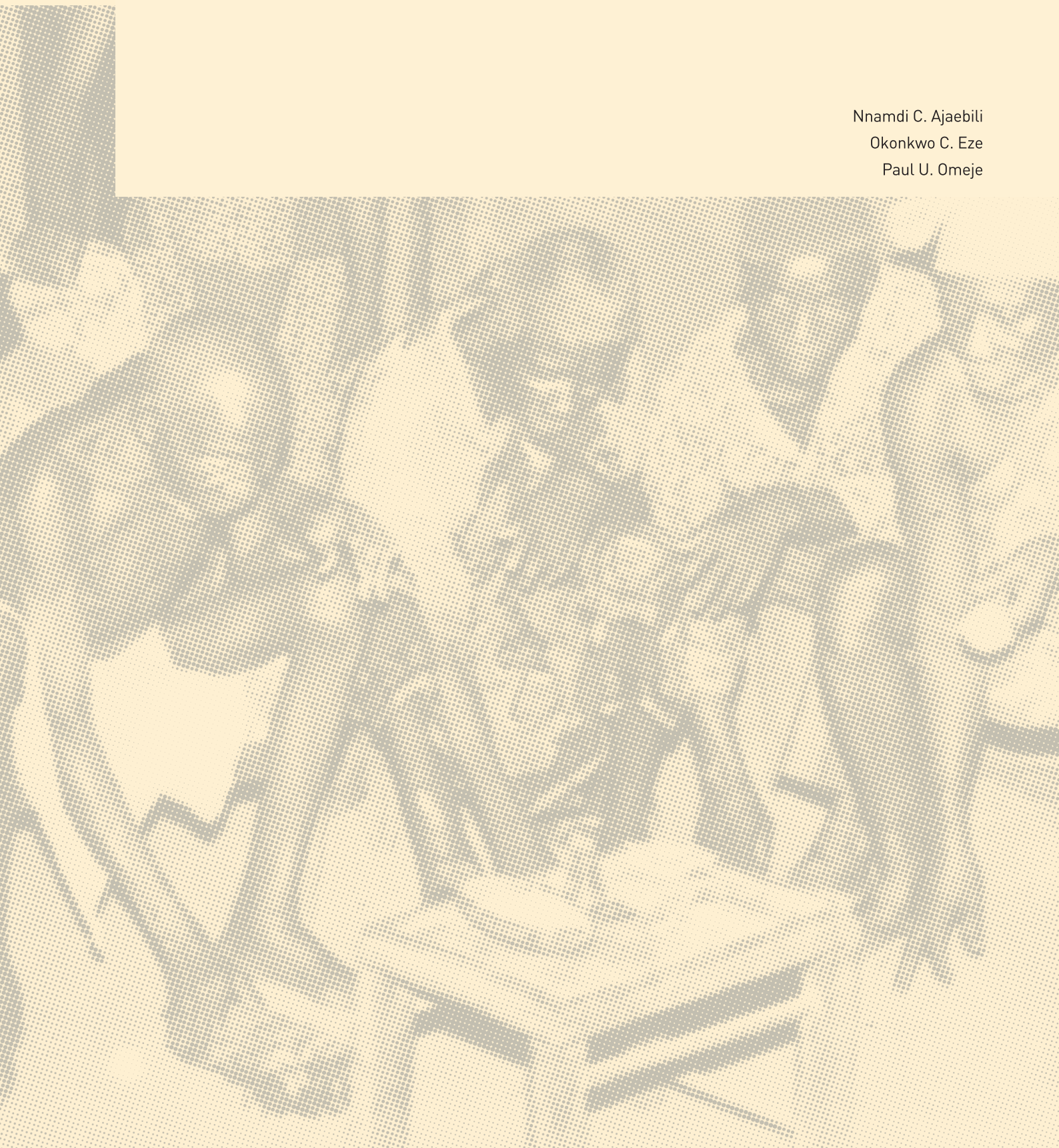
Ofo: the tangible and intangible heritage of the Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The *ofo* is made from a tree known as *detarium elastica*. Among the Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria, it is the material and mystical symbol of *truth*, purity, justice and authority. The fundamental principle inherent in the institution of *ofo* is that right is might; right here is defined as justice. Through the institution or cult of *ofo*, the traditional Igbo defend and apply this principle in their personal and social relations, *ofo* is thus the defender of the innocent. The weak can also be protected by this principle, but only if they are innocent, that is, if they have *ogu* on their side. This gave rise, in Igbo cosmology, to the twin principle of *ofo-na-ogu* (justice and innocence) which is the foundation of all the basic moral principles in Igbo traditional ethics, such as truth, justice, innocence, uprightness and moral purity. The purpose of this essay is to survey the mundane and spiritual dimensions of the age-old *ofo* institution which has been a bedrock in the sustenance of traditional Igbo society but which, unfortunately, is fast losing its relevance among some so-called 'modern' Igbo.

