



Rites Associated with Owbo-nu-ogwu (Deified Symbols of Justice) in Ikwerre of Niger Delta

Imoh, Sydney Chigonum (Ph.D.)

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies Faculty of Humanities University of Port Harcourt
Email: sydneyimoh@yahoo.com, sydney.imoh@uniport.edu.ng, Tel: 08038577709

Abstract

Owbo-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 rites associated with these symbols in Ikwerre religious thought. The article adopted the symbolic interactionism theory as its frame work 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:

Owbo-nu-ogwu, Deified Symbols, Justice, Rites 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 Aluu clan (27-08-2019), *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 Chijioke Walia of Omudioga clan, in an oral interview (28-08-2019), 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, *Ohna* Wopurum Wosu in an oral interview (28-08-2019), 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 (29-08-2019), 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 (16-03-2020), posited that *Owho-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 *Owho* object. This simply means that he confirms the similarity of *Owho-nu-ogwu* as obtained in other areas. *Owho-nu-ogwu* are therefore, Ikwerre socio-religious symbols that serve various ritual purposes.

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

Owho-nu-ogwu are believed to have originated from *Chiokike* (the creator) during creation. The *Owho* tree according to sir Chief Omeodu (16-03-2020), was one of the trees created and planted by God in anywhere it was found. He went further to say that the *Owho* tree 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 *Owho* tree 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 rites associated with *Owho-nu-ogwu*, deified symbols of justice in their cosmology. It reflects on the socio-ethical rites of *Owho-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*”(*Owho*) 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 *Owho-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, Nihinu njigum Owho-nu-ogwu*, meaning the heaven and the earth should bear me witness because I hold *Owho-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. Some of these rites are associated with different concepts such as the following:

1. *Olulu Nzi nu Nweke* (Marriage Rites)

In Ikwerre, marriage is a customary activity or rite especially among mature men and women who have reached the age of puberty. It is the union of a man and a woman as husband and wife/wives for the purpose of establishing a home. It is a sacred institution which is valued for its beauty and believed to be an affair of unity between individuals and communities meaning that marriages are family affairs rather than public affairs. Hence, Mbiti (1973) in his book “Love and Marriage in Africa”, observes that:

Marriage is an existing and beautiful dimension whereby the mystery of life is propagated and handed down. It follows from the dimensions of sex since without sex, there is no propagation of human life. Human society throughout the world recognises the procreation of children as a supreme purpose in marriage. Both churches and African traditional societies emphasised the importance of marriage. It is on the creative dimension of marriage that one in fact becomes co-creator with God. In procreation, one is fostering God’s creative work in the world, (Mbiti, 1973:42).

For the vitality of every marriage in Ikwerre, some laid down procedures need to be fulfilled. When a man finds a woman to marry and both of them agree (*okwerikota*), he goes to inform his parents while the would be wife does the same. The consent for the progress of marriage plans according to Eze Victor Wehuche (02-08-23), could be denied on the following reasons:

- a. That the intending spouses are blood relations and cannot marry.
- b. That either of the families has bad family records of criminality.
- c. That there is a history of premature death in such family.
- d. That the family has bad records of abominable diseases.
- e. That the family is known for barrenness or social disorder.
- f. There may be age difference between spouses.
- g. That the family has a record of *osu* (cast system).

It therefore becomes imperative for both families to reinvestigate these conditions to ensure their children do not enter into such misery in the name of marriage. As soon as the signal is clear, the marriage rites are said to commence such as the following:

i. Inquiry Rites (*Mmaya Ojiji*)

This is the first stage of wine carrying associated with marriage. The moment the two families have given their consent in principle, the next stage is for the parents of the man to visit the woman’s family with a jar of palm wine and a bottle of local gin to announce their intention via local proverbs and riddles like *onweru mkpirinku ayi huru nizo, ayi choru omaru nye nwea*, (there is a palm nut we saw on the road, we have come to know the owner). The two families continue to crack jokes until the drinks are consumed. At this stage, the groom’s family makes their identity known as well as their intentions, it gives the bride’s family the opportunity to carry out their own investigations before the commencement of marriage rites. This particular visit takes place four times with different items on the list until the visits are completed. It is referred to as *obuzu mmaya abali ano*. (Completion of four days drinks).

ii. Rite of returning of empty calabash of palm wine (*obula ololo mmaya*).

