



Typology of *Owho-nu-ogwu* (Deified Symbols of Justice truth) among the Ikwerre of Niger Delta

By

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Abstract

Owho-nu-ogwu are two different deified ritual symbols which complement each other in Ikwerre worldview. These two ritual symbols occupy a central and unique place in Ikwerre ritual balance. This is because the people believe that these two cultic symbols can vindicate anyone who is accused falsely as well as punish any offender in line with their customs and traditions, but the belief and practices associated with them are gradually going into extinction as a result of modern forces of change such as westernization. This article, therefore, re-examines the typologies these symbols in Ikwerre religious thought. The article adopted the symbolic interactionism theory as its framework which states that the meaning of symbols is imposed on what the users interpret them to mean. The article adopted both the analytical and descriptive approaches. Our findings so far revealed that the belief in these cultic symbols is still relevant to the people in spite of the devastating effects of modern changes. The work therefore, recommends that the socio-cultural values of these symbols should not be misconceived as “fetish” as most Christians see it, but rather be seen as institutionalised practice which they inherited from their forebears. The work also recommended that these practices should not go into extinction, but a way through which their culture is kept.

Keywords:

Owho-nu-ogwu, Deified Symbols, Justice, Typology and Ikwerre.



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Introduction

Every tribe in Nigeria and anywhere in the world has a particular culture with regards to their language, belief systems, thought forms, ritual practices and general way of life used in identifying them. From time immemorial, Ikwerre people have always had the consciousness that they have been in existence as an ethnic group and not a sub-group of any known tribe in the world. They have always been confident to handle their private affairs without seeking for assistance from any other tribe. They have always evolved their own distinct cultures with emphasis on language, dance, ritual practices and belief systems. One of such is the belief in *Owho-nu-ogwu* (deified symbols of justice and truth) as agents of moral control.

Owho-nu-ogwu are two socio-religious symbols which play a critical function in the Ikwerre traditional belief system and relationship between the humans and the ancestors. These ritual symbols are still prominent in the socio-ethical behaviour and control of contemporary Ikwerre people and their experience because the ideas and values which they represent are still valid to the present day Ikwerre people.

Owho-nu-ogwu are two different ritual symbols that complement each other, this simply means that the two work hand in hand for effective results. According to Chief Owokaire from AluuClan (12/09/2023), *Owho* ordinarily is believed to be the authority for leadership of the first son of a family unit or the eldest man in the lineage or kindred. As the head of each family unit or kindred, *Owho* serves as the staff of authority of the *Okpara* (first son) or the eldest (*Owho* holder). This therefore, legitimizes his office or position among the group as the representative of both the living and the ancestors. *Owho* is used by the *Owho* holder to maintain a link between the living and the ancestors. He is therefore both the eyes and the voice of the people, and this also earns him a lot of respect among the group.

Owho also designates a plant species of deuterium which grows and flourishes in different parts of Ikwerre. Confirming this fact, Elder ChijiokeWalia of Omudioga clan, in an oral interview (13/09/2023), stated that the *Owho* tree is located at a strategic place where it can always be identified without been tampered with. And thus it can neither be climbed nor cut down without specific rituals. He further posits that the branches of *Owho* tree which litter on the ground around it can be gathered and used for ritual purposes.

In another development, *OhnaWopurumWosu* in an oral interview (14/09/2023), on his part, affirms that *Owho-nu-ogwu* go together and complement their religious significance among the Ikwerre people. Hence, they often say “*NjigumOwho-nu-ogwu*”. In other words, *Owho-nu-ogwu* are closely bound together that one could hardly talk of one without the other.

Concerning *Ogwu*, Elder Imesie of Omagwa Town, in an oral interview (14/09/2023), said that *Ogwu* is the protective strength and it symbolizes innocence. *Ogwu* therefore represents a religious and cultural symbol of clear conscience, innocence and fair play. *Ogwu* consists of the moral laws of the Supreme Being (*Chiokike*), as made known to the people of Ikwerre in the original, universal revelation and the rules of social life built over the centuries and handed down through the people's oral traditions. In other words, *Ogwu* serves as antidote or amulet against all forms of evil. On the other hand, *Ogwu* is believed to identify with and stand on the side of the innocent to fight for him and also vindicate him in times of danger and calamity.

