

WHAT TECHNOLOGY PRODUCED, THE IGBO-UKWU BRONZES: THE DIACHRONIC AND SYNCHRONIC STUDY OF "ICHI" SYMBOLS

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Abstract

The Igbo-Ukwu bronze objects were discovered accidentally as from 1938 and detailed archeological works were carried out in 1959 - 61 by Professors Thurstan Shaw and Hartle at two different sites at Igbo-Ukwu and Ezira respectively and published in 1970 by Thurstan Shaw. These works dated 9th Century A.D radiocarbon analysis. A further functional analysis of the works by Professor MA. Onwuejeogu showed that these works portrayed spiritual/mystical kingdom of Nri, Igbo of Africa. Again the works were presumed to be produced by indigenous Igbo artists/craftsmen. The complexity and uniqueness of style and technique of production were assumed by some scholars to be due to much lead added to them. While others believe that it was purely a matter of technology and state of the mind. The styles and techniques of Igbo-Ukwu were completely different from that of Benin and Ife bronzes. This research aims at finding out the correlation between the peaceful, stable and spiritually evolved government of Eze Nri and the technology that produced the Art pieces. Could it be the material (leaded bronzes) or the technology (techniques) or both of them (material and technology) plus stable economy that led to such productions? These are the contextual arguments that complement a practical production using metallic analysis of Thurstan Shaw and other metals already used by the author in producing some bronze works with the *ichi* symbolism. This is a call for Ndigbo to think home like other cultural areas of Nigeria, such as the Binis who are still using their cultural settings to enhance their art/bronze casting as well as integrating themselves well in Nigerian politics.

Introduction

The Igbo-Ukwu archeological finds were discovered by Thurstan Shaw and was published in 1970. They were dated by carbon-14 technique at A.D. 900. Later, Onwuejeogwu did detailed anthropological research on the culture that produced and used similar artifacts. He came out with a conclusion that the Igbo-Ukwu objects were associated with Nri culture, centred at Nri in Igbo culture area. He has published books and articles on these objects (Onwuejeogwu, 1975;1981).

The general motif in almost all the finds is associated with the 'Ichi' symbol executed on objects including human face. (Shaw, 1977:33;36-37). These symbols connote dignity, health, wealth, peace and personality. Therefore, the main objectives of this paper are: -

- (a) To investigate how the 'Ichi' symbols, which are few and inflexible are used by the Igbo to express a gamut of philosophical ideas.
- (b) To examine the extent the present Igbo economic success reflected in these symbols, which had their origin in the past.
- (c) To find out if there is a continuity of *Ichi* symbolic philosophy on the present social behaviour and relationship of Igbo people, such as women fertility, accumulation of wealth and achievement; and
- (c) To probe if Ichi symbols have anything to do with the development of human resources.

To accomplish this, two major scholars are used in the methodology and analysis of this research: -

- (a) The works of Thurstan Shaw on Igbo-Ukwu as they relate to practical/archeological area.
- (b) The works of Onwuejeogwu on the same Igbo-Ukwu as they relate to the cultural traits.

Igbo-Ukwu Bronze Objects

The bronze pieces with Ichi marks, in the Igbo-Ukwu archeological finds, were first discovered by Thurstan Shaw in early 60s and were dated back to 9th Century A.D. with Radio Carbon14 dating

analysis. These finds have been proved by Omvujeogwu (1981) -a Social Anthropologist, to have a cultural trait of the Nri of Igbo area of Anambra State. He further went on to state that certain symbolic motifs depicted on the Igbo-Ukwu objects, such as the elaborate facial marks called Ichi on the bronze pendant head and the chord round the ankles of the figure of a man and a woman. depicted on the cylindrical bronze objects, are at present associated with the titled men who are the political and ritual leaders of their community in Nri and Oren and Igbo-Ukwu towns. He also established that the Igbo area of Anambra State was once ruled by the Nri Kingdom whose distinctive cultural features are: - highly developed title system based on the *Ozo* title, a well developed *Mmuo* society - (Masquerade cult), deep genealogies of eight to ten generations, elaborate temples for supernatural being called *alusi* and ancestor temples called *Obu*. At Nri and Oreri, sacred kingship was developed par excellence. It is this ecological area that nurtured the culture that produced and used the Igbo-Ukwu and the Fzira bronze objects. The concepts of peace, harmony and truth were ritually symbolized and enacted in the ceremonies of the titled men who were also political elite. Nri men who had taken the Ichi title always earned in their hands the spear of peace called *otonsi*.

