

# INTERPERSONAL SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES IN THE TRADITIONAL IGBO SOCIETY

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**Abstract:** This study examines interpersonal symbolic communication in the traditional Igbo society, which entails culturally-learned, often nuanced, socially shared system of communication between individuals by the use of instruments as symbols, in which the relation between the symbol and the signified concept is arbitrary. Data for the study were drawn from oral interviews and participant observation as primary sources, while secondary sources were library materials and the internet. Findings indicate that there exists yet another form of non-verbal communication that is symbolic (involves symbols) and is exclusively interpersonal in "the various Igbo culture areas" (Onwuejeogwu 1975). The examples are sub classified based on what they communicate. The study concludes that interpersonal symbolic communicative practices could be used as tools in interesting and complex ways for the description and reproduction of varied sociocultural world of the Igbo.

**Key words:** personal, symbolic, communicative, practices, traditional Igbo society

## 1. Introduction

Communication is a natural phenomenon through which human beings relate with one another. Different cultures communicate in various ways within their communities and this has been of interest in cultural communication studies. Communication can be classified into two major types-verbal and non-verbal. The non-verbal type has two subtypes audio and non-audio. There are two types of non-audio communication – body communication (for example, beckoning on someone, having a hand shake with someone), and symbolic communication (using instrument to communicate). From symbolic communication we have yet another two types-public symbolic communication (an individual on behalf of a community using symbols to communicate with the public: for example, installation of palm tendrils on a disputed property (information to everybody to stay off the property until the dispute is resolved), installation of leaves in the front of a palm wine tapper’s residence-information to the public that some palm wine is on sale there), and interpersonal symbolic communication (an individual using symbols to communicate with another individual – as discussed and exemplified in this paper). This is shown schematically on Figure 1.

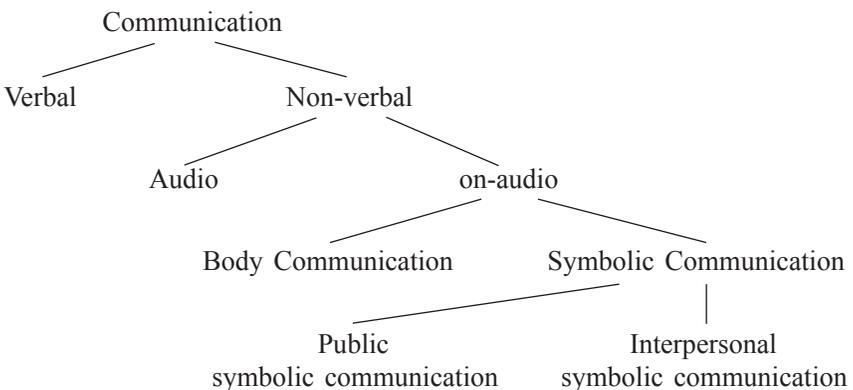


Figure 1. Classification of communication types

The crux of this study hinges on interpersonal symbolic communication. This type of communication under study is exclusively between two individuals with pieces of instrument.

Interpersonal symbolic communication is interwoven with cultural communication. The concept, cultural communication is the practice and study of how different cultures communicate within their community by verbal and non-verbal means. It can also be referred to as intercultural communication and cross-cultural communication. These practices differ in traditional societies and this study focuses on the Igbo traditional society. This study examines interpersonal symbolic communicative practices in the traditional Igbo society.

The arrangement of the paper is based on a concise contextualization of the study, a discussion of the methodological approach used to investigate the existence of interpersonal, symbolic communicative practices in the traditional Igbo society.

### **1.1. Conceptualizing cultural communication**

The term “communication” can be classified in various ways. One major way of doing this is by focusing on verbality and verbality hinges on words and human language.