Keywords

ofo, *ofo-na-ogu*, truth, justice, purity, authority, spiritual and mundane dimensions, Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria, *detarium elastica*, *odu-atu*, *Ala*, Christianity, colonialism, social practices, rituals and festive events (ICH domain)

Introduction

The portion of the River Niger which lies between latitudes five degrees north and seven degrees north divides the territories inhabited by the Igbo of present day Nigeria into the South-eastern and Mid-western areas. However, the bulk of the Igbo population is located in the South-eastern area. Thus, Eastern Igbo refers to those that live east of the Niger, while the Mid-western Igbo are those that inhabit the western section of the Niger. Igboland is flanked on all sides by numerous other Nigerian ethnic groups which have, over the centuries, maintained mutual cultural intercourse with the Igbo people: on the northern borders are the Igala and the Idoma; to the south are the Ijo, Ogoni and the Ibibio peoples; on the eastern border are the Ekoi, Efik and the Yako peoples; and to the west live the Isoko, the Urhobo, the Bini and the Ishan peoples.[1] Politically, the bulk of Igbo populations are found within the present Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States of Nigeria, while relatively small numbers are found in Delta, Rivers, Cross River and Akwa Ibom States.

With a population of about sixteen million, according to the 2006 national census figures for Nigeria, the Igbo are noted for their endless local cultural diversities. However, only a few institutions and practices, notably the worship of *Ala* – the Earth Goddess, veneration of ancestors, the belief in *ofo* – *detarium elastica* (a sacred stick symbolising truth, purity, justice and authority), the Igbo language itself (though with numerous dialectical variations), as well as their egalitarian tendencies, are typically Igbo. Among the people, several cosmic forces exert influence on human affairs through empirical and non-empirical mediums, agencies or institutions such as the *ofo*, divination and native medicine. But *ofo*, the subject of our study is both empirical and non-empirical in relevance, and it enables the traditional Igbo to manipulate the universal forces for his overall well-being. Because human action must have a moral character to be worthy of approval, the Igbo have a saying that *mmuo adighi egbu onye nadighi ihe ojoo omere* (the spirits do not kill the innocent person). This, among the Igbo, refers to the twin principles of Justice and Innocence (*ofo-na-ogu*) which regularly guide the actions of men and the spirits. Among men and the spirits, therefore, there is justice based on innocence (*ogu di na madu, din a mmuo*). This demonstrates that certain limitations are placed on the powers of the gods and the ancestors by the twin principles of justice and innocence.[2]

Conceptual framework

Etymologically, *ofo* is both a tree, *detarium elastica*, and a symbol among the Igbo of South-eastern Nigeria. Its origin among the Igbo is difficult to unearth as it is shrouded in mystery. The branches of the *ofo* tree have been ascribed with both political and spiritual functions among the indigenous people of Igboland. Chieka Ifemesia has, therefore, defined *ofo* as *a short, thick, portable, sacred wand carved from a branch of the ofo tree, a special plant which was believed to have been consecrated by God as a symbol and guarantee of truth and justice*.[3] Pantaleon Iroegbu is of the opinion that *the piece of wood called ofo in Igbo culture is a symbol of constituted authority, while the ogu is a symbol of innocence*.[4] J. O. Ijoma, for his part, refers to the *ofo* simply as a *staff of office and justice*.[5] There are other features of *ofo* not captured in the above definitions. There is a spiritual dimension attached to it. As C. I. Ejizu has noted *the ritual stick …* (was) *imbued with the spiritual energy of the super-sensible realities: it represents the benefit of man*.[6] *Ofo*, therefore, has a deeper meaning than the physical stick itself.