Having found out that the "Ichi" symbolism, which seems few on the face has much philosophy to control the peace and harmony of a kingdom, and that the extent of cultural traits found in the bronze objects of Igbo-Ukwu has a direct link with the Nri kingdom and the present Igbo of Anambra State. We shall therefore explore the metallic composition of the bronze objects, which made the bronze works unique.



Plate 1: The Ichi on a Face pendant (Igbo-Ukwu Archeological Works 9th Century A.D.)

Igbo-Ukwu Bronze Objects (Metallic Compositions)

The metallic compositions of Igbo-Ukwu bronze objects as analyzed and recorded by Thurstan Shaw (1970:292-295) showed that there were objects with 97% copper, 1% lead, 1% tin and 1.1% arsenic copper. While some objects were leaded bronzes with low tin contents - 93% copper, (5- 13% lead, (1-2) % tin and 1% arsenic copper.

The leaded copper objects were analyzed to have (94-97)% to copper; (2-4) % lead; 1% tin and 1% arsenic copper.

The Arsenical copper objects were analyzed to have 95% copper, 1% lead, 1% tin and (1.3-2.6) % arsenic copper.

Finally, the tinned and leaded copper are as follows:- 93.8% copper; 1.2% lead, 2.1% tin, 1.75% arsenic copper.

Evidence has shown that most of the Nigerian bronze objects from Igbo-Ukwu, Benin, Ibadan and Ife, collected their raw materials from Nigeria. Some writers like Fagg Meek and Lebeuf have attested to the ancient exploitation of tin in Nigeria and there was assertion that Nigerian tin is alloyed with copper from some sources in making of West African bronzes. (Lebeuf, 1964; 242).

These written accounts should no longer be treated lightly in the search for the sources of raw materials in Nigerian bronzes/brass traditions. The raw materials use the composition of the alloys in western and eastern Nigeria did not show great similarity in metal contents. The Benin and Ife analytical results show high Zinc content while the Igbo-Ukwu indicates low zinc but high lead content. This shows differences in local techniques and sources of raw materials.

Therefore, we have found evidence showing that deposits of copper, lead and tin/zinc exist in



Plate 2: The Ichi on a Figure in a Bronze Stool (Igbo-Ukwu Archeological Works 9th Century A.D.)

Early Studies of Ichi

Some early literatures have been published regarding the Igbo-Ukwu archeological discoveries of Nri culture. The first and earliest reports were made by early writers who lived in Igbo land or visited the Bight of Biafra or Igboland between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The reports were entity but in most cases helpful in filling [the gap in the absence of ethnographic materials. Such reporters were Duarte Pacheco Pereira (sixteenth century), Olaudah Equiano (1789), Captain John Adams (1823) and W.B. Baikie (1854). Some anthropologists who worked in Igbo land between 1895 and 1934 were Major Leonard (1906), Notheote Thomas (1914). C.K. Meek (1930) and M.D.AY. Jeffrey (1934),

There are three main limitations in using these reports. Firstly, they are mainly records of what they were told about Nri. Secondly, the anthropologists generally stayed only a few days at Nri and then left because their assignments were to make survey reports on some general issues. Thirdly, later anthropologists like Meek and Jeffrey not only worked twenty years after (the British had banned the practice of Nri ritual and political activities in Igbo land but also during the interregnum of F/é Nri Obahke, who died in 1927. For example, M.D.W. Jeffrey, who wrote copiously on the ritual of F/é Nri, briefly saw an F/é Nri at Oren and none at Nri. His work on Nri was based mainly on what he was told and furthermore, he did not stay more than a few days in both Nri and Oren towns. It is therefore not surprising that his report is a medley of both Nri and Oren systems.

The reports made by early missionaries such as the Rev. Father Dubaze in 1906 and (i.T. Basden (1922) although they display the usual Christian bias against the so-called pagan religion, are useful indicators for finding out the role the missionaries played in destroying (the traditional influence of Nri in Igbo land.

Onwujogwi! (1981) tried to reconcile most of the scanty reports and stayed in Nri (own for a period of three years. He was able to give analyses of political organization of Nri, which is the setting of Igbo culture where lineages of Nri origin still exist in some of the Igbo settlements. He tried to record the development of the Nri state system, and analyzed in detail its political and social organization. He also dealt with the inevitable evolution towards a modern state. Further works were done by scholars like Isichci Filizabath (1976). Harile, D.D. (1967) and Basden. G.T. (1966).

