

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

Prof. O.O.C. Uche & Charles Ikenna Okeke

Abstract

Ofo is bound up with the traditional Igbo religious experience and their conception of the world. It is necessarily involved in the dynamics of Igbo social and cultural life. However, Igbo culture has been jeopardized by colonialism and globalization and is on the precipice of dilapidation and extinction as a result of ignorance and disdain for cultural practices. The Igbo cultural practices are mostly facing extinction, probably by the effects of acculturation. The *Ofo* usage is one of the cultural practices in Igbo society that despite the contribution to sustainable development in the traditional Africa, especially the symbol represented by the stick, there is lack of awareness on its merit in the present day Asaba community. Many people attribute the oblivious nature of *Ofo* to the fetishes and thus demand complete destruction. However, the use of *Ofo* ritual symbol in recent time in Asaba to avert the menace of cultism informed the curiosity of the researcher to examine the structure of *Ofo* symbol as alternative method for peace building in Asaba. This study adopts a qualitative method for analysis of data collected from primary and secondary sources. Phenomenological approach is also employed to allow the symbolic object speak for itself. The methodology via ideological pole brought out the socio-religious implications of *Ofo* symbol towards peace building. Some of the findings from ideological pole present *Ofo* as instrument of truth, unity, justice, authority and retribution 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 which many see as diabolic.

Introduction

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 is applied in this study.

While the meaning content is closely related to the outward form of the symbol in sensory pole of interpretation; the ideological pole finds an arrangement of norms and values that guide and control persons as members of social groups and categories. Every dominant symbol is a unification of disparate *significata*. However, they are interconnected by virtue of their common possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought.

This is in consonance with the last focus of the methodological theory of symbolic interactionism which states that since meaning is dynamic that meaning can also emerge by going beyond the observable phenomena and through norms and operational sense come symbolic meaning. The following are deduced from the ideological perspective of *Ofo*. They include: Justice, Authority, Truth, Unity and Retribution. These values are inter-related in peace building as one entails or presupposes the other.

***Ofo* as Symbol of Justice**

Justice is one of the most important moral and political terms. The word comes from the Latin *jus* meaning right or law. Thus, justice consists in what is lawful and fair, with fairness involving equitable distributions and the correction of what is inequitable. The concept of justice can take a number of different forms, depending on the practical context in which it is being applied, though there are common elements running through this diversity of use. Justice as a concept can be represented in different symbols via ritual, religious, social and cultural. The major ritual symbolic object for justice

in Igbo is *Ofo*. As traditional judicial potent force, *Ofo* can be employed for justice in various dimensions such as Legal, Distributive, Commutative and Moral angles.

❖ **Legal Justice**

Legal justice concerns what the citizen owes in fairness to the community. This includes: individuals, groups, organizations and even state. The denial of the essential goods which are necessary for someone to maintain a family, contravenes this principle. It means that a society is unjust and contravenes natural law when it forces people off their lands and denies them their inherited claim to land and shelter and livelihood.

❖ **Distributive Justice**

Distributive justice refers to the patristic notion that material goods beyond what is needed for living with dignity are owed to the community so that all may live in dignity. It is a characteristic principle of Christian social teaching and a very central theme in international economic order and business ethics, based on the common principle that the goods of the earth from the beginning are meant for all (Gauthier, 1986). God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity. Thus, it governs the distribution of rights and benefits that the state owes an individual as its citizen, e.g., protection of life, education, job, public peace and order.

❖ **Commutative Justice**

Commutative justice regulates the relationship between individual members and groups within and among themselves in accordance with a strict respect for their rights. It has bearing on the relations between individuals especially in respect to the equitable exchange of goods and fulfillment of contractual obligations. It demands the respect of others at the exchange of things of equal value. Positively, commutative justice is concerned with transaction involving property values, contracts, buying and selling, and other forms of exchange of goods and services. Thus, cheating, fraud etc are violations of commutative justice.

❖ **Moral Justice**

Morality is a body of principles that attempt to define what is good and bad. The idea of what to do or not to do is already moral perspective. It could be prescriptive (Do this) or proscriptive (Do not do). Moral justice entails exercising one's moral responsibility towards others. The principle of justice could be described as the moral obligation to act on the basis of fair adjudication between competing claims. As such, it is linked to fairness, entitlement and equality.

