

The Monumental Ikoru Drum: The Collective and Public Voice of an Igbo Community

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Abstract

There is no sculpture in Igbo land as visually awesome, intimidating, and monumental as the Ikoru drum. Extant oral myths surrounding its origin have been lost to memory. It is only among the Ohafia Igbo that one encounters a detailed oral account about its historical origin, its carving, and ritual institutionalization as a tribute to the heroic spirit and social achievements of an Igbo community. Among the Igbo, it is known as Ikoru, whose meaning is not preserved. Among the people of the Cross River, it is known as Ikorok, or the drum of death. The Ikoru drum is scattered in many villages and towns in terms of its distribution. What they all share in common is that this drum is located and displayed at the center of either a village or town settlement. If the center is the most public space in an Igbo settlement, the presence of the drum here gives it a public function and orientation. It is a monumental cylindrical drum carved out of an iroko tree (*Chlorophora excelsa*). It has two spherical ends that could terminate in human and animal heads. It is sometimes decorated with important symbols, such as the antelope or the sacred python. The largest of these drums is located in Umunze, and one requires two ladders to assail its awesome height. The study has focused on the Ikoru drum, its types, functions, and, more importantly, its role as a drum of heroes and a means of trans-village and town communication. The emphasis was placed on its forms and functions within the scheme of Igbo cultural ideation. The study concluded that the Ikoru drum is the most monumental of all sculptures found in Igbo land and is an embodiment of the Igbo ideals of communal achievement and heroism.

Keywords: *Ikoru drums, Types, Functions and Cultural ideation*

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Background to the Study

A traditional Igbo proverb says that only the community can feed its collectivity. No man can cook for the community because he will not be able to satisfy the communal appetite. In this sense, the community is both human, social, moral, and political. The community is the context in which a member of a community can achieve social status and rank by becoming a member of, say, a men's title association. It is also the context in which a man may celebrate his heroism through a victory in war, as an accomplished yam master, or even as a wrestler or hunter. To define itself in space, the Igbo had planned their living settlements with a conceptual ground plan of their communal or public centers known as *Ogo ilo, ama ala* Obodo, Ogbodo, Otobo, etc. It is known as the strategic center, a magnetic space that controls all the activities of a living community. It may be located at a geometric or conceptual center for a settlement. It has a public orientation because all the unifying symbols of a settlement are located on it, such as a market, a public shrine, ritual trees, an ancestral grove, a masquerade house, or the monumental drum known as *Ikorok*. On the Cross River, it is known as *Ikorok*, or the drum of death. In this paper, we focus on these drums through a formal analysis of their types, functions, and meanings in order to demonstrate that their presence in an Igbo community, village, or town is a celebration of their social ideals based on the ancestral charter that propels the onward movement of life. While our data may be drawn from the oral lore of various Igbo communities, more specific data will be drawn from the Ohafia Igbo, who are found to the extreme south-east of the former Eastern region.

What is the Ikorok drum? The Ikorok drum is a prestigious symbol found in every Igbo village or town, particularly the latter. It is carved out of hard wood from the iroko tree (*Chlorophora excelsa*). It is a towering and majestic tree that may grow to a height of over fifty feet and more. No bird can scale its height except the eagle, which is the king of birds. It is to differentiate itself from the other birds that the eagle perches on the iroko tree while watching the world below. Its origin is not known, but there is an oral tradition from Ohafia that sheds some light on its historical origin. This oral myth has it that a woman by the name of Nne ube went to collect firewood from the outer farmland. As she did this, she chanced on a particular wood shaped like a cylinder. In her curiosity, she hit it with her knife, and it produced a sound that was strange to her. She took it home and showed it to some carvers and the elders. One of them took a stick and hit it on this wood. The sound that emanated from the wood was unique and distinct. A carver examined the wood again and suggested that they should locate a wood prototype that could possibly be transformed into a drum with the aim of creating a similar sound or something much better. Thereupon, they sought out and engaged a famous carver who was commissioned to carve what they conceived of as an ikorok drum. An Iroko tree was soon felled down, and a stem log was cut out of it. It was then taken to the site chosen for the carving of the drum, which was also enclosed with a fence of palm fronds. The carver set to work after a sum of money was agreed upon in addition to a gift of a wife to him. He was also to be fed by his hosts. After a few months, the carver was able to carve a large cylindrical structure with an inner cavity. At this point, it required the opening of a slit to interconnect the two square openings at the two ends of the drum in order to produce the required sound.

Something happened. The elders held a meeting in order to consult a diviner who would advise them on the necessary ritual rites to activate the sound of the drum. The diviner advised that human blood was required in this rite of ritual activation. From a distant place, they procured a human being, whom they sacrificed to the drum so that the slits of the drum could be cut and the belly could be opened so that the drum could talk. At the end of the rituals, the men gave a gift of a goat to the women in order to mollify them. Through this act, the men began to assert their monopoly over the ownership of this drum. It soon became a tradition for heroes who have returned from any warfare to present their warhead trophies to the drum and engage in a public dance in which they were hailed by their community as heroes.

