

THE SYMBOLISM OF OBOCHI (DAY) IN IKWERRE TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A LEGACY OF LIVED EXPERIENCE OF PENTECOSTALISM IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
<p>Man is a cultural being, homo-symbolicus, which in essence means that he is a symbol-using animal. Indeed, his capacity to symbolize is often proposed as a criterion placing him apart from the beasts. Language may be the most important kind of symbolization, but it is not the only one. It has been said that religion may be viewed as a vast symbolic system, as indeed and it is to this possibility that this paper tries to address. Like metaphors, symbols typify or represent or recall something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought. But there is no universal meaning that any single motif may be said to symbolize, the Jungian notion of archetypes notwithstanding. Symbols and what they signify are above all culturally constructed and culturally bound. One culture’s symbolic analogy is another culture’s puzzle. The work x-rays the Symbolism of Obochi (Day) in Ikwerre Traditional Religion: A Legacy of Lived Experience of Pentecostalism in Contemporary Nigeria. Ikwerre is located at North Eastern Niger Delta of Nigeria. The majority of the African people including Ikwerre believe in African traditional religion (ATR). This ATR is the all-pervasive determinant of the people’s life and culture. It is part and parcel of the cultural heritage of the people and determines the spontaneous and subconscious reactions of the people and their interpretation of reality. The methodology adopted in this work is hermeneutic and descriptive phenomenological method of investigation. Therefore, the work recommends that the dominant culture should not swallow up the minor cultures, therefore, the minor culture should be allowed to stay.</p>	<p>Symbolism, Ikwerre, Day, Cultural Heritage and Pentecostalism</p>

Introduction

Among the Ikwerre, like many other traditional societies in Africa and Nigeria in particular, days are symbolically very important especially in religious context. The Ikwerre people believe in the Supreme

Being whom they identify by the name “*Chiokike*”, The Creator. This Great Being is thought to be the mind behind the existence of the visible and invisible world and controls the activities within each of the spheres. Also, Ikwerre’s conceive their world in two dimensions viz, the visible world and the invisible world but man is at the center. Within the visible world, people conduct their activities and at death when they become spirits, the plan of action is shifted to the invisible made up of the Supreme Being, the divinities and the ancestors. The people also believe that from this invisible world of the spirit being, the ancestors intervene with their human families. From there too, they come back to life as infants in a process known as reincarnation. Within this-cyclic process, we see that the people believe that life is a continuous process. In this, we come face to face with a reasonable belief in real life without end.

Africa has erroneously been described as the Dark Continent by her detractors, thus perceived as having no history, culture or civilization. Prior to the coming of the Europeans to Africa for trade, evangelization and colonization, it is known that Africans have their ways of life embedded in their language and culture. They developed their arts such as the sculptures of the NOK, the beautiful bronze works of Benin, the Igbo Ukwu and other arts works found among the various ethnic nationalities that make up today’s Nigeria.

Not only were Africans making progress in arts, they also strengthened their grip on communicating their values through oral tradition – a system whereby through word of mouth the social, political, economic and cultural heritage of the people is communicated (Obuba, N. 1997:34).

Abner Cohen (1974:26) defines symbols as objects, acts, relationships or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meaning. This definition tries to indicate that there are different symbolic forms and that it is possible for one symbolic form to be given several interpretations and these interpretations could be given at different levels depending upon the level of interpreter’s consciousness and intelligence

Michael Molloy (2002:8) expressed that symbol is something fairly concrete, ordinary and universal that can represent and help human beings intensely experience something of greater complexity.

Onigu Otite (1979:33), sees symbols as “agents that are impregnated with messages and with invitation to conform and to act”. Thus, when symbols are decoded in their social and cultural context they are found to have both cognitive and emotional meanings. For

instance, the axe or the meteorite stones found in most of the cults of God and solar divinities in West Africa convey the meaning and idea about the wrath of God and they also signify the purity of God and His impartial justice. In essence, such symbolic forms inwardly remind and urge the devotee, especially the cruel and the savage, to lead a pure and honest life in order to avoid the wrath of God. They likewise urge the believer to guard against falsehood when it comes to the question of settling disputes in any shrine that houses such symbols.