Cherry (2021) opines that non-verbal communication occupies a substantial portion of our communication. She further explains that:

Experts have found that every day we respond to thousands of nonverbal cues and behaviors including postures, facial expressions, eye gaze, gestures, and tone of voice. From our handshakes to our hairstyles, nonverbal details reveal who we are and impact how we relate to other people. Nonverbal communication types include facial expressions, gestures, paralinguistic: such as loudness or tone of voice, body language, proxemics or personal space, eye gaze, haptic (touch), appearance, and artifacts.

## 1.2. Context of the study

Some scholars have studied non-verbal traditional communication systems in the Igbo society from various perspectives. Such studies include (Nwadike 1999; Unagha 2002; Okafor 2014; Onukawa 2020; & Jidefor 2021). Some of these scholarly works dwell on the ominous as used in contemporary Igbo literature. The works which examine ominous signs and events from literary perspective reveal that some actors in some works on Igbo drama use ominous signs and events as suggestion or warning about something bad that is going to happen (Nwadike 1999; Okafor 2014). Another work discusses the Igbo experience in the traditional modes of communication in Nigeria, taking it up from the Igbo traditional modes of communication in two parts, namely, non-human and human modes. Examples of non-human communication in this work include “palm tendril” (*Omu nkwu*) which is an example of what we have as “public symbolic communication” (Unagha 2002). Yet another study reiterates the efficacy of ominous as a medium of traditional non-verbal communication among the Igbo with peculiarity of being mystical. The study opines that messages of ominous signs and portentous events are transmitted through animate and inanimate elements and convey information on both inauspicious and auspicious incidents. The study also reveals that the communicative role of ominous signs and events is significant and efficacious among the traditional Igbo (Onukawa 2020). There is also a study that believes that communication can also be effectively carried out through the use of different human body parts (head, eye, nose, mouth, facial expressions, hand, etc.) (Jidefor 2021).

Despite the extensive studies carried out by the aforementioned scholars, and others on different modes of traditional non-verbal communication, no study, to the best of our knowledge, has been carried out based on interpersonal symbolic communicative practices in the traditional Igbo society. Therefore, this is the gap this study intends to fill.

### **1.3. Studies of symbolic communications among other African cultures**

Symbolic communication and related issues in communication are not peculiar to the Igbo. This communicative practice has also been recorded among other African cultures. For instance, Marfo et al. (2011) have studied the Adinkra and other symbols of communication among the Akan of Ghana. In this study, they explore the Adinkra symbols and the related ones, the individual messages they encode and their significance in the Akan society. They explain that most of the symbols are inspired on creation and on man-made objects. The Adinkra symbols in particular constitute a medium of objective and deep-seated socio-cultural knowledge of the Akan people.

A study of the use of signs in communication amongst the Vhavenda of South Africa by Makhnikhe et al. (2022) seek to explore the characteristics, types of signs and symbols used by the Vhavenda communities to communicate meanings. The study seeks to redefine, conceptualize, and contextualize communication from the perspective of African and Vhavenda communities specifically.

Chemis et al. (2020) have undertaken a semiotic analysis of signs on social events among the Nandi people of Kenya. Their study indicate the signs used in Nandi social events, explains the meanings of signs used in Nandi social events, and describes the relativity of signs used in Nandi social events. The results of their study shows that there are several signs used in Nandi social ceremonies.

### **1.4. Objective of the study**

The objective of this study is to:

- examine interpersonal symbolic communicative practices in the traditional Igbo society,
- analyze the messages depicted in the interpersonal communicative practices in the traditional Igbo society.

## 1.5. Methodology

This is an ethnographic study; therefore, data were primarily drawn from oral interviews from thirty male and female elders (sixty years and above) of Igbo extraction, who are very conversant and well knowledgeable in the Igbo culture. They were selected from different Igbo culture areas. Data were also drawn by introspection as the researcher is an Igbo native, who was born and bred in the culture of the Igbo people. Library and internet were secondary sources of data collection. Some of these practices are pan-Igbo while some are not, therefore, we specify the Igbo culture areas where applicable, as classified by Onwuejogwu (1975).