Among the Nsukka Igbo, for instance, *ofo* was and (still is) of two types, viz: the ancestral *ofo* held by the head and leader of each family, and the *Odu-atu* or *Otishu* – a typical titular *ofo* ringed along its full length with metal string and capped with a buffalo tail, hence the name. The *Odu-atụ*, which *symbolised truth, justice, righteousness, power, authority, wholeness and moral innocence*,[7] was associated with titled men in the Nsukka area. In recognition of this, A. E. Afigbo argues *inter alia … it is known that among the Nsukka communities, a titled man was expected to carry in addition to a brass bell, Okikpe* (elephant tusk) *and ofo, some other status symbol known as Odu atu* (the tail of a buffalo).[8] *Odu-atu*, also referred to as *Otishu* or *otisi* in some other Igbo communities, was associated with royalty. Simply put, *ofo* is a royal sceptre. The *Odụ atu* is a constructed and accepted symbol that conveys values and respect to the spirit of the ancestors who are believed to have handed the *ofo* insignia to their descendants.

The essence of *symbolism*, as argued by S. Firth, *lies in the recognition of one thing as standing for another, the relation between them normally being that of concrete to abstract, particular to general*.[9] *Ofo* does not have meaning in itself, but that which the Igbo ascribe to it. In the context of the above, it has been observed that *the*

piece of ofo lying in the forest is not of much significance but when it has been consecrated and duly handed over to one who has been customarily initiated to be head of the family, it assumes a special significance and (spiritual) *dimension.*[10] The above definitions attempt to explain the generated and received meanings and significance of consecrated *ofo vis-a-vis* other twigs. *Ofo*, and all it stood for, was an object of attack by the twin alien institutions – Christianity and colonialism – which opposed every aspect of Igbo culture.

The mundane dimensions of the *Ofo* institution

As a material symbol, *ofo* is made up of a carved stick about four to six inches long, and thick at one end. A bundle of *ofo* twigs can also be wrapped together to make up the *ofo*, thick at one end and usually black due to constantly being rubbed with the blood and feathers of sacrificial animals, including fowls and goats. The *ofo* tree, *osisi ofo* (*detarium elastica*), is believed, among the Igbo, to be a mystical tree specially designed by God for its special role. Once the carved stick or bundle of twigs is prepared as a symbol of *ofo*, it is then consecrated and automatically becomes the central family cultural object which unites the living, the ancestors and the gods. It is the head of the family, the *Okpara* (or *Onyishi* in some areas) or the oldest man in the lineage, who is the recognised holder of *ofo* in the family. With this position of ritual authority, the gods and the ancestral spirits endow the *ofo* holder with special functions, rights and privileges, and it is the duty of the living to obey him.

The *ofo* is the symbolic representation of the Earth Goddess, *Ala*, as well as of the ancestors, *Ndi ichie*, both of whom oversee the customary morality of the Igbo. Thus, whatever the *ofo* holder decrees, condemns or approves is believed to be what the gods and the ancestors ordain, disapprove or approve. The presence of *ofo* in any gathering fosters a sense of unity and conformity among all members of the group. This is because it is highly feared, given that it can kill or be used to ostracise any erring member of the society, *igbu ofo*. The mystical aura, power, and influence which the *ofo* holder exudes among the people implies that he must be transparent, impartial, upright and honest in all his dealings, otherwise he will be struck down by a series of calamities - including death - by the gods and the ancestors.

