands of artists. Besides the stylistic concerns, they avail of symbols to convey values of great emotional and intellectual importance to a given group. These include elite values, interest-group values, ideas and aspirations approved in the particular society, and so forth. And once the symbols which express the values appear in their proper context, they provoke the kind of sentiments and reactions associated with their referents. (Ejizu, 1986).

Part of the beauty of artistic display on *Ofo* is the anthropomorphic idea in which the human face is engraved on it. The human face with open eyes reminds those who are present when it is employed that the ancestors are witnesses or have seen all that have been agreed upon. Hence, failure to comply with the tenets for peaceful resolution will face the consequences of the ancestors who witnessed the ritual. The artistic anthropomorphic design of *Ofo* which increases in size as often as sacrifice is offered arouses emotion for commitment, truth, justice and equity which are essential elements for peace building. On this note, Nwala (1985) avers that *Ofo* as a mystical tree, after consecration for the purpose providence has destined it to be used for, through the work of art could be made with a bundle of *Ofo* sticks rather than just a stick, or made from an Iron, brass or bronze into different emotional forms. This piece of wood is most times clothed with blood from sacrifices offered from animals and the feathers of a bird or birds. The constant rubbing of blood on the *Ofo* makes most of them to be black in colour.

Conclusion

A study of Igbo ritual symbols is of primary significance since they are reliable means of information into the socio-religious life of a people. Considering the basic truth that symbols are the only means of communication and expressing value the researcher developed interest in cracking the cultural code of Igbo symbols particularly the investigation of *Ofo* dominant symbol and sensory implications to peace building in Asaba, Nigeria. It is observed that *Ofo* symbol has many implications for peace building. This is clear through the observable features of *Ofo* which can be used relatively to promote peace building in Asaba. From the sensory dimension they include; family unit and unity, sense of sacred and anthropomorphic sense. The understanding of these values of the symbolism of *Ofo* will remove the doubt of those who view *Ofo* as a symbolic object for negative actions and help people to appreciate and clarify the practices of traditional office of *Ofo* title holders.

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