

## Symbols in African Philosophy and the Issue of Nation Building



### Philosophy

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### ABSTRACT

*A cursory glance at the African culture reveals that symbols are an integral part of the organisational life of African societies, and constitutes a fundamental element in the African people's construction of sense knowledge and behaviour. Very recently, enquiries in the area of symbolism has generated great interest as a result of its unique ability to manifest the sacred, to encompass a multitude of structurally coherent meanings and to reveal the continuity between the structures of human existence and the cosmic sphere. This paper takes a step further to argue that African symbols can contribute to the quest for nation building, with particular reference to the Igbo-Africans of Nigeria, in areas such as the economy, poverty alleviation and the tourism industry.*

### Introduction

In Igbo African ontology, there are a retinue of proverbs that speak of the community as the centre of the life and survival of the individual. And that existence is not only meaningful, but also possible only in a community. The communal-individuality of the African is expressed in the Igbo proverb: Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya (If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be caught by man). Mbiti (1970) has classically proverbialized the community determining role of the individual when he wrote, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 108). Another Igbo proverb worthy of note is Igwebuikwe, which is a combination of three words. Thus, it can be understood as a word and as a sentence: as a word, it is written thus Igwebuikwe, and as a sentence, it could be written thus Igwe bu ike, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space. Let us try to understand the three words involved: Igwe is a noun which means number or population, usually a huge number or population. Bu is a verb, which means is. Ike is another verb, which means strength or power. Thus put together, it means number is strength or number is power. According to Kanu (2014), it speaks of the modality of being, resting on the principles of solidarity and complementarity; thus, to be is to live in solidarity and complementarity. Thus, to live outside the parameters of solidarity and complementarity is to suffer alienation. To be is to be with the other, in a community of beings.

### Achebe (1958) brings the essential nature of the Igbo-African communal relationship to a higher and more fundamental focus when he wrote:

We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him (p. 132).

### With the style of existential expression, he wrote further:

A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Everyman can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so (p. 133).

To live together as kinsmen implies interactions and thus communication as the wheel of interaction. This could be vertical or horizontal; between human beings or between human beings and spiritual beings. And communication makes use of symbols for the conveying of meaning. They have become an integral part of the organizational life of African societies. They are not simply by-products of organization, but rather elements that structure the African's construction of sense, knowledge and behaviour.

While this piece touches on the understanding of African symbols, it raises fundamental questions as regards the contribution of African symbols to nation building.

### Symbols in African Ontology

Two concepts are involved, the first is African and the second, symbols. Achen (1913) argues that the origin of the concept Africa depicts its geographical setting. It is of a Phoenician origin and was first used by the Romans to refer to the territory about the city of Carthage. Ki-zerbo (1981) avers that Africa as a concept is used to denote the land of sunshine, of black race and mostly refers to the sub-Saharan regions of Negroes. Its etymology can be traced to the Latin adjective "aprica", which means sunny. However, in this piece, the idea of Africa encompasses the territory about the city of Carthage and the sub-Saharan Africa. It is the second largest of the Earth's seven continents, covering 30,244,000 sq km (11,677,000 sq mi), including its adjacent islands with 54 countries. Robert (2003) observes that it encompasses 23 percent of the world's total land area. In 2000 some 13 percent of the world's population, an estimated 797 million people, lived in Africa, making it the world's second most populous continent, after Asia. Knappert and Pearson (1976), state that its peoples are divided into more than 1,000 ethnic groups, with different languages, social customs, religions and way of life. Onyeocha (1997), articulated the geo-numerical identity of Africa thus,

Africa is the world second largest continent. It covers an area of 11, 617, 000 square miles. It is three times the size of Europe (10, 400, 000 square kilometres and 4,000, 000 square miles) and contains about four hundred million inhabitants. Africa is divided into twenty five major ethnic groups speaking about seven hundred languages. It contains within it every known type of topography and climatic condition, except the Arctic cold. There are in the North the Sahara, and in the South the Kalahari Desert, with permanent snow in the Kilimanjaro. Also found in Africa are jungle areas, temperate zones, swamps and Savannah. Finally, some of the highest falls and longest rivers in the world- the Nile, Niger, Zaire (now Congo), and Zambesi rives- are also found in Africa. (p. 16).

When the idea of African symbol is thus expressed, the concept Africa provides the locus or context for reflection on symbols. Explaining why a discussion on the concept Africa is significant to this study. What then are symbols? Raddiffe-Brown (1952) defined symbols as "whatever has meaning" (p. 143). However, according to Fairchild (1965), symbols are,

That which stands for something else. Particularly, a relatively concrete, explicit representation of a more generalized, diffuse, intangible object or group of objects. A very

large part of social processes is carried on by the use of symbols. Such as words, money, certificates and pictures. A true symbol excites reactions similar to, though perhaps not quite as intense as those created by the original object. (p. 314).