It is pertinent to note that *Ofo* could be also be employed in other forms of justice which include procedural and retributive justice. Procedural Justice, or fair procedures and mechanisms, recognizes that an agreed and fair procedure should be followed in a distribution of out-comes of the society while, retributive justice, or just compensation, deals with fairness in the allocation of punishments or level of compensation for victimization.

In general, *Ofo* defends the right of the weak against the injustice; however, the weak must have innocence (*ogu*) on his or her side. It is within this context that the Igbo always speak of *Ofo na ugu*. It is this place that the *Ofo* occupies that which makes it very fundamental in conflict resolution, especially when it involves the weak and the powerful (Nwala 1985).

Very important in the dispensation of justice and peace is the custodian of the *Ofo* who must conduct himself with honour and uprightness. Why is justice, honesty, transparency, uprightness and impartiality expected from the holder of the *ofo*? It is because he also puts his life at risk by failing to live up to any of these, as the ancestor spirits and deities are also witnesses to the judgment that he passes and may visit him with death, infirmity or curse. When the *Ofo* is used for the resolution of conflicts, the parties involved take the resolution seriously because it is not only about the two parties coming into an agreement. It is an agreement that the deities and ancestors have witnessed to. Failure to comply with what has been agreed to be just can lead to death. Another consequence is ostracism as failure to comply is considered a revolt against the community, the ancestor spirits and the Ala deity and thus the need to break fraternal relations with such a person (C. Omo, personal communication, May 7, 2023). Once the *Ofo* is struck on the ground, the ritual or agreement is sealed. Usually, when it is struck on the ground the action is accompanied with curses on anyone who contravenes what has

been agreed upon (Kanu, 2017). This striking of the *Ofo* on the ground with an accompanying curse or curses is responded to by those present with the word (I-see!) which is an equivalent of Amen- (meaning, may it be so).

The *Ofo*, therefore, is a judicial instrument employed for settling disputes and ensuring peace and harmony among the members of a family, clan or village in Asaba. Whenever it is presented at a judicial proceeding it ensures that everyone tells the truth and is honest in the presentation of his or her case lest the person be killed or cursed by the ancestor spirits and deities who are witnesses to the judicial proceedings. More interestingly, when the case becomes difficult to judge because of the parties involved, for instance, in laying claim to the same property or position, they are asked to come and swear before the *Ofo* to show that their positions are true. A very important element at this point is the Kola nut, which is broken and kept before the *Ofo* so that the disputants would come and pick from it to eat. Usually at this point, the party who is lying backs out of the case; however, if they insist on swearing before the *Ofo* or taking an oath before the *Ofo*, they run the risk of instant death or ancestral curses visiting their homes (I. A. Okwudarue, personal communication, May 7, 2023). To eat such a kola nut when one is in the wrong is to bring curses and condemnation upon oneself. For instance, if two brothers are laying claim over the same land, may be claiming that it was given to each of them by their late father, a priest or the head of the family is called to administer the *Ofo*. During the administration of the *Ofo*, the priest or oldest person in the family would lay curses on whomever is making the wrong claim over the property. The curses would include death, incurable sicknesses, family generational failures, etc. If after the administration of the *Ofo* and the wrong claimant dies, it is believed that evil has befallen him or her as a result of the attempt to take away another person's property. However, if at the end of the administration of the *Ofo* nothing happens, those involved may decide to appeal to a more powerful deity.

***Ofo* as Symbol of Authority**

While power is the ability to do something; authority is the legitimated power; in other words, the right to do something. *Ofo* is a staff of authority (Turner 1968 and Ortner 1973) held by those who have been entrusted with the power to govern or lead a people; no matter how small the number may be, it can range from the family to the entire community. Among the Igbo, there are several treasures handed down from one generation to another, however, one of the greatest treasures handed down from one Okpara or head of the family to another is the *Ofo*. In the Nuclear family which is the bedrock of social and political organization of the Igbo society, the Father as the leader of the household takes possession of the family *Ofo*, a symbol of his authority, justice, law and uprightness (Kanu 2015). At the Extended Family called (Urnunna), the head of this political unit is the oldest male member of the extended family also known as the *Diokpa* is the custodian of the *Ofo* of the extended family. In the Maximal Family, also referred to as Idumu in Igbo, the oldest male among them holds the *Ofo*. At the Village-Group Assembly, the oldest member of the council of elders referred to as the *Diokpa* is the custodian of the *Ofo* (Kanu 2013).