Owho-nu-ogwu are two different ritual symbols but complementary to each other. This simply means that the two work hand in hand for effective results. In his views, Eze Sir Edison Omeodu of Ndele

clan in an oral interview (12/09/2023), posited that *Owbo-nu-ogwu* look alike in structure for the fact that they are often used but the *Ogwu* symbol is smaller in size and can be represented by a small log of wood or any other symbol. He went further to say that the *Ogwu* symbols are smaller in size and popular when presented at public gathering. They could be a piece of wood, or any other material symbol which possess a material representation in different parts of Ikwerre clan but they look similar to the *Owbo* object. This simply means that he confirms the similarity of *Owbo-nu-ogwu* as obtained in other areas. *Owbo-nu-ogwu* are therefore, Ikwerre socio-religious symbols that serve various ritual purposes.

The Origin of *Owbo-nu-ogwu* among the Ikwerre

Owbo-nu-ogwu are believed to have originated from *Chiokike* (the creator) during creation. The *Owbotree* according to sir Chief Omeodu (12/09/2023), was one of the trees created and planted by God in anywhere it was found. He went further to say that the *Owbotree* is one of the forbidden trees that can be found in different parts of Ikwerre land. According to him, the tree is not always tampered with due to its ritual purposes. This accounts for why some individuals are believed to be unworthy to either touch or use it.

The *Owbotree* is usually respected among the Ikwerre such that it is neither cut down and used as firewood nor sold to the general public for any economic reason. In most cases, the fallen branches are left wherever the tree is found because the Ikwerre people attach much importance due to its religious functions.

This article centres on the typology of *Owbo-nu-ogwu*, deified symbols of justice in their cosmology. It also reflects on the socio-ethical relevance of *Owbo-nu-ogwu*, as agents of moral control in Ikwerre land. Chinua Achebe (1978:10), while writing in his book, "things fall apart" sees the core values and rites of the African traditional cultures and religious worship using Okonkwo's medicine house and shrine where he kept the wooden symbols of his personal god "*ofor*" (*Owbo*) in Ikwerre language and his ancestral spirits. He always worshipped them with sacrifices of kolanuts, food, palm wine and also offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his wives and children. In that same way, the Ikwerre people also pray with *Owbo-nu-ogwu* symbols to affirm their commitment and also confirm certain issues and principles that are in general interest of the society especially in their extempore prayers such as "*Elu le kasi, Ali le kasi, Nihinunjigum Owbo-nu-ogwu*", meaning the heaven and the earth should bear me witness because I hold *Owbo-nu-ogwu*, the symbols of justice.

In Ikwerre traditional religious setting, these symbols serve as one of the most important visible objects of worship. They embody both the moral and the religious values of the people of Ikwerre. In them, one sees the interplay between crime and justice, between what is highly religious and what is profane, between guilt and innocence, hence every Ikwerre man can never say anything without bringing in elements of sayings that involve these symbols. This has always influenced the life of the people believing that any action that negates these symbols spells doom in their lives. These symbols act as the objects of covenant between the people's will and that of the gods and the ancestors of the land. This article therefore, reveals to a large extent that these cultic symbols are means of social and moral control and as well the modes of their socio-moral control are quite revealing about the core values and rites of the Ikwerre people.

This article therefore, tries to focus on the generality of the rites associated with these symbols as the people's agents of socio-moral control. In other words, social and moral control may be seen as the application of normative prescription such as laws, customs, religion, human values and observations

in which the society regulates the activities of the individuals, groups, social organisations, with a view to achieving certain defined aims and objectives.

In the words of Dike (1986:14), sanction is always imposed when there is a breach of these regulatory norms and customs. It is important to note that many belief systems have been affected by human articulations and protuberances. Nature has also affected some of the people's worldviews including their actions when some of these developments occur and people begin to modify them as a way of life and attaching serious values to such developments and ensuring that they become useful to mankind, it becomes what may be seen as civilisations. In other words, it is important to note here that a people cannot accept every new influence in a hurry and survive it as a people.

Theoretical Framework

This article adopted the symbolic interactionism theory. This theory posits that one's self concept is created through the interpretation of the symbolic gestures, words, actions and appearances of others that are observed during social interactions. This perspective considers immediate social interactions to be the place where society exists. In this view, humans give meaning to their behaviours, events, objects and things. Symbolic interactionists study society through the interpretation of objects, events and behaviour by the members of that society. They assume that social order is constantly being negotiated and recreated through the interpretations of the people who give it meanings. This is a helpful construct to better understand differences that arise in interpretation of religious tenets or writings and other difficulties encountered in different religious circles. Using this framework, the people of Ikwerre in this article see these two cultic symbols as socio culturally constructed reality in which these sacred objects provide security and permanence for the society as long as its members realise that these cultic objects give meaning and relevance to that which they believe in. Furthermore, this perspective posits that meaning is constantly modified through social behaviour in order to better reflect "reality" as interpreted by its members. As a people interpret each other's behaviour, social bonds are formed (Anderson and Taylor, 2002).

