

## **THE LOGIC OF SYMBOLISM IN IGBO AFRICAN MEDICINE: A HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH**

*By*

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### **Abstract**

*Existence in Igbo African universe is best described as a communion of forces; and the human person is understood as a confluence of two inseparable realities: the physical and the spiritual. In essence, what bothers the physical is often conceived as a kind of imbalance of the spiritual and vice versa. Life in this manner is conceived as a matrix. Within this parlance of existence also, lies an enigma which has perennially prodded great minds. However, what actually is the logical principle under firing this interaction between the physical and the spiritual universes is still in contention. The emergence of symbols and the act of symbolization, perhaps, has given a whole lot of insight to deciphering the meaning of this incorporated existence (human existence) and the mode of interaction underlying it. Igbo African medical practice is among those areas where the interaction of forces is highly noticeable. As a system of its own, Igbo African medicine incorporates the animate and inanimate; the physical and the spiritual, all in arresting various health situations. What then is the logic underlying the use of symbols in this practice? What is the goal or end of symbolization in Igbo African medical practice? This paper shall adopt a hermeneutical approach in examining the basic claims of Igbo African medicine. In the end, this paper would have given appraisal to a vitalist system of logic that is both Communo-Ontological and Igbo African in nature and praxis.*

**Keywords:** Logic, Symbolism, Igbo-African, Medicine, Hermeneutical Approach

### **Introduction**

The search for identity in Igbo African society seems like an endless if not an impossible mission. What defiled the Igbo continues to haunt him in every sphere of his existence and each time the name 'Africa' is mentioned one imagines what a beautiful continent it could have been if not for those notoriously mentioned influences (trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and neocolonialism) that in the view of this paper should have constituted the driving force, both for the individual and state's self realization in Igbo Africa; since the core of our socio-cultural being has been cast upon the dangerous pendulum of globalization and modernity.

What actually globalizes is subject to question. It may not be culture per se that globalizes in the real sense because culture is man's creation and a defining element of a people's existence. Rather, it is the human person. The human person, who is both a local and a global subject, is capable of transcending outside his cultural milieu in seeking to interact with other climes. And in the cause of this interaction, he is capable also of losing his identity. However, as a uniting force between cultures, philosophy is yet to retreat the Igbo African mind as such from her intellectual deportation; since most Igbo African philosophers continue to sell their stock in the language, system and thought of the West. This however has elicited this research which attempts to examine the logic of symbolism in Igbo African medicine as well as initiate a new system of logic native to Igbo African medical practice.

### **The Logic of Symbols and Symbolism**

Reality is best understood through a kind of representation that almost replicates its very kind or nature and this very act is as old as mankind. This is the reason it is often held by philosophers like Dukor and Umeogu that since different ways exist through which reality could be known, that symbolism has got as its primary aim to reveal the truth or reality.<sup>1</sup> Where as in the actual sense of this understanding, reality could at times prove holistically unfathomable even when our so called proven knowledge of it may seem almost complete. Still, a phenomenon or an idea or a proposition must be represented. It is that very act of representing these using symbols or signs that we refer as symbolism. In as much as a lot scholars had written on this, the fact remains that reality is ever unfolding as much as the means of its symbolization and articulation. Of course, this discussion does not bereft the understanding that symbolism cuts across different fields and has been widely regarded as being as old as human knowledge: thus, the secularization or universalization of symbols for objective interpretation to boost human knowledge becomes of vital importance.<sup>2</sup> One striking feature that characterizes a philosophical study of symbols is its ambition. It is the fact that something does not just represent the other in isolation without having a logical form or semblance with what it represents. This conformity of an idea or phenomenon with what it symbolizes or represents offers both Metaphysical and Epistemological insights to the body of knowledge in general. In a nutshell, Symbols are theoretical or mental entities that are not always subject to verification. Although these symbols are not, often times, subject to verification, they are equally of practical value to Arts and science in general; in as much as they correlate with the idea they stand to represent. Symbols can be abstract or esoteric too.