However there is need to look into the behavioral pattern of this Nri kingdom, because their beliefs and myths were core matters to their economic and social achievements. All this reflected on the Igbo-Ukwu found objects.

The richness and antiquity of Nri culture were discovered through archeological finds from 1938 when a farmer digging in his compound discovered a number of remarkable bronze works of an including a pendant with ichi designs. Then in 1959, archeologists Shaw and Hartle did a good deal of excavation at Igbo Ukwu and Ezira respectively. The results were published in 1970.

- The finds comprise bronze objects marked with all the scarification marks of the Igbos and bronze objects depicting flies, beetles, grasshoppers (possibly locusts) eggs, heads of animals such as leopards, elephants, rams, monkeys, snails and pythons.

A comparative study by Onwuejogwu 1981 of the culture trails that occur in Igbo-Ukwu and those that occur in the extant culture of Nri shows that they can be classified under five broad headings - those associated with the Nri title, the *ozo* title; the *Ichi* title: the rituals of *alitsi* and memo; status and prestige. The links between the Igbo Ukwu objects and present day belief systems have been tabled by Onwuejogwu 1975: 42} and it states that it has to do with *Ozo* title, *ichi* title and Nn title systems.

Now, how does one account for these links? Are they accidental? The answer is that the extant culture of Nri is flourishing near the very spot where the archeological finds described were buried. The *ichi* marks on the face of living Nri men may be taken as an example to demonstrate the linkage. *Ichi* marks are crucial in the Nri title system because without taking the title, one cannot take the *Ozo* title, and without taking the *ozo* title, one cannot take the Nri title.

Ichi therefore, is a royal mark made on the face of human beings as well as on objects such as walls, wood and metal (Onwuejogwu, 1981). The objects, including three bronzes, excavated by Shaw at Igbo-Ukwu dated C. AD (850-900) have *ichi* marks on them. Those excavated by Harlle at Ezira dated A.D. (1495) have *ichi* marks on them.

Equiano, who was born in Igboland around 1745. associated *ichi* marks with persons exercising political status in Igbo-land.

John Adams (1823) associated *ichi* marks with persons of some high political status in Igbo land. Baike (1856) associated *ichi* marks with persons of high respect in Igbo land. These archeological finds show that morphologically, the *ichi* marks have not undergone any major radical change. Probably also the idea they express might not have changed much since they remained constant since Equiano's time and he was not describing the end of a period. It should be noted that Nri oral traditions and those of other Igbo towns east of the Niger, exhibit a conspicuous absence of events or episodes leading to radical changes. Generally, the Igbo culture area was comparatively less disturbed than the rest of the west coast of Africa until the later part of 18th century, Even then the disturbances were not of the type in which a new influx of immigrants brought radical changes or ideas to alter the existing ideas and social structures.

Nri therefore is probably a society whose culture had undergone minimal changes during the past thousand years. Therefore, since the form and style of *ichi* marks remained relatively constant, in time and space, so also probably has the symbolic expression conveyed by the *ichi* marks. The question now is who are the Nn people?

The Nri People

Nri is unique in Igbo land and its kingdom passed several thousands of years. The first, ethnographic description of Igboland, based on field work in the 1890s stresses the reverence and precedence which was paid to Nri by other Igbo communities, a precedence which was cry still *ji/ed ill* a proverb "The street of the Nri family is the street of the gods through which all who die in other parts of Igboland pass to the land of spirits" (Leonard 1906). Another early ethnographic work is called the *Eze Nri* - the spiritual potentate over a large extent of the Igbo country (Thomas. 1914; 48). Nri ritual specialists travel through much of the east and west of Igboland undisturbed, 'purifying communities from their abominations and sins against God, *Chufavu*; spirits or Ancestor, *ndichie*: and earth, *aim* (Chris Ebigbo, 1994).