## 2. Some interpersonal symbolic communicative practices among the Igbo

We present below some of the interpersonal symbolic communicative practices among the Igbo. We give a message communicated, the symbolic communicative practice that yields the message and explanations of both the message and the symbolic communicative practice.

### 2.1. Proposal of marital Relationship

*Itunye ego ayọrọ n'ihe e ji asa nwatakiri nwaanyi amuru oheru ahụ*  
(*Ikudo nwaanyi*)

‘Putting cowries into a new born baby girl’s bathing bowel’  
(communicating betrothed)

Among the Igbo marriage is a very serious relationship. It is considered inseparable and thus contracted with all seriousness. Every family likes to be associated with good and decent family notable with high moral standard. An Igbo considers his/her in-law as part of his/her family thus we have an Igbo saying that: *ogọ bu ikwu ato* ‘in law is a third family tie’ and *ogọ bu chi onye* ‘an in-law is one’s guardian angel’. This saying borders on the fact that marriage is a sacred institution

that demands careful selection of the family to partner with to establish strong lasting family ties and relationship. This is why in the olden days the parents of a groom are actively involved in the selection of a bride's family. When the groom's family spots out an acceptable family, it quickly registers an interest. As soon as a baby girl is born in that family, the family of the groom pays her a visit, and one of them (usually the groom's father) drops some cowries (coins) into the bathing bowl of the new baby. This interpersonal symbolic communicative practice is understood by both families. The message passed is that the visiting family likes the new born baby girl and her family and as such, she is already betrothed to their son, the groom to be (on his behalf), pending when the little girl is of age for them to complete the remaining marriage rites. In the *Item* culture area, what is put inside the bathing water of a new born baby girl by a friendly family, demanding that their son marries the baby is called *Achalò*. At that time, and to the Igbo culture areas where this is commonly practiced, contraction of marriage depends on both parents with no consent of the bride and groom. Both develop love for each other as they live together as husband and wife and stories about divorce and separation were not the order of the day.

## 2.2. Affirmation of marriage

*Nwagboghòbja na-alụ di inara nwokoròbja bjàra ilụ ya otu  
ihe odinala n'ihu òha*

‘The bride receiving a cultural item from the groom  
in the presence of the public’

In many cases in Igbo land, the intending couple, contract their marriages themselves-they consent to each other on marriage and later affirm same publicly. The groom commences the public affirmation of the marriage by scheduling to go with his relations to meet with the parents and kinsmen of the bride and perform all necessary marriage rites. On the scheduled day, and before the commencement of any activity, the bride and groom are requested to affirm their marriage publicly. In many areas

of Igbo land, the father of the bride pours some palm wine (*mmanya nkwu*) or raffia palm wine (*mmanya ngwo*) into a cup (in the presence of the public from both parties), gives to the bride, and ask her to sip the wine and give to the groom. She sips the wine and hands over to the groom, who also sips. This symbolically communicates acceptance of the groom by the bride and vice versa, and thus licenses/authorizes the bride's father and her kinsmen to go ahead with the marriage rites. But, if peradventure, the bride collects the wine from her father, pours it away, or the groom receives the wine from her and pours it away, it communicates automatic dissolution of the marriage without any verbal expression from either of the parties. Dr. Mrs. Chinwendu Nwizu informed us that in her Akpulu native community and some other neighbouring communities it is coconut that is used in the affirmation of marriage. The bridegroom presents one coconut to the bride in the presence of the public and she receives it. This symbolically communicates the affirmation of the marriage to each other.