Hence, to understand the form of any language at all is to understand the logic of symbolism in that language, or perhaps the mystery underlying such language correlation with what is. This is in attendant to the fact that whenever a statement is made in a particular language, one experience a kind of mental symbol creation and this symbol creation often carries with it a logical correlation between the subject and the object. For instance, the statement "John Cena fights like a lion" only tells one of John Cena's brevity and die-hard-attitude in a wrestling bout. Here the symbol 'Lion' needs no explanation about its conformity with the personality of John Cena especially if one has actually seen how John Cena fights. In all cases words always carry with them an esoteric picture of something or an object or a subject or something real. And when one

digs further on this understanding, a kind of conformity existing between the word spoken and what symbolizes it is established. Symbols in the light of this therefore, are not only esoteric because the object of signification in any language could be visible or concrete in another sense. Symbols are not all mystical also because what represents a thing could be understood by simple analysis or by a more systematized means which Heidegger calls 'phenomenological epoche'.

### **Symbolism in Igbo African Medicine**

Igbo African medicine is synonymous with Igbo culture. It is one of the many cultural enterprises that bespeak volumes of the relevance of symbolism in human knowledge and in the understanding of reality as a whole. Nothing exists in Igbo African medical universe without a name and an object of signification that explains as well as affirms its concrete or abstract existence and what it stands for. As deep and vast Igbo African medicine is its shades of light on truth and understanding is possible on the grounds that ideas, phenomena, objects- both natural and supernatural are all at least known through different symbols put in place to replicate them. Every knowledge of and about reality or meaning of being in every clime or language must always incorporate a kind of reasoning with symbols, in symbols, by symbols and through symbols.<sup>3</sup> This submission was made by Umeogu in his attempt to bring to fore the place of symbols in Igbo African medicine. On a more epistemic level, symbolism is also necessary for a better understanding of Igbo African medicine since in praxis it aligns with Igbo culture in which being is conceived as a communion. This is the reason Dzobo contends that while signs provides simple information in a culture, that symbols communicate as well as enhance the understanding of complex knowledge in that same culture.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it will be pertinent to mention at this juncture that signs and symbols are both elements of the same category with different degrees of usage. While a sign could provide a cue to explaining being, symbols provide deeper logical explanations on the nature, degree and mode of being by means of 'symbolismic expression' (in Umeogu's vocabulary). This in essence attends to the fact that one could actually defend the idea that culture provides a better understanding of symbols and that symbols speak of a particular cultural background each time it is found in any human communication.

It has been held strongly by scholars that the influence of language on Igbo African healing process is much deeper than just mere communication. In one of his essays on symbols and symbolism in Info-Tech Epistemology, Dukor argued that words, propositions and sentences in Igbo medical practice are theistic panpsychic and animism and possesses existential and commanding force of the divine authority.<sup>5</sup> That a proposition possesses existential and commanding force of the divine authority as Dukor argues, in simple terms, supports the saying among the native Igbo that 'onu nwa akahie bu onu ndi ichie'; which means that the words of the dwarfed man- probably an adept 'dibia' (diviner) is the same as the words of his ancestors. 'Nwa akahie' or the dwarf here is only used to represent a great healer or 'dibia' who also divinizes, but not in the understanding that every dwarf is a healer or 'dibia ogwu'. In the same vein, the ancestor in this very context and in Igbo ontology is symbolic of intercessory angels who beseech on behalf of mortals to God. This

explanation is informed by the fact that in African epistemology as Dukor argued; conceptions are not only generated from innate ideas but also abstracted from experience too.<sup>6</sup>

