

## **“Ofo” in Cultural Identity and Spiritual Practice in Owa Culture**

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*Abstract:* The Ofo is a cultural artifact deeply rooted in the traditions of the Owa people, part of the Ika-Igbo nation in Delta State, Nigeria. It represents personal accomplishment, power, and individual success, often associated with the male's personal deity or "Chi" (God). The Ofo is typically a wooden staff, carved from a specific type of tree believed to have spiritual significance, serving both spiritual and social functions. The wood is usually polished and may be adorned with symbols or decorations. It often features intricate carvings, including anthropomorphic figures, animals, or geometric patterns. These carvings are not merely decorative but hold symbolic meanings related to the owner's lineage, status, or spiritual beliefs. This symbolic image is, however, challenged by globalization, preservation of sacred objects, and cultural interpretation to make contemporary relevance pose several challenges. This study maintains that the teaching and learning of the ethics of artifacts in our schools would be educational tools, allowing people to learn about the moral protection of artifacts, aesthetic utility, and harms to the environment. The implementation of the ethics of artifacts would encourage the use of conservation and application of techniques to preserve and restore artifacts. This includes chemical treatments, environmental controls, and physical repairs to learn more about the sacred objects and their importance in our environment.

*Keywords:* *Ofo; Artifacts; Owa People; Ethics; Preservation of Culture.*

### *Introduction*

Historically, the Ofo represents authority and is often held by community leaders, such as elders, priests, and titled individuals in many parts of Owa

communities in Delta State, Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> 'Ofo' is a symbol of great social, religious and moral achievement. The individual 'Ofo' is inherited by men and has a significant role as the custodian of tradition and moral authority.<sup>2</sup> In Owa cosmology, the Ofo is believed to be a conduit for spiritual power and ancestral blessings. It is often used in rituals, prayers, and as a symbol of the ancestors' presence and guidance in many communities.<sup>3</sup>



*Ofo comes in different sizes and structures. This is a sample of a carved Ofo among the Owa people, delta state Nigeria.*

In Nigeria, many cultural artifacts, including the Ofo, suffer from inadequate preservation facilities, which can lead to deterioration over time.<sup>4</sup> As societies modernize, traditional practices and the importance of artifacts like the Ofo may decline, leading to a loss of cultural heritage. The movement from rural to urban areas often results in the abandonment of traditional practices and artifacts.<sup>5</sup> There is a risk of counterfeit artifacts

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<sup>1</sup> Chinyere Ndubuisi, "Beyond Carvings And Rituals: Unveiling The Ikenga's Role In Modern Igbo Society," *Journal Of Contemporary Rituals And Traditions* 2, no. 2 (2024): 77-94.

<sup>2</sup> Jacinta Uchenna Ikegwu, "Ofo As A Global Cultural Resource And Its Significance In Igbo Culture Area," *Ikenga: International Journal Of Institute Of African Studies* 14, no. 1 (2018): 325-343; Rosabelle Boswell, "Scents Of Identity: Fragrance As Heritage In Zanzibar," *Journal Of Contemporary African Studies* 26, no. 3 (2008): 295-311.

<sup>3</sup> Igor Kopytoff, "Ancestors As Elders In Africa," *Africa* 41, no. 2 (1971): 129-142.

<sup>4</sup> V. O. Ekwelem, V. N. Okafor, and S. C. Ukwoma, "Preservation of Cultural Heritage: The Strategic Role Of The Library And Information Science Professionals In South East Nigeria," *Library Philosophy & Practice* (2011).

<sup>5</sup> Catherine M. Cameron, "Structure Abandonment In Villages," *Archaeological Method And Theory* 3 (1991): 155-194.