This is the next stage in the marriage negotiations after the fourth visit. At this stage, the would-be bride is told to make an open declaration before his suitor. This exercise is accompanied with some practical acts by the bride such as coming to identify who her groom is before the entire people. The speaker whom the family has appointed then asks the bride if the family should go ahead and take whatever her suitor presents. If she answers in affirmation, then everyone present is free to eat and drink what is presented before them. At this point, the suitor's relations would hand over that particular jar of wine to the bride. She is then expected to return the jar or calabash to the groom's family the same day where she passes the night and returns to her parents the next day. If the bride does not intend to marry the suitor after all, then she would on the process of returning the empty jar keep on any nearby road leading to her suitor's place. She may decide not to even return at all, go to her maternal place to make her intentions known. This means that she is no longer interested in the marriage and her suitor's family will not go to them anymore. This clearly indicates that marriage is not a thing to be rushed over during these stages of negotiations based on the system of acceptance and rejection. This system signifies maturity in the act of acceptance since an open refusal will hurt the feelings of the suitor and bring public shame to them.

iii. Rite of payment of bride price (*oku ishiaku*)

One prominent evidence to show that the would-be brides relations have accepted the marriage proposal is by sending the lists comprising all that must be paid as the bride price, and the bride prices vary from community to community and family to family, as may be deemed necessary. In this case, the community of *Omunda* (kindred) has a specific amount before the family of the bride to be settled.

According to Mrs. Eberechi Nwanyanwu Ihunwo of Rumuji in oral interview (04-04-2020), the marriage list is presented in parts. The first part is for the *Omunda* (kindred), the suitor and his relatives now have the list according to the agreed sum. The bride's parents money is charged differently and mostly not in the open. It is usually done indoors because it is a private affair. The second part of the list is that of the women. The suitor is made to present all that are needed including that of the bride's mother. All items needed are paid to avoid unnecessary statements from different angles before the bride finally moves into her husband's house. For the bride's mother, all her items are usually presented in a basin and brought for inspection by her fellow women. For the bride's father, the suitor may promise to pay on a future date just to pave way for the women to take their shares because it is very important. Reasons being that he must be called upon to do one or two things in the family when his attentions are needed especially during festive periods. Please note that at the stage of negotiation, foods and drinks are served with married men and women clustering round the bride's mother singing as a sign of happiness and merriment at the end of which everyone vacates.

iv. Rite of four days visit (*Ije abali ano*)

After the payment of the bride price, the wife in question follows her suitor to his house and spends four days. Please note that in Ikwerre, there is no room created for divorce, hence every marriage is sealed with all the rituals being performed to avoid mishap in the future. The bride is usually warned to remain with her husband and possibly advised to report any form of misconduct to her parents and not to return completely. This particular rite is necessary because the bride uses the four days to familiarise herself and unite with members of the family before coming back in view of her four days experience. While this is done, the groom also observes the conduct of the bride and takes his last decision. The bride can as well extend her days if she decides based on her experience because no law stops her from doing so.

v. The ceremony of the big wine (*Mmemme nmaya ku*)

According to Mrs. Eberechi Ihunwo, this forms the last part and most exciting of all the marriage rites in Ikwerre land. This involves everybody in the family or clan both the married and the unmarried friends far and near are usually invited to grace this final stage of the marriage. At the return of the bride from her four days visit, she now makes her intentions known to her parents. If her intentions and experience are positive, the parents now inform her husband to come over and take the final information which informs the ceremony of the big wine. If the reverse is the case, the parents are told to return all the charges incurred during the previous visits including the bride price. On the appointed day, everybody in the family including the suitor's friends and well-wishes would accompany the suitor to the place with many jars of palm wine and gins to show love. This journey is led by the suitor's family *Owbo-nu-ogwu* title holder as a symbol of an ancestral authority thereby guaranteeing truth, love and faithfulness in the marriage agreement. The bride also does the same thing with her *Owbo* holder in attendance. The presence of the *Owbo* holders indicates that the marriage is not complete without any seal of agreement and the blessings of the ancestors. Traditional dances are invited with foods and drinks available to every person present at the ceremony. The bride's father shows his solidarity and love by sharing some of the items provided to members of his kindred as it is believed that a child does not only belong to his or her parents but everyone hence all matters relating to marriage, child birth and family upbringing and death are every one's responsibility.