Rites Associated with *Owho-nu-ogwu*

Before we talk about rites, it is important to talk about the people's religion. This particular religion has been handed down from one generation to the other which originated from the soil of the people, the people were born, nurtured and they grew in it, it is tolerant and accommodating, peaceful in nature, a non-missionary religion whose adherents were not converted but members of the society were born into it including the ancestors. It has no room for religious propaganda or bigotry. The tenets of this religion are written in the people's songs, myths, dances, pity sayings, etc. It has no written text but understood by those who care to know. Before the coming of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam, the traditional religion had sustained Africans (Ikwerre inclusive) for generations. As to rites and rituals associated with *Owho-nu-ogwu*, it is important to note that human beings and their lives are defined by rites, consciously or unconsciously, humans participate in the continuation of socially constructed actions based on a familiar or unfamiliar reason for the actions which enable them to journey through life endeavours, thus, there is no known religion without rites. These rites are in different dimensions such as social, creative-aesthetic, involving repetition and connection with the past.

The term "rite", therefore, refers to a form of religious expression. Rites are communal activities that occur when the individual celebrates relationship with the society. In understanding reality, and maintaining a relationship with it, Ikwerre express these experiences in the form of rites through the medium of *Owho-nu-ogwu* and other agencies.

At the base of rites lies myths which provide the theoretical background to the meaning of rites. Behind a rite lies the reality of a past event. Myths and rites associated with them are transferred from one generation to the other to ensure the handing over of traditions from one generation to the other. This article among others considers the types of *owbo-nu-ogwu* which the Ikwerre people use in their day to day ritual practices, and they are as follows;

i. *Owbo-nu-ogwukem*(*Owbo-nu-ogwu* of the individual Person)

This type of *Owbo* is possessed and owned by some male adults in the communities. Personal *Owbo* symbols are not transferrable even at the death of the owner. Personal *Owbo* is composed of a normal-sized segment of the branchlet of the *Owbotree* and it has no special design. In most cases, this type of *Owbo* can be commissioned by the chief priest of any deity or a particular *Owbo* holder and it can as well be abandoned at the death of its possessor. This particular *Owbo* symbol is usually kept at the private hall of the possessor (*Obo koro*) which is an apartment of the hall and it is usually brought out during prayers at “*Ali Ezi*” shrine, the family ancestral deity and sent back at the end of every prayer meeting.

ii. *Owbo-nu-ogwukeezi nu oro* (*Owbo-nu-ogwu* of the family)

This particular *Owbo* is kept and held by the *Okpara* (first son) of every family unit in Ikwerre land. Elder Thomas Ogbegbe of Aluu clan in oral interview (13/09/2023), confirms that the *Owbo-nu-ogwukeezi nu oro* is the sole hereditary staff of office of the head of the family. The next in line in the order of age in the family acquires this family *Owbo* at the demise of the incumbent and may not assume that office until the end of the mourning period which may take up to one full year as a mark of honour to the dead. The family *Owbo* therefore, symbolizes the authority of the *Okpara* (first son) in the family setting.

This particular *Owbo* symbol is kept at the family ancestral hall under the headship of *Okpara* (first son) and can only be brought out during family prayers by his permission. It is important to note here that if the first son is incapacitated, he may delegate his responsibilities to the next sub-ordinate who now performs his responsibilities. If the next in command grabs the *Owbo* without the permission of the possessor, the Ikwerre people refer to it as *Oghoowhonelu*, meaning that the person is taking the symbol by force which can lead to untimely death.

iii. *Owbo-nu-ogwukeagburu*(*Owbo-nu-ogwu* of the Lineage)

This particular *Owbo* represents the ancestors and is held by the head of the lineage or kindred at every level of social interaction and organizations. *Ohna* Ohnada Davidwecheonwu of Omagwa clan in an interview (13/09/2023), opines that this type of *Owbo* is normally inherited and kept by whoever is the eldest surviving male (*Nye ishigbukwaru*) member of the kindred. This *Owbo* serves as a symbol of unity and a force binding the people together as well as confirming the members of a particular lineage with a religious authority.

