Book Review
Cultural Symbols: The Christian Perspective
Introspecting the Symbols of *Ofo*, *Ogu* and *Ikenga* in Igbo Tradition through Biblical Perspectives for Deeper Reflection and Evangelical Action

By

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A work of theorem at an auspicious time, *Cultural Symbols: the Christian Perspective,* is the latest contribution to the discourse on cultural anthropology. A critical analysis of the various cultural and religious symbols operative in many cultures and religions and what the attitude of a Christian should be towards these symbols in his/her practice of true Christian faith, form the main thrust of this great work.

This book responds to the standing challenges to the African religious institutions and leaders to find a viable and original conceptual understanding of cultural symbols and how to use this knowledge to advance the propagation of the gospel truth towards genuine conversion of African people [especially the Igbos]. This is because many professing Christians today are yet to get abreast on the significance of many cultural symbols and what their responses to these symbols should be. This book is revelatory and apt in answering most probing questions in this regard.

Nwaorgu, in this piece tried to distinguish symbolically, linguistically, historically, mathematically, sociologically, anthropologically and religiously two major dimensions of culture: material culture and immaterial culture. To him, material culture is that which can be objectified, handled or seen, such as artifacts, monument, icons and unsculptured symbols like un-carved ofo, life ikenga and others. These are products of immaterial culture of the people. All put together- material and immaterial- form the people's way of life.

The three major cultural symbols that ran through the book are 'ofo', 'ogu', 'ikenga', among other symbols. The word 'ofo' is very familiar in Igbo world view, cosmology and ethos. It is a sacred cultural symbol of truth, justice, law and authority. Ofo is viewed as the core and embodiment of traditional Igbo socio – religious culture (p. 51).

Nwaogu, noted that for several generations, "ofo and ogu" provided the Igbos a unified system of worship prior to the advent of the Christian missionaries. Ofo takes its origin from the cultural life of the Igbos. The religious quality of ofo, underscores the assumption that man is nothing else but what he makes of himself and his socio-cultural milieu. To the Igbos, ofo became a way of existence, aimed at ensuring social coherence, orderliness and justice, at a time when the traditional religious practices had a strong influence on the people.

The author also identified the political instrumentalization of the ofo symbol. He said that ofo is the direct symbol of staff of office, Igbo identity of headship, power and authority. It is also a moral agent and the Igbo philosophical world-view for "moral code." (p. 24). It has both spiritual, legal, social and psychological connotations and implications to the people.

Through the use of 'ofo na ogu' the Igbos maintain a unified system of worship. He said that in Igbo cosmology, ofo established ogu, while ogu helps ofo to act and function (p. 195). They are embedded in each other. What do Ikenga and ofo stand for? Are they deities?

Nwaorgu, in his attempt tried to explain that Ikenga is viewed as the god of personal strength and achievement to which any traditional minded forbearers attributed their successes in various realms of endevour. Although the Ikenga symbol cuts across all Igbo speaking area and even beyond, the author said that its structural representation is idolatrous. To him for instance, the cross and Ikenga do not have the same meaning and cannot (p. 236).

All the attempts Nwaorgu made through the wealth of data and information in this work is to decode the implications of ofo, ogu and ikenga as religio-political

and cultural symbols in Igbo land and their relationship and differences from other religious symbols namely, Christianity.

From a scholastic framework, Nwaorgu, explained philosophically, the fundamental meaning and essence of these symbols. He equally argued, addressed and deducted from a didactic approach both historical and contextual dimensions.

The critical analysis of ofo, ogu and Ikenga raises more questions than it answers. One, how does ofo practice fit in or not into the Christian doctrine of our time? Two, how does one distinguish between what is external idolatry/fetish and what is still viable in ofo? Three, can one mix ofo with the gospel or blend Christianity with traditional religion without getting a corrupt form of Christianity?

The candid attempt by the author to address these questions form a long discourse in his outline where he finally pitched his stand as a pastor and condemned without equivocation the practice of 'ofoism' or any form of blend of traditional religion and Christianity. This is indeed a master- stroke.

This book is broadly divided into thirteen (13) chapters and well articulated sub-headings which dealt explicably on the issues of cultural symbols. In fact through an exhaustive examination of prior works on this subject matter, Nwaorgu, did a thorough re-examination of the concepts and finally pitched his tent by asserting his position on the issue under discussion.

