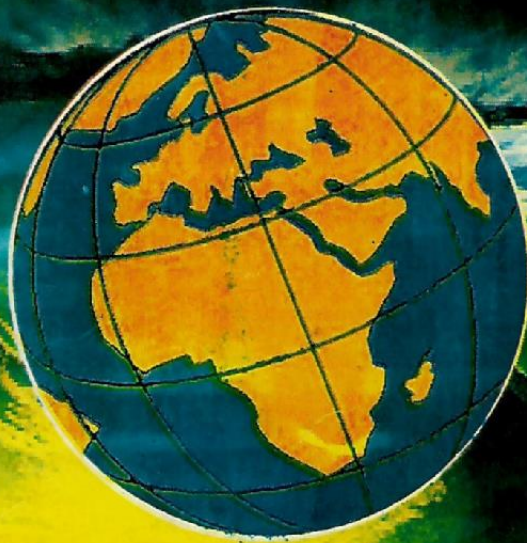


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## **- RITUAL OBJECTS: FUNCTIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE IN IGBO TRADITIONAL SOCIETY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Today, quests for ritual sacrifices and the needs have prompted man to research more and more into the circumstances that have led man's continuous efforts to ritualize, with a view to determining if ritualization could be given a wider recognition in the society. According to Abanuka (1999) ritual means the prescribed order of performing religious services. In other words, ritual means the prescribed order of performing traditional rites and sacrifices, using the appropriate local materials like "oji, "Omunkwu" etc. Thus, ritualization is one of the important ways by which our socio-economic and cultural needs can be sustained. This work start with an introduction, the nature of ritual sacrifice in Igbo traditional society, ritual objects and their functions and significance and ends with conclusive remarks.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to Okafor (1994:110) Ritual play a prominent part in Igbo land traditional worship, sacrifice, and social ceremonies. Ritual is relevant to the extent that enables individual to reach beyond the self or is directed to the supreme reality or the attainment of a perfect state of being. Deep disagreements could arise if ritual is breached or omitted.

Sacrifices abound in rituals. The act of sprinkling blood during a sacrifice is a very significant ritual. It is often attended with chants, incantations and other music. There is a social ritual which usually takes pace within the family. An elder will at the beginning of a meal, throw out a few small balls into court-yard. He could pause till children or other domestic animals have eaten the balls. This ritual had a two fold meaning, namely: a sacrifice to the spirits and a precaution against the introduction of poison. It was hoped that if an animal ate the food and lived, then it was safe for a human being.

According to Radcliffe Brown (1977) beliefs may be vague and variable but rituals often continue to be meaningful even though the participants no longer believe in the religion on which the rite was originally based. For example, educated Christians often continue to participate in rituals honouring local spirits they no longer believe in just in case, or because the rituals symbolize membership in the local community quite apart from religious allegiance. Certain Christians also continue to observe local religious customs in addition to the practices of their world religion because they still believe in both systems.

Radcliffe Brown (1977:215) pointed out that ritual activities are useful for symbolizing that an individual has achieved a particular status in the community. These may be called life cycle rituals or rites of passage. Infants are formally accepted as members of the society by out-dooring or baptism, adolescents become full adult member through puberty/initiation ceremonies, marriage rituals (which may extend over a long period of time) formally tie the two families together and legitimate the children by giving them a specific position in the society. The ritual of death provides an organized way for the community to ritual to the loss of members including highly valued leader. Thus, ritual objects have important functions and significance in Igbo world.

### **NATURE OF RITUAL SACRIFICE IN IGBO TRADITION SOCIETY**

According to Okafor (1994) before the advent of the missionaries into Nigeria in the early 30's, ritual practices/sacrifices were the dominant ways of propitiating our late grand fathers, the gods and goddesses that were established by them, which served to them as the only link between them and God the Almighty,



and the only source open to them to request from him (the Almighty God) their needs by way of ritual sacrifices, followed by songs and incantations.

