

God Question and Symbolic Communications: The Impact of Okonko Setting in Igboland

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ABSTRACT The most cherished human skills, art of dialogue and interactions with humans and the divine are acquired in Igboland through the framework of ancestral society called Okonko. The framework is highly articulate and stable in introducing the younger generation to the exercise of socio-linguistic analysis and oratorical coefficient in the Igbo culture. In the present paper, effort has been made to highlight the Igbo approach to God in relation to human experience expressed in coded formula. The focus is basically on the interplay between the divine, traditional setting in Okonko and the ability of the human intellect to grasp and express the same as signs and symbols. The paper concludes that within the Okonko framework there is always a guarantee for the humans to penetrate the communications system and gain access to meanings regardless of social status. However, this has been grossly impacted by social changes and culture contacts.

INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of focus and understanding, it is necessary to explicate the context in which the words “God question,” “Symbolic communications” and “Okonko setting” are used in this study.

God question is used in relation to the experience of the continuing presence of the divine spirit in the religions and cultures of all peoples on earth. Symbolic communications, on the other hand, describe those historically transmitted patterns of communications found in African religion in general and in Okonko Society of Igboland in particular. These symbolic communications are forms of information and communications that demand from people certain amount of thinking and reflection in order to penetrate their meanings. They can be identified, in various degrees, in other cultures. In all African societies, the most significant educational events occur within a context or setting. With traditional Igbo society as an example, the symbolic communications transmission occurs within the context of Okonko setting. The setting is consistent, continuous and stable. From the explanation, it is obvious that God manifests his spirit in religions and it is experienced in plurality of ways open to human existence. To communicate such an experience is to name the interplay between religion and reason.

The interaction between religion and reason has made our world a neighborhood broadened into a global village. Its skyline is dotted with a richer montage of Church spires, mosques, syna-

gogues, shrines and temples (Ruland 1998). Religion is very much talked about either out of fear or out of conviction. And today, unlike before, the God question has been placed at the centre of information and communications technology.

We know that religion is not something extrinsic. The human person is a religious being whose relation with God is often deep. This God is present in history, acts within it and identifies with the various cultures of the world. Therefore, God’s face and actions are hidden in human cultures.

According to Rucker (1997), the word “God,” is a code expressing the power over life and death one has experienced and before which the whole person and the person’s whole world are mortal. This accounts for the reason why “all through history there is a long list of martyrs because of religions” (Tauran 2008).

The common thread in all human experience of God becomes the imagination and effort to communicate what is experienced. This is because God is the God of life. Life and death are every day experiences in the world, particularly in Africa. There is a need, therefore, for forms of communications, which will serve as a vehicle of transmitting the experience. Again, in Igboland, God is experienced in Okonko Society in the fulfillment of abundant life, including the material means that make life possible. Here, “God is a living God, present in the creation and the permanent recreation of life by the strength of the spirit” (Lima 2000). And because God is involved, Okonko Society cannot be eliminated in Igboland.

In the light of the above, this paper gives a general overview of Okonko Society in Igboland. It analyses Okonko as a setting for scientific and communication skills. Basic skills of symbolic communications expressed in languages would be identified. The paper draws conclusion by looking at the relevance of symbolic communications in today's technology era. This is necessary because, "African culture is still overwhelmingly oral-aural, attributing primacy to the spoken word as a means of conveying information or communicating" (Imbisa 1991).

OKONKO SOCIETY IN IGBOLAND

In Igboland, there are various societies and associations that exist. These societies and associations play different roles. And they remain relevant till date because in traditional society, no person exists alone except corporately. He or she owes existence to other people, including those of past generations and his/her contemporaries. Such guilds or associations include "umu ada", "Nze", "Dibia", "Eze ji", "Ozo", "Isi Nwanjoku" and "Okonko". Of all these Societies that exist in Igboland, Okonko is the most prominent. Okonko Society is the association of free born male adults in Igboland. It is primarily a social, political, judicial, and religious organization, established for the purpose of maintaining justice, peace, and order in the society. As Ayandele (1991) observed, every member of Okonko Society is expected to be a man of honour and respect "who must confide absolutely in all members and help members in distress".

Much of Okonko activities and history in the whole of Igboland, are concerned with the question of influence, purity of life, peace and harmony with the ancestors and in the community. These make Okonko Society to be of semi-religious character, "it has a standard code, language, ethics and world-view which are most carefully guarded" (Nwosu 2010). The age-grades and the "ezumezus" (Okonko initiates) as a whole carry out festivities that are esoteric in nature to influence the affairs and conduct of people in Igbo Communities where they function. The society determines ritual behaviour and social practices in most parts of Igboland.