Mrs. Ihunwo asserts that *Mmayaku* (big wine), is hardly what it used to be in recent times hence the bride price now in Ikwerre is known as *Ishiaku* (major price). In some families, the bride price is usually kept out of public view as the family may decide to avoid publicity and in most cases especially in wealthy homes, the suitor may not be told to pay a specific amount provided that both spouses live in peace with members of their families. It is important to note here that some families demand higher amounts based on the financial position of the suitor and this singular act has kept some young ladies out of marriage because those who cannot afford such amount usually go for the cheaper ones. On the other hand, some families try to consider the suitors assistance to members of the bride's family hence they limit their charges to what could be afforded by the groom in expectation that in the near future, the man would be invited to take part in family affairs and also contribute to the overall development of their families especially in financial matters. This accounts for this slogan "*Balu aa nwere olu aa*", meaning that marriage is a continuous venture.

vi *Otu ime* (Pregnancy Rites)

Mrs. Eberechi Ihunwo asserts that in Ikwerre land, no marriage union is complete without the presence of a child or children because it is very important for spouses to have children after the marriage has been blessed by both the gods, the ancestors and the living. Pregnancy rites are usually acceptable as necessary pre-conditions of safe delivery. According to her, pregnancy rites involve a traditional period between conceptions and child birth, so the ceremonies of pregnancy and child birth generally constitute a complex whole. In pregnancy rituals, there are many other rites whose purpose is to facilitate birth or to protect the lives of the mother and child from the evil forces against the wishes of the people. The most important and widespread pregnancy ritual in Ikwerre land is the *Ogba njije* rite (clothing). This rite according to her, takes place within the first two months of pregnancy which is in fact the beginning of the marriage festival which is entirely different from the *Olulu nwere* (marriage) festival which involves the payment and the agreement aspects of the marriage. Usually, a newly married woman does not consider herself married or accepted in her new home and probably settled in such home until she gives birth to a child.

This particular pregnancy rite has features of rites of incorporation onto the full status of womanhood, as well the new bride who has entered into her husband's family as a married and full-fledged wife and expectant mother. As soon as it is noticed that the woman has conceived, the husband and members of his family would consult a diviner to find out how the pregnancy can be preserved and also enquire if the rite can be performed. The rite which involves other rites takes place within the first three to four months of the pregnancy which involves the rites of smearing the body of the woman with chalk centering around the husband's home and outing ceremony to the market, centering around the market and the children and the ancestors are called upon during these rites. The reasons for the performance of all these rites were basically to ensure that the ancestor who was to re-incarnate arrived in the way and day acceptable to the family as well as to ensure that the child in the womb is properly placed and in good condition. These rites are necessary to preserve the pregnancy and ensure safe delivery. The diviner who names the sacrificial items such as goat, hen, dried fish, yam etc., performs the rites with his *Owho-nu-ogwu* symbolic sceptre and promises the family of good fortunes. Please note that all rites are performed on mostly *Nkwo* and *Irie* days as such days are presumed to be exclusively for the gods and the ancestors. At the end of these rites, the wife is then given a set of new wrappers as a sign of acceptance in her new home.

vii. *Omu nwo* (Birth Rites)

Mrs. Eberechi Ihunwo maintains that in Ikwerre and other neighbouring communities, there is the believe that *Owho-nu-ogwu* symbolic sceptre has a major role to play in the birth of a child. They believe that the sceptre has the capacity in assisting a man to get children. A woman who is unable to bear children is often told to offer sacrifice to the lineage *Owho*, and any child believed to have come or born after sacrificing to the sceptre is named *Nwo owho* (*Owho's* son). She asserts that in Ikwerre traditional marriage contract, the family allows a man to marry more than one wife in the event of a childless marriage.

The rituals which are performed at the birth of a child in most cases are very few in some places. As labour sets in, the head of the family may take a yam seedling with which he makes or draws a straight line from the woman's head to her abdomen saying *Chiokike* (God the creator) and *Ali* (earth goddess), please help this woman to deliver in peace. He may decide to go to the family ancestral shrine to repeat the same prayer, after then he cuts the yam into pieces and lays them on the ground and calls on *Ali* the earth deity to communicate his prayers to the Supreme Being. The straight line on the woman's abdomen is a symbol of straightness of the child coming to the family without any form of difficulty. The coming of the new baby is welcomed with shouts of joy and happiness by the female traditional birth attendants with the husband being eager to know the sex of the child. The moment the sex is determined, he shouts with joy as well, showing that he is man enough.

During child birth with traditional birth attendants, normal delivery is usually welcomed by the child's cry which serves as a signal that the baby is very much alive. She observes that from the very first time of delivery, the baby must run the gauntlet of all manners of perils, in most cases, it is to let the child cry out. In many parts of Ikwerre land, if the child fails to cry out at birth, it forfeits its life, the omission is usually seen as evil omen. The outburst of the new born baby raises hope and joy in the hearts of the expectant and awaiting parents and members of their family while the reverse is always the case in a lifeless one.