Whoever holds the *Ofo* is endowed with powers, rights and privileges from the ancestors and deities (J. Kpalobi, personal communication, April 30, 2023). Its holders are accorded respect as it distinguishes them from others who do not hold any; and whatever the holder binds or loses using the *Ofo* is considered bound or loosed in the world of the ancestors. It is therefore a connecting cosmic power between the seen and unseen and the living and dead. The concepts of deities and ancestor spirits are very important because the *Ofo* is a symbolic representation of these spiritual beings (Kanu 2014).

The head of every household, usually the father or the *okpala* (if the father is deceased), the priests, and the *okpala* of the sub-family unit and the patrilineage, all had the *ofo* in their possession during the pre-colonial time. To prepare an *ofo*, certain rituals must be performed, which transforms the object into a peace symbol embodying the spirit of the ancestors of the possessor. According to M.N. Osaje (personal communication, May 8, 2023), the head of the *umunna* (*okpala*) is the one that performs this ritual. To do this, he will kill a cock, a goat or cow and the blood of the animal is smeared on the *Ofo* stick. The feathers or hair of the animal is stuck to the wood. The spirit of the ancestors is invoked to come and reside in the wood and empower the possessor. In this covenant ritual, all the male adults of the

patrilineage must be present. At the gathering, they will agree that this *Ofo* will be a source of unity for the people. After the rituals, the stick becomes consecrated, and thus, it is imbued with the spirit of the ancestors of the possessor.

It is not only used within the family or political leaders in traditional Igbo societies. Even spiritual leaders like *dibia* (medicine man) also have an *ofo*. It is employed by the *dibia* and the heads of families who lead in rituals either at the family or community levels. As spiritual heads and custodians of morality, the *Ofo* is a symbol of the foundation of their legal, political, religious and social authority not only to decide on issues but also to enforce judgments. Such rituals, according to Hoston (1956), Boston (1959) and Edeh (1985) are considered valid only when the *Ofo* is used.

***Ofo* as Symbol of Truth**

As a popular symbol of truth, *Ofo* serves the primary socio-religious function of ensuring correct moral living and harmony in the traditional Igbo society. The declaration of one's innocence constitutes an integral part of the traditional morning prayer by the lineage elder on behalf of himself and the rest of his kindred. Likewise, all holders of the normal kinds of *Ofo* are supposed to undergo the same type of treatment each time they handle the symbol for any formal use. In the event of guilt on the part of the holder, the *Ofo* is believed to automatically counter-reactive. It turns in on the holder and visits him instantly with punishment.

Another very common use of *Ofo* as a symbol of truth towards peace building is in settling of various disputes ranging from family quarrels to such serious cases like ownership of big property such as land. This particular use of *Ofo* stemmed from the belief in *Ofo* as one of the highest guarantors of truth and justice. No one may utter falsehood before *Ofo* without being visited by some terrible calamity (C.E. Nwajei, personal communication, May 2, 2023). Thus, *Ofo* has potent store houses of information. The totality of this ritual symbol is a make-up of the traditional universe, providing a network of data. The traditional *Ofo* is a portfolio of truth. Ray (1976) maintained that African traditional religious symbols are used to re-enact the deeds of the gods, to become possessed by divinities, to manipulate sacred objects, to speak sacred words, to conform experience... and to control, and renewed the shape and destiny of the world.

Corollary to the foregoing is the use of *Ofo* as a form of oath. According to Ejizu (1986), In many parts of Igbo land *Ikpo Ofo* or *Ine Ofo* is the greatest form of oath. All the holders of the different grades of *Ofo* would assemble with their *Ofo*. These are piled together for the person taking the oath to carry. In the meantime, certain rituals and incantations are rendered. If the person survives the signs which indicate guilt, he/she is declared innocent, otherwise he/she is held guilty of the charges proffered against him/her. *Ofo* is therefore, a judicial instrument that requires everybody to be honest whenever it is presented in any judicial proceeding. Nwala draws similar conclusion when he affirms that: *Ofo*, as a legal instrument for validating decisions of the family lineage, village or clan, helps to ensure political stability by its role as a means of sanction, settling disputes and ensuring peace (Nwala, 1985).

***Ofo* as Symbol of Unity**

Within some Igbo-African communities, the *Ofo* also serves as an official stamp that validates the existence of cults, social groups and individuals that are associated with it. As an official stamp, it signifies that the community or the cult or group of any kind that is identified with the particular *Ofo* is acting as one. This agreement is not only between those who are alive but also between the living and the dead as the *Ofo* also points to the authority of the ancestors who have handed over the *Ofo* to the next generation (O.A. Udeh, personal communication, May 4, 2023). Whenever it is used by the custodian during judgment, blessing or agreement, it is a reminder to him that he is not alone but in agreement with the living and the dead. It is, therefore, a symbol of unity, coherence and conformity and also a reminder to those who are present that the issue at table is a serious one which has to be respected.