As described above, it is the *Okpara*, that is, the oldest male member of the family, who holds the *ofo*. He is thus the priest and spiritual head of the family, as well as the custodian of morality. The *Okpara* is also the political head of the family and holds the family's landed assets in trust; he ensures that each member receives his due share of those assets. Being the spiritual head, the *Okpara* also performs sacrifices to the ancestors and the gods on behalf of family members and other kinsmen through the instrumentality of the *ofo*. Throughout Igboland, *ofo* holders are marked out from the rest of the community as they are usually accorded deep respect with other concomitant privileges. Such privileges include entitlement to certain parts of domestic animals or big game slaughtered for any purpose; they are also entitled to manual labour on their farms by younger adult members of their kindred during the farming season. Hence the title of *Onye isi ofo* or *Eze ofo* is only accorded to men of integrity, uprightness, moral and social distinction. Apart from the bond of common ancestry, the *ofo* is the strongest bond of unity within the kinship group. This does not preclude the existence of other *ofo* as every *Okpara* is entitled to the *ofo* of his particular family as well as a shrine, both signifying the relationship existing between the *ofo* holders, other members of the family, the ancestors, the gods and *Chukwu* (the supreme deity).

In addition to being a symbol of political authority, *ofo* also symbolises legal authority. It confers legal and political legitimacy and enhances the enforcement of rules and regulations made by a recognised authority.



Plate 1
An Okpara invoking the spirits of the ancestors as he strikes the *ofo* on the ground.
Source: C. I. Ejizu, *Ofo: Igbo Ritual Symbol. Enugu, Fourth Dimension Publishers*, p.44.

T. U. Nwala notes that *ofo acts as an invincible legal seal for every decision of the clan, village or lineage. This ritual seal takes place once the ofo stick is struck on the ground with curses placed on anyone who contravenes any given decision of the Amala Council.*[11] It is usual that the act of striking the *ofo* on the ground (Plate 1) be followed by everyone around concurring by saying '*Iseee!!!*' which translates as the Christian word, 'amen', meaning 'So be it.' Being a legal instrument for validating and enforcing the decisions of the family, lineage or community, *ofo* also serves as a means of settling disputes, ensuring peace, harmony and conformity, and thereby enhancing social and political stability in society. The *ofo* thus expresses the will of the entire community, which includes the living, the ancestors and the gods of the land.

Among the Igbo, the presence of *ofo* in the settlement of disputes, or in any judicial proceeding, sends a warning signal to everyone to be honest, lest the *ofo* should kill the defaulter. Oath-taking is sometimes administered by the *ofo* holder to attest to the evidence of persons when a case proves difficult to settle. It is in this sense that *ofo* could be regarded almost as a detective agency. *Ofo* holders are usually called upon to administer the *ofo*, *igo ofo* when someone is being accused or there is impending danger, or something is missing somewhere in the community. During this ritual act, they pronounce a number of curses, including death, on the offenders. If after one year, the person that swears or takes oath before the *ofo* does not die, then his innocence is publicly declared. He, thereafter, may proceed to celebrate his 'discharge and acquittal' by the *ofo*. It should be noted as well, that oath-taking, *idu isi*, could be done before any other oracle or deity in Igboland, but *ofo* would appear to be the most common ritual institution for that purpose.

Ofo: the spiritual dimension

E. Isichei, in her study of the Igbo people, has argued that *the Igbo were nothing if not profoundly religious, and all the accounts of their life reflect the fact.*[12] Every Igbo believed in the existence of a Supreme Being – *Chi-ukwu* (*Chukwu* for short) who was (and still is) assisted by the intermediary gods – *les dieux*. Among *les dieux* were the ancestors whose spirits were approached for solutions to myriads of problems and challenges facing their descendants. It appears reasonable, therefore, to state that *Igbo societies are governed by gods and ancestors.*[13] Among the Igbo people, *ofo* was not only a consecrated symbol handed down by God through the ancestors as an insignia of His power and justice, but also a major medium through which man could communicate with the Creator. In line with this, it has been postulated that *only through the ofo was it possible to make contacts with the gods*[14] because *ofo bu ezi okwu n'ukwuba aka oto* (*ofo* is truth and righteousness).

