

**THE OFO IN IGBO FOREST OF ARTS, CRAFTS AND SYMBOLS:
IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE-BUILDING**

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Abstract

The Igbo, like other African people produce a wide variety of art including traditional figures, masks, artifacts and textiles, works in metals such as bronze, etc. Evidences of this dates back to early 9th century with the bronze artifacts found at Igbo Ukwu. Of particular interest among the retinue of Igbo arts and symbols in this paper is the Ofo. 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. The Ofo is most times in the form of a stick, given to a leader, within a family, village, state, etc. It depicts the complete trust and confidence of the entire family, group or town placed at the disposal of an individual, 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 studied the different dimensions of the Ofo in Igbo ontology, with the particular objective of identifying its role in peace-building. It discovered that the Ofo, as a symbol of truth, justice, authority and retribution, occupies a central place in the building of peace in the Igbo traditional communities. For the purpose of this study, the phenomenological method of inquiry was adopted.

Keywords: *Ofo, Igbo, Arts, Symbols, Worldview, Peace-Building, Conflict Resolution*

Introduction

In the area of peace-building, a new concept that is beginning to attract the attention of scholars, especially from the African extraction is that of 'alternative dispute resolution', also abbreviated as 'ADR'. It has been employed by various scholars to describe a wide variety of dispute

resolution mechanisms that are short of, or alternative to, full-scale court processes. The term can refer to everything within facilitated settlement negotiations in which the disputants are encouraged to negotiate directly with each other. In the contention of Best (2006), it is an application of non-conventional peaceful methods of settling disputes and resolving conflicts situations using the least expensive methods and ways that satisfy the parties as well as ways that preserve relationships after a settlement might have been reached.

It is referred to as an alternative because of its alternative place in relation to the official conventional litigation and the courts with preference for non-violence. Its processes include negotiation, conciliation, mediation, and arbitration. Agarwal (2001) adds that its main features include proceedings that take place in private, thus ensuring confidentiality. It may be less adversarial, less formal and a more flexible process, independent, objective and impartial. In this method, the third party makes the parties of the legal dispute to reach an agreement about the dispute by bringing them together and communicating with each other.

The Ofo is hereby proposed as an indigenous alternative method for dispute resolution with a unique procedure. This indigenous approach is fundamental because of the advantages of indigenous alternative methods for conflict resolution. Osi (2008) aver that indigenous dispute resolution processes are intuitive, time tested and pre-colonial forms and systems of dealing with community problems by coming up with a consensual, communal solution. Igbo indigenous methods of dispute resolution according to Berhe (2012), places emphasis on the community and parties to the dispute and uses local actors and traditional community based judicial and legal decision making mechanisms to resolve disputes within or between communities.

This paper is, therefore, a contribution to the ongoing discourse on alternative models for conflict resolution. Ofo as a cosmic force in Igbo ontology and a fundamental figure in Igbo arts and symbolism has been employed over the years in conflict resolution. It is, therefore, going to be studied to emphasize its influence, among the Igbo society and its efficacy in peace building for contemporary adaptation.

The Ofo in Igbo Religion and Culture

The 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. It is made from a piece of wood known as the *osisi ofo*

(the ofo tree, which is usually about four to six inches long) also known with the botanical name: *Detarium Senegalese* (Nzekwu 1961; Arinze 1970 and Metuh 1991). The ofo is a mystical tree, however, consecrated after it has been cut for the purpose providence has destined it to be used for. There are times when it is made with a bundle of ofo sticks rather than just a stick, or made from an Iron, brass or bronze. 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 color (Nwala 1985).

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 *of*, a symbol of his authority, justice, law and uprightness (Kanu 2015). At the Extended Family called *Umunna*, the head of this political unit is the oldest male member of the extended family also known as the *di-okpara* is the custodian of the *of* of the extended family. In the Maximal Family, also referred to as *Idumu* in Igbo, the oldest male among them holds the *of*. At the Village-Group Assembly, the oldest member of the council of elders referred to as the *diokpa* is the custodian of the *of* (Kanu 2013a,b&c).

Whoever holds the ofo is endowed with powers, rights and privileges from the ancestors and deities- it's 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 2014a&b).

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. 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. 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.

Selected Images of the Ofo

The images below are a collection of different images of the Ofo made from different materials. The different shapes of the images also carry different meanings that have relevance to the particular life and religio-cultural history of the particular people using it. Thus, every ofo is not just a religio-cultural instrument with cosmic powers, it also reflects the story of people who use it.



Plate 1: Ofo made from Metal

The above is an Ofo made from metal which represents, not just a religio-cultural element but also the skill of the craftsman in ironwork. The material with which the ofo is made may be due to what was available or affordable at the time of the production of the ofo. The use of an Iron instead of wood has nothing to do with the efficacy of the ofo.



Plate 2: Wooden Ofo

Above is an image an Ofo made from wood. The metal at the base is the handle for carrying the ofo. The darker designs on the ofo are a display of the artistic wizardry of the craftsman in wood carving.



Plate 3: Wooden Ofo

Above is an ofo made from an ofo tree. The bigger part is ofo is darker as a result of the rubbing of the blood of sacrifices on it. Usually when agreements are reached, sacrifices are offered and the blood rubbed on the ofo. If the sacrifice is offered to the ancestors or a deity, then the deity is part of the sealing of the agreement in question.



Plate 4: Wooden Ofo

Above is an ofo made from an ofo wood. The use of a human face does not in any way diminish its spiritual powers, it is rather the African way of expressing the divine in an anthropomorphic manner. The base at the bottom of the ofo is for standing the ofo before those who would be using it.



Plate 5: Wooden Ofo

Above is an ofo made from wood cut from an ofo tree. The base at the bottom of the ofo is for standing the ofo before those who would be using it.



Plate 6: Ofo with Smears of Blood

The above plate is an ofo with smears of blood from animal sacrifices. Usually an ofo that has been in existence for several years would carry on it the drops of blood of the several sacrifices that were performed during the settlement of disputes over the years.



Plate 7: Ofo Made from Bronze

Above is an Ofo made of bronze. 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.

The Ofo and Conflict Resolution

In a capitalist value system, might is considered as right, following the Machiavellian ethics. This places power where there is might rather than placing power where there is right. Thus, the powerful exerts his or her power without considering the right of the weak. However, within the African ontology, right is might and right is justice. This is the central and basic principle of the cult of the ofo. The 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 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. 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, among the Igbo is a judicial instrument employed for settling disputes and ensuring peace and harmony among the members of a family, clan or village. 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. 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.

Conclusion

The Igbo, like other African people produce a wide variety of art including traditional figures, masks, artifacts and textiles, works in metals such as bronze, etc. Evidences of this dates back to early 9th century with the bronze artifacts found at Igbo Ukwu. Of particular interest among the retinue of Igbo 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. The *Ofo*, as a symbol of truth, justice, authority and retribution, occupies a central place in the building of peace in the Igbo traditional communities. It is presented in this piece for the possibility of adaptation for the contemporary Igbo society.

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