According to Arinze (1990) this was made possible by the use of man made hut that housed different ritual objects. These ritual practices were significant and any mention of God were viewed seriously, without first making reference to the gods and goddesses, through which whatever requests that were needed by man could be made possible. These needs ranges from protection of the community against any external aggression, increase in population by way of procreation to abundant yield in the years to come.

Onigu (1997) observed that it was a common practice then that all requests to be made were proceeded by ritual sacrifices to propitiate the ancestors of the land and these requests take place at the beginning of the farming season to avert famine, harvest failure, casting of witches and wizards, victory against any external aggression etc.

Furthermore, Onwejeogwu (2008) emphasized that each of the families that existed own his place of ritual worship/sacrifice, with the ritual object fancied for recognition and admiration and headed by the eldest son in the family who is also the "Ofo" holder and whose function as well was to announce to the family when ritual sacrifice was to take place and why. Okafor, Emeka and Akuma (2004) pointed out that it was also his responsibility to assemble the required materials for the ritual sacrifice and to invite his colleagues (heads of families) that he was now ready to perform a sacrifice for an on-coming ceremony and that they are all expected to grace the occasion, having assured them he had received their blessing as a mark of acceptance him perform the ceremony.

According to Asouzu (1998) it is pertinent to note that these invitees were expected to grace the occasion with some ritual objects like palm wine as done in Uzuakoli in Bende Local Government Area of Abia State and Amokwe in Udi L.G.A of Enugu state in appreciation that the celebrant has lived up to expectation by adoring the life style of her fore-fathers and most importantly that those of the invitees were free to take anything like food presented to them on the occasion. These practices continued till early 40's when western civilization in the name of religious practices started spreading to all nooks and corner of the Igbo tradition society. Even until date, these ritual objects and their functions and significance have continued to be important in Igbo land.

## **RITUAL OBJECTS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE**

### **(a) 'OMU' IN SACRIFICE:**

Sacrifices is a common phenomenon in Igbo land passed from generation to generation because it is believed that is a connecting link between the living and the dead ancestors. An instance is in Amowe in Udi L.G.A of Enugu state sacrifice is offered both in time of trouble or stress and in time of posterity and abundant harvest. Arinze (1990) said that sacrifices could be made to expiate for abomination to ward off evil spirits, to ask for favours or petitions to the gods, and to show gratitude to the gods for favours enjoyed.

In Uzuakaoli and Nsukka in Enugu State, 'omu' is associated with almost all sacrifices. For example, 'omu' is used to condone off, from entering any piece of land that is in conflict between a person and the other, or between two brothers.

In another sacrifice such as sacrifice of expiation, (ichu aja), for abomination like murder, suicide, 'omu' is tied around the legs of the victim of the sacrifice-goat or fowl and dragged round the compound of the culprit. The essence of 'omu' here is identify to the gods the 'thing' that would suffer the penalty of the abomination. The implication of this is that the supposed sufferer of this abomination, who is the committal, has been transferred to animal which is killed and offered to gods to propitiate the gods. This is because the committal, pays for his offence by death. 'omu' in this way also performs the function of a sign by informing the people, through the act of typing 'omu' around the legs of the goat or fowl for the sacrifice and dragging it round the compound, that something abominable has been committed and needs expiation.



**(b) 'OMU' AS A BOUNDARY MAKER'**

According to Nzeako (1999) the chief priest encircles a shrine with 'omu' before offering it sacrifice. The 'omu' is so used to warn people to keep off because the encircled place is sacred and thus out of bounds to anything profane or defiled. The only person authorized to enter there is the priest who, of course, would cleanse himself of his profanity. Symbolically, 'omu' in this circumstance attracts the gods to the scene of the sacrifice, which is encircled with 'omu' to come and consume the sacrifice.