To an Igbo man, the titular *ofo* was more or less, and in all essentials, equated with the sacraments of Christianity. On installation, a new *Onyishi*, the head of the family or community, was required to take over the *Arua* or *Nna* (insignia of the ancestors or the living-dead), and *ofo* (*oho* in Nsukka dialect) – the revered symbol of the ancestors and justice.[15] With this development, the *Onyishi* not only became the representative of the ancestors, but also the spiritual head of the family or community. With the *ofo* cultural symbol, the *Onyishi* was in a position to invoke God's spirit through the ancestors (*igo ofo*) for His intercession in the affairs of the community, just as Christians did through the saints. It is in the context of this that G. T. Basden concludes that *awfaw* (sic) *is considered to possess the functions of a mediator between the spirits and the man ....*[16] *Ofo* was, therefore, endowed with the functions and values necessary for the spiritual wellbeing of the people and the corporate survival of society.

Apart from the family or community heads, there was yet another group that was permitted by the culture to use the titular *ofo* in the form of *Odu-Atu*. These were the titled men – *Ozioko, Asogwa, Mkpozi or Ishi Iwu* – depending on their communities. The holder of the consecrated *odu-atu* - the sacred symbol - was expected to protect and defend the ancestral spirit of the family or community. At his investiture, the *Onyishi* (head of the family) invoked the spirits of the ancestors which were requested to abide by the title holder and help him to be fair, firm and fearless in the defence of justice and community at all times and in all cases. As P.C. Ezeme has argued:

> *The Onyishi then invited the deities of the land and the ancestors to witness the occasion and implored them to bless the candidate before him with wisdom and courage with which to lead the people aright ....* (Thereafter) *the Onyishi removed the staff of office*

> *(odu-atu) from the Onu Arua* (ancestral shrine) *where it was placed before … and handed it back to the candidate who henceforth became a titled man.*[17]

The involvement of the venerated ancestors and the titular deities of the community in the occasion was because, spiritually, the title holder was to be considered as the link between the ancestors and their living descendants.

In the Igbo worldview, this was necessary because *the traditional theology upholds the place of lesser gods (les dieux) around the Supreme Being, who are nonetheless more relevant, active and interested in their affairs.*[18] In all essentials, the *odu-atu* could be said to have acquired elaborate symbolism that was rooted in the religious sense of the indigenous Nsukka people. The sacred *odu-atu*, a combination of *ofo* and buffalo tail, not only stood for truth but had a spiritual use as an antidote to poison. Religiously, it was believed to neutralise poison and also to punish misconduct, after it had been charged with spiritual energy. Once more, Ezeme contends that:

> *In the gathering of the elders (Ndi oha), every Odu-Atu was dropped in front of Onyishi and the ancestral shrine but before one spoke, he took his own from the collection and held it while he addressed the group. It is believed that with this in his hand, he* (the titled man) *spoke the truth and only the truth.*[19]

It stands to reason that apart from being truthful, any criminal act such as murder, poisoning, theft or adultery on the part of a titled man would assuredly be followed by an appropriate punishment from the ancestral spirits or the earth deity. As Ejizu has noted, *the sacred (odu-atu) sheds into the daily events of life and natural occurrences much in the same way as the gods participate in the affairs of men and share in determining the fortunes of men.*[20] *Ofo* was of ontological importance to the Igbo people because it symbolised God's power, justice and control over the living. This was more so as God was regarded as *Deus autem non est moruturum sedi virorum* – not God of the dead but of the living. The title which qualified one for the *odu-atu* ran in family lineage, hence the candidate was expected to be able to recite his genealogy and invoke the spirits of the ancestors (*igo ofo*). According to an informant, the *ofo Eze Nshi* (*Nri*) in Imilike made its holder invincible and immune to evil spirits and men.[21]

In Igbo cosmology, *ofo* was regarded as a titular god owing to the attributes ascribed to it. Societies do not develop themselves and their institutions in a vacuum. The growth of any community, as well as of the institutions that permit the existence of such a community, is more often than not a result of important functions attached to innovations such as *ofo* in Igboland. Igbo society has retained the *ofo* symbol for the purpose of continuity. The people invented this culture of *ofo* and its associated rituals to define themselves. Since the culture did not distort or prevent the growth of Igbo society, it has continued to hold sway even in the face of the corrosive influence of Western civilisation. *Ofo* has had a positive influence on the Igbo as it is believed to protect the innocent and punish the guilty with death; hence the Igbo saying that *oji ofo ga-ana* - the righteous must be free.