Charles Morris (1945:65) described symbol as a sign that is produced by interpreter and acts as a substitute for some other signs for which it is synonymous, and he gave the example of wearing of black dress by a widow or some other bereaved person as being a symbol or some other signs or mourning such as weeping. Radcliffe Brown (1952:143), expressed symbol as whatever that has meaning and the meaning is what is expressed by the symbol. For example eagle feather is a symbol and symbolizes royalty and dignity.

Carl Gustav Jung (1979:20) observed symbol as a term, a name or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning.

It implies something vague, unknown or hidden from us. Thus a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. It has a wider unconscious aspect that is never precisely defined or fully explained. Nor can one hope to define or explain it.

Ejizu (1990:1), states that a symbol is “a thing recognized as normally typifying, representing or recalling something of great practical importance, by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought”. From this definition any object or thing that is representing something of importance is a symbol to that particular people for instance palm fronds, red fabric etc.

Iheanacho cited in Wotogbe-Weneka (2005:99) expressed that all religions have various means of communicating its beliefs and practices to its members, in such a way that they understand vividly. This can be concrete, verbal or expressive action, which are symbolic in nature. He further stressed that symbols are indeed complement of religious communication and practice.

Wotogbe-Weneka, W. O. (2009:90) described symbol as a sign, number, letter, etc that has a fixed meaning, especially in science, mathematics and music. From this, it will not be over statement to say that symbols are representative concepts, objects, ideals, or images which express and signify something else, other than that which is perceived or observed in reality. Thus, symbols are mediums or channels, which act on-behalf of other things.

Michael Cox (1983:17) describes the outcome of this experience as “brief transforming sensation, shattering moment of vision, which can transfigure and elevate, however fleetingly, the most ordinary human life”.

Alfred North Whitehead (1974:127) describes religious symbol as “the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. This primary expression mainly clothes itself in the media of action and words, but partly in art”. But then, the way an experienced person expresses his perception of the sacred in symbols could be fallible contrary to direct experience of the holy which is infallible, that is why he further stressed that direct experience is infallible. What you have experienced you have experienced. But symbolism is very fallible in the sense that it may induce actions, feelings, emotions and beliefs about things which are mere notions – without exemplification in the world which the symbolism leads us to assume.

Raymond Firth (1973:15), explained that in a symbol there is concealment and revelation and that the essence of symbolism lies in the recognition of one thing as standing or representing another, the relationship between them normally being that of concrete to abstract, particular to general. Thus, this implies that symbols could actually convey information to the people in the communities or society.

According to Idowu, E.B. (1973:73), the fact about the use of material is that to the Africans, the material has no meaning apart from the spiritual that informs the material and gives it whatever quality and meaning it has. The material can therefore, only be, at best, technically a symbol. It is the divine entity that is represented by the material object to which worship is rendered. The material symbol can rot away, becomes destroyed, carried away, and can even be replaced, but not so with the divine being. Symbols may change. Deity or his ministers remain.

Idowu further explains that a symbol is not an end in itself but a means to an end. As its function is symbolic, it has meaning beyond itself. The main purpose of such a symbol is to aid men’s perception, concentration, and to be constant reminder of the divine presence. This has been age-long in the history of religion. Thus, a religion is not necessarily idolatry simply because it uses material representations. Yet, there is a sense in which danger to religion and religious men’s mind in its weakness. The danger

is where it is exploited by priest craft, to easily ignore the delicate line of demarcation between the reality represented and what is primarily only a symbol.

Phenomenology of Obochi (Day) in Ikwerre in Time Perspective

The Ikwerre are traditionally conscious of the importance of day and also time in their traditional religious worship. Anyone in a distance would not appreciate the symbolic importance attached to days in Ikwerre traditional religious life. As the Christians have symbolic regard for ecclesiastical seasons, Sabbath day (Saturday) and Sunday, so do the adherents of Ikwerre Traditional Religious regard the Ikwerre days especially the first four days (properly regarded as Ikwerre market days) which similarly in Igbo culture, *Onwuejiogwu* in his *Nri* study, discovered as *Alusi* – divinities sent to Eze Nri by Chukwu.