**(c)'OMU' IN EKPE SECRET SOCIETY:**

According in Arochukwu L.G.A of Abia State and Uzuakoli in Bende L.G.A of Abia State have Ekpe Secret as a cultural festival of the areas. This festival comes up every two years in uzuakoli and membership is restricted to those who have been initiated into it. It is open to adults. Children are barred from being member as they are being suspected of leaking the secrets of the "Ekpe" group. This cultural festivals use 'omu' in all facets of its celebrations. The masquerades are tied round with 'omu' during the dancing period and every other member uses 'omu' as well by tying it around the waist or hand. Symbolically, 'omu' in this respect, signifies total regards to the gods of the land and the ancestors. 'omu' also is tied around the coffin of a dead person and anywhere you see it, you will be sure something bad had happened. Tying it around the coffin symbolizes that somebody has died, and ready for burial. 'omu' is tied round the farm uncultivated to inform people there is no thorough-fare. Moreso, people are forbidden from defecting in any plot of land tied around with 'omu' when the owners found out such action is going on there.

In funeral ceremonies when it is expected that very dangerous masquerades will perform, 'omu' is used to encircle the area where the chief mourners are staying. This is to prevent the dangerous masquerades or people with evil intentions from entering the area 'omu' is encircled, and it also serves as a warning to the on-lookers and visitors that the place is holy.

Any path on which 'omu' crosses signifies that people should steer clear such path..it is an indication of 'no thorough-fare" as is done in Nsukka in Enugu state. At motor park and 'omu' is used to encircle certain portions to prevent people from entering or urinating or dumping of refuse.

**(d)'OMU' AS A RELIGIOUS RITUAL:**

'Omu', plays important roles in traditional Christian religions. Palm Sunday is a day reserved for all Christians to carry 'omu' (palm leaves) as a replay in remembrance of our lord and saviour Jesus Christ' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Every Christian has an 'omu' leaf on his hands and a long queue is made *singing songs and shouting "Halleluah", saying, "Hosanna in the Highest and peace in All places"*. The significance as well as the symbolic expression of 'Omu' here is that the Lord Jesus Christ recognize 'omu' here serve in two capacities – that is as both cultural and ritual.

**'OJI IGBO' (Kolanut)**

In Igbo land, 'Oji Igbo' (kolanut) serve as a very important item of food in traditional/ Christian ceremonies. In the first place, it is served first to visitors as a mark of hospitality. It is used to propitiate the ancestors in all ceremonies. A wife cannot be released to the suitor in igbo marriage ceremonies unless 'Oji Igbo' is presented. And it is this 'Oji Igbo' that would be used alongside with 'palm wine', or 'gin' in propitiating the ancestors and gods of the land to guide and protect the husband and wife, and also wish them blessings and pro-creation in advance. The Kolanut in this case, therefore plays a central role in family formation. In all ceremonies, both Christian and tradition, 'Oji, is used also in burial of the dead/funeral ceremonies. It is necessary to mention that in some parts of Igbo land like in Uzuakoli when 'Oji Igbo' is broken and it becomes divisible into seven parts or more, whoever is the host or presenter of the 'Oji' is expected to make some sacrifices to the people, because it is believed that is would attract good luck for him.

Similarity, we have 'Oji Ugo', this one is scarcely seen and anytime it is gotten, he who has it will as well expect good luck. It represents good things ahead.



Also, there is a type called 'Oji Gworo' or Oji Hausa', as people call it. It is available in most Igbo-speaking areas, and it is served to people in both traditional and modern ceremonies. Significantly, we requests since they have been appeased with it.

**'PALM WINE':**

Palm wine is regarded highly not as a delicacy but also a ritual object in igbo land and it is used in all Christian/ritual ceremonies. In all libations, it must be there and it is first poured on the ground for the ancestors to drink before any other person takes it

In all Igbo traditional festivals such as marriages, New Yam festival, Christians, New year day etc. 'palm-wine' is the major thing used. A suitor cannot take a bride in Igbo land without presenting to his in-laws with some 'palm-wine'. Even in settlement for peace to reign, 'palm wine' is often used. So also is 'schnapps', (gin). It goes hand-in-hand with 'palm-wine'. Is used in every occasion ranging from marriage, new yam festival, success in business, Christmas to New Year Day etc. as done in Arochukwu area. The significance of 'palm-wine' and 'gin' used in libation is that as soon as they were poured on the ground for the land libation, they dry up and it is believed that the ancestors have accepted drank and is a mark that all requests are being looked into and success could be ours.