The nature and dynamism of Okonko Society have religious and ethical contents. It was within this context that Thompson (1970) noted that

during Okonko initiation acts, the initiates are taught pride in:

their ancestry, the pride that is the foundation of most religions, ancient and modern, civilized or barbaric, the pride that fosters admiration and reverence, and suggests regulations for the conduct of life.

In this regard, the nature and frame work of activities of Okonko Society are well known to all and sundry in Igbo Communities. And its activities make it a cohesive, social, religious and political force to reckon with.

There are elements of sacred and profane, common and secluded concepts in the theory and practice of Okonko. These are born out of the need to fashion out settings that would guarantee the satisfaction of man's real needs and desires, especially in relationship with God and nature. It is in this light that Bosch (1996) noted that, *in the religions of Israel's neighbors God is present in the eternal cycle of nature and at certain cultic places.*

Therefore, Okonko in Igbo Society expresses the sacred and secluded concepts in "ida mmiri", "ikpu ulo" and "ida mboko". These concepts represent the accumulation of a people's wisdom, identity and scientific inclinations. The scientific settings which are the resultant effects of the sacred and secluded concepts of Okonko now represent the objective manifestation of the reality of rationality of the Igbos (Nwosu 2010). Okonko constitutes a major element in Igbo cultural and scientific curiosity. It has functional values for various communities in Igboland, expressed in metaphor, images, exhortative and story languages which shall be articulated later.

Okonko as Setting for Scientific and Communication Skills

Indeed, God is a dynamic being, engaged in the active direction of human history. He has endowed and beautified Okonko with vital instruments of Scientific and Communications skills meant to enhance the relationship between the living and the ancestors. The setting is an assurance of conformity in certain rituals and social behaviour in the community. Therefore, some remarks here suffice to present Okonko as setting for African scientific knowledge and communications skills.

Historically, skill preceded science, even primitive man was acquainted with certain skills.

Ellis (1976) confirmed this when he wrote that, *anyone in ancient times who possessed a special knowledge of things enabling him to act skillfully and with success was considered a wise man. Intelligence as a consequence was considered primarily a practical not a speculative kind of knowledge.*

Again, the first skills of Hellenistic civilization were oriental; they were not derived from Greek science. Thus, in the context of history, Okonko has within its theory and practice, a framework that enhances communications skills.

It is the case that Okonko enhances communications skills and scientific knowledge by increasing and passing on to the next generation a body of communications skill. This is done through modeling and imitation in age-grade and masquerade feasts. Through these settings, even in the absence of formal school of science and communication technology, Okonko initiates qualified as inventors and scientists, "because the utilization purpose of technological development and the development of technique generally depend on a disposition to employ or apply reason in the required manner" (Agbakoba 1998).

The Scholastic philosophers expressed skill and knowledge in terms of human experience of material reality. This is the most direct contact with reality, the empirical. Kant declared that experience makes a kick-off that provokes other aspects of contact with reality. These experiences and the consequent analysis of them confront the human person with practical and theoretical problems, for some, he has the answers, for others, not (Kant 1966).

In Okonko Society, the God who creates and communicates is also the one who gives scientific knowledge and communication skills to humans. Within this traditional society, therefore, the framework, knowledge and communication skill transfer are complex and diversified. They are like what Rad (1967) described as, "the practical knowledge of the laws of life and of the world based on experience". It reflects that human knowledge and skill which results from human reflection and conformity with perceived order. Hence, in Okonko Society, scientific knowledge and communication skill are significantly imparted during the period of "deconstruction" and "construction" or initiations and regular attendance of meetings. During these times, apart from teaching the initiates the art of virtues and ways of the ancestors, techniques used in making local communications instruments are taught.

This exercise continues till date in Igbo communities.

In fact, certain crafts like the production of hollowed drums called "ikoro", "Ekwe" and "Ekpete" remain the exclusive monopoly of the "Okonkonites." Non-initiates cannot produce these communication instruments or know how to use them. Other communication materials that remain the preserve of this society include Okonko masks and costumes. Masks and masquerades costumes represent symbolic forms of communications in Africa. "They are vital instruments for cultural communication and communion between the living and the ancestors" (Oluka 2008).

So, in the complicated experiences of everyday life and the problems associated with them, Okonko Society sifts out principles that correspond to man's aspiration and lead him to success in life.

Okonko settings can be described as traditional schools. The traditional schools were settings that brought to light theories that "abound to show the preoccupation of the ancient people and their encounter with nature" (Dopamu 2003). Okonko Society as a setting fits into the description Dopamu (2003) gave when he noted the genesis of what is today known as scientific and communication technology. He said, *rudimentary science began with the study of nature-observation of weather, seasons, the behaviour of animals, plants and other animate objects; which animal was dangerous and which was friendly, which plant was medicinal and which had occult properties... All these did not happen by accident, they rose out of human needs and they were developed upon as a result of further investigation, experimentation, invention and utilization.*

All these rudimentary methods and dispositions are taught in Okonko Society during the period of initiation and subsequent meetings. They are mysteries and knowledge guarded jealously by the Okonko Society in Igboland.