In Ikwerre religious activities, each day is symbolic in the sense that every divinity has its own specific day of worship. No two divinities of different identity and name share the same day of worship. In the same vein, periods (time) of worship is also symbolic. Worship which is sacred and significant is handled with sacred care to the extent that not every time is considered suitable enough for entering into the shrine of any divinity especially the highly regarded ones such as the *Ali.*, *owumini*, *Rukani*, etc. *Owhor* which is a very important symbolic instrument of both political, cultural and religious authority has much to do with the Iwhuruoha/Ikwerre day. *Owhor* has *Ekne* as its sacred day. The *Okpara* of any family or kindred, performs special worship on the *Ekne*.

Today is Ekne

God's day

Day of creation

Day of peace/Harmony

Day of procreation

Day of increase in wealth

Eberi day is very symbolic. It is the day *Ali* deity is worshipped. *Ali* which is the principal and ethnical deity within the Ikwerre pantheon is worshipped and highly regarded on *Eberi* market day. All the *Ali* deity wherever found in Ikwerre land is worshipped on *Eberi* day. On *Eberi* day, adherents of *Ali* do not go to work. It is a day of rest. It is a day of full worship. The premises of *Ali* are cleaned the previous evening, and in the morning of *Eberi* all adherents would assemble there for worship. The priest of *Ali* pronounces as it were the absolution on the people.

Raigbo is said to be the bead of the Ikwerre day and symbolic of all Ikwerre activities. It symbolizes period of events among the Ikwerre. Many important markets in many Ikwerre areas hold of *Afo* day. *Afo* examined otherwise means *Afo* year, *Afo* stomach. In effect, when it is said that *Owu afo nnem*, it means he/she is the same mother with me and such symbolizes deep and special relationship.

On *Ekne bu mbum Eke*, new yam is eaten and which must be harvested on *Nkwo* day. It is regarded as New Year day and the people begin to calculate the cultural as well as religious calendar year from that mbum *Eke*, is a day of calm reflections to the ledmen. *Eke* is perhaps from *Ekne keru uwa*, meaning innate or *eke* destiny.

In Ikwerre, the actions of certain domestic animals were considered forbidden. They included goats or dogs copulating at night, cocks crowing between 7.00 pm and 12.00 midnights, hens laying and hatching just one egg (Wotogbe-Weneka, 1990:65). When any of these acts occur, it is believed that

the ‘bond’ uniting man and divinities is broken. To restore the relationship and avert any resulting calamity in the society, myriads of sacrifices were offered by the offender or his relations.

The people held certain periods of the day, certain days of the week, and certain seasons of the year, with a high sense of sacredness. 12.00 mid-day and mid-night were believed to be the times when evil and good spirits met. Such periods were observed with some alertness. 3.00 am in the night was believed to be the period when the soul/spirit of a dying person departs the body to join the spirit world (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2009) avers. As pointed out earlier, *Riagbo* and *Ekne* are regarded as sacred days. They are days when *Ali* and other divinities stay near the human abode to receive their sacrifices. Exhausting farm work like clearing of farmlands, planting of yams or cassava, were not allowed on these days. Defaulters were believed to meet one form of mishap or the other. On such days, the people stayed at home, did some minor jobs, visited friends and made some feasts. Death on such days was and is still regarded as a bad one and the corpse may not be buried until the people ascertained the will of the ancestors and *Ali* through divination. Interment of any corpse on such days was forbidden until very late that evening.

Generally, the periods of the year when the people meet to offer special sacrifices to *Ali* are always held with sacredness. During such periods, people stay at home with reverence to *Ali*. Children born within such periods were given such names as “*Wali* (received from the benevolence of the great goddess). The observance of such days was believed to give good fortunes to the natives.

Also in Ikwerre, other natural phenomena follow this sequential order as decreed by the Supreme Being. Hence, the rising and setting of the sun, the waxing and waning of the moon, the ebb and rise of the tide, the day break and night, etc., follow this cyclic order. An interesting question for which our readers would want us supply the answer is — for how long shall this cycle of man or reincarnation process continue? It is not true to state that while man is on earth he knows the date of his physical death or transition. Research on the children of the deceased has always indicated that the death of their father was a surprise. Those who attempt to state that their father knew precisely the time when he would pass away; further interrogation on them has also indicated that it was an empty declaration to show or impress the world that their father was a super man. It is possible for man to know that his earthly mission is drawing close either through dreams, inspiration, old age or so, but the precise time remains a mystery of privilege known only by his creator. To borrow the word of Jesus Christ, “it is not for man to know when God has declared his own time. This “mysterious time”, as it remains a mystery in the physical so it is in the spiritual. As it is above so it is below.