In chapter one, the author discussed the philosophy of cultural symbols. Through interviews and evidences obtained from the actual users, the author established that ofo carries the political symbolism of office, Igbo identity of headship, ritual power and authority, moral symbolism of moral code and agent, spiritual symbolism of Igbo god of truth, justice, righteousness and fair play; legal symbolism of the justice of the community, material constitution, mediator between the spirits and the diviner of crime, social symbolism of unity and discrimination, mathematical symbolism of tree diagrams, linguistic symbolism of semantics and scriptural symbolism of idolism.

The author distinguished the differences between signs and symbols by saying that, "signs merely point to something, whereas the symbols direct our manner of thinking about an object (p. 2). He did not fail to note the ambivalence nature of cultural symbols, while identifying various symbols that existed even outside Igbo society and their meanings.

In the following chapters, two, three and four, the author went into details and indeed more than many who have discussed these issues before him. He took time to trace the origin and classification of cultural symbols. He said "the origin of most cultural symbols are not clearly known but some dated back to antiquity" (p. 30). Their origins are broadly classified into two: autochthonous origin and exotic origin. He probed in these chapters in detail the various aspects of ofo, kolanut [oji], Edan ogboni, earth cult staff of the ogbonis and others. He equally discussed the kolanut: presentation, breaking, lobes, colour, slicing and symbolic nature. The various types of ofo were also classified in chapter three which include: the tangible, the natural ofo, the female ofo tree, communal ofo, lineage ofo, ancestral ofo, kindred ofo among many others, without failing to say what these ofo mean to the various groups identified with it.

In chapter five Nwaorgu, unraveled explicitly the mystery behind the ofo and Edan Ogboni symbols in the area of traditional initiation ceremony into the ofo cult. Direct or willful initiation into ofo includes commissioning of a new ofo or the ritual cleansing of the ofo, re-activation of the ofo and the rite of carrying ofo (p. 103).

Chapters six and seven highlighted the purpose and principles of ofo in Igboland. The author quoted Mbonu Ojike, by saying that, "the use of the ofo among Africans parallels the Christian use of the Bible" (p. 125). Ofo has various functions varying from social, political, moral, and economic purposes. Among these functions Nwaorgu, said that the principal function of ofo in Igboland is that it serves as a medium of communication between man and the transcendent.

On the principle, the author describes and suggests that the reality of the rules guiding the general use of ofo, herein called nso ofo" (p. 138). To him ofo is a being, for it to be associated with nso [sacred prohibition]. He noted that ofo is either a

deity or a spirit contrary to the views of those who deny the deism of ofo. The Igbos believe that nso are essentially religious rules associated with spiritual beings.

What are the practice and duties of ofo holders? This is the main thrust of chapter eight of this book. The whole duties of ofo holder were religiously treated here. "In general, Igbo societies were not controlled in the past by any central authority. The village republican system of socio-political organization was more common and universal throughout the Igbo land than the monarchical system. The author said the ofo holders have the duty of administrating their communities, families, villages, clans or kindred, as each of these groups has an ofo holder. They serve as political leaders in Igbo socio-cultural setting" (p. 148).

Meanwhile chapter nine discusses the death and funeral rites for ofo holders. Usually, before an ofo holder dies, his lineage ofo is ritualistically transferred to the second rightful person to him in the lineage to hold temporarily. "At death, efforts are made to ensure that the ofo holder through funeral rites observances reaches home peacefully" (p. 164). The author noted three phases of funeral, such as "death rites, tribunal for final burial and final burial rites" (p. 164), which were designed and must be observed to give befitting funeral rites for easy passage to the deceased.

The author in chapter ten, asked several penitent and heart-searching questions like: is ofo the problem with ndi Igbo? Is ofo idolatrous? Is ofo a deity (muo) or an idol? Is an ofo holder infallible or artisan [dibia] an idolater? He however, attempted an answer to these questions. Ofo plays a functional and dysfunctional roles of cursing and blessing, protecting and destroying, unity and disunity.

Nwaorgu said that is the symbolic instrument of discrimination between free born [diala] and outcast [osu]. To him the final solution to the osu caste system is neither "igopu osu" [ritual de-consecration] nor, "igbandu" [reintegration into the community], but the spiritual abolition of the ofo system and the genuine conversation of the Igbo.