In the past, Eze Nri had ritual and some political control over many Igbo settlements. The external affairs of Nri were administered by the state officials and other men who had taken the *ichi* title. The Nri state system (as analyzed by Onwuejogwu, 1975, and 1981) and the ritual hegemony were not based on the use of military force, for Nn never had a military or police organization. The Nri system of control was based on the propagation of ritual ideology that Eze Nri had mystical

powers and that Nri men and Nri towns were sacred. To achieve this control, Nri titled men spread out all over a large proportion of Igboland, and lived in these settlements, they became the chiefs and priests. Nri became a centre of a ritual hegemony for many centuries until 1911, when the British took over the administration and banned the activities of ETC Nri. Furthermore, the system is sustained by the ritual manipulation of symbols. By symbols, I mean the use of concrete and/or abstract imagery to express concrete or abstract ideas and emotions; also the use of concrete or abstract imagery to express a wider and general ideal world of which the one we live in is an imperfect representation. It is important to note, according to Onwuejeogwu, that Nri hegemony and the state system were based on the realization of the political system and domestic life material. Trading activities were ritualized by associating markets with the supernatural beings called *eke*, *aye*, *awo* and *nkwo*.

Yam, palm produce, cocoyam and vegetables were ritualized in the Ifejioku cult. Leadership was ritualized in the various title systems epitomized in the *o-o* title, which was controlled and directed by the king of Nri, called Eze Nri. Similarly, the crude agricultural tools such as the hoe, cutlasses, digging sticks, clubs and the single and double headed iron spears, and swords of various types were all ritualized. It was considered an abomination to spill human blood in violence on the surface of the earth. Thus earth was ritualized as a supernatural force called *ana* and *ajana*.

Finally, Nn has been occupied by four Eze Nri, the twelfth to fifteenth in succession. The first eleven ruled before Fqmano's time. According to cultural history, the heyday of the kingdom was between the third and the eleventh rulers. It is very likely that the form and idea relationship associated with ichi marks were developed during the heyday of Nri kingdom. The form and idea relationship of symbols central to Nn political and ritual system with special reference to the *Ichi*, *ozo* and *Nri* titles, have remained sufficiently constant to warrant a valid reconstruction of the system at most back to the tenth century A.D. (Onwuejeogwu, 1981).

The Ichi: Analysis

With the records of ethnography and archeological discoveries, it has been proved beyond doubt that the concept of peace, harmony and truth was ritually symbolized and enacted in the ceremonies of the *o-o* -titled men, who were and/or are also the political elite of the Igbo people. Nn men who had taken the *ichi* titles always carried in their hands the spear of peace called *otnvi* or *ngwucigiiiga*. With the spear of peace in their hands and the *ichi* marks on their faces, they were identified as the 'Sons of Hze Nri-Nwa Nri', who controlled the mystical force. They travelled generally unmolested from one Igbo settlement to another as agents of Hze Nn to perform political and ritual functions associated with the removing of abomination *ikpu alu*, the dissolving of the codes of abomination and enacting the new codes, the ordaining of ritual and political officials, the crowning of chiefs, the making of peace and the creating of markets and shrines. In the performance of these activities, Nri people spread into different parts of Igbo land and Eze Nn held some degree of control over the external and internal politics of the older Igbo settlements,

It is important at this stage to discuss how the ichi title taking is affected. As Onwuejeogwu puts it, the ichi title taking commences in the eighth month and ends in ninth month of Nn traditional calendar and the procedures are as follows: -

- (a) The payments, which vary according to towns, must be made to the holders of the title with good feasting. A specialist facial artist or surgeon from Umu-Dioka (A town in Idimili Local Government Area of Anambra State) is invited to perform his task.
- (b) The exorcism, which is to follow the marking of (his face is a risky operation, so no ritual sacrifices are made. The first is that of "tying of bad spirit" called "*i/ickwitMi*" or "*oghooiuke*" to stop them from coming to create havoc. The other is called *ino/oho*, in which a hole is made in the ground and ritual food blurted - a symbolic way of burying the evil spirit.
- (c) The ordeal is that the person is laid on the back and his head placed on a plank laid across a small pit. He is firmly held by the head while the marks are made. He must try not to cry or else he is attributed a coward who could not attain spiritual height, groups of women from his lineage, *umuada* and some friends will gather around consoling him not to cry or else

the family will carry the shame of weakness. Hot water is dropped on the marks, charcoal from the bottom of a pot is rubbed in and the face is wrapped with leaves called *otubolo*. The person is then removed to his mother's house for nursing.