After a normal delivery, the mother of the new child and her baby are secluded in her hut for seven days to pave way for the naming ceremony followed by twenty eight days or three market weeks for the *Omungwo* (taking away by her mother) rite. The end of this rite is marked by some purification

accompanied by some feasting. First, the *Ada* (eldest sister) of the husband takes a yam and waves over the head of the new baby and the mother and prays with it. In her prayer, she says “may everything which comes with the birth of a new baby be pleasant in the family” and everyone answers Amen. She then throws the yam on the ground and waves the pot containing the palm wine around the heads of all the women around and says “may you all conceive and bring us more children the next time you sleep with your husbands so that we may all enjoy many similar feasts” and everyone says Amen.

Mrs. Ihunwo asserts that in some families, the children in the neighbourhood come around with pots and plates filled with yam paper soup (*Okorogbo*), and take outside the compound to eat with other children. This rite is basically to induce the ancestors to reincarnate. After this rite, the woman is said to be free to move about freely and do other things she wants such as washing, birthing the baby and cooking. During the period of *Omungwo*, the mother is not allowed to birth the baby, instead, she allows the older ones to do the work to enable them take care of certain features such as straightening the nose, the head, the hands, the legs, etc. The mother can only be allowed to watch them do it for her first baby whom she learns from for future child births. At the end of these events, the owbo sceptre is used to strengthen these rituals.

viii. Oguu nwo ahua (Naming Ceremonies)

Mrs. Ihunwo in oral interview (04-04-2020), opines that in some Ikwerre areas, the rite of naming the child is a rite of incorporation and it follows the seclusion stage unlike the seven days period. This ceremony or rite is called *Opuya nu omungwo* (coming out of child birth). According to her, the father of the child first of all, consults the diviner to know which particular ancestor reincarnated in the child, his name and if he is subject to some prohibitions. If no trace of reincarnation is found or established, the paternal grandfather is obliged to give the child a name of his choice. If it has any trace to the dead ancestors or their late grandfather, the child may be given a name such as *Ndamzi*, (my father lives), in the case of a man and *Nnenne* (mother's mother) for a woman. This rite is performed by the head of the family in the presence of all. First is the primary ritual of breaking the kolanuts, accompanied by prayers to the Supreme Being, the deities and the ancestors for long life for the child and the mother. At this stage, the child is taken outside with some water being poured on the roof of the house and is allowed to drip on the child making him or her strong in the affairs of the society.

If the child is a boy, the father raises his hands upwards and prays for him to grow up strong. He says, “you will withstand the wetness of the rain, and the heat of the sun, listen to what your mother tells you, take a hoe and knife and go to the farm, for so do we earn our living” and everyone says Amen. The father then looks at the child and calls out his name while explaining its meaning in a prayer. *Ndamzi* (my father lives), “may you continue to prosper in life as before and bring good fortunes to your parents, and may long life be yours in all your endeavours”, all says Amen.

At this point, other people may carry the child and present gifts to him with his name being mentioned at the ceremony. Participants at the ceremony may include members of both the nuclear and extended families.

ix. Oba otu (Initiatory Rites)

Concerning the rites of initiations, Gennep (1960:11), asserts that it would be better to stop calling the rites of initiation as “puberty rites”. I would by no means deny that some people in some places perform rites of physiological puberty which in rare instances coincide with initiatory rites. Gennep therefore makes a very useful and fundamental distinction between puberty rites and initiatory rites.

For him, the former is a life crises rite while the latter is initiation into different types and stages of voluntary societies – totemic groups or secret societies. He went further to distinguish between the physical puberty and the social puberty (Gennep 1960:65). For him, puberty rites celebrate transition into social puberty and this may take place long before or after the attainment of physical puberty.

Given these different dimensions, Metuh (1987:185), remarks that the term initiation rites are often erroneously taken or refer exclusively to rites which mark the passage from childhood to adulthood or life, or what has been called puberty rites. Commenting on physical puberty and social puberty according to Gennep, Metuh (1987:193), posits for physical puberty:

Physical changes associated with puberty like swelling of the breasts, the appearance of pubic hair, the first menstrual flow in girls and changes in voices, growth of a beard and pubic hair in boys, show at different times in different individuals.

In either case, it is the society that decides when these rituals must take place and in some cases they take place before or long after puberty. Metuh (1987:199), further asserts that on social puberty:

They are rites which mark change from passive to active membership in the society with the accompanying privileges and obligations. During these rites, candidates are taught the implications of community life, that is, living together, obedience to elders, public spiritedness, endurance and entrusting with secrets of the esoteric traditions and love of the group.