being produced and sold, which can devalue the original cultural significance of the Ofo.<sup>6</sup> The traditional methods of creating Ofo might be lost if younger generations do not learn these skills.<sup>7</sup> Also, non-Igbo individuals or scholars may often misinterpret the meaning and use of Ofo, leading to distorted representations of this sacred object being stolen and housed in museums and private collections outside. Determining the rightful ownership of Ofo artifacts can be complex, especially when they have been passed down through generations or sold multiple times.<sup>8</sup> The Ofo can be appropriated in ways that strip it of its cultural significance, reducing it to a mere decorative object. The commercialization of Ofo artifacts can undermine their cultural and spiritual value.<sup>9</sup> It is now a big challenge that many young urban children and people, even within Nigeria, may not be fully aware of the significance and importance of the Ofo in African traditional thought due to the desacralization of the sacred. There may be a lack of educational resources to teach about the Ofo and its role in Igbo culture.<sup>10</sup> The colonial era saw the suppression and marginalization of many traditional practices, including the use of the Ofo for cultural identifications.<sup>11</sup> However, it remained a potent symbol of resistance and cultural identity. Today, the Ofo continues to hold significance in Ika-Igbo communities, both in traditional settings and in the Diaspora. It is used in cultural festivals, academic discussions, and as a symbol of Igbo heritage and identity. There are ongoing efforts to document and preserve the Ofo and its associated traditions. Museums, cultural institutions, and scholars are working to ensure that this vital aspect of Ika-Igbo heritage is not lost.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark Jamieson, "The Place Of Counterfeits In Regimes Of Value: An Anthropological Approach," *Journal Of The Royal Anthropological Institute* (1999): 1-11.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher I. Ejizu, "Ritual Enactment Of Achievement: "Ikenga" Symbol In Igboland," *Paideuma* (1991): 233-251.

<sup>8</sup> Babatunde Adebisi, *Legal And Other Issues In Repatriating Nigeria's Looted Artefacts* (Morrisville, North Carolina: Lulu Press 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth A. Klesmith, "Nigeria and Mali: The Case For Repatriation And Protection Of Cultural Heritage In Post-Colonial Africa," *Notre Dame Journal of International & Comparative Law* 4 (2013): 45.

<sup>10</sup> Teresa Mcguire, "African Antiquities Removed During Colonialism: Restoring A Stolen Cultural Legacy," *Detroit College of Law Review* (1990): 31.

<sup>11</sup> Barrister Matthew Obumneme Arum, "Symbolism In Igbo Culture: Towards A Decolonization Of Igbo Cultural Values," *Sapientia Global Journal Of Arts, Humanities And Development Studies* 4, no. 3 (2021).

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes cultural education, better preservation techniques, legal frameworks for repatriation, and efforts to maintain the traditional craftsmanship associated with the Ofo. This study suggests the teaching, learning and the implementation of the ethics of artifact by policies maker for the common good of all.

### *Ofo literature*

In the Igbo traditional religion and its philosophical underpinnings, provide a rich tapestry of Ofo symbolism, connecting beliefs with broader philosophical themes. Ofo is a deity and cult figure in the Owa culture of southeastern Nigeria, often associated with success, personal achievement, and the right hand of man, symbolizing power and accomplishment.<sup>12</sup> While there may be no philosophers directly labeled as "philosophers of Ofo," several scholars and African thinkers have explored the themes and philosophical implications of Ofo within the context of African philosophy. Ethnographers and anthropologists have also documented Ofo, exploring its social, religious, and legal roles within Ika-Igbo society. These studies provide insights into the Ofo multifaceted significance and much literature often references the Ofo, highlighting its importance in storytelling, proverbs, and oral traditions. Authors use it to convey themes of justice, authority, and cultural continuity to explain the relevance of artifacts. Chinua Achebe, in his novels, explores the cultural significance of Ofo and how they shape Igbo identity and values through communalism, personal identity, and the role of traditional beliefs and symbols in shaping philosophical thought in Africa.<sup>13</sup> Innocent Asouzu made a complementary reflection on "Ibuanyidanda" philosophy, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of all beings through symbols and spirituality. This idea often touches on traditional symbols like Ofo, exploring their philosophical

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<sup>12</sup> Ejizu, "Ritual Enactment Of Achievement:" Ikenga" Symbol In Igboland."