In the final chapters eleven, twelve and thirteen, the author went further to proffer solutions to the questions already asked. But he did well to note in chapter eleven that ogu, in Igbo land is a symbolic instrument of innocence and clear conscience. He did not fail to examine the Biblical solution to the identified trado/socio-cultural ideologies by placing side by side the Biblical implications of these symbols and why they must be rejected by Christians. He equally, suggested various deliverance prayers that should be conducted for ofo holders and even communities.

Finally in chapter thirteen, Nwaorgu showed the symbolism of ikenga from several perspectives and a close relationship between ofo, ogu, and ikenga, using Venn diagram. The intersection of these symbols is the set of virtues in "ofoism. If ofo and ogu are inseparable and work together like siamese twins as ofo and ikenga, it then means that ofo, ogu and ikenga are inseparable.

This book did not only analyse the various aspects of cultural symbols but also brought them into biblical perspective. The author further asked, should ofo and ogu be viewed by Christians the way it is seen by the traditional Igbo society? By implication what should be the attitude of Christians on ofo, ogu, ikenga and others- that of acceptance or rejection? This movement of the author into the delicate area will equally move this review to another level of discovering the strength and weakness of the book based on the issues raised by the author and his own view-point as a pastor.

Critical Analysis and Conclusion

This book, *Cultural Symbols: The Christian Perspective,* succeeds in its true revelation of the mysteries behind ofoism. It is an eye opener on everything that is related to cultural symbols. And as such, a veritable instrument for radical evangelization of Africa and Igbo land in particular.

The salient way through which the author identified the relationship between the major cultural symbols of ofo, ogu and ikenga is a master- stroke. This equally accounts for the author's use of his mathematical and scientific knowledge in describing and clarifying his points. It is indeed a welcome development. On this

aspect, the author distinguished himself greatly from previous researchers on this subject matter. The book is really a product of an in-depth study.

The separation of ofo and Christian religion is part of the strength of this book. His frank and clarion call for total rejection of ofo in all forms, to avoid syncretism, distinguished him as renowned and seasoned man of God.

However, I did not quite agree with the author that "ofo is the problem with Ndigbo." Many nations still do not believe in the Christian religion and yet are prosperous in political, economic and scientific know-how. Majority of Igbo communities which have embraced Christianity and discarded ofoism are yet to come to grips with modern development. That is if the problem the author referred to here is that of development. So to me ofoism is not the problem with Ndigbo.

Nwaorgu is yet to answer the question of the "why ofo is still upheld and efficacious by many communities, irrespective of the intimidating presence of Christianity? Does it mean that Christian religion has not really penetrated the minds of the people or that it lacked certain qualities that do not satisfy the religions yearnings of the some practioners of ofoism. This is what the author should try to address in his next edition.

The book was not properly structured. There were lots of dis-jointed and improper articulations of thoughts in the table of contents. For instance his discussion of ikenga should have been done in chapter twelve [12] while chapter thirteen should have discussed his personal views and not vice versa. It is equally, wrong for the author to place one of the forewords at the last page of the book {Or do we describe this as *backword*}. This error should be checked in subsequent edition.

To me, it is a big omission for a book of this nature to start without introduction. The author should check this in the next edition. An introduction would have given the reader a clearer understanding of the author's objective and a general over-view of the book.

The book did not give much room for dialogue between ofoism and Christianity. Dialogue here supposes to mean an encounter between ofoism and Christianity.

Here meaning and harmony are sought in diversity of ideas and representations. All that Nwaorgu did was an outright condemnation of the cultural symbols as idolatry and that the practioners are bound to hell fire. I think the author was biased given his religious background.

Most of the references he made in this work were based on hear-say [177]. I think a work of this nature should unravel the ingenuity of every preposition and stand by doing real and proper research.

All said and done this great work and its relevance is timely and timeless. The validity of the authors' opinion cannot be pin-pointed. It will be relevant in generations to come as reference to it will always be made. All shades of interests-historians of ideas, philosophers, political scientists, students of religion, cultural anthropologists and ethnographers, and pastors – will find this work a good resource. It is seriously recommended for graduate studies in Africa studies.

Bibliography

Nwaorgu, A. E. (2001). *Cultural symbols: the Christian perspective.* Owerri: T' Afrique International Association. The book contains 13 chapters, iii + 265 pages. The book provides photographs, charts, illustrations and bibliography.