### **2.3. Wish of Fecundity and other goodies in marriage**

*Nne na nna nwagboghọ na-ala di inye ya onyinye di iche iche*  
'Gifting various items to a bride by her parents'

The traditional Igbo (like many other traditional African societies) are much concerned about, not only having children, but having plenty of them. In fact, childlessness is known to constitute a threat to the stability of many marriages in Igbo land. The Igbo aspire to have many children, particularly the males for several reasons which include perpetuation of their ancestry. It is the wish of parents whose daughter is getting married that she will bear children for her husband and also receive other goodies of life in marriage. On the very day she joins her husband, each of her parents gives her parting gifts that symbolically communicate their wishes. In most areas of Igbo land, a mother gives her daughter a hen. With this, the mother symbolically communicates her wish of absolute fertility to her daughter. The mother wishes her daughter

to produce many children for her husband just as the hen produces many chicks. In some other areas like Olokoru in Umuahia (Mrs. Chidimma I.G. Nwosu, pers. comm.), a father gives his daughter a tuber of yam for her to be productive of children, as productive as the yam—the king crop of the Igbo. Prof. Victor Nwaugo informed us that in his Egbema area, a father presents her daughter with the following as parting gifts: a) an egg, that symbolically communicates his support for her marriage, b) camwood (*uhie/ufie*), that communicates his wish of prosperous marriage to her, and c) kaolin (*nzu*) that communicates his wish of protection in marriage to her.

#### 2.4. Establishment of comradeship

*Mmady iliwere ibe ya nne okuko maobu nne ewu*  
‘Someone gifting a hen or a she goat to a fellow’

In our societies, oftentimes, someone presents a gift item to another individual as an expression of love or admiration. The gift items are usually what is affordable, at one’s disposal and that which would be useful to the receiver. In the traditional Igbo society, such gifted item is usually a hen or a she goat. Such domestic animals are used to communicate comradeship. This gifted item enlarges the native poultry farm or goat farm of the receiver; and as the hen or she goat keeps reproducing (keeps giving birth to chicks or kids) the products are shared between the donor and the receiver. This practice thus perpetuates the camaraderie.

#### 2.5. Wishing a sick person speedy recovery

*Inye onye na-aria orja nwa riri/uriom okuko*  
‘Giving a chick to a sick person’

When someone is sick, he/she becomes weak and depends on the assistance of others for virtually all physical activities as he/she recuperates, well-wishers visit him/her and express their wishes that

he/she should recover soon. The expressions of speedy recovery can be oral or with tangible objects that differ in various cultures. For instance, in the Western cultures a well-wisher to a sick person may give him/her a “get-well-soon card”. In the Igbo culture a well-wisher usually gives a sick person a chick to symbolize a wish for his/her quick recovery. A chick started as an egg, hatched as a feeble creature, depends on the mother hen for everything at the initial stage of life, and gradually gets stronger to be independent and to fend for itself. The message here is that the sick person recuperates quicker like the process of maturity of a chick.

## 2.6. Erasure of fright and assurance of safety and peace

*Mmanwụ inye nwaanyi dị ime ọmụ nkwu*  
‘A masquerade giving palm tendril to a pregnant woman’

In the Igbo society, as in many others, the masquerade is the main symbol for traditional drama, known for entertainment and maintenance/enforcement of lay down traditional ethics. Masquerading is all men affair and masquerades are dreaded by women. Women so much dread the activities of masquerade that they stay afar to watch the masquerade in order not to attract its chasing and the attendant merciless flogging. Actually, a masquerade does not chase after pregnant a woman, but on sighting a masquerade, a pregnant woman usually runs as much as she can out of fear. If peradventure a masquerade suddenly comes in contact with a pregnant woman in a situation where the pregnant woman is gripped with fear and cannot run, the masquerade gives the pregnant woman a piece of the palm frond tendril. This item communicates to the pregnant woman, erasure of fright and assurance of safety and peaceful disposition devoid of any form of attack. The palm frond tendril is a highly revered cultural instrument in the Igbo culture, and it basically communicates peaceful disposition or resolution. This is the reason for which the masqueraders perform with some of it (palm tendrils) to indicate that their activities are peaceful.