Experience in this context speaks volume of the efficacious method of healing in Igbo African medicine which in the words of Bourdillon is much more oriented towards the manipulation of symbols but not necessarily less efficacious than orthodox medicine.<sup>7</sup> This nevertheless is less contradictory of the fact that what is held esoteric is also replicated in concrete form as Dukor's earlier assertion held. Bourdillon's idea of manipulation in this context may not be exactly what we have in mind since it is not clear about what is being manipulated and the end to which the manipulation tends. But one thing is clear: The image of the divine is not just something of abstraction from ordinary experience in Igbo medicine; rather it is something concretely symbolic than only esoteric and the healer, as scholars like Dukor, Kanu, Umeogu and Ngangah argued, occupies both the position of the healer and the priest. This statement implies that God, through the gods as represented by certain concrete images of: 'Amadioha' (great ancestral progenitor of human race), 'Ndi ichie' (benevolent spirits of dead elders of the kindred), 'Agwu' (the wisdom of the dibia or healer), 'Akware' (the informant of the dibia or healer) and 'Arusi' (oracle of the gods), play vital roles in inquiring the cause of a particular illness and finding a panacea for its cure. A kind of ritual is carried out using kolanut (oji), native chalk (nzu), yellow clay (edoo) and sometimes palm wine or a hot drink, and these are symbolic substances meaningfully used by the adept 'dibia'. More so, Ngangah has this to contribute:

It is difficult to isolate Igbo African medicine from the gamut of other customary practices and beliefs such as ancestral worship, belief in the cyclical nature of life and the unbroken communion between the dead, the living and the unborn- a related feature of which is reincarnation-divination and belief in cosmic laws which governs man's interaction with both spirits and nature.<sup>8</sup>

The fact, as Ngangah argued, that the traditional healer in Igbo African medicine treats the 'person' of his patient, unlike the orthodox physician who treats the 'body' of his patients alone is quite symbolic. This, Ngangah explained further saying that treating the 'person' of a patient goes beyond clinical issues to delve into the social, cultural and spiritual world of such patient all of which are believed to impact upon his health within the traditional milieu.<sup>9</sup> And this brings us face to face with the African concept of personhood as communalism of the 'I' and 'we'. While the 'I' symbolizes the individual seeking to presence himself (to use I. Odimegwu's vocabulary), the 'We' symbolizes other individuals both living and dead: other forces both vital and derived and other epistemic realities both known and yet to be known. These in one way or another contribute to the active existence of the Igbo African person.

What then is the logical correlation of symbolism with Igbo African Medicine? In the following heading, we shall engage on analysis based on scholar's views and real life experience.

### **The Logic of Symbolism in Igbo Medicine**

Understanding the cyclical nature of being in Igbo ontology traces virtually in the: cultural, political, religious and economic life of the Igbo. This argument does not bereft the fact that Igbo medicine also share this

influence. A recurrent error in the understanding of Logic among African and Non African philosophers who had written on this context begs the question here; but the truth remains that the basic tools of analysis when employed in explaining basic phenomenon native to Africa should incorporate interpretations based on the particular cultural milieu in the African context. What we mean by the logic of symbolism in Igbo medicine in this context does not incorporate Aristotelian form of logic or its other Western variations. Rather the core of our use of logic shall dwell on specific Igbo conceptual frame work that is different from the West. For instance: such logic that unravels the close relatedness of the different aspect of life in traditional {Igbo} African society which makes the ancestors and gods subjects, and not mere objects of human intelligence.<sup>10</sup> This gives an insight to the vitalist system of logic we have set out to propose. In the words of Maurier as quoted by Iroegbu, “this is a Vitalist form of logic in contrast to the Western objectivist or conceptualist logical form”.<sup>11</sup>