**'OGIRISI':**

'Ogirisi' is a tree with many green leaves. Its functions are many and Igbo people plant a lot of it, because of the services it renders to them. Ogirisi trees are planted as boundary between one person and the other. The parts are used as malaria herbs. It is boiled alongside with other herbs and then taken as a medicine to cure malaria. In Uzuakoli 'Ogirisi' plays a leading role during 'Ekpe' secret cultural festival and also is used as a staff. Wherever it is kept (the leaves) nobody goes there except those initiated as member of the 'Ekpe' secrets cultural group. If it is wood, yam, cassava or any other materials, so as the leaves are kept on top of it, nobody ever removes them.

Wherever there is land dispute, and the levels are placed there, nobody violates this order including the supposed owner of the piece of lands, until a settlement is reached, and the leaves removed before the right owner can enter there.

Very importantly, it is believed it is that where the tree situates, anybody carrying medicine to that compound will lose because it will render the medicine he is carrying ineffective.

The most useful significance of the orgirisi is that it has protective power which it exercises upon those dwelling under its canopy. Individuals, kins, families and clans plant and nurture orgirisi in their family compounds principally for this protective element.

**'AKWA' (EGG):**

'Akwa' (egg) is very much valued in Igbo land. It serves a number of functions. First, it is edible, being taken as food.

'AKWA' as a ritual material is used for ritual especially by people or for individuals suffering from 'Ogbanje' as required by the fortune tellers or diviners with materials prescribed by them which must include 'Akwa' (egg) and 'Oji' (kolanut).

One suffering from heart problem is always given 'Akwa' (egg) to drink. 'Akwa' (egg) is broken and the fluid inside sprinkled in the eyes of someone inflected through snake spit. This will automatically remove the effect in his eyes and render the poison ineffective. The significance of 'Akwa' (egg) is that it believed that as soon as rituals are performed with it to the ancestors, it sacrifice will be received graciously.

**'NWA OKUKO' (CHICK):**

'Nwa Okuko' serves a very important function when performing ritual sacrifice with it. Many a time, the 'chick' is slaughtered in the ritual area and the blood sprinkled on the ritual objects and on the people.

According to Okafor (19994) the symbolic expression is that they the (ancestors) have licked the blood and at the same time have accepted the 'Nwa Okuko' (chick) by killing it themselves, and all requests made for this purpose had been accepted.



#### **'NZU' (WHITE CHALK) AS A RITUAL OBJECT:**

'Nzu' in Igbo land symbolized peace. If one is desirous of an off-spring and in performing ritual sacrifice, 'Nzu' is sprinkled on the body, so that one's body will be cool again. When a new born is received, the only way open to other to know that a new born is around, is by a member of the family where the new born is gotten, to sprinkle 'Nzu' (white chalk) around her 'neck and face' hands and feet'. This automatically indicates to the rest of the people that a new baby has been born.

If one is accused of being responsible for the deteriorating health of another, and at last he is proved innocent, the only way he would let other know is by sprinkling 'Nzu' (white chalk) on his body and dance at the market square to the joy and admiration of all. The fellow concerned must take an oath is also given about seven days; thereafter at the expiration of which his innocence is confirmed.

People sprinkle 'Nzu' (white chalk) and dance to the admiration of viewers in Nri during New Yam festival. In Arochukwu traditional marriage, Nzu is used in the ceremony. Haralambos and Holborn (2004) noted that these events are surrounded by rituals.

#### **CONCLUSIVE REMARKS**

The Igbo people are cultural people and live in South Eastern area of Nigeria. Traditionally, the Igbo live in small scale segmentary societies based on unilineal descent groups and organized in acephalus, autonomous village group communities. Culture is very important among the Igbos and the use of ritual objects form very important part of their culture and are very significance.

All the ritual objects with their functions and significance are well appraised and acceptable in Igbo land. The ritual objects are used in various ceremonies and these ceremonies have helped in no small measure in maintaining peaceful coexistence and harmonious relationships within the Igbo land. Thus, every culture should recognize ritual objects and their functions for peaceful co-existence and harmony in the communities.

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