Okonko settings remain basic in Igbo ideology. They still have the strongest influence on Igbo personality in spite of the spread of Christianity and Islam in south-eastern Nigeria.

Basic Skills of Symbolic Communications

African traditional settings embedded in Okonko Society are rich in basic skills and acts of symbolic communications. These are activities that are not performed on their own. Usually,

other media of cultural transmission such as songs, incantations, percussion, customs, dance and other modes accompany them. According to Schreier (1996), basic skills of symbolic communications are,

those modes of expression that carry an oral culture's information and values and propose how these might become the basis for a local theology shaped in the language of the people.

Thus, Okonko basic skills of symbolic communications can be described as a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their potentials and attitude to life. The use of words or language becomes one of the most important means of symbolization in Okonko Society. Masquerades are most outstanding or basic symbolic communications in Igboland. As noted earlier, masks and masquerades are vital means of communication and communion in Africa. Masquerades, in this case, help African communities in a number of ways, by providing a certain framework for social control, serving as models for distinctive cultural identity and entertainment.

Masquerade is an anthropomorphic headdress mask whose costume includes folded wrappers attached to the base of the masks. These masks are skillfully made by only the Okonko initiate in Igboland.

Other basic skills of communication in the arsenal of Okonko Society are metaphorical, imagistic, exhortative and story-like language. These are forms of communication empowered through the use of stories, parables, proverbs, fables and myths. Pobee (1989) states that, "for many non-literate people, the wisdom of the people is embedded in proverbs, myths, dreams and vision." But today, there are many literate people that are ignorant of the use and meanings of symbolic communications. Metaphorical, imagistic, exhortative and story like, languages in Africa are expressed through proverbs, myths, parables, and fables. For example, Igbo elders of the clan could discuss on noodle tale which relates the comical stupidity of a village fool. There is also the anecdote, a brief traditional incident concerning a laughable action. There are onomastics, folklore, riddles and proverbs. They are found in varying degrees and expressed in many ways, not only in Igboland, but in other societies. They are, according to Ellis (1976), ... *maxims expressed in poetic diction, rhythm*

and parallelism, and concerned with moral instructions.

These forms of communication skills demand from people a certain amount of thinking and reflection in order to penetrate their meanings. Therefore, these basic skills are handed on, in Igbo society, within the context of Okonko and they are valued authentic media of religious, social and philosophical truths. According to Shorter (1973), they play an important role in traditional African societies in the process by which the young are initiated to life, that is, educated... What needs to be done is to identify their universal values and reinterpret them in the light of modern information and communication technology.

CONCLUSION

The apparent ignorance of the subtle scientific and communications elements embedded in Okonko Society can only be overcome as we talk about them and analyse them in a paper like this. Hence in this paper, we initiated a discussion on God question and the interplay between Okonko and symbolic communications. We noted also the reality of Okonko as a scientific and communication setting in Igboland and contemporary society.

Religiously, the interest of this paper is more in the relevance of symbolic communications to today's society. This is derived from the fact that the basic elements are in the middle of communications process. Therefore, they are properly and authentically communications media. The masks, "ikoro", "Ekpete" and display of masquarades, proverbs, and myths, are the various media technologies present in Okonko Society. The audience interacts with them in different ways to decode meanings.

Modernization has, however, changed the way people interact with these traditional communications media. The interest now is more on internet, and television, than the ones emanating from African source. Yet, there is much of value in the lives, thought, and culture of those who are not Christians (Cobb 1999).

The various creative elements of communication articulated here should be developed. Though these arts are becoming less common than they were, "Africans are still better orators, conversationalists and listeners than writers and readers" (Shorter 1973). And the traditional African mass

media remain essentially the prolongations of the human senses. They bridge space, time and make the world of the living and that of the ancestors a global village.

The processes of change and culture contacts have implications on Okonko settings today. Stringent ethical prerequisites embedded in Okonko matter little in today's technological era. There is no longer close scrutiny, noted Agunwa (1993) in social and communications usages; *there is a collapse of the social control system. Western education has replaced traditional socialization process which inculcated... salient values.*

In other words, when Okonko Society was the policeman, the setting could effectively punish offenders. But today, modern processes provide avenues for aversions. Banality has taken over the market place.

The regain of Okonko setting, especially as they relate to the formation of the young ones can enhance moral rectitude. Again, since African science and technology remains a debate, this study becomes a challenge for modern African scientists to make further investigations into traditional symbolic communications.

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