## 2.7. Hospitality

*Onye nwe ụlọ inye onye ọbịa nzu*  
‘A host serving native kaolin to a visitor’

Among the Igbo (and other Africans) exchange of visits is a common practice, so much so that one’s visitor does not need to give prior notice. The Igbo people are very well known for their hospitable disposition and this is usually shown to visitors with different items of cultural significance. In many Igbo culture areas, the first cultural item which a host serves a visitor on reception is the kola nut (usually the native kola nut “Oji Igbo”). However, in some culture areas like the “Cross River Igbo” (Nwaozuzu 2018), like *Abiriba*, *Ohafia*, the first item which a host presents to a visitor is the native kaolin. The host first touches the kaolin and rubs on a conspicuous part of his hand, and this communicates hospitality, love, and goodwill to the visitor. The visitor (or each of the visitors, if they are more than one) does same to communicate to the host that he is open-minded, and without any grudge whatsoever on the visit, before kola nut is presented, blessed and eaten.

## 2.8 Respect

*Iwepu/Ikpupu okpu n’isi ma a na-ekele ufodu mmadu*  
‘Removal of cap from the head while greeting some people’

Greeting is a prominent cultural practice in the Igbo (nay African) culture, thus people are much concerned about greeting others and being greeted as well. The initiation of greeting among individuals of unequal status is usually determined by age or social status whereby a younger person initiates the greeting with a senior person, and a relatively less socially prominent fellow initiates the greeting with a more socially prominent person. The greetings initiated, in this case, aside oral expressions, also involve symbolic communication and body communication of shaking the receiver (elderly person or socially more prominent person) with two

hands. If the initiator of the greeting is wearing a cap/hat he removes it while saying words/sentences of greeting, and having a hand shake. The removing of cap/hat while greeting symbolically communicates added respect and pleasantries for the receiver.

## 2.9. Serious warning / caution

*Inye mmadu mkpisi!*

‘Giving a stick to someone’

It is not out of place for human beings to disagree with one another. The best attitude to life is to know when one has offended another, and thus show remorse for the offence. In a situation where one offends another, but does not realize or accept it, and thus fails to show remorse (and probably continues with the same offence); the offended may complain to someone else (a third party) known to both of them, and request him/her to warn the offender seriously. In the Igbo culture such serious warning may not go verbal. The offended may give a stick (short or long) to the third party and request him/her to hand it to the offender, and let him/her know the source. The stick communicates serious warning to the offender to desist from such offensive acts that could be inimical to their relationship. Once the offender gets the stick, the message is fully communicated instantly without any further oral explanations. In some Igbo communities two sticks are used if the warning is on threat to life. Dr. Kingsley Izuogu informed us that in his Ngwa Igbo community, if someone severely threatens the life of another, an elder-relation to the one whose life is threatened- takes a live stick (symbolizing life) and a dried one (symbolizing death) to the person that threatened the life of his/her relation. The sticks symbolically communicate to the individual that he/she is now the custodian of the life and death of the fellow threatened. According to Prof. Victor Nwaugo (pers. comm.), in his Egbema Igbo community, what is used in communicating a serious warning in respect of threat to life is a type of grass they call *Orozo*.

## 2.10. Conviction

*Mmanwụ idowere onye dara iwu obodo ọmụ nkwu n'onu ụzọ ama*  
 'A masquerade keeping a palm frond tendril at the entrance of the  
 compound of someone that contravened the law of the community'

As we said earlier, in the traditional Igbo culture the masquerade, among other functions, ensures the maintenance/enforcement of lay down traditional ethics. There are different kinds of masquerades with diverse rules of operation. There is one that goes out in the night to perform its activities in a particular period of the year, and when it assumes that everybody ought to have gone to sleep. To protect the sanctity of the masquerade, its community usually enacts a law that abjures light and sound from any source at that period within the community. If any family within the community contravenes this law by putting on light and/ or sound within the time of operation of the masquerade, the masquerade, on noticing same traces the light and/or the sound to the particular compound and drops a palm frond tendril at the entrances. This communicates instantly to the head of the family in question that his family has committed an offence against the community by defiling the masquerade and he is expected to visit the head of the community to pay a stipulated amount of money as fine. No one needs to give him (head of the family) any further verbal information on this.