This philosophy was aptly captured by Ejizu's argument that *once fully charged by being possessed of the spiritual energy, the religious symbol serves a multiple purpose among the people.*[22] Apart from its religious function, *ofo* was also seen to be reliable in the administration of justice, hence an accused proved his innocence by swearing to the titular *ofo*. According to S. N. Nwabara, *ofo ala had the power to kill a liar, a perjurer, a poisoner or any person who had committed an abomination that could call the wrath of the gods down upon the entire community.*[23] It is, therefore, plausible to state that in most Igbo communities, *ofo* had both esoteric and exoteric qualities. Given its impartiality in the dispensation of justice, oaths sworn upon *ofo* were always binding on the people of Igboland.

It is to be noted that among traditional health practitioners of repute and confidence, there was always the need to invoke the spirits of the ancestors through the utilisation of *ofo* before beginning the treatment of serious and strange sicknesses. This was always done as a testimony of truth and sincerity on the part of the practitioners. The invocation of the ancestral spirits - *igo ofo* - was to enhance the potency and effectiveness of the drugs to be administered to the patient, just as it was for the *ofo* to repel evil forces or any other force that might have been responsible for the illness. While the clairvoyant diviner, with the *ofo* symbol in his

hand, consulted the ancestral spirits to unravel the root cause(s) of sickness, the herbalists (*dibia*) provided medication for its cure. *Ofo* can, therefore, be said to be an extremely useful element in the lives of the people because it assisted diviner-healers to determine and understand what hitherto could not be explained. It was also believed that God devolved His power of healing through deities to *ofo*.

Another area where *ofo* had proven its usefulness was in safeguarding property such as land or economic crops from trespassers or actions capable of causing damage. In this way, it functioned like the deities by protecting the weak and vulnerable from the whims and oppression of the mighty. The argument is that *ofo*, like a titular god, was spiritually efficacious in checking trespassers because of the danger of its potent psychological/spiritual power.[24] Consequently, the titular *ofo* came to be associated with the supreme divinity, as well as all the other acknowledged deities, as the superintendent of the affairs of man. Owing to the awesome spirituality of *ofo*, Igbo people appear to have owed it unreserved reverence just as to *les dieux* – the lesser gods. In all essentials, *ofo* was similar to Christian sacred artifacts.

Having been handed down from God through the ancestors, *ofo* was believed not only to symbolise the Supreme Being, but it also reinforced the covenant between the ancestors and their descendants. *Ofo* had a cluster of functions associated with it in Igboland. As a result, it could be said to represent different things to different people. While it was an embodiment of truth and righteousness to some people, to others it had the power of life and death – an attribute of the gods. This would appear to have informed F. A. Arinze's observation that *at its first consecration, it has all the appearances of a charm, but its most important aspect is its symbolism of ancestral authority* ...[25] and spirituality. The argument here is that abstract concepts such as honour, prestige, justice, good and evil were made tangible through such symbols as *ofo*. Succinctly put, the concepts translated to whatever they were believed to represent.

Change and compromise

The greatest threats to the culture of the Igbo people came from the twin alien institutions – Christianity and colonialism - during the early years of the 20th century. Not all Igbo people experienced the influence of the two phenomena at the same time. Given their location at the northernmost tip of Igboland, the Nsukka people, for instance, were among the last groups of the Igbo to come into contact with external influences. The advent of Western civilisation into Nsukka, and indeed the entire Igboland, could be likened to the harmattan wind that left nothing in place. Some of those who brought Christianity into Igboland, according to D. U. Opata, were *neither humble by birth nor by training and formation ... thereby rode the high road of unbridled arrogance*[26] in their attempts to evangelise. It is against this backdrop that Christianity can be said to have come as a 'superior' religion with a monopoly on spirituality. The Christian missionary zeal to evangelise 'the pagans' was hijacked and *adversely infiltrated by the arrogant self-confidence and racial superiority of the Victorian Age*.[27] The zest with which the Christian missionaries embarked on their assignment did not create room for a proper understanding of sacred emblems like *ofo*.