In Ikwerre traditional setting, the head of the lineage at every level of the indigenous social organization such as the family, the kindred, the village, the clan, etc. keeps the *Owbo* symbol which represents the ancestors and also serves at the respective levels as a symbol of unity and oneness. This particular type of *Owbo* is of great importance in most parts of Ikwerre land. The *Owbo* confers on the possessor a religio-political authority.

iv. *Owbo-nu-ogwukendiiche*(*Owbo-nu-ogwu* of the Ancestors)

In most parts of Ikwerre, the word *ndiiche* means the ancestors. According to Chief Eric Ow'honda of Ndele clan in an oral interview (13-09-2023), *Owbo-nu-ogwundiiche* serves as the spirit (*mmuo*) of

the ancestors. They stand as the symbolic physical presence of the ancestors among the living. *Owho-nu-ogwundiiche* therefore represents the staff of office which stands for justice, truth, uprightness etc., which can be inherited and reserved by the Okpara (first son) or whoever is the eldest surviving male member of the individual group like family, village, clan, kindred, etc. He further asserts that *Owho-nu-ogwu* of the ancestors in Ikwerre land is an encased *Owho-nu-ogwuobodo* (community staff) which is kept in the ancestral box (*Igbendiiche*), and cannot be exposed but kept sacred due to their relevance.

v. *Owho-nu-ogwukenyedibia* (*Owho-nu-ogwu* of the Medicine Man)

In his opinion, *Ohna* Jonathan Akpelu of Egbeda clan (14/09/2023), asserts that in Ikwerre land, *Owho-nu-ogwu Nyedibia* stands as the diviner's staff of authority, practitioners of certain prominent trades and chief priests of different dieties among the traditional Ikwerre possess *Owho-nu-ogwu* symbols as their title of legitimation and medium of communication between them and their spirit patrons. Thus, the traditional medicine men, diviners, rain markers, black smiths, wood carvers, scarification makers, teeth fillers even the sooth Sayers keep these symbols which go by the names of their respective professions such as *Owho-nu-ogwuAgunshi* (that of medicine), *Owho-nu-ogwuOgba Aha* (that of divination), etc. He goes further to say that the type of *Owho-nu-ogwu* one possesses determines what he practices such as *Owho-nu-ogwuOgba Aha* which goes with divination. For him, *Owho-nu-ogwu Aha* establishes a link between the possessor and the medicine world. He uses this *Owho-nu-ogwu* symbol to determine the particular medicine to be established and administered to any sick person.

vi. *Owho-nu-ogwuAgbara* (*Owho-nu-ogwu* of the Divinities)

According to *Ohna* Jonathan Akpelu of Egbeda clan, in an oral interview (14/09/2023), *Owho-nu-ogwuAgbara* is owned by the community with a wide range of different types on the accounts of the various communities, deities in Ikwerre land. *Ohna* Jonathan asserts that every deity in Ikwerre land possesses the *Owho-nu-ogwu* called *Owho-nu-ogwuAgbara*. It is kept in the custody of the chief priest who is the custodian of the deity's shrine. *OwhoAgbara* is jointly prepared by the chief priest and members of the cult of the concerned deity in Ikwerre land. There is that of *Amadioha* (the god of thunder and lightning), *Owhoali* (the earth goddess), *Owhoajokuji* (the yam goddess), *Owhoaliezi* (the family ancestral goddess), etc. In most cases, the *Owho* belonging to the earth goddess (*Ali*) is considered the highest in this class precisely on account of the great place of honour and importance of *Ali* in Ikwerre traditional religion.

Our major findings

1. In Ikwerre ritual network, *Owho-nu-ogwu* stand out as part of the most important ritual symbols for multifarious purposes ranging from socio-cultural to socio-religious contexts. Hence, there is hardly any traditional function the Ikwerre did without the help of *Owho-nu-ogwu*. Hence, they occupy the nucleus of the Ikwerre ritual networks. For the Ikwerre in particular, *Owho* is the power bestowed on anyone who leads. As the traditional symbol of authority, anyone who leads uses this sceptre to concretise his leadership position in the society. Such a person remains the mediator between the living and the dead ancestors.
2. In Ikwerre, only adult male members of the families, kindreds, villages and communities have the right to possess and use the symbolic sceptre except in areas where women are the priestesses of certain deities. It therefore, becomes a taboo for children to either touch or use it. Any of such cases must be corrected through purificatory rites by the victim's family. This is because the people hold their ancestors in high esteem as sacred beings and the *Owho*

sceptre seems as the abode of the spirits which must be handled by the authorised persons only to avoid desecration.