## 2.11. Divorce

*Di itupuru nwunye ya ngwa usekwu ya n'ezi*  
 'Husband throwing away his wife's kitchen utensils outside'

*Di idote ebele mmanya e ji ahịhia ube mechie ọnụ ya, maọbụ nke  
 e ji ọmụ nkwu/igu nkwu kee; n'ọnụ ụzọ ụlọ nna nwunye ya*  
 'Husband placing a container of palm wine, either cocked with pear  
 leaf or wrapped with palm tendril/palm leaves; in front of his father  
 in-laws residence'

Naturally, married couple do disagree from time to time, and the issues for the disagreement may be minor or severe. In some cases, if the

issues for the disagreements are severe and the wives are found culpable, the husbands invite relatives and friends of theirs and those of their wives to counsel their wives. If a wife continues in her unacceptable conducts, in spite of the series of counselling, the husband may decide to end up the marriage through some interpersonal symbolic means of communication which include the following: A) He might wake up one early morning and throw the wife's kitchen utensils outside, and this instantly communicates to his wife that the marriage is over, and irretrievably so. In many parts of Igbo culture areas, this pattern of divorce is considered more authentic if it happens on an Eke market day. B) In some Igbo culture areas, a husband who decides to divorce his wife may place a container of palm wine, in front of the father in-law's residence. In Nnewi area the container is cocked with the leave of pear (Chief Uche Mbonu, a native of Nnewi.pers. comm.), whereas Professor Boniface Mbah informed us that in his Oba native home and other areas around Nsukka, the container of the palm wine is tied with palm tendril or palm leave. According to Dr. (Mrs) Chinwendu Nwizu, in her Akpulu native home and other areas in Ideato, the palm wine used in the divorce is the raffia palm wine, which is ordinarily tabooed in marriage in the area of Igbo land. This symbolically communicates to the father in-law that his daughter's husband has divorced her and again, the marriage is irretrievable.

## 2.12. Disclaimer / repudiation

*Igbaji mkpisi maobu Idobi eriri n'etiti mmadu na ibe ya*  
 'Breaking of stick or cutting of a rope  
 between someone and another person'

As in the case of marital relationship, two people who are related in other facets like kinship, friendship, also do disagree on some minor or severe issues. The disagreement may be so intense that efforts by others to reconcile them may prove abortive. In this situation, the one who feels more aggrieved may decide to terminate the relationship, by breaking a stick or cutting a rope in between him/her and the other

person. This activity symbolically communicates repudiation to the other fellow, and that their relationship has been permanently severed.

### 2.13. Quit notice

*Ido abiriika n'agiga ulo ebe e nyere mmadu ka o biri*  
 'Planting of plantain sucker at the corner of a house where a tenant lives'

One of the basic needs of humans in the universe is shelter and the Igbo people are not left out of this basic necessity of life. If one is unable to erect a house due to lean resources, one can at least rent an affordable accommodation in order to have a roof over one's head. However, if after renting a house, the tenant, after some time, falls out of favour with the landlord, it might attract a quit notice from the landlord. In some cases, the landlord may not want to drag issues with the tenant to the extent of involving the services of a lawyer and taking the case to court or before any arbitration panel. What the landlord will do in some Igbo culture areas, for example Ibeme, Obingwa Igbo, "is to quietly plant a plantain sucker at a strategic corner of the house, visible to all" (Dr. Chima Onwukwe, a native of Ibeme, pers. comm.). This symbolically communicates to the tenant, a notice to quit the house without any delay.