- (d) The person is placed under seclusion for the traditional twelve days and carefully nursed. If he dies during this period, it is an abomination, and the house will be purified. At the end of the period the daughters of the lineage, *umu okpu* or *umu ada* will commence singing and dancing for the survival and courage of the young man. They are fed with pounded yam, fish and drinks from palms.
- (e) The young man is now integrated and he goes to his lineage's *Alusi* to perform the ritual of "breaking-the-egg" called *iti anwu*. He breaks the egg, and after twenty-one days his parents give feast to his lineage: after thirty days, his body is decorated with patterns using pigments made from the juice of *uli* seeds. He is finely dressed, in the presence of all who have taken the title, and then he goes to the market where he is greeted and given gifts by the people *i=n afia ichi*.
- {0 The next stage is the admonition by the *isi nze* of his lineage that henceforth he must begin to observe taboos

He is like the first son of Eze Nri, nwa Okpala Nri. He can now carry the spear of peace called *otonsi* and can validly perform the ritual of purification, abrogation and enactment of taboos under the supervision of the elders. These *ichi* marks are marks of royalty and can be executed on wood, pottery and on walls. Most Igbo masks carry these *ichi* marks till date (See Plate 3).



Plate 3: The Ichi on Mask in Oraifite. (Ekwe-nkwu, 2001).

The *ichi* title confers on the young man the rights of a full male citizen of the state and the right to become an emissary of Eze Nri. By beginning to keep the taboos, he has begun to obey the supreme authority of his state, and has taken the major step towards becoming a political figure.

The next stage of the young man's elevation is the taking of *ozo* title, which is the highest title in Igbo land. We shall confine ourselves here only to the final cleansing of the young man called /./ He. Onwuejogwu recorded that the taboos that are observed by *ozo* men are recited to him by *Isi nze*. The tongue of the man is consecrated, *mmaacha*, by the *isi nze* thus: the *ozo* man puts his tongue out and the *isi nze* takes some leaves *ukpa* tree, dips them in *ngwo* solution and rubs them on the man's tongue four times, He goes the same with the leaves of a Kola nut tree. A hen is also brought and the beak rubbed four times on his tongue. While performing each of these actions, the *Isi nze* says: "You are now *nze*. Beware of evil and dirty deeds. Beware of lies. Never tell lies. Beware of injustice. Never be unjust. Bring peace and prosperity to your people". The hen's mouth is torn open and the blood dripped on the man's tongue and on the ground. The hen is cooked and all *nze* men eat it.

Conclusion

Two important things to note here are that the young man has changed his natural face into more spiritual face by the *ichi* marks; then he has taken the *ozo* title which is a baptism from wrong doing to good living. He is now acclaimed to be closer to the gods and his words are full of truth, peace and harmony.

As an *ozo* titled man, he can carry the *ofo* of his ancestors so as to keep the lineage going in truthfulness. This helps him to regenerate the forces of his dead ancestors to aid him in his future endeavours. Here again the mystery of reincarnation is revealed.

The excavations revealed the hitherto unsuspected existence of brilliant Igbo bronzes which are completely different from those of Benin and Ife, which were actually made of brass (copper & zinc).

This technology was achieved because the kingdom of Nri over the Igbo people was based on spiritualism. They were able to tap from the higher realm of the infinite creative intelligence through their understanding of the science of reincarnation and peace of the mind. They became creative and curative in their general affairs. They were taught the efficacy of herbs and the control of evil spirits or discarnate entities.

Their bronzes were true bronzes made of copper, tin and lead. They reflect an astonishing level of technical virtuosity, and a delight in intricate craftsmanship for its own sake. There is one portrayal of human with *ichi* marks. Others are duplicating of objects from natural world, sometimes realistically, sometimes with surrealistic stylization, sometimes with realistic shape but with ornate surface decorations.

Finally, these archeological finds have helped us to reconcile the link between the past and the present. The achievements of these groups of people today are traits from their origin. It is not surprising that as of today, there is a high level of technology among the Igbo people in the present day Nigeria. It is unfortunate that colonization and materialism have made the people to forget the past only to pursue their shadows. Hence there is a high rate of crime, untimely deaths, incurable diseases such as cancer, AIDS etc; high rate of stroke and hypertension.

The Igbo people under the rule of Nri kingdom enjoyed a lot of freedom and peace of mind. There was longevity and creativity in the art of bronze casting, which reflected that freedom and peace of mind achieved.

The training and development of human in the field of sculpture are highly needed in Nigeria today. There is need to improve the skills, methods and techniques of sculpture especially bronze works in the teaching of sculpture in our schools. These works of old, which are of high repute in the culture of Igbo-Ukwu, Ife and Benin, were motivated by something, which our modern sculptors lack. Yet these old sculptors had little or no academic training in their field.

Therefore, *Ichi* was a symbol of purity in all events. Adherence to it gave peace and order, prosperity and technology that produced Igbo-Ukwu bronzes.

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