<sup>13</sup> Ngozi Dora Ulogu, "African Literature And The Changing World: The Antithetical Ideologies Of Individualism And Communalism In Chinua Achebe'S Novels," *Villanova Journal Of Social Sciences, Arts And Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2019);

George Ogbonna Mbarah, "Ak {Nauche, Personhood And Social Order In Contemporary Igbo Culture," (Phd Diss., 2017).

implications as a work of art shaped and sculpted.<sup>14</sup> This study presents detailed studies of Owa an Ika-Igbo religion and cosmology, discussing the Ofo for ritual symbolism primarily for the systematic reconstruction, shaping cultural identity and the traditional religious experience.<sup>15</sup> The sacred symbols provide reliable information about indigenous religious thought, decoding Ofo a deity that symbolizes "male sex organ" of the socio-cultural life of the Igbo people.<sup>16</sup> Although its dense meaning content has been affected by globalization, it remains a tool in African traditional thought systems.<sup>17</sup> The role of deities like Ofo in the spiritual and everyday lives of the Igbo people cannot be underestimated.<sup>18</sup> The Igbo metaphysics and the philosophy of symbols explore how symbols like Ofo represent deeper philosophical concepts related to personal achievement and societal roles. It examines how artifacts become integral parts of understanding African philosophies of self and community.<sup>19</sup> Ofo is founded on a community of shared beliefs in the wisdom that the notion of art for art's sake is rendering life to be given a considerable methodological component. Maduabuchi Dukor's contributions to African philosophy include an exploration of traditional symbols and their philosophical meanings discussed Ofo as part of the larger Igbo worldview and its implications for

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<sup>14</sup> Innocent Asouzu, *Ibuanyidanda (Complementary Reflection) And Some Basic Philosophical Problems In Africa Today: Sense Experience, "The Mkpuchi Anya" And The Super-Maxim*, vol. 8 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Christian Sunday Agama, "Symbolism And Social Order Among The Igbo," *Filosofia Theoretica: African Journal Of Philosophy, Culture & Religions* 9, no. 2 (2020).

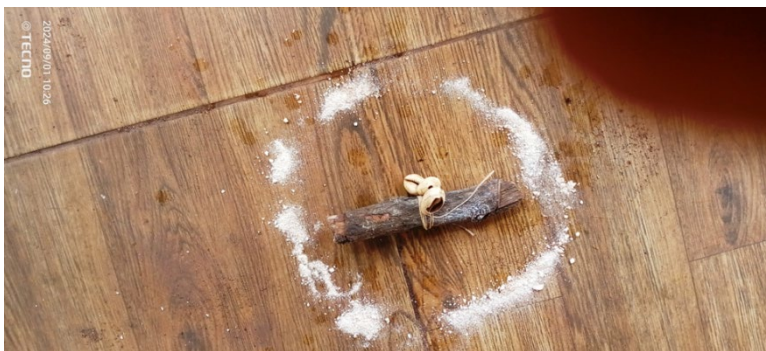
<sup>16</sup> Christopher I. Ejizu, "Ofo Na-Ogu And Mmanwu: Ritual Symbolism In The Interface Of Igbo Indigenous Religion," *Interface Between Igbo Theology And Christianity* (2014): 31.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Ejizu, *OFO: Igbo Ritual Symbol* (Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishing Company, 1986).

<sup>18</sup> Ikechukwu M. Osebor, "Inclusive Symbolic Frames And Codes Shaping Cultural Identity And Values," *Meθexis Journal Of Research In Values And Spirituality* 4, no. 1 (May 2024): 82-99.

<sup>19</sup> Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, "The Ofo In Igbo Forest Of Arts, Crafts And Symbols: Implications For Peace-Building," *Igwebuike: African Journal Of Arts And Humanities* 6, no. 5 (2020); Christopher I. Ejizu, "Better Late Than Never: The Dialogue Of Ofo, Igbo Indigenous Ritual Symbol And The Roman Catholic Faith," *Ministerium: A Journal Of Contextual Theology* 1 (2022).

understanding personal and collective success.<sup>20</sup> This assertion entails that the evolution of the human mind was accompanied simultaneously with the evolution of symbols and their exploration for the best interest of all.<sup>21</sup> The above contributes to a deeper understanding of how traditional symbols and deities continue to influence and shape African philosophical thought.<sup>22</sup> However, subjectivity in interpreting the symbolic nature of Ofo and the reliance on elders and traditional authority for interpreting ethical principles can lead to subjective ethical considerations.<sup>23</sup> Without standardized frameworks, there is a risk of inconsistency in the application of justice and fairness. Additionally, prioritizing Ofo ownership for communal welfare over individual rights might conflict with contemporary human rights principles.