Ofo, which served as a staff of justice held by the *Onyishi* and title holders when arbitrating disputes, was not spared from attack by Christian evangelists. The invocation of the spirit of the ancestors through *ofo* suggests that the dead are spiritually alive, just as eschatology teaches in Christian theology. The similarity between the African traditional religion and Christianity in this regard notwithstanding, the former, with all its symbols and teachings, was considered heathen. In Opata's view, *the fact that Christianity is a religion that, ab initio, had as its mission the conversion of people to a new vision made it develop a combative language of conversion*.[28] In an effort to inculcate Western culture and civilisation, every vestige of Igbo culture, such as *ofo* and all it represented, was to be obliterated.

It appears Christian missionaries and colonial officials were at cross-purposes with respect to this aspect of Igbo culture. The former, it is interesting to note, stood against all the 'pagan' practices and symbols appertaining to the people's culture. In other words, in its arrogance Christianity saw every spiritual symbol or emblem - like the titular *ofo* among the Igbo people - as a despicable idol, and its holder as an idol-worshipper. There was an attempt by the new religion to defuse the spiritual power surrounding the *ofo* symbol. On the part of the colonial rulers, however, for maximum success

to be achieved the institution needed men of honour, integrity and influence to carry out the day-to-day duties of administration. The title holders who had the *odu-atu* or *otishu* (a royal sceptre) such as Ozioko, Asogwa, Mkpozi, Ishi iwu, were men of trust and confidence who all fitted into that bracket. *Ofo*, therefore, was not only of interest, but also invaluable to colonial officials.

The two alien institutions – Christianity and colonialism – presented a tapestry of ironies as they adopted distinctive techniques of manipulating and controlling the people who graciously accommodated them. The fact that the two institutions targeted different groups - the young and the elderly respectively - appears to have sustained the utility of titular *ofo* in Igboland, especially in the Nsukka area. By the early 1960s, most Christian converts in Nsukka were young and had not yet attained the maturity to participate actively in the political and socio-cultural activities of their society. To be good Christians, such young converts were taught to despise and denigrate *otishu* and all other religio-cultural artifacts. However, the people's unified perception of reality and covenant with their ancestors deepened the vitality of the *ofo* symbol which it also reinforced,[29] thereby reducing the effects of Christianity.

The division between the two foreign groups to a large extent promoted the continued relevance of the *ofo* symbol. This was more so as colonial rule only lasted for a relatively short time, whereas Christianity was much more deeply embedded. The elderly, who were the custodians of the people's culture, remained outside the fold of the newly-created Christendom in some parts of Igboland, like Nsukka. For the traditional leaders, *ofo* remained a proven tool that guided moral innocence and regulated interpersonal and inter-group relationships. Undoubtedly, this was because, *for one to be cut* (off) *from* (the) *sustaining spiritual power* (of *ofo*) *is to be deprived of continued existence. Isolated, the individual as well as the community, tends towards death and disintegration*.[30] Without a full grasp of Christianity and Islam, the cross and the crescent would ordinarily have no meaning to African Traditional Religion and *ofo*. The attack on the *ofo* symbol showed a superficial understanding of its importance in the corporate life of Igbo society. Despite the onslaught of Christianity and Western culture, the Igbo have remained a people whose cultural traits have power.[31]

It is also important to note that the two cultures – Western and Indigenous – have in the course of time influenced each other and caused compromise and adaptation. In Opata's opinion, *the virtues of borrowing and adaptation are very important for any dynamic system*[32] because they enhance growth and acceptance. This fact appears to have informed the view of Pope John Paul II that *a faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out and not faithfully lived*.[33] The emergence of indigenous evangelists, born and bred in the Igbo cultural milieu would seem to have changed the narrative. This crop of clergy has demonstrated understanding and a sympathetic approach to traditional culture. Interestingly, the combative attitude of the alien Christian culture has given way to dialogue with its indigenous counterpart, resulting in adjustments on both sides; a demonstration of flexibility and dynamism on both their parts.