Elders in Ikwerre communities are usually those with high integrity, honesty, great knowledge and extraordinary wisdom in laws and customs of the land, acquired through their long experience in life. As a result of this, the heads of the various sections of each community are expected to be upright, law-abiding, god-fearing, humble, loyal and sacrosanct to the society in which they oversee. With these qualities, peace, unity as well as living a harmonious with one another could be unleashed thereby contributing immensely to the development of the Ikwerreland and the society at large.

Consequently, the elders of Ikwerre land are seen as intermediaries between the living and the dead. These community elders are also seen as representatives of land (*ali*) who among other duties, should avoid forbidden things in order to keep the society in its true perfect state. Consequently every injunction from them was treated with reverence, because non-compliance might be accompanied with disaster. A good example is the Akpor Council of Chiefs whose meeting holds every *Riagbo* (a holy day in some of Ikwerre communities). In the Akpor Council of Chiefs sitting very *Riagbo* day,

complicated cases could be treated and at the end of the ruling the people are satisfied with the kind of judgment rendered to them.

The Akpor Council of Chiefs in Akpor kingdom is a known political body in the Ikwerre ethnic nationality whose fame has spread to the entire Ikwerreland and beyond. This particular body comprises of various *Owhor* holders in the ten communities of the Akpor kingdom starting from Ozuoba the father, Rumuoparali the first son down to Rumuolumeni. The head of the Council is the *Enyewe Ali* Akpor (king) who of course could be seen as the Chief Judge of the ruling council. This political institution is highly respected by the people as they oversee the custom and tradition of the Akpor Kingdom and the Ikwerre society in general. This kind of political institution could also be found in other kingdoms of Ikwerre ethnic group.

The Ikwerre according to Olumati, R. (2014), are traditionally village people with a social system comprising of clans and villages. Within such set up is the family, and also the kindreds. In such environment too, nature manifests its importance in natural settings. Among such natural settings are the days, time and numbers. To grasp their importance, recourse to the traditional or indigenous lifestyle becomes basic and imperative. Through this process, we have discovered that the value the Ikwerre have for the days, time and number is not a borrowed idea from any other foreign culture. In their world view which is both cosmological and ontological, periods such as day and time and the phenomena of number are sacred because they are related and involved in the activities of the human and the spiritual forces which they acknowledge. The people strongly believe that the four market days are from *Chiokike*. And the belief of the people in the Supreme Being and the divinities create room for rituals, sacrifices, festivals and what have you. The ceremonies with their rituals are performed on selected days, and times (hours) and materials involved are in numbers. In this way their symbology becomes clearly manifested. In Ikwerre traditional religious practices, ceremonial days are set aside and made sacred, the time is set aside and hallowed too. Again, the kolanut (*Aji*), the gunshots, the animals, the birds are ritually and sacredly numbered.

Traditional festivals and ceremonies are not fixed without recourse to the ‘weight’ of the day(s) to be used. The festivals and ceremonies are matched with the relevant ‘symbolic days’. Even during inter-village wars, sacred days were respected. Binding on all to accord respect to the *Raigbo* day, fighting in such a day *Raigbo* amounts to sacrilege. That is, defilement of the earth goddess or breaking of the traditional customary norm.

As I had earlier mentioned in one of my papers on kolanut symbology, there are four major days in Ikwerre. Divinity in Ikwerre society has its special or sacred day. Such a day is equally sacred and symbolic to the village or town that worships God through such a divinity. It is in this regard that among the Ogbakiri of Rivers State, the *Nyekwu* divinity by which *Wezina* is termed “*Ali wezina*, *Nkkwo* is so sacred that the Wesina stream is never cropped nor water collected from it on the *Raigbo* and nobody would enter the Wesina bush on such a day, this is a remembrance for *Ekenta* the founder of *wezina*.