### 2.14. Negotiation of bride price

*Iji mkuru aziza akpa maka ego isi nwaanyi*  
 'Using some broom sticks to negotiate bride price'

In some culture areas of Igboland like Nkpo and other areas around Onitsha, the negotiation of bride price during marriage is not done verbally. This is based on the fact that giving out one's daughter in marriage is not the sale of a human (in fact humans are not sold), and therefore the bride price should be negotiated in a special way. During the negotiation of bride price the father of the bride (or representative in some circumstances) presents to the bridegroom (or representative) some sticks (usually some broom sticks) that represent the amount he

desires should be paid as bride price. On his own part, the bride groom removes some of the sticks, leaving the number that represents the amount he is capable of paying as bride price, and hand over to the bride's father. This interpersonal communication on bride price, with the sticks of broom goes on until an agreement is reached (Prof. Chuma Okeke, pers. comm.).

### **2.15. Information to a father-in-law of the daughter's delivery of a baby**

*Mmadu inye nna nwunye ya ji e tere nzu*

'Someone giving a tuber of yam rubbed with native kaolin  
to his father-in-law'

In most parts of Igbo land if one's wife is delivered of a baby, he visits his father in-law and inform him verbally. He may present some items of gift like a bottle of hot drink and some kolanuts to the father in-law. But according to Prof. Chuma Okeke, in his Nkpo native home and other areas around Onitsha, this information is not passed verbally to a father in-law, but rather it is symbolically communicated. The son in-law visits his father in-law and presents him with a tuber of yam painted with native kaolin on either the right side or the left side, as the head of the tuber of yam points towards the holder. The tuber of yam symbolically communicates to the father in-law that his daughter has been delivered of a baby, whereas the side of the rubbing of kaolin communicates the sex of the baby. If the kaolin is rubbed on the right side of the yam, it communicates a baby boy, but if it is on the left side, it communicates a baby girl.

### **2.16. Declaration of innocence**

*Onye e boro ebubo imachi omu nkwu nye onye boro ya ebubo*

'An accused person handing a knotted palm tendril to the accuser'

In the Igbo society, as in other known societies, some accusation may be leveled against an individual by another individual. The accusation

may not be true, as it could be consequent upon a quarrel between them, misdirected suspicion, or it could be borne out of sheer ill-will. In many parts of Igbo land, if someone feels innocent of the issue, he/she is being accused of, he/she declares the innocence verbally to the accuser. However, in some areas the accused communicates his/her innocence symbolically to the accuser. For instance, Barrister Ernest Nwokeke informed us that in his Mbano area, this is communicated symbolically with a knotted palm tendril. The accused produces a knotted palm tendril and delegates someone else to hand it to the accuser. Professor Solomon Umeham confirmed this as applicable to his Arochukwu native home.

### 2.17. Notification of a visit

*Mmadu idote ihe n'onu uzọ ulọ onye o biara ebe ya ma o hughị ya*  
 'Someone placing an item in front of the door of a person he/she  
 visited but did not meet'

Paying of visits to fellows is a common practice among the Igbo, and at times the visitor may not meet the person visited. In many parts of Igbo land, if the visitor did not meet the person visited, he/she leaves without any indication of his visit. However, in some areas the visitor symbolically notifies the person visited of his/her visit. Prof. Boniface Mbah informed us that in his Orba home town, the visitor places a bunch of some green leaves in front of the house of the person visited. When the person returns and sees it, he/she is informed that someone visited and thus inquires about the person that visited. Dr. Allen Ihionu (pers. comm.) said that in his home town, Ubaha Okigwe, the particular leave used for this is the leave of cocoyam (*Ede*). According to Prof. Chuma Okeke, in his Nkpo home town and some other areas around it, it is the visit of the Chief Priest (*Eze mmuo*) that is communicated symbolically. If the Chief priest visits someone and the person is not at home, he places a bow tied with palm frond (*omu*) at the person's doorstep. This communicates to the owner of the house that *Eze mmuo* visited and also an invitation for him/her to report to the Chief priest (*Eze mmuo*) at the shrine.