The *Ofo* is not just a staff of office, but a repository of the group soul consciousness (A.A. George, personal communication, May 2, 2023). This consciousness embodies the past, present and future of

the group. It is generally believed that the volition of a *Diokpa*, when voiced out before the *Ofo*, will become manifest. Therefore, through its influence the *Diokpa* is able to hold his group together. This unity though not uniformity is a seed of peace in the community. Everyone thinks about the common good than personal good. *Ofo* as a symbol of unity seeks always the interest of all.

***Ofo* as Symbol of Retribution**

Ofo as a judicial potent force is employed for procedural and retributive justice. Procedural Justice, or fair procedures and mechanisms, recognizes that an agreed and fair procedure should be followed in a distribution of out-comes of the society while retributive justice, or just compensation, deals with fairness in the allocation of punishments or level of compensation for victimization. As a popular symbol of truth and justice, *Ofo* serves the primary socio-religious function of ensuring correct moral living and harmony in the traditional Igbo society. In the event of guilt on the part of the holder, the *Ofo* is believed to automatically counter-reactive. It turns in on the holder and visits him instantly with punishment. The belief in the continued presence of the ancestors implies that they are capable of punishing whoever does things contrary to the *omenana* (customs and traditions) of the people.

The presentation of the *Ofo* is a symbolic representation of the ancestors and the Earth goddess in the assembly. In a family meeting, the family head presents the *Ofo* calling on the ancestors and the Earth goddess to join in the proceeding. If the purpose of the gathering is to reconcile husband and wife, the head of the family having presented the *Ofo* reminds all that reconciliation is the focus of the gathering (O. A. Ozah, personal communication, May 4, 2023). In a communal or intergroup gathering, the individual occupying a leadership position, like the *Diokpa* of the community, after presenting the *Ofo* reaffirms the resolutions of the people. In each instance, he strikes the *Ofo* on the ground. Such an agreement is usually guided by the customs and traditions of the people, an unwritten constitution on how the people should organize and live their lives. It is an abomination to go against anything that has been sealed with an *Ofo*.

It is pertinent to note that the fear of the negative consequences that might befall anyone who goes against anything sealed with the *Ofo* ensures that resolutions remained intact. For instance, in the resolution of a particular conflict, the *Ofo* could be used to seal the agreement reached. The *Diokpa*, acting as chief mediator, presents the *Ofo* in the midst of all who are already seated. Prior to the presentation of the grievances of the individuals or parties, the mediator affirms the presence of the ancestors in the session. He states that anyone who does not want peace to reign be held by the *Ofo*. Any resolution that will ensure peace in the community may be affirmed by the *Ofo* (M. C. Okoba, personal communication, May 6, 2023). Also, in the dispensation of justice and peace the custodian of the *Ofo* must conduct himself with honour and uprightness because he also puts his life at risk by failing to live up to any of these, as the ancestor spirits and deities are also witnesses to the judgment that he passes and may visit him with death, infirmity or curse.

Conclusion

The people of Asaba like other African people produce a wide variety of art including traditional figures, masks, artifacts and textiles, works in metals such as bronze, etc. Of particular interest among the retinue of Asaba arts and symbols is the *Ofo*. The *Ofo* in Igbo traditional societies did not only occupy a fundamental place in the religio-political life of the people, it was a very strong cosmic force in the sense that it represents the unseen ancestors of the Igbo society. Also, in many ramifications, the *Ofo* is one of the central or unifying concepts of traditional Igbo thought, especially that aspect concerning the Igbo conception of truth and dispensing of justice. It is central because it is universal to the Igbo-speaking peoples as a symbol of truth, justice, authority and retribution. It depicts the complete trust and confidence of the entire family, group or town placed at the disposal of an individual referred to as *Aka Ji Ofo* (The hand holding the *Ofo*). He is usually a respected man who enjoys a commanding influence. The person who carries the *Ofo*, holds not just a social responsibility but a sacred one with many precepts to observe. This work has thus studied the different dimensions of the *Ofo* in Igbo ontology, and has identified its role in peace-building in Asaba, Nigeria. The *Ofo*, as a symbol of truth, unity, justice, authority and retribution, occupies a central place in the building of peace in Asaba traditional society.

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