*A sample of cut-to-size Ofo from the mythical Ofo tree, among Owa people delta state Nigeria.*

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<sup>20</sup> Maduabuchi Frank Dukor, "Philosophy and Bread On The Table Reflections On Existence And Essence Of Being," *UnizikSpace, The Institutional Repository of Nnamdi Azikiwe University* (2023).

<sup>21</sup> Cynthia Adjovi Mawuli, "Transmission And Embodiment Of Heritage: An Analysis Of Adinkra Symbology On Traditional Clothing In Ghana," (Phd Diss., Master's Thesis, Central European University, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Oladapo Jimoh Balogun, "A Redescriptive History Of Humanism And Hermeneutics In African Philosophy," *Open Journal Of Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2013): 105-112.

<sup>23</sup> O. Monday, "Is Altruism Always Sufficient For Organ Donation? Vroom's Expectancy Theory, For Expanding The Organ Donor Pool," *Saudi Journal Of Kidney Diseases And Transplantation* 31, no. 2 (2020): 503-507.

### *Ethics of Artifacts*

Addressing the moral challenges of Ofo requires a multidisciplinary approach that combines philosophical principles with practical methodologies to preserve cultural heritage for future generations.<sup>24</sup> Philosophical theories, such as deontology, emphasize duties and responsibilities, suggesting that we have an inherent duty to protect artifacts. This study suggests the adaptation and implementation of the ethics of artifact for the preservation of Ofo and its relevance. The ethics of artifact examines the intrinsic and extrinsic value of artifacts.<sup>25</sup> It outlines the manners, practices, or principles by which communities or social organizations view their objet d'art.<sup>26</sup> The moral considerations surrounding the creation, use, and impact of human-made objects, particularly in terms of their influence on society, individuals, and the environment, has been studied.<sup>27</sup> The beliefs of Ofor explore moral principles and why people make moral and immoral decisions in the context of artifacts.<sup>28</sup> This field focuses on how individuals should behave in the development, use, and preservation of artifacts based on their moral compass, values, and society's shared values, laws, and traditions.<sup>29</sup> This study maintained that the ethics of artifacts should be geared towards preserving the cultural, historical, and aesthetic value of artifacts.

In this perspective, ethics would help to consider the impact of environmental factors on artifact preservation.<sup>30</sup> Pragmatic ethics advocates for practical solutions that work best in real-world scenarios for

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<sup>24</sup> Sarah Harding, "Value, Obligation and Cultural Heritage," *Arizona State Law Journal* 31 (1999): 291.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Klenk, "How Do Technological Artefacts Embody Moral Values?," *Philosophy & Technology* 34, no. 3 (2021): 525-544.

<sup>26</sup> I. M. Osebor, "The Role Of Structural Ethics In Restraining "Japa" Among Clinicians," *Ramon Llull Journal Of Applied Ethics* 15 (2024).

<sup>27</sup> Helena Siipi, "Artefacts And Living Artefacts," *Environmental Values* 12, no. 4 (2003): 413-430.

<sup>28</sup> O. I. Monday, "The Relevance Of Deep Ecological Principles In The Aquatic Crisis: A Philosophical Analysis," *Bangladesh Journal Of Bioethics* 11, no. 2 (2020): 42-48.

<sup>29</sup> O. I. Monday, "Ethics Of Cognitive Restructuring: A Rehabilitation Of Rape Victims And Offenders," *Voice In Bioethics* (2020).

<sup>30</sup> I. M. Osebor, "Native-Centric Ecology As A Panacea To Aquatic Crisis?," *Sapientia Journal of Philosophy* 18 (2023).