3. In Ikwerre society, *Owbo* is not worshipped as either a god or idol. It is not also seen as a charm. *Owbo* simply serves as a symbol or medium through which the people communicate with their respected ancestors. They also use it as a tool for maintaining peace, justice and fairness as well as fishing out and punishing miscreants in the communities. It therefore, serves as a deterrent. As a result, the people fear it as a result of its resultant consequences.
4. The presence of *Owbo-nu-ogwu* in Ikwerre traditional society is integral to her socio-cultural structure. It serves as a vital instrument for the classifications of persons, for the differentiation of roles and empowerment of public office holders. Matters relating to promulgation and enforcement of laws, customs, traditions and rituals as well as corruption were promptly handled with the *Owbo* to ensure and restore decency, harmony and mutual co-existence in the society.
5. *Owbo-nu-ogwu* is usually employed during traditional morning prayers (*Ogoowhootutu*) and making ritual sacrifices aimed at fostering the unity of the people as well as the link between the living and the ancestors. Also, in the events of any dispute, enmity, disagreement, quarrels, suspicion which may negatively affect the general welfare and progress of the family or community, they apply *Okwanriko* (ritual of eating together) with the agency of *Owbo-nu-ogwu*. This is because without *nriko* the people do not make merry together for the fear of poison and death.
6. In Ikwerre, *Owbo* is used basically in two ways, such as *ogoowhonda* (pronouncement of blessing with the sceptre) and *ogoowhoojoo* (pronouncement of curses with the sceptre). The former is used for invoking blessing from the ancestors when people do what the community likes while the latter is for invoking curses on deviant individuals. This agency of the *Owbo* helps in the promotion of good behaviour and condemnation of evil.
7. Naming ceremonies remain an unbroken practice among the Ikwerre people. In spite of misinterpretation of what naming stands for, it is still believed and practiced by the people with the use of the sceptre which motivates their desire to continue the family lineage that binds the living members of families with their ancestors together. This fulfils the human needs for remembrance and belongings.
8. In Ikwerre, ancestors are seen as essential link in a hierarchal chain of powers stretching from this world to the spirit world. Deceased ancestors remain close by as part of the family, sharing meals and maintaining interest in the family affairs just as before death. Yet, they are thought to have advanced mystical powers which enable them to communicate easily with both the family and God. Hence, they are seen as go-between or intermediaries.
9. The Ikwerre Christians demonstrate the reality and relationship between the ancestors and their living descendants in their beliefs in the reality of the communion of saints of which the saints who are also dead Christians are thought to be in heaven and thus acting as intermediaries between them and the Supreme Being (God).
10. In Ikwerre in particular, traditional marriages are usually consummated by the agency of *Owbo-nu-ogwu*. This is because *Owbo* is believed to have the capacity of assisting a man to

get children. Hence, any woman who was not able to bear children is often asked to offer sacrifices to the lineage *Owho* or ancestral *Owho*. Any child believed to have come or born after such sacrifice is called *NwoOwho* (*Owho's* son).

11. Presently, some Ikwerre people have given their lives to Christ through church programmes and seminars, but a good number of them still hold tenaciously to their traditional faith which makes the belief system to flourish even in recent times.

Recommendations

From the research, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Ikwerre people should establish the continuity of the institution of *Owho-nu-ogwu* usage since the ritual symbols are still very important and relevant. Modernity and Christianity should not be allowed and prohibited to replace and completely take over the functional role of *Owho-nu-ogwu* ritual symbolism, rather, they should be used side by side. That is, allowed to co-exist without one affecting the existence of the other.
2. *Owho-nu-ogwu* are unique and integral to the Ikwerre traditional religion and culture. Since culture they say is a people's way of life, identity and personhood, any attempt to disregard the culture of the people means to dispossess them of their essence. The Ikwerre people should try to appreciate and preserve their cultural heritage by upholding and practicing it because their destiny as a people is tied to it.
3. It is observed that the virtues of truth, justice and righteousness are irreplaceable in any given society and endeavour, hence they should be re-enthroned among the Ikwerre people so as to promote social stability and mutual co-existence.
4. Education as a veritable tool for information and should be utilised to sensitize the Ikwerre people of the need to preserve and protect their cultural heritage which is at the brink of total collapse as well as secure their relationship with the Supreme Being.
5. Life in its entirety is dynamic, hence, every aspect of it necessarily experiences change as both a catalyst and a constant. There are some areas of traditional Ikwerre religion that has outlived their relevance in view of the demands of the contemporary societies. Hence, there should be a crucial review and modification to update them with the status quo.
6. The sense of consanguinity and affinity that characterised the Ikwerre life prior to the advent of Christianity and modernity should be restored as a matter of fact and necessity. Ikwerre Christians and non-Christians alike should reunite and relate together without allowing anything to disintegrate them irreparably since it is said that "united we stand but divided we fall". They should uphold the unity sense of belonging which both the *Owho* and Bible propagate.
7. Every household should see it as a point of duty to instill discipline and fear in their wards believing that the *Owho* can as well kill anyone found wanting in line with the Christian commandments.
8. Government should institutionalize *Owho-nu-ogwu* checks for moral control from the national to the local government levels.

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