In all the communities of the Ikwerre that we visited, we discovered that each community has its sacred day when its major market holds. Again, the divinity of each community has its own day when it is worshipped. Such days are so symbolically sacred that the people regard it as ‘holy days’ and days of rest. *Ekne* is symbolic to adherents of the Ali divinity. According to John Worlu, Ali divinity was created by *Chiokike* on *Raigbo/Ekne* day. To him, *Raigbo* is symbolic as an important day of creation. Another informant, Orji Njoku informed us that *Raigbo* is so symbolic and significant to the Ikwerre

that is can be regarded as ‘Sabbath day’ of the *Ali* and other related divinities. That is why *Ekne/Raigbo* day is very sacred. All devoted adherents of *Ali* observe it as a day of rest. There are five basic days: *Raigbo*, *Snaragbo*, *Eberi*, *Mmakara* and *Nnim*.

It is within these days that the Ikwerre markets have their operational periods of function. Every autonomous Ikwerre community has its major day and it is on such symbolic day that the big market of such community would hold. It is in these circumstances that Omerelu has *otu* Omerelu market which holds every day that has *Raigbo* as its most important day of holding. On such a day, the market would hold in full with ceremonies. In some Ikwerre areas, any Sunday that falls on the big market day is a special day. It is regarded as a feast day. There is always exchange of visits. It is styled church Eke. (Eke day Sunday). Many communities in the southern Ikwerre cultural area are involved in such symbolic days. The symbolism of day is also realized in the fact that various divinities have their special days of worship. For instance in the Akpor area, Anwinigbo divinity is worshipped on *Raigbo*,

Conclusion

It is important to note however that the symbolism attached to a certain number varies from one locality to the other, while some are a reflection of their market days others are greeting patterns. The most common of such symbolic numbers include 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 10. For instance, among the Ikwerre people, the number 4 (*ano*), a holy day known as *Riagbo* and 8 (*asata*), a day in Ikwerre known as *nnim* are important figures. The traditional Ikwerre greeting is forefold, while most market days are either held every four days or eight days. In some parts of Ikwerre land, local market days are believed to be 4 (*ano*), while in others, it is believed to be 5 (*ise*) also known as *asaragbo* in the Ikwerre calendar. The number one (*itu*) is believed to be a cardinal numeral in the indigenous thought form of the Ikwerre people. This is because of its primal position as a pivot on which other figures or numerals ride. Thus, the traditional belief of the people that the worst thief is he who steals anything that remains one. This number also falls under the first day (*eberi*) on the Ikwerre calendar.

Riagbo in most Ikwerre communities is termed a holy day because on this day, no one is expected to carry out any farming activities like clearing of the farmland, burning, ploughing, planting or weeding. The only activities that could be carried out on a *riagbo* day is harvesting which is done in the early hours of the day. Other activities include the gathering of the *owhor* holders, selling and buying at the market place. Example of communities in Ikwerre that observe *Raigbo* is found in the Akpor kingdom, etc.

The study reveals that in Ikwerre indigenous religions, symbols are indispensable as they aid the devotees in meditation and help communicate to the people the characters and attributes of the deities. Symbolisms in indigenous religion for the past centuries have been treated with levity in religious parlance or scholarship that notwithstanding sacred symbols are possible expressions of the African belief system and thus, the experience of the people’s religious life largely pivot around them. Most early investigators or writers of the African religion were foreigners who were mostly Europeans, American anthropologists, Christian missionaries and colonial masters. The problem we had was that those early writers know nothing about the African religion and so they failed to portray what the Africans believed and their religious symbols. Contrary to the biased stereotypes of some nineteenth century scholars which underpin them are acutely sensible and logical. Their meanings lie embedded and are discoverable, within the total matrix of the respective traditional African societies.

Today, it is a pity that most of Africans artistic culture and other types of religious symbols are being pilfered out and smuggled to the outside world (foreign countries), and people no longer consider the religious significance of such items in Africa.

The Ikwerre people are tremendously religious in all they do, this is because symbols are the basic tools which they present their confrontation with the unknown, it will be recalled that the metaphysics of any culture cannot be fully and adequately studied, appreciated, acknowledged and recognized without a symbol. Cultural symbols in Africa as a whole stand for something greater than what we see in the physical.

We have discovered from our research that some numbers among the Ikwerre people are very religiously symbolic for example; the number four and its multipliers are both fundamental and sacred. The number four is symbolic of the Ikwerre *izu* (week) made up of the Ikwerre sacred market days. The number four is also golden and symbolic of luck. It points to the supernatural and invisible beings. It is through the symbolic forms that the visible physical world penetrates the invisible (spiritual) world and in this way, the man symbolically presents the visible world to the invisible realm.

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