In Ikwerre tradition, one could say that the Ikwerre have puberty rites both for the boys and the girls. However, like many other African peoples, they do have rites of initiation of boys into secret societies. These rites are called *Obaa otu* (initiation into groups) which begins from the early stage of puberty to adulthood. It is against this background that Mbiti (1969:121), observes that the great significance of these rites is to introduce the candidates to adult life. In Ikwerre, such candidates are now allowed to share in full the privileges and duties of the community they find themselves. They enter into the state of responsibility, they inherit new rites and new obligations are expected of them by the society.

In Ikwerre, these rites prepare young people in matters of sexual life, marriage, procreation and responsibilities in the family. They are henceforth allowed to shed their blood for their community and to plant their biological seeds so that the next generation can begin to arrive. In Ikwerre society, since adulthood implies grave responsibility and role playing for the on-going of the society. The occasion of the rites offers an opportunity for the individual to learn something or more of his responsibilities and the mythological origin of his clan. It is also an occasion for society to ritually accept the young adults into the society in a never to be forgotten experience of his initiation. In other words, initiation rites therefore graduate an individual to the full pedigree of responsibility in the society. For example, we have the *Ogbaa* rite in Ozuaha Town in Ikwerre Local Government Area of Rivers State, the *Ikoro* dance of Orogbum, etc.

x. *Oli izu* (Funeral Rites)

According to Eze Dr. G.B. Odum in an oral interview (05-04-2020), the type of funeral rites one is given at death depends on how one died and on one's age, sex, and status in the society or community he or she comes from. Death after a ripe old age is regarded and considered a good death. Whilst death before this age, death by accident or death by detestable illness like leprosy, small pox, falling

from palm tree, suicide is seen as bad death. The corpse of the dead person is hurriedly disposed of and no funeral rites as such may be given or take place until after an elaborate purification ceremony is conducted. Hence, in this case, a distinction must be made between death rites and funeral rites.

The sole purpose of the funeral rites is to assure and ensure that the deceased gets an entrance to the spirit world since death for the Africans, Ikwerre in particular means going home. It is therefore a rite of passage when a person dies, people usually say *Onwunam* meaning he has died or left. Every effort must be made to ensure that the dead gets to the house or goes home peacefully. For a man who had died a good death, this is only possible when all the necessary funeral rites have been completed. Before the funeral, the body of the deceased is symbolically prepared for its journey to the spirit world or land by undergoing a ritual washing or ablution with water and anointing with camwood oil. A dog is killed and its blood allowed to drop into his eyes to enable the dead to see clearly and fearlessly during the journey because the dog is a fearless animal, and this ritual is called *Ogbu nkita anya* (killing of brave dog) in Ikwerre ritual parlance.

During this ritual exercise, a ram or a he-goat is also strangled by any man whom the deceased may choose through divination. This goes alongside the killing of fowl with its head being roasted with yam for purification of the body of the deceased. At the end of this exercise, the next in command steps aside and makes public declaration of taking over the headship of the family or clan and goes home with his two eyes closed until the next day.

This particular funeral rite demonstrates the close bond between the visible and the invisible worlds in an essentially religious worldview. The rites are designed to send the deceased home where he now belongs and this makes it possible for the living to continue to communicate with him as a living dead. In most cases, these rites are seen as re-enactments of the paradigmatic models set by the divine beings, as well as the actualisation of the divine order which has been recognised and really comprehended by past generations. In other words, these rites are really different ways of expressing the same fact – the rites of passage celebrate the belief that divine intervention shapes the course of human socio-biological development. It is pertinent to note here that *Owbo-nu-ogwu* symbolic sceptre plays a prominent role here because it is mostly laid on the ground for these rites to be performed and any abnormality is visited with signs of misfortune such as the sudden appearance of a two headed snake (*Mkpurumkpu* in Ikwerre dialect).

Our major findings

1. In Ikwerre ritual network, *Owbo-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 *Owbo-nu-ogwu*. Hence, they occupy the nucleus of the Ikwerre ritual networks. For the Ikwerre in particular, *Owbo* 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 *Owbo*

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

3. In Ikwerre society, *Owho* is not worshipped as either a god or idol. It is not also seen as a charm. *Owho* 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 *Owho-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 *Owho* to ensure and restore decency, harmony and mutual co-existence in the society.
5. *Owho-nu-ogwu* is usually employed during traditional morning prayers (*Ogo owho otutu*) 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 *Okwa nriko* (ritual of eating together) with the agency of *Owho-nu-ogwu*. This is because without *nriko* the people do not make merry together for the fear of poison and death.
6. In Ikwerre, *Owho* is used basically in two ways, such as *ogo owho ndu* (pronouncement of blessing with the sceptre) and *ogo owho ojoo* (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 *Owho* 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 *Owho-nu-ogwu*. This is because *Owho* 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* as checks for moral control from the national to the local government levels.

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