the preservation of artifacts, considering current technological and economic constraints.<sup>31</sup> Value theory, also known as axiology, explores the nature of the value of artifacts, including what is valuable, why it is valuable, and how value judgments are formed. Ethical considerations include restoration practices that respect the artifact's authenticity, ensuring accessibility to the public while also respecting the rights of original owners or communities. The production, use, and disposal of artifacts can have significant environmental impacts, such as the use of sustainable materials, energy efficiency, and reducing waste and pollution.<sup>32</sup> Ethics are closely tied to the concept of the circular economy, where artifacts are designed for reuse, recycling, and minimal impact on the environment, making it a crucial ethical consideration. The moral implication of artifact preservation involves sensitivity to the cultural contexts from which they originate. The Owa people's wisdom regarding artifacts includes respecting the wishes of descendant communities regarding how artifacts are displayed and used. Ethical practices should consider the long-term sustainability of both the artifacts and the methods used to preserve them.<sup>33</sup> Ethical practices applied over time in museums and archives play a crucial role in the preservation of artifacts. They use specialized techniques and controlled environments to maintain the condition of artifacts. The moral code of artifacts explains the extrinsic value derived from their utility, educational potential, or the meanings attributed to them by individuals and societies, linking them to the past and providing insights into historical events, cultures, and practices.<sup>34</sup> The preservation of artifacts ensures that this historical knowledge is not lost. It embodies the cultural heritage of a community, reflecting its traditions, customs, beliefs, and artistic expressions.

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<sup>31</sup> Catherine Sease, "Codes Of Ethics For Conservation," *International Journal Of Cultural Property* 7, no. 1 (1998): 98-115.

<sup>32</sup> O. I. Monday, "The Ethical Implications Of Eco-Individualism On Sustainable Environments," *European Journal Of Sustainable Development Research* 5 no. 3 (2021): 7.

<sup>33</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "World Heritage And Cultural Economics," *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures / Global Transformations* (2006): 161-202.

<sup>34</sup> Osebor, "Inclusive Symbolic Frames And Codes Shaping Cultural Identity And Values."



### *The significance of Ofo in African traditional thought*

The philosophy of Ofo is central to the African traditional judiciary system and is used in oath-taking ceremonies as a symbol of truth and justice.<sup>35</sup> The presence of an Ofo during legal proceedings emphasizes the gravity and sanctity of the process, forming an integral part of rituals honoring the ancestors and protecting cultural heritage. It is believed that Ofo has the capacity to invoke the presence of ancestors and seek their blessings or guidance.<sup>36</sup> During significant life events, such as marriages, funerals, and initiation ceremonies, the Ofo is often present, symbolizing continuity and the linkage between the living and the ancestors.<sup>37</sup> In matters of dispute or when someone needs to swear an oath, the Ofo is used to symbolize the seriousness of the commitment and the spiritual consequences of falsehood. The Ofo remains a powerful symbol of Igbo cultural heritage, embodying the community's values, beliefs, and historical continuity. Advances in technology have made digital preservation possible, allowing artifacts to be digitized and stored in formats that can be accessed widely without risking damage to the original objects. Their preservation ensures that this educational resource remains available. Some artifacts have significant economic value due to their rarity, demand, or potential for tourism. Preserving such artifacts can have economic benefits for communities and institutions. Artifacts often hold personal or collective sentimental value. They can be symbols of heritage, identity, or significant events, making their preservation emotionally important.

### *Conclusion*

This study maintains that the ancient roots of the tradition of Ofo date back centuries, with roots in pre-colonial Igbo society. It has evolved over time and remains deeply ingrained among Owa people. The Ofo artifacts are challenged by colonialism and conservation practices yet remain powerful

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<sup>35</sup> Aniekan Etim Nana, "Oath-Taking In Ibibio Society: A Means Of Settlement Of Traditional Dispute," *Journal Of African Studies And Sustainable Development* 6, no. 4 (2023).

<sup>36</sup> Friday Ifeanyichukwu Ogbuehi, "Traditional Legal System A Paradigm For Judicial System In Nigeria," *IgboScholars International Journal* 4, no. 1 (2017).

<sup>37</sup> I. M. Osebor, and B. P. Irabor, "The Role Of Metaphysics In The Development Of Native-Centric Education," *Oracle Of Wisdom, Journal Of Philosophy And Public Affairs (Owijoppa)* 7, no. 3 (2023).

tools for cultural expression and spiritual significance among Ika-Igbo people. The study concludes that addressing the challenges of Ofo artifacts requires education, and implementation of the ethics of artifacts. This provides a framework for understanding why artifacts should be preserved and guides for making practical, informed decisions on the use of artifacts and how best to preserve them for future generations.

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