## 2.18. Notification of a gift of a cow

*Mmadu inye ibe ya udo dika ihe onyinye*  
‘Someone presenting a fellow with a big rope as a gift’

Gifting / presentation of gifts is a common cultural practice. Gifts are usually presented when someone pays visit to another. Gifts can come from the host and also from the guest; and gifts can also be of any type or form, and they are seen but not usually mentioned for courtesy sake. Among the Igbo, if the gift item from either the host or guest is a cow that (of course) cannot be brought where the host and guest are, or is not readily available, the person who owns the gift item of cow presents a big rope to the recipient. This rope symbolically communicates to the recipient that the presenter has a gift of a cow for him/her.

## 2.19. Prohibition of trespass

*Mmadu idotere onye ozo osisi Ijita n'ebe o si aga*  
‘Someone placing the *Ijita* stick on the path used by someone else’

Among the Igbo there are various live plants used in marking boundaries of land. The one used in Egbema is called *Ijita*. According to Prof. Victor Nwaugo (pers. comm.), *Ijita* is not only used for boundary demarcation, it is also used for the prohibition of an individual from trespass. If someone, observes that a neighbour, or someone else trespasses any part of his premises, he (owner of the premises) places *Ijita* at that portion to communicate prohibition of thorough fare.

## 2.20. Injunction

*Ikwunye omu nkwu n'ihe na-ese okwu*  
‘Installing palm tendril on a property in dispute’

In the Igbo culture, if a property is in dispute between two persons, one of them can place an injunction on the property before, probably,

suing the opponent to the people's assembly for arbitration. The said injunction is usually placed by installing palm tendril on the property in dispute. For instance, if two persons are contesting the ownership of a portion of land, and one of them goes to operate on the land without establishing his true ownership of it, the opponent can install palm tendril on the land and follow it up with the involvement of the people's assembly for arbitration. This symbolically communicates an injunction to the one who operates on the land, that he should stay action pending the establishment of the true owner of the land. However, if none of the individual contestants failed to put injunction by installing palm frond on the disputed land before arbitration, the people's assembly will do so, and this becomes "public symbolic communication" as pointed out earlier.

### **3. Summary and conclusion**

It has been revealed in this study that among the Igbo, like in other known cultures, individuals can use instruments, as symbols exclusively to communicate between each other. This interpersonal symbolic communication constitutes an aspect of the non-verbal communication system in the people's culture. We have identified some of the symbols that convey some messages, the messages they convey and the specific meaning/interpretations of the messages. The messages usually conveyed by interpersonal symbolic communication include: proposal of marriage, affirmation of marriage, wish of fecundity, establishment of comradeship, wishing a sick person speedy recovery, erasure of fright and assurance of safety and peace, hospitality, respect, warning/caution, conviction, divorce, disclaimer/repudiation, quit notice, negotiation of bride price, information to a father-in-law of the baby delivery of his daughter, declaration of innocence, notification of a visit, notification of a gift of cow, prohibition of trespass, and injunction. It is the conclusion of this paper that the interpersonal symbolic communication constitutes a medium in which the Igbo frame their world and realities. All of the items that are involved in the interpersonal

symbolic communication have high significance in the Igbo culture; and are embodiments of spirits. The traditional Igbo believe that spirits dwell in woods, bush, forests, seas, rivers, mountains, and around the villages, and compounds, including the shrines, oracles and even the grave-yard ... the spirits are in the same geographic region as men” (Nwala 1985: 33). In fact, the Igbo believe that spirits habit everywhere. We can further conclude that interpersonal symbolic communication generally involves the spirits. This becomes an interesting fact of the Igbo worldview.

### Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to all our informants from various culture areas of Igboland.

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