The process of investiture in traditional Igbo society has been conspicuously and abysmally watered down on account of Western influence. The old order has given way to the new one, where the *Onyishi* no longer observe the traditional take-over of the insignia of ancestral authority and spirituality during installation. Some spiritual objects, including *ofo*, have had to be tucked away in boxes for as long as the convert *Onyishi* lived, thereby shielding him from the spiritual authority which *ofo* represented. In the same way, the investiture of the titular *ofo* on the Ndi Ozioko, Asogwa, Mkpozi or Ishi iwu (title holders) which involved elaborate ritual ceremonies generally referred to as *inye ofo* – the handing over of spiritual power[34] - was replaced with Christian prayers and church services. To demonstrate a complete departure from traditional practice, some priests usurped the powers exclusively vested in the *Onyishi* to confer titles on deserving candidates. Instructively, Christian title holders had, in addition to *odu-atu / otishu*, a crucifix as their staff of office, and perhaps as a symbol of spirituality.

Changes in society more often than not result in the phasing out of those aspects of life believed to be at variance with modernity. It has been argued that, probably because of the scarcity of buffalo, and more importantly its spiritual potency in conjunction with *ofo*, many title holders have opted for *odu anyinya* (horse's tail) with some other stick in place of the time-hallowed *ofo*.[35] Some people who ordinarily would not have



Plate 2
Odu-atu and a crucifix as symbols of authority for Christian converts who are title holders.
Photo: Okonkwo C. Eze, 20 April, 2019.

accepted the title because of their questionable integrity felt liberated by Christianity. This was where Christianity has had a powerful influence on the people's culture, so much so that the ceremonies attached to *ofo* became almost perfunctory (Plate 2).

Christianity also infiltrated other ritual practices in some communities and adversely affected them. In Ovoko, for instance, titled men no longer drop their sceptres (*odu-atu*) before the eldest man during meetings for fear of a libation being poured upon them.[36] Christianity is seen to have reached out to the people's cultural heritage, reformed or changed its ideals, values and practices to conform with its own principles. Again, the old practice where a titled man was forbidden from spending any night outside his community with his *odu–atu* has also been profoundly undermined by Christianity and its twin sister, Western civilisation. Christianity, in its efforts to be more appealing to its adherents, especially some members of titled society, has actually turned them into cultural freaks. Such titled men, in their bid to be good Christians, have clothed their indigenous cultural symbols in Christian garb.

Given the changes that have taken place in Igbo society, the *Onyishi* and the titled order no longer administer the customary laws in the spirit of justice. In some other cases, as in Okuje town in Nsukka, men of low status who would not ordinarily have been allowed to take titles that would grant them the responsibility of handling the *odu-atu*, have been empowered by Christianity.[37] This insignia which formalised the leadership role of the old order, a position men of low caste could not exercise over the 'sons of the soil' - *Nwa di Ala* - has been upturned and flagrantly abused by Western culture. In all, it can be said that *ofo* has been systematically deprived of its spirituality, and in some cases replaced with Christian symbols such as the Bible, a crucifix, holy water, chaplets, etc.. This is the extent to which Igbo culture has been sequestrated in the name of Christianity.

Conclusion

This paper has surveyed the mundane and spiritual dimensions of *ofo*, a revered ancient institution in traditional Igboland. It has shown that the *Okpara* or *Onyishi*, who is the custodian of the *ofo*, has many interwoven tangible and intangible roles. To the traditional Igbo, *ofo* is a ritual and religious symbol, the highest moral principle. Alongside *ogu* (innocence), its twin, it forms the bastion of Igbo moral order. It also serves as a legal seal and a mace in judicial and political affairs among the Igbo communities. It is the highest principle of justice, law and morality, binding both the living and the supernatural powers of the gods and the ancestors. Thus, the institution of *ofo* is the bedrock and a major tool for ensuring cosmic and social order in traditional Igboland, hence it deserves to be revived and re-ennobled, especially for those Igbo people who are increasingly losing touch with the potency, vibrancy and effervescence of Igbo cultural and religious institutions.

ENDNOTES

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