There are, of course, other oral myths regarding the origin of the Ikoru drum. In a place known as Umunze, about forty kilometers south of Onitsha, some villages here own their Ikoru drums. The only thing that they remember is that the largest of the Ikoru drums in their area was carved by a man who was commissioned by the community. The drum that he carved is the biggest anywhere in south-east Nigeria. To beat this drum, one needs two ladders to be able to assail its formidable height. The drum is a monumental cylindrical structure embellished on the sides with Python symbols. The two ends of the drum were embellished with seated human figures, each carrying the head of a war victim. It is also said that the drum is beaten during emergencies, such as during an unexpected attack by an external enemy. With its powerful sounds, the drum summons the community to rise in unison in order to confront this emergency because the leopard is lurking in the bush. The sound is said to travel over five miles. Its summons was mandatory. It became a symbol of identity for each village or town. Of course, there are other variations of the Ikoru drum. In one example, the drum is a cylindrical structure with an open slit on the top of what is considered to be the belly of the drum or its cavity. Both ends of the drum are embellished with the carved heads of an antelope. While all Ikoru drums are cylindrical in structure, there are variations in the use of symbols in the decoration of the drums. It is possible that there could have been other versions of the Ikoru drum, but all are now extinct. All the elders will soon remember that the Ikoru is a devourer of human heads and was often, in the past, vitalized in the drops of human blood.

The Ikoru drum is central to human life, and living in the various Igbo communities that own it can be seen from its location at the center of either village or town settlements. It is one of the public symbols that the Igbo display at the village or town square, together with other symbols such as the masquerade house, a playground, an ancestral grove, and even ritual trees. These various public symbols project a unifying ideology of Igbo communities—the heroic, social, ritual, and cosmological ideals of a living community. Not to forget is the fact that Igbo communities, whether village or town, are represented by their elite members who assemble at the village square in order to discuss the affairs of the community in what has been described as an open assembly-type village democracy. By placing the Ikoru drum at the center of an Igbo village or town settlement, the owning community manifests its unifying symbolism, the heroic and cosmological ideals of life and living supported by ancestral charter. It is a drum of heroic status since only achievers, such as war heroes, can dance to the Ikoru drum. When one hears the drum sounds, one is reminded that the owning community is eloquently invoking its social influence and that its ownership is one of the ways of telling the other contiguous

communities of their social, economic, and political achievements. For ultimately, the sounds of the drums remind people of the community's social wealth and economic influence; the greater the size and far-reaching the sounds, the more visible the identity of the village or town. In order to preserve its uniqueness and social distinction, the people of Umuozee commissioned a carver to produce this drum for them. When he completed the work, he was highly appreciated with gifts, including a wife. However, on his way home, he was ambushed and killed in order to prevent him from repeating this creative feat for another community.

The awe-inspiring and monumental attributes of the Ikoro drum inspired the work of a sculptor and batik artist, Onuora Chijioko. In a masterful batik composition, the artist presents a picture of an Ikoro drum in its awesome and monumental presence. In its iconicity, the drum is presented in a frontal pose, and facial features are carefully delineated to portray a deity, with both hands contoured to connect the two sides of the face. Facial markings uphold its titular status, while a towering cap accentuates its vertical thrusts. Within a vertical pictorial frame bathed in changing colors with a subtle and sharp contrast, vertical hand gestures evoke a moment of communal celebration, as if to invoke into life the hidden power of this drum deity.

Conclusion

They say that the Ikoro drum is a devourer of human heads, which are brought before it as a public tribute and homage by warriors who have returned from war with their head trophies. In this sense, the Ikoro drum is a titular deity. Among the Ohafia Igbo, there are structured dances that a warrior must follow as he pays tribute to this heroic drum. In other contexts, the Ikoro drum is a vital means of communicating periods of emergency to member villages that own one. The sound ranges across vast distances, connecting human groups near and far. Its form is cylindrical with spherical ends. In some cases, the top of this drum is transformed into a deity, whereas in others, they are two seated human figures, each bearing a head trophy, while there are other decorations consisting of the antelope form or that of a python. The origin of this monumental drum is increasingly lost to fading memory. It is only among the Ohafia Igbo that there is an extant oral myth about its origination and institutionalization as a heroic drum to which heroes pay tribute in a structured dance of celebration. In all, the Ikoro drum is always kept at the center of an Igbo village or town settlement, which is its strategic center, along with other symbols such as a market, playground, masquerade house, ancestral grove, and others. Of all these, the Ikoro drum stands out with its unusual visual scale and monumental presence. Today, the Ikoro drums lie in new silence in many Igbo towns and villages, with their former functions receding into the realm of Igbo heroic folklore.

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