Iroegbu argues further that in the structure of Igbo logic, for instance, the ultimate driving force is not the idea or the figure, neither is it the sign nor the symbol that matters; rather what matters for him is the good relationship and well being existing between these ideas and figures and signs and symbols; and which must result from the life and discussion of the interlocutors.<sup>12</sup> Critically speaking this idea defiles what western logical system stand for giving the somewhat esoteric ways in which practitioners of Igbo medicine ply their trade most especially in difficult cases where the gods must be consulted and some sacrifices made in order to find solution to a perplexing health issue. In as much as the Igbo African medical logic, as Iroegbu said, is not verifiably carried out some times, they are highly systematized in their own peculiar ways too. The point here is that this medical logic is Igbo African and therefore should not be dismissed entirely simply because they do not operate on Western principles. One may sound apologetic in saying this, but the truth remains that a dying system of thought must be resuscitated at all cost. However, this is not to excuse the negligence on the side of the Igbo African educators to recognizing the urgent need to indigenize philosophy as Iroegbu has noted in the following:

Until philosophy is written and taught in an African {system of logic} and language, African philosophy may turn out in future to be nothing but Western philosophy {and logic} in African disguise.<sup>13</sup>

Having gone this far, let us examine what Igbo medicine truly is. Natively speaking, the Igbo medicine is nothing but what is called 'Ogwu'. This could be negative or positive since the reality of Igbo medicine or 'ogwu' exists in two dimensions and share in the same substance (force). It could be a force of evil- to kill and destroy and in the other hand, it could be a force of preservation and vitality. A comprehensive definition of 'Ogwu' or medicine or charm almost aligned with the words of Francis A. Arinze. According to him, it is an object which by some mysterious immanent and unconscious power is believed to preserve from evil, diseases, bullets, or motor accident, or to make one succeed in trade, in love affair...<sup>14</sup>

A charm or 'ogwu' or medicine could be regarded as a symbol of divine force interplaying in human existential drama, while in its various usage it could be devised for different purposes. What is important here

is that 'Ogwu' shares in the category of force as such but not in the category of 'Vital force'. In his *Igbo Metaphysics*, E. Edeh argued that the kind of force that 'Ogwu' has is such that is derived. It is such force that was given to it by the human person who shares completely in the communalism of vital force as outlined by P. Tempels in his *The Bantu Philosophy*. Hence if a charm or medicine or 'ogwu', should be efficacious; be it in the edible or other forms; to enhance or cut life short, then an active force from the traditional healer or the priest doctor must be invoked into it. The ability to invoke such active or animated force is not a privilege everyone enjoys. It is exclusively for the few adepts that possess 'Agwu'- a special call to serve in a traditional capacity. Such person could operate by administering herbs (herbalist or 'Dibia Ogwu') or by divination ('Dibia afa') or by offering sacrifices and appeasing the gods ('Dibia aja'). And such person must work in communion with God, the gods, his ancestors and his 'agwu' before he excels. The logical matrix that exists within these symbols of divine substance is the action or the result of the command in the spoken words of the dibia over his charm or medicine or 'ogwu'. When the process tends to a positive end, it receives approval from God and other vital forces and when it tends to a negative end, God and other vital forces do not give their approval. In the case of a sick person, the divine may expedite his healing on the ground that he is in good terms with his 'chi'. The Divine can also prevent his healing too until he has atoned for a certain abomination or injustice he may have gotten involved in.

## **Conclusion**

In essence, the logical principle operational in Igbo African medicine is not one. It varies and this is the reason it has been held that Igbo mysticism remains the deepest in all religions. However, what we shall describe in this essay as the principle of 'The onye metara owere isi ya buru' might be closer to what we have set out to inquire; or what Obiajulu described as the principle of like terms or the likes attraction which is extrapolated as the principle under which like causes produce like effects.<sup>15</sup> Since we do not see God or understand his true nature; since we do not comprehensively understand the true ways of our ancestors, we have devised some concrete images and symbols as sacramental's that create in us a lively sentiment of faith in the divine as does all religions. Since then God and our ancestors have neither stricken us all dead nor refused to answer when we call them, except the incessant fear constantly imposed on us by the West who wants their own religion to dominate the others. Most of our fathers in the past who embraced the western religion without casting theirs into flames lived long and died happily while others who were perverted entirely continues to die young and our world has lost its bearing completely.

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