Ejizu (1986), agreeing with Fairchild, defined symbol as “a thing recognized as normally typifying, representing, recalling something of a great importance. It implies an analogous association with what it stands for” (p. 1). Explaining further, Turner (1968) added that symbols could be in the form of “objects, activities, events, gestures and special units in a ritual situation” (p. 19). From the foregoing, Madu (2013) avers that “symbols implies the practice of using acts, sounds, objects or other means which are not of importance in themselves for directing attention to something that is considered important” (p. 2). The qualification of ‘Africa’ helps in the understanding of the meaning of the symbol in question. This is because a symbol can mean different things to different people. Thus Africa provides a context for the understanding of a particular symbol. This further stresses the link between culture and symbols, and thus the worldview of those who possess the symbol. For what a thing might mean to the African might be different from the meaning derived from it be an Asian, European, American etc. It is from this understanding that Geertz (1973) avers that “symbols relate to ontology and a cosmology” (p. 127). Symbols are not innate; they are the creation of society and unless a person learns what they symbolize, it will not be known. It is in this regard that the human person is referred to as a homo symbolicus, that is, an animal that symbolizes, conceptualizes and seeks the meaning of things. It is society that gives them the meaning they carry. And in Africa, the meanings in symbols are religious because of the consistent interaction of the sacred and the profane.

#### **Nation Building: Meaning and Nature**

Ezeanya (1980) observes that nation building is a herculean task whose magnitude only very few realise. The difficulty of this understanding is seen in the fact that some see it as consisting only of technological development and the setting up of all kinds of modern structures, accumulating an almost inexhaustible supply of the most sophisticated and deadly weapons, the ability to defend the frontiers of a nation, a high percentage of mass literacy, control of buoyant economy, and in fact, being in possession of all kinds of material goods which are calculated to make man's life happy here below and guarantee national security by force of arms. He wrote,

The building of a nation ...cannot be achieved by the mere accumulation of material things or the procurement of a life of comfort and ease often only to a limited few. This alone will not make man really happy for the simple reason that man is not mere matter. He has a spiritual part which matter is too base to satisfy. He is a composite of matter and spirit and he has his destiny far beyond the confines of this world. He has an eternal destiny.

Any project of nation building which loses sight of, or ignores the spiritual and material well-being of man taken as a whole, cannot succeed in building a nation in which no other is oppressed. Therefore the work of nation building has both the material and spiritual aspects. (p. 322).

#### **Aristotle had expressed this perspective when he wrote that,**

The end of the state is not mere life; it is rather a good quality of life... similarly, it is not the end of the state to provide an alliance of mutual defence against all injury or to ease exchange and promote economic intercourse... but it is the cardinal issue of goodness and badness in the life of the polis which always engages the attention of any state that concerns itself to secure a system of good laws well obeyed. The

conclusion which clearly follows, is that any polis which is truly so-called, and is not merely one in name must devote itself to the end of encouraging goodness. Otherwise a political association sinks into mere alliance, which only differs in space from other forms of alliance where the members live at a distance from one another. (pp. 118-119).

In the past, discussions and commentaries on nation building easily tended to be developed by economists who saw it primarily from the perspective of economic growth. In that context, so long as the monetary value of goods and services (Gross Domestic Product) increased yearly, there was nation building. However, from the above understanding, and from the perspective of Onwuliri (2008) it must include a positive change in human wellbeing. An all encompassing enterprise. And in the contention of Nwajiuba (1999), the majority of people must benefit from it. Thus Levi and Havinden (1982) maintained that it must be a long-term improvement in the standard of living, as felt and judged to be by most of the people in the country.

#### **African Symbols as Religious Symbols**

Kanu and Paul (2011) observed that in Africa, there is widespread profound sense of the sacred and mystery, which makes it difficult to separate the life of the African from his personal inclinations to the divine. It is in this regard that he does everything with the consciousness of God. Mbiti (1970) puts this succinctly,

Wherever the African is, there is his religion. He carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting new crop, he takes it with him to a beer parlour or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament. (p. 2)

Thus, the symbols employed by the African are not entirely free from religious meanings. It is in this regard that African symbols are referred to by the researcher as religious symbols. For instance, symbols like the Kola nut, among the Igbos, symbolizes communion with their ancestors (Oji ndi mmuo na ndi mmadu jiri gbaa ndu). The cotyledon is not eaten but given to the ancestors to eat. Thus although a physical thing, it speaks of the relationship of the human with the ancestors in the world of the living dead. The Ikenga symbol, a carved image with two horns, which comes from the Igbo word ike/m ji-aga (ikenga), that is, the strength with which I advance. Is considered the god of fortune and the genius of a man's strength. Thus Meek (1973) refers to Ikenga as the personification of a man's strength of arm and consequently, of his good fortune. According to Talbot (1932), success in trade, farming, hunting, etc are blessings from Ikenga. Lieber (1971) refers to it as the god of luck. Another symbol among the Igbos is the nzu (white chalk). According to Anedo (2007), it is a “symbol of cleanliness, open mindedness and purity, diviners use it to draw four lines on the ground signifying four market days: eke, orie, afo and nkwo” (p. 134). Ilona (2007) refers to it as “a holy item, it is always found in the personal places of worship” (p. 33). The Igbo masquerades as cult symbols of the ancestors who manifest from ant-holes. Anizoba (2002) refers to them as “our fathers” and “owners of the village” (p. 84).

**A cursory glance at the symbols mentioned, reveals that there is always an inescapable divine or sacred element in African symbols. As symbols, they reveal the unknown, invisible and hidden, it makes public what is private and social what is personal. These symbols have characteristics, which according to Ejizu (1986) include:**

1. Multivocality: which means that they are able to communicate multiple nuances in one single formation.
2. They have a spectrum of referents: they can communicate simultaneously a number of meanings that might not be

evident on the level of immediate experience. For instance, the Kola nut can speak of life, unity, the ancestors etc at the same time, even though it is not evident in the immediate experience of the kola nut.

3. Symbols can give meanings in both the sensor and ideological levels, physical and spiritual.
4. Symbols are instruments of expression, communication, knowledge and control.

### African Symbols and Nation Building

Symbols form the intellectual and imaginative part of the human person, through which he is able to transform his knowledge and experience of the environment as well as his inner and subjective world into special codes, patterns and visual configurations that represent reality in abstract terms. Through them, the African communicates his ideas, fears, anxieties, mood, sensation, feelings, intuition etc., in lines, shapes, colours, texture and form. Since it occupies a fundamental place as this, it would be inadequate to talk about nation building without an input from African symbols. The following are the contributions which symbols can make towards nation building when properly harnessed.

1. Ezenweke (2012) understands symbols as an important element of communication. She wrote,  
The principle of communal life that is highly cherished in Africa is particular and in the rest of human society is grounded on human relationships implies interactions and involves the incident of communication which finds its meaning in symbols. Symbol is therefore the only way through which communication and interaction are possible. (p. 158).

**If there must be nation building, it means that those who make up the nation will have to come together and find solutions to their problems or challenges. In this process, symbols are indispensable for meaningful communication and interaction.**

2. As Ezeanya (1980) had earlier indicated, nation building is not only about economic or physical development. This is based on the fact that we are dealing with the building of the nation of a human being who is a composite of matter and spirit. His development must be wholistic and must include his eternal destiny, that is, the spiritual aspect of the human person- though which he communicates with spiritual beings. According to Ezenweke (2012), communication with these immortal beings cannot be possible without the use and application of symbols. They help the human senses to comprehend the invincible reality of the supernatural world.

3. African Symbols can contribute to the building of a nation's

economy. Industries that make use of traditional symbols, according to Pricewaterhouse Coopers (2008), accounts for more than 3.4% of the global gross domestic product with a global market share of approximately 1.6 trillion US Dollars in 2007. In Nigeria, the impact of these symbols is great. It is employed by carvers, pot makers, weavers etc for their designs, and these are sold internally and externally as well. It has equally generated employment for a lot of young people.

4. African symbols can also contribute towards the development of the tourism market. These symbols are capable of attracting people from all over the world to experience the rich culture of Africa. According to UNWTO (2004) two million people visited Nigeria and about 3.7 million dollars was generated. If this is well harnessed and adapted for global consumption, it would increase the income of the economy annually. If the government focuses on the developing African symbols, it would further empower the poor masses.

### Conclusion

This piece has studied the contribution of African symbols to nation building. It has further reflected on the communal-individuality of the African which makes the presence of symbols as a means of communication and interaction indispensable. It further discussed the meaning of African symbols, nation building and the characteristics of African symbols. It submits that symbols helps in enhancing communication without which there can't be nation building; it enhances the spiritual dimension of man, for a wholistic nation building; it also enhances economic development and tourism